

A close-up photograph of a man's muscular torso, showing his chest and abdominal muscles. The man is shirtless and wearing black athletic shorts. The background is a vibrant blue with a bokeh effect of out-of-focus white and yellow lights. The title 'Protective PLAYER' is overlaid on the image. 'Protective' is written in a white, cursive font with a red glow, and 'PLAYER' is in a white, blocky, outlined font.

Protective
PLAYER

AMAZON BESTSELLING AUTHOR
LENA LITTLE

PROTECTIVE PLAYER

GAME ON: BOOK 1

LENA LITTLE



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CONTENTS

[Free Books](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Extended Epilogue](#)

[Also by Lena Little](#)

PREVIEW

After eighteen years in the hockey league, I'm feeling like an old man. I feel every bump and bruise in ways I never have before. Add to that, my team isn't playing well, my passion for the game waning, and another run to the Cup isn't looking likely.

But then, in the most unexpected place, I bump into Devon. The most beautiful girl I've ever seen, and an absolute firecracker at that. The more I see her, the more I want her. She's a bigger high than any drug and a thousand times more addictive. I cannot get enough of her.

It doesn't take me long to realize I need to have her. That I need to claim her as my own. Devon has lit a fire in me I haven't felt in a long time and has reignited my passion not just for the game, but for life as well. She helps elevate my play on the ice, which, in turn, helps my team as a whole play better.

Just when everything seems to be turning around, my legs are knocked out from under me when I find myself at the center of a scandal that ties directly back to Devon. A scandal that threatens everything I've spent a lifetime building. A scandal that could destroy my legacy.

Even worse, somebody is obsessed with her. Someone who mistakes her kindness for something else.

I love this sport. I really do. And while I've worked so damned hard to get to where I am, none of it matters if I don't have Devon. None of it. I'm not a guy prone to violence or quick to anger. I generally reserve my aggression on the ice, but when it comes to Devon's safety...

All bets are off.

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“**W**hy are you in such a foul mood, man?”

I look up from my beer and frown. “Is there something we should be celebrating tonight? Last I checked, we got our asses kicked.”

Anders Lindgren, probably my closest friend on the team, flashes me a grin. “Hey, you’ve been in the league long enough to know we’re going to have nights like this.”

“These seem to be the only kind of nights we’re having this season.”

Anders frowns and says nothing. It’s not like he can argue with me. I pick up my beer and take a long swallow while I scan the table we’re sitting at. After the game, Anders talked me into coming to the bar with some of the guys to wash the taste of our latest loss out of my mouth. As I look at them, watching them laughing and joking with each other, getting louder and rowdier as the night wears on, I suddenly feel like an old man.

“Kids,” I mutter. “They’re all just kids.”

“Being around young energy is good for you, Dawson.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, right.”

I’m thirty-seven years old, have been playing professional hockey in LA for the past eighteen years, and I’ve never gone through a season like this before. Halfway through the season, we’re sitting nineteen points out of a playoff spot, and I don’t think we have what it takes to close that gap. It’s not that we

don't have the talent. I just don't know if we have the heart. It's more frustrating to me than sitting in this damn bar right now.

The only reason I came back for this season—largely at Anders' prodding—is because we've got a strong, young nucleus. I believed we were in a good position to make a run at my fourth Cup after which, I'd planned to skate off into the sunset. For whatever reason though, we haven't found that spark. We've flashed now and then, but we just haven't put it all together and can't seem to stack the wins together. Which is why we're sitting near the bottom of our division.

This is honestly the first time in my career that I've felt my age. I feel every hit. It takes me longer to recover, and I just don't feel like I've got that spring in my step I rely on. Once upon a time, I was one of the most electric players in the league. I was on ESPN, making highlight reel plays almost every night, and made a career out of making opposing players look silly. Nobody could touch me. I was in a class of my own.

Now, I feel like a shell of myself. Calling myself half the player I was would be overly generous. For the first time in my career, I feel like an old man playing a young man's game.

"You okay?" Anders asks.

"Yeah. Fine," I reply. "Just pondering my hockey mortality."

"You realize we've still got half a season to go, yeah?"

"And if it plays out like the first half, we're going to need to make vacation plans sooner rather than later."

"That's what I love about you, Dawson—that sunny, optimistic demeanor of yours."

I laugh grimly. "You realize you're nearing the end of the road too, don't you? You're thirty-eight, brother."

He waves me off. "Speak for yourself, brother. I'm in my prime."

I laugh and drain the last of my beer and get to my feet. "I'm going to get out of here."

“Come on, stay a little longer,” Anders argues and gestures to the room around us. “Look at the chicks in here. You really want to pass up a chance to take that blonde over there home? Or that brunette? Hell, why not both?”

“Nah. I’m good,” I reply. “I’m beat and want to get some sleep.”

“Wow. You really are becoming an old man.”

“I tried to tell you.” I point to our younger teammates. “Make sure the kids don’t get themselves into trouble.”

“If you leave, who’s going to make sure I don’t get into trouble?”

I laugh. “See you on the ice tomorrow.”

“Yeah, yeah.”

I say goodbye to the guys and tell them to keep their noses clean then make my way through the bar. The one good thing about playing pro hockey is that we’re largely anonymous. We’re not like football or basketball players who get recognized and pestered for autographs or whatever by fans everywhere.

Our fan base is every bit as passionate and zealous as the other major sports but is smaller. Hockey, though growing, is still considered a niche sport here in the States. Our fans know who we are but nobody else does. It’s nice, honestly. I like still being able to go out and have a drink without being mobbed.

I step through the front doors and take a deep breath of the cool autumn air as I pull my coat on and pull it tight then laugh softly at myself. It’s in the high fifties tonight, which is chilly by Southern California standards, but is nothing compared to winter back in my hometown in Montana. I’ve gotten spoiled by the temperate climate here and have gotten pretty thin-blooded. Or, as my older brother likes to say, I’ve become a pussy. Asshole.

The door opens behind me, and a second later, I stumble forward a step when a body slams into me. I spin around ready to light somebody up, but the growl in my throat withers and dies when I see *her* looking up at me with green eyes wider

than saucers and her full, red lips perfectly parted in a surprised “O”.

“I am so sorry. I didn’t mean to... I just wasn’t...I’m sorry,” she stammers.

My heart pounds like a fist on a drum. She’s no more than five-three or five-four with hair the color of a penny that cascades down to her shoulders. Her skin is fair and flawless. She’s got a petite but curvy figure, and she’s all of about twenty—twenty-one, maybe. She’s absolutely stunning—easily the most beautiful girl I’ve ever seen—and just looking at her robs me of breath.

Jesus.

“I said I’m sorry,” she repeats.

Everything snaps back into focus, and I nod and try to work some moisture into my mouth. “Yeah, it’s alright. Don’t worry about it. No harm done,” I tell her. “Not that a little thing like you could do much damage anyway.”

Hearing myself ramble on, I cringe inwardly and silently tell myself to shut the fuck up. I honestly don’t recall the last time I felt this awkward around a woman. High school maybe? She’s thrown me off-kilter, and I feel like mentally punching myself.

It’s crazy but the second my eyes fell on her, I felt a seismic jolt inside of me. The feeling was visceral, and I felt it down to the marrow of my bones. I don’t understand it. Don’t know where it came from because I don’t react to women like this like... ever. But something about this little redhead sends an unexpected shockwave right through me.

She glowers at me, clearly annoyed by what I’d said. I admit, it was kind of stupid and probably had a touch of sexism thrown in if somebody was inclined to see it that way. And she’s clearly inclined. As I look at her, I realize it’s not annoyance I see on her face. She’s upset, but it’s not at me. Her look of upset is more filled with fear than irritation about my stupid one-liner. She’s afraid of something. Or someone.

“Are you okay?” I ask. “Is somebody giving you a hard time?”

She sniffs and turns away, discreetly wiping at her eyes. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine.”

“You don’t know me,” she snaps as she starts digging through her purse.

“You’re right, I don’t. And I’m sorry if I’m overstepping but you look upset,” I say. “Where I’m from, we don’t just walk away from a lady who’s upset without finding out if we can help.”

“That’s very old-fashioned of you,” she says, her tone acidic.

I shrug. “I guess so. But I’d like to help you if I can.”

“It’s nothing. It’s fine.”

She pulls her phone out of her purse and looks down at it, clearly expecting me to walk away. When I don’t, she raises her head.

“I said I’m fine.”

Music blares as the door opens behind us, and the girl nearly jumps out of her skin. She whirls around, her eyes comically wide as she sidles behind me. Two women walk out of the bar, arm in arm, giggling with each other as they head down the street. The door closes behind them, shutting out the music again, and the girl lets out a breath of relief.

“Yeah, you look fine.”

She sighs. “Okay, fine. There’s a guy in there... I know him from school,” she says. “He’s been trying to get me to dance with him all night and won’t take no for an answer. He’s starting to get pushy, and it’s creeping me out. So, I told him I was going to the bathroom then made a beeline for the door. I’m going to get an Uber to take me back to the dorms. That’s it. That’s the story. Happy now?”

I look at the door of the bar, half-tempted to walk back in there and set the guy straight. Irritation curls hot in my gut because I don’t like seeing this girl upset. And I don’t like that some asshole is being pushy and scaring her. It makes my blood boil for reasons I don’t quite understand. A surge of protectiveness

roars through me from out of nowhere. Protectiveness and possessiveness.

With a deep breath, I calm myself down and turn to her. “Let me drive you back to your dorms. I want to make sure you get back safely.”

“I’m fine. I’m calling for an Uber.”

I shake my head. “I’m parked down the street—”

“Dude, I don’t even know you. Do you really expect me to get into your car?”

“You don’t know your Uber driver either, and you’re perfectly willing to get into that guy’s car,” I say with a chuckle. “Just consider me your Uber driver if it’ll make you feel better. You can even sit in the back seat, well away from me.”

She shakes her head, her green eyes fixed on mine, an exasperated look on her face. “Why are you so insistent on trying to help me?”

“Like I said, where I’m from, we help out when and where we can.”

That’s a big part of it, but if I’m being honest, it’s more than that. Way more. I want her to see me. I want to spend more time with her because something about this girl intrigues me. Her wide, doe eyes and the way she’s biting her lower lip give her an almost innocent look that drives me wild, has me firing on all synapses.

It’s not just a sexual attraction I feel right now—though I won’t lie, she’s sexy as hell and I would love to see that curvy figure naked, explore her body, and memorize every curve and dip. But there’s more to it than that too.

My reaction to her is primal, sure, but something else burrows under my skin. I don’t know what it is exactly because honestly, I’ve never felt anything remotely like this before. I’ve never looked at someone and gotten assaulted by visions of a future...with them.

Fuck me. I’m starting to act like a creep.

For now, I want to help her. I want to get her somewhere safe and well away from this guy who's making her uncomfortable. It's not just for her own good, it's for his too. If I ever see him try to make a move, I can't promise anything less than broken bones.

"Okay." She finally nods. "I'm warning you right now though, I've got a can of mace."

"Noted. Now, let's go before that guy gets wise to you being out here, and I have to beat him to a pulp. I'd rather not go to jail tonight if I can help it."

She laughs and it transforms her face, making her look even more beautiful than she already is...which I didn't think was possible. But her laughter makes the air between us feel lighter. It's like she stuck a pin in the balloon of tension and popped it. Maybe not entirely, but enough. I mean, I'm still sporting a half-chub.

"I'm just parked down the street."

"Okay."

We walk down the street in silence, and as I open the back door of my Navigator for her to climb into the back seat as promised, she pauses and turns to me. "Thank you."

My chest cracks open at the way she stares. "You're welcome."

DEVON

“So, where are we headed?” he asks as he pulls away from the curb.

“UCLA,” I tell him. “Hedrick Hall.”

“Yes, ma’am,” he says as he types the location into his phone.

Sitting in the back of his SUV, I’ve got my hand tucked into my bag, my fingers curled around the can of mace I’ve got inside. I don’t think I’m going to need it, though. It’s just a feeling and god knows I’ve been wrong about people before—tonight is proof enough of that—but this guy doesn’t set off a single alarm bell. It’s quite the opposite, in fact. There’s something about him that’s touched off some very different, very unexpected, and very intense feelings in me.

And by intense, I mean cinching-my-thighs kind of intense.

I don’t have a lot of experience with men. Okay, I’ve got no real experience with men. I’m a virgin. It’s not because I’m the waiting-for-marriage type. It’s because I know my worth and don’t want to jump in bed with anyone just because. But... something about this man is making me feel warm all over and has my core clenching with...need.

God, what’s with me?

It’s inexplicable and totally unexpected. He’s hot and ruggedly handsome, that’s pretty obvious, but he’s not even touching me and I already feel something zapping down my spine. No man I’ve ever met has ever gotten me wet like this, but I can’t deny that my panties are soaked right now, and I’m hoping I don’t

leave a wet spot on his leather upholstery. Talk about humiliating.

He glances at me in the rearview mirror, his dark eyes sending another jolt of lust surging through me. I swallow hard and shift uncomfortably in my seat. As I study his strong jawline, studded with salt and pepper stubble, and his sharp, angular profile, I realize there's something familiar about the man. I narrow my eyes and scrutinize him, trying to figure out where I know him from. He's not a big-time movie star or rock god or anything like that, but I know I know him.

"Why do I feel like I know you?" I finally ask.

His soft chuckle is a deep rumbling that passes through me deliciously, somehow making me even wetter than I already am. I lick my suddenly dry lips and try to slow my racing heart.

"I don't know," he says in that deep timber that makes me quiver. "Why do you think that?"

"Were you ever on TV or something?"

"Sometimes, yeah."

"What's your name?"

"Dawson Davis," he replies. "And you? What's your name?"

"Devon. Devon Kirkpatrick."

I rack my brain, trying to recall every movie and TV show I've seen. His name, like his face, rings some distant bell in my head, but I can't quite put my finger on it. It's driving me crazy.

"I swear I know you. Tell me where I might know you from. Please?"

That deep chuckle rumbles through my body again and I subtly squirm in my seat, trying to keep from drawing his attention for fear he'll know that I'm sitting in a puddle back here.

"Do you watch hockey, Devon?"

"Hockey? No, I never have."

He nods. “Well, I’m a pro hockey player.”

The fact that he’s a pro athlete explains his big, toned frame. Dawson is probably six-two or six-three—almost a foot taller than me and twice as wide. The man dwarfs me in every way. But I don’t think there’s an ounce of fat on the man. He’s hard muscle from head to toe.

Normally, I don’t like guys like that, who spend hours upon hours per day in the gym and never let others forget it. They don’t usually have much between the ears, which is what I find most attractive. But something about Dawson just strikes me differently. I don’t know what it is, but he just doesn’t seem like the typical gym bro I tend to despise.

“Oh, really?” I ask lamely. “Where?”

“Here,” he says with a laugh. “In LA.”

“Oh god, I’m so sorry.” I can feel my face turning bright red. “I didn’t even realize we had a hockey team here.”

“Yep. We’ve got uniforms and everything.”

“I didn’t mean to offend you, Dawson. I’m just not a sports person.”

“Don’t sweat it. Hockey isn’t everybody’s thing.”

We drive on in silence for a few minutes as I try to push away the feeling of mortification gripping me. I feel like I just spit on the man’s profession—and also proved myself to be an ignorant wretch in the process. Who doesn’t know LA has a pro hockey team? But that explains why his name and face ring a bell. I’m sure I’ve heard of him. I probably heard his name or saw his face in blurbs on the news or whatever.

“Okay, we’re here.” He pulls into a lot and stops the car.

Dawson climbs out and comes around to open the back door then gives me his hand and helps me out. I turn to him with a grateful smile.

“Thank you. I appreciate you driving me home.”

“You’re not getting rid of me quite yet,” he replies. “I’m walking you to your dorm.”

“You don’t have to do that. It’s just across the quad—”

“Just consider me a full-service Uber driver.”

“Dawson—”

“I’m not leaving until I know you’re safe inside your dorm. So, we can stand here and argue about it all night or we can start walking.”

His voice is firm and commanding, and it’s clear he means what he says. I’m not used to being ordered around like this. I like to consider myself a strong and independent woman. I don’t normally tolerate anybody telling me what to do. But the way he’s looking at me and the tone of his voice... I’d be lying if I said it didn’t turn me on. Of course, my thinking might be muddled since I’m already dripping wet, but I don’t think that’s it.

“Okay,” I say. “Let’s walk.”

Dawson walks beside me, and I catch myself stealing glances at him as we turn onto the pathway that will lead us from the parking lot and through the quad. His big presence is intimidating but, at the same time, really reassuring to me. I know nobody is going to dare mess with me with Dawson at my side.

“So, what are you studying?” he asks.

“Early developmental psychology. I’m going to be a child psychologist.” Glad for this change of topic, my voice fills with its usual passion when asked about what I want to do. “My long-term goal is to help underprivileged and underserved kids. Nobody ever seems to look out for them from a mental health standpoint, and it breaks my heart. I want to help all those kids who fall through the cracks.”

He nods and looks impressed. “That’s a noble goal.”

“I don’t know that I’d call it noble. Ambitious maybe, but not noble.”

“It’s ambitious and noble,” he replies. “And you’re right, there are a whole hell of a lot of kids who fall through the cracks. You’ve got a good heart, Devon Kirkpatrick.”

I feel the warmth creep into my cheeks and am suddenly glad it's dark outside so he can't see how red my face must be. I'm not a girl who handles praise all that well. And when it's being given by a man I find as attractive as Dawson Davis, it just makes it all the more awkward.

"Thanks," I say quietly.

We round a bend in the path, and I can see my dorm up ahead. There's part of me that doesn't want the night to end. That wants to hang out with Dawson for a while. It's so easy to talk to him, and I feel more myself than with anyone else.

As we draw closer to the dorm, I stop in my tracks and feel the blood in my veins turn to ice.

"Oh my god."

"What is it?" he asks.

Dawson follows my gaze, and I feel him tense up when he sees the man standing outside the front doors of my dorm.

"Is that him?" Dawson asks. "The guy who was harassing you at the bar?"

I nod, feeling numb. "Yeah, that's him. That's Zack."

"And who exactly is this guy to you?"

I shake my head. "Just a guy I know from class. I mean, I was friendly with him, but I wouldn't call us friends. But then he just started getting all weirdly possessive."

"Okay, let me take care of this. I promise he'll never bother you again."

As he starts forward, I grab his hand and hold him back. The moment our skin touches, my body jerks and it's like I grabbed hold of a live wire. He must feel it too because he turns to me with wide eyes and a look of surprise on his face.

We stand there, eyes locked, not speaking or moving for a couple of moments. I quickly pull my hand away, breaking whatever spell we were caught in, and laugh awkwardly, my cheeks burning furiously.

"Sorry," I mumble.

“No, it’s all right.”

“I just... I’d rather you not go beat the snot out of him. Even though he creeps me out, I don’t want to see him get hurt.”

Dawson gives me a small smile. “There’s that good heart of yours in action again.”

“Yeah, I guess.”

“So? What do you want to do?”

“I don’t know,” I say as my stomach roils.

I look around, trying to figure out what I’m going to do. It’s not like I have many friends outside the dorms, and to get to any of them, I’m going to have to pass Zack. And I rather not see him at all. I rather he not know I’m in my room because I’m afraid he’ll just keep bothering me all night until he gets what he wants. Goosebumps crawl across my skin as a tremor of fear passes through me.

“You don’t have anywhere else to go, do you?”

I shake my head. “I don’t.”

“Come on then,” he says. “Let’s get you out of here.”

“Where are we going?”

“I know we only met but trust me. I’ll get you somewhere safe.”

And that was the thing. We met less than an hour ago, and I didn’t know him. But I trust him. There’s something about Dawson Davis that makes me feel... safe. I have no real reason to believe it but I just know deep down that he’ll always protect me and won’t do anything to hurt me. It’s insane. But it’s something I know to be as true as my own name.

“Okay. Let’s go.”

We walk back to his SUV, and when I step up on the runner to climb into the back seat, I turn around and throw my arms around his thick neck, and lean forward. I don’t know how it happened, and if you ask me a hundred years from now, I’d

still swear that all I meant to do was plant a kiss on his cheek. That's not what happened.

Our lips meet, and my entire body feels like it exploded. Like electricity crackling through my every vein and filling me with an intense heat, unlike anything I'd ever felt before. It's not even just a peck.

As he slips his tongue into my mouth, swirling it around mine, his big hands practically encircle my entire waist. I let myself melt into him, pressing my body against his hard, toned physique as our kiss deepens. My panties are so drenched, I'm half-convinced they'll never dry out again. My legs are shaking so hard, I have to put my hand on his broad shoulders to keep from falling.

I slowly pull back and he strokes my cheek—a strangely delicate gesture from such a big, gruff man. But it makes my heart skip a beat all the same. Our eyes are locked together, and heat comes off his body. It's hotter than the sun and makes me feel even weaker in the knees than I already do.

“Sorry,” I say. “I... I... That's not something I normally do with strange men. And honestly, we only met an hour ago...”

I hear myself rambling and let my words trail off, my face burning with a heat I've never felt before. Dawson offers me a smile as he helps me slide into the back seat of his SUV.

“It's alright. I understand and as much as I might want to, I won't take advantage of the situation. You have my word.”

“Thank you,” I say even though every cell in my body is crying out, demanding I let him take advantage of the situation—and of me.

“I ain't going to lie though—you're a damn good kisser.”

I clap my hands over my mouth as a flustered laugh bursts from my throat. Dawson gives me a wink and closes the door of the SUV.

DAWSON

Stiff and sore and with a hard-on stiffer than I've had in I don't even know how long, I roll off the couch and stretch out.

It's not the most comfortable thing to sleep on but I surrendered my bedroom to Devon when we got back here last night. She had misgivings about coming back to my place, of course, and I had to reassure her that I had no nefarious intentions. As much as I wish she would have thrown caution to the wind and her panties at me along with it, I behaved like an honorable gentleman.

That kiss... I dreamed about that the entire night. Which is why I woke up with the kind of hard-on I haven't had since puberty. Her warm breath in my mouth, the velvety feel of her tongue on mine, her soft, supple body in my hands, those full, round tits pressed to my chest. It was almost impossible to keep from coming in my pants right then and there. By some miracle, I managed to keep from making a mess of myself.

But it came at a price. I spent the entire night tossing and turning on the couch, fantasizing about the thousand different ways I would take Devon. Fantasizing about all the things I would do to her and the things I would make her do. I imagined the feel of her body. Imagined the sweet scent of her musk and the taste of her on my lips. Thinking about all that had me in the shower jerking off last night just to relieve the pressure. Twice.

Giving myself a shake, I walk into the kitchen and pull the bottle of orange juice out of the refrigerator. I twist off the top and toss it on the counter then take a long swallow.

“Good morning.”

I manage to avoid choking on the orange juice and turn to see Devon standing in the kitchen archway and have to quickly think of something mundane to keep from getting a hard-on right in front of her.

She’s wearing one of my T-shirts—that she’s swimming in—and a pair of socks. And that’s it as far as I can tell. I’m sure she’s wearing panties under the t-shirt, of course, but the image she presents me with her tousled hair and bleary smile smacks of innocence that turns me on in so many ways. Turns me almost feral.

All I can think about is sitting her up on the counter, spreading her pale thighs, and driving myself into her hot, sweet hole as hard as I possibly can until I fill her with my seed.

I clear my throat and run a hand through my hair, trying to purify my thoughts as quickly as I can. Devon steps forward and takes the bottle out of my hand.

“You mind?” she asks.

“Have at it.”

She takes a long swallow of juice, and my eyes travel the curve of her neck, moving down to the swell of her breasts beneath the thin fabric of my t-shirt, then further down still to her shapely, toned legs. For being such a tiny little thing, she’s got remarkably long legs. And as I stare at them, all I can think about is having them wrapped around the back of my head and my tongue deep in that sweet, wet cleft between them.

“Thank you.” She hands the bottle back to me.

“You’re welcome,” I reply and take another drink before setting it down on the counter.

We stand there staring at one another in an awkward silence for a couple of moments. It feels like that strained morning-after tension—but without the benefit of having had the night

before. Devon looks down and laughs to herself, breaking that tension.

I give her a smile. “Hungry?”

“Starving, actually.”

“Good,” I say. “Go get dressed and all while I make us some breakfast.”

“You’re going to cook?”

“I am a man of many talents.”

She grins. “Color me skeptical. But I suppose we’ll see.”

Devon walks out of the kitchen, leaving me to my own devices. Admittedly, I’m never going to have my own show on Food Network but I’m not half bad. So, I decide on an omelet and collect everything I need from the refrigerator.

“I’m going to take a shower, if that’s okay,” Devon calls from the back of the condo.

“Go ahead. Mi casa es su casa,” I call back.

While she showers, I make breakfast. By the time she’s done, dressed, and sitting at the table, I’ve got it all laid out.

“Chorizo omelet with cheese and avocado slices, sourdough toast with jam, and bacon,” I proudly announce. “And coffee, of course, if you’re so inclined.”

“In fact, I am so inclined.”

“Good girl. Dig in.”

I watch as she takes the first bite of her food, and she grins around it. “Okay, this is pretty damn good. Really good, actually.”

“I told you. I’m a man of many skills.”

“Clearly.”

We eat in silence for a few minutes, and it somehow feels completely natural. Domestic. We’ve known each other less than twenty-four hours but sitting here, having a conversation over breakfast with her just feels... normal. Like this is the

way things are supposed to be. It shouldn't. I know it shouldn't. But it just does.

Devon takes a drink of her coffee and sets the cup down. "Can I ask you something?"

"Of course."

"Don't take it the wrong way, okay?"

I laugh. "I'll do my best."

"Well... I mean... I know pro athletes make boatloads of money, and I was just kind of curious why you're living in a one-bedroom condo that's kind of... small," she says, eyes darting around my space. "I mean, it's nice, don't get me wrong. It's a hell of a lot nicer than my dorm. But it's kind of plain and doesn't really seem like you."

I raise an eyebrow, a smile curling the corners of my mouth. "And what does seem like me?"

"I don't know. But I know it's not this." She shrugs. "All the furnishings and everything seem like they came with the place. And I don't see much in the way of personal touches. I thought pro athletes liked to keep their memorabilia—jerseys, balls, trophies. Things like that."

"First, we call them sweaters, not jerseys. Second, we play with pucks, not balls—"

She rolls her eyes and laughs. "Po-tay-to, po-tah-to."

"Nah. More like, potato, block of cheese."

Her giggle is girlish and sweet. She bats her big eyes at me, and as my gaze locks onto hers, Devon's cheeks turn bright red, and she quickly looks away. She chews her bottom lip, and I'm suddenly glad I'm sitting at the table because my cock stiffens as thoughts of bending her over the table and pounding away on her from behind flash through my head like an erotic highlight reel. I shift in my chair, doing my best to will those thoughts and my hard-on away.

"I'm serious. This place just doesn't feel like you," she says. "It seems kind of small for a big guy like you. And even

though you don't strike me as the overly sentimental sort, it's just totally sterile. Impersonal.”

“I'm a little more sentimental than you think,” I tell her. “And you're not wrong... I do have a room where I keep all my memorabilia.”

A goofy grin on her face, Devon pointedly looks around and turns back to me. “Are there secret rooms somewhere in this place?”

“No. This is the place I rent in season. It's a temporary place. My home—my real home—is back in Montana.”

My laptop is sitting on the table, so I pull it over and open it up. After logging in, I open up my pictures folder, turn it around, and push it over to her.

“That's my actual home.”

Devon takes a bite of her omelet and chews as she scrolls through all my photos. The light from the laptop sparkles off her jade green eyes and her full lips curl into a smile as she “oohs” and “ahhs” while flipping through all the pictures.

It's a faux-log cabin, twelve-room spread I had built about five years ago. My home sits in a valley near the Flathead National Forest. I've got horse stables, an indoor pool and jacuzzi, and an indoor basketball court on the grounds. It's picturesque, remote, and entirely peaceful. It's my place of Zen.

“You have horses,” she breathes.

“I wouldn't be a proper Montanan if I didn't,” I tell her. “I grew up around them. There's nothing better than heading out on a long ride on horseback. It just feels like freedom.”

“I've never ridden a horse before.”

“That's something we're going to have to change then.”

“Yeah?”

I nod. “You'll absolutely love it.”

Devon takes a sip of her coffee and sets her cup down as she continues scrolling through my pictures in silence. It's clear she likes what she sees when she finally looks up.

“Yeah, this house seems more like you,” she says.

“I hope so. I had it custom-built with my own designs.”

“You designed your own house?”

“Like I said, I’m a man of many talents.”

“So I’m learning,” she says with a giggle. “But it looks so remote. Like there’s nothing anywhere around you.”

“That’s by design. It’s where I go to relax and be alone. It’s where I go when I want to escape this crazy, screwed-up world.”

She sighs wistfully. “That would be nice... being able to hit the eject button like that. God knows there are times I want to just get away from everything and everybody.”

“My door’s always open to you, Devon. Any time you want to escape, just say the word.”

She smiles at me. “I might just take you up on that.”

“Please do,” I say and glance at my watch. “But right now, I need to get down to the rink for practice. You’re welcome to stay—”

“No, I should get back to my dorm and get ready for classes.”

“I can drop you at your dorm then.”

“I’d appreciate that.”

“Are you going to be okay?”

She nods. “Yeah. I think so.”

I grab her phone and quickly input my number. “That’s my number. If that assclown even says boo to you, I want you to call me, and I’ll teach the little shit some respect.”

She smiles. “Thank you, Dawson. For... well... for everything.”

“I want to see you again.”

She opens her mouth but hesitates. Her cheeks flare with color again, and she looks away shyly, biting her bottom lip. She takes a minute then looks up.

“I’d like to see you again too.”

“Good. You have my number. Let me know when you’re done with classes for the day, and we’ll get together.”

She raises her eyes and holds my gaze. “You know how crazy this is, don’t you? I mean—”

“Life is crazy. But sometimes, you just have to say fuck it and take a chance.”

“Fuck it then,” she says and toasts me with her coffee mug.

“That’s the spirit.”

“I mean it. Thank you for everything, Dawson.”

“You’re very welcome. But you don’t need to thank me for anything. Believe me when I say it’s my pleasure.”

Her smile is magnetic and somehow makes her look even more youthful than she is. Adding to the insanity is the fact that I’m almost twice her age. I’m technically old enough to be her father. I would have been a young father, but still. Devon is all-woman though, and as I let my gaze travel the curves of her body once more, I’m reminded of that fact.

My heart slams against my ribcage because I’m battered by waves of feelings that are utterly alien to me. Feelings I’m not entirely sure how to categorize or what to do with. All I know is that I want her. All I know is that I’m going to claim this girl and make her mine. Devon doesn’t know it yet, but she belongs to me.

She’s incredibly young, but there’s something about her that resonates with me in ways I never expected... ways I never expected to resonate with anybody to be honest.

And like I just told her... sometimes you just have to say fuck it.

DEVON

“Are you okay, Dev?” Samantha asks. “You seem kind of out of it.”

My friend Sammy and I walk through the quad on our way to our next class. It’s a gray, overcast day with a bit of a chill in the air. It’s going to be scarf and beanie season soon enough. I turn and offer her a smile.

“Yeah, I’m fine,” I tell her. “Just kind of a long night.”

Dawson had been kind enough to give me his bedroom last night, and even though it was possibly the most comfortable bed I’ve ever slept in, sleep hadn’t come easy. For part of the night, I watched the door, worried that he was a wolf in sheep’s clothing and would come barging in and force himself on me. When I realized that wasn’t going to happen, part of me was a little... disappointed. Strange to say, I know. But I couldn’t stop thinking about him. And if I’m being honest, there’s a big part of me that can’t stop thinking about having him inside of me.

I don’t know what’s going on with me. I’m not that kind of a girl. I’m not the type to meet a guy at a bar then take him home and bang him two hours later. That’s just not me. But I’d be lying if I said I didn’t want to bang Dawson last night—and still do this morning. I keep thinking about that kiss we shared and yearn for his touch. Yearn for more than that. I keep thinking about having that gruff, grizzled face between my thighs and that satiny soft tongue on my most sensitive parts.

It's a thought that makes me shudder and fills me with heat. Especially down there.

"So, what happened to you last night anyway?" Sammy asks. "You just disappeared."

"I sent you a text."

"Yeah, but you were being all mysterious and cagey," she says with a laugh. "Did you end up going home with that water polo guy who was chatting you up?"

"Oh god, no. That guy was as intellectually stimulating as a sponge cake."

"Yeah, but the body on him..."

"You know me better than that," I say. "I need something more than a smokin' hot body. I need actual substance."

"And this is why you are a virgin, my dear Devon." Sammy sighs. "We're in college. No guy has substance here. They won't have it until they're like, in their thirties and have some life experience under their belts. In college, you take the hottest guy and get your own life experience."

She laughs but I don't, my thoughts turning elsewhere. Dawson has substance. The fact that he's able to hold an intelligent conversation without slipping in the obvious innuendo with the hope I'll think it's clever enough to make me drop my panties then and there proves that to me. Then there's the collection of books on his nightstand. That he reads for pleasure at all, unlike most of the cretins on campus, is a big point in his column.

His condo has very few personal touches, but the ones I saw point to a man with plenty of life experience and substance to spare. He's not some meathead jock. He's not some horny college frat boy who thinks he can impress me with how fast he can shotgun a beer then expect me to fuck him in the back seat of his car. No, Dawson is a man with something between the ears. And that's even more attractive to me than his smokin' hot body.

Sammy stops walking then turns and scrutinizes me. I try to shy away but she grips my upper arms, her eyes boring into

me. Sammy has always had this preternatural ability to see through me and just knows when I'm hiding something from her. It's like she can read my mind. It's invasive and creepy. She's worse than my mom. Sammy finally lets go of my arms and steps back, a wide and wolfish grin on her face.

"You went home with somebody." She shakes her head and eyes me up and down. "My little Devon finally went home with somebody. So, come on, if not the water polo guy, who was it?"

"It's not like that. I didn't sleep with him."

Sammy grins fiendishly. "So you say. But who was it?"

I sigh. Sammy can be a pit bull. When she gets her teeth into something, it's almost impossible to unlock her jaws. She's not going to stop pressing until I give it up.

"Fine," I say. "His name is Dawson Davis—"

"The hockey player? You're kidding me?"

"Wait, you know who he is?"

She scoffs. "He's played for LA for the last eighteen years, has won three Cups, has a pile of Conn Smythe, Selke, and Hart awards, and is a lock to be a first-ballot Hall of Famer, babe. Of course, I know who he is."

"I don't even know what any of that means," I admit. "But honestly, I didn't even know LA had a hockey team until last night."

She shakes her head again. "You're clueless. Adorable but clueless. But what I want to know is how this all happened. How did you end up going home with Dawson Davis?"

A small smile touches my lips as I tell her the story, starting with Zack being a creep and ending with me walking out of his condo this morning. As I tell her, my lips warm at the memory of the kiss we shared, as does my body, and I feel myself growing wet again at the mere thought of his hands on me. By the time I'm done with my story, Sammy is bouncing up and down, an excited smile on her face, and she actually squeals with delight.

“I cannot believe you’re going to sleep with Dawson freaking Davis, babe!” she exclaims.

“Woah, woah, woah. Let’s back that pony up.” I hold my hands up. “I never said I’m going to sleep with him. All I said is he wants to take me to dinner.”

“Which, of course, will lead to a lot of naked time with Dawson freaking Davis. You are going to have to tell me everything. I mean, you do realize that, right? Like every single minute detail. I want it all, girl.”

From the corner of my eye, I can see people starting to look at us and feel my face growing warm not with lust this time, but with embarrassment.

“Could you keep your voice down?” I hiss. “It’s not like I want this to be broadcast all over campus. And I’m sure Dawson wouldn’t like it either.”

Her smile widens but she does as I ask and lowers her voice. “Dev, what’s he like? I mean, I’ve seen him give postgame interviews, but what is he really like?”

“He’s... nice.”

She looks at me with a deadpan expression. “Nice? That’s it? That’s all you’re going to give me? Come on now, what is he really like?”

“He’s nice,” I say with a laugh. “Intelligent. Thoughtful. He made me breakfast this morning and showed me his house in Montana. Said he’ll take me horseback riding because I’ve never been.”

What I don’t tell her is that he’s also forceful. That he’s commanding. That he looks at me like I’m already his and that I somehow belong to him. I don’t tell her that because some girls might see that as creepy.

But the way he looks at me, the way his eyes just drink me in—it’s a turn-on. It’s something I like. Something I crave. And trust me, it’s not something I would have ever expected of myself. I belong to nobody. But as the memory of his gaze lingers in my mind, I find that I’ll carve out an exception for Dawson freaking Davis.

“Oh. My. God,” she squeals. “Babe, this is incredible. Unbelievable. I mean, what are the chances that you would hook up with Dawson Davis?”

“Is that where you went last night? Hooking up with some hockey player?”

I turn and feel my heart drop into my stomach when I see Zack Winters standing there, a deep frown on his face like he’s a disapproving parent or something. I didn’t see him walk up and have no idea how long he’s been standing there or how much he overheard.

Zack is tall—though still half a foot shorter than Dawson—and kind of gangly. His mousy brown hair, hazel eyes, and pale complexion add to his nondescript appearance. He’s the kind of milquetoast person you’d meet and totally forget about five minutes later.

Zack has been in a couple of my classes, and he’s glommed onto me. I made the mistake of talking to him and being friendly, and now he won’t leave me alone. Lately, his behavior has gotten weird. Creepy. He’s turned up in places I’m at, claiming it’s all a strange coincidence or twist of fate that brought us together when I know it’s anything but that. Lately, he’s been acting possessive and jealous whenever I’m talking to somebody, and it’s starting to freak me out.

I’ve tried to subtly sever ties. I always leave class before him or make some excuse as to why I can’t hang out and talk. I’ve tried to be nice about it but he just hasn’t taken the hint. If anything, he’s clinging to me even harder. I refused to go to campus security because I didn’t want to be a bitch or get him into trouble. I have a hard time being mean to people. But that’s a decision I’m starting to regret because he’s obviously just not getting it. Or more to the point, he’s not wanting to get it.

“I was waiting for you,” he says. “First at the bar when you said you were going to the bathroom, then outside the dorms. But you never came home last night. Were you with this hockey player all night?”

“I don’t owe you an explanation, Zack.”

“She doesn’t owe you anything,” Sammy growls.

“I wasn’t talking to you, Samantha,” he fires back. “I was asking why Devon left me standing there at the bar when she said she’d be right back.”

“I wasn’t there with you, Zack.” I’m trying not to pull my hair because he’s seriously grating on my nerves right now. Have been for a while. “We weren’t there together. I mean, you get that, right? You just showed up.”

“To see you—”

“That’s not her problem, dude,” Sammy says.

“This isn’t your business, Samantha, so shut up,” he spits.

Sammy recoils like he just slapped her, and the blood in my veins starts to boil over. My body heats up as the anger rises within me like a dark and malevolent tide, and before I know what I’m doing, I step forward and thrust my finger into his face, pulse pounding in my temple.

“Don’t you dare talk to her that way,” I snap. “In fact, don’t you dare talk to her at all. And while I’m at it, leave me alone too, Zack. You don’t own me. We’re not even friends. Not really. And I don’t owe you an explanation for anything.”

“You don’t mean that, Devon. We’re friends,” he whines. “We’re a lot more than friends.”

“Only in your mind, Zack. And from here on out, don’t you dare think about talking to me. Don’t even look at me. Just leave me the fuck alone!”

And with that, I grab Sammy’s arm and we head away quickly, leaving Zack standing there, his face red, his eyes narrowed, and people all around him whispering and giggling at his expense.

DAWSON

I t's hard to miss the furtive looks or hear the hushed whispers as I walk through the student union. I'm well-versed in ignoring them, though.

I'm on a mission. I weave through the maze of tables that fill the center of the cavernous room, my eyes in constant motion. It takes a few minutes, but I finally spot her. With a wide smile on my face, I make my way over to the table where she's sitting with half a dozen of her friends. When she looks up and sees me standing there, her eyes widen in shock and a startled laugh bursts from her throat.

"Dawson," she gasps. "W-what are you doing here?"

"Practice ended early because we've got a game tonight, so I stopped by to see you."

Three of the six other people at the table recognize me, and their expressions are even more shocked than Devon's. They exchange looks and quiet words as she stands up and pulls me off to the side, her cheeks flushing and an adorably awkward smile on her lips.

Behind us, her friends are gaping at us and whispering amongst themselves, all while trying to keep from making it look too obvious they're talking about us. It makes me laugh.

"How did you find me here?" Devon asks. "I mean, the campus is huge."

"I pinged your phone."

Her mouth falls open and she gapes at me. “You pinged my phone?”

“Well, I didn’t do it. I’m not quite that tech-savvy,” I tell her. “I know a guy who knows a guy who did it for me though.”

She giggles again and shakes her head. “You could have just called me, you know.”

“Yeah, but you wouldn’t have been as impressed as you are if I just showed up out of the blue like this.”

“Who says I’m impressed?” She scoffs. “In fact, who’s to say I don’t think you pinged my phone like that is creepy and stalkerish?”

“Your eyes tell me you’re impressed.”

Devon giggles then bites her bottom lip in that adorably sexy way that drives me wild, making it increasingly harder to keep my hands off her.

“Both things can be true, you know,” she says. “It’s kind of creepy and stalkerish.”

I shrug. “If there’s one thing hockey has taught me, it’s to never be afraid to get after what I want and stop at nothing to get it. Besides, you don’t think it’s all that creepy anyway. I can see that in your eyes too.”

“Oh, can you?”

“I can.”

Devon looks down but can’t keep the smile off her face as that giggle I’ve come to like drifts out of her mouth again. She looks around and seems to notice all the people stealing glances at us and gasping. She’s clearly uncomfortable with any sort of public scrutiny because her face turns a deep shade of red and a squeak escapes her throat.

“How do you do it?” she asks as she focuses her attention on me. “How do you deal with people staring at you wherever you go like you’re a zoo exhibit or something?”

I shrug. “I just shut it out. I mean, I guess I’ve just gotten used to it, but it hardly even fazes me anymore, truth be told. I

barely notice it.”

“Yeah, well, I’m not used to having people gawking at me.”

“It shows,” I say with a chuckle.

“Laugh it up, funny man.”

“How has your day been?” I ask. “Has that guy... What’s his name? Zack? Has he given you any trouble today?”

She frowns, and it’s easy to tell she had a run-in with him. Her face falls, and she stares at her feet. Devon’s debating with herself about whether to tell me about it or not. But then she nods to herself, her decision made.

“Yeah, we had a thing earlier,” she confesses. “But don’t worry, you don’t need to go body-check him or whatever you were going to do. I handled him.”

I laugh. “Body-check him, huh?”

“Yeah, isn’t that like a hockey thing?”

“It is,” I reply. “So, you handled him?”

She nods. “I did. Very forcefully too, I might add. You can ask Sammy about it.”

“Oh, I believe you. I have no trouble believing you can be downright vicious when you need to be,” I say lightly.

“You better believe I can. So you should watch it, mister.”

“I’ll stay on my toes.”

“Do that.” She flashes me a smile that makes my loins twist.

We stand in an awkward silence for a moment, our eyes just locked on each other’s. To me, that feeling of things between us being natural and somehow just being right settles down over my shoulders again.

Being around Devon is like being enveloped in warmth. It’s a feeling that’s foreign to me but one that the more I feel, the more I find that I like it. The more I crave it. And the more I crave Devon.

“So, I mean... It’s nice to see you and all, but what are you doing here, Dawson?” she asks, breaking that awkward air

between us.

“Oh, I stopped by to see you obviously. But I also want you to come to the game tonight. Bring your friends. I’ll reserve a suite for you guys.”

Devon’s mouth falls open. “Really?”

“I figure it’s time for you to see your hometown hockey team. Let me prove to you that we exist and all.”

She squeals and jumps up and down like an excited kid on Christmas morning. “Dawson, that would be so amazing. You’d really do that?”

“I’d do a lot more for you, Devon.”

Devon sucks in a steadying breath. Her eyes widen, and she falls silent for a moment but her cheeks flush. She’s so flustered that even the tips of her ears turn bright red as her mouth opens and closes, making her look like a fish pulled out of water. She clears her throat and rakes her fingers through her hair, making me laugh softly.

“You enjoy doing that, don’t you? You like saying things to get a rise out of me.” She pins me with a look.

“Yeah, sometimes. Your reactions are just too adorable to pass up sometimes.”

“Well... stop that,” she says with a giggle.

“I’ll consider it. Anyway, I need to go squeeze in a nap before heading back to the arena for the game. Should I go ahead and reserve the suite?”

“Yes.” That excitement is back in her voice. “Yes, please. That would be incredible.”

“Done. Go to the security door near the main entrance, and I’ll make sure to leave word that you’re to be admitted to the suite.”

“Thank you, Dawson. Thank you, thank you.”

“Like I said, you don’t need to thank me for anything.”

“Well, thank you anyway,” she says. “My mother raised me with manners.”

I laugh. “Fair enough. You and I will go to dinner after the game.”

“That sounds wonderful.”

“It does.” I lower my voice as my gaze drops to her lips. So sweet. So fucking tempting. “Anyway, I’ll see you tonight.”

“You definitely will.”

I lean forward and place a gentle kiss on the crown of her head, doing my best to not hear the gasping and surprised giggling from the crowd around us. It seems Devon is going to be something of a celebrity on campus after I leave. She’s going to love that. I turn and head out of the student union.

I’ve got just enough time to nap for a couple of hours then get to the arena to get something to eat before we hit the ice. I just hope we put on a good show for Devon tonight—and that we don’t lose.

As I walk across campus, heading for the parking lot, I feel a lightness in my chest and fluttering in my stomach. It’s... excitement. I haven’t had nerves before a game in ages. Which leads me to conclude it’s the idea of playing in front of Devon that has my gut churning. I’m excited for her to see me play.

There haven’t been many people in my life who have given me a case of nerves before a game like this. I can count them on one hand and still have fingers left over. A smile creases my lips at the thought.

Mixed in with that excitement, I recognize the darker thread woven around it all. And its name is Zack.

Devon said she handled him, and I believe her. But I know guys. Especially the jealous and possessive types. Because I do, I have a sick feeling that we haven’t heard the last of him yet. Not by a long shot. And knowing that, my excitement is tempered by the tide of worry that’s rising inside of me.

I hope I’m wrong. But I don’t think I am. Which means that something is going to need to be done about this kid because

he will not bother Devon anymore. I won't allow it. He's gonna have to get through me, and nobody—I mean nobody—gets through me. Zack's about to learn it the hard way.

DEVON

“That was unreal!” Sammy exclaims. “Baby, you need to make this man yours so we can keep getting sweet seats like these.”

I laugh. “I would never date somebody just for the things they can give me.”

“Come on.” She waves her hand wildly to the view from our box. “It doesn’t hurt.”

“You’re awful.”

“That’s why you love me.”

“I don’t know that I’d go that far,” I tease.

Sammy laughs. She was kind enough to explain the game to me the whole night. I was having a hard time keeping up with it all at first, but I started to understand it a little better by the end of the game. I think I’ve got a grasp on the basics. But the nuances of the game are still way over my head. I know enough anyway to know that Dawson’s team won. That somehow made it even more exciting.

And he had a great game. He scored twice, and Sammy said he assisted on two other goals, giving him four points for the night, which I took to mean was a really good thing. She was super excited about it.

Even though I didn’t understand what was going on most of the time, we all had an amazing time. There were eight of us in the plush, fully catered suite Dawson provided. It was an unbelievable experience. And I was a hero to all my friends

for the night. Most of them had been to a hockey game before. Many games. But they'd never been to one in such style before.

Honestly, I think I could get to like hockey. And if I'm being honest, watching it from a suite is even better.

"Devon Kirkpatrick?"

We all turn to find a large man in a dark blue suit standing in the doorway to the suite. He's got an earpiece in like he works for the Secret Service or something and a pin on his lapel bearing the team emblem.

I raise my hand. "That's me."

"Mr. Davis asked that I escort you down to the tunnel to wait for him."

Sammy turns to me with a grin on her face. "Well, ain't you all fancy?"

I laugh. "You going to be okay?"

"I'm sure we'll muddle through."

My friends are still busy eating and drinking everything on the back table, talking about the game excitedly. The fans are starting to file out of the arena, but as I look around, I see people still partying in the suites. I turn back to Sammy with a worried frown.

"You don't mind, do you?" I ask.

"You're kidding, right?" she replies. "Get out of here. Go meet your Prince Charming."

I grab Sammy and hug her tight. "I love you."

"I love you back. Now, go. Oh, tell him I said great game, and if he's in the mood, I wouldn't mind an autographed sweater."

I laugh. "I'll see what I can do."

"You're the best, babe."

"Yeah, I know," I reply with a wink.

The man smiles at me and leads me out of the suite. I follow him downstairs and through a labyrinth of hallways until we

come to a wide corridor. The walls are adorned with murals of what I assume are team legends.

There are clusters of other people in the tunnel waiting. Most of them are behind a rope line and look like they're waiting for the teams to come out so they can get autographs or something. Standing alone on the other side of the tunnel makes me feel a little conspicuous, and I can't help but notice people are casting curious glances at me.

Mostly to avoid the weird looks from the other people across the way, I settle the hat with the team logo on my head then look down and smooth out the black and purple, long-sleeved t-shirt I bought in the team store before the game.

Sammy wanted me to get Dawson's sweater, but I quickly vetoed that idea. I thought it would look way too desperate. So, I settled for a generic team design so I could support Dawson without looking super needy.

"Hey, you guys got lucky tonight."

A big, burly guy wearing a Seattle sweater is leaning against the rope line staring hard at me, a scowl on his face. He's obviously had a few tonight.

"Hey, little girl. I'm talkin' to you," he growls.

I look away, trying to ignore him as his friends try to hold him back. But he shrugs them off, ducks under the rope line, and marches over to me. He stops just a foot or two in front of me, his belly straining against his sweater as he leans forward, his dark eyes narrow, his lips curled back into a sneer.

His warm breath—reeking of beer and cigarettes—washes over my face, and I turn my head to the side, trying to avoid breathing it in.

"I said you guys got lucky tonight." He emphasizes each word as if I'm hard of hearing.

"I heard you the first time."

"So? What do you have to say to that?"

"I have nothing to say to that. And I have nothing to say to you. So, please. Just leave me alone."

His laughter is harsh and grating. “A chickenshit. Just like your team, huh?”

I grit my teeth and look him in the eye. “Do you get off picking on girls half your size?” I snap. “Is that your thing? Do you think that makes you a big man or something?”

“I just don’t like mouthy little bitches.”

His friends are calling to him but the man steps forward, his round belly bumping into me as he looms over me, his face red, his eyes filled with anger. What he’s angry about, I have no idea. I’ve never had to deal with anybody who takes their sports as seriously as this guy does. But the way he’s staring at me makes me shudder as fear ripples through my heart.

I hate to admit it, but this guy is scary. He intimidates me. Mostly because I have no trouble believing he has no qualms about putting his hands on a woman.

“You hear me? I don’t like mouthy little bitches,” he repeats.

“Neither do I.”

The man takes a step back, a startled expression crossing his face. I turn and when I see Dawson walking up, his jaw set and a scowl on his face, the wave of relief that washes over me is profound. Dressed in blue slacks and a white button-down shirt with the collar open and the sleeves rolled up, he looks like he’s walking off a GQ photoshoot. But there’s no mistaking the look on his face. He means business.

Dawson steps between the man and me, glaring hard at him. The tunnel suddenly goes dead silent, and there’s a nervous energy crackling in the air around us. It feels like the atmosphere right before a storm breaks. The man who accosted me is about as tall as Dawson, but he’s heavysset and obviously out of shape. If it comes to blows, Dawson is going to kill this man without breaking a sweat.

“Dawson,” I say quietly, tugging on the back of his shirt. “Let’s just go.”

“I don’t like mouthy little bitches either,” Dawson repeats. “And from where I’m standing, you’re the only mouthy little bitch around here.”

“Dude, I wasn’t—”

“Shut the fuck up,” Dawson roars.

The man flinches but then casts a glance at his friends who are staring at him in stunned silence. He clenches his jaw and stiffens as he turns back to Dawson, caught between not wanting to get his ass beat and not wanting to look like a chump in front of his buddies. My hope is that common sense wins out and the guy backs off. But when testosterone and alcohol are mixed, I’ve learned that common sense rarely wins out.

“Dude, I was just messing with her,” the guy says. “No harm done.”

“And what the fuck made you think you could mess with her like that?”

Dawson’s voice was hard and cold, and the man licked his lips nervously. He keeps cutting glances at his friends, but he’s not getting any help from them. He sniffs loudly, and when he glares back at Dawson, I groan, knowing what’s coming.

“Yeah, well, what’s it to you? She your bitch or something? Because if she is, you should probably teach her some fucking manners—”

The man never gets to finish that statement because Dawson drives his fist into the man’s ample belly. His eyeballs almost bulge out of their sockets and his mouth falls open, a loud “oomph” bursting from his throat as he doubles over, clutching his belly. As the man gasps and wheezes, Dawson puts his hand on the man’s back and bends down so he’s at eye level with him.

“You need to learn some fucking respect, you piece of shit,” Dawson snarls. “And you need to learn that you don’t walk up on women that way. Especially my woman. Am I clear?”

The man gasps loudly and looks like he’s trying to speak but no words come out of his mouth. Nothing but that high-pitched wheezing sound so he just nods.

“I mean it. Learn some goddamn respect,” Dawson says. “If I ever see you in my building again, I’m not going to stop with a

punch to the gut. I will beat you bloody. Am I clear?”

“Y—you’re clear.”

“Good boy.”

As Dawson stands back up, a half dozen men in red windbreakers with “Security” stenciled in yellow across the back come running up. Dawson chuckles.

“Johnny on the spot,” he mutters to me.

“Sorry, Mr. Davis,” says the first man to reach them. “We’ll take this from here.”

“Yeah, that’s probably a good idea. Having somebody posted on the rope line so something like this doesn’t happen again would be another good idea.”

“Yes, sir. We’re sorry about that. We were dealing with another situation.”

“And in the meantime, letting this situation happen.”

“Sorry, Mr. Davis.”

Dawson takes my hand and walks me down the tunnel. I’ll be lying if I say that I hate him rushing into the rescue like that. I don’t totally hate it. I know it goes against my feminist ideals, but seeing him willing to beat somebody who offended me... it’s kind of hot. Okay, it’s really hot and I find something pool low in my belly.

“Ready for dinner?” he asks.

Truthfully, I’m ready for a lot more than that. But I’m not going to tell him that since I’m sure it’s all the adrenaline and endorphins of almost having some large, drunk man beat me senseless just because his team lost.

“I am,” I say simply and offer him a warm smile.

DAWSON

“**Y**ou played great tonight,” Devon says.

“It helped to have a good luck penny up in the stands.”

“I’m sure you do that every night.”

I laugh. “Not this season. Tonight just felt... different.”

I pull to a stop in the parking lot and turn off the engine. I’m not lying. Tonight really did feel different. I’m not going to say I tried harder—I give it my all on every shift on the ice—but there was a different energy inside of me knowing that Devon was in the arena. It’s strange and I can’t explain it, but it just felt like everything was clicking tonight.

“Well, I’m glad it all worked out and that you guys won.”

“I mean, you realize you’re going to have to come to every game now. You’re obviously my lucky penny.”

She laughs and even in the dim lighting in the cab, blush rises on her cheeks. A soft rain comes out of nowhere and starts to fall, the raindrops tapping on the roof of my SUV with a pleasant, almost musical sound to it. We sit in silence for a couple of moments, the air in the cab suddenly feeling tense, awkward, and charged with a sense of anticipation. Devon turns to me and smiles.

“Thank you for tonight. Dinner was incredible and I had an amazing time.”

“You’re very welcome.”

“And thank you for putting that guy back at the arena in his place,” she says. “If I’m being honest, I was a little scared.”

“Yeah, well, security should have been there to do their jobs. I’m sorry things even escalated to that point. That’s a memory I’d rather you didn’t have.”

“Don’t worry, tonight was too fun and too special to let that douchebag ruin it. I’ll keep nothing but the good memories of tonight.”

“Good. I’m glad to hear that.”

My eyes travel the length of her body, starting at the shapely, milky white thighs that disappear under the dark skirt then up to the swell of her full, round breasts straining against the fabric of the shirt she bought at the team store. This vision stiffens my dick into a crowbar. I want her in ways I’ve never wanted anybody before.

Leaning forward, I slip my hand around the back of her neck and pull Devon to me. The second our lips meet, I feel that same powerful burst of electricity I felt the first time we kissed. Her lips part and I slide my tongue into her mouth, swirling it around hers. Air rushes from my lungs, my nerves strung tight and my manhood begging to be set free.

Devon leans into my kiss, a small groan of passion escaping her mouth as her tongue rolls languidly around mine. The sound goes straight to my veins. I slide my hand up her side and feel her stiffen when I cup her breast and give it a gentle squeeze. I wait for her to pull away or smack my hand, but she doesn’t. Instead, she melts into me. Her breast is full and soft and feels like it’s made just for my hand. I slowly pull back and look into her eyes, which blaze with heat.

“Come here, Devon.”

We slip into the back seat of my Navigator. The windows are blacked out, so we don’t have to worry about anybody seeing us. With the rain still drumming on the roof above us, I pull Devon onto my lap and pull her down into another kiss. I can’t get enough of how sweet she tastes.

As she whimpers into my mouth, I slide my hands down her back, trailing my fingers over her ass before slipping them beneath the hem of her skirt and along her soft, cotton panties.

Gripping her ass, I pull Devon forward and move my hips, sliding the length of my rigid cock along the sweet cleft between her thighs. Devon gasps and looks down at me, her eyes wide, biting her bottom lip. She's trembling but as she rolls her hips, rubbing her slit against my stiff rod, her face flushes, and her eyes fill with a wanton desire that only gets me harder. I lean forward and kiss her neck, nipping at her skin with my teeth.

Devon's movements get faster, and she grips my shoulders, digging her fingernails into me as she rubs herself against me. She rises and falls in my lap, grinding herself against me, her moans growing louder than the drumbeat of rain on the roof above us. Then all at once, Devon stiffens, and she throws her head back.

A long, shuddering groan fills the air, and she shakes wildly on top of me. She looks at me with an expression of surprise on her face, almost like she doesn't know what just happened and I suddenly know that's the first orgasm she's had that she didn't give herself. God, her innocent turns me into an animal.

A slow smile crosses my face as I grab her hips and slide her off my lap, laying her down across the back seat of my Navigator. She looks at me with a look of uncertainty on her face. I slide down and kneel on the floorboard. It's not the most comfortable position for a guy my size to be in, but considering the prize waiting for me, I'll muddle through.

She watches me with wide eyes while I slide my hands up her silky-smooth thighs and gasps softly when I slide her panties down, letting the tips of my fingers trail along her skin. I take them off and slip them into my pocket and part her legs as I lean forward. Forcing myself to go slower, I slide the tip of my tongue along her wet, sweet lips.

Devon twitches.

"Oh god," she whispers.

I slide my hand up through the thin thatch of hair above her sweet slit and up to her tits, cupping and squeezing them. At the same time, I part her velvety soft lips with my tongue, plunging it into her as deep as I can. Heaven. Fucking heaven.

Devon squirms and moans as I lap at her pussy, breathing in her musk and savoring the taste of her nectar—sweeter than candy.

“Dawson...” she moans. “I need to tell you something.”

It takes herculean effort, but I stop. Of course, I stop. If she wants to talk about current world events while my nerve endings are firing in all directions, then I’ll fucking listen.

“What is it, baby?”

“I’m a virgin. I haven’t...I’ve never...”

I already know it, but hearing the words out loud still fires my blood to boiling point. She’s really mine. All mine. “Do you want me to stop?”

“God, no. No!”

That’s all the encouragement I need.

Taking her clit into my mouth, I suck on it and drive a finger into her wet little hole. She’s far too tight to get a second finger in so I move the one digit along her slick walls as I swirl my tongue around her button. Devon is squirming on the seat, her trembling cries ringing in my ears, the sound of it sweeter than a church choir.

“Oh god, Dawson,” she gasps. “Oh my god.”

Her body stiffens again, and her breath quickens. Knowing she’s close, I suck on her clit harder while I pound my fingers into her tight little twat. It’s so wet my finger is sliding into her sex with ease, and I’m finally able to squeeze a second digit in.

Devon clenches up and winces, but she writhes against my hand, taking my fingers deeper into her honey pot. Her eyes are squeezed shut and her mouth is hanging open, her entire face frozen in a rictus of pleasure as she reaches down and

takes a handful of my hair, yanking it hard as she pulls me closer to her.

The pain of her pulling my hair so hard makes me grimace but sends a rush of endorphins through me. It hurts but not in a bad way. That slight pinch of pain only fuels my lust, and I lap at her clit wildly, nibbling and sucking on it as I drive my fingers into her dripping wet slit with a furious abandon that has Devon thrashing around, her grip on my hair only getting tighter.

“Oh, fuck. Dawson!”

Devon’s body grows as rigid as my dick, and she holds completely still for a moment. But then a cry so loud I thought they might be able to hear her in the dorms bursts from her mouth, and she starts to shake wildly. She grips my hair, yanking hard on it, as she comes. The pain continues to make my fiery need burn brighter, and I suck juices that are—as the song goes—sweeter than Tennessee whiskey.

The trembling in her body seems to go on forever, and it takes a while for her breathing to return to normal. Only then does she relinquish her grip on my hair. Licking the sweet taste of her off my lips, I climb into the seat beside Devon as she sits up with a shell-shocked look on her face. Her hair is tousled and she’s still slightly shaking as the haze of her orgasm clings to her.

I look at her and my cock twitches, and I have to shift in my seat. I want nothing more than to throw Devon back down, spread her legs, and fuck her with the sort of abandon that would take her breath away. But I can see by the look on her face that although she might want that, she’s not ready for it. I can see the hesitation in her eyes. So, as much as I want to be balls deep in my sweet little girl right now, I’m going to have to wait until she is ready. The last thing I want is to take something she’s not ready or willing to give.

“I really want to,” she says softly, as if reading my thoughts.

“Wanting to and being ready to are two very different things.”

My cock is throbbing, begging for release, and I have to shift in my seat again. Devon leans forward and grabs me through my slacks, squeezing it hard. I put my hand over hers. She looks up at me and I can see just how desperately she wants to please me. That's good. I like that her natural inclination is to please me. But the time has to be right, and this isn't the right time.

"Wait," I say. "We'll wait until you're ready."

She pushes my hand away and quickly unzips my slacks and pulls my rock-hard cock out. The feeling of her tiny, soft hand gripping my shaft sends bolts of electricity shooting through me, and I lean my head back on the seat and moan. Devon kisses my neck and bites at my collarbone as she starts to jack me off.

"Jesus," I groan.

She tightens her grip and quickens her pace, sliding her hand up and down. Her hand on me feels like heaven, and I don't want it to end. But I'm already so turned on that I know I'm not going to last very long. Devon kisses me again hard, squeezing my cock with what feels like all her strength.

Her eye contact, direct and unwavering, only adds to the intensity and intimacy of the moment. My heart is pounding wildly, and I'm throbbing beneath her nimble fingers, feeling myself growing lightheaded. Her eyes still on mine, Devon bites her bottom lip, and my entire body twitches.

"Come for me, Dawson," she whispers. "I want to feel that hot, sticky come all over my hand."

Jesus, fuck.

Hearing those words coming out of her sweet, innocent mouth sends a blast of heat washing through me. And that does it. I throw my head back and grunt as I erupt. I watch my come spilling down her fingers.

Devon has a glint of wonder in her eyes and a salacious smile on her lips as she keeps squeezing me, sliding her hand up and down, making sure she gets every last drop out of me. She raises her gaze to mine and laughs softly.

“My god, Devon. That was incredible.”

“This whole night’s been incredible. Every last bit of it.”

“I can’t wait to do it all again.”

“Me either.”

“Good girl.”

“**W**here are we going?” Devon asks.
“You’ll see.”

I guide my Navigator through the traffic in downtown LA. After taking her out for a nice dinner, I promised her a surprise. Everything in me wants to take her back to my place and fuck her senseless, but there’s another part of me that just wants to spend time with her. That wants to talk to her. That just enjoys being with her. Get to know her better. Which surprises me as hell because I like my own company and prefer being alone.

She laughs. “You’re really not going to tell me?”

“I’m really not.”

It’s my first night back in town after a brief three-game road trip. I was gone for about a week, and my mind was consumed by thoughts of Devon. Memories of going down on her in the back of my Navigator filled my mind. I couldn’t stop remembering the sweet, musky taste of her, the feeling of her soft, silky pussy against my mouth, and the way she writhed against me as I fucked her with my tongue. Nor could I stop thinking about the warm feel of her hand, so delicate and nimble, wrapped around me, squeezing and pumping it until I came harder than I think I’ve ever come in my life.

I was away from her for less than a week, but every moment of my day was filled with thoughts of getting back to her. She’s become my obsession. We called and even Facetimed while I was away, but it wasn’t the same as getting to look into

those sparkling emerald eyes or hearing her laughter ringing in my ears. And it's definitely not the same as being able to feel her warm, soft skin against mine.

While I was away, I found myself craving those simple things. It's like nothing I've ever experienced in my life. Devon makes me feel things that are completely new to me—and I like it. I like it quite a lot.

“I watched your games while you were away,” she says.

“Did you now?”

“Well, two of them. The third game wasn't on TV here, but I saw you play against Minnesota and Detroit. You were on fire. ESPN said you're the hottest player in the game right now and it's like you found the fountain of youth.”

I glance over at her, smile, and squeeze her hand. “I think I did.”

Devon blushes and looks away, biting her bottom lip, completely unaware of how much that little gesture turns me on. I have to keep myself from pulling over and fucking her in the back seat right now. Our swing through Minnesota, Detroit, and Buffalo had netted three wins and put us on something of a hot streak. Personally, I had four goals and five assists in those three games. Nine points in three games. That probably does make me the hottest player in the game right now. That's not what matters most to me, though.

“Anyway, let the wonks at ESPN say what they want. I don't care,” I tell her. “All that matters to me is we picked up six points and we're starting to find a rhythm. A playoff spot isn't completely out of reach.”

“I'm not sure what all that means, but I'm really glad you're playing well...that your team is playing well.”

I laugh. “Thanks, doll. You can have Sammy explain the way points work. She seems to know the game pretty well. I'd rather not talk shop though because tonight's about us.”

“That sounds nice. Now, where are we going?”

“Have you always been this impatient?”

“Yeah, pretty much.”

“Well, you’re going to have to learn to deal with it.”

“You’re such an ass.”

“Yeah. I know.”

A few minutes later, I pull into the underground lot beneath the arena, and Devon turns to me with a smile on her face.

“I thought you didn’t want to talk shop.”

“I’m not talking shop.”

“Then what are we doing at your shop?”

“You’ll see.”

I stop at the gate and the attendant comes out of the booth.

“Hey, Mr. Davis.”

“How’s it going, Armando?”

“Can’t complain. You’re good to go.”

“Thanks.”

“You got it. Have a good night.”

“Yeah, you too.”

He gives us a wave and steps back into the booth. A moment later, the gate goes up. I pull in and drive through the labyrinth beneath the stadium until I come to my spot. I park and shut off the engine then turn to Devon.

“Come on,” I say.

“What are we doing?”

“Having a nice evening. So, let’s go. Out of the car.”

She laughs and climbs out. I walk around and take her hand then lean over and plant a soft kiss on her forehead. Devon leans into me while I slip my arm around her waist and lead her into the arena. With no events at the arena tonight, there’s minimal staff. But we’re greeted with friendly smiles by those who are there.

“So, what are we doing? You going to show me your locker room or something?”

“Not exactly.”

I lead her down the long tunnel that leads to the ice, and sitting on a table just inside the gate are two pairs of skates. Devon beams at me.

“Are you kidding me?” she asks.

“Do you see me laughing?”

She laughs for me. “I’ve never ice skated before. I don’t know how to do it.”

“Well, it’s time for you to learn.”

Smiling at her, I sit Devon down in the chair before kneeling and pulling off her shoes. I set them on the table, put on a pair of ladies’ ice skates for her, and lace them up good and tight. Once I have her set up, I quickly put on my skates and help Devon to her feet. She’s a little unsteady and giggles at herself.

“Easy now,” I say. “Just take it good and slow.”

I open the gate and walk Devon to the ice. She’s stepping gingerly, a nervous look on her face but a smile on her lips. The house lights are off, leaving the stands in darkness, while the spotlights over the ice are on, making the smooth, clean surface of the ice glimmer.

“I don’t know if I can do this, Dawson.”

“Of course, you can.”

I step onto the ice first and turn around, taking Devon’s hands in mine. Her legs are wobbling and she squeals, but I hold onto her and help keep her upright. Moving slowly, I start skating backward, pulling her out to the ice with me. She glides along, still wobbly and unsteady, but managing to stay on her feet.

“See? You’re doing great.”

She laughs. “I am! I’m doing it!”

“Now, I’m going to let go...”

“No, no, no,” she shrieks. “Don’t let go.”

“You can do this. Just slide your feet forward one at a time. Smooth and easy.”

She yelps when I let go of her hands, skating backward in front of her. Devon’s strides are jerky and uneasy, and she has to pinwheel her arms a few times to keep herself upright, but she does it. I laugh and clap. “See? You’ve got this. Just believe in yourself.”

Her face lights up, and she gives me that smile that not just stirs my loins but makes me feel all sorts of things.

And then she stumbles. Her eyes widen and her mouth falls open as she waves her arms wildly, doing everything she can to stay on her feet.

“Oh no!” she squeals.

Devon’s foot comes out from under, and she lurches, overcorrects, and falls backward. She hits the ice butt-first with a loud grunt.

“Ow!” she cries.

I skate over and reach down. She gives me her hand, and I haul her to her feet. With a chuckle, Devon rubs her injured backside and sticks her lower lip out as if she’s pouting but bursts out laughing.

“You were doing great,” I say.

“Until I wasn’t.”

“It’s a learning process. Just take it slow and easy.”

I take Devon’s hand in mine and skate alongside her. We move slowly and deliberately, up one side of the rink then down the other, and it’s not long before she’s skating smoothly and with more confidence. She looks over at me with a wide smile on her face and a glimmer in her eye.

“This is amazing,” she says.

“Yes, you are.”

Flush crawls up her neck, and she looks down at the ice. The arena's speakers crackle. A moment later, Percy Sledge's hit song 'When a Man Loves a Woman' begins to play, making me laugh. Devon looks over at me with a look that's equal parts surprised and amused.

"Laying it on kind of thick, aren't you?" she asks.

"This isn't me. This is Jerry, the head of security here. He thinks he's funny," I say with a chuckle. "This one is pretty good, but it's definitely not the song I would have chosen if I were trying to lay it on thick."

"Oh? And what song would you have picked?"

"I'm not sure. Maybe 'Unchained Melody' by the Righteous Brothers or maybe 'At Last' by Etta James."

She looks at me like I've suddenly started speaking Greek. "How old are you again? Sixty?" she teases. "How about music from like this century?"

I laugh. "Baby girl, they don't make romantic music like that today. Back in the day, they made music that made you feel. That had soul."

We share a smile as we continue to skate, and she's starting to sway to the song. Her crack about the music makes me think about the age difference between us for the first time since I met her. I'm almost twice her age—old enough to be her father, for fuck's sake. But honestly, it just doesn't feel like it. She's got an old soul. She has a wisdom that's not common in girls her age. Her maturity makes it easy for me to forget about the age difference.

"Do you ever think about it?" I ask. "The fact that I'm significantly older than you?"

She shakes her head. "I don't."

"Why not?"

"Because it doesn't matter to me. You only get so many chances to be happy and find somebody you really click with. And I'm not going to throw something like this away just because there are a few years between us."

“A few years,” I say with a rueful chuckle.

“All that matters is that we’re both legal, consenting adults. You treat me with respect. You treat me like a princess. And you make me happy. That’s all that matters to me.”

“You’re a queen, not a princess. You’re my queen.”

“Does our age difference bother you?”

“Not if you’re okay with it.”

“I am.”

“Good.”

I pull her to a stop and spin her around so she’s facing me. The music is ringing throughout the arena, and our gazes are locked together, the frigid air between us crackling with electric current. Smiling, I lean forward and kiss her. Devon melts into me and gives as much as she gets.

The blood in my veins quickly heats up and I feel myself stiffening as thoughts of getting her home and getting her naked start flashing through my mind again.

But...the moment is interrupted by the sound of applause and whistling. We pull back from each other and see Jerry and the other security guards standing against the railing on the first deck, cheering us on. Devon and I both laugh and shake our heads.

“Clowns,” I say and give Jerry and his guys a wave. “Absolute clowns.”

Devon looks up at me, her full lips parted, her green eyes sparkling. There’s a strange look on her face that makes me tilt my head and look at her curiously.

“What is it?” I ask.

“I’m ready.”

“Ready? For what?”

A coy smile touches her lips. “The other night... in your car... you said there’s a difference between wanting something and being ready for it,” she says softly. “Well... I’m ready.”

My body flashes hot, everything around us fading in the background, and all I hear is my rapidly increasing heartbeat.

“Then let’s get the hell out of here.”

DEVON

Dawson closes the door to the condo behind us and pushes me up against the wall.

His mouth crashes into mine, his kiss so fierce it nearly takes my breath away. He plunges his tongue into my mouth, sliding and swirling it around mine roughly, my head already foggy with desire. Dawson grips my hair and pulls my head back, making me gasp while he plants a line of kisses along my neck and nips at my earlobe. All the while, I run my hands over his toned, taut body because I can't get enough of him and I want more. So much more.

I wrap my legs around Dawson's waist as he picks me up and carries me to the table in the dining room. His mouth still locked onto mine, our kiss hot and fiery, he sits me down on top of the table and pulls back. He cups my face in his hands and looks me in the eye.

"Are you sure you're ready for this, baby girl?" he asks. "There's no shame in saying you're not. We can wait."

As the memories of that night in his car flash through my mind, my heart races, and my mouth grows dry. The memory of his mouth on me, the feel of his fingers and tongue inside of me send bolts of electricity shooting through my veins, and as I stare into his eyes and feel the intensity of his gaze, my panties grow uncomfortably wet again. I've never gone very far with a guy and have no experience with sex. I'm still a virgin after all.

But the feel of his hands on my hips and the fire I see in his eyes—not to mention the bulge in his pants—has me drenched. I’ve been waiting for the right man to give myself to. And as the taste of Dawson’s lips lingers on mine, I know I’ve found him.

“I’m ready,” I say again. “I want you.”

The corner of his mouth quirks upward. “That’s a good answer, baby girl.”

Still sitting on the table, I part my thighs as he steps forward, his mouth crashing into mine. Dawson is still cupping my face in his hands as our tongues tangle. It feels like there’s a fire burning between my thighs that’s only getting hotter as Dawson trails his fingertips up my legs. He pushes my skirt up and hooks my panties to the side, lightly stroking my wet, swollen lips.

I lean forward and kiss his neck and when he plunges a finger into me, I cry out and bite his shoulder. He pumps his finger in and out of my slick center and my entire body quivers. He looks into my eyes then drops to his knees, quickly pulls my panties off, and tosses them to the side. After that, he hooks my legs over his shoulders and leans forward, plunging his tongue into my pussy, making me cry out.

“Jesus, Dawson,” I gasp.

He licks me roughly, spreading me open and driving his tongue into my walls. Dawson slams a pair of fingers into me, so much deeper than before, making me wince as I’m gripped by a sharp pinch of pain. But as he moves them inside of me, he takes my clit into his mouth, nibbling and sucking on it, the waves of pleasure washing over me enhanced by that slight hit of pain.

He laps at me, sucks on me, and fingers me harder. Faster. My legs are shaking wildly and the breathy moans coming from my mouth sound like something out of a porn movie. I’m too aroused to care. Reaching down, I grip Dawson’s hair and pull him closer, grinding my wet pussy against his face, taking his fingers and tongue even deeper into me. I grind myself against his mouth, quivering from head to toe.

The blood in my veins feels like it's on fire as I grip Dawson's hair and rock back and forth on his face. He laps at me hungrily, feasting on my pussy like a starving man. My body tights and Dawson grunts as I yank his hair harder. A moment later, I throw my head back and cry out as I come. Hard. I'm no stranger to getting myself off but the orgasm he's given me is unlike anything I've ever felt before, and I feel lightheaded and dizzy.

Dawson doesn't give me a chance to recover as he roughly pulls me off the table and kisses me. I'm still trying to catch my breath when Dawson gives me a wolfish grin. A moment later, he turns me around and forces me down, bending me over the table. Dawson puts his hand in the middle of my back, holding me down. The crack of flesh meeting flesh rings in my ears, and my ass suddenly feels like it's on fire. The sting of him smacking my ass though melts away, and I'm left with a rush of pleasure that fills my body, bringing an unexpected smile to my lips.

I turn and look over my shoulder at him. Dawson gives me a devilish grin and smacks my ass again, harder this time. I close my eyes and moan because I need him inside me. Right freaking now.

"Do you like that, baby girl?" he asks, his voice low and gruff.

"Yes, Daddy. I love that."

We both freeze, our eyes locked and my mouth falls open. I never meant for that word to come out of my mouth.

The smile on Dawson's face tells me he likes hearing me call him that. And strangely enough, that turns me on even more. The word sounds right. It feels right.

I remember the way his cock, so thick and long, felt in my hand. Although I'm a little worried about the way he'll fit inside of me, afraid that it might hurt, the desire to feel him filling me up outweighs the fear.

"Fuck me, Daddy," I say. "I want your cock inside of me, Dawson. Fuck. Me. Now."

Dawson fumbles with his belt but quickly gets it undone. He kicks his shoes off and pushes his pants and boxers all the way down before he kicks them off as well. I stare at his thick girth and briefly wonder if I can take it, if I can take all of him.

“Give me that cock, Daddy. I need it.”

Dawson doesn't even bother with his shirt. Instead, he steps forward and grabs hold of my hips, pressing his fingers hard into my flesh. My eyes widen and a gasp bursts from my mouth as he drives himself into me. He stretches me open wider than I've ever been just with my fingers or toys and hits me so deep I feel my eyes roll to the back of my head.

The pain of his cock buried inside of me is quickly overcome by a torrent of pleasure unlike anything I've ever felt before. No vibrator has ever made me tremble or made my body crackle with electricity the way having Dawson inside of me is making me feel.

Dawson grips my hip with one hand and delivers a slap to my ass so hard it makes me suck in a deep breath as he starts to fuck me. He's not gentle either. He pounds into me, my breath bursting from my mouth with every thrust. Dawson winds my hair around his knuckles and tugs it. Oh god. I love this. I love it way too much.

“Say it again,” he grunts as he pumps into me.

He doesn't need to tell me what he wants me to say. I already know and it has my juices flowing down the insides of my thighs.

“Fuck me, Daddy. Give me that cock,” I groan. “Give it to me, Daddy. Harder.”

A low, throaty growl drifts from Dawson's throat, and he looks at me with a hunger that makes my core pulse. But he gives me exactly what I want. Still gripping my hair and pulling my head back, Dawson rams his hips forward. The sound of our bodies slapping together echoes around the room, blending with our moans and cries of pleasure.

He presses me down on the table and holds me there then slaps my ass again. My body trembles and flushes with warmth, and

the feeling of pleasure that grips me makes me stutter and moan.

“Yes, Daddy,” I gasp. “Just like that. Just like that.”

Dawson’s moans grow louder, his movements more frantic. I push back into him, trying to take him even deeper into me as we rut like a couple of wild animals. I throb and my stomach lurches as a feeling of absolute ecstasy washes over me. I throw my head back and call out his name while my orgasm comes crashing down over me. My head spins, spots of color dancing before my eyes.

My legs are shaking, and I feel like I’m about to collapse but Dawson holds me up, pressing me down and keeping me bent over the table as he keeps pumping until I feel him swell. Deep grunts flow from his mouth and he presses down harder on the middle of my back, keeping me pinned to the table. I turn my head and give him a wanton smile.

“Come for me, Daddy. Come for your little girl,” I gasp.

A howl of pure ecstasy bursts from Dawson’s throat as his cock twitches and he explodes. A shudder runs through me, making my entire body quiver as he shoots what feels like gallons of his warm, thick come into me. We ride out the waves of pleasure together, him still buried inside of me, emptying every last drop.

It’s only when he starts to grow soft that Dawson takes a step back and withdraws from me. A flood of my juices mixed with his slides down the insides of my thighs, and I turn to Dawson with a shaky smile on my face. Our breathing still labored, he pulls me to him and plants a soft kiss on my lips, his eyes locked onto mine.

“For somebody who’s never had sex before, you certainly know what you’re doing,” he says.

I smile. “I’m a girl who knows a few things.”

“Yes, you are, baby girl. And I’m looking forward to finding out what other things you might know.”

I laugh softly. “Let’s go take a shower and maybe I can show you.”

“I love the way you think.”

Hand in hand, we walk to the master suite and head for the bathroom. My body is tingling with the aftereffects of what we just did. This is crazy. It's all insane. I wasn't looking for love, but I feel like I somehow stumbled into a fairy tale and accidentally found my Prince Charming.

DAWSON

“**Y**our play lately has been inspired, Dawson. And it doesn’t seem to be a coincidence that the team is playing just as well,” Wendy, a reporter with the local station says. “It certainly seems like you’ve discovered a fountain of youth. What do you attribute your hot streak to?”

I lean against the half-wall that runs in front of the bench and clear my throat. I look out at the ice where the rest of the team is practicing then down at my skates. I hate doing interviews. Having a microphone stuck in my face and having to answer a litany of stupid questions is my least favorite part of the game. But Randy, the team’s GM, had all but ordered me to do it. Randy told me that the organization and I deserve some credit and attention for our recent play.

“Dawson?”

“Yeah, we’re just playing solid, fundamental hockey. Everybody is out there grinding every shift, making sure to get the details right,” I say. “We’re just clicking on all cylinders right now because we’re playing together as a team.”

Wendy gives me a look. I’ve dealt with her many times before and know she’s not one of those reporters who’s satisfied with cliches and platitudes. She’s a reporter who wants substance from the people she interviews. I’m just not really in the mood to be interviewed right now. My mind is consumed with thoughts of Devon. I’m counting down the minutes until practice is over and I can get back to her.

“Come on now, Dawson,” Wendy pushes. “This is your eighteenth year in the league, but you’ve got some real spring in your step. You’re looking the way you did when you were a rookie.”

I laugh. “Are you even old enough to remember the way I looked when I was a rookie?”

Wendy smiles and shakes her head. “Stop dodging the question, Davis. Seriously, what’s with the resurgence here? You’re playing like somebody ten years younger.”

“I don’t know what you want me to say here, Wendy. There’s no magic or anything going on here. The team is playing well. I’m playing well. That’s really all there is to it.”

“But I think the team is playing well because you’re playing well,” she presses. “And I’m curious about what has you playing so well lately, Dawson. What’s the magic elixir?”

Anders skates to a stop beside me with a wide, mischievous grin on his face. “It’s not a what,” he says. “It’s a who. Ask him about his new squeeze.”

Wendy raises an eyebrow. “Is there a new woman in your life, Dawson?”

I elbow him in the ribs and shoot him a withering look then turn back to Wendy. “He’s Swedish and doesn’t understand English very well. You’ll have to forgive him.”

She laughs. “He’s been here fifteen years and has always seemed to speak and understand English perfectly in my experience. So, tell me about this new woman in your life, Dawson. Is she the reason you’re playing like a kid again?”

Anders grins. “You could say she’s infused him with a youthful energy.”

I turn and give him a two-handed push in the chest. Still grinning, Anders glides backward then turns and skates off to join the shooting line, leaving me there to deal with the fallout of the grenade he just threw into my interview.

“Youthful energy, huh?” Wendy asks. “So, is your new woman younger than you, Dawson?”

“Listen, there’s nothing there for you to report on. Anders is just being a dick,” I tell her. “You know how he is.”

“I do know how he is. And I’ve never known him to tell a lie.”

“Then you don’t know him all that well.”

“So, are you telling me there’s no new woman in your life?”

“I’m telling you that my personal business isn’t your business. You’re a beat reporter who covers this team. My personal life is out of bounds. You’re a sports reporter, not a gossip columnist for fuck’s sake. Try to act like one.”

A small smile curls the corners of her mouth. “That’s not a denial, you know.”

“I’m serious, Wendy,” I say, my tone low and stern. “My personal life is out of bounds unless and until I decide to make it a story. Do you understand me?”

She looks at me, clearly disappointed by my unwillingness to give her something juicy to report on. It’s not that I’m ashamed of whatever it is Devon and I have going. I’m not ashamed to be seen with her nor am I all that concerned what people might say about the age difference between us. But as a pro athlete, my entire life has been under a microscope since the day I was drafted. There are very few areas of my life that are truly mine. And I intend to keep what Devon and I have private and just for me as long as I can.

“Wendy? Tell me you understand what I just said,” I growl. “Because I swear, if I see a single word about any of this, I will have you blackballed. Nobody will speak to you. And how long do you think you’ll last on this beat if you can’t get an interview with anybody?”

“I hear you, Dawson. I get it. But you know that I’m good at my job and can find out who this mystery woman is with a phone call,” she says. “So, if you want me to keep my mouth shut and not do any digging, you’re going to need to give me something.”

“This is extortion. You’re using my personal life to further your own career.”

“Extortion is such an ugly word. I prefer to think of this as establishing a solid working relationship based on mutual respect and trust.”

“More like based on mutually assured destruction.”

“You say po-tay-to, I say po-tah-to,” she replies with a grin. “Listen, this is only going to work if we can have an honest back and forth. So, I’ll forget I heard Anders say anything, but you need to start giving me more than just empty platitudes. Do we have a deal?”

I frown. I hate having to make a deal just to keep my personal life out of her work. But I do know how good a reporter she is. When she’s on a scent, she’s a pit bull. Dogged barely begins to describe her. If she wants to find out who Devon is, I know it won’t be hard for her to do. Wendy is smiling at me like she knows she’s got me over a barrel.

“Do we have a deal?” she presses.

“Yeah. Fine. We have a deal,” I growl.

“Good,” she chirps. “Then let’s get started.”

AFTER GIVING WENDY HER INTERVIEW—GRUDGINGLY—I finished practice and grabbed a shower before heading home. I’m not sure what Devon’s schedule is, so I figured I’d grab something to eat and maybe take a nap then give her a call to see about getting together tonight. I haven’t been able to stop thinking about her all day. In truth, I haven’t been able to stop thinking about her since the night we met, but my thoughts have been more intense and persistent since the other night.

Being with her was like an out-of-body experience. She knew just what buttons to push and when to push them to get me off. And she got me off intensely. Everything with her just felt so natural and so easy. Our bodies connected in ways I’ve never experienced before. Ways I didn’t know I could connect with somebody. Her body—so small, supple, and smooth—felt like

it was made just for me. And I can't wait to see her again tonight.

I walk into my place and close the door behind me. After dropping my bag and tossing my keys on the table beside the door, I walk down the short hallway and step into the kitchen. As I pull a bottle of water out of the refrigerator, I pause as it hits me. The floorplan in my place is wide open—I can see into the living room from the kitchen. But when I walked in, my brain didn't register it at first.

There's somebody in my living room.

I close the refrigerator door and turn around to find Devon stretched out on the couch, looking back at me with a flirty smile on her lips. She's wearing nothing but a t-shirt short enough that I can see the pink cotton panties poking out from beneath the hem. Oh, fuck. My blood rushes down south, and I clench the bottle.

"And how was practice today?" she asks.

"It was fine," I say with a laugh. "What are you doing here?"

"Oh, I'm sorry. When you gave me a key, I thought that implied I could stop by whenever I wanted. I can leave if you'd prefer."

"It's too late for you to leave now. I won't let you."

Taking a long swallow of water, I walk into the living room and pick up Devon's legs then set them in my lap as I sit down. I lean forward, set the bottle down on the coffee table, and turn to her. God, she's so beautiful. I slowly run the tips of my fingers up and down her leg, relishing Devon's smooth, warm skin. She shudders as a soft breath passes her lips.

"No class today?"

"No class today. My professor is out sick, so I figured I'd come by and wait for you," she says. "I know we weren't supposed to get together until tonight, but I didn't think you'd mind if we spent a little more time together."

"I absolutely do not mind."

"That's a good answer."

Devon sat up and crawled down the couch, that flirty smile still on her lips. She straddles me and wraps her arms around the back of my neck, her eyes locked on mine as she bites her bottom lip. My cock is already stiffening, and Devon laughs softly as she rubs herself against it. The need to be inside her and thrust until she's panting is almost overwhelming,

"Somebody's eager," she teases.

I slide my hands up her thighs and let the fingertips of my right hand lightly dance across the front of her panties. I press a little harder, rubbing her clit through the cotton, and smile when I feel how wet they are already. "Seems like I'm not the only one who's eager."

"N-no. You're not."

Devon leans forward and kisses me, sliding her tongue into my mouth as she runs her fingers through my hair. I slide my hand down and slip them beneath the hem of her shirt, cupping and squeezing her firm, round ass. She writhes in my lap and pulls back, looking me in the eye as she slips off my lap.

I watch as she steps out of her panties and throws them to the side. After that, she leans forward and pulls my shorts down, freeing me. I kick off my shoes and shorts, then pull her back down onto my lap. Devon reaches down and takes hold of me, squeezing it for all she's worth and giving it a few strokes as she settles herself down on top of me.

Jesus.

She teases her clit with the head of my dick, sliding it back and forth against her firm little bud. Devon moves it further, running the tip of my cock just inside her. The way she suctioned around me almost pushes me to the edge. Her breath quickens, and she closes her eyes, and I'm in danger of coming just by watching her.

Devon bites her bottom lip hard as she slowly lowers herself onto me, taking me inch by inch.

"My God, that feels incredible," she gasps.

Devon winces when she settles herself on top of me, me buried to the balls inside of her. She grips my shoulders, her

nails digging into me as she starts to roll her hips. She rocks back and forth, sliding up and down on top of me, her breathing growing ragged, her eyes locked onto mine. I grip her hips, relishing the feeling of her tight, wet hole as she rides me like her life depends on it. She's so tight, it feels like she's gripping me in her fist and squeezing.

I lift her t-shirt and take her tits into my hands, licking and sucking on her hard nipples. Devon gasps when I gently nip one. She rides me harder, impaling herself on my cock. I reach back and smack Devon's ass hard, making her yelp. A smile crosses her face, and she moans as her movements grow faster. Harder. I feel her body tighten and her breath comes in short, little pants.

“Ride me, Devon. Ride me harder, baby.”

“Yes, Daddy.”

That fucking word spurs me into action. I grab her hips, slamming her down onto my cock. Devon gasps and her nails dig into my shoulders almost painfully, making me grimace, but it only heightens the pleasure coursing through my veins.

Devon is writhing frantically on top of me, sliding up and down, and I can't look away. She leans forward and bites my shoulder as her body starts quaking wildly. She sits up again, throws her head back, and cries out as she comes.

The sight of her body—back arched, head back, cries of passion and pleasure escaping her mouth—is too much for me. I thrust my hips upward, burying into her, and feel my dick start to pulse. A moment later, hot jets of come coat her insides and drip down her thighs.

With a sigh, Devon leans forward and presses her forehead to mine. She's still pulsing around me, milking me dry.

“You feel amazing,” she says.

“Yes, you do.”

As I soften and slip out of her sex, Devon slides off my lap. I stretch out on the couch and pull her down next to me. She lays her head on my chest and wraps her body around mine as I idly stroke her hair. Damn, this feels good. I can get used to

this. To her. To us. To coming home and finding her already there.

She nestles closer to me, drawing circles on my chest with the tip of her finger. We lie together like that, our bodies intertwined, long enough that I start to feel the gauzy curtain of sleep descending over us.

“I’m glad you stopped by,” I say.

“Me too,” she murmurs.

With a smile on my face, I drift off to sleep with one thought running through my mind. How did I get so lucky to have this beautiful, young woman come into my life?

DEVON

“I assume you didn’t come home because you were at Dawson’s last night?”

I look at Sammy and smile. “You would be right.”

“You’ve been spending a lot of time with him lately. Are things getting serious?”

“I don’t know. We’re enjoying spending time together right now,” I tell her with a shrug. “I’m trying to keep from overthinking it all.”

“Probably wise. So, things are good? He’s treating you well?”

“Things are better than good. I mean, he’s sweet and thoughtful. I never expected him to be any of those things, to be honest,” I admit. “Given what he does for a living, I expected him to be kind of... mean. I thought he might be one of those meathead jocks who just want to beat people up and think they’re better than everybody. But he’s not like that. He takes care of me.”

“And let’s not forget that he’s sexy as hell.”

I laugh. “Yeah, he’s that too. But he’s more than that. A lot more.”

I turn my face up to the sun and smile to myself. It’s a beautiful, sunny, and warm day so we decided to have lunch in the quad outside rather than sit in the student union. The tables around us are crowded since apparently other people have the same idea, and the buzz of conversation is loud. All I’ve been able to think about lately is Dawson. My life has felt like a

whirlwind from the night we met until now, and it only seems to be getting better with every passing day. It seemed silly at the time, but I really do feel like I've somehow stumbled into a fairy tale.

Sammy leans forward, a sly grin on her lips. "So, I suppose it's safe to assume that my little girl isn't such a little girl anymore?"

My cheeks immediately flush and my face burns, but I can't keep the silly grin off my face. I look away instead and try to hide it with my hand. Sammy squeals and pulls me into a tight hug, rocking us back and forth on the bench and giggling like she's gone mad. Laughing and my face still burning with an embarrassed heat, I extricate myself and sit back.

"Babe, I'm so proud of you," Sammy squeals. "I honestly never thought I'd live to see the day you gave up your V-card."

"Oh my God, keep it down, Sammy," I say with an awkward laugh. "I don't want everybody knowing my business!"

She's talking so loudly that I quickly glance around, afraid that everybody in the quad can hear her. Nobody seems to be paying attention to us, though. Thank God.

"Sorry." She absolutely doesn't look sorry, not one bit. "I'm just super excited for you."

I just shake my head and laugh to myself as I try to slow my racing heart. My face is still burning with embarrassment, making Sammy giggle.

"So? How is the sex?" Sammy asks.

"Oh my god, you're shameless."

"Damn right, I am. I want details, girl."

I purse my lips and fight to keep the grin off my face. I shouldn't encourage her. And I really shouldn't be kissing and telling. But holding all the happiness and wonder is like a building pressure inside of me. I feel like if I don't talk about it, I might actually explode. And Sammy is like my sister. She

and I share everything, so why wouldn't I share this important milestone in my life with her?

"It's amazing," I gush. "More amazing than anything I've ever imagined."

She grins wolfishly. "Details, babe. Details."

I shake my head, trying to come up with the words. "I don't know. He's just so big and physical. He could be rough with me sometimes, and the weird thing is that the rougher he is, the more I like it. The rougher I want him to be," I tell her. "I honestly never thought I'd be that kind of a girl, but apparently I am."

"It's not surprising. You're such a control freak and so rigid about everything in your life that giving up control to somebody in this one aspect and letting yourself feel out of control for a change is probably really intense. I'm sure it's so different for you that it feels really hot and sexy. Lots of us like it a little rough, babe. And there's nothing wrong with that."

"That's kind of what I was thinking, but I wasn't sure. I kind of thought it made me some kind of a deviant or something," I say with a laugh.

"Far from it. Sex is something that's supposed to be fun. Something that's supposed to bring us pleasure. And as long as you two aren't hurting anybody else and are good with whatever form that takes with each other, that's a beautiful thing. There's nothing wrong with it and nothing you should feel ashamed of or embarrassed about."

"That's the thing... I don't feel ashamed or embarrassed. Not really. I just didn't know this side of me existed."

"Sounds like he's bringing out the beast in you, girl."

"Yeah, maybe so."

"That's not a bad thing. In fact, I'd say that's a really good thing. You're always bound up so tight, I'm glad to see you letting your hair down and enjoying life for a change. You've always taken life and school way too seriously."

“I want to have a career. Of course, I’m going to take school seriously.”

“I know and I’m not knocking you for that,” she replies. “I just think it’s good that you’re finally learning to mix in a little fun and pleasure with that serious side. It’s healthy. Balance is always a good thing, babe.”

“So, you are fucking him.”

I turn my head quickly and see Zack standing on the other side of the table, his eyes narrowed and a scowl on his face. My heart stutters and I feel that warmth bleed into my face again as I inexplicably feel a rush of embarrassment. I don’t know how long he’s been standing there eavesdropping on our conversation, but it’s apparently been long enough that he heard what I was telling Sammy.

“I thought so,” he growls.

Mixed in with the embarrassment of having him know my business is a thread of dark anger at his presumption. I narrow my eyes, glaring balefully at him. Sammy starts to get to her feet, but I put my hand on her arm and shake my head, letting her know that I’ve got this. She sits back down and silently shoots daggers at Zack.

“Who in the hell do you think you are, Zack?” I snap. “What I do is none of your business. You have no right to even ask about my personal life. You’re somebody I know from class. We’re not friends and I don’t owe you a goddamn thing, least of all an explanation or justification for what I do in my personal life.”

He folds his arms over his chest, his expression darkening. “You do owe me an explanation, Devon. You led me on. You made me believe there was something between us—”

“When in the hell did I ever do that?”

I can feel the eyes on me from all over the quad as people turn and start paying attention to the scene I’m causing. At the moment, I don’t care. I’m so appalled by Zack’s suggestion that I somehow led him on that I don’t give a damn who

overhears me. It irritates me that he's putting the blame on me when he's the one acting like a creep.

"You're always nice to me," Zack shouts back. "You're always flirting with me—"

"If you actually think that me talking to you like a classmate is flirting, you're so much more pathetic than I thought."

Zack recoils like I just slapped him. He quickly recovers though and leans forward, his face twisted with hurt and outrage. Stepping around the table, moving to within a couple of feet of me, Zack glowers at me with pure hatred in his eyes. If he's trying to intimidate me, he's failing. I stand my ground and grit my teeth. No way I'm letting him do this to me.

"I thought you were a nice person, Devon," he spits. "I never expected you to turn out to be a bitch. And I really never expected you to turn out to be a fucking whore."

Before I can stop to think about what I'm doing, I rear back and deliver a sharp slap that rocks his head to the side. All around us, I hear the crowd gasp, which is quickly followed by giggles and murmuring voices. His eyes water and his face turns bright red. He looks like he's immediately regretting what just came out of his mouth. As far as I'm concerned, there are some things that you can't just walk back from.

"Stay the fuck away from me, Zack," I hiss. "Don't speak to me and don't you ever come near me again. Ever."

"Devon—"

"Fuck you, Zack."

The regret in his eyes fades away and is quickly replaced by the anger I'd seen just a moment ago. He clenches his jaw and balls his hands into fists at his sides. "You're going to regret this. I swear to God, you're going to regret this."

He turns and storms away, scores of curious eyes following him as he goes. I'll be lying if I say his final words don't make me feel a little concerned. I don't know Zack very well, but it seems clear that he's more than a little unbalanced and prone to delusions. And the thought of what he's capable of scares me.

DAWSON

“Dawson.”

Wendy is in the underground player’s parking lot, which is unusual. That she’s waiting for me outside the doors to the arena with a grim look on her face is even more unusual. She’s always got a smile on her face. I quickly rack my brain, trying to recall whether I forgot a scheduled interview with her or something. I come up with nothing. If I scheduled a time for her, I have no memory of it.

“I’m late for practice, Wendy. Can this wait?”

“Is it true?”

“Is what true?”

“The story that broke online this morning.”

I stop and turn to her. My thoughts immediately turn to Devon. Somebody leaked the story that I’m dating a college coed half my age. These days, that seems to be a scandal worthy of earning the wrath of cancel culture. Ordinarily, I wouldn’t give a fuck what the keyboard warriors are writing about me online, but I worry about the backlash Devon might face if salacious tabloid stories about our relationship start making the rounds.

“What story? What are you talking about?”

“Dawson.”

I turn and see Jerry, the head of arena security standing there, an expression even darker and grimmer than Wendy’s on his face.

“Yeah, give me a minute, Jer.”

“Sorry, Mr. Buck wanted me to round you up the minute you got here,” Jerry replies. “He needs to see you right away.”

“Tell Randy I’ll be there in a minute. I need to finish my conversation with Wendy.”

“Sorry, Dawson. Mr. Buck said immediately.”

I blow out a frustrated sigh and turn back to Wendy. Her expression hasn’t changed, but she nods and offers me a look of resignation.

“Call me. We’ll talk about all this after,” she says.

“Yeah. Maybe.”

I turn and follow Jerry through the doors and into the belly of the arena. He’s silent as we walk, which isn’t like him.

“What’s going on, Jer? Can you give me a heads-up? What am I walking into?”

“I can’t say, Dawson. I honestly don’t know. All I know is Mr. Buck is tenser than I’ve seen him in a long time. Maybe ever.”

“Great.”

We take the elevator up to the executive floor, and Jerry escorts me down to Randy’s office. He gives me a nod and a pat on the shoulder.

“Good luck, Dawson.”

“Thanks, Jer.”

Jerry walks away and before I can even knock on the door, I hear Randy’s deep, booming voice on the other side of it, beckoning me in. I step into his office, close the door behind me, and cross to the chairs in front of his desk. I feel like I should be saying, “Dead man walking.”

“Sit,” he says gruffly.

Randy played in the league for sixteen years—mainly as his team’s enforcer—and still has that rough and rugged look he had on the ice. Unlike his playing days when it hung to his shoulders in a god-awful mullet, these days, Randy’s dark

brown hair is flecked with gray, cut short, and styled well. His flinty gray eyes still miss nothing, and he's still in good enough shape that he'll sometimes come down during practice and mix it up with us on the ice. He's in his fifties, but I still won't bet against him in a scrap.

The grim look on his face tells me I'm not here to negotiate my next contract with the team. Whatever it is, it's not good news. I take a seat and run through the scenarios in my mind. I know they're not going to cut me. I'm playing at a level that has me in the conversation for the Hart Trophy and have the team closing in on a playoff spot—something unthinkable a month ago.

I haven't broken any team or league rules. There is literally nothing I could be in trouble for. Which leads me back to Devon. It's the only possible thing anybody might be taking some sort of issue with.

“Listen, Randy, before you say anything, I'll be straight with you and tell you it's true—”

“You're admitting it?”

“Yeah, I am. I've got nothing to hide since I haven't done anything wrong.”

“League rules would beg to differ, Dawson,” he replies and runs a hand through his hair. “Jesus Christ, how could you do this? How could you betray this organization like this?”

“Let's not be dramatic, for fuck's sake, Randy. A betrayal? Give me a fucking break,” I spit. “Yeah, she's significantly younger than I am, but she's very much of age. That's hardly unique. Your own wife is more than a decade younger than you are, need I remind you. So, get off this betrayal of the organization bullshit. Also, there is absolutely nothing in the league rules about women I can date. Jesus, man. You're making me out to be some kind of damned pervert when I'm not.”

Randy sits back in his chair with a puzzled look on his face. “What the fuck are you talking about, Dawson?”

I share his confusion. “What are you talking about?”

“You first.”

“Isn’t this about the girl I’ve been seeing for a little while now?”

“Uhh... no. Why would I give two shits about who you’re seeing?”

“That was my goddamn question,” I snap. “Now, what the fuck are you talking about?”

“The story that broke this morning—somebody’s alleging that you’re using PEDs, Dawson. They say they sold them to you directly.”

His words are like a cold slap across the face, and I recoil, staring at him with a look of utter confusion on my face. What he just said makes absolutely no sense.

“What are you talking about, Randy? I’ve never done PEDs in my life.”

He turns his laptop around and shows me the screen. He’s got it pulled up to Bleacher Beat, one of the biggest and more reputable sports blogs on the internet. In big, bold letters, the headline on the screen reads, “I Sold Dawson Davis PEDs.” Just below the headline is my current team photo followed by a lengthy article that quotes an anonymous source who claims to have been my PED supplier for the last decade.

“That is utter bullshit. Randy, tell me you aren’t buying this bullshit.”

“Because it’s on the Beat and not on some anonymous hate blog, the league took notice, Dawson. They’re sending somebody to investigate—”

“Tell me you don’t believe this bullshit, Randy. Tell me you don’t believe I’d actually use fucking PEDs,” I press. “Somebody is trying to fuck with me. I have never used PEDs. Not once in all my years in the league. I’ve never had one dirty test in my eighteen years in the league. Not once!”

“I know that, Dawson. And no, I don’t believe you’d use the stuff. I know what kind of man you are and you’d never cheat yourself, the organization, or the game that way,” he says.

“But what I believe and what the league thinks are two very different things.”

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter and run a hand across my face. “This is fucking unreal.”

“I believe you, Dawson. But we have to let this process play out.”

“What does that mean?”

He sighs and looks down at his desk. “It means I have to keep you off the ice until the league finishes their investigation.”

“What? Are you fucking kidding me? We’ve got a game tomorrow night, Randy.”

“And the league has made it known they don’t want you practicing or playing until this is over.”

“Randy, this is bullshit. We’re making a push for the playoffs ___”

“I know. And you’re not wrong. This is bullshit, but the Commissioner himself called me and asked me to sit you until ___”

“Fuck the Commissioner,” I growl as I jump to my feet. “I’m innocent, Randy. I am fucking innocent. This is all bullshit.”

“My hands are tied, Dawson. There is literally nothing I can do about this. We have to be patient and let this process play out.”

“Piss test me, Randy. I’ll take a test right now. I will fill that coffee mug on your desk while you watch.”

“It’s not that easy. And you’ve been around long enough to know that. Now... just go home. Go spend time with this new girl you’re seeing. Have her help you get your mind off all this shit. Everything is going to work out.”

“Yeah. Sure.”

I storm out of Randy’s office and slam the door behind me, silently vowing to myself that I’m going to find whoever did this and beat them to a pulp.

DAWSON

“I can’t believe they suspended you,” Devon says.

“They’re not calling it a suspension,” I growl. “Not officially.”

“What happened, Dawson?”

I shake my head and tell her about my conversation with Randy. She listens to me and as I describe the allegations made against me, I see a flash of something like recognition and fear in her eyes. It was there for just a moment and then it was gone, replaced by a glimmer of concern again. But I’m sure I saw it.

“What is it?” I ask.

“Nothing. I just can’t believe that happened.”

“Yeah, that makes two of us.”

“What are you going to do?”

“What can I do? All I can do is sit still and wait for the league to test me and make their decision.”

“This doesn’t seem fair. It doesn’t seem right that somebody can make anonymous allegations like that and you end up paying the price for it.” Her forehead furrows, and she huffs. “Especially when there’s no proof you did anything. I mean, how is that fair?”

“It’s not fair. But the league is so scared of the taint of PED use, they’re quick to have a knee-jerk reaction. I mean, yeah, some guys have gotten busted for using them, but their default

setting shouldn't be guilty until proven innocent because most of us haven't touched a PED in our lives and never would." I pinch the bridge of my nose and snap my eyes shut. "It's absolute bullshit."

My mind keeps flashing back to that look I saw in her eyes. It's like she knows something but is afraid to tell me. But then, I figure I'm so twisted about it, I'm probably being paranoid. There's no way Devon knows anything. She doesn't move in this world.

I mean, she barely understands the sport of hockey as it is. Something about that look in her eye continues to bother me, and I turn to her, just about to ask her about it when she offers me a gentle smile.

"I guess if you're looking for a silver lining, it's that we get to spend a little more time together while you're waiting it out. I mean... I don't mean to make light of this situation or anything—"

I lean forward and plant a soft kiss on her forehead. "No, you're right. That is a silver lining. Spending time with you will definitely help take my mind off all this shit."

She gives me a flirtatious smile. "I bet I can give you something better to focus on."

"Think so, huh?"

"I do."

"Show me."

She moves over and straddles my lap, wrapping her arms around the back of my neck then leans forward and presses her mouth to mine.

Well, then.

Her lips and tongue are sweet like the cherry soda she was just drinking, and as I stiffen beneath her, she slowly rocks her hips, rubbing her warm, wet center against me. I pull back from her kiss and smile at Devon.

"That's a good start. I'm starting to focus on something better."

“Mmmm good.”

I stand, picking Devon up along with me. She wraps her legs around my waist and holds on tight as I carry her into the bedroom and set her down on her feet.

I take a minute to soak her in. It’s not just her beauty that has captivated me. She’s so much more than just her physical appearance. She’s such a calming presence and a soothing balm for my soul that even with this shitstorm raining down around me, all I can focus on is her.

“Take off your clothes,” I say.

With a sultry smile on her lips, Devon pulls off her sweater and throws it to the side. After that, she shimmies out of her black leggings, and it joins the sweater on the floor on the other side of the room, leaving her in just her bra and panties. My heart races and I’m already impossibly hard as my eyes travel over her smooth, soft, porcelain skin. I step forward and trail the tips of my fingers over the swell of her hips, up her sides, and along the curve of her full, round breasts.

Reaching behind her, I grab the back of her neck and run a thumb along her skin while I press my mouth to hers. I swallow her sounds, swirling my tongue around in her mouth and savoring the feel and warmth. Fuck, I can’t get enough of her sweet taste.

I slide my other hand around her back and deftly unclasp her bra, letting it fall to the floor then push her panties down to her thighs. I kiss her harder, our tongues sliding around one another furiously as I slip a finger into the warm, wet cleft between her thighs.

“Oh my god,” she moans as I pump my finger in and out.

She’s already wet and dripping for me. Ready to be taken. Ready to be pleased.

I take my finger out of her, step back, and put my finger into my mouth, relishing her addicting taste Devon quickly slides out of her panties and stands before me naked and so deliciously mine. My eyes travel over her pert, pink nipples

down her flat belly, to the thatch of red hair just above her sweet, wet snatch.

As Devon watches, her eyes shining with hunger, I strip out of my clothes and pull her onto the bed beside me. I pull her around so she's straddling my face. She wriggles around, placing her wet pussy onto my mouth, and I immediately plunge my tongue into her. Her juices dripping down to my chin, Devon's groans echo around my room as I wildly lap at her. She writhes on my face as I lick and suck, her breathy moans filling my ears, getting me even harder.

"Put my cock in your mouth, baby girl. I want to feel your mouth around me."

"Yes, Daddy."

A moment later, my body twitches as I feel her swirling her tongue around the head. She wraps her long, nimble fingers around my shaft, pumping it up and down as she takes the tip into her mouth, sucking and licking on it wildly.

"Jesus Christ," I moan. "Fuck yes, baby girl."

I slap her ass as I fuck her with my tongue and her squeal around my cock is muffled. She takes me all the way to the back of her throat, sliding her tongue along my shaft as she goes. The feeling is incredible. My skin feels like it's on fire. As she bobs her head up and down, gripping it and jacking me off at the same time, I feel my balls tighten. I lick at her furiously, spreading her open and sliding my tongue deep into her slit.

The lower part of my face is slick, but I keep going. I can't get enough. The taste and scent of her pussy is fucking intoxicating. Devon tightens her fist and mouth around my cock, sucking and jerking me with a rhythm that has me hurtling toward the edge. I spread her open and lick her as she grinds herself against my mouth.

Devon's body tightens and her legs start to tremble, and I know she's close.

"Come for me, baby girl. Come on me."

Her breathing is ragged, but she keeps licking and sucking on my cock, stroking me up and down as the tremble in her legs grows stronger. I smack her ass again, harder this time, and she gasps.

When my tongue hits her clit, Devon cries out. She thrusts herself harder against my face, her whole body shaking as she comes. I lap up her juices, reveling in the way she's writhing against my face. It takes a few minutes but eventually, her quivering starts to slow, and her legs stop shaking. And when it does, she takes me back into her mouth and starts working me furiously again.

"Wait, wait," I gasp. "Hold up."

I know if I let her keep sucking me off, I'm going to come, so I roll her off me. I'm not done with her yet. Sitting up, I grab hold of Devon and throw her down onto her back. She smiles as she parts her legs for me, giving me a full view of everything. Resisting the urge to bury my tongue inside of her again, I plant a hand on either side of her head and brace myself above her.

"I need your dick, Daddy," she moans. "I need you to fill me up."

Say no more.

A low groan passing my lips, I thrust my hips and bury myself inside of her. Devon gasps as I sheath myself in her sex, stretching her open with my girth. She bites her bottom lip but gives me a smile and shudders.

Fire fills my veins. I start to move inside of her, slow and gentle at first, letting her get used to the feeling of me filling her up so completely. But when I see that spark of hunger in her eyes, that desperate need for more, I give her a grin and start to pound her harder.

"Oh, fuck," she stutters. "Oh, yes, Daddy. Harder. Give it to me harder."

I give her what she wants and start fucking her as hard as I can. The sharp crack of our bodies crashing together fills the room, blending with Devon's cries and my grunts, the noise so

loud, I'm sure my neighbors can hear us through the walls. I don't care. My breathing is labored and the muscles in my legs are burning as I continue fucking her wildly, as if I'm taking out all the day's frustrations on her.

She's gasping and moaning but still has that sultry smile on her face, which only turns me on even more. Small and delicate as she seems, Devon can take a hell of a pounding. She reaches up and takes hold of my wrist, so I let her take it. She moves it to her throat and has me wrap my fingers around her neck. I look at her questioningly, but she just smiles.

"Do it, Daddy. Choke me."

My cock has never been harder as I squeeze her throat lightly while I continue pounding her, making sure I don't hurt her, get carried away, or do anything she doesn't want. Devon keeps her hand over mine, imploring me with her eyes to keep going. I'm so turned on that I feel my balls tighten almost painfully as I swell. I grit my teeth and keep thrusting my hips for all I'm worth, impaling her again and again.

It all feels so fucking amazing, I'm trying to hold off, but I know it's already too late. An animalistic growl bursts from my throat as my cock pulses, and a moment later, I explode. My body shakes wildly as I feel my spunk shooting out in hard, thick streams.

"Oh, fuck," I groan.

Devon draws in a long, shuddering breath. I lean forward and bury my face in the crook of her neck, my entire body tingling as I pump every last drop into her. She clings to me, her warm body pressed to mine, and runs her fingers through my hair. I pull back and open my eyes then stare into hers.

I'm arrested by her sight, by this sight. And I feel something else flood my veins. Emotions I've never felt for anybody before. When I said this is more than physical, it is. I'm already burning with the need to have her beside me forever, with her as my wife and the mother of my children. Our family. Ours.

"What is it?" she asks.

“I love you, Devon.”

Her face blanches, and her entire body tenses as she stares back at me. I hadn't meant to say that, but as I looked into her eyes just now, the words came flying out before I was able to check them. And seeing her looking at me the way she is, I realize I made a mistake and am silently kicking my own ass. That was stupid.

She's young and probably isn't close to being ready for something like that. I should have known better. My face is growing warm, and I feel stupid as shit as I try to find a way to walk it back.

“You... you love me?” she asks, her voice soft.

I grimace. “Listen, I didn't mean—”

“I love you too, Dawson.”

The wave of relief that washes over me is as deep as it is profound, and if I had been standing, it would've knocked me off my feet.

“You do?”

“I do. Like, a lot,” she says, but then I see that strange glint in her eye I saw before. And just like before, I can't put my finger on what it is.

“What is it?”

“I love you, Dawson. But there's something I need to tell you.”

DEVON

When Dawson told me how he felt about me—that he loved me—I thought I might actually pass out or die right then and there.

I mean, I got the general idea that he was fond of me, but we'd never really talked about our feelings. I never knew he felt so strongly for me. God knows my feelings for him took root and grew stronger a while back. I've been trying to deny it to myself just to protect my own heart if he didn't feel the same. But I knew I'd fallen in love with Dawson Davis a little while back. Maybe even that first night we met.

It's why I had to tell him what I suspected. I couldn't let us move into this new phase of our relationship without telling him because if I'm right and Dawson ever found out I even suspected it, he might never trust me again. Trust is such a fragile thing, and all love has to be built upon a solid foundation of it. Without trust, you have nothing. If I want this to work with Dawson, I know that I need to go into this with a clear heart and conscience.

The other thing I need to do is strictly for me. I need to know whether I've contributed to his suspension and the troubles he's having with the league right now. My contribution would be completely incidental and not my fault, but the idea that I'm involved—no matter how tangentially—is bothering me. And I need to know. I need to know if my suspicions are correct. If they are proven to be true, then I need to figure out how to fix it.

I walk through the quad, my eyes darting left and right as I scan the crowd. It's between classes so the quad is pretty full of people taking advantage of a beautiful Southern California afternoon. It takes a few minutes, but I finally spot him.

As usual, he's sitting alone at a table on the far edge of the crowd. I draw in a deep breath and let it out slowly, steeling myself. Confrontation has never been my strong suit, and I try to avoid them whenever possible. But this is one I can't avoid. This is one I have to force myself to take head-on. There's too much at stake.

Zack looks up as I step to the table, standing on the other side of it from him. He offers me a smile and sits up straight.

"Hello, Devon," he says. "I've been thinking about you."

"Why did you do it?"

"Do what?"

I grit my teeth and try to control the anger surging through my veins. Zack just sits there, giving me a smug, arrogant smile, which is making it harder.

"Don't bother trying to deny it, Zack," I hiss. "I know you fed that bullshit story about Dawson to that reporter."

"I don't know what you're talking about, Devon."

I narrow my eyes, glaring at him as the hatred, thick and dark, flows through me. As if me trying to control my anger amuses him, Zack chuckles. "You need to calm down, Devon. Your face is turning red. That's not good for your blood pressure."

"Cut the crap, Zack. You are so pathetic and what you did is wrong in so many ways. You can be pissed and try to take it out on me. That's fine. But you're screwing with Dawson's life. You're destroying his career. You may have already ruined his reputation with your bullshit accusations. You know as well as I do that you never sold him PEDs."

Zack's eye twitches as his expression darkens, a muscle jumping in his jaw.

He's getting angry. No, that's not right. Zack is always angry. And I'm sure hearing how much I care for Dawson is letting

that anger bubble to the surface. That mask he wears concealing his true nature is slipping. All I need to do is push him a little harder and get a little deeper beneath his skin to get him to take that mask all the way off and admit to what he's done.

"You think you have some claim to me just because I talked to you in class. You don't, Zack. Like I said before, I don't owe you a thing."

"Why did you flirt with me then, Devon? Why did you lead me on?"

"I didn't. Never once. And if you took me being friendly as flirting or me somehow leading you on, then that says a hell of a lot about your twisted little brain. It says you need some damned professional help, Zack," I respond hotly. "The only person who has claim to me is Dawson and trust me, you'll never be a fraction of the man he is. And there's no way in hell you would ever satisfy me the way he does."

His face turns beet red, and his jaw is clenched so tight, he looks like he could bite through steel. Zack's entire body is taut, every muscle tense. Hearing me talk about Dawson with the obvious affection in my voice even I can hear is getting to him. He's right there, teetering on the edge and all I need to do is give him one more nudge to send him tumbling over it.

"Being pissed at me is one thing. That's between us. But trying to ruin a career this man—the best man I've ever known, in fact—is low, Zack. It's lower than I ever thought you'd go. Attacking somebody who had never done a thing to you, and doing it in such a cheap and sleazy way, shows just how pathetic you are. It shows you're too weak and too cowardly to come at me straight on and that you have to get to me by going after somebody I love."

"Do you think I give a shit about that cretin?" Zack snarls, finally exploding. "Do you think I care what happens to him or his reputation? Newsflash, Devon, I don't. I don't give a shit. You were supposed to be mine. Not his. You made me believe —"

“No, you let yourself believe something that wasn’t true. I was never going to be yours, Zack. Never. I never cared about you like that,” I cut him off. “I never cared about you at all. You’re a guy I know from class. That’s it. That’s all it ever was.”

“That’s not true. You love me.”

“I never did, and I never will.”

He gets to his feet, his eyes narrow, his jaw clenched, his face dark and twisted with rage.

“Is that why you made up the PED story, Zack? Because you thought it would make me fall into your arms?” I ask. “Did you think ruining Dawson’s career would somehow make me love you? Is that really what you thought?”

“I made it up because Dawson Davis is a fucking pig who doesn’t deserve you. He’s a cretin who’s taking advantage of you. You’re blinded by his money and fame, and you just can’t see it right now, Devon,” he says, his tone gentler. “But give it time. When he’s drummed out of the league and isn’t surrounded by the bright lights and money anymore, that shine you feel for him right now will fade. And you’ll realize that it’s me. That it’s always been me. I made up that story for you. For us. I did this to give us a chance at the man you deserve. Me. I made it up for our future.”

A small grin twitches at the corner of my mouth. “Thank you, Zack.”

He looks at me with confusion on his face for a moment. But then he stands up straight, his features smoothing out as he smiles wide, a glint of hope flashing through his eyes.

“You’re welcome, Devon. I knew you’d come around. I knew you’d understand if I just explained to you why I did what I did.”

I pull the phone out of my bag, hit stop on the record function, and raise my gaze to his, a smile crossing my lips. Zack looks at the phone then at me, a look of confusion on his face. At first. But then the realization dawns on him and his expression quickly darkens.

“What did you do, Devon?”

“I didn’t do anything but let you talk. You put the final nail in your coffin. Everybody is going to hear your confession, Zack. Everybody’s going to know what you did. You’re about to be famous and hey, maybe some girl will be blinded by those bright lights you’re about to be surrounded by.”

“Devon—”

“Goodbye, Zack.”

I turn and walk away, laughing softly to myself. Behind me, Zack is screaming my name and, when I don’t turn around, lets loose with a string of curse words and heated invectives. That only makes me laugh harder as I cross the quad, leaving Zack where he belongs—behind me.

EPILOGUE

Two Months Later

After getting that recording of Zack admitting he'd made the whole PED story up, she fed it to Wendy after I'd hooked them up.

Always one to run with a juicy story, Wendy took a copy of Devon's recording and properly vetted it. She tried talking to Zack himself, played the recording, and he'd shut her down, which was confirmation enough for her. After that, she published a piece exposing Zack's lies. The story had caught fire and made the rounds just as fast as the original story had—in part, I assume, because Wendy was pushing it and twisting arms. Which means, I'm now indebted to her and will be made to suffer.

After Wendy's story broke, things moved quickly from there. The league always was more reactionary than proactive and did everything it could to avoid bad PR. All told, I missed four games while the league conducted its investigation into me. After talking to the reporter from the Bleacher Beat, who admitted he never properly vetted the information he'd been fed, and listening to the recording Devon had secretly made of Zack admitting it had all been a lie, the Commissioner held a press conference. Without admitting any wrongdoing, he very publicly apologized and immediately reinstated me.

The reporter who originally published the lie was fired, and I received another public apology from the Bleacher Beat in a headline bigger than the original that named me as a PED user.

Thanks to Devon, I was fully exonerated. Not that being proven innocent and having it splashed all over the news everywhere will stop some people from believing that I do, in fact, use PEDs. For some people, allegations are enough. Where there's smoke, there's fire, they think. And despite the plethora of public apologies and announcements of my innocence, my image will always be tainted in the eyes of some.

Not that I care what people outside my locker room think. My team has had my back from day one, as have Randy and my head coach, Hugo. They've publicly supported me and told anybody who would listen that the allegations were utter bullshit. They took plenty of slings and arrows on my behalf from the keyboard warriors and professional trolls who live on the internet. Especially Anders.

He has been savaged online for backing me up and has been painted with the same PED brush used to smear me. It's bullshit. But the support I receive from my team means the world to me, and I'll never be able to thank them enough.

As for the piece of shit who started the whole mess, when Devon told me her plan, I was hesitant to let her try to get him on tape. There was no telling how dangerous he was or what he might do. I wanted to just go and beat the shit out of him, figuring a little pain and blood loss would get the confession I wanted. But Devon talked me off that ledge, making sure I understood that gaining a confession that way wasn't going to be the silver bullet I thought it would be. She convinced me she needed to get him to confess of his own free will.

I didn't like it and was worried about putting her in harm's way like that, but she insisted. And eventually, I came to realize she was right. I had to trust her—and I did. I just didn't want that little shit getting squirrely and doing something to her because then I would have really beat the shit out of him. I might have beat him to death. So, I waited in the car and listened in while Devon went and did her thing. And she nailed him, and he never saw it coming.

After the story broke, he apparently received such backlash that he ended up dropping out of school and went into hiding.

And by hiding, I mean he went back to his parents' house. I filed a defamation lawsuit against him and made sure that was made public.

He's got no money and I honestly doubt he'll be able to pay off the multi-million-dollar judgment I'm expecting to be dropped on him. Frankly, I don't care. I just want to deter assholes like Zack Winters and anybody like him from putting bullshit out there like he did. If these pricks know they're going to face serious consequences, maybe it will make the next guy think twice before spreading their lies and bullshit just to get even for some perceived slight.

As for matters on the ice, the team won one and lost three in my absence. I tried to stay away and avoid becoming a distraction. But the circus that surrounded me, which obviously surrounded them by extension, was a distraction anyway. How could it not be when day after day, they had to answer questions about my PED use, what they knew, and how long they'd known it? They're human and that kind of bullshit coming at them from every direction was bound to take a toll. Their faith in me never wavered, though.

Unfortunately, we went into the last half of the season with a slim margin for error, and losing those three games hurt us. But once the bullshit was over, we got ourselves back on track and went into the last game of the season needing a win. A victory over Dallas would put us in the playoffs and a loss or tie would send us on summer vacation. It was unthinkable considering where we stood at the midpoint of the season, but coming out of the PED drama, we played like a team possessed and with a giant chip on our shoulders. And it all came down to the final night of the regular season.

One game.

Do or die.

And as the final horn sounds, I skate to the far end of the rink and jump into the mass of bodies. My entire team is there, hugging and jumping as we slap each other on the back and cheer each other after coming away with a victory.

We're headed to the playoffs. The entire arena feels like it's shaking as the crowd roars and jumps in the stands, celebrating along with us. This trip to the postseason is so unlikely that in a lot of ways, it's more satisfying and more exciting than even our last run to the Cup.

We've been through a rough season and have come out stronger because of it. We've been forged and tempered in fire, and we're ready for the trials of the postseason. Sixteen wins stand between us and a Cup. I've never been part of a team this close, and I think that bond we share is going to make us a tough team to beat. But before we take the celebration to the locker room and start setting our focus on the postseason, there is something I need to do.

I give Anders a nod, and he gets the team settled down. They're in on my plan so they're already patting me on the back as we skate to center ice. The PA announcer asks the crowd for quiet, and though it takes a few minutes, everybody in the arena settles down as well. The gate in the half-wall opens and the ice crew quickly rolls out a red carpet. I stand at the end of it with my team in a half-circle around me, and I'm handed a microphone by one of the ice crew.

"Thanks," I say.

Randy and Hugo walk down the carpet and step to the side, standing with the rest of the team. Jerry escorts Devon, decked out in black leggings, Ugg boots, and one of my team sweaters, to the end of the red carpet and smiles at her, quietly murmuring in her ear. She looks at me, her face red, confusion etched into her features. The arena is nearly silent as the crowd watches intently, no doubt as confused as Devon is at this point.

The house lights are extinguished, plunging the crowd into darkness and leaving the ice aglow. A spotlight in the rafters turns on and is trained on Devon. Even from where I'm standing, I can see just how red her face is and laugh to myself. I raise the mic with one hand and beckon her forward with the other. "Devon Kirkpatrick, please come out to center ice."

She remains at the other end of the carpet, shaking her head and laughing, her face practically neon red at this point. The crowd, growing restless, starts to cheer and clap, urging Devon forward. Jerry is laughing and puts his hand on the small of her back and leads her forward, walking with her to where I'm standing. Once he gets her out there, I smile at him as he walks over and stands beside Randy and Hugo.

Devon is trembling, her face uncertain.

I look around the arena and even in the darkness, can see the packed arena writhing like a living being. Raising my hand, I give them all a wave then raise the microphone again.

“Okay, settle down,” I call out and the crowd does. “The first thing I want to say is, on behalf of the team and the organization, thank you all for supporting us this year. We weathered some storms, but you all had our backs and we appreciate that. This run we're about to embark upon isn't possible without you all, so thank you!”

As the team starts banging their sticks on the ice, showing their appreciation, the crowd erupts. The energy inside crackles around us like electricity, making the hair on my arms and the back of my neck stand on end. It's almost tangible. As the crowd settles down again, I take Devon's hand and give her a wink. Her face is still red, and she looks almost petrified. She's not a girl who enjoys the spotlight.

“Secondly, I know a lot of people out there have wondered what sparked my rejuvenation this season,” I say. “It wasn't PEDs like some choose to believe. It was this woman right here. She is my fountain of youth. Her love and support have made me feel like a rookie all over again. She's wonderful, guys. Amazing. She's unlike anybody I've ever met before in my life.”

Holding Devon's hand, I raise her arm as the crowd erupts in cheers and applause. Devon covers her face with her hand, laughing to herself, her face so red, I'm starting to worry that it will never fade back into that creamy, milky complexion I've come to know and love.

“What are you doing, Dawson?” she whispers.

I raise the mic again, and though I'm addressing the crowd, my gaze is locked onto hers. "Devon made me think about my life. She made me realize there is more to life than just hockey," I say, my comment met with some good-natured boos. "She's refueled my passion for life and the game. So, if there is anybody to credit with me playing like a kid again this season, you should credit Devon. She's truly made me feel young again."

Devon looks at me with a smile on her face and rests her hand over her heart, touched by my comments. I lean forward and give her a peck on the cheek, touching off another roar of the crowd, which makes her laugh awkwardly. I hold my hand up, quieting the crowd again. Once they're silent, I raise the mic.

"And that's why, I've come to realize that I don't want to walk through the rest of this life without having her by my side."

Devon's eyes widen as she quickly figures out what this is all about. Our team's mascot, a giant lion in a team sweater, skates up to us holding a red satin pillow with a small, dark box. Anders skates over and grabs the mic from me but holds it close to my mouth. Devon clamps her hands over her mouth, her eyes so wide I fear they're going to just pop out right there and fall onto the ice. Laughing to myself, I take the box, get down on my knee, and open it.

"Devon Kirkpatrick, will you make me feel like the luckiest man on this planet for the rest of the years I have left?" I ask. "Will you marry me?"

The arena is so quiet you could hear the proverbial pin drop, and everybody seems to be holding their breath. The color drains from Devon's face and her green eyes sparkle as she looks at me, her lips trembling. She looks like she might cry. But she reaches out and plucks the ring from the box and slips it on her finger, her cheeks flushing and a smile as bright as the spotlight on her face. She raises her eyes to me and nods. "Yes. Nothing would make me happier."

The arena explodes with applause and wild cheering. And as Devon throws herself into my arms, I pick her up and swing her around, my heart swelling until it feels too big for my

body. My teammates file by us, patting me on the back and offering their congratulations to us. Anders is last in the line, and he smiles at Devon.

“You know what you’re getting into, right?” he asks.

“I do,” she says.

“And you still want to marry this clown?”

Devon smiles. “I do.”

“Good. Then keep working that magic that’s making him feel young because once we win the Cup this year, we’re going to need him for another run next season.”

Devon smiles at him and then turns to me. “Oh, I can promise you that I’m going to keep this old man feeling like a rookie. You may even get a few more years out of him.”

“That is good to hear.” Anders smiles. “Now, let’s go pop some champagne to celebrate your nuptials and getting into the playoffs.”

“That sounds good to me,” I say.

As I walk down the carpet with Devon by my side, I wave to the crowd again. The applause and cheering is thunderous. I can feel it down in my bones. It’s only then I realize it’s been a long time since I’ve felt the energy from a crowd like this. It’s been a long time since I felt this energized and excited for a playoff run. I guess I’d become jaded to it all. And this renewal, I know, is the effect Devon has on me. She really is making me appreciate this game, this crowd, and this life more than I have in a long time.

“Thank you,” I say.

“For what?” she asks.

“For being you. You’ve given me back everything I didn’t even know I’d lost.”

She offers me a shy smile. “Well, it only seems fair. You’ve given me so much I never even knew existed. I love you, Dawson.”

“I love you, baby.”

As we walk down the tunnel toward the locker room, I pick her up and spin her around, kissing her with all the passion I can muster. Whether we win the Cup this year or not, I already feel like I've won a championship.

EXTENDED EPILOGUE

DEVON

“What are you working on?” he asks.

“Just typing up some case notes before my sessions today,” I reply. “How are the kids?”

“Amazing. Just like you.”

I laugh. “That’s sweet. But what are they doing?”

He flashes me a grin. “Dylan is sleeping. Daisy and Dominic are with River doing crafts right now. I tried to get in on that, but River kicked me out of the room. She said it’s her time with the kids and I can have them back later.”

I laugh. River is our live-in nanny. Not that we really need one. We hired her shortly after moving to Montana when I was first getting my practice off the ground and Dawson was still trying to figure out his post-hockey life. He’s settled into retirement nicely and, unlike some athletes, hasn’t regretted his decision to pull the pin and hasn’t felt unsettled in the least. He’s been happy. And he’s very hands-on as a parent—too hands-on, apparently for River’s liking.

She’s more than just a nanny, though. She’s part of our family. She loves the kids as much as if they were her own and enjoys spending time with them. And even though we don’t need somebody to look after the kids, she’s become so much a part of the fabric of our family and our daily life that we can’t see our home without her.

Having River here gives us a lot of freedom. I’m able to keep my practice and Dawson is able to pursue whatever interests

him. But for the most part, he loves being retired and loves being a dad more than anything.

At the moment, Dawson is helping coach a youth hockey team in Kalispell, a small city of nearly thirty thousand about twenty minutes from our home. It's also where I have my practice. Even in a place as small as Kalispell, there's a need for a child psychologist. I've even had patients begin coming in from surrounding areas. It's really rewarding work, and having Dawson's love and support plus River's help with the kids is helping me pursue my own goals.

"What are you going to do today, babe?" I ask.

"It's a beautiful day. I think I'm going to go ride horses for a while. Want to go with me?"

"I wish I could. I've got to get into town soon for my appointments."

He gently kisses the top of my head. "Have I ever told you how proud of you I am?"

"You have. But I never get tired of hearing it."

Dawson ended up playing three more seasons in LA and won two more Cups, giving him a total of five in his career. Outside of those insane Montreal teams back in the 50s and 60s—which had players win double-digit championships—and a few in the modern era who have six rings, Dawson is one of the most decorated players in league history. You can say I've become something of a student of the game. Even Sammy is impressed with my knowledge.

His team won the Cup in what would be his final season, and after that, we gave up the condo in downtown LA and moved to Montana full-time. It's a stunningly, naturally beautiful place with clean air, open land, and is an incredible place to raise our children.

We had Dominic, nicknamed Anders, before we left LA—named after Dawson's best friend, of course. And the elder Anders, who retired with Dawson after their final Cup win, has been a doting godfather, to say the least. Then, after

moving to Montana, we had Daisy and Dylan, the youngest of our brood.

“Well then, I’m proud of you, Dr. Devon,” he says. “And I love you even more than that.”

“Then I am the luckiest woman in the world.”

“That’s fair since I’m the luckiest man in the world.”

“Yeah. You really are,” I say with a grin.

“Don’t I know it.”

I turn my face up to him and Dawson gives me a gentle kiss, his lips lingering on mine for a moment. He looks at me with those dark, soulful eyes that still manage to stop my heart every bit as much today as they did that first night we met outside the bar.

“Don’t forget we have that dinner on Friday.”

“I was doing my best to forget it. Thanks for reminding me,” I say with a roll of my eyes. “I don’t suppose you can come up with an excuse to get out of it?”

He laughs. “If you don’t want awards and recognition, you probably shouldn’t be so good at your job, babe. People in town love you and want to honor you for all you do. And you know what? You deserve it. So, stop fighting it. Let these people cherish you the way I do.”

“Nobody will ever cherish me the way you do.”

“You’re damn right. And that’s because you’re mine. All mine.”

“Yes, I am. And you’re all mine.”

“Damn right, I am.”

He gives me another kiss and I smile. “Go. Ride your horses. I need to finish up here and get down to the office.”

“Yes, ma’am. I’ll see you for dinner. I’ll make you something special.”

“Yeah? What are you going to make?”

“It’s a surprise.”

I laugh. “You’re still full of surprises even all these years later.”

“And I hope to keep surprising you for the rest of our lives.”

“I know you will.”

He gives me another quick kiss and a smile then turns and walks out of my office, leaving me with my work and my thoughts. My eyes drift over to the picture from our wedding.

It was on a small, private vineyard in Santa Barbara and was an amazing affair. The smiles on our faces haven’t dimmed a bit since that day. The next pictures over are photos of us as we started to grow our family. In the most recent one, Dawson is holding Dylan in his arms, and he couldn’t look prouder if he tried. It’s the most perfect picture ever and truly encapsulates just how happy we are.

I look out the window and see Dawson riding off on one of the horses, a big gray and black dappled stallion he’d named Stanley—of course—and smile.

Life is beautiful. Life is perfect. I don’t know what fate decided to bless me, or what I’ve done to deserve this life, but the one thing I can say without reservation is that I’m beyond grateful for it.

I never thought life—my life—could be this amazing or resemble anything close to the fairy tale it is. And it only gets better with every passing day.

The End. Thanks for reading!

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