

A
GRUMPY X SUNSHINE
HOCKEY
ROMANCE

"SMILE FOR ME,
PUCK BUNNY."

PUCKING KNOCKOUT

ROYANNE
STEELE

SMILEY

PUCKING KNOCKOUT

BOOK ONE



ROXANNE STEELE

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CONTENTS

Smiley Blurb

PLACEHOLDER FILE

1. Prologue: Smile For Me, Puck Bunny.
2. A Night With An Nhl Star
3. Make A Deal With Me
4. Everything Can Change In Three Years
5. Miss Social Media Manager

About the Author

Also by Roxanne Steele

*To all those who dream of starting over again for the sake of
happiness...*

This for you.

- Roxanne Steele

“Smile for me, Puck Bunny.”

That’s how I met him.

At the end of an alleyway one rainy night.

*With tears streaming down my face, bruises across my skin,
and my heart beaten from an abusive relationship.*

I’m the girl who wondered how she’d *ever* smile again.

Until fate led me to *him*.

My saving grace.

We shared one night of passion. No names exchanged.

By morning, I slipped from his lustful embrace.

Away from the hero, whose smile brought me *hope*.

Mr. Smiley, my knight in shining armor.

Years later, I’m a completely different person.

Pursuing my dreams and living life unrepentantly.

***Until I’m assigned as a Social Media Manager to the
Montreal Stingrays.***

The goal is simple—build the team’s online presence before
the playoffs.

The only problem is Nico.

Nicholas James Salvatore, the 6’7”, broody, chiseled captain
of the team.

Not only do I know the superstar NHL hockey sensation, but I
learn rather quickly that he’s no longer the bright and happy
man I remember.

He’s cold, grumpy, and a pain in the ass.

Yet, I'm expected to do the impossible—make him seem kind, friendly, and approachable.

With a contract signed and six months to blow him up on all social platforms, it's my time to return the favor and turn that frown upside down.

PLACEHOLDER FILE



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PROLOGUE: SMILE FOR ME, PUCK BUNNY



~*A* NASTASIA~

“CUNT ASS BITCH.”

Rounds of mocking laughter do nothing to hurt me. What is left to destroy when that foundation of strength is nothing but shambles?

“Let’s not waste any more time.”

The painful grip on my chin follows with a lift of my head so swiftly, I’m not surprised when the back of my head smashes into the wet concrete wall behind me.

This punishment would be considered a blessing.

I’ve dealt with worse.

“Tonight should be a reminder of how unimportant you are to me.”

I’m forced to peer into his eyes of pure darkness.

No emotion. No guilt. Nothing.

Just emptiness...

“You’re like any other puck bunny. Useless piece of shit with pussies good enough to take a pounding from rich fuckers

like me.”

His grip extends until his fingernails dig into my wet cheeks.

“When I tell you I want you here at 7:00 p.m. sharp, you’re here at 6:45 p.m. I don’t care what stops you from being on time, Stasia. Not even that sick bastard you enjoy calling a father.”

I swallow the lump in my throat.

Why did I ever tell him about Jones?

Trusting this rich seducer was the worst mistake I could have ever made in this lifetime.

The sound of a phone vibrating interrupts the provoking silence burning between us. Watching that eerie grin of satisfaction form on his rough lips scares me.

When Antonio Garcia smiles, it means someone has perished from his wrath.

“Perfect timing.”

He doesn’t let me go. Instead, he uses his free hand to offer it to the side. One of his goons places a phone in his hand and bows, but my eyes can’t stop from following the trail of his hand that now displays a video.

My stomach sinks.

“Not respecting my time has consequences, Stasia. I thought, as a puck bunny, you’d understand that, but this is the perfect opportunity to remind you that this isn’t your small town on the outskirts of Canada. This is The Bronx. Where everyone is here to make their money and enjoy the world of business.”

I can't stop my tears, even as the video that's on repeat becomes so blurred, I can no longer see the horrifying confirmation that the man I deemed a father was dead.

Life support cut off on purpose...

"Next time, I'll do more than just pull the plug on those you love," he threatens with a wider grin. He's admiring how every tear runs down my cheeks. "I'll turn your life upside down and enjoy stealing every spec of joy that makes you happy, you hear?"

He grips my face tightly and pushes me back into the wall, so he can further press against me.

"So, you best remember what I, Antonio Garcia, can do to an insignificant puck bunny like you," he proudly declares with not an inch of remorse. "You're my property. This body is mine, so don't think anyone else can enjoy it without my permission."

He licks the tear that streams down my left cheek.

"Or I may have to ruin this pretty little face of yours," he grunts into my ear. He can't tame the way he grinds himself against me.

Seeing me broken only turns him on.

"Now, you're going to stay right here in this alleyway and entertain my men. That's the least you can do, yes?"

My eyes widen, fear swarming them while I fight the shiver that begs to rip through my body.

There are ten men here.

Ten.

“As a puck bunny, that’s what you’re good at, isn’t it?” he questions as his hand moves from my chin down to my neck. His long fingers wrap around my neck so easily and tighten nice and slow.

A reminder that he can snap my neck whenever he wants.

It’s a shame that the idea of pain only makes me want it more.

He’s already fucked me up.

“Speak, Stasia,” he growls in annoyance.

If I dared speak without his permission, he’d enjoy bashing my head repeatedly against the concrete wall behind me.

“W-We’re outside.”

No shit, Sherlock.

Outside, at the end of the alleyway, with dark clouds hovering in the sky and lightning putting on a show in preparation for the intense rainfall that will ridicule us.

Yet he wants me to entertain his ten goons outside in public, where anyone can walk by or hear us?

This man is mad.

“Yes, Puck Bunny. Outside is where you belong. Where everyone can see what a shameful bitch you are. Naked and ruined. You love attention, yes? That’s why you signed my contract.”

No.

That’s not why I signed the dotted line that has now ruined my life.

I signed up to work here at Garcia’s Nightbound Club & Bar because I was desperate for a job. Under the table cash.

Bundles of it. Anything that would pay Jones' medical bills after this man sent his goons to beat him so bad, he landed in the ICU in an induced coma because the pain was too much.

Now he's dead.

The man I called a father.

The one person in this big world who wanted me to succeed.

Not like my own biological parents, who think I'm nothing but a slutty waste of space.

"You're wasting my time," he concludes and lets me go.

Then he kicks me for what has to be the tenth time tonight.

I grip my stomach and fall to my knees, the pain far too debilitating. This repeated abuse makes me fear the worse.

That I'll never be able to have kids...

Then again, that should be the least of my concerns. I'll probably die before I can conceive a child into this world.

And this world will only ruin the innocent when you don't have money and power.

"Wait till I'm in the VIP area before having fun, boys," he declares with pride as one of his goons bows to offer him those imported cigars.

Rich shit...

"Yes, Boss."

They all bow in respect—whether earned or forced—but that doesn't matter to them.

I can see from the sly smiles hidden by the shadows of this deep alleyway that they can't wait for their boss to be lost in

the booming music and line of puck bunnies, ready to adore him for the rest of the night.

Get on his good side, and maybe they'll get a pay raise before fucking all the NHL All-Stars.

I force myself to fight the fresh set of tears that threaten to fall.

This is my life.

A life I didn't ask for.

When I envisioned coming to New York in hopes of getting a job in the fine arts, I didn't see myself getting roped into this madness. One thing led to another, and all I wanted was to prove my worth to those who discarded me like trash.

Prove to them that I could be something like my younger brother, who they adore...

If I was the last child, maybe we'd be worth the investment. Instead, my older brother was dashed to the streets before he could finish college.

I wasn't even lucky to finish high school...

Now, here I am.

In an alleyway.

Broken, abused, continuing this fake shit of a relationship because I was stupid, like every puck bunny that becomes Antonio's favorite of the month.

I'm such a fool...

"Ready, boys?"

Their laughter is pure mockery while I tense up at the sound of their zippers being undone.

How I wish I could disappear.

To just fade away and leave my body behind.

Leave the pain behind and come back when I'm nothing but battered, bruised, and aching ruthlessly.

At least, I know how to brace the agony after being nothing but a puppet for the night.

Enduring the agony and shame of being a fuck doll is the hardest challenge to face.

“BunBee?”

My body freezes at the far too-familiar nickname.

The childhood nickname that ignited glee in the depths of my innocent heart.

I can't dare lift my head. Shame consumes me at the idea of someone from my childhood recognizing me.

“Hey! VIP entrance is the other alleyway. We're busy.”

“No, hold on.” That familiar voice is suddenly filled with far too much anger.

“This ain't your business, boy. If you know what's good for you, you'll—”

I flinch at the gasping grunt that stops one of these goons from finishing their threatening sentence.

Despite what's happening in front of me, I can't lift my head. I'm frightened down to my bones that by doing so, I'll be pulled into a bigger trap.

A setup from Antonio to make things more interesting.

“You son of a bit—” More grunts follow until there's obviously a fight breaking out a few steps from me, but I'm

hugging myself and pressing my back against the wall as much as I can.

Don't see me. I'm nothing but a wasteful girl...

With a booming pound of thunder, the rain that threatened to fall takes this opportunity to descend upon us all. Within seconds, I'm drenched as the merciless droplets of frost make the little threads of white cloth only more see-through.

I'm zoning the world out, hoping my life will just fickle away, but when there's an eerie silence after plentiful grunts and groans, I'm unsure if I'm dreaming.

Maybe I died in the process, and this is purgatory.

When something touches the top of my head, I freeze up so badly, I can't even allow myself to breathe.

"Fuck..." the familiar voice curses. "This isn't where I should find you, BunBee."

"Who is she to you, Marc?"

The deep voice asking who I am comes from right in front of me. I'm still repeating the question in my mind. The vibration of depth in such a baritone voice makes me think of chocolate running along delicate strawberries.

The voices that can make your lady bits sing the fluttering hymns for hours.

"Baby sis, man." The pain in the familiar man's voice makes me realize who he is.

My older brother.

Maclaren Decan Davis.

"Fuck. Those bastards must have kicked her out, too, but how the hell did she get to NYC?"

The sexy, deep voice doesn't say anything at first.

I don't expect him to reply honestly.

This isn't his business.

"Make sure Antonio is distracted," he announces.

"What are you thinking, man? We can't mess with what Antonio owns. We have to get her out of this. Fuck... I can't let her stay in this shit, but if we push the wrong buttons tonight, we're going to lose our sho—"

"You talk so much, Marc." He sounds tired of admitting it. "Just do it. Don't worry about shit. I'll handle it."

"A-Alright, Cap," he whispers. His voice sounds a bit more sympathetic as he whispers, "BunBee, hold on tight, 'kay? We'll figure shit out."

Figure shit out.

That's not a promise to get me out of this cycle.

I shouldn't even get my hopes up.

No one saves anyone in this world.

The rain is still beating us ruthlessly, which makes me wonder why this man is helping me. My own brother doesn't know how to get me out of Antonio's grasp. What makes him think he stands a chance?

The touch on my cheek is soft and so tender, I suddenly feel the urge to lift my head enough to get a glimpse of who this man is. The moment our eyes lock, it feels as if the air in my lungs is taken away. It's too painful to gasp, but God...

This man is as stunningly attractive as those muscled beasts you see on fitness posters and magazines.

What steals me away is how alluring his eyes are.

Shades of blue, green, and even yellow. Tiny specs of hazelnut and black.

The mixture is such a unique combination, I'm breathless just looking into their mesmerizing depths.

That's not the only thing that takes my breath away.

It's that golden smile upon his smooth lips that creates a beacon of hope in my heart.

I'm sure he's pleased with his newly captured possession. A perfect tool to use against Antonio, but despite his happiness, I can't share this brewing feeling within.

Hope.

A way out.

His eyes scan me slowly, as if I'm actually worthy of his gaze, as he takes in every inch of me. When our eyes meet again, I see the flickers of conviction in his gaze, leaving me to wonder what he wants from me.

What does he get in return?

My tears blend with the droplets of rain as I fight the sinking feeling that begs to steal me away into a spiraling cyclone of hopelessness. I feel the way his thumb lightly brushes my flush cheek before it moves until it glides along my busted bottom lip.

Daring to look past him for a few seconds, my eyes confirm the sight behind him.

All those goons lying unconscious on the ground in the beating rain...

I'm positive there were only two of them.

How the hell could they have taken them down so easily?

Returning my attention to him, I wonder what's next for me. It shouldn't matter, though. My life has been nothing but a miserable masterpiece these last five years.

Nothing will change now.

Despite the truth screaming in the hollows of my mind, I still wish for something with this man.

For a way out.

“You deserve better.”

Shocked by his words, I can't reply. All I can do is stare back with my lifeless gaze and a deep frown that reminds me that I've lost that trinket of hope since I was thrown on the streets at fifteen.

“Smile for me, Puck Bunny.”

Nothing could make me so lost in wonder until this man showed up in the one instance where I'm stripped of every ounce of aspiration.

For the first time, I'm willing to do what another man wishes for me without force.

I give him the best smile I can muster.

I'm sure it's ugly.

Raw and vulnerable enough that I'm nothing but a canvas that portrays a glimpse of my hardship, but for one sole moment, I'm given an aspect of control I've not been privileged to experience in a long time.

To react the way I want to.

His own grin further spreads across those forbidden lips, and those eyes of blue serenity soften.

“I’m gonna get you out of here,” he vows, as if this is a new newfound purpose in life. “No one has earned your trust, but if you have nothing to lose, can you trust me tonight?”

Tonight.

Just one night.

He’s right.

I have nothing to lose.

All I can muster is a nod, but it’s more than enough for this smiling man who may very well become my savior.

“Then let’s get away from here.”

Mr. Smiley.

My knight in shining armor.

A NIGHT WITH AN NHL STAR



~*A* NASTASIA~

HIS HAND IS SO WARM...

I can't help but acknowledge how his touch sparks something inside me.

I've gotten used to touch igniting sexual desire, but this stranger's hold around my hand does something different.

Kindles sensations I've forgotten.

Not parental. Not sibling love. Something more.

Different. Unique.

Foreign enough that I crave to explore it.

"This is the best I could do on such short notice," he admits and looks over his shoulder to meet my eyes.

He does that a lot.

Eye contact is a big deal to this stranger.

That and physical touch.

"This is the only luxury suite that doesn't really ask questions. It's hard when everyone and their damn pets recognize you." His chuckle is soft and light-hearted.

Whenever he laughs or smiles so sweetly, it makes his alluring eyes twinkle with so much purpose. It makes me wonder how one can be so happy in life.

The problem could be me. I've forgotten what it's like to be that happy in this world.

I lost my smile long before I arrived here in NYC.

"I ordered some room service. Getting something warm into your system will do you good. I did a guestimate in terms of clothes size, so I apologize in advance if it's a little too big." He squeezes my hand gently while his mesmerizing eyes search mine.

I'm waiting for him to question me.

Who are you? What's your name? Why the hell are you involved in Garcia's bullshit?

He doesn't.

All he does is smile and look at the elevator doors.

"I'm keeping my fingers crossed that there's a first-aid kit in the room. We should attend to those scratches and cuts on your face, arms, and legs." He looks back at me again, his gaze softening tremendously while he admires my face. "Can't go ruining such a pretty face."

Why?

Why is he helping me?

With a ding, after so many passed floors, we finally reached our destination.

Which I realize is a penthouse.

"Here we are," he declares and doesn't hesitate to lead me into the vast paradise of marble and gold hardware. It's an

eyesore in a good way because you don't want to linger in one spot for too long.

Or you'll miss out on the sophisticated beauty this place delivers as a unit with its plentiful pieces of artistry.

"Let's have you sit at the kitchen island for now," he encourages as he leads me to the massive marble island with crystal clear bar stools with gold hardware.

He's going to lift me up onto one of the bar stools but pauses.

"It's okay to touch you, yes?"

I'm certain he thinks I've lost my mind with how long it takes me to respond to his question. In fact, my drawn silence should have let him give up on trying to get an answer out of me.

Yet, he waits... and waits... even though I'm wasting his valuable time.

Swallowing the thick lump in my throat, I muster a nod of approval.

His smile couldn't be more loving in return.

"Alright. Up we go." He lifts me as if I weigh absolutely nothing to him. That has to be the case with how tall he is at 6'7". Matched with his chiseled physique, I'm sure he carries a lot heavier on a regular basis. "Does anywhere on your body hurt to the point you feel like you'll die?"

His question is a little amusing, especially with the playfulness in his voice. It's enough to kindle the tiniest lifts in the corner of my lips.

One that he notices.

“My personality is manageable, huh?” he teases with a wink before he fixes his suit jacket that’s been resting on my shoulders this whole time. “My team thinks I’m hilarious. Or high. They haven’t been able to determine which one, honestly, but for the sake of avoiding drug tests, we go along with me having a comedic side.”

He brushes my wet blonde locks away from my face to rest behind my ears, his touch beyond gentle as the graze of those fingertips sends shivers through me.

“Sorry,” he apologizes. “I just think your hair should be behind your ears, so we can see your heart-shaped face properly.” He chuckles nervously and adds, “Not like I’m hitting on you or anything. Marc would kill me, I think.”

I’m intrigued as to why he hasn’t even asked for an explanation regarding that. This is probably the perfect moment for him to ask, thanks to the topic at hand, but he stares at me for a long moment.

“I want to get this out of the way, so you know I’m not here for any sort of benefit,” he begins. “You don’t need to tell me anything you don’t want to. Heck, we don’t even need to exchange names. My purpose tonight is to ensure you’re fed, hydrated, safe, warm, taken care of, and satisfied. Even if it’s one night.”

No one has ever shown such a compassionate offer.

“When morning comes, we can pretend we never crossed paths. You’re not obligated to pay me back in any way, and if you don’t want to meet your brother to get drilled with X number of questions, I’ll send him to an empty penthouse and feign my innocence in knowing your whereabouts. What do you say? Deal?”

I blink.

I stare.

I get lost in those hypnotic eyes.

I finally nod.

“Good.” There’s a ring from down the hall. “That should be food and clothes. Give me a minute to get that sorted. Where did I put my wallet?”

He’s patting his pants and scurrying around the island, which makes my lips lift further and further, watching him scramble. When he looks as though he’ll never be able to discover where his wallet is, I lift my hand to present the matte black card holder that I can only assume is his “wallet.”

The richer the man, the smaller the wallet.

His darting eyes find my dull ones, and instead of being upset with me, he laughs.

“Oh, man. Let me guess. It was in my jacket pocket, wasn’t it?”

He earns himself a smirk.

“I earned myself a cunning puck bunny.” I like how he doesn’t use the term in a derogative way. “May I borrow that?”

I nod and offer it to him, and he can’t help but admire me up close.

“You really light up when you smile, Puck Bunny,” he whispers. His free hand gently strokes my cheek before he pulls away. “I don’t know your story, but I hope by the end of the night, I can give you a few hours full of sunshine.”

When he walks away, I dangle my feet while admiring my surroundings at an appreciative pace.

This is what money looks like.

Spacious rooms, high ceilings, massive windows, glass shit everywhere. Gold, gold, gold. Relaxed men who could tap their wallet to pay instead of questioning how they reached their grand total.

Mr. Smiley is the polar opposite of Garcia.

Returning with a tray full of covered plates, he encourages me to freshen up and change. I'm hesitant at first, knowing well I can't offer him anything in return, but he insists once again that he wants nothing for tonight.

No price for taking care of me...

I can't remember the last time I enjoyed a hot shower. Adding the privilege of washing myself without a five-minute countdown, I'm soaking up every second of this moment.

Washing any remnants of blood, dirt, and whatever else manages to soil my blonde locks, I scrub myself to the best of my ability. The cuts and bruises all over my body are extremely noticeable now, but I ignore the pain and hints of embarrassment they ignite.

This may be the only chance I get to shower like this for a while.

Changing into the provided clothes, I realized one problem.

"Too big." I'm staring at the pants that will literally fall off me if I take a few steps attempting to wear the cotton leggings.

If they had a drawstring, I could manage, but this has nothing to help grip my far too-small waist.

Shyly walking into the hall in just an oversized white shirt and a new pair of underwear, I carry the evidence in my grasp

to show my current problem. I search for Mr. Smiley, only to see he's on the phone and staring at the window that gives a view of the city.

“Coach, I get it. I really do, but you don't understand. I'm on this team for a reason. Not just to make sure we win and do well on the ice, but to ensure we're protected off it,” he emphasizes and pinches his nose. “Coach, you get how fucked up this world is. Heck, Marc and I just had an encounter with Garcia. If he realizes I interfered with his biz, he's gonna bother me, and I don't want to deal with him right now.”

I frown at the news, realizing I may have just hindered him with my very existence.

“Listen, Coach. Montreal Stingrays isn't where I'm meant to be. I'd be fucking miserable if I signed a deal there. Canada... fucked me up. Not to say we don't have problems here, but I have bad blood there. Plus, Britney...”

He trails off and takes a deep breath. Letting it out, he closes his eyes.

“Britney wants too much. I can't provide her with the lifestyle she's craving. The trophy wife world she envisions just because I have a few racks in my credit card. My well-being is not important to her, and if she's going to keep being the social manager of Stingrays, it just won't work.”

I remember how I wanted to be some sort of social media influencer when I was thirteen. It was shot down pretty quickly because I didn't have two thousand dollars to buy a new phone to make TikToks. Adding how social media relied on looks and luck, I'd have to clean my whole appearance.

All of it costs money.

The money I've been putting away in my locker...

Now that I've upset Garcia by walking away with Mr. Smiley, I may have just lost the little bit of savings I've kept for fifteen months.

"Plus, Marc is my best friend. If he ain't coming with, it's an automatically no."

There's a long pause. I can see from the lines of Mr. Smiley's facial expression that he's not happy with what his coach stated.

"Marc has just as much potential as I do, Coach. I wish you'd see his worth. Why does everyone shoot him down before he can get up and fly? Is it because he doesn't have loads of money or popularity? It's some real bullshit, if you ask me."

He lets out a huff before he crosses one arm over his chest.

"Coach, my decision is set in stone. I'm staying here. Unless our whole team collapses, I'd rather start from the bottom here and make my way up all over again. I've done it once. I'd gladly do it again with the team that supports me for who I am. Not make me fucking miserable."

He grumbles something before he shakes his head.

"If it'll make you stop talking, I'll think about it," he grunts before his eyes lazily move to the side until they land on me. He's going to say something, his mouth half open, but he's lost in admiring me from head to toe.

The silence is so long, I'm sure his coach is questioning where he went.

It takes me pointing a finger to my own ear for him to look confused. Then his eyes widen as he curses.

“Oh, fuck. Sorry, Coach. Uh... just saw a flying squirrel from the fifty-fourth floor. No... no, I’m not high, ugh. Everyone always thinks I’m high. I haven’t smoked a joint in a hot minute. Trust me, if I was high, I’d be a grumpy bastard you would all hate to be around. I gotta go, Coach. See you tomorrow morning.”

The moment he hangs up, he sighs.

“Puck Bunny... you can’t be standing there looking like a hot snack when I’m on the phone.”

I don’t know what’s funny about his declaration, but I snicker and cover my lips to hide how close I am to laughing at him.

“Now, now,” he begins with a beaming grin as he approaches me. “It’ll make my fucking year if I get to see a genuine smile like that on your lips.” When he reaches me, he gently wraps his hand around my wrist so he can lower my hand enough to see my face.

“God, you really are a stunner when you smile, Puck Bunny.” We share an intense look, one that makes me feel like we’re magnets fighting the pull that wishes to bring us together. I’m sure he feels it the same way because he’s peering at my lips and back into my eyes.

Then he’s biting his bottom lip like he can’t wait to get a taste of mine.

“I shouldn’t kiss you,” he admits, yet he inches closer. “But... I want to.”

Then what is he waiting for?

He’s only an inch away, his lips so close to mine that a mere lean forward would seal them.

“What does my *Sweet Sunshine* want?”

Sunshine?

Me?

Sweet and Sunshine in one sentence.

It's my turn to lower my gaze to his lips, the pulsing tension between us growing as I admire the tender softness their appearance projects.

They're not rough or burned.

I bet he tastes good...

My teeth sink into my bottom lip as I softly bite them. The pinch of pain makes me realize he's giving me the wheel in the realms of control.

I can either take it or leave him hanging.

The moment his phone rings, neither of us makes a move.

The song keeps playing, making me feel pressure to just do what my body wants. I don't want to fear the consequences, something I'm so used to worrying about.

Which is why I close the distance.

Kissing Mr. Smiley is exactly how I've wished men in the past would have kissed me. Not sloppy, rough, and in such haste to get to the 'fucking' part.

Mr. Smiley kisses me as if I'm his *someone* in this grand world. I'm a valued individual who was woven into his path at the right place and time, leaving us to build our next path together, no matter where it leads us.

His craving for physical touch doesn't shy away when he kisses me. He doesn't hesitate to pull me against him while his lips delve into my mouth until I let his tongue slip inside.

The phone is ringing again.

It's been ringing for a while now.

To the point, I feel as though it should be important.

He ignores it.

I ignore it.

Until we're in such a desperate need for breath, we have to pull away from one another to grasp it.

"Fuck," he whispers. "You're dangerous, Sweet Sunshine." He's saying that with such a taunting smile.

"Y-Your phone,"—I point at his pocket—"is ringing."

Now he's giving me those smiles that make butterflies flutter in the pits of your stomach while you question whether jumping a man is illegal in the state of NYC.

"Your voice is wonderful to listen to," he praises instead and doesn't hesitate to lean in again to brush his lips against mine. "Fine. I'll answer it because my Sunshine of the night is concerned." He then kisses my cheek.

"Start eating. You can explain to me why you're pantless after," he urges with that husky voice from the alleyway that has my core in a heated mess. "Not like I'm complaining." With a wink, he turns around and picks up the phone.

I notice his dialect changes instantly, his voice deepening as he begins to speak what I can only assume is Russian. It's a language I wish to learn myself, especially when it's supposedly where my roots are, but my parents didn't think it was important for us to learn it.

Anything to hinder us, I guess...

Unable to ignore the aroma of food any longer, I move off the stool to look at the choices Mr. Smiley ordered.

Wow...

I've never seen a golden tray carry so much food before.

From all the various plates, I feel like I'm looking at a five-course meal. As much as I want to dive in, seeing the two plates of each meal makes me want to wait a little longer.

Would Mr. Smiley want to eat with me?

Deciding to take a chance, I perch myself back onto the stool and wait. Admiring the high ceilings, I rest my chin on my crossed arms that rest on the island, my mind drifting away as I wonder how I'm going to start back up again.

I accepted a long time ago that being a puck bunny wasn't going to end well. I even accepted that every shift could potentially be my last.

Witnessing with my own eyes how puck bunnies would leave alive and well and come back in garbage bags forced me to envision myself experiencing the same.

Despite the fear of being one of those chopped-up girls, I couldn't let go of the opportunity.

The money I'd been saving in hopes of maybe going back to school. Or to get a tiny apartment, even if it's just a studio. With each shift, I told myself I'd be one step closer to reaching my goals.

Where do I go when all that money is gone?

“Sunshine.”

Opening my eyes, my vision is blurry as I seek the mystical blue eyes that peer down at me.

“Why are you crying, Puck Bunny?” His sympathetic gaze doesn’t suit him. He looks more vibrant with his various smiles and playful expressions.

Not with deep frowns and eyes that seek my refuge.

“Talk to me, Sunshine,” he urges and doesn’t hesitate to swipe away the tear that runs down my left cheek.

Swallowing the lump forming in my throat, I mentally tell myself it’s okay to be open with him. If he had bad intentions for me, I doubt he’d do all of what he’d done thus far.

Especially if it put his future and dreams in jeopardy.

“I’ve been wanting to find a way out. From this life, I got entwined into. Now it’s here... without much pain and agony, but I don’t know how I can make it a successful start to a new beginning,” I confess as quietly as I can.

Just hearing myself speak seems like a rare occurrence. It’s been years since I’ve been allowed to say more than a few sentences at a time.

“I didn’t do this job because I wanted to. It was the only thing available to a child like me. The only way not to get taken off the streets and touselled in forbidden places where I’d lose control entirely. Garcia didn’t give me much control. I barely spoke. Just did what was asked obediently when I could. Tonight... was the first time I struggled to do what was asked of me. After being used and abused. Being forced to act as if we’re madly in love when I’m obviously a tool. I had enough... and was ready to face the consequences, as humiliating as they are, but somehow, I’m here.”

I need to pause, so I don’t get emotional. I want to be strong in Mr. Smiley’s eyes, but it’s much harder than I realized.

“Wearing comfy clothes in a warm home, with the aroma of highly luxurious food I’ve only been allowed to see and smell. Never touch or dare eat. It’s the blessing I’ve always prayed for, even when I lost hope that there was a god of any kind. However...” I put my head down as I peer at my bare crossed arms, the bruises pulling my attention.

“I don’t want to be a burden to you. I know when this night ends, I need to move forward and take this opportunity to run to the hills and not look back. My dilemma is... my savings are in my locker. Every dime, penny, and bill. I only have one friend I trust who keeps hold of my SIN, health card, and birth certificate, but I didn’t want to let her hold on to my money as well. Money changes people. No matter how kind they are in the beginning.”

“You’re right,” he agrees. I’m more impressed that he was willing to listen to me. “So, it’s a locker at Garcia’s Club, yes.”

Lifting my head, I slowly nod.

He looks deep in thought while he peers at the untouched trays of food.

“Not hungry?”

I feel my cheeks warm up at his question.

“I... wanted to eat with you,” I quietly confess. “I haven’t shared a meal with someone in a very long time. It felt right to wait.”

“You really aren’t like other puck bunnies, Sunshine,” he admits with a glimmer of pride in his eyes. “Makes me a bit relieved to witness with my own eyes your perseverance.”

“Perseverance?” I don’t understand. “What do you mean?”

“Despite your circumstances, you don’t want to rely on me. No matter your reasons for becoming a puck bunny, you didn’t let the lifestyle you’re surrounded by day and night change you. Maybe you haven’t grasped it just yet, but you didn’t let the dark society consume you. That level of perseverance deserves to be acknowledged and applauded.”

He pulls out his phone.

“Do you mind setting up the island with our first appetizer then? I have one more phone call to make.”

“Alright.”

Within a short period of time, I have everything set up on the island for easy access. Our appetizer, a mushroom and cream soup with fresh garlic bread and butter, is begging to be devoured. I’m close to drooling when Mr. Smiley returns.

“Ready to eat, Sunshine?”

I nod with enough anticipation to make him laugh.

“I’ll never get tired of those nods, Puck Bunny.”

His praises make me feel a warmth deep inside. One that some would connect with affection with a dose of comfort. That sensation only grows as we enjoy the various meals.

Talking with Mr. Smiley is comforting on a different level, neither of us needing to exchange names or speak of our pasts. In fact, we were able to center our conversations on the meals before us as we enjoyed the variation of taste, texture, and even quality of the food.

By the time we finish dessert, there’s a ding down the hall.

“That must be a special delivery,” Mr. Smiley declares as he rises up. “No need to wash anything, Sunshine. The housekeeping will remove everything well before the morning.”

Sit on the couch and bring the first-aid kit with you. I want to make sure you're bandaged up."

With a nod his way, I put the plates neatly towered on the golden cart before grabbing the first-aid kit he brought earlier and sitting on the edge of the couch.

The comfiest couch ever.

When Mr. Smiley is back, he's holding a black bag, but he doesn't comment on it as he reaches the couch and gets to work on bandaging every wound he acknowledges.

"Last one," he announces as he places a pink band-aid on my lower left cheek. "There. All done."

"Thank you," I whisper.

"You're welcome, Sunshine," he whispers in return. "What shall we do to call it a night? Wine? TV? Steamy books trending on Booktok."

"Do you even read?" I ask, thanks to his Booktok comment.

"I'm very much a reader, Miss Sunshine," he teases and leans further back into the couch. "I have to learn from all the fictional boyfriends out there. They are raising the invisible bars higher and higher in women's expectations. My pull game isn't enough anymore."

For the first time in years, I laugh.

Tear-jerking, stomach-clenching laughter that echoes through the hollows of this wondrous paradise of a penthouse.

"Did my truthful disclaimer appease you, Puck Bunny?" he doesn't look offended in the slightest by my burst of joyous madness. He appears beyond satisfied with my response.

“Very much,” I confess and bob my head. “Thank you, Mr. Smiley.”

“Mr. Smiley, huh?” His expression, which is glimmering with a grin, proves he likes the nickname. “Mr. Smiley and Miss Sunshine. I think we’re two peas in a pod made for one another.”

His smile is all but contagious as my lips curl just slightly in agreement.

Tonight really is the most smiling I’ve done in years.

MAKE A DEAL WITH ME



~*N*ICHOLAS~

A DIAMOND in a sea of coal.

That's how I viewed Miss Sunshine at the end of the alleyway tonight.

I'm not a stranger to Garcia's sick tactics in getting his puck bunnies to do exactly what he wants, but something was different tonight.

Different with this particular puck bunny...

Her presence tugs something inside me, a protective need to ensure her safety and well-being, as if it was my newfound purpose.

Beating the shit out of those goon fuckers will probably bite me in the ass, and I may even get blacklisted from Garcia's club, but truth be told, I don't care.

For this mysterious woman, I'd do it again.

"You don't need to entertain me." Her voice is so whimsical. It's soft and quiet, as if she barely speaks in general. "I'm sure you're busy and have important things to do."

“Not tonight.”

Definitely not tonight.

I’m too distracted to do anything but be here, in this moment.

Miss Sunshine is radiant.

Despite how contradicting this nickname is, when I’ve managed to get a smile out of her, it feels like the whole room is illuminated with warmth.

Her warmth.

She’s a sight to adore, with her long blonde locks, plump pink lips, heart-shaped face, and rosy cheeks. I can only imagine her eyes when they dilate with their luminous mix of blue, green, and a tiny pinch of hazelnut, but I wonder if I’ll get to witness a few more instances where her genuine smiles make her eyes twinkle with joy.

Our height difference is interesting, especially with her only being around 5’2” versus my 6’7” height, but nothing that would stop me from wanting something between us.

Wishful thinking.

She’s Marc’s little sister, surprisingly.

I didn’t ask for details from either of them, nor do I plan on inquiring. If these two are meant to cross paths, it’s up to them to meet again and work out whatever tore them apart.

Obviously, their sicko parents contributed to that.

“My plans to drink and forget my worries can happen any other night,” I assure her. “Tonight, I’d rather continue making Miss Sunshine smile.”

“Not sure my lips are capable of smiling as much as you do,” she confesses with a shy uplift of those delicate lips.

This is probably the most she’s ever smiled. I can assume that with confidence because Garcia’s club steals the light in these puck bunnies’ expressions. They’re nothing but money-makers to him. I can’t blame his hustle, but the way you treat those who keep you fed determines how long their loyalty will last.

I hope tonight makes Miss Sunshine realize her worth in the eyes of a man who is using her for some sort of collateral.

“Makes me wonder what your lips are capable of, Miss Sunshine.” I can’t stop myself from wondering as I rise up and fetch the black box that was delivered earlier. “But first, this is yours.”

“Mine?” Her confusion makes her look cuter, especially when she tilts her head. “I didn’t order anything, Mr. Smiley.”

“I know you didn’t.” I place the item on her lap. Her bare legs tempt me, but I calm myself because this moment is important for her.

She deserves to have a good memory in this life versus the plentiful bad ones that she’s collected in this maddening city.

“Think of it as a ‘sorry for interfering with your life’ gift. I’m sure your commitment to Garcia means you have some sort of goal or underlying motive in sticking around such an environment. I say that not out of judgment but pure fact,” I elaborate while she’s still staring at the black box before her. “Needless to say, my interference may have caused you to lose out on this chance. I’m not sure if you’re planning to go back to him. If you really want to return to his biz, I can—”

“No.”

I'm forced to pause my offer to the firm denial from Miss Sunshine. She shakes her head, her eyes darkening as if she's witnessing everything she's experienced in the past up to this point.

"I won't return," she vows and swallows. "The pay may have been grand, but I'll end up in a trash bag if I keep on this lifestyle. The signs were there, again and again, but how many times am I going to ignore it all for the sake of fulfilling a dream? Sure, it may mean I won't have the means to achieve this goal anytime soon, but at least I'll be alive."

Deep down, I'm impressed she's willing to acknowledge this out loud. Most puck bunnies I've met enjoy living in that bubble of desire, pleasure, and financial opportunities. The idea of life and death is discarded to the side, as if their ignorance will ensure the chances of them perishing by the hand that feeds them are nothing but a fable.

This puck bunny before me is a part of the one percent that doesn't think or act that way.

"Can I ask," I begin, drawing her attention to me. "What's your dream, Puck Bunny?"

"To be seen."

Three simple words, and yet the weight they carry is so great, I'm speechless.

"This world, I'm but a minuscule piece in a grand puzzle that only grows and grows at an everlasting pace. Every minute, 250 individuals are born, while 105 individuals perish. Very few make an impact on the world. Some may never make it for one to remember their name, let alone their existence."

She stares upward, and I can't help but follow her pursuit, the two of us watching the twinkling sky from the massive

skylight.

“I don’t need to be famous, nor am I searching to be so impactful that the world despises me. I’m yearning for a balance. One that lights up my soul again. Something that gives me the attention I seek, but one I can control at the press of a button,” she reveals. “I thought Garcia’s club was going to be exactly that. Give me the opportunity to discover myself. I wasn’t stupid. I knew sex would be involved. The only difference was I thought I’d be given the opportunity to choose who touched me and who didn’t.”

I look back at her as she closes her eyes and inhales. Breathing out at a timely pace, her expression is hard to read as she continues to look upward.

“There was no control when I lost mine. No real warning or permission. It was just snatched like a gift you’ve protected for so long for the right moment, only for a thief to come and rip it away from your grasp.”

Fuck...

The thought makes my blood boil as my hands curl into fists.

“When?” is all I can ask.

“Fifteen.” She looks at me once more. The smile that cloaks her lips makes my heart sink with how vulnerable her expression is. “That was the trigger I needed to be set free.”

“Sunshine,” I whisper. What more can I say? Nothing I say can console the reality she had to face alone. The circumstance that led her all the way here to NYC, where she assumed selling her body was the only way she’d gain experience and a sense of control over what pleases her sexual needs after they were invasively abused.

“Despite my various experiences, both good and ugly, I still desire to be out there somehow. Create content. Explore the city and eventually, the world. My journey may inspire others. My story may save another.” She lifts her shoulders just slightly in a shrug. “Despite it all, I know it’s a different world that can be just as ruthless, but if I’ve survived this long on the cruel streets of the Bronx, the online trolls are a piece of cake.”

I see it then.

That flicker of hope. The blossoming determination.

She’ll make it.

“Open the box, Sunshine,” I whisper in encouragement.

We share a look, but she does what I ask, leaving her in a state of shock the moment her eyes set upon the contents of the box.

So much passes through her facial expression, but her eyes can’t lie to me. I wonder if she knows how easy it is to see her emotions in the depth of her bewitching eyes, but then again, maybe she’s only allowing me the moment of grace.

“Mr. Smiley...” She searches for the right words, anything that can express the true reflection of gratification that blooms across her gorgeous face.

The silence serenades us as she stares at the important items retrieved from Garcia’s club.

The sentimental valuables from her specific locker.

“You can make sure everything is there before the morning. If you’re missing anything, I can pull some strings.” It would be tricky—costly—but not impossible. Why I’d go to

this extent for this puck bunny is beyond me, but I'm not one to overthink shit. I follow my instincts.

And my heart.

“Everything is here.” I'm graced with that rare gem of a smile. “All the money I saved. The stack of Polaroid photos I'd take with the puck bunnies every Saturday night shift. Even the bottle caps.”

I wonder what the Polaroid photos and bottle caps signify, but she doesn't hesitate to share them with me.

“I started collecting bottle caps to keep track of my rank as a puck bunny.”

My confusion must be obvious.

“When you're a low-rank puck bunny, it's normal for most of your clients to barely afford a Corona. The higher up you are as a puck bunny, the more exquisite the beer is. Soon enough, you move on to wine and limited-edition glass bottles with lids that are made of gold and diamonds. I collected them over the months and told myself one day when I got my own place, I'd hang them up on a board, like a pinboard that displays collections.”

She seems proud, even though I'm sure the memories of being a puck bunny aren't filled with butterflies and rainbows.

“As for the Polaroid photos, I always take them on Friday nights.” The way her eyes twinkle with admiration shows how much pride she has in the women who surrounded her in an environment that was never meant to be favorable to them. “At first, it was just to gain some memories because my family never took many photos. I knew our predicament wasn't pretty, but at least we were surviving, one day at a time. I

wanted something to commemorate that. At least until I reached a level of financial stability to leave this place alive.”

I watch how those beautiful eyes dim once more.

I anticipate the heartbreak she's going to reveal in her next statement.

“Then I began to realize that surviving Garcia was a privilege. A chance that would either give you another shift to make the money you desperately need or land you in a body bag. Actually, body bags are too expensive to use on puck bunnies,” she admits more to herself, as if it’s some sort of funny realization. “Garbage bags are best. It’s where we belong, after all.”

“You don’t belong in the trash.” I have to correct her for my own sanity. My hand reaches out to gently brush along her cheek.

“You’re a diamond who deserves to sparkle within the spotlight your soul yearns for,” I affirm as if I know how harsh her life is. I’m confident it has been a whirlwind of agony and frustration trying to prove you deserve to survive in this cruel world. “I’m sorry you had to feel your existence isn’t justifiable.” She all but smiles.

I look at the Polaroids and point to the one on the top. It’s her with two other girls, and from the brief glimpse of the other photos that are scattered in the box, they seem to be in most of them. One has black locks that are long and curly, while the other is a ginger. She has freckles and blue eyes, similar to Miss Sunshine, while her other friend has brown eyes.

Despite their smiles, I’m sure they hide their traumas on their sleeve. You can see the exhaustion under their eyes with

the deep, darkened bags.

“Are those your close friends?” I ask curiously.

“Yes.” Her smile is genuine, but her eyes are just as sad. “Emily and Rose. They were really protective of me. They’ve been at Garcia’s since thirteen.”

Fuck...

“They had no choice, you know? Similar circumstances to me. That’s probably why we got along really well. I’m pretty sure I got fewer punishments when they were around.”

When they were around...

“They’re not here anymore, though.”

We share a look, and I watch her shrug as she picks a few of the photographic memories until she finds the two she specifically wishes to show me.

One Polaroid is with Emily and Miss Sunshine, while the other has her posing with Rose. They’re wearing skimpy outfits, though in both pictures, Miss Sunshine is wearing something more modest.

Not skimpy bikinis that barely hide anything for the imagination.

What bothers me are the obvious bruises and the immense weight both friends have lost in comparison to their first pictures.

Like the life was sucked out of them, and they were on their last days.

“Rose was working hard to pay for her sister’s chemotherapy treatments. There was a client who always requested her, but Rose needed to deny him her services one

night because she was really ill. I guess she was worried she could be potentially pregnant with the client's child." She seems so far away as her eyes gaze at the image with longing. "I think it frightened her, honestly. Her family put the burden on her shoulders to bear in terms of raising her little sister. They were into gambling, buying luxury items left and right. Each credit card bill was bigger than the next. So much debt. Essentially, they were living off Rose, thinking it was her duty to pay their bills because she was the eldest."

She sighs and shakes her head.

"It's tricky when you come from a family of culture. They engrave traditions and morals that only benefit those in power and control. Never the child themselves. If they don't fix that mentality, you'll reach a point in your life where you can never change it. As a child, you believe your sole purpose is to be the breadwinner for the family's success. Once you marry, your next purpose is to bring children, to create the next generation. You never get the chance to focus on yourself. Your emotional state is dismissed, just like your mental stability," she elaborates.

"Rose always used to say that in her culture, mental health meant if you went to therapy, you were crazy. If you complain about the physical, emotional, or financial abuse your family impaled on you, you're nothing but ungrateful. Your birth immediately means your future involves taking care of your parents who birthed you, or else you're useless. Garbage. A waste of their time raising you. It's a philosophy I find selfish and undermining, but Rose was so infatuated with being the sole provider for everyone. It was a responsibility she held dearly, but it was leading her down a path of no return. Despite my age, I could comprehend it all. So could Garcia."

“Used it against her,” I mutter and watch Miss Sunshine nod.

“Because she didn’t do what the client requested, Rose’s punishment was the collapse of her family’s little business. Not sure what they did exactly, but they were thrown in so much debt because of a transaction gone wrong, and well...”

She doesn’t need to finish. I know what happens to those who don’t pay their debt in a timely manner.

But the little sister.

“Garcia found out Rose was actually pregnant,” Miss Sunshine reads my mind. “It’s our duty to ensure we’re on some sort of birth control. Otherwise, it’s deemed as though we’re trying to set our clients up to be blackmailed or used. I thought Garcia would kill Rose for that discovery, but he did worse.” She sighs. “He ensured Rose’s little sister wouldn’t see through another chemo treatment.”

“The drugs were poisoned.” I don’t say it as a question.

I already know.

“With a small enough dose of a substance similar to Fentanyl and yet so hard to trace because it’s such a rare drug. It was probably a fragment of the tinniest dose, but it was all that was needed to end the little girl’s life.”

Cruel.

I wish I could be more emotionally expressive by projecting my shock at how dangerous Garcia and his mob are within NYC, but I’m not in the slightest surprised by the truth.

In fact, I almost expected it to go down this route.

“Parents dead. Little sister dead. Millions of debt. Rose’s life would be nothing but serving jail time for her family, who

left her with so much debt in both business loans and medical bills. It was the perfect trap for Garcia to place on her. The collar would ensure she never went anywhere else, but I think he forgot how dangerous it is for someone to have no purpose in life.”

“They have nothing to lose,” I confess, knowing the feeling all too well.

Especially with my family.

“What path did she end up taking?” I ask as I watch how Miss Sunshine smiles. I see a sense of admiration in her eyes, as though she appreciates both my intrigue and ability to grasp what she’s portraying.

I love hearing her speak with that whimsical voice.

“She spent her last night with her legs around the client’s throat and choked him to death,” Miss Sunshine tries to hide it, but I see the flicker of pride in those blue depths.

Deep down, I’m sure there’s a fighter begging to be freed.

“Garcia and his men walked in just when Rose placed a gun to her head,” Miss Sunshine confesses. “Fuck you, Garcia. See you in Hell.”

I can envision it all in my mind until the confrontational moment where those eyes of exhaustion and hopelessness met Garcia’s surprised ones.

Bang.

“I found it empowering at the expense of losing my friend,” she admits as she lowers Rose’s photo back into the box. She’s admiring Emily’s image now, and her sadness is as clear as day. “I think that’s what gave Emily the push to get out. The timing was all wrong, though.”

She shakes her head at the memory.

“Sometimes certain clients like us to go to where they’re most comfortable. Hotels, penthouses, super-secret luxury basements... wherever that will bring the most satisfaction. The client Emily had was an odd one.”

“Define odd?” I inquire.

“A meat factory.”

We’re staring at one another longer than we expected.

“That’s odd,” I finally confirm and pinch my nose as though I’m in the center of that massive factory space, surrounded by various types of meat. “Serial killer behavior.”

My comment is only a suggestion, but from how Miss Sunshine lowers Emily’s photo back into the box, I feel I hit the nail on the head with her added silence.

“Am I right?”

“Sadly,” she confesses. “That was one of his hiding places. Can’t say it’s really a hideout when you mince the bodies of your victims, but Emily thought if she entertained him just enough, she could escape when he least expected.”

“Serial killers don’t let their prey go that easily,” I mutter. “They love a chase. The thrill of it all. Even if he got off from her giving him the best ride of pleasure he’s ever experienced, would he have fallen asleep so easily?”

“Never,” Miss Sunshine notes in agreement. “And that’s where my friend failed.”

“What would you have done?” I ponder.

“I would have done my task,” she admits. “Unlike Emily or even Rose, I still had someone who needed me. Even

though I don't anymore..." She looks down at the box and picks up a tiny copper pin. It's in the shape of a skull, and the skull is grinning widely. The image is rather haunting, especially with the copper tint, but it has to mean something important.

A valuable piece that reminded her of the person who gave it to her.

"This came from Uncle Jones. He's not my real uncle, more like the man who took me from the streets when it was far too dangerous for me to be out on them. He didn't have much. Just enough scraps to keep going on, day by day. Despite that, he made me his priority, as if I was his newfound purpose. It made me feel like I wasn't so lost in this world. Along the path, I thought I'd be able to make enough stable income to help him out. He wanted to be a bartender again. Honestly, I feel he could have been the owner of a nice, cozy little bar hidden in those dark, musky alleyways. It would be busy with country classics or a little indie live band."

The way her whole expression lights up just talking about this Jones proves he meant a lot to her as a parental figure, even if it was super short.

So, what happened to him?

"Then it came time for me to get my punishment for doing something wrong," she quietly admits, and all that happiness is stolen away. *The true thief of joy...is pain.* "Garcia's goons found Jones and beat him so bad..."

He lowers her head, as though she needs to give him a moment of silence.

"His bones were already brittle... not because he was old, but because he used to do a lot of kickboxing and underground

fighting. He could speak about those for hours on end, saying one day he'd train me to box and fight, so if anyone tried to mess with me, boom. Down for the count."

She imitates a small punch move that makes her look adorable. With how short she is, you'd never think she could hurt a fly, but I could imagine her being taught to wreak havoc and bring even the biggest men down to the ground.

"He took me to one cage fight. It was illegal, and no way should a sixteen-year-old be around gigantic, muscled men with loads of tattoos and anxious to see their fighter win, but I wanted to see why Jones admired the sport so much. When I got to see firsthand how fights went down, I think he thought I was traumatized by it." She smirks at that. "Teeth flying. Blood everywhere. Broken bones. Even death. He got me that pin as a souvenir. His friend was the victor that night and gave it to us. It was such a brutal night of exhilaration that left me completely speechless on the ride home."

"Were you frightened by it?"

"No." She shakes her head. "I was infuriated at how amazing it must feel to defend yourself. To give your all in every punch, kick, and spin. To remove that factor of powerlessness from the equation and awaken a side of you that's almost cynical but tamed enough to hold back when the enemy is down for the count. The moves are so simple, yet each one can be deadly. A kick to the neck, head, or liver, and your opponent is either dead, dealing with bleeding out in the brains, or about to go into liver failure."

"It excites you," I can't help but note. The thrill in her eyes is back for round two.

"I wanted him to teach me. He shouldn't have been pulled into this shit, but it was fifteen people against one sixty-year-

old. He left a few of them wounded, but in the end, he was outnumbered and outpowered. They didn't kill him. Just beat him enough to be stuck in the ICU. The bills kept stacking with every day he remained on life support, but I was determined to get him out of there and back home. That he wouldn't perish because of this shitty club. At least..."

"Until tonight?"

She slowly swallows a lump that forms in her throat. She's trying not to get emotional, but I can tell it's difficult.

"I showed up a minute late," she confesses.

"A minute." I'm waiting for her to specify the severance that triggered Garcia to punish her by killing the only person who was willing to be a guardian in her life, but she stares back at me.

"Sunshine." There has to be more. "You're not trying to imply that because you showed up to your shift a minute late, you were punished with the death of Uncle Jones, are you?"

She simply nods.

That sick mother fucker...

I blow out a breath of air from my chest to keep myself calm. To think something so minuscule could be the single triggering factor to end another's life.

"He was going to do it either way," she quietly whispers, drawing my attention back to her. "He was just waiting for me to fuck up." She shrugs. "And I did tonight."

"If killing Jones was your punishment, why was he going to let those sick group of bastards..." I trail off because I don't even want to say the next words.

To put them out there in the universe.

She doesn't deserve this lifestyle. Not one so abusive, inhuman, and as brutal as being one of Garcia's puck bunnies.

"I think he just wanted to break me, I guess." She doesn't sound too sure. "I mean... group... sex happens often at Garcia's, but I've never experienced it. Maybe he was just waiting. Reminds me of an initiation, if you ask me."

I feel there's a part of her protecting herself from really breaking down from how close she was to experiencing something even more traumatizing than what she's dealt with in her young life.

"He would have made more money using me for his clients, but he was already upset. It seems as though I wasn't the only one late. All the 'favorites' were tardy tonight, and with the sets of hockey teams from across America coming down to Garcia's VIP section, he wanted everyone to be appeased." She lifts her eyes to stare into mine. "In all areas of satisfaction."

"I don't regret saving you then," I whisper and move a few strands of her hair behind her ear. "If I gave you one chance to start all over again, would you take it?" I don't know why I'm desperate to help her.

Save her from this cycle of abuse, torment, and danger.

She's debating my words, which is something I wholeheartedly admire. Others would immediately jump the gun or express their magnitude of gratitude.

Those are the first to normally spend the money on a big purchase and run out of those funds in a heartbeat.

Her lingering silence meant she was thinking.

Planning.

Determining whether she felt worthy of having another shot at life and if presented with the financial means, what would she do to never fall into this predicament again.

“I would,” she eventually says and meets my eyes with a stern look. “On a few conditions.”

I like her.

She’s a critical thinker who’d escalate in our dark world if she wanted to work in the realms of businesses and drug deals.

“Talk to me, Sunshine,” I encourage her with a smile as I relax against the couch on my right side.

She smirks and lowers her eyes briefly down my body. It’s short, but the dancing movement of lust makes itself known.

Her tongue licks her bottom lip as if she’s beyond thirsty.

Putting the stuff in her hands back into the safety of her black box, she closes it and places it on the coffee table. Crazy how her most precious items are in a single box. Important enough for her to feel a sense of hopelessness without it.

Our society complains about everything from wi-fi access to not getting the latest iPhones and PlayStations, but other people only have enough to fill their pockets.

If the clothes they wear even have any.

Turning her attention to me, she’s ready to lay out her demands.

I smirk at her, her confidence earning my attention.

“Whatever you offer me will be from your heart and have no strings attached,” she declares as important condition number one. “I won’t need to repay you, nor will the act of kindness be used against me.”

“Deal.” I have no problems with that.

“Two. You at least allow me to stay till morning.”

“Guaranteed deal,” I assure her.

“You let me still call you Mr. Smiley.”

The way I arch an eyebrow at her makes her snicker and lose a bit of her sternness.

“It’s better than being called Mr. Grumpy, isn’t it?”

She has a point.

“Deal.”

“Give me verbal reassurance that you don’t hate puck bunnies.”

“Why do I feel as though that’s not what you’re trying to ask?” I counter her question with my own because of the slight hitch in her voice.

She blushes ever so slightly before she mutters, “I just want to know that you don’t hate me because of the path I accepted to walk.” She shyly glances away.

“Does my opinion matter to you?” I’m intrigued.

“A little,” she confesses and looks back at me. “Meeting you tonight made me realize that despite all the darkness that surrounds us during the night, there’s always a glimmer of light that shines right before the sunrise. I want to be able to look back at this one night and feel the same burst of rejuvenation and hope that I lost a long time ago.”

She gives me a small smile and allows herself to show me the vulnerable warmth in her loving gaze.

“For tonight, Mr. Smiley is my saving grace, and I just want to know that you’re not disgusted by my existence.”

I reach out to her because I crave to caress her cheek, my thumb wiping away the single tear that escapes her glassy eyes.

“Whether it’s today, tomorrow, or years from now, Miss Sunshine, I’d never judge or hate you for doing what you have to survive the ruthless shadows of NYC. Instead, you leave me feeling pleased to have met you. Not just to get you out of the situation at hand, but because you deserve to let that fierce woman within out for the world to see and praise.”

It’s the first time I’ve let myself act without much thought, especially to a woman I know nothing about, but I lean in and softly kiss the top of her nose.

“I carry no hate for puck bunnies, and I most definitely do not hate you, Miss Sunshine.” My eyes soften. “Far from hate.”

She’s already lowering her gaze to my lips, and I can feel the pulsing chemistry between us.

I’ve wanted to kiss her the moment I caught sight of her bare legs in the skirt that makes her petite frame so fucking sexy. I’ve restrained myself because she deserved to feel like a grand prize that one can only admire but never be worthy enough to claim versus a pawn who’s only here for sexual endeavors, but it’s so fucking hard to resist her.

To not touch her.

I can only wonder if she feels the same way.

Feels the static shock of energy begging to connect and blaze.

“You forgot to say deal, Mr. Smiley,” she whispers and leans in closer.

The tension grows stronger and stronger.

I can barely think.

Or breathe.

She said something, I swear she did, but I'm fighting not to lose control. Using every last hint of restraint not to make the first move. My brain plays catch-up, and I finally process what she says—her lips just barely touching mine.

“Deal.”

Her lips quirk at the corners, and I wait for her to either kiss me or say something to break this enchanting spell that has me captive.

“Then what are you waiting for, Mr. Smiley?” she quietly purrs with the most seductive, whimsical voice to reach my ears. “Kiss me.”

That's all it takes to set the beast free.

EVERYTHING CAN CHANGE IN
THREE YEARS



THREE YEARS LATER...

~*N*ICHOLAS~

“NICHOLAS JAMES SALVATORE.”

My coach will either pop a vein or have an aneurysm before the end of this conversation.

“Do you want to stay on this team? Does having the privilege of being the captain of the Montreal Stingrays ignite so much fury in your soul that you must do everything in your power to taint our team’s reputation for your own cynical high?”

“You using my full name does make me want to bash your head and call it a day, Coach, but my therapist says I should work on not acting upon my intrusive thoughts,” I voice with the dullest voice while my eyes are glaring back at the man I actually admire.

It’s a shame we’re butting heads right now.

Coach Zawaski has been a blessing and a curse to my ass. Blessings come from allowing me the opportunity to stay on this team as captain for so long, and a curse because the man somehow is always the first to find out when I’ve gotten into the craziest shit.

Sure, he makes it his purpose to ensure I'm not thrown into jail for losing my temper one too many times or bringing "business" to the ice intentionally, but fuck.

He's a pain in my ass when he holds so much power in his grasp.

"Nico," he corrects himself, only to lean into his desk so he can emphasize his next words. "You're getting on my last nerve."

I hold my tongue because I see from the dangerous flicker of intention in his eyes that if I say just one more thing to tick him off, I'm done.

Guess potentially murdering someone and getting caught on a circulating video that's currently going viral is the last straw.

"You know I've done a whole lot of shit to protect you. To save you from yourself, yeah?"

All I do is nod.

"How much longer are you going to push and shove and kick and keep fucking, assuming I'll always save your back, HUH?!" He slams his fists into the desk. "You think I don't know shit, huh?"

I bite my bottom lip and look away.

"Look my way, Nico."

I'm forced to obey despite the twitch in my eye and ignoring the urge to walk out of this place.

"I know what the Salvatore Family must do to uphold their grand reputation that goes bump in the dark," he emphasizes very slowly, as if I can't comprehend English matched with his Russian accent. "I know life isn't butterflies and rainbows. It's

filled with loads of bloodshed, stacks of money, drugs, alcohol, puck bunnies, and all the crazy shit that happens when you walk out of this training center and do your business. I'm not fucking stupid, blind, or completely illiterate. I get that you have to take care of business when it comes knocking on our door."

He leans over the desk, his face inches from mine, which makes me tense up because of the familiarity of it all.

A childhood where one mistake is punishable by the quietest order from the head of my family—my dear father.

"But if we can't clean your reputation with some sort of alibi by the end of the day, I have no choice but to let you go."

I fight not to show a hint of fear at his words, but the pit of my stomach is flipping in irony.

Montreal Stingrays wasn't a team I gave a shit about. I didn't want to join because my purpose was to remain with the boys who I trusted and enjoyed their company.

Until they disbanded us.

Montreal Stingrays was the only team willing to take me and four others, but the rest of the boys I called family were dashed to the side like pieces of waste.

"Understood."

What else am I supposed to say?

There's no possible miracle that's going to pop out of nowhere and save my image. Plus, there was no point in thinking of doing a public apology to an establishment that has earned the grand prize of the shittiest club in all the Bronx.

"I've yet to be in contact with Mr. Garcia, but the police are investigating the incident that happened last night at the

club. As for Marc, he should make a full recovery. Thankfully, he didn't break any bones, but his nose may be a bit crooked until he can get that fixed next week by a surgeon."

"He regrets nothing," I mutter.

"I'm well aware," Coach grumbles and rolls his eyes. "You two don't care about this team, do you?"

"You, of all people, know that's not it," I argue.

"Why did you get into that fight at Garcia's, Nico?"

"We had unfinished businesses," I declare as if it's common sense. *It's been three years since that night, hasn't it?* "He pushed his limits, and we decided it was time he got a taste of his own medicine. Even at the expense of his club, which is hosting sex trafficking and torturing puck bunnies."

Coach doesn't comment on my words. He simply leans back in his seat and lets out a long sigh.

"You can't play hero in this world, Nico."

"Hero?" I scoff and grab his attention as I rise up and slide my hands into my pockets. "I'm not anyone's hero. My purpose in life is to excel in the sport that keeps me sane and busy while juggling my father's legacy, which he enjoys reminding me of every chance he gets. Without hockey, you might as well sign my death certificate early and RVSP to my funeral."

"Nico," Coach groans and pinches his nose. "Can't you find a bigger purpose? Get a wife or something."

"If you think a woman can tame me, you haven't observed me long enough, Coach."

He shakes his head.

“Because you’re only good-looking by face. Everything else is red flag territory, and the only women you seem to attract are puck bunnies wanting to get paid.”

“Sucks to be me, then,” I conclude.

“Nico.”

“I can’t fix whatever shit is circulating online, boss.” I get to the point and don’t bother calling him coach because I’m losing my position whether I like it or not. “I despise social media. You’ve known that from day one. Cameras in my face every fucking day. Can’t even eat without people recognizing me. Especially here in NYC. At least in Canada, people pretend not to know you’re one of the best forwards on the Stingrays and have hockey teams left and right begging for me to be traded over to them.”

“No one will want you if your track record keeps building, Nico.”

“Maybe you’re right, but it’s not my fucking fault that some paid douches want to go viral on stupid platforms, invalidate my privacy by recording the shit I deal with outside of my working hours, and paint me like the fucking villain when I was saving innocent girls being raped and abused!”

He holds himself from fighting back, acknowledging my statement.

“What? So now that I give you a hint of what I’m dealing with, we can have a conversation?” I offer almost out of spite.

“Nico. If you told the police—”

“Do you believe the NYPD doesn’t know what has been happening in the club for years? Long before I even came to NYC, the rumors were there. You’d either have to be Canadian or oblivious not to know what the fuck happens behind those

closed doors after midnight. That's the place you go to have a 'real' good time. It's not like other bars with two a.m. curfews. You know this. I know this. The police, private investigators, lawyers, judges, and anyone else in the legal system knows this. So, unless someone outside of this loophole benefits from Mr. Garcia being behind bars, he's going to be able to continue doing this shit again and again and making millions while doing it."

"Doesn't mean it's worth losing your career, Nico."

"My existence seems to mock me daily with how easy it is for me to lose my career based on other people's assumptions about me. All because a stupid brat with a phone recorded shit they shouldn't have seen at a club they shouldn't have been at, but no one is talking about that, are they?"

The knock on the door makes me frown before I shake my head.

"I'll make sure my locker is cleaned before the end of the day."

"Nico."

I turn around and head to the door. Opening it up makes my frown grow deeper, as the woman I wouldn't want to see in the heat of this moment is now facing me with wide eyes full of surprise.

"N-Nicholas?"

This cheating bitch.

I don't even want to say her name, which is exactly why I glare back at her.

My cold demeanor makes her frown while I see the way she tries to submit to me by making herself look like some

victim.

As if she's guilty and feels horrible for cheating on me.

She clearly didn't respect me three years ago when I decided to give her another chance to be my woman.

Only for her to enjoy a three-year fling with our rival's team captain.

If it wasn't for the ugly bidding war madness happening over in Montreal that has made our training centers and stadium rink inaccessible until things are settled in court, we wouldn't be back in NYC training for the new season.

"What do you want, Jessica?" Coach questions, sounding irritated.

He knows what this bitch did to me, but of course, he has to keep her around because she's "good at social media."

All this social media bullshit is getting on my nerves.

"Um... well..." She looks at me, then at Coach. "It looks like there's been an update in regard to the viral video that was posted last night from Garcia's club."

Great.

Perfect cue to leave.

"Hold on, Nico," Coach beats me to it, which makes me sigh as I stall my movement to get fucking out of here. "Explain Jessica. We got to practice."

"Um... I'm unsure if you've heard of Stasia Gwyneira Beckett's social media company. I'm not sure that's her real name or anything, but a video she posted last night at a different angle actually proves Nico's innocence."

Wait. What?

“Do you have the video?”

“I do,” Jessica declares and shuffles in those six-inch heels she can barely walk in. I’m not intrigued enough to fully immerse myself in the news, but I stand my ground and listen as she plays a specific video that sounds like a news broadcast.

“As you can see, a video of one of our beloved and popular players from Montreal Stingrays, Nicholas Salvatore, has been circulating the web all day with the premise of igniting a fight that turned deadly at Garcia’s VIP Club on 16th. However, new evidence and a different angle posted by one of the strongest social media companies, Gwyeneria Social Corp., is proving you shouldn’t judge a book by its cover,” the female broadcaster emphasizes.

“With over fifteen million views in less than twenty-four hours in comparison to the trending video of one million views showing Mr. Salvatore punching a man, which eventually led to his death, you can see in this new video that he was protecting a group of women who were hidden beneath the table, which includes two minors who we obviously cannot identify due them being juveniles.”

I can barely remember the night, let alone a group of women being under the table where the fight broke out.

“We have one of the women who was at the scene.”

Now I’m intrigued as I glance over my shoulder to see Coach briefly lift his gaze to meet mine.

I see a tiny bit of hope in his brown eyes.

“I’m appalled to hear that Mr. Salvatore is being torn apart on social media when he just stopped an entire sex trafficking exchange from happening! We were hired as entertainment, but when we reached the designated meet-up spot, we were

kidnapped, blindfolded, and thrown into a car. We didn't even know we were at Garcia's! We were forced to sit at the table and hide the two little girls with us beneath the table, so no one would notice there were underage kids. The ringleader of this was supposed to meet someone at Garcia's, but they were late! I noticed Mr. Salvatore was eyeing our table multiple times. I think he knew something was wrong, but we couldn't say anything. We were scared they would hurt the little girls."

"It seems like a terrifying situation that could have gotten a lot worse, yes?" The reporter who interviews her stresses.

"Yes! We could have lost our lives if Mr. Salvatore hadn't interfered. There were other hockey players and teams present, but no one helped. They always assume our entertains are just sluts or puck bunnies, as they call them, who want a good night. No one wants to interact with us and give a wrong impression. This is just another example of why so many of us go missing or are found dead because no one stands up! Mr. Salvatore saved us from the hand of death or a life of being trafficked, and instead, everyone is painting him as some violent bad guy. It's insulting!"

"It proves that in our world of technology, sometimes it's dangerous to judge an event from one angle."

"It is! I hope and pray Mr. Salvatore won't be punished or lose his job because he's truly a hero, and he's the only reason why I'm here, seeing another day. Mr. Salvatore, if you ever hear or see this, thank you from the bottom of my heart for interfering, even at the expense of your reputation."

I look away before Coach can read my expression.

How long since someone thanked me for still having a heart?

Ever since I stopped being the happy guy who'd do favors for everyone, it seemed as though I was no longer worthy of being thanked or praised.

Only bowed to, shouted at, or insulted before a bullet is shot into their head.

“With the new viral video posted by Gwyeneria Social Corp., which is currently one of the most followed organizations on social media history circulating the net, it's becoming clear that this platform of entertainment can be just as dangerous as physical violence. Some say this could be a way of saving face for Mr. Salvatore, seeing as he is the captain of Montreal Stingrays, but many are countering back, saying the times in which these videos were shared were during the hours in which Mr. Salvatore, as well as other attendees, was brought in for questioning by the police after the incident happened. So far, ten people have been charged, with another fifteen pending. Despite the incident happening at Garcia's Club and Bar, it seems no charges have been laid on his establishment.”

Of course not.

“Due to the potential damage this viral video has caused, I've been informed that the police will be taking legal action against User1730daddyboy17, who posted the video and amassed one million views in less than twenty-four hours due to the possibility of a defamation charge. Currently, we've had no communication from Mr. Salvatore himself, the Montreal Stingrays, or the NHL League Organization to further comment on this incident.

“However, with the swift need for punishment by the NYPD and the Special Unit Investigations Department, this may be the stepping stone needed to push the creation of new

social media laws to be presented to the House of Representatives and approved for the public safety and protect influential individuals, which should include celebrities and committed individuals. Now, onto the weather.”

The video ends there, leaving the room in tense silence.

“Make sure the heads are aware of this updated video,” Coach announces. “Also would like to be in touch with the owner of Gwyeneria Social Corp.”

“Y-Yes, Coach,” Jessica replies and turns swiftly to leave. I could tell from her voice that she didn’t like the last bit of Coach’s instructions.

Who owns Gwyeneria Social Corp?

They may have just saved my ass.

Coach is up and heading to the door, where I’m stepping out of the way so Jessica can pass.

For a second, our eyes lock, and I can see the immense guilt in her green eyes. Time has passed, yet she’s still trying to find the old me.

The smiling guy who was excited to become a superstar on the ice who many would admire and praise.

Instead, this side of me was born.

And she’s one of the contributors to my creation.

“Follow, Nico.”

I don’t question him. I just follow his lead as we head to the training gym, where I’m pretty sure the rest of the team is currently attending a special Boot Camp-style camp.

The moment Coach pushes open those dual blue doors, we’re watching our goalie go soaring in the air.

And crashing into the ground with a grunt.

I come to a stop, as does Coach, the two of us completely shocked as a man in baggy clothes and a motorcycle helmet is punching, kicking, and tossing every one of our teammates to the padded ground like they don't weigh double, if not triple, his weight.

With a quick scan of the room, all nineteen of my teammates are down for the count—Glenn, our phenomenal goalkeeper, being the final one pinned to the floor with his opponent still on top of him.

I can't even try to hide my shock as I stare at the black-clothed individual who lifts their head up to look my way.

The way I look down at Glenn, then back at this powerful douche, has me pulling my hands out of my pockets and raising them in defeat.

I'm not in the fucking mood to get my ass embarrassingly beat by some random dude wearing a stupid motorcycle helmet.

One with a neon-colored smiley face.

The design matches the tattoo on my back.

Great. An overpowered fan who is probably going to ask for my autograph later. It makes me want to roll my eyes.

No. I do roll my eyes, but I make sure to turn my head so this cocky competitor in front of us doesn't think I want to fight.

A burst of laughter comes from an older gentleman in the corner of the room. He proceeds to clap and admire the way my teammates groan in defeat.

“Dammit, Coach Huxley. Why would you possibly set us up for failure like that?” That’s Marc, who’s coughing. “I can already not breathe through my nose. What if that douche punched my nose again?!”

“I’m hearing more complaining than apologies for underestimating my training techniques. If you all weren’t talking shit, saying my apprentice wouldn’t be able to whip your asses in one go, none of you would be sitting on your butts, complaining like weak bitches!”

“Coach!” Multiple guys groan.

“This is embarrassing,” Coach Zawaski announces, drawing everyone’s attention to us. “You’re lucky I’m here with your captain and not the appraisal council who’s coming in next week to see what steps you lot of NHL all-stars are up to before the season begins!”

More groans ignite from Coach’s words before he silences them with a simple raise of his hand. He then looks at Coach Huxley.

“Should I even ask?”

“Nope.” The 6’5” man is grinning from ear to ear before he ruffles his white locks. “I’m glad you two are here.” He gestures to the man who took down the rest of the team. “Wanted to introduce you.”

“Who do we have the pleasure of meeting after taking down my entire team?” Coach Zawaski inquires before using his thumb to point back at me. “Minus Captain Coward here.”

“You would have recorded and used that shit as blackmail for seasons to come if I was put against some trained assassin,” I grumble.

Coach Huxley is losing it.

“Did you just call the CEO of Gwyeneria Social Corp an assassin?!” His laughter is loud, but my shock replicates Coach Zawaski as we look at the individual in question.

“Wait. Gwyeneria Social Corp?” Glenn questions just as the guy lets go of his arm. “You’re the owner of the biggest social media giant trending in 2025? Never thought I’d meet a guy who’s projected to be the youngest billionaire!”

The way Coach Huxley is laughing now has us all looking at him with concern about his own mental state, but he’s wiping the tears from his eyes and shaking his head.

“Projected youngest billionaire is an understatement,” he begins and smiles widely with pride. “Sorry to shatter your manly pride, but you just got your asses whipped, kicked, and tossed by a woman.”

“WHAT?!”

“COME WHAT NOW?”

“A WOMAN?!”

“NO FUCKING WAY!”

The number of baffled responses only ignites a whimsical giggle that sends goosebumps through me.

I know that harmonic laughter.

My eyes immediately land on her just as those slim yet muscled arms cloaked in leather pull off the helmet to reveal bountiful blonde curls that cascade down to her lower back.

That heart-shaped face, flawless skin, parted pink lips, and rosy cheeks.

What steals the show are those uniquely alluring eyes that don’t hesitate to lock onto mine. They are wide and projecting

far too much shock.

As it shows the spikes of lust I immediately have for the woman before me.

“Don’t tease them too much, Boss,” she begins and gives the biggest smile that lights up her entire face. “It’ll force me to remind them that in these padded walls, cockiness doesn’t take you anywhere but on the ground.”

Miss Sunshine... we meet again.

MISS SOCIAL MEDIA MANAGER



~*N*ICHOLAS~

“WHY DON’T we get straight to introductions, shall we?” Coach Huxley declares with pride as he crosses his arms over his chest. He looks over at the single woman in the room who has all our attention.

“Anastasia Madeline Gwyeneria,” she introduces herself with boldness before giving a slight curtseying bow, which is damn cute with how short she is, matched with her attire that screams ‘comfy and badass.’

Now that I have the time to take in her 5’2” figure, I realize she only gives off the assumption of being a slim-built man with how baggy her sweatpants are. Matched with the sweater vest on top, the only way to even see her slim definition is in her arms, which show a bit of definition in her biceps thanks to the tight leather hugging her arms like a glove.

Three fucking years and Miss Sunshine is still as beautiful as ever.

She turns me on just as strongly as she did then, too.

The only difference now is she's unlocked that fierce confidence that was struggling to be free after years of torment and captivity.

Now, she's free to reign and conquer anyone who gets in her way.

To think she went from relying on Garcia's dirty cash that risked her life to the woman before us who just took out my entire team like they don't weigh at least 200-300 pounds.

I'm still trying to wrap my head around her taking down Glenn.

What makes me super curious is what Coach Huxley just acknowledged. That Miss Sunshine may be set to be the youngest—potentially the fastest—billionaire of 2025.

She's the CEO of Gwyeneria Social Corp.

"I'd actually sent our current social media manager to call your organization," Coach Zawaski admits as he's looking at this petite woman like he's questioning who, what, where, and how all at once. "I'd admit, I would have never guessed a five-foot-nothing woman would take down my goalie."

"5'2". She corrects and points to her black leather combat boots. "On the job, however, you won't see me near anything leather, and I enjoy strutting in six-inch anything. Boots, stilettos, or the new trend of Givenchy boots, which are rather horrendous, but sometimes you have to take the L in the fashion world as long as it makes you popular in a good way." She moves her finger around the room. "And I'm sure none of you know what a Givenchy boot looks like?"

"Does it matter?" Glenn asks and sighs. "I'd marry you in a heartbeat."

I don't know why I'm scowling in seconds, but my fellow mates are either losing it in laughter or groaning in disbelief.

“Shoo him away in his native language, Stasia, or he'll hunt for the kill,” Coach Huxley pleads with her mockingly.

“Coach Huxley! C'mon now. Why are you setting me up for failure? Besides, she doesn't know what languages I even speak. Let alone my native tong—”

“Хорошая попытка, но не интересно.”

Her words with the matched thick accent silence the room in a heartbeat. My mind is already translating what she said.

Nice try, but not interested.

“I don't understand a word she just said, but fuck,” Glenn whispers. “I'm in love.”

“You're fucking Russian!” multiple guys declare as though he lost a game we worked months setting up.

“And hell to the no.” Everyone's attention falls on Marc, who's already pointing at Glenn with narrowed eyes. “In no shape or form are you going near my little sister.”

Now, everyone is looking at him in shock.

“Little sister?!” Kennedy gasps in horror. “There's more of your breed?”

The cute snicker comes from the petite ray of sunshine who's grinning from ear to ear.

“Damn,” a few of the guys hiss in amusement while Marc glares at Kennedy.

“No way you two are related because... A, she's ten times prettier than your ugly ass; B, she's obviously smarter than your dumb ass, or else how would she be a young billionaire

in the field of social media; and C, y'all have different last names.”

“She’s my little sis,” Marc groans and ignores the other insults. He looks pleadingly to Miss Sunshine as if he’s begging for her saving grace.

“If you want the truth, yes. We’re related,” she reveals and lowers her helmet to sit next to Glenn’s feet. She then walks around his massive frame until she’s standing next to Marc, who looks like a happy puppy being acknowledged by his little sister. She offers him a hand, which he gladly accepts.

“The only reason why we don’t look as close to alike is that he dyed his hair so many times, his roots may never get their platinum blonde shade back, and his nose is crooked.”

“BunBee,” he grumbles and tries to pinch his nose out of habit, only to flinch at the slight pain the touch delivers. “Ugh! Fuck. If this doctor doesn’t get me in by the end of the week, I swear I’m losing my shit.”

“Money talks, Marc,” Kennedy reminds him. “Throw a few stacks his way, and maybe they’ll slip you into one of their plentiful open time slots.”

“Fuck you, Kennedy,” Marc barks but looks down to acknowledge Miss Sunshine. “Long time, BunBee.”

“Long time,” she sweetly says with that whimsical voice that has more than one of us captivated by the sound of her voice. “Glad we’re meeting under different circumstances.”

“Thank fucking God,” he sighs and lightly moves a few of her blonde locks out of her face. The action seems foreign in nature because we’ve never seen Marc be “nice” to a woman. Doing anything emotionally delicate for a female seems to be impossible for him.

Until today.

“Aww, this seems like a sentimental family reunion,” Adair, one of our defensemen, declares. “Coach? Why were you reaching out to her, to begin with?”

“And why did she have to kick all our asses?” Glenn inquires as he sits up. “I mean, it was hot, but I’m out of massage therapy credits, and physio doesn’t start until two weeks from now.”

“You went easier on her because she’s hot,” Amos grumbles as he’s sitting on the floor with his arms casually chilling on his knees.

“Can y’all not call my sister hot in front of me?” Marc requests.

“Get used to it, Ashford! We ain’t ignoring fact for your brotherly comfort.”

Some of the guys hoot and holler while Marc rolls his eyes and looks at his sister.

“Please tell me you’re only here to kick our asses and ensure none of these douches gets your number.”

That makes her smirk before she briefly looks my way.

Specifically at me.

“I’m sure Coach Huxley and Coach Zawaski were going to explain that. Wouldn’t want to steal their glory and leadership from you guys,” she declares and points to the female change room no one uses. “I’m going to quickly change. Is that okay, Coach Huxley?”

“Certainly. I apologize for pulling you into work before you could even sign the dotted line and enjoy a tour around the training center.”

“No harm done,” she assures him and walks back to pick up her helmet. “I hope you don’t mind that I parked my bike in parking spot 55, yes? It was the only one available.”

“That’s mine.”

I don’t realize I’m speaking until the growled words come out of my mouth.

For a brief moment, we share another intense look.

Fuck, she’s hot. How old is she now? God... we’re more than five years apart. Then again, that didn’t stop me from fucking her that night. Shit...

I can’t afford to have a boner right now.

Especially with her brother—my best friend—being in the same proximity.

“Is your car invisible?” she counters with the sweetest smile, which has the guys losing their stupid shits.

“Did she just talk back to our always grumpy captain?!” Kennedy cheers the question as if this is some sort of celebration.

“Coach! I don’t know who, what, where, or why this beauty is in our presence, but HIRE HER!” Glenn urges with prayer hands.

“If you little shits keep talking, I swear,” I begin, which shuts them up real quick.

“Alright, we’re behaving,” Marc quickly notes, only to see his little sis is already heading into the changeroom.

“Her vibes are good,” Claude, another defenseman, notes. He’s not usually the type to speak, but when he does, it means

something or someone left a good impression on him. “I’ve seen her on TikTok.”

“On TikTok? Claude. She’s currently the #1 trending sensation on every social media platform,” Sergi, our backup goalie, emphasizes with his thick Italian accent. “Companies, organizations... fuck, the Queen of England requested to meet her just for a picture!”

A few guys whistle before Kennedy whispers, “The Queen of England?”

“THE Queen of England,” Sergi emphasizes. “People pay millions to have her in the same room of an event. Get this... she built a mass of 300 million TikTok followers in less than three years. No other content creator has managed to reach half of that in the allotted time.”

“So, you’re a fan, I’m assuming,” Marc concludes as he observes Sergi’s excited mood. Sergi is as bulk and massive as Glenn, so to see him so giddy about this is probably signaling Marc’s overprotective sibling alarms.

“If I answer that, I feel like you’ll try to burn down my entire room,” he admits.

“Ugh. I’m not going to think about it,” Marc grunts.

Kennedy leans in to whisper to Sergi, “You have a limited-edition cuddling pillow, don’t you?”

“How’d you know?” Sergi gasps in shock.

“I fucking knew it!” Marc snaps while Glenn has to put himself in between the two before Marc jumps—or attempts to jump—Sergi. “I totally asked you in Morocco if you were sleeping with a pillow with a blonde on it, and you said no! It’s an ‘*AnImE cHaRaCtEr*.’” He imitates the move from

SpongeBob with his fists on his hips so he can mimic bending over like a hunched bird. “LYING ASS!”

“It’s not even that serious,” Sergi argues. “And yes. I did lie because no way was I going to let you steal my limited-edition cuddle pillow! It’s worth thousands.”

“Millions,” Oliver, another defenseman, declares as he stares at his phone with Jayden and Theo perched over his shoulder and cringing at whatever is on the screen.

“Ten fucking million for a limited-edition pillow?” Jayden looks horrified.

“Used,” Theo coldly notes and looks icked by the sight. “What about brand new?”

“Don’t even search that. That would break Sergi’s heart.” Kennedy chuckles and pats Sergi’s shoulder. “Better go preserve that body pillow before it gets ruined by your drool.”

“I wash it regularly,” Sergi argues.

“Can we drop the topic?” Marc scowls and looks at Coach Zawaski. “Coach! What is my sis doing here?”

“I’m waiting to explain, but you lot of men are acting like buffoons who’ve never seen a woman in their life,” he grunts with a dramatic eye roll. “Now drop and give me one hundred.”

“One hundred?” The guys are shocked. “Coach!”

“Did I stutter?”

They groan but drop to the floor to get the torture over with. I notice Coach is looking my way, to which I just side-glance him back with a scowl on my face.

“Hmph.” It’s all Coach Zawaski grumbles my way before he looks to Coach Huxley. “Thanks for making the arrangements. Didn’t think you could pull strings like that.”

“You’re only lucky she’s my top student,” Coach Huxley admits. “She seemed interested in the proposition, so why not? If she can gain from working with us, it’s only another thing for her to add to her very lengthy portfolio.”

“She technically saved us without realizing it,” Coach Zawaski admits.

“How so?” Coach Huxley asks, but his eyes move past us, encouraging our heads to turn over our shoulders to confirm Jessica’s entrance into the training room.

Her clunk heels click against the floor before she slows her pace in an attempt not to lose her balance walking on the padded blue mats beneath our feet.

“Sorry for the interruption, Coaches,” Jessica begins and, of course, has to take her time trying to look my way.

My eyes are more interested in the plentiful plaques hanging against the wall for viewers to admire the various achievements that have occurred in this very space.

“I’ve tried doing what you requested, Coach Zawaski, but it looks like there’s an extremely lengthy waitlist to even be allowed to contact Gwyeneria Social Corp. Despite my connections and various contacts, I’m not sure I can reach this ‘influencer.’”

The tone Jessica uses to address Miss Sunshine really ticks me off, but I hold my tongue because I can’t let my team even think I’m interested.

I don’t need to be in a relationship right now. They’re only distractions and mostly unserious.

“As the current social media manager of the Montreal Stingrays, surely there’s something I can do that can meet beyond the standards or requests you need to be fulfilled from this *influencer* organization. Besides, you’re aware that I have years of experience in this field versus whoever runs Gwyeneria Social Corp, which is still considered a small business.”

“As much as I’d love to discuss your offered opinions in regard to social media content and how to better our image on platforms that enhance our reach globally, it won’t be necessary,” Coach Zawaski announces. “Because you’re fired, Jessica.”

This just took a turn none of us were expecting.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



Roxanne Steele

is a debuting Sports Contemporary Romance Author.

Roxanne was inspired to write this story after sitting in a hospital room and realizing how precious life really was.

She held onto this dream of being an author, and decided, it was time for her to try.

Before here own time in this world runs dry...

If you enjoyed her work, please review, follow her social media platforms, and let her know that her decision was worth fighting for!



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