



THE
PROPOSAL

BRENDA ROTHERT

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A COLORADO COYOTES HOCKEY ROMANCE

COLORADO COYOTES

BRENDA ROTHERT

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CHAPTER ONE

Mila

“YOU DID IT.”

Peter Cline, the lead attorney for the Colorado Coyotes, picks up the glass of champagne my assistant Quentin poured for him and holds it up.

“*We* did it,” I say, looking around at the group of Coyotes employees gathered in my office. “I can’t thank you enough for sticking with me during the past two years. Today is for celebrating, but tomorrow we’ll get back to work rebuilding.”

As everyone else raises their champagne flutes for a toast, I lift a thick shot glass of Stoli, the celebratory drink of choice in my family. The glass belonged to my grandfather and is one of my most prized possessions.

Deda was born into a poor Russian family and he made himself into a billionaire with his own blood and sweat. No tears, though, because that would be weak.

“Sorry I’m late,” says Ron Maddox as he walks into my office. He’s the head coach of the Colorado Coyotes, the professional hockey team I own. “Did you get it?”

“We got it!”

He pumps his fist in the air. “Yes! I don’t know how you pulled that off, Mila, but you did a damn good job. How much did you get?”

“All of it. The last \$25 million.”

It's been more than two years since the Shapiro Center was destroyed due to multiple facility explosions, killing twenty-two people. The investigation into the explosions took nearly a year and were eventually ruled as accidents—one caused by faulty wiring and the other caused by fire from the first explosion reaching chemicals in a storage room.

Our team has been sharing the home ice of a local community college's hockey team, which has eaten into our bottom line significantly because of the much smaller seating capacity. We wanted our new arena to be the biggest and the best in the league, which meant acquiring property and financial assistance from the city of Denver. It's been a bureaucratic nightmare, every milestone wrapped in red tape.

But today, I got the call from one of our state senators that we're getting a state grant worth \$25 million to cover the last of the funding.

“How'd you get the governor to cave?” Peter asks me.

“He didn't. I went around him.”

Our state's governor, Mike Mills, was behind many of the roadblocks I ran into as I tried to secure funding for the new arena. I bet on the wrong horse in the last election, giving heavy financial backing to the incumbent governor. Now Mills wants my head.

Coach Maddox shakes his head and grins in my direction. “Balls of steel, Mila.”

I'll be the first to admit, it was a hell of a fight. It's well known that I'm not self-made; my father is a Russian billionaire with a well-deserved reputation for ruthlessness who gave me the money I used to start my business career.

But no matter how many times I multiply that money, I'm still seen as the entitled daughter of a criminal. I put as much distance between myself and my father as I could as a teenager, but even now, at age thirty, it's always his reputation that precedes me rather than my own.

“Do you want me to ask the PR department to put together a press release?” Quentin asks me.

“No,” I say, remembering the caveat for receiving the grant for the new arena. “Everyone, can I have your attention for just a second? This is really important.” The room quiets. “We are not authorized to announce this. There will be a press conference held by Senator Shumaker’s office and we’ll need everyone to attend. The politicians want us to kiss the ring over this money, and we’re going to.”

“You got it, boss,” Coach Maddox says.

People start to filter out of the room, returning to work. It’s late morning, and I have a full day scheduled.

But first, I get to sneak out of my office for my favorite part of the workday.

THERE’S a corner of the press booth at the community college’s arena where I can sit out of sight to watch the team practice. The college team practices early and our team gets the ice later in the morning, but several college players usually hang around to watch or take part in drills with our team.

I’ve loved hockey since I was a little girl. I was sent to a Swiss boarding school, but when I came home for breaks, my father would sometimes play ice hockey with me and my brothers. It was the only time I saw him smile and have fun.

Now I get to sign some of the best players in the world to play on the team I own. Ford Barrett is a recent acquisition I’m especially proud of. He’s our team captain and is part of the first offensive line. Beau Fox and Colby Harrison round out the first line, and I’d put them up against any first line in the league.

“What was that?” Barrett asks one of the college players, clapping him on the back.

The kid shrugs after missing a shot by a wide margin. Barrett leans in and says something to him, then demonstrates

taking the shot the player just missed. The kid nods and goes to the back of the line in the drill they're running.

I'll miss this. Everyone at the community college has bent over backwards to accommodate us. They refused to accept the money I offered for the use of their facilities, and I had to donate it to the college foundation to get around it. We've honored student activity passes at our games, allowing the students here to watch professional hockey for next to nothing.

I know why everyone calls me the Ice Queen. My brash, no-holds-barred approach to business isn't for everyone, and I'm about as warm as that rink the players are skating on.

I'm more feared than loved. Like my deda always said, though, fear gets things done. Love? Not so much.

I SPEND my afternoon in meetings, my slivers of in-between time spent reviewing the information that our PR department is providing for the senator's press release. Though I never doubted we'd build a new arena in Denver, I also can't believe the funding is finally secured.

I'm the youngest team owner in the league, by far. Only one of two female owners. I wanted to rebuild bigger and better for many reasons, but mostly for the twenty-two people we lost in the explosions. We've already broken ground on the new arena, and every person who died that day is part of it.

A fountain at the entrance is dedicated to one person. A little chocolate shop is named after another. Our team of architects and designers worked with the families on ways to honor each person lost in a way that has meaning for the family.

If there's one thing I know well, it's the pain of loss. I haven't just lost family members, I've also had to come to terms with who my remaining family members really are.

Now we can focus on the future, though. The future of the Coyotes organization is bright. I text a couple of close

girlfriends about meeting up later for drinks to celebrate.

Quentin walks into my office, chewing his lower lip the way he only does when he's about to deliver bad news.

"Well?" I prod.

"Our source in the lieutenant governor's office says the governor is planning his own press conference to put us on blast for using \$25 million in taxpayer dollars."

"Fuck." I sit back in my chair, my good mood ruined.

"He's planning to focus specifically on you and Senator Shumaker. They want to tie him to your father, Russian organized crime, the whole bit."

Anger churns in my chest. Mike Mills has been a pain in my ass since the day he was elected. I should have known he wouldn't just accept defeat.

"I'm guessing he plans to do this before Shumaker's press conference?" I say, wondering when all this is going to happen.

"His is taking place in about an hour."

"Of course," I mutter.

He wants to get his message out first. Then our press conference will have to be used to respond to his, putting us on the defense.

I take a deep breath and close my laptop. "Okay. Get Peter, Brian, Jane, and Coach in here. And call Zhu Anderson. I'm not using Jack for crisis communications anymore."

My assistant leaves to make the calls and I start thinking about a response to the governor, staring at the imperfect stone on the wall across from my desk that I always look at when I'm bored during phone calls.

The only big block of offices the college could loan us while we're here is in the basement of one of the oldest buildings on campus. It has peeling linoleum floors and cinder block walls that are crumbling in places. The spot I always

stare at looks like someone carved a little triangle out of the corner of one of the blocks.

Really, this office is perfect. I was adamant that if our players are sharing locker room and ice space with college players, the rest of us would be on campus, too. Renting posh office space downtown would separate the front office staff from our whole reason for being—hockey.

Peter is the first to walk into my office, and he looks out of breath. His office is next to the boiler room on the opposite side of the basement from mine.

“Did you run the whole way here?” I ask, standing up from my chair.

He holds up a finger, panting too hard to talk. I walk over to the refrigerator in my office and take out a bottle of water, passing it to him.

After opening the bottle and taking a sip, he sits down in a chair across from my desk.

“We have a big problem,” he says.

“You heard about the press conference? All we can do is manage our response. That vote can’t be undone—we’re getting the money. We just need to remind ev”

He puts up a hand to stop me, shaking his head. “I don’t know what the hell you’re talking about, but it sounds like we’ll be eating takeout here again tonight. I’m here because I just got an official notification from USCIS.”

I shrug. “Can you translate? I don’t speak acronym.”

“Mila, there’s no easy way to say this. You’re being deported back to Russia.”

CHAPTER TWO

Colby

“WHAT’S UP WITH THE KID?” I ask my teammate Seth, nodding at Nolan, one of the college players.

Nolan always participates in our practices, feeding pucks and helping out however he can. Today, though, he’s off in a corner with his head down, looking like a wounded animal.

“No idea,” Seth says.

“Someone should check on him.”

“I nominate you,” Seth says, reaching for a water bottle. “Whatever it is, he’ll get over it.”

The formal part of our practice is over. Now we’re just standing around, a few guys still shooting or working with the college players. Our teammate Beck approaches us and gives me an expectant look.

“I never had a chance to ask you what happened the other night.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

He has to be talking about going out to our favorite local bar, Mountain Top, a few nights ago. I had a couple of drinks, but I didn’t get drunk enough to forget anything.

“Dude.” He shakes his head. “There were two of us and three chicks. I took one of them home. How did you tactfully pick one of the others without looking like an asshole?”

“Oh.” Yeah, now I remember. “I didn’t.”

“Neither one? What’s up with that? They were both good-looking. Hell, I would’ve taken any of the three, honestly.”

I shrug. “I didn’t say neither one.”

Beck groans. “Another threesome? Why didn’t I think of that?”

“You’re lucky to even get one woman to come home with you, man. You talk about yourself nonstop.”

“What can I say? I’m absolutely fascinating,” he says, grinning.

Seth laughs and pats me on the back. “Another threesome. That pretty face just spreads legs wherever you go. You know, you’re the only guy I know who’s had a foursome with no other dudes in it.”

That was a couple of years ago, and those three women drained my ball sac dry. I ended up getting IV fluids from the team doctor the next day for dehydration, and I sure as hell didn’t mention to him that I’d been up all night fucking three insatiable women.

I’m twenty-seven now, and I’ve still got all-nighters in me, but it’s just not smart. I have to be up early almost every day and my travel schedule is rigorous. To keep my spot on the first offensive line, I have to take care of myself, and that includes sleep.

The two women the other night were roommates, and after about three hours of fun at their place, I came home and went to bed.

Seth and Beck head for the locker room, but I hang back and skate over to Nolan.

“Hey, man,” I say, noting the defeated look on his face. “You okay?”

He shrugs. “My girlfriend dumped me. I’m okay, though.”

“Sorry, man. What happened?”

“She was always complaining about me not having enough time for her. I’m a Math major, so my classes are hard as fuck. I’m also a teaching assistant and I work part-time at a sandwich shop not far from here. I’ve also got practice and games, and...” He shrugs again, looking helpless. “She’s not wrong, though. I don’t have a lot of extra time. I’ve actually got none.”

“Dude, if she doesn’t respect that you have practice and classes and work, you’re better off without her.”

“I know. I just hate letting people down, I guess.”

I get that because I’m the same way. I always go out of my way to let women know I’m not interested in a relationship. The lower their expectations, the fewer uncomfortable conversations I have to initiate.

“Do you have a girlfriend?” Nolan asks me.

I cringe. “Hell no. I haven’t had a relationship in more than three years and I’m happy being single. I like my freedom, you know?”

“Yeah.” His expression brightens. “I’m too broke for a girlfriend anyway. Maybe when I’m older.”

I clap him on the shoulder. “You want to go get some lunch?”

“Sure. I’ve got a guest pass you can use to eat in the cafeteria.”

“Nah, man. I’m taking you out for a burger. Let’s go shower.”

I try to get in and out of the rink as fast as possible when I’m here. The college girls have figured out which of us are Coyotes players, and they hit on us like crazy. Like I’m gonna hookup with a college girl. They’re too young and too desperate. A few weeks ago, a female student stopped me and asked me to sign her boob. I signed her notebook instead and got the hell out of there.

NOLAN ASKED if we could meet up at a sports bar near the sandwich shop he works at, so I return a call from my younger brother Heath on my drive there.

“Hey, what’s up?” he says.

“Not much. You?”

He sighs heavily. “I think it’s time to call it, man.”

I shake my head and grip the steering wheel tighter, preparing myself for an argument.

“You’re not quitting,” I say firmly. “Don’t even consider it.”

“Wake up,” he says, aggravated. “I’m twenty-three years old and I can’t even make it onto a minor league team. You’re paying Bobby all this money to train me, and for what? It’s just a stupid dream.”

Every few months, he melts down. And every time, I talk him into continuing. If I’m being honest, it’s not just for him, but for me, too. I can’t live with my guilt over what happened to him, and I’d give anything to make it right.

“It’s a grind, man,” I tell him. “Even in the minors. Even for me. I’m up before sunrise and I’m sore most of the time. I rarely spend three or four nights in a row in my own bed. I get fucking tired. At least once a week, I wish I could eat half a pan of lasagna, drink a six pack, and sleep in.”

Heath scoffs. “Don’t try to make me feel sorry for your life as a pro hockey player. You’re living my dream.”

It hits me like a punch square in my gut. I’d give him my career if I could, without hesitation. He deserves it.

“Look, I’m ridiculously fucking proud of you,” he says, his voice wavering. “But I’m training eight hours a day, and for what? For nothing. You put me through school and got me a degree. It’s time for me to hang it up and go use that degree to get a job.”

“No.” I practically yell the word into the phone. “Bobby says you’ve got the talent. It’s too soon to quit.”

“Yeah, he says that so you’ll keep paying him to train me every day.”

After a moment of silence, I continue pleading with him. “Don’t give up, okay? You’re still young. It takes grit to hang in there and I know you’ve got it in you. Remember what I always say about hockey being ten percent talent, forty percent hard work, and fifty percent refusing to go away.”

He’s living and training in Minneapolis with an outstanding coach, Bobby McCall. So far, none of his efforts to make a minor league team have worked out, but not for lack of trying. I’m frustrated for him, but nowhere near ready to let him quit.

“Hey,” he says, the fight gone from his voice. “You’re all I’ve got, man. You’re my brother. I don’t have anyone else.” He pauses to pull himself together, his tone emotional. “You’ve already given me so damn much, and I just want us to be equals again. Brothers.”

A lump forms in my throat. He’s pulling on my heartstrings hard today, but I can’t give in.

“This is what brothers do,” I say. “They hang in there with each other no matter how hard things get.”

“I’ll never be you, Colby. I wish I could, but”

“You don’t need to be me,” I say fiercely. “You’ve got talent of your own. I know it’s hard waiting for your shot but keep grinding.”

“Yeah, okay.”

I know he’s just doing it for me at this point, but I’ll take whatever I can get.

“Have you guys been doing that drill I sent you the video of?” I ask.

“Every day.”

“How’s everything else going? You seeing anybody?”

“Not really. Bobby’s girlfriend wants to set me up with someone, but I said no because I don’t think I’ll be here...you know, long term.”

He doesn’t think he’ll be there much longer because he’s so close to giving up. It kills me to hear the defeat in his voice. When I first set him up for training with Bobby, he was enthusiastic. He believed in himself as much as I did.

It’s been almost a year, though, and I get his restlessness.

“Can you come to my next game in Chicago?” I ask.

He laughs lightly. “Um, let me check my schedule. Oh, yeah, it’s wide open.”

“I think we’re flying out right after the game, but I can get away for an hour or so during the day if you want to get lunch. And I’ll get you some good seats.”

“I only need one, man.”

“I’ll see you then. Call me if you start to doubt yourself again. We’re in this to win it, remember?”

There’s a long pause on the other end of the line. “Yeah, I know.”

“Go for a run or whatever you need to do to get your head on straight again.”

“Yeah, I will. See you later.”

“Later, man.”

CHAPTER THREE

Mila

“THIS CAN’T BE HAPPENING. I’ve been in this country on a work visa for seven years.”

It’s the morning after Peter gave me the bad news about being deported, and I’m still going back and forth between panic and fury.

This is Mike Mills’ doing. I know he has the clout to make it happen, and he’s petty enough to do it.

“I’m afraid it is happening,” Peter says, the bags under his eyes revealing that he didn’t sleep much last night, either.

“How did you phrase the offer to the Mills campaign? Did you make it clear that I’ll donate through a PAC or whatever I have to do to get around spending limits?”

“They said there’s nothing they can do and that it would be unethical for them to take money in exchange for a favor.”

“Fuck.” I toss my pen across the room and it hits the concrete wall before dropping to the ground with an unceremonious plopping sound. “He probably thinks I’m trying to set him up, but I’m not. He got me and I’m willing to pay to make this go away.”

Peter runs a hand through his sparse gray hair, looking frazzled. “I don’t know how that’s possible. We’re under a microscope right now. Any political favor you call in, Mills could find out about it. And I’m sure I don’t need to tell you

how badly it could blow up if it gets out that you're trying to buy your way out of a legal deportation."

I groan and put my head in my hands. "There has to be a way."

"Well..." he says, sighing heavily. "Here are your options. We can appeal the decision, but if you're right and this is coming from Mills, an appeal is unlikely to succeed."

"The president," I suggest, somewhat joking, but not really. "I'll make a huge contribution to her campaign if her office can help with this."

Peter shakes his head. "You can't risk even saying that out loud to anyone outside of your inner circle. This isn't Russia, where money can just make anything go away."

I glare at him. "Money can make things go away everywhere."

He puts his hands up. "You'll have to hire another attorney, then. I'm not risking my license over this when there are other solutions."

"You think I should refuse the \$25 million?" I look up at the ceiling. "Damn, that's so much money. I'd have to"

"Absolutely not," Peter says.

I breathe a sigh of relief. "Okay, I'm glad we're on the same page. So, we're still taking the money, and I can't get deported. What are the other options?"

Peter rubs his chin, which he always does when he has to give me bad news. I'm tired and hopped up on caffeine from the many cups of coffee I drank to stay upright this morning, which means my patience is running thin.

"If an appeal won't work, what else can I do?" I prod.

He lets out the breath he's holding. "You can...get married."

"Married?" I recoil at the suggestion. "Me? No fucking way."

Peter looks at me like I'm a feral cat he's trying to catch, his expression a mixture of fear and determination.

"Being the spouse of a U.S. citizen would solve this problem," he says.

I laugh at the absurdity of the suggestion. "I don't have a boyfriend, though. I haven't even been on a date in...well, let just say it's been a long time."

I furrow my brow, trying to remember the last time I went on a real date. It's been years. I'm not exactly the warm and fuzzy girlfriend sort.

"Sure, I understand. I just wanted to let you know what the options are."

I exhale, steeling myself. "Okay, what else?"

Peter gives me a blank look. "You mean other options?"

"Right. Appealing is a no, and so is getting married."

"That's it, Mila. Your only other option is to go back to Russia and apply for a new work visa."

I shake my head, still in disbelief. "What about the number of people who depend on their jobs here? And the arena, which will contribute millions to the local economy? Why can't you make the case that there are economic benefits to extending my current visa?"

He shrugs. "I can do that if you want me to, but if an order to deport you has come down from the governor..."

I nod wearily. "It won't work."

Quentin speaks up from the other side of the room, where he's been leaning up against the wall listening to the conversation.

"What about Eli in accounting? His girlfriend just broke off their engagement."

I gape at him, horrified. "What about Eli for what?"

"You could marry him. It would solve the problem."

My jaw drops. “Eli usually has an entire salad bar between his teeth. Not only no, but hell no.”

“It doesn’t have to be a real marriage,” Quentin argues. “Just an arrangement on paper.”

Peter cuts in. “If you go that route, it has to be believable. You can’t marry someone and live separately. There are investigators who check the legitimacy of marriages that occur close to deportation dates, and if they don’t believe it’s real, you’ll be in this same boat again. Except you’ll also probably be accused of marriage fraud.”

“No,” I say, cringing. “I can’t get married, let alone pretend to like it.”

“I’d marry you, but everyone knows I’m gayer than a handbag full of rainbows,” Quentin offers.

I smile at him. “I’d marry you, too. You’re one of the only people I could stand to be around that much.”

“I could open a Tinder profile for you and vet potential candidates,” he offers.

“I’m not marrying some random guy you find on Tinder.”

I can’t believe I’m even considering this idea. It’s crazy. Relationships are always messy, which is why I swore off of them a long time ago. And marriage is the ultimate relationship.

“Are there immigration attorneys who could help?” I ask Peter hopefully.

“I called one last night. She’s an old friend from law school. Unfortunately, there’s nothing more she’d be able to do, but she said people have managed to delay proceedings with appeals.”

I bury my face in my hands again, wishing I had a Mike Mills voodoo doll.

“But let me guess, my appeal process would go quickly because the red tape will magically disappear.”

Peter presses his lips together and nods. “The governor’s office is a powerful one.”

I’m not going back to Russia. Given the things my father and grandfather have done, I wouldn’t be safe there. Mills probably knows that. It’s probably funny to him that I could be dead before my flight back to Moscow even lands.

With a deep breath, I sit up straight and fold my hands on my desk. I’m not some shrinking violet that Mills can toy around with. I’m Mila Fucking Pavlova. All I have to do is remove the emotion from this situation and see it as a business decision.

“Sounds like we’ll be having a wedding,” I say. “First up, we need to find a groom.”

Quentin squeals with excitement. “You’re going to be a vision with that long dark hair and fair skin. A blush-colored dress would be so fab.”

Peter lets out a gruff grunt and gets up from his seat. “I don’t think I can help with this part.”

Once Quentin and I are alone, he grabs a pen and paper and sits down in front of my desk.

“Okay, this has to be someone I trust completely.”

Quentin nods, tapping the end of his pen on the notebook. “Someone who also has an interest in you staying here.”

“The only people who meet that criteria are people who work for the team. If I go down, we all go down.”

“Dominic Locke?” he suggests.

I don’t respond, but inwardly, I’m cringing. Dom is a notorious player who loves the sound of his own voice. I’d have to put tape over his mouth to survive living with him.

“Maybe,” I say weakly.

“Oh.” He leans forward, his eyes lighting up. “Colby Harrison. He’s single and makes all my bells jingle, if you know what I mean.”

I nod, considering him as an option. He's right about Colby being easy on the eyes. Since this is going to be a fake marriage, it doesn't matter if we're attracted to each other, but we need it to be believable.

"Ask him to come to my office for a meeting," I say, the wheels turning quickly in my mind. "We need to take care of this as fast as we can."

Quentin leaves the room and I smile, wishing I could see Mills' face when news of my pending nuptials breaks. He'll make it his life's mission to prove my marriage is fake, so I'll have to stay one step ahead of him.

Assuming, of course, that I can convince Colby to marry me. I've had to talk my way in and out of many business deals, but this proposition will be unique to say the least.

I unlock the desk drawer that contains my personal checkbook and set it on my desk, then think better of it and return it to the drawer. This deal is probably going to cost me, but I need to be smarter about it than writing a check.

Maybe Colby wants a mountain retreat or an oceanfront cottage. Whatever it is that will make him agree to this, I have the means to buy it for him.

Mills is about to find out that money can make any problem go away.

CHAPTER FOUR

Colby

I TAKE off the backwards baseball hat I'm wearing after walking down the stairs to the basement level in the temporary location of our team's front office. Not really the right vibe for a meeting with the team owner.

After lunch, I went for a run with Nolan on a local trail, originally wearing the hat to keep the sun out of my eyes. Fortunately, I was able to shower and change into clean clothes back in the locker room here, which is where I was when Mila's assistant Quentin sent me a text that she wanted to meet with me as soon as possible.

I can't imagine what she wants with me. Unless it's about the threesome? But surely she wouldn't want to bitch about that to me, even if she heard. It was consensual, obviously.

Our team owner can be volatile. She had an ongoing feud with my friend Ford's girlfriend, Elle, over Elle's opposition to our new arena. Now that ground has been broken on the new arena, the tension between the two of them seems to have cooled.

Mila's true to her Russian roots, though. I don't know her well, but from everything I've been told, nothing means more to her than loyalty. After the explosion at the arena, she made sure the families of those that had died were taken care of financially. Her generousness is only matched by her shrewdness. My agent says no one picks apart every line of a

contract the way she does, fighting things both big and small to get the most bang for her buck out of players.

There's a gray placard that says "Archives" on the wall just outside the door to the office Quentin and Mila share. On the floor, there's a clear plastic sign that has "Mila Pavlova, Team Owner" carved into it. I pick it up and walk inside the door that's slightly cracked open.

"Hey," Quentin says brightly, his expression turning to a scowl when he sees the sign in my hands. "That damn thing won't stay on the door no matter what I put on it."

"Try licking it first," I suggest. "Then put some Gorilla Glue on it."

"Really?" He gives me a puzzled look. "Okay. Can I get you some coffee, tea, or water?"

"Nah, I'm good, thanks."

"She's ready for you. You can go on in."

There's a door inside Quentin's office that leads to Mila's. I head toward it, turning back to Quentin halfway. "Hey, I was just busting your balls about licking it. Gorilla Glue is great, though."

He smiles widely, looking pleased. "Did you just chirp at me? Was that chirping? I've always wanted to get chirped at the way you guys do to each other on the ice."

That wasn't chirping. Chirping often involves an opponent talking about either your mom or the size of your dick. But I don't want to ruin Quentin's good mood, so I just grin at him and head back for the boss's office.

"Colby, hi!" Mila's voice is unusually high as she jumps up from behind her desk. "Come on in."

Her smile reminds me of the Joker. It's too big for her face and it doesn't look real.

"Everything okay?" I ask, sitting down across from her desk.

“Everything’s great!” she says, her voice still unnaturally high. “Yeah, it’s *great*. Can I get you a drink?”

She opens the refrigerator in her office, scanning the contents. “I have water, iced tea, energy drinks, and Diet Dr. Pepper.”

“I’m good, thanks.”

She takes out a can of Diet Dr. Pepper and cracks it open, returning to her seat behind the desk.

“Thanks for coming on such short notice.”

“No problem.”

Something’s off. Mila is the team owner; she doesn’t thank me for coming to her office when she wants to talk to me. I arch my brows and smile, waiting to find out what’s up.

“So.” She taps her bright red, perfectly manicured nails on her desk and takes a deep breath, looking...nervous? I’ve never seen Mila look nervous. “I have a bit of a situation I’m hoping you can help with.”

“Sure.”

Another deep breath. What the hell is going on here? Mila is known as the Ice Queen, not just because she owns a hockey team but because she’s so unemotional. I’ve seen her stare people down until they break out in a sweat. Right now, though, she looks like she needs a shot of the Stolli vodka she loves so much.

“Did you hear we got the last \$25 million for the arena?” she asks.

“No, I hadn’t heard. That’s great.”

I don’t pay attention to numbers outside of our team’s stats, my own stats, and my own contract, but I pretend to be interested. There was never any doubt Mila was going to make the new arena a reality.

She clears her throat. “The arena is fully funded, but I made a political enemy out of the governor, and...well, I found out I may be deported back to Russia.”

“Deported?” I just stare at her, in shock, wondering how someone as powerful as Mila could be shipped out of the country like that. Surely she has friends in high enough places to stop that from happening.

“I know our team is on the verge of greatness,” she says, her voice steady now. This is the dialed-in Mila I’m used to. The one who kicks ass and takes names.

“I agree,” I say.

“I want to continue being part of it,” she says. “The day to day of owning this team means everything to me. I’ve never wanted to own the team and pay other people to run it. I’m a hands-on owner.”

I nod, because she’s right, and I respect that about her. She watches every game we play, and we sometimes see her watching our practices, too.

“Yeah, I’ve always noticed that,” I say, wondering where this conversation is going.

“I’ll cut to the chase.” Her gaze is locked onto mine. “I need to get married so I can avoid deportation.”

I nod, finally seeing what she’s getting at. Mila is respected by everyone on our team, but she keeps a professional distance from all of us. Even Coach Maddox doesn’t socialize with Mila. She had a couch in her office at the old arena where she was known to sleep after working late nights.

“We’ll all be there,” I promise her. “I’ll make sure every player and wife are at your wedding. Anything you need from us. We’ve got your back.”

She laughs nervously. “I was really hoping you’d say that because I definitely need you to be there. At the altar. With me.”

“At the...?”

Oh. Mila’s estranged from her father. She doesn’t have any family here.

“I mean, if you want me to walk you down the aisle, I can,” I offer.

She presses her fingers to the bridge of her nose. “Colby, I need you to be the groom. I need you to marry me so I can stay in this country.”

A hearty laugh bursts out of me. I don’t just laugh, I laugh *hard*. It’s one of those laughs that reaches my belly, giving me a cleansing feeling.

“Where are they?” I ask, peeking at the door to see if someone’s standing behind it. “They almost got me that time.”

“What are you talking about? There’s no one in here but us.”

I nod, pointing at her. “There’s a camera, then. Of course, there’s a camera because they planned to watch this one over and over again.”

“What the hell are you talking about?” she demands, her nervousness replaced by her usual short-tempered demeanor.

“I know this is a prank. Sal owes me one from the time I convinced him I slept with an eighty-one-year-old grandma. And this...” I shake my head, looking around the room for a tiny camera. “This was elaborate. Getting the team owner in on it.”

She narrows her eyes, looking like she wants to fly across the desk and strangle me.

“This isn’t a prank. What, like marrying me could only be a joke?”

I hesitate, my smile sliding away. She could be digging her heels in, determined to convince me this is real. But if she’s not...

“No, you’re beautiful. I didn’t mean it like that.”

It’s the truth. Mila is one of the most beautiful women I’ve ever seen. With her long dark hair, caramel-colored eyes, and perfect pink lips, she looks more like a model than the owner of a professional hockey team. But none of us think of her that way. Not just because she dresses in business suits every day,

but because she's so cutthroat. I have no doubt that she'd neuter any man who did her wrong—with a rusty pocketknife if needed.

I just stare at her across the desk, torn between falling for a prank and getting castrated.

“Look.” She turns her laptop around to show me the screen. “Does this look like a prank?”

I lean forward, finding a letter that looks like it's on government letterhead. According to what I read, her work visa isn't being renewed and she's being deported back to Russia.

This is too elaborate to be a prank. My gut churns as I replay myself laughing two minutes ago.

“You're serious?” I say. It's half question and half statement.

“It won't be a real marriage, obviously. But we do need it to look real because apparently there are investigators who will look into it. You are single, right?”

Why the hell was I so averse to relationships? Beau and Ford are protected from this nightmare because of Beau's wife and Ford's girlfriend. But good ol' Colby, the confirmed bachelor? I'm in a chokehold here.

“Yeah,” I admit, knowing it's pointless to lie to her.

“I promise you I'll be going into this in good faith. We can set ground rules. I never planned to marry—*ever*, so I don't expect romance. I won't even ask you to sign a prenup. I'll buy you the vacation home of your dreams as a wedding gift, in your name only.”

I swallow hard, reality setting in. She's determined to make this happen. I want to bolt, but I can't. There's too much on the line.

“I don't want a vacation home.”

How can I break this to her gently? Excuses fly through my mind. Could I say I'm religiously opposed to marriage? Is there even a religion that opposes marriage?

“My team owner pays me pretty well,” I say, smiling weakly. “I don’t need your money.”

The flicker of vulnerability on her face nearly crushes me. Mila is a proud woman; it has to be hard for her to be begging any man to marry her, even if it would be a fake marriage.

“What do you want, then?” Her gaze doesn’t leave mine. “I know people. Not the right people to buy off Governor Mills, unfortunately, but other people. Do you have a loved one with a criminal record?”

There’s an actual pain in my gut. She has to already know the answer to that, and she’s trying to exploit it. But I wouldn’t help him if my life was at stake. Not for anything.

I can’t marry her. It’s insane. Yet...my mind is now running with the question, like someone who has just been granted a wish by a magic genie. What would I want if I could have anything? I’m a millionaire with my dream career, but what’s out of reach for me?

“There it is,” she says smugly. “You *do* want something. What is it?”

“My brother lives in Minneapolis. He’s twenty-three and he trains eight hours a day with a hockey coach. He’s good, but he didn’t get to play when he was in high school so he never got scouted. If you can get him on a Triple-A team, I’ll do it.”

“Done. What’s his name?”

“Heath Harrison.” I furrow my brow. “I don’t want him to ever know I had anything to do with it and I don’t want it to be our Triple-A team. Can you call in a favor from another owner?”

She considers my request. “He’s good enough, right?”

“Absolutely. And he’ll keep working with the trainer. He’ll do whatever it takes.”

“Okay. I can do that. But it may be Anaheim and I don’t want to hear any bitching about it.”

My heart pounds hopefully. “I’ll take any Triple-A team. Not just for a week or two, though. He gets at least a few months to prove himself.”

“Fuck.” She rolls her eyes. “This is going to cost me. But okay.”

I can’t give my brother my career, but I can give him the shot he deserves. I only wish I could be there when he gets the call he’s worked so hard for.

“I promise you he’ll kill it,” I say. “He wants this really fucking bad.”

She nods. “We have a deal. But listen, you can’t tell anyone this marriage isn’t real. Not even your teammates. I think our story should be that we’ve been sneaking around for a few months and we can’t stand being apart anymore, so...” She waves a hand, looking annoyed with the very idea of romance.

“I won’t tell anyone,” I promise. “How long will we have to do this?”

“I wish I knew, but I don’t. I’ll have attorneys on it, though. We’ll make sure it’s as short as possible.”

“Okay, wifey.” I grin at her.

She glares daggers at me. “Never call me that again.”

Then she extends her hand toward me and I shake it. Her skin is soft and her grip is strong.

I stand up, still not believing this whole conversation just happened. There’s still a shred of me wondering if I just bought into a well-played prank.

“I guess you’ll let me know when our wedding is?” I say lightly.

She puts her dark-rimmed glasses back on and turns to read something on her computer screen. “Talk to Quentin about getting a tux.”

“I have one.”

She looks away from the screen, sizing me up. “It’s not cheap, is it?”

I glare back at her. “You worry about what you’ll wear and I’ll worry about what I’ll wear.”

“Fine.”

“What’s my pet name for you?” I ask.

“What?”

“You know, if we’re in love, what do I call you when we’re alone?”

“Mila.”

She’s as warm as a block of ice. If we’re going to convince people we’re in love, she’s going to have to try harder than this.

“I’ll think of something.”

I leave her office, vowing to come up with the cheesiest pet name ever.

CHAPTER FIVE

Mila

QUENTIN NUDGES me and I take my Air Pods out.

“We’re landing in twenty minutes,” he says.

“Already?”

I was listening to a business podcast, our flight from Denver to New York City passing quickly. Quentin and I have two days to plan my wedding and we’re spending Day One in New York City picking out my wedding dress. He’s been furiously phoning vendors and calling in favors to secure food, flowers, and anything else we’ll need.

The ceremony will take place in the evening, as the sun sets, on the rooftop of a beautiful building I’m part owner of. Quentin is arranging for twinkle lights, lantern-like centerpieces, and every single white peony he can get his hands on.

“You’re the best, Cheryl. I’m for sure naming my firstborn after you,” Quentin says into the headset he’s wearing to take and receive calls on the flight.

“Toasted ravioli is a go for an appetizer,” he says to me. “That gives us meats and cheeses, crab cakes, stuffed mushrooms, and toasted ravioli.”

“You’re making me hungry. Let’s stop for food on the way to the dress shop once we land.”

Quentin gives me a judgmental look. “You don’t want to try on dresses right after eating.”

“I don’t have to eat an entire bucket of fried chicken, but I need *something*.”

“We’ll get some crackers from Zelda.”

I scowl at him, because the crackers the flight attendant on my plane hands out are *not* what I had in mind. This whole deportation and wedding thing has been stressful. I try to eat healthy most of the time, but I could really go for a cheeseburger.

“I need a sandwich,” I say.

“Bread will make you bloat. And we don’t have time to stop anywhere. We have exactly three hours to secure a dress, shoes, lingerie, and a headpiece.”

I balk. “Okay, let me stop you there. I don’t need lingerie. Or a headpiece. What is this, 1985?”

My assistant-slash-thinks-he’s-the-boss shakes his head at me. “Every bride needs lingerie. And we’ll try some delicate headpieces; I found a gorgeous one online that is decorated with the most delicate looking pearls. You can do a headpiece by itself, a headpiece and a veil, or neither.”

“Neither.”

Quentin sighs heavily, and rather dramatically, through his nose. “This is literally the one and only time in my life I’ll get to help a bride plan her big day. Just let me live my dream, okay?”

We agreed to never again say anything about my relationship with Colby being fake. We’re playing it safe. From now on, I’m a woman, completely smitten with a twenty-seven-year-old man from...

Where is he from again?

“Where’s the memo?” I ask Quentin.

He pulls a slim black binder from his messenger bag. Inside is a portfolio he prepared of things I’ll need to know

about Colby. He stayed up late last night making one for each of us.

Quentin is the best assistant I could have ever imagined having. He's become my closest friend in the time he's worked for me.

"Indiana," I murmur, reading through the list.

His favorite food is sushi and his favorite movie is *The Godfather*. Favorite ice cream, chocolate. Top vacation spot, Colorado.

I'm marrying a walking cliché. He probably likes long walks on the beach, too. But he's saving my ass, so I can't complain.

Our flight lands and a black SUV with tinted windows picks us up on the tarmac. After loading our things, we drive off, heading to the downtown bridal boutique we have an appointment at. As soon as we walk through the door, we're greeted by a woman with a sleek, jet-black-colored bob who looks like a size -2.

"Ms. Pavlova, I'm Lillian," she says. "Your assistant told me you're on a tight schedule, so I already have a dressing room waiting for you."

I lower my brows. "Don't you want me to look at the dresses first?"

"Oh honey, no. Your assistant sent me photos of you and some pictures of styles you like and I already have around a dozen dresses waiting for you to try on."

Quentin grabs onto my arm, squealing, and takes off for the private dressing room. At least one of us is excited about this.

The first dress is a pretty blush color with a lace overlay. It has a high neckline and I immediately veto it. The next one is ruched on one side and cut very low. When I walk out of the dressing room with a glare, Quentin gives Lillian a look.

"Is there a pole nearby?"

"So that's a no," she says smoothly. "It's a process."

When I put the third dress on, I step out of the dressing room and Quentin gasps.

“Sweet baby Jesus, you look stunning,” he says, tears shining in his eyes.

I check my reflection in the mirror. It’s a sleeveless dress with a fitted bodice, ornately embroidered with shimmering beads. The skirt is lined with tulle and a little poufy, making my waistline look nonexistent. And Quentin was right, the blush color really does look great on me.

I’m thirty years old, and not once have I dreamed about being a bride. I never wanted it. I’m too independent to be pinned down and too adventurous to only be with one man for the rest of my life.

In this dress, though, I see the dream I could have had. I don’t look like a cutthroat ice queen, but a beautiful, happy bride.

“Either you can buy that and wear it, or I will,” Quentin quips.

“This is the one.”

I’ll never have a real wedding day. Might as well feel gorgeous on my fake one.

THAT EVENING, I’m back in Denver, walking from the parking lot into the restaurant I’m meeting Colby at for dinner. I’m scrolling through wedding ring options on my phone, trying to decide what I want.

It still feels surreal that I’m actually getting married. Me. Married. Fake or not, I’ll have a ring on my finger. I’ll be someone’s *wife*.

Someone who likes rock and country music and hates no-show socks. I’m still working on memorizing the information Quentin gathered about Colby. I remembered the sushi, which

is why I asked Quentin to make a reservation at the Asian fusion place we're eating at tonight.

"Reservation for Pavlova," I tell the hostess.

"Right this way."

She leads me to a table for two in the back, where Colby stands up from his seat. He's wearing jeans and a gray Coyotes polo, which doesn't really compliment my charcoal-gray business suit, but at least he's here.

"Hey, I'm sorry I didn't realize this place was so formal," he says as I take my seat, and he sits back down in his.

"You look fine. How are you?"

"May I offer you a glass of wine?" our server asks, holding out a bottle of merlot.

"You read my mind," I say. "We'll take the bottle."

"I'll have a Sapporo," Colby says.

I give him a puzzled look. "You don't want wine? That's a great red; I've had it."

"I hate wine."

Shit. These are the kinds of rookie mistakes we can't afford to make. I smile tightly at the server.

"Yeah, you can still leave the bottle."

I'll be falling down drunk if I drink the entire thing myself, but damned if I don't want to. I don't even know Colby, and I'm marrying him in forty-eight hours. What if we don't get along?

"So I bought a dress," I say. "And Quentin made us a private appointment with a local jeweler for after we're done here."

"Okay. What else do you need from me?"

"We have to go get our marriage license together tomorrow."

He nods, frowning his brow in thought. "That's game day. I can only go late morning."

“That’ll work. Do you need me to talk to Ron?”

That’ll be an awkward conversation with my head coach. *Hey Ron, Colby will need some extra time away from the arena tomorrow because we’re getting married. Surprise!*

He shakes his head and looks away, exhaling hard. “No, and while we’re on the subject, don’t ever try to call in favors for me with him or anyone else.”

I study his sulky expression, wondering why he’s so surly tonight.

“Are you hangry?”

His brows drop even lower. “No, I’m not hangry. We need to get something straight—I’m not your pet.”

“My *pet*?” I’m taken aback by his defensiveness. “Is this about me ordering the wine?”

“Yeah, and offering to talk to...” He can’t seem to use his coach’s first name. “My coach. I know it’s not in your nature to let a man take any sort of lead, but you’re going to need to work on that.”

I’m able to keep myself from bursting out laughing, but I can’t keep from smiling a little bit.

“You want people to think you wear the pants?”

“I do wear the fucking pants, but I respect that you’re also a pants-wearer. Don’t try to railroad me.”

I run the tip of my tongue over my inner cheek, taking in his words. Railroading people is what I do. It’s who I am. It’s how I’ve managed to build a successful business empire.

I need this marriage to happen, though. Peter texted me while I was in New York today about a court date for my deportation hearing in four business days. If I’m not legally married by then, I’ll be taken from the hearing to the airport where I’ll be escorted onto a plane bound for Moscow. No return ticket. I refuse to let that happen.

“Okay,” I say, trying to sound conciliatory.

“Did you make the call we discussed?”

“Yes.” I look over both shoulders, making sure no one is within earshot. “Your brother will get a call by the end of today.”

“He’s coming to the wedding.”

“Great.”

I stick to light small talk until we’ve ordered dinner and gotten our food. Once Colby is through his first sushi roll, I broach the next difficult conversation.

“I think we need to discuss your house.”

His blue eyes lock onto mine. “What about it?”

Look soft, Mila. Feminine. Sweet. Try for big, innocent eyes.

“I think we should sell it,” I say.

He furrows his brow and looks over his shoulder. “What? Your eyes are like saucers, did you see something?”

So much for demureness. I just don’t have it in me.

“No, I just...what do you think about selling your house?”

He pops another piece of sushi into his mouth, shaking his head. “No fucking way. I love that house. You can move in with me if you want.”

Somehow, I don’t think I’ll like his house as much as my downtown penthouse, but that’s a conversation we can delay.

“You could always lease it,” I say. “How’s the sushi?”

“It’s great, how’s yours?”

“Really good. I don’t usually order this much, but I was starving. Quentin wouldn’t let me eat before I tried on dresses and then there was nothing but mixed nuts on the flight back.”

“Which you can’t eat because you’re allergic to hazelnuts,” he says.

I smile, impressed. “You’ve been studying.”

“Have you?”

“Yes, but I think it’s easier to get to know each other by talking, don’t you?”

He nods, setting down his chopsticks. “Did you have any pets as a kid?”

“I had a white cat named Ivan. How about you?”

“A German shepherd named Loodles and a beagle named Doug.”

“Doug?” I smile. “That’s a funny name for a dog.”

“Yeah.”

We pepper each other with random questions until we finish dinner and head to the jewelry store. Since we drove separately, we meet up there, and I see a bead of sweat rolling down Colby’s face as we walk in.

It’s not the least bit hot outside. He has to be nervous.

“You okay?” I ask him.

“Yeah, I just...never imagined doing this.”

“I get it. Same here.”

We make quick work of it. I choose an oval solitaire that reminds me of my deda’s Fabergé egg collection, smaller diamonds glittering around the band, and Colby chooses a simple platinum band.

When the jeweler tells us our total is \$341,070, Colby’s eyes widen.

“Pretty sure that’s over my Amex limit,” he mutters.

I take a check from my bag and fill it out, saying, “I’ve got it.”

If I’m going to wear a wedding ring, I’m wearing a beautiful one. We’re in the parking lot outside the store when Colby gives me a puzzled look.

“How did I propose to you?” he asks.

“Something simple, since we don’t have any photos or anything.”

“In the bathtub.”

My cheeks warm at the thought of telling that story. It’s a good one, though. It explains the lack of photos and it’s spontaneous, just like our non-relationship.

“In the bathtub,” I agree.

“Should we be...texting each other?”

My eyes widen. I hadn’t even thought of that. If Mills has people doing any serious digging, there won’t be any signs of Colby and I communicating.

I take out my phone. “What’s your number?”

He gives it to me and I input it, typing out a text.

Mila: So glad we don't have to keep this a secret anymore and not even text. I love you and can't wait to be your wife.

He reads it and nods, writing back.

Colby: Love you too babe. Sleep well and I'll see you tomorrow.

He looks up and our eyes lock.

“We good?” he says.

“We’re good.”

We walk in separate directions to our cars and I drive home, thinking about how perfunctory and unromantic this whole thing is.

Which, for me, makes it absolutely perfect.

CHAPTER SIX

Colby

“WHAT THE ACTUAL fuck is happening right now?” Dominic demands.

“Look, I know it’s a shock”

“A *shock*?” He looks around at our teammates, all dressed in suits for the wedding that’s about to take place.

My wedding. Dominic hasn’t had a chance to confront me about it until now, ten minutes before I’m supposed to take my place at the altar, right next the officiant marrying me and Mila.

“Harrison, a shock is when the football game you think is being broadcast this week isn’t the one that’s on, or when you think a fart’s coming out and it’s shit instead. This is more than a shock,” he says.

“Why? She’s beautiful and smart. Generous. Mila’s a total package.”

“Exactly,” Dom says, his eyes wide with disbelief. “She’s out of reach. She’s never, not once, looked at a single guy on our team with a gleam in her eye.”

He’s right about that, but I have to sell everyone on the idea that Mila and I have been hot and heavy in secret for the past two months.

“I tried to flirt with her once and she looked at me like I was a maggot on rotting flesh,” he says, shaking his head.

“I mean, don’t most women look at you like that?” Seth quips.

“Your mom doesn’t.”

“Who made the first move?” Beau asks me.

“It was pretty mutual.” Mila and I talked about this and decided to say we ran into each other out shopping, got dinner together, and immediately knew we had a connection. “We ran into each other, went to a ramen place for dinner, and the rest is history.”

“But you’re younger than her,” Dom says with disbelief. “And you’re such a beta.”

I shake my head at that. “You think I’m a beta just because I don’t walk around the locker room talking about women I’ve been with.”

“Yeah. We alphas like to pound our chests and hump the whole fucking world.”

For all his bravado, Dom’s insecure. He’s constantly talking about his sexual conquests like he thinks it makes him more of a man. I love the guy, but I don’t think real men need to run their mouths.

“I don’t know what to tell you, man,” I say, shrugging. “She’s crazy about me, and I’ve never been happier.”

The second part of that statement is true. When Heath called me in tears over getting picked up by Triple-A Anaheim, I shed a few tears myself. Even though I knew it was coming, his excitement choked me up.

My brother deserves this. After everything he’s been through, this opportunity could be life-changing. That’s my why. And Mila’s why is staying in the United States. We’re both going into this marriage with eyes wide open.

“Wait a minute.” Our goalie Sal gives me a puzzled look. “Are you our team owner now? Like, as her husband, won’t you guys both own the team?”

“Not really.”

“Bullshit,” Beck says, grinning. “You’re about to be Mr. Colby Pavlova.”

“Fuck off,” I say.

“Is she taking your last name?” Ford asks.

We never talked about it, so I go with the safe answer. “No, she’s keeping her name.”

“You okay with that?”

“Of course.”

“Which last name will your kids have?” Beau asks.

I check my watch, eager to end this interrogation. “Uh, mine. But no plans to have kids anytime soon.”

Or ever. This is just a business arrangement between two people. But it’s time for me to pretend I’m head over heels in love with my team owner.

“We need to go,” I tell my brother, who’s standing beside me in a tux.

He claps me on the shoulder. “Let’s do it.”

My heart races when Heath and I reach our places by Cal, the officiant marrying me and Mila. Quentin had the rooftop of this building transformed. There are flowers and potted pine trees very tastefully set up around the space, lights twinkling bright as the sun begins to set. The view of the mountains in the background is breathtaking from up here.

Heath is standing up with me and Quentin is standing up with Mila. We didn’t have time for bridesmaid dresses. We wanted this ceremony to be intimate, making it look like privacy is important to us. I invited around twenty people, all teammates and their wives or girlfriends, and Mila invited twelve friends.

She had everyone turn in their phones and sign NDAs to add to the illusion that we’re doing this in secret. In truth, Quentin tipped off a hockey blogger and I’m pretty sure the

chopper circling in the distance has at least one photographer on it.

Mila wants news of our wedding to leak, and I have no doubt it will. She hired a photographer to take photos of the ceremony so we can release a statement and a photo after it leaks. All our bases should be covered.

Except this last formality—the vows. We decided to go with the traditional sickness and health, good times and bad ones, blah blah, because writing fake vows is a step too far.

The string quartet starts playing, signifying Mila's walk down the aisle. She's on Quentin's arm, her eyes on me.

Everyone stands and turns around to see the bride and there's a collective gasp. I can't deny I gasp a little myself.

Mila is the most stunning bride I've ever seen. Her pale pink dress hugs every curve just right. Her dark hair is styled into big waves, some of it down around her shoulders and the rest styled inside what looks like a delicate tiara adorned with sparkling diamonds and pearls.

It's her expression that gets me, though. Her trademark shrewd gaze is nowhere to be found. Everything about her is soft, sweet, and vulnerable. She missed her calling as an actress, because my heart's hammering in my chest like all of this is real.

When they reach the end of the aisle, she takes my hands, her expression nervous and elated at the same time. Our bickering is forgotten as I gently squeeze her hands in mine.

As Cal starts the ceremony, Mila mouths "I love you" and I mouth it back. I find myself wishing like hell that it were true. That two commitment-phobes really did fall crazy in love and decide to get married even though she owns the team he plays for.

The fullness I feel as we exchange our vows is almost too much. This whole ceremony is everything I thought I was dead set against. My mother gave herself over to love and it cost her everything; I swore I'd never make the same mistake.

"Until death do you part?" Cal asks me.

The hope and love swirling in Mila's eyes is messing with my head. This is all just for show, right?

She squeezes my hands, nudging me to get my shit together.

"I do."

"You may now kiss the bride."

Mila breaks into a huge smile as I reach for her, one hand on her hip and the other on her cheek. My lips meet hers for the first time and I taste a hint of the Stoli she must have taken a shot of before the ceremony.

That brings me back down to Earth. Happy brides don't need a shot of vodka to get themselves down the aisle. She has a lot more on the line than I do; if it gets out that this marriage is fake, not only will she get sent back to Russia, her reputation and credibility will take massive hits.

When we pull away and I look out at our cheering friends, it's all I can do not to laugh.

What the hell is happening here? Does no one else see that this isn't real?

Quentin actually manages a couple of tears, which he wipes away with a cloth handkerchief. A helicopter flies by and Mila snuggles into my side, gazing adoringly up at me.

"Ladies and gentleman, may I present Mr. and Mrs. Colby Harrison," Cal says.

At that moment, a fireworks display begins. As planned, Mila gives me a shocked look and I kiss her and wink. Quentin and I coordinated this "surprise" fireworks show from me to her, but it was her idea. She leans against me, playing her part like a pro.

When the excitement of the fireworks comes to an end, I raise Mila's hand in the air and everyone cheers. I glance at Heath and he looks so damn happy that guilt stabs me in the gut. But he's the last person I want finding out this isn't real.

I take Mila behind the stairwell door, where she grins at me and leans in close.

“We did it,” she whispers.

“We did.”

“How do you feel?”

I have no idea how to answer that. All I can think about is the way she’s looking at me, both warmth and happiness swimming in her eyes. If I’m doing half as well at pretending as she is, no one will doubt we’re crazy about each other.

“Good,” I say. “Yeah, good, how about you?”

“Great, other than having to see that hellbeast Elle Lawrence at my own wedding.”

There’s the real Mila. She and Ford’s girlfriend have a strong mutual dislike for each other, but I wasn’t about to tell him he couldn’t bring her tonight.

“Look at you, though,” I say. “If you have to see her, at least you look like a queen.”

“I do, don’t I?”

“You do.”

“We should get back out there.”

“Hey, are you taking my last name?”

Her jaw drops. “Uh...no. Is that okay?”

“Yeah, I just wanted to know.”

She takes in a deep breath and lets it out. “Okay, game face.”

Quentin spared no expense on our celebration dinner, which we eat at circular tables already set up in a corner of the rooftop area. We have shrimp cocktail, filet mignon, sushi, and several sides. As soon as we finish eating, Mila and I have our first dance, and she melts into my arms like it’s the most natural fit in the world.

“You smell good,” I say in her ear.

“Thank you. And um, not to make things awkward, but there’s something pressing against my stomach, and...”

I laugh softly. “Sorry. Like I said, you look good and smell good, and I’m a man, so...”

“Okay, well...” She laughs lightly. “Thanks?”

After a couple of dances, the photographer takes Mila and I to the other side of the roof for photos, and when we return to our guests, Quentin is standing next to a silver rolling cart with a large domed cover.

“Mr. and Mrs. Harrison, I present to you your wedding cake!”

It’s a two-tier chocolate cake with raspberry filling, which Mila chose and I agreed to. Cake is cake.

“Holy hell,” Quentin mutters, giving Mila a frantic look.

There’s a silver-tinted letter “M” pressed into the top of the cake where a plastic bride and groom would normally go.

“Where’s the C?” Quentin demands at one of the catering assistants. “It’s supposed to have a C and an M.”

My teammates snicker and elbow each other. I ignore it because I’m man enough to stand beside a woman as strong as Mila. And honestly, it is kind of funny since Mila is known for being strong and independent.

“It’s a good thing my name’s not Steve,” I murmur to Mila. “We’d have an S and M wedding cake.”

She laughs. It’s a real, full-throated laugh that makes me smile. And then she walks over to the cake, pulls out the letter “M” and sets it down on a nearby plate.

I join her and together, we cut the first piece of cake. She puts a small first bite on a fork and feeds it to me, glowing with happiness. I do the same for her, and the moment feels right for a kiss, so I give her a soft one.

“Time for cake and drinks?” she murmurs against my lips.

“Absolutely.”

CHAPTER SEVEN

Mila

Turns out weddings are exhausting. By the time Colby and I get to my place with a bag of fast-food burritos, it's almost one in the morning.

"Didn't we say no gifts?" he says, a stack of cards from our guests in hand.

"People never listen."

I turn on the lights as we walk into my penthouse apartment and Colby gives a low whistle.

"What a dump," he cracks.

When I bought the Coyotes and moved to Denver, this apartment wasn't for sale. It was close to our arena at the time and I wanted it, so I offered the owner a price he couldn't refuse. Then I had the place gutted and renovated.

Now it's wide open, with rich dark wood floors and white walls displaying decorative pieces by Russian artists. I collect paintings from my native country, keeping what isn't displayed in a secure, climate-controlled storage so I can rotate pieces in and out and keep adding to my collection.

"You live here?" Colby walks over to the kitchen, which has white cabinets and white marble counters.

"Of course."

"It looks like a photo in a magazine."

“Thanks.”

He pinches his brow. “I mean...do you use the dishes? Do you sit on the couches?”

“Sometimes. I have a housekeeper who does all my cleaning and laundry. And a window washer, because obviously, the view is amazing.”

The apartment already had floor-to-ceiling windows in the main living area, which I kept when I renovated. Only the bathroom and two bedrooms have windows with blinds.

“Hey, will you unbutton this?” I ask him, moving my hair to the side to allow him access to the back of my dress.

He walks over and hums his disapproval. “Christ, this is like fifty itty bitty buttons.”

“Yeah, but after you finish we can eat burritos.”

“You didn’t eat much tonight.”

His warm breath dances over the bare skin of my neck. I’ve had my share of sex, but never an intimate moment like this, where I can feel the heat of a man’s body as he slowly undresses me.

Well, *unbuttons* me. It’s not like we’re consummating this marriage. Without him, though, I’d have to cut this dress off, and I wouldn’t think twice about it. I’ve been squeezed into it for way too long.

“I can’t eat in this corset.”

“Why are you wearing a corset?”

His deft fingers have already gotten so many buttons undone that I can feel the dress dropping. I hold on to the front so it doesn’t slip off.

“To make my waist look smaller.”

He hums skeptically. “You already have a small waist. Are you hoping to seduce me, Mrs. Harrison?”

I suppress an eye roll. Why does every man think a woman asking for help is trying to jump into bed with him?

“No, just trying not to bust out of my dress in front of our wedding guests.”

“This is a sexy little number, though.” His speaks so close to my ear that it tickles slightly. “All covered in lace.”

Damn Quentin for insisting I buy lingerie. His argument was sound—if reporters go digging at the wedding shop to find out what we bought, it looks more legit if I bought sexy lingerie with my dress. But it’s making my new husband think I want him, and I don’t.

I explain that Quentin wanted me to get the lingerie as I feel Colby’s knuckles brushing over the fabric of my corset at the small of my back.

“Hmm.” He keeps unbuttoning. “So, this was supposed to be for me?”

“Well, it was supposed to *look* like it was for you.”

He finishes undoes the last button and then puts his hands on my waist, gently turning me to face him. I don’t miss the hunger swirling in his eyes. They’ve changed from their normal vibrant blue; now they look like the sky on a stormy summer day.

“I should probably get a good look at it, then,” he says. “In case anyone asks me about it.”

My lips part with shock. What happened to the aloof, mostly agreeable man I married a few hours ago? This version of Colby is smooth, confident and...

“Oh, God.” I groan, having just looked down at his crotch. Why did I do that? Now I know he’s rock hard.

“Show me,” he says softly.

I thought we’d change into sweats and inhale our burritos when we got here. Now he’s looking at me like *I’m* on the menu.

I don’t hate it. But I also don’t want to complicate our arrangement with sex. But my husband is undeniably attractive, and at this moment, I kind of don’t care about complications.

How many wedding nights will I have? Just the one, and real or not real, it's my only chance to show my husband what he just signed up for.

I take a deep breath and slowly release my hold on the front of the dress. It falls to the ground and Colby's eyes flash with desire as he takes me in.

Getting into this thing wasn't easy. Quentin had to pull on the back of it while I pulled on the front, and I called him every name in the book as he laced it tightly around my midsection. It's a white, one-piece corset covered in lace that narrows my waist and pushes up my boobs. I added the garter belts and straps that came with it because it made me feel sexy.

And I must look incredibly sexy, judging by the way Colby is practically drooling.

"Turn around," he says, his eyes back on mine after taking a long look at the front of my body. "And then look at me over your shoulder."

"I'm not accustomed to taking orders."

A smile plays on his lips. "We both know you're enjoying this as much as I am. Now let me get a good look at my wife's ass."

What's happening here? I was hoping that Colby and I would get along, but not like *this*. What we have going is a carefully arranged, tightly controlled situation. My head tells me to maintain that control, but some other part of me is in charge right now, so I turn around and look at him.

"Holy *shit*, Mila."

His gaze moves up and down, his expression a mix of wonder and lust. It gives me a hit of the drug I'm hooked beyond help on—power.

He takes a step closer to me, and I take a step forward, a step away from him. I know where this is going. If he gets his hands on me, I'll lose the tenuous hold I have on my self-control. It's been a long time since a man has touched me, and I'm feeling too close to Colby right now.

It's because we just got married. Because he helped me out of the biggest jam I've ever been in. Because feeling sexy is always arousing. It *can't* be that there's a spark between us. I'm a planner, and that's not part of my plan.

I've already had my eggs frozen so I can become a mother in two years with the help of an anonymous sperm donor. I'm going to have a family *on my own*. Hopefully twins. When I picture my future, I don't see a man in it.

"Hear me out," Colby says, taking another step forward.

"No."

My voice is unusually high and my nipples are hard inside the damned corset. I'm not the usual Mila right now. Mila in a business suit would tell him to stop right fucking now. But Mila in this lingerie? She's not so sure that's what she wants.

He puts up an index finger. "One time. Just tonight."

My mouth goes dry. I should say no. That two-letter word normally comes so easily to me.

It's just one night, though. A chance to see if I'm lucky enough to have rushed into a fake marriage just to save my ass with a man I end up having incredible chemistry with.

That would be the ultimate middle finger to Mills, and it would satisfy the ache Colby built inside me with nothing more than words and the way he's looking at me, like a starving man looking at a gourmet meal.

"Just tonight," I say softly. "And first you have to get me out of this thing."

He stalks forward, hands reaching out toward the upper part of my back. "Fuck me, more buttons?"

"Not as many. I'm laced into it. Quentin pulled it as tight as he could get it while allowing me to still breathe."

"The things women do to look smaller," he mutters. "You're just as beautiful without this thing, you know? And we're going to have a hell of a lot more fun without it."

Fun. When was the last time I had fun? It's not a word that normally appears anywhere near my name. But after the stress of the last few days, fun sounds really good.

"Hey," I say softly as Colby releases the tie at the top of the corset. "You won't tell your teammates about this, right?"

"No. I don't kiss and tell."

"Is that what we're about to do?"

He slides his hands around my waist, making a growling sound as he bends and puts his mouth on my neck, making me gasp. He kisses the nape of my neck, then places another kiss at the spot of my pulse, and then another on my shoulder, all while pulling my back against his front. I moan and close my eyes, his lips making my stomach twist and turn.

"There'll be kissing," he says against my skin. "And everything we"

He's cut off by a loud beeping sound, followed by a mechanical-sounding female voice stating, "Fire. Evacuate immediately."

I jump, his arms falling away from me. The automated beeping of the fire alarm and the verbal warning play on repeat. I turn around to face him, my eyes widening with panic.

"Holy fuck, it's the fire alarm."

"You mean the cockblocker?"

"Colby!" I shriek. "Look at me! I can't evacuate in a corset!"

"Shouldn't we call the front desk and make sure this isn't a drill?"

I can't believe he's thinking about missing out on sex when the building is most likely on fire.

"A drill at one in the freaking morning?"

"You go get dressed and I'll call the front desk."

I nod, calling out over my shoulder. “There’s a button inside the pantry to call directly down to the front desk.”

Running into my bedroom, I grab the first thing I see that will cover me up—a knee-length robe. After throwing it on, I slip my feet into a pair of flats and go back out to the kitchen.

Colby’s expression confirms it’s not a drill.

“We have to go *now*. There’s a fire in the elevator shaft, so we have to take the stairs.”

“What the fuck? We were just in the elevator a few minutes ago!”

“Listen to me, Mila. Grab your phone and one thing you can fit in your hand. We have to get out of here.”

My jaw drops as I mentally scan through my entire art collection, trying to decide which one piece I want to save. It’s impossible; this art collection means everything to me.

“Let’s go!” Colby yells.

I can hear my deda whispering in my ear, reminding me that our strength lies within us, and no one can ever take that away. He had to leave his own precious art collection behind when he fled our homeland; I can do the same. If only one item can come with me, it’ll be one of his Fabergé eggs.

“I need to break that,” I tell Colby, pointing at the climate-controlled glass case that displays my eggs. “It’s thick.”

“Grab a fucking picture and let’s go!”

I shake my head and Colby runs his hands through his hair, thinking.

“You got a baseball bat?” he asks.

“No. It’s designed to be impossible to get into.”

“Fire. Evacuate immediately. Fire. Evacuate immediately.”

The voice and the beeping haven’t stopped. Colby gives me a desperate look.

“This whole building could burn down.”

I close my eyes, willing myself to be strong enough to just go. My apartment is equipped with fire sprinklers, and it's possible nothing will be damaged.

"You go," Colby says. "I'll stay and break the glass. What do you want that's in there?"

I'm taken aback by his offer. Not only isn't he racing out the door without caring whether I'm behind him, he's offering to stay while I get to safety, all because of a sentimental art piece.

"Any of them," I say tearfully. "Any one of them. And I'm not leaving without you."

He's still wearing his tux pants, shoes and white dress shirt, the sleeves of the shirt rolled up since dinner. Racing over to an iron sculpture of a human male, he picks it up and says, "Turn around and stay back."

I do as he says, turning and crouching, able to hear my heart pounding in my ears as I hear him running. He lets out a mighty roar and I hear the sound of breaking glass.

"Go to the door!" he yells.

My priceless collection is scattered on the floor, shattered glass everywhere. Colby scoops an egg into each pocket and fills his arms with more, then races over to me.

"Let's go!"

Frantically, I open the door. Smoke billows into the small foyer from around the elevator doors. I lead the way to the stairwell, holding the door open for Colby and taking two eggs from his arms to stick into my robe pockets.

He was able to save nine eggs. It eases my grief over leaving the rest of my collection.

"Go as fast as you can," Colby says from behind me as we descend flight after flight of stairs.

After the first couple flights of stairs, we start encountering others fleeing the building. Colby has fallen behind me, and when I stop to look for him, I see him standing on a landing,

making sure all the women and children are going down in front of him.

A man racing down the stairs runs into a little girl and pushes her into me. She's maybe five years old and she looks up at me with big, terrified eyes and says, "Sorry."

"You didn't do anything wrong, just keep moving," I say.

It feels like it takes forever to reach an EXIT door. I'm sweating hard by the time I do, inhaling gulps of fresh air. I hold the door open, checking the faces of everyone who filters out.

My heart is hammering in my chest as I wait for Colby. Firefighters rush past me, going up the stairs. One of them forces me to move out to the road.

Finally, Colby walks through the door, a young boy in his arms. A woman rushes forward with a sob, thanking him as she takes the boy.

"I couldn't carry him," she wails. "Thank you."

"It's okay," Colby says. "He's okay."

He searches the faces in the crowd as I make my way toward him. When our eyes finally lock, his expression crumbles with relief and he puts his arms around me.

The whole building is on fire, flames visible through the front entrance. I'll mourn the probable loss of the art in my apartment later, but for right now, I'm just grateful we made it out in time.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Colby

“WHAT’S she wearing underneath that robe?”

“Something white. That’s definitely a garter belt.”

My teammates Sal and Beck are in the seats behind me on the team plane, and like everyone else on this plane, they’re obsessing over the photos being posted online of me and Mila.

We’re getting a one-two punch—not just headlines about a team owner marrying one of her players without anyone even knowing they were involved, but photos and stories about the fire.

Between the time it took us to wait for the fire to be put out and catch an Uber to my house, and my 6:00 a.m. wake-up call for my road trip, I ended up getting just under two hours of sleep and zero wedding night sex. I’m definitely not in the mood for my teammates’ bullshit.

“Stop fucking looking at that picture,” I say loudly enough for everyone to hear.

“Sorry, Mr. Pavlova,” someone says.

“He wants us to look at the one of him saving the kid,” another voice says.

For fuck’s sake. Who takes pictures when everyone around them is trying to escape a burning building? And worse, sells them to online tabloids? I didn’t notice anyone taking photos

last night, and if I had, I would have smashed their camera phones.

Hopefully, Mila is asleep at my place. She was on the phone the entire two hours I slept, talking to attorneys, her security company, and her insurance company. Once we got home, everything seemed to hit her at once and she started panicking about people stealing her art if it survived the fire and the fire sprinklers in her apartment.

During one of her calls, I overheard her saying there was at least \$40 million worth of art in her apartment, which blew my fucking mind. Compared to the way I grew up, I consider myself wealthy now that I have a seven-figure annual salary. But Mila is a *billionaire*.

Selfishly, I fell asleep to the realization that I'm married to a Russian oligarch's daughter. If I do something he doesn't like, he has the means to have me dropped into the ocean with my feet encased in concrete.

I was hoping that maybe he's not as bad as I've heard, but my Google searches so far on this flight have been... harrowing.

Mikhail Pavlov isn't just a bad dude. He's a criminal who's deeply connected to the Russian mafia. And now he's my father-in-law.

What the hell was I thinking? Heath is talented; he could have made it onto minor league hockey team without any help from me. But I married into the Russian mafia to make it happen immediately.

I'm too exhausted to Google anything else. I let my eyes slide closed, hoping to catch some sleep since I have a game tonight.

WHEN I WAKE up from a hard sleep, our plane is descending in Tampa. I stretch my neck and check my phone.

Mila: I had to call security to get me from your house to work. Reporters everywhere. Used your toothbrush. Give Tampa hell tonight.

The corners of my mouth quirk up as I read her text. Mila has two sides. Though I don't know her well, I was already aware of the succinct, all business and no emotions Mila who sent this message. But yesterday, I also saw the Mila who is soft, sweet, and vulnerable.

Damn, did I want her bad last night. It wasn't just how sexy she looked in her corset, but the way her eyes burned into mine, filled with desire. I thought she preferred to be in control, but she liked it when I told her what I wanted last night.

And I fucking loved seeing her do it. Now I'm stuck on a road trip for a week, and I'm ninety-nine percent sure my new wife isn't the sexting sort.

I text her back as the plane taxis down the runway.

Colby: How are you?

Mila: I'm fine.

I shake my head and put the phone away. After what I read about Mila's father and grandfather, I'm not surprised she's so stone-cold sometimes. That's how she grew up, with a family that valued power above all else.

SUVs are waiting for us on the tarmac, and on the ride to our hotel I check my other texts, finding more than a dozen from hockey reporters and bloggers I've given my cell number to. I also have seventeen voicemails.

I won't be talking to any of them. I have to put aside all the distractions and focus on tonight's game.

THE BUS RIDE to the airport after our game is quiet. We didn't just lose, we got smoked. 5-1. By Tampa, which we weren't expecting.

Everything is off today. I always take a pregame nap, but today I couldn't fall asleep. I stared at the ceiling thinking about all the ways the Russian mob will end me if I piss Mila off.

Pissing Mila off is extremely easy. I've seen her lose it on assistants when they get her drink order wrong, which is why she runs through assistants as fast she does. Quentin is the only one who's figured out how to get along with her.

An hour into imagining how it feels to be waterboarded, I couldn't help dropping off to sleep. I woke up more than an hour later than I was supposed to because I forgot to set my alarm. Got a thorough ass chewing from Coach Maddox, which was actually a relief. He's the only staff member who's not afraid to even look at me now that I'm married to the team owner.

And now we're off to Chicago, our grueling weeklong road trip just beginning. I haven't checked my phone since before the game because I know I'll find even more texts and voicemails from reporters.

Reluctantly, I turn my phone back on. As predicted, an obnoxious number of texts pop up. I scan through the senders, ignoring all of them but one.

Mila: My building is closed pending a structural inspection. Staying at your place tonight.

Mila: Why aren't you passing more pucks to Ford??

Mila: You're missing every shot! What's going on?

Mila: WOW. That was painful. They should have bought you guys dinner before fucking you that hard.

Mila: Is the bed in your guest room meant to deter guests? It's like sleeping on a concrete slab.

If I wasn't so tired from last night and so sore from being boarded a dozen times during the game, I'd laugh.

I must be the dumbest motherfucker in the history of all motherfuckers. I'm *married* to the Ice Queen. I'll be on the receiving end of her mercurial moods every day now. I won't

be surprised if I come home to find my underwear shredded and my dishes in pieces all over the kitchen floor. She's known for throwing things across the room when she's angry.

I'm a man of my word. She held up her end of the bargain; I'll hold up mine. But we aren't going to get along very well if she complains about every shot I miss on the ice.

I ignore her texts, put on my headphones, and find a podcast about inner peace to listen to. Hopefully I can find my Zen, even if it's only for a few minutes.

CHAPTER NINE

Mila

“DID WE LOSE THEM?” I ask from my spot in the back of the SUV I’m riding in.

I’m curled up in the very back of the vehicle, out of sight. Once the press found out I was flying to Chicago, they descended like crazies as soon as I landed.

“I think we’re okay,” my driver, Roman, says. “But stay back there just to be safe.”

Quentin is traveling with me and he came up with a plan to have five black SUVs leave the parking garage at the Palmer House, our hotel, at the same time. All have tinted windows. Three of the vehicles are empty besides drivers, Quentin is in the backseat of another one, and I’m in the last car. Our hope is that the reporters and photographers will see someone sitting in the one Quentin’s in and follow it.

That would leave me in peace for an afternoon of shopping. I’m wearing a blond, shoulder-length wig and dark sunglasses. I’ve never seen the press hound anyone the way Colby and I are being followed around these days. Between the leaked photos of our “secret” wedding and the photo of him carrying the little boy out of my burning apartment building, it seems like the whole world is interested in us.

I had to get a police escort from Colby’s house to the airport earlier, because photographers wouldn’t leave their

spots in the road at the end of his driveway. Gratifying as it would have been to run them over, I decided against it.

“Okay, we’re at the Gucci store,” Roman says. “As close as I can get you to it, anyway.”

“I’ll be around thirty minutes,” I say, crawling from my spot in the back to the second row of seats.

Roman holds my door open and I step out, checking to make sure the wig is still on straight.

Since I can’t go back into my apartment until it’s cleared by structural engineers, I can’t get to any of my clothes and shoes. I’m currently wearing one of Colby’s hoodies and a pair of leggings Quentin picked up for me. One of the women who works for the Coyotes PR department is the same shoe size as me, so I bought a pair of her tennis shoes.

I’m about to do some serious shopping on Chicago’s Magnificent Mile. It’s one of my favorite places in the United States to shop. Quentin is buying me casual clothes and shoes while I take care of workwear and formalwear.

The past forty-eight hours have been an absolute whirlwind, and shopping helps me reset mentally. I fill the SUV with bags of designer clothes and shoes, and garment bags with dresses and coats. As always, when I’m in Chicago, I stop for a Chicago-style hot dog from a downtown street cart, the cart owner hugging me when I tip him \$100.

My phone rings with a call from Quentin and I pick up as I wait for Roman to come back to the car after buying a bottled water.

“Hey, how’s it going?” he asks.

“Good, I think. I haven’t seen any cameras. How about you?”

“I had five on my tail earlier. When I got out of the car and they saw it wasn’t you, I told them you changed your itinerary and went to New York.”

“Excellent.”

“How’s the shopping?”

“Great. I bought black leather pants.”

“Go on then, Mistress Mila. I’m sure your husband will like those.”

There’s a moment of silence. I still can’t believe I have a husband. I also can’t believe he left me on read last night. The nerve.

“What’s the word at the office?” I ask.

“Oh, you know...”

I know that tone. He uses it when there’s something he needs to tell me but he knows it’s going to upset me.

“Quentin, what is it?”

He blows out a breath. “There have been some inquiries about your deportation from reporters.”

“Inquiries? From who?”

“PR is on it. They’re working with Peter to draft a statement and then they’ll send it to me.”

Roman gets back in the car and I pause for a second, but then remember that everyone who drives for me is required to sign a nondisclosure agreement.

“Mills did this,” I tell Quentin. “He leaked it so the reporters will be all over us to see if our marriage is legit.”

“Let them,” Quentin says nonchalantly. “You and Colby are crazy about each other.”

If I were in my office, this is where I’d throw a pen against the wall. My mind is working through not just my next move, but also Mills’ likely response.

“I want to talk to Clark Samson at tonight’s game,” I say.

“The *Denver Chronicle* sports guy?”

“Yes. He’s the only one I want to talk to. Can you set up fifteen minutes for us before the game?”

“Of course.”

“Go buy yourself something nice with one of my credit cards, Quentin.”

There’s a pause. “Seriously?”

“Yes. Get some clothes and shoes, whatever you want. Make sure you hit up the Gucci store. We’ll have a fashion show in my hotel room later.”

“Oh my God, I’m going to wet myself.”

I smile and notice Roman looking at me expectantly in the rearview.

“Gotta go, Quentin.”

“Okay, bye boss.”

I end the call and meet Roman’s gaze.

“To the Apple store, please.”

“IS THIS REALLY HAPPENING?” a woman asks me a couple of hours later, her eyes filled with tears.

“Yes, it is.”

She looks at the sky and then back at me. “Bless you.”

I’m having the best afternoon I’ve had in a long time at a downtown Chicago women’s shelter. Since I’m traveling undercover, I decided to make the most of it. I went to the Apple store and bought thirty MacBook Air laptops and twenty-five iPads. A coordinator at the shelter is helping me hand them out to women and children who need them for college and high school classes.

One woman breaks down in tears when I pass her a boxed laptop and offer her a hug.

“I can’t believe this,” she says, shaking her head.

“Keep working hard,” I tell her.

Donna, the shelter’s coordinator, nods toward a darkened room. “We used to have a study room, but all of our computers

broke down and we don't have the budget to replace them.”

“So what do women do when they need computer access?”

“There's a library about three miles from here. Only about a mile if you take the bus. But it's tough for moms who are trying to work, save money, and take care of their babies while also going to school.”

It's getting late in the afternoon; I have to get to the arena for everything I need to do before tonight's game.

“I'll let you guys give out the rest of the laptops and iPads,” I say. “I have to go.”

“Are you sure we can't credit you for this generous donation?”

I shake my head. “I want to remain anonymous. My business name is listed on the receipt I gave you, so you could figure it out if you wanted to, but”

“Say no more. You want to stay anonymous and you will. You've made a difference in some lives today. Thank you so much for your generosity.”

I smile and nod, putting my sunglasses back on before I step out of the shelter and back into the waiting SUV.

Once in the vehicle, I drop a pin in a text to Quentin.

Mila: Send a \$50,000 donation to this shelter for a new study room. Take it from the Nikolai account.

Quentin: Will have Sara in accounting send it within 24 hours.

I take a final look at the door to the shelter as Roman drives away, smiling to myself. I wish Deda could be here for this. The Nikolai fund is his money. Deda was sixty-eight years old when a random act of kindness changed him. He wanted most of his fortune to go toward helping people who need it, but he didn't want anyone to know where the money came from.

I get to be the one who bestows that help, and it's changing me for the better.

THE COYOTES FRIENDS and family box gets quiet when Quentin and I walk in a few minutes before puck drop. I smile at the open stares, trying to look casual.

I've always worn a business suit anytime I'm in a hockey arena. My collection of black and charcoal business suits, now inaccessible in my apartment back home, is impressive. I picked up several new ones while shopping today, but tonight I decided to dress like a hockey wife.

I'm wearing black leggings, tennis shoes, and a jersey with Colby's name and number on it, my hair back in a ponytail. People are craning their necks trying to see the ring on my left finger.

"I hear they have great nachos here," Quentin says.

"Servers usually work the VIP boxes; order anything you want."

My stomach is swirling nervously. I haven't had anything but coffee, hot tea, and the hot dog I ate for lunch today. I should be hungry, but I'm too worried about the questions swirling around my marriage.

The first headline hit this afternoon, crediting "a source who asked not to be named" with saying my marriage to Colby isn't real, and that I forced him to marry me so I could avoid deportation.

It's critical that we sell the legitimacy of our union, and tonight is the perfect opportunity.

When the puck drops, my mind is focused entirely on the game. Quentin wasn't a hockey fan before he started working for me, and I still have to explain things to him sometimes.

Our team comes out swinging after last night's big loss. Beau slides a puck into the net just twenty seconds into the game and the box erupts in cheers.

Colby looks a lot smoother tonight. I was hard on him over last night's game, but I get excited during games. My passion is both my best and my worst quality.

When he scores a goal, I swell with pride. His picture comes up on the big screen over the ice and I'm reminded just how handsome my new husband is.

One time. Just tonight.

I wanted it just as much as him. Feeling his hands unlacing my corset set me on fire. Our chance went up in smoke—literally—and now I can't stop thinking about what it would have been like.

His body is ridiculous. Top hockey players have to be in incredible shape to skate like they do off and on for an entire game. It was his words, though, his commanding tone and possessive gaze, that left me practically panting for him.

I slip away after the first period for a quick interview with Clark, accomplishing what I want. We win the game 4–1, the mood light after the game.

“Mila,” Shelby Fox says, approaching me as I'm about to leave the box. “Hey, I just wanted to say congratulations. I didn't get a chance to see you at the wedding. You looked stunning.”

She's Beau Fox's wife, and I've heard nothing but good things about her.

“Thank you,” I say. “I appreciate you guys making it on short notice.”

“It was such a romantic setting.”

“It was everything we wanted.”

She furrows her brow. “Is it okay if I walk with you to the place where we meet up with the guys? I've only been to this arena a couple of times and I don't remember how to get there.”

“Of course.”

I introduce her to Quentin and the three of us make small talk as we wait in the hallway outside the locker room. I could walk inside the locker room, but I want to be a player wife tonight instead of a team owner.

Security is keeping the reporters in a separate room, so when Colby walks out of the locker room and grins at me, no photographers are there to capture it.

I see it, though, and I'm relieved that he doesn't seem pissed about my texts last night.

"Hey, I like the sweater," he says before kissing me.

I cup one of his clean-shaven cheeks and look into his eyes. "Great game tonight."

He cocks a brow at me. I know he's thinking about my texts during last night's game. "Thanks."

Standing on my tiptoes, I lean up to murmur into his ear. He still has to bend forward a bit to accommodate my height.

"Will you talk to Clark Samson with me for five minutes?"

"On the record?" he asks softly in my ear.

"Yes." I put a palm on his chest, making this look like an intimate exchange between lovers.

"Sure. You staying in my hotel room tonight?"

"If I'm invited."

He puts an arm around my waist, his hand on the small of my back. "I think you should. Have you heard the rumors online about us today?"

"Yes."

"Let's talk to Clark and go get room service at the hotel."

I nod and tell him where we're meeting Clark. He takes my hand and leads the way and I give him my best attempt at dotting looks as we walk.

I'll do whatever it takes to convince everyone this marriage is real. Mike Mills won't win this round.

CHAPTER TEN

Colby

“IT’S...COZY,” Mila says when we walk into my hotel room.

I half laugh as she scans my king room, wondering if she’s ever stayed in anything less than a full suite.

“It gets the job done,” I say as I take my tie off. “I sleep and shower in hotel rooms, that’s about it.”

She sits down on the bed, refreshing the news app on her phone. “Clark’s story will hit tonight, don’t you think?”

I hang my suit jacket over the back of a chair and start unbuttoning my shirt. “Probably.”

Mila had Clark Samson eating out of her hand earlier. She was smart to spin the news that our marriage is fake the way she did, which was to say it’s only because she’s a woman. No one points out when men get married after whirlwind courtships, but women are always presumed to be manipulating a situation or lying. Thanks, patriarchy.

I kept my arm around her and told Clark I’m crazy in love with my little dove, which I said is my pet name for her. She pursed her lips as I told him, the irony of calling her a peacemaker not lost on either of us.

“I don’t know,” I say, wondering if she’s ever going to relax and get out of work mode. “You want to order some food?”

“I ate during the game.”

I can't help letting my gaze follow the line of her long legs before it settles on the jersey she's wearing. Seeing her in a jersey with my name on it ignited my possessive side and now, despite promising myself I wouldn't complicate things by sleeping with her, I'm hard just looking at her.

“Hey, I have a possible strategy for us to use,” I say, trying to speak her language.

She looks up from her phone. “What is it?”

I sit down next to her at the foot of the bed. “We want people to think we can't keep our hands off each other, right? Banging every chance we get.”

“Right.” There's a skeptical note in her voice.

“So what if we actually do? Then we won't be pretending. It can't look any more natural than it will if we're actually fucking.”

She nods slowly. “So it's not that you want to fuck me, per se, just that you're willing to for the cause? To help our relationship look legit?”

“Exactly.”

“Bullshit.” She laughs and returns to her phone. “You're just horny, and I'm not going to be your cheap, expendable hole.”

“Christ, could you be any more unromantic?”

She laughs, genuinely amused. “What, like you were trying to woo me or something? You just want to get off and go to sleep.”

“You'd get off, too. And there are worse things, you know.”

She sighs, exasperated. “My mind is a thousand miles away from sex right now. I'm trying to kill these rumors Mills is stirring up.”

“At midnight?”

“No rest for the wicked.”

“Stalking the *Chronicle’s* website on your phone won’t change anything.”

She glares at me. “But...you’re not in the mood right now, are you?”

“I could be.”

“I think it’s best if we don’t complicate things with sex.”

I don’t respond, instead flipping open my suitcase and looking for a shirt and jeans to change into. When I walk out of the bathroom a few minutes later, I grab my wallet and phone.

“I’m going out.”

She balks. “Out? You can’t go out. We’re supposed to be in here fucking each other’s brains out.”

I shrug. “We’re not, though. So I’m going out.”

“Out where?”

“Wherever my teammates are. I’ll text someone and ask.”

She sets her phone down, looking exasperated. “Please just stay here. We need to be in here alone tonight.”

I shove my wallet and phone into my pocket, feeling like a puppet.

“Look, I’ve been more than cool about this whole thing. You gave my brother a shot a little earlier than he would have gotten it on his own, but I’ve done a hell of a lot more for you. Celibacy is taking things too far, though. I’m not doing that.”

She runs to the door and presses her back to it. “No. You can’t fuck anyone else. It’ll ruin everything.”

With a single note of sarcastic laughter, I put my hands on either side of her and lean close.

“Move, Mila.”

She raises her chin, her gaze fearless. “No.”

“If you want me to keep playing along, get out of my fucking way.”

Tears pool in her eyes. “I know I’m hard to get along with. I’m too intense and I work too much. No one wants to be around me because I’m...a lot.” She lowers her voice to a whisper, fear swimming in her eyes. “But if I get sent back to Russia, I’ll be captured within an hour. My father has enemies who would love to get their hands on me.” Tears fall onto her cheeks. “Death would be merciful compared to what they would do to me. And I no longer have contact with my father, so he will not help me.”

My anger softens. From everything I’ve read about her father, she’s telling the truth. And I can’t be part of anyone being held captive and tortured.

I take a step back, folding my arms over my chest. “I’m worried about what your father and his enemies might do to me, too.”

“Don’t be. As long as we’re in the United States, nothing will happen. My father doesn’t care about what I do unless it affects him, and this doesn’t.”

“I thought your father gave you the money to buy the Coyotes.”

She nods. “He gave me a substantial amount of money when I turned twenty-one. I used some of it to buy real estate and some of it to buy the team.”

“Why did he give you that much money if he doesn’t care about you?”

She looks at the floor, silent for a full minute before she finally answers.

“My grandfather was poor as a kid. One of his siblings died of starvation. He had nothing and he made himself into a very powerful, wealthy man.” She lifts her head and meets my gaze. “But not a good man. He was a horrible person who did horrible things. And he raised his sons to be the same way. Then he was diagnosed with Alzheimer’s.”

Her voice catches with emotion and I reach for her hand, leading her over to the bed to sit down. She sits next to me, takes a deep breath, and continues.

“He got lost on the way home from a doctor’s appointment one day, and a very poor woman found him in a dangerous area. It’s...” Tears stream down her face and she wipes them away. “I don’t know if it’s irony or what, but before his Alzheimer’s, my grandfather could have just said his name in a place like that and people would have run in fear. He couldn’t remember his name, though. It was his first really bad episode. And this woman, Irina, she fed him and let him stay in her home. She had no idea who she was helping. And it... changed him. He called me crying about all the awful things he’d done and how much he regretted them. When he tried to tell my father how wrong he was, my father...” She sighs heavily. “He saw him as a sick, weak old man.”

I stroke my thumb over her skin, knowing how hard it is for her to show any sign of vulnerability.

“My father said I had to choose between them. He put the word out that my grandfather had lost his mind and become a liability. I chose my grandfather. That’s why I came to the U.S. in the first place, and it’s why I can’t go back home.”

“I’m sorry.”

She shakes her head. “Don’t feel sorry for me. I’ve led a privileged life. I have everything I’ve ever wanted and more. I promise you that as soon as this is all over, I’ll reward you for helping me.”

That’s how everything is with Mila. Transactional. Her coldness has made her into a shrewd businesswoman, but it’s also kept her from believing anyone cares about her for more than her money.

“It was your grandfather’s Fabergé eggs we saved from the fire?” I ask.

“You saved them.” Fresh tears spring to her eyes. “Yes, they were his.”

“It’s a shame we don’t get to choose our own families, isn’t it?”

She laughs softly. “Would you choose differently?”

I tense up, wishing I hadn’t said anything. “For some people I would.”

“Me too. But then...who would I be without going through everything I did? I know I’m a strong person because of where I come from. The things I’ve seen and learned.”

I cup her cheek in my hand, turning her face toward me. “I’m not helping you because I expect money.”

“I know. But money is how I show my appreciation.”

“Show me your appreciation by being real.”

She pinches her brows together. “Real?”

I nod. “You don’t have to be strong all the time, you know.”

“I don’t know any other way to be.”

“You were real just now. And it didn’t even hurt.”

She smiles. “Sorry for saying I won’t be your expendable hole.”

I arch a brow, amused. “I think it was *cheap* expendable hole.”

“Okay, *that*.” Her expression is sheepish. “Sorry I said that.”

“Sorry for wanting to give you mind-blowing orgasms.”

She laughs and leans against me. “I hardly ever laugh. Thanks for making me laugh.”

“Want to order pizza and watch a movie?”

“That sounds great.”

I stand and pick up the paper with a listing of what’s available on pay per view.

“*Horny Hairy Girls* or the new Marvel movie?” I ask.

“You choose. I’ll order the pizza. What do you like on yours?”

“Everything.”

She places the order, asking the pizza place to leave it outside our hotel room door, and we change clothes. She’s wearing shorts and a Coyotes T-shirt and I’m wearing my boxers and a white undershirt. We climb into bed and she snuggles into my side, making my cock twitch to attention.

“You picked the Marvel movie,” she says, amused. “I called that one wrong.”

“I don’t care if I fall asleep during this one, but I won’t be missing a minute of *Horny Hairy Girls* when I watch it.”

She laughs again and I’m glad I stayed.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Mila

OUR BUILDING SITE is finally ready.

I look out at the wide-open lot, filled with excitement for the future. Several buildings had to be acquired and demolished to make way for the new arena, and now the construction crew can start on the foundation.

“Mrs. Pavlova-Harrison, can I get you to pose for some photos?” one of the photographers from our PR department asks me.

I cut him down with a glare. “It’s just Pavlova. And let’s get the players over here for that. This is about them, not me.”

The building contractors are explaining what’s going on at the job site, and I’m trying to pay attention but my focus keeps wandering.

Colby is still on his road trip; I had to fly back early for work. Strangely, I wanted to stay. I stayed with him for two nights, flying to St. Louis for one more game the day after the Chicago one. After the St. Louis game, we went out with several players from the team.

I tried to lay low, knowing no one wants their team owner hanging around in their off time. But the guys were all very nice, including me in conversations and even doing a group shot of Stoli to celebrate Colby and I getting married.

That's the hardest part for me—being included in social things when I know I don't really fit in. But they all made me feel like part of the group, which meant a lot to me. Bystanders who recognized members of the team stopped to take photos of us with their camera phones, and Colby made sure to sneak in several kisses, which warmed me in more ways than one.

I smile as I think of the way he cracks spontaneous jokes. It's always funnier when he catches me off guard. On a whim, I take out my phone and text him.

Mila: Send nudes.

Colby: Mila???

I cringe, not nearly as good at joking around, especially via text, as he is.

Mila: That landed wrong. It was supposed to be funny.

Colby: I'll take some pics for you tonight if you want. Or you can have the real deal anytime...

My heart stutters as I imagine him writing the text. Not only do I find myself daydreaming about the way he looked at me and spoke to me on our wedding night, but I've been thinking about the way his shaggy blond hair would feel on my skin as he kissed his way down my body.

I work up the courage to be flirtatious, which doesn't come remotely natural to me.

Mila: Can I have both?

Colby: Put that corset back on and you can have anything you want.

I flush, feeling off-balance. All my adult life, I've refused to give men power over me. After seeing my father abuse his place of authority and use his power for selfish reasons, I knew I wanted to be in complete control of my life.

Sure, I've had sex. But always on my terms. When I want it. How I want it.

Somehow, Colby makes me feel like I'm powerful while submitting to his control at the same time. When he looks at me hungrily or uses his commanding tone, I'm totally at his mercy. I wonder if he realizes that.

Maybe I can be more than a bossy, demanding ice queen. I smile to myself, texting him again.

Mila: I can do that.

Colby: I want pics of you in my bed tonight. I miss my wife.

My chest fills with warmth. Somehow, he sees through me. He sees parts of me I can't even see. Deep down in my power-hungry-badass-independent-woman heart, I like being desired by him. I don't know that I deserve it, but holy shit, do I like it.

Mila: For your eyes only, okay?

Colby: Always.

The contractors are standing off to the side, waiting for me. I tell Colby I have to go and tuck my phone away, knowing I'm going to re-read his texts so many times this afternoon.

I meant it when I said sex would complicate things between us. But I thought about it a lot on my flight home. Colby can't sleep with other women for obvious reasons. And we both want each other.

So complications be damned.

AT THE END of the workday several hours later, I switch off the lights to my office and then Quentin's. He needed a half day off today so I've been all alone down here in the basement.

All alone. Re-reading Colby's texts and googling how to take sexy selfies. I'd be mortified if anyone knew, but I'm a total newbie. I still don't know if I'll be able to go through with it, but I know I want to please him.

He's done so much for me and asked for so little. And I hate the thought of him looking at sexy photos of other women. With his looks, he probably has so many nude photos sent to him that he has to store them in the cloud. But he asked for photos of *me*. His wife.

What if, somehow, I could make him happy? It's the first time I've considered it. We're very different people. I can be intense and emotional or cold and detached, both ends of a wide spectrum. Colby generally stays in the middle, even-keeled with occasional ups and downs.

He saved my precious Fabergé eggs in the fire, did the interview with Clark Samson even though I wasn't nice to him the night before, and stayed in our room with me even after I rebuffed his advances. Colby is giving me what I need.

It's time for me to think about what *he* needs.

I order some Chinese food, picking it up in Quentin's peach-air-freshener-scented Toyota Corolla. I asked him to switch cars with me for the rest of the day when he left at noon, and he was more than okay with driving away in my white Mercedes SUV. I still have reporters after me, and I can't have anyone following me on this errand.

The little bungalow house on the east side of the city blends right in. The landscaping is okay, nothing special. The roof is somewhere between old and new.

After parking a few houses down, I raise the hood of a plain gray hoodie over my head and take the food inside.

So far, Colby seems trustworthy. But he can still never know why I come to this house at least once a week.

No one can.

I FEEL LIKE A TEENAGER AGAIN. My hormones are raging. After a quick lingerie shopping trip, I spent more than an hour doing my hair and makeup, trying to make both look natural and effortless.

Like Stuart Smalley, I have to look myself in the mirror and reassure myself that I can do this. My inner cynic doesn't trust anyone. If I send Colby racy photos, he could show them to his teammates. I could be making myself into a joke.

But I'm not doing this for myself. It's for him. Putting someone else's wants before mine is a foreign feeling, and it's scary as hell. But fear has never stopped me from doing anything.

It's just after midnight. I had the game on earlier and we won 3-2. Colby texted me that he's on his way to his room and will let me know when he gets there. I spent the past hour taking and deleting photos of myself, cringing and laughing at half of them.

No duck lips or fake, big innocent eyes allowed in my selfies. And no filters. This is me. He can either get off on it or not.

Though I'm waiting for a text, my phone rings with a FaceTime call from Colby. I jolt upright in bed, not sure I'm ready for him to see me.

But what can I do but answer? He knows I'm waiting for him.

"Hey," I say brightly, my heart hammering.

"Hey, beautiful. How are you?"

I think he's kicking off his shoes. I get a thrill that he called me as soon as he walked into his room.

"Pretty good. Great game tonight."

"Hey, what are those straps I'm seeing?" He says, looking more closely at the camera and my exposed shoulders peeking out from under the bed covers.

I wrinkle my nose and shrug. "Just a ratty old T-shirt. Nothing to see here."

He grins. "Bullshit. Show me."

I take a deep breath, breaking out in goose bumps as I move the covers aside and show him the red corset-style

lingerie I'm wearing.

“Holy shit...red is your color, babe. That's goddamn sexy.”

I move the camera back onto my face. “I hoped you would like it.”

“I love it...hang on.”

He sets his phone down and I get a view of the hotel room ceiling as he undresses.

“Did you buy that just for me?” he asks from off camera.

“I did.”

He picks up the phone and points the camera at his face again, now shirtless. I hold my breath for a few seconds as I take him in, wishing I hadn't decided to leave the road trip.

“I've been thinking about you,” he says as he lies down on his bed.

“Same.”

“Tell me.”

I smile sheepishly. “I may have some regrets about things I said the other night.”

“What would you do differently if we were together tonight?”

“Well...I wouldn't order pizza.”

He grins. “Good start.”

“And I'd be less of a shrew.”

“Hey now.” He lowers his brows. “Don't call my wife a shrew.”

“What would you do differently?”

“I'd kiss you the second we walked into the hotel room.”

My stomach flip flops at the thought. “You're an amazing kisser.”

“Show me your outfit again.”

I move the camera down, a little less self-conscious this time. He groans softly.

“It’s a crime I can’t touch your tits right now. Do it for me.”

I obey, letting him see as I slide a hand over my satin-covered breast.

“Jesus, Mila. Show me your face.”

When I return the camera to my face, there’s a predatory gleam in his eye. I can tell by his uneven breathing and his facial expressions that he’s stroking himself.

“Touch your pussy. Imagine it’s me sliding my fingers inside your sexy little lingerie.”

All rational thought eludes me as I let him command me, sliding my fingers inside myself.

“Fuck,” he says, his voice strained. “You’ve had me worked up since the moment I saw you on our wedding night.”

I have? Hearing his words brings me right to the edge of climax. I can’t believe I’m going to come so quickly.

When I do, it’s quiet—nothing but ragged inhaleds and exhaleds as I arch my back and reach my peak. Colby groans and his face relaxes.

“You’re so sexy when you come,” he says. “But next time I want to hear you.”

My smile is sleepy. I haven’t had any sort of action in a long time, and now I’m deeply relaxed.

“Next time I want to feel you,” I say softly.

“You will. I’ll be home tomorrow.”

Home. We live together. In his house. I don’t know if I’ll ever be used to that.

“Safe travels,” I say.

“Thanks. See you soon.”

We end the call and when I go to set my phone on the nightstand, I get a text from him.

Colby: Send me a pic. Don't think I forgot.

Damn. I thought I escaped having to send a racy photo. I scroll through the ones I took earlier, choosing a close up one of my breasts half-covered by red satin, my nipples visible.

I wish I had a shot of Stoli for some liquid courage before I press *Send*, but I only have a glass of water on the nightstand. I send the text, my pulse pounding nervously.

Colby: That's fn hot and I'll look at it daily but send me one of your face. While you're lying in my bed.

There goes my heart, beating erratically again. He wants a photo of my face.

I take two, sending him the second one. He sends one back and he's almost smiling in it, his arm behind his head on a white pillowcase. I immediately save it.

Colby: Thanks.

Mila: Good night.

Colby: See you in fourteen hours.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Colby

“WHAT’S UP, MAN?” I greet my teammate Ben Hogan as I sit down next to him on the plane.

“Hey. I’ll move that.”

He scoots a small bag over to his side of the seat between us. No one’s sat next to him on a flight for the entire road trip, which is horseshit. I deliberately took this seat to send my teammates a silent message that they’re a bunch of petty assholes.

Ben is one of the quietest guys on the team. He’s also a 6’4”, 225-pound brick wall, so no one messes with him. Last week, he was moved up from the third offensive line to the second, taking Dom’s spot on the second line.

It was a good decision by our coaching staff. Dom has an attitude of entitlement and he got lazy. I love the guy and would do anything for him, but winning games is why we’re all here. Ben has been giving his all every day since he joined the Coyotes after the Shapiro Center exploded, working his ass off at every practice and in every game. He deserves this shot.

Dom’s been running his mouth about Ben only being twenty-three, saying we should all worry we’ll be replaced by players who don’t cost the team as much.

Which is also horseshit. Our coaches play whoever gets the job done best.

“You got plans for the day off?” I ask Ben.

He shrugs, his brows lowered in a gaze that almost looks tense. “I’m going to an engagement party back home.”

“Nice. Who’s getting hitched?”

“My brother.”

“Older or younger?”

“Older by two minutes.”

My brows shoot up in surprise. “You’ve got a twin brother?”

“Yep.”

He’s even more quiet and detached than usual, purposely isolating himself. He probably feels like shit that everyone’s giving him the cold shoulder.

“Hey, about this thing with Dom...he’ll get over it and so will everyone else,” I say.

He furrows his brow, confused. “Oh, I don’t give a shit about that.”

“What’s up then? You stay out too late last night?”

“Nope. Just not looking forward to the engagement party.”

Maybe he has to see an ex he’d prefer not to see. It’s hard to imagine Hogan with a girlfriend. He’s a closed book.

“Anything you want to talk about?” I ask.

“Nope.”

He puts his headphones on and returns to ignoring me. I pull up the picture of Mila from last night, her post-orgasm glow making me so aroused I have to shift in my seat to hide it. After a quick look, I close out the photo, not wanting anyone else to see it. I can still see her expression clearly in my mind anyway.

She’s so beautiful when she gives me glimpses of her soft side. The side that no one else gets to see.

I put on my headphones and close my eyes, imagining her waking up in my bed as I drift off to sleep.

MY BATHROOM HAS BEEN TAKEN over by Mila. Makeup and hair products are all over counter and I detect the perfume she wears. Her red lingerie from last night is hanging over a towel hook. I pick it up and bury my face in it, inhaling her scent.

I don't know if I can wait for her to get home this evening. I want to drive to the arena and drag her out of her office like a caveman, my hand wrapped around her hair.

Probably not the best idea. Instead, I take a shower, unpack, and start a load of laundry. It's rare that I have several hours without anything to do, so I take advantage of the time and work on the cedar chest I'm building in my garage.

It's a slow process because I'm teaching myself how to do it with DIY videos, books, and trial and error. It doesn't really matter when I finish the piece. It's more of a way for me to relax.

Though it's impossible to keep my mind from Mila, I make progress sanding the chest and putting another coat of stain on it. I quit working around 5:00 p.m., ordering Italian food for dinner and changing into some clean clothes.

It's 5:45 p.m. when I hear one of the garage doors open. Mila can't get to her vehicles because of the fire so she's driving my Range Rover, which has an garage opener in it.

She walks into the house from the garage, slipping out of her heels and releasing her hair from a bun. Long, dark waves fall down her back. I picture that hair fanning across my pillow and my cock twitches behind my pants.

"Hey," she says, her eyes softening when she sees me.

"Hey."

She walks over to me and puts her arms around my waist, leaning against my chest and looking up at me. "You look

good. And you smell good, too. Like a tree.”

I lower my mouth to hers, kissing her softly. She tightens her hold on me and I deepen the kiss as she moans.

“I want you,” she murmurs. “And I have a birth control implant. I’m clean and I checked your medical records this afternoon, so we”

I laugh, still completely turned on by Mila being Mila, and smooth a hand over her silky hair. “You checked? You could’ve asked me.”

“I know, but I didn’t want to...” She lowers her voice to a whisper. “Text that.”

“It’s fine. We get tested every few months and I’m clean.”

She smiles, her amber eyes warm. “So then, Mr. Harrison...”

“So then, Mrs. Harrison.”

She steps back and takes a handful of my T-shirt, leading me into the bedroom. Once we’re inside, she starts to unbutton her black suit jacket.

“No,” I tell her. “I want you to walk over to the bench at the foot of the bed, bend over, and put your hands on it.

She licks her lips and immediately complies, putting both palms on the bench. My erection is like a steel rod as I pull her pencil skirt up around her hips, making her inhale sharply.

“Fuck yes.” I smooth a hand over her white satin panties, just a tiny V that barely covers her.

Her ass is round and perfect. I pull my T-shirt off over my head and bend to place a kiss on one cheek. She gasps as I tug on the strip of fabric, creating friction against her pussy. When she looks at me over her shoulder and our eyes lock, her lusty expression makes me flip her around.

I take off her jacket, then reach around to unzip the skirt, and tug it to the ground. The silky dark pink top she had on beneath the jacket is next, leaving her in just her white bra and panties.

“Don’t play with me for the next hour,” she says, her eyes never leaving mine. “Fuck me. I want it hard and I want it now.”

Fuck. I’d love to bury myself in her this second and give her exactly what she asked for. But I know what I want and I think she’ll want it too once she experiences it.

I cup her chin and tilt her face up toward mine. “Your control ends when we walk into the bedroom. Take off my shorts and suck my cock.”

Her eyes widen slightly and for a second, I think she may protest. But instead, she dives forward, pulling down my shorts and boxers, and dropping to her knees.

It’s been nearly two months since I had sex, so when she swirls her tongue around the head of my shaft, I groan, need coursing through me.

She licks and sucks my crown, while sliding her hand up and down, knowing exactly how to make me feel the most pleasure. I wind my fingers into her hair, holding onto it as I fuck her mouth.

It’s so good that I have to slow down and soon after, stop. It’s not this I’ve been fantasizing about since the moment I woke up this morning but feeling her pussy clench around me.

I help her to her feet, unfasten her bra, and ease her onto the bed. Her breasts are firm and round, her nipples already pebbled when I run the tip of my tongue over them. I can’t get enough of her tits. No matter how much my hands and mouth get, I want more.

She moans and runs a hand between her legs, but I stop her, pinning it to the mattress.

“Only I get to touch you,” I say as I kiss her neck.

“Do it, then,” she says softly, her voice filled with frustration.

I can’t deny her any longer. Not this time. I slide her panties off and when I kiss her inner thigh, she gasps and puts a hand in my hair.

“Don’t,” she whispers. “I’m so close. You’ll make me come.”

“That’s actually my plan,” I say lightly.

“Inside me,” she says. “Please.”

My whole body is wound tight with arousal as I move on top of her and slowly sink inside. She’s everything I dreamed she would be and more. Tight, wet, and so fucking responsive.

We groan in unison as I fill her completely, slowly easing out and then slamming back into her. She wraps her legs around my waist, moving her hips in time with mine.

Her eyes are a hundred shades of brown and gold. I press my forehead to hers as she cries out, getting close.

“Oh...oh my God...Colby.”

She’s practically panting now, her nails sinking into my back as she grinds against me. She cries out suddenly, and the feel of her orgasm milking my cock spurs on my own climax as I empty myself inside her.

Breathing hard, I move to lie beside her, staring up at the ceiling as I come down from the high. I had a feeling we’d have great sex, but great isn’t the right word for it.

“That was incredible,” she says. “I want more.”

“Give me five minutes.”

“Yeah?” She turns her head to look at me, her expression hopeful.

“Yeah.”

She laces her fingers through mine and speaks softly. “I never said thank you.”

“For what?”

“You know.”

“You’re welcome.”

She snuggles into my side. “Is that pasta I smelled when I walked in?”

“Yep.”

We’ll eat later. Much later. I’m going to spend at least the next couple of hours in bed discovering what she likes, other than being told what to do.

I already know she’s a big fan of that.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Mila

I'M SO WARM. I'm half-asleep, half-awake, trying to go all the way back to sleep, when I realize *why* I'm so warm. Colby is wrapped around me, my back to his chest. He has an arm curled around me and one leg entwined with mine, too.

It's nice, but I won't be able to go back to sleep. This is the first time I've woken up next to a man I had sex with the night before. I'm not the warm and fuzzy affectionate type, and I was raised to never let my guard down.

I move one of my feet slightly and Colby shifts, kissing my hair.

"You're awake," he says.

"Yeah, what time is it?"

He lifts his head to look at a clock on the nightstand. "7:12."

Groaning, I roll over and he moves to his back. I always arrive at the office by seven thirty in the morning. We were up really late last night, though.

My hips and butt are sore, but the rest of my body is still in an ultra-relaxed, post-orgasmic state. I get it now—why hockey players are hyped as the best lovers. Colby doesn't wear out. I was the one who finally passed out around 4:00 a.m.

“I need to get to work,” I say.

As I move to get up, his arm reaches out, holding me onto the bed. “Not yet.”

I feel a clenching sensation between my legs. Normally, I don’t like being told what to do, but when he’s commanding in the bedroom, I’m more than eager to do what he wants.

“I have a meeting at nine and I’m not prepared for it.”

He’s up on an elbow, his tongue swirling around my nipple. God, it feels amazing. I close my eyes and let the sensation wash through me. I never do this—just let myself be and feel. I’m always rushing between meetings, overthinking everything, and falling into bed exhausted. In this moment, there are no meetings or deadlines. Just warm skin on mine. Deft fingertips tweaking one of my nipples while he sucks and licks the other one.

His eyes are hooded with lust as he lifts his face and says, “Turn over onto your stomach.”

It’s so damn sexy the way he knows I’ll do it. I’d do pretty much anything he asked right now, my body wound tight with desire for his touch.

I flip over and he moves my hair aside, stroking his fingertips up and down my back. He takes his time, touching me from ankle to shoulder. I moan softly, trying to press my back against his fingers to deepen our contact.

“Don’t move,” he says in my ear.

I freeze, desire pooling between my legs. It’s excruciatingly good, being so turned on and not being able to do a thing about it.

“You don’t just get up and leave this bed when I’m hard for you,” Colby says, his breath dancing over the skin of my ear and neck. “When we wake up together, you’ll spread your legs for me and I’ll play with your pussy for as long as I want. You can rule the whole fucking world when you leave this bed, but when you’re here, I’m the one who’s in charge.”

I may combust. His voice is deep and authoritative, but there's a note of tightness to it. From the rock-hard feel of his erection against my leg, he's also worked up, but he shows no sign of ending this delicious torture.

He trails the backs of his knuckles down my spine, his touch feather soft. I fist the bedsheet as his fingers graze over my ass, using all my self-control to keep from moving.

When he slides a single finger inside my pussy, I moan loudly, digging my knees into the mattress.

“So wet, Mila. Everyone else will see a prim little boss in a business suit when they look at you, but I'll be thinking about this wet pussy.”

He strokes his finger over my folds and I bury my face in a pillow to swallow the loud cry I let out. I'm so close. I don't know how he can bring me to the edge with just his words and his fingers.

I'm seconds away from coming when he moves his hand back to my legs, caressing my thighs as I groan in desperation.

“Come here,” he says, moving to a sitting position in bed, his back against the headboard with a pillow behind it.

I stare at him hungrily for a couple of seconds, hoping he's going to let me straddle him and ride him until I come, which won't take long.

“You want to ride my cock?” he asks, the corners of his lips tugging up in a smirk.

I nod eagerly, not caring how desperate I look. I *need* to finish what he started. My body is humming with arousal, my nipples hard and my skin tingling.

“First you need to suck it,” he says, wrapping a hand around his shaft.

He's flawless. His eyes are the dark, stormy blue I remember from our wedding night, his gaze raking over me like a wolf studying its prey. His long, lean body is all muscle.

I move between his legs, about to lower my head to his lap when he says, “No, I want you over here.”

I move to his side and kneel on the bed, licking the head of his shaft. I want to make him as crazed as he makes me.

“Ass in the air,” he orders, and I comply immediately.

He groans as I work my mouth and my hand over him at the same time, running his palm across my ass. The deeper I take him, the harder he breathes, and I feel high as I listen to his sounds of satisfaction.

There’s no one and nothing else in the world. No schedules or meetings. Just the two of us, our bodies coming together to find an ecstasy we could never find alone.

“You’re so fucking good at that,” he says, moving his hand over my back and into my hair.

He grabs a handful and guides my head up and down. I’m achy and needy, wanting his hand back on my ass.

Never in my life have I asked for anything in bed. When I want something, I take it. But Colby has helped me discover how much I enjoy being submissive in bed with him. I crave more of him reminding me he’s in control.

I decide not to overthink it. Instead, I slide my mouth off of his shaft and look at him. His lips part and I can see how much he wants my mouth back on him.

“Spank me,” I say.

His brows shoot up. “Lay across my lap.”

My pulse pounds with excitement as I move, my midsection on his thighs. He circles his palm over my ass, the memory of his fingers inside me making me clench. I wait, not even breathing, for the first smack.

I’ve never wanted this from any other man, but I want it so bad from him that a cry of frustration sounds as I wait. He raises his hand and brings it back down, but it’s just a light touch. I turn my face to look at him.

“It’s okay. I want it. Spank me hard.”

Conflict swims in his eyes as I wait. He doesn’t move his hand again.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

He looks away, his voice cold. “I’m not spanking you.”

Anger forms in a tight ball in my chest. I’ve eagerly complied with everything he’s wanted in bed, and he won’t do the one thing I asked for? The self-consciousness I feel for asking him to spank me engulfs me.

I move off of him. “I don’t know what to say. I thought we’d both like it.”

“You just can’t let me take the lead, can you?” he says bitterly. “Not even with sex.”

I sit up, covering my chest with the bedsheet. What the hell is happening here? We went from the edge of bliss to a confrontation in a matter of seconds.

“You’ve taken the lead with pretty much everything involving sex,” I say defensively. “I had no idea it was such a buzzkill for me to say anything. Am I just here to silently suck you off?”

His eyes harden. “If that’s what I want, yeah.”

“You’re making me feel like a sex doll.”

He scoffs. “That’s rich. I’m nothing but a prop to you outside the bedroom, might as well keep things fair.”

I’m about to respond when he gets out of bed and goes into the bathroom, slamming the door behind him. He turns the shower on, our conversation apparently over.

Nothing hurts more than someone thinking I’m not even worth talking to. I get out of bed and find some clothes, taking a five-minute shower in a guest bathroom with a bar of soap I find with some other toiletries beneath the sink.

I’m dressed and out the door before Colby even finishes his shower. If he wants to give me the cold shoulder, he’ll get the same treatment in return.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Colby

“DID YOU SEE THAT FUCKING MOVE?” I slap the coffee table and look back and forth between Beau and Ben.

“Good stuff,” Beau agrees.

We’re watching Heath’s first professional game in my basement, and I hold back tears as we watch the replay of him scoring his first goal as a professional hockey player.

It’s completely worth it. All of Mila’s bullshit. Not being able to pump gas for my car without reporters and photographers watching me. My teammates’ nonstop crap about me being Mr. Colby Pavlova.

I’d do it all a hundred times just to witness this moment. My brother’s teammates circling around him to celebrate his goal. His hard work is finally paying off. I can’t give him all the things our childhood robbed him of, but this—this one thing—I was able to be a small part of.

“Where’s the Mrs.?” Ben asks.

“She had a dinner thing.”

“How’s married life?” Beau asks me.

I hold back a scowl. Married life. I still can’t wrap my mind around being married. I can’t just take a break from Mila because we live together and have to make it look like we’re blissfully happy.

For a little bit there, I think we were. Ironic that it wasn't Mila getting pissed off and blowing everything up, but me.

"It's good." I check the food delivery app on my phone. "Is this guy going to make me negative tip him? He's gonna have to give me twenty bucks to accept the delivery at this point."

The app said our pizza and wings delivery was ten minutes away half an hour ago. I'm so ravenous I could eat an entire pizza on my own at this point. Good thing I ordered plenty of food.

"You sure it's good?" Beau asks.

I furrow my brow, confused. I was fantasizing about wings and have no idea what he's talking about. "What?"

"Married life. You seem more like a guy who's been married a decade than a week."

Fuck. A decade? With Mila, that would be ten years of mind-blowing sex, but also ten years of dealing with her moods.

It's easier to blame her than to take accountability for our argument this morning. I'm more to blame than she is, but if she wouldn't have been so stubborn and kept pushing the issue, our day would have started a hell of a lot better.

"Colby."

I look at Beau. "Hmm?"

"What's up with you?"

"Nothing."

Ben turns to me. "Fuck it. I don't mind asking him. Everyone's wondering about you and Mila. It doesn't add up."

Of all days to have to pretend I'm madly in love with Mila, they had to pick this one.

"What do you mean?"

"Someone would have picked up on something," Beau says. "We know you well. I know you really well, and I know you went home with that woman you met at Mountain Top

like six or seven weeks ago. You wouldn't have done that if you were with Mila."

Shit. The walls are closing in. I've never lied to Beau, but knowing how high the stakes are for Mila, I have to now. It doesn't matter how angry I am with her. I care about her and I won't let her be shipped off and left at the mercy of her father's enemies.

"It started right after that," I say.

Beau's jaw drops. "Six weeks? You married her after *six weeks* of dating?"

I shrug. "I wouldn't call it dating. More like spending every available moment in bed together. We have a physical connection I've never had with anyone before."

Ben's looking at me like I'm the craziest fucker he's ever seen. "You *married* her because the sex is good?"

I laugh lightly. "It's not *good*, man. It's transcendental."

"What's sex got to do with your teeth?" Beau asks.

I lower my brows at him, pretty sure he's not that dumb.

"I kid," he says, grinning. "But I'm not kidding when I say that's fucked up. You can have all the great sex with someone you want without marrying them."

I want to raise a hand in the air and yell out "testify," but I continue defending my marriage.

"She didn't want to be exclusive without a ring on her finger. And I'm not sharing her with anyone else."

"So she gave you an ultimatum?" Ben asks gruffly.

"No, she gave me honesty. Mila doesn't sugarcoat things."

Beau laughs and I cut him off with a look.

"Sorry," he says, his smile sliding away. "It's just that that's a huge understatement. Mila not sugarcoating things. Because there's no coating whatsoever. She fucks people with no lube."

“Fuck you. She gets shit done and she’s a generous team owner.”

Beau gives me a genuinely remorseful look. “I’m sorry, man. That was unfair of me.”

The sound of the door from the garage into the mudroom opening tells me Mila’s home. I point at Beau and Ben.

“Not another word,” I whisper.

“Hey babe,” Mila calls out from the kitchen. “I got your hemorrhoid cream.”

Beau and Ben try to snicker silently as I close my eyes. She saw my teammates’ cars in the driveway and now she plans to make me as uncomfortable as possible in front of them as she can.

“And I googled it since you didn’t want it in your search history,” she continues. “Having a dildo in your ass is perfectly fine even if you have huge hemorrhoids inside.”

Beau looks like he’s having trouble breathing from trying not to laugh out loud, and Ben’s shoulders are shaking with silent laughter.

Mila comes around the corner, carrying three pizza boxes and two boxes of wings.

“Oh, hey. Your food’s here. Sorry, I didn’t know you had company.”

“Hey, Mila,” Beau says, smiling.

“Hi,” Ben says.

“Hey, good to see you guys.” She sets the boxes on the coffee table. “Do you want me to get some plates, my love?”

“Nah, I’ve got it.”

We walk into the kitchen together, where I take three bottled beers out of the refrigerator.

“Are we playing games now?” I ask her as I pop the cap off of a beer and take a drink.

She gives me an innocent look. “What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean.”

We just stare at each other for a few seconds. What I really want to do is kiss her and apologize for this morning, but if I do, I’ll have to talk to her about what happened. I’m not doing that.

“This isn’t the time for this conversation,” she says in a low tone.

“I guess not. But enough of your bullshit.”

She laughs bitterly. “So you get to decide when it’s enough of my bullshit, but I don’t get to have any say over yours?”

I’m not missing my brother’s first pro game to talk in circles with her. We pissed each other off this morning and I guess it’ll be over when we both decide to get over it.

I shake my head and get plates and napkins for dinner, walking out of the room when she says to my back, “Don’t try to sex your way out of this later.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it, dove.”

I get back into the living room, where Beau is giving me a knowing look.

“You want us to go?” he asks softly.

“No.”

Ben looks at Beau. “I think we should go.”

“No, seriously. We’re good. We had a little spat this morning but we’re fine.”

I look at the TV, pumping my fist when I see that Heath’s team is now up 2–0.

“He got an assist on the second goal,” Ben says. “He’s really good, dude.”

“He is. I think there’s a good chance we’ll be playing against him someday.”

“That’s cool as hell,” Beau says. “Your parents must be proud of you guys.”

“Who knows, I haven’t spoken to them in a long time.”

Beau grins and says, “Well, I’m damn proud of you guys.” He raises his beer bottle. “Toast to Heath’s first game and his bright future in hockey.”

We clink our bottles and dig into the food. I don’t see or hear from Mila again, but once my teammates leave, my happy beer buzz makes me decide to go try to make peace with her.

My bedroom door is locked. I shake the handle, wondering if she locked it on accident.

“Mila, open the door.”

“Fuck off,” she says from inside the room.

I scoff and turn around, walking toward the guest room.

Kicked out of my own damn bedroom. Beau’s right. I jumped into this marriage with no regard for how hard it might be. No matter how great the sex is, I’m stuck with a hothead now.

At least Heath is getting to prove himself.

Maybe Mila will cool off when I’m on the road trip I leave for tomorrow. Or maybe I’ll return and find I’m locked out of my house entirely. Knowing her, it could go either way.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Mila

WHEN I WALK into the kitchen the next morning, Colby is standing in front of the stove, pouring a bowl of eggs into a skillet.

“Hey,” he says.

“Good morning,” I say crisply, getting out a travel mug to fill with coffee for my drive to the office. “Is it okay for me to keep using the Range Rover?”

“Yep, I can take my truck.”

He’s shirtless, only wearing a pair of athletic shorts. When he turns to walk over to the refrigerator, the sight of his bare chest sends a pang of longing through me.

If only I could be completely mad at him. Instead, I’m about fifty percent mad and fifty percent still turned on from our unfinished romp yesterday morning.

“Do you really think I see you as a prop?” I ask as I sip my coffee.

He takes a block of cheese from the refrigerator, meets my gaze and nods. “Yeah. I’m a means to an end for you.”

“Our arrangement is mutually beneficial. I’m not using you if we’re both getting something out of it.”

He shrugs as he grates cheese onto a plate. “You see everyone as a prop. You’re the puppet master, making sure

everyone around you knows you've got them dangling on strings."

Okay, that stings. I've been a good team owner. I take care of the people who work for our organization, giving the front office staff an industry-leading benefits package that includes paid mental health and maternity leave. The team has to play eighty-two games per season, so there's less I can do for them, but I pay them well.

"If I were a man, you'd call me a closer. An alpha who never backs down. But because I'm a woman, I'm a bitch."

He moves his skillet from one burner to another, turning the heat off. "I've never called you a bitch. Don't put words in my mouth."

"You know what I mean."

He slides his omelet onto a plate. "What do you want from me?"

"I want to know why you blew up yesterday."

His jaw tenses and his eyes flash with anger. "Why do you blow up? Happens all the time and you never explain yourself."

I look away because he has me there. I've always worn my heart on my sleeve.

"I thought we were getting along and everything was good," I say helplessly shrugging my shoulders.

"I'm still playing my part."

I exhale through my nose, frustrated. Grabbing my travel cup, I leave for the office.

Life is easier without personal relationships. I have a handful of friends I can call anytime, but other than that, I'm happier alone. Life has been total chaos since I married Colby, and I know we won't be able to fool the world forever.

On the drive to the office, I call the Coyotes attorney, Peter.

"Morning, boss," he says.

“Hey, I know you probably aren’t in yet but I have meetings all morning so I just wanted to catch you while I can.”

“Sure, what’s up?”

“I need Mills to ease off me on the situation we recently discussed in my office.”

After a moment of silence, he says, “But isn’t that situation resolved?”

We have to talk in code, just in case. I wouldn’t put it past Mills to resort to tapping my phones, either personal or in the office somehow.

“I don’t think the current resolution will be permanent,” I say. “I think you should explore opportunities to make friends at a federal level.”

Translation: I’m willing to make a huge donation to someone higher up than Mills in exchange for them getting him to back off me. Then Colby and I can quietly divorce and I can have my life back.

“Understood,” Peter says. “I’ll make some calls.”

Why didn’t I think of this sooner? It’s the cleanest way out of this mess.

“YOU SURE YOU’RE OKAY?” Quentin asks me a couple of hours later.

“I’m fine.”

He’s standing in the door between our offices, his expression skeptical.

“Did you...lose your makeup?” he asks.

I glare at him, not in the mood to be called out for my natural look today. I planned to put makeup on after I talked to Colby, but then I walked out the door and forgot about it.

“I’m giving my skin a breather.”

“Okay. Are you ready for me to get your 10:00 a.m. call on the line?”

I glance at the schedule on my computer. 10:00 a.m. call with the fire marshal about getting access to my apartment. I need to get in there to see if my artwork is damaged and hopefully get some things from my closet.

“Yes, I’m ready,” I say.

As soon as I get on the call, I get right to business.

“When can I get back into my apartment?” I ask.

“I’m afraid you won’t be able to,” the fire marshal says.

I furrow my brow, grabbing a pen in case I need to throw one across the room. “What do you mean? We have to be able to get in at some point. My insurance company needs to see if my art is damaged.”

“The building isn’t structurally sound. We’re in the process of condemning it.”

I lean my elbow on my desk, my forehead resting in my palm. “Okay, well, before you condemn it, I need to get my art pieces packaged up and moved out of there. I have a very valuable Russian art collection. Some of it is actually priceless because it’s irreplaceable.”

He laughs. “No one’s going into that building. It’s been secured and eventually it’ll be torn down.”

Some of the paintings in my apartment were gifts from my deda. He was the one who helped me start my collection. And some of his Fabergé eggs were left behind, too.

“No! There has to be a way for me to get my art out.”

“Ma’am, I don’t know what else to tell you. The building is not structurally sound. It could collapse. Nothing in there is worth a human life.”

“But what about my insurance company?”

“This is what they call a total loss. You’ll be able to get paperwork to that effect.”

I close my eyes, feeling sick. The fire may not have even reached the penthouse level. My security company said the sprinklers activated, so my art probably has water damage, but some of it could be salvageable.

In the past week, I’ve lost my home, some of the most treasured pieces in my art collection, and all my possessions. And I’m married to a man who hates me. My whole life has been upended.

“Is there a number I could write on a check that would change anything?” I ask hopefully.

He groans, sounding disgusted. “No. Have a nice day.”

With that, he hangs up.

I drop the pen onto my desk, too devastated to throw it across the room. My art collection is more precious to me than anything. No insurance payout could ever cover the loss of what was in my apartment when the fire started.

I used to thrive on being alone. Keeping everyone at arms’ length. These recent glimpses of life with a partner are messing with my head.

I have to get out of this marriage.

“WELL?” I ask Peter later that afternoon.

He crumples up the paper wrapper for the sandwich he just ate at his desk and tosses it into a trash can.

“I’ve done nothing but make calls today, and I’m coming up empty.”

I groan, aggravated. “How hard can it be to find a politician who wants a massive campaign contribution?”

His eyes flash with annoyance. “It can’t be just any politician. It has to be someone who can influence Mills. And I

can't just openly call senators and ask if they're game for a bribe."

"Bribe is such a loaded word."

He shakes his head and lets out a single note of laughter. "Loaded with truth. We have to be careful about this, and it might take time."

I pinch my brows together, silently asking the universe to make just one thing go well today.

"Trouble in paradise?" Peter asks.

"I'm meant to be a lone wolf."

"Buy a ten-thousand-square-foot place and you'll never even have to see each other. Separate wings."

I sink down into one of the chairs in front of Peter's desk. "I am about to be on the market for a new place. My building was condemned today. Lucky me."

"Damn, I'm sorry."

"Keep making calls." I stand up, shrugging off the sense of self-pity, eager to move on to anything that will get my mind off of my personal life. "I'm a very motivated donor."

"I'm on it."

I leave his office and head back toward the end of the basement where my office is, smacking into something as I round a corner.

"Hot!" I pull my shirt away from my chest to escape the burning sensation. "Holy fuck, that's hot."

Quentin is gaping at me, the cup of coffee he was carrying now rolling across the floor, empty. Its entire contents are on my chest.

"I'm so sorry," he says, eyes wide with shock. "I didn't even hear you coming. I am *so sorry*."

I laugh. For a solid thirty seconds, I laugh so hard I can feel it in my stomach. This day just won't stop sucking. I want

to say *fuck it* and lock myself in my office with a bottle of Stoli.

“Um...I’ll go get you a shirt from the PR department merch,” Quentin says. “Do you need some paper towels to clean up?”

I shake my head, defeated.

Of course, the only T-shirt they have in the PR department is a men’s 3XL, which makes me look like a little kid playing dress-up. It makes for an interesting video call that afternoon.

I’m relieved that Colby is leaving for a road trip today. With any luck, I’ll have the problem of our marriage solved before he gets back home.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Colby

ONE MONTH later

“WHAT’S GOING on with you, man?” Ford’s brow is wrinkled with concern.

Our team captain brought me into the college team’s equipment room for a private talk, and the smell of sweaty gloves in this closed-up space is overwhelming.

“I’m good.”

He shakes his head. “This is me. We’ve always been able to talk about things. I’m really concerned about you.”

I look away, my chest tightening. I’ve been playing like shit for the past three weeks, missing passes, instigating fights for no good reason, and not taking shots on goal that I should be taking. Beau and Ford have been trying to cover for me during games, but it’s pretty much impossible. An offensive line is like a three-legged stool; when one person is off, the entire line is off.

And while I appreciate Ford’s concern, this is nothing that can be talked out in an equipment room two hours before a game. Mila has been laying low, working late on the days I’m home, and only showing up at my house to sleep in the guest room and shower. She told me she’s working on a way to get

us out of the marriage, but it's taking a lot longer than she expected.

So in the meantime, I travel, play in games, smile and kiss her in public. Inside, though, bitterness has taken me over. The only thing that truly makes me happy these days is watching my brother's games. He's playing consistent hockey and has worked his way up to the first offensive line.

That's my reason. It's why I play along in public instead of getting as far away from Mila as I can.

The worst part is that it's not even her fault. She didn't do anything wrong. I still think she's the most beautiful, sexy woman I've ever seen, but she pushed me over a line that morning in bed and I can't get myself back on the other side of it.

I was fine before that. Now I'm too fucking pissed to even speak to her. I know why my teammates are worried about me. I've always been easygoing, slow to anger. Now I hardly speak to anyone and I'm playing like a high school kid who just picked up a stick for the first time.

"Look, I'm okay, really," I say. "I have to go stretch."

Arms crossed over his chest, Ford shakes his head. "Whatever you've got going on, it's safe with me." He looks at the closed door and lowers his tone. "You've been miserable since you married Mila. Is she blackmailing you somehow?"

I almost smile at that. "No. I've just got something I need to get past and no one can help me with it."

He puts a hand on my shoulder. "I'm always here, day or night. I don't talk to Elle or anyone else about private conversations. This isn't about hockey. I'm worried about my friend."

I nod, looking down to cover my watery eyes. There haven't been many conversations like this in my life, where someone basically lets me know how much they care. I have no idea how to handle it.

"Yeah, thanks." I step away, my chest so tight I can't stay another second.

I put on my headphones while I stretch on a mat in the weight room. Sal and Sergei are warming up, slowly walking on side-by-side treadmills across from me. Sal's eyes flicker over me and I see a note of concern.

They're all wondering what my fucking problem is, and I get why, but I know I shouldn't talk to them about it. I wasn't raised to air my dirty laundry.

When I finish my stretches, our team trainer, Chris, stretches my legs out on his table. My left hamstring has been sore and Chris suspects I'm trying to mask the pain so I can continue playing.

"How's that?" he asks after pushing my left leg back.

"Yeah, it's good."

"Has it flared up at all since yesterday?"

"Nope."

I can tell from the skeptical expression on his face that he doesn't believe me. Hell, I wish an injury was to blame for my shitty play as of late. It's just my fucked-up mind.

We're playing Seattle at home tonight. I wish Heath could have made it, but when he's not playing, he's training. When I'm sitting alone on the locker room bench, working through the visualizing exercises I do before every game, I imagine Heath and I out on the ice together. He's in an Anaheim uniform. We're both skating hard, trying to get to the puck. It's not about who will win the game between our teams but getting to experience being able to play a game together.

The crowd is energized, holding up signs and cheering for their favorite team. Being on the ice and feeling that energy is a privilege many people dream of but never achieve. Heath and I will get there, though. We'll prove to ourselves that it's possible to move past a tragic childhood. That we can leave all that in the past and focus entirely on now.

The sound of Coach Maddox's voice makes me open my eyes and turn my focus to him.

“I don’t want to see any half-assed plays out there.” He looks around the room, meeting each player’s eyes. “If you don’t want to win more than you want anything else, get the fuck out of here. This isn’t a matter of knowing what to do—all of you know exactly what to do out there. It’s all execution. Get out there and execute.”

His gaze stops on me for a few seconds while he’s talking. He’s as frustrated as I am with my play lately. Ben Hogan will get my spot on the first line if I don’t turn things around. He’s a rising star and lately I’m a burned-out one.

I won’t go down without a fight, though. I draw on my frustration, filling my veins with fire. By the time I skate onto the ice, I’m ready for battle.

Nick Durham, Seattle’s most obnoxious player, starts shit with me before the puck even drops.

“Hope your cold streak continues tonight,” he quips. “Since you don’t give a shit about scoring for your own team, feel free to put a puck in our net tonight.”

“Is it true your own teammates wear earplugs so they don’t have to hear your grating, whiny voice, Durham?” I fire back.

It is true—I heard it from one of his teammates. They all either love him or hate him.

His smirk is gone, but he keeps chirping. “I get it, man. Why bother anymore? Can’t get fired when you’re fucking your owner.”

The puck drops as he ends the sentence, our team getting possession. I run into Durham’s shoulder as I rush down the ice, not letting myself fall further into his trap.

I block out all personal thoughts, focusing only on the game. Seattle’s defense is playing me light, probably because they’ve watched film of our recent games. I use that to my advantage, sending a pass from Beau into the back of the net.

My teammates surround me, arms in the air. It’s the first time in a while that I’ve smiled. I glance up at the owner’s box, where Mila is sitting in her usual spot, her gaze on me.

Her smile reminds me how relaxed she was when we woke up together in my bed. Now that I've seen both sides of her, I can't think of her only as a ball-busting, no-holds-barred team owner. I see the woman, too. The woman who was brave enough to be vulnerable in front of me, more than once.

I've been too much of a pussy to do the same. Mila really is fearless. She owns the weight that comes with her family's name, not proud of her grandfather's and father's actions, but also not ashamed to try to make her name stand for something better.

Seattle scores right before the end of the first period. Coach lays into us in the locker room, his face getting red as he draws on his whiteboard while yelling over his shoulder.

Ben scores in the second period. Not to be outdone by the kid who took his spot, Dominic also scores.

Seattle manages a goal in the third period, but we still take the game 3–2. I feel lighter knowing I contributed something tonight. My teammates clap me on the shoulder, the mood in the locker room relaxed.

“Mountain Top?” Ford asks me as we're both walking out of the shower area.

“Not tonight. I need to go home.”

I dress in a navy suit, light blue dress shirt, and forest green tie, reading a text from Heath as I leave the locker room to walk to my car. Mila hasn't met me outside of the locker room in a month, and I can't blame her.

Heath: Great game. Proud of you.

I send a quick response and put my phone in my pocket, eager to get home.

One of our longtime ushers, Henry, stops me as I'm about to walk out the door.

“My son and his family are in town from Miami. Any chance they could get a photo with you?”

“Yeah, of course.”

Henry's a good dude. He's in his sixties but still likes to kick a soccer ball around with us before games, and he's pretty good.

I pose for photos with Beau, Ford, and Henry's son's family, signing autographs for them and making small talk before heading toward the parking lot again.

My Range Rover is already in the garage when I get home just after midnight. The house is quiet when I walk in and set my keys on the counter.

I take off my suit jacket and hang it over a chair, then remove my tie, and roll up the sleeves of my dress shirt. My stomach is churning nervously. I could put this conversation off for tomorrow, but I won't take the chance of pissing out.

Opening the fridge, I take out a beer and pop the top off, taking a long drink. Then I set the bottle on the kitchen counter, blow out a breath, and walk upstairs.

Mila's been sleeping in the guest room at the end of the hall. The door is cracked, so I push it open. I see her form in bed and consider leaving.

She'll never see me the same again. I need more time to think about this.

I'm about to leave when she gasps and sits up in bed.

"Colby?" There's a tremor in her voice, like a hint of panic.

"Yeah, it's me."

"What's wrong?"

Everything. I want to crawl into bed next to her and show her I'm sorry in the only way I know how. That won't work this time, though.

I wrap a hand around the back of my neck and take the plunge. "Can we talk?"

All she has to do is say no. Bite my head off for waking her up and tell me to go fuck myself. That'll be my sign that this was a terrible idea, and I'll never try it again.

“Sure.” She sits up in bed and turns on the bedside lamp.

I walk over to the bed and sit down on the side, near her legs. Fear claws at my neck, begging me to stay silent. The fewer people who know the truth, the better.

I’ve come this far, though. I look at the wall, unable to meet her gaze.

“It’s about what happened with us that morning,” I start. “Well, more than just that.”

“Okay,” she says softly.

Okay. Here we go.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Mila

“I DON’T WANT YOUR PITY,” Colby says, his eyes still focused on the wall.

“I don’t pity you.”

“I mean after I tell you this. I want to explain myself, but...” He leans forward to rest his elbows on his knees, scrubbing his hands down his face. “I don’t want to talk about it again after tonight.”

“Okay.”

I can’t fathom what he’s about to tell me, and what it might have to do with what happened between us. In the past month, we’ve hardly spoken. I try to be in his home as little as possible when he’s here.

He won’t even look at me, and I worry he’ll do something to spite me, like tell a reporter I backed him into a fraudulent marriage to avoid deportation. Elle Lawrence would eat that shit for breakfast.

Peter has made progress with making political allies to help me out of my situation, but it’s slow going. He’s establishing relationships; doing small favors for a few politicians to build trust. Soon, he plans to choose one to throw our full support behind, and even then, he won’t immediately ask for help with Mills. It’s a waiting game, and it’s

excruciating when I know Colby could blow my entire life up with just a phone call.

“My dad isn’t a good man,” he says. “I guess we have that in common.”

I nod, the thought of my war criminal father leaving a bad taste in my mouth. But this isn’t about me, so I remain silent, just listening.

Colby sighs heavily. It pains me to see him suffering this way, shame clearly heavy on his shoulders.

“He abused my mother,” he continues, his voice flat and void of emotion. “And occasionally me. But you know how it goes—Mom tried to make herself the target instead of me and Heath, and since I was the older brother, I tried to make myself the target instead of him.”

I’ve heard family members discussing horrible things as casually as most people discuss the weather. But imagining Colby experiencing abuse as a little boy cracks my heart. My father was cold, harsh, and mostly absent from my life when I was a kid. But he never raised a hand to me, and he would have arranged a painful death for anyone who did.

“When I was thirteen, he beat my mom up worse than he ever had before. Because the electric bill was high. He opened it and lost his shit on her. Said it had to be her fault.” He stands, pacing across the room but still not looking at me. “My brother and I were at school and we both got called out of class. My mom crawled out of the house to a neighbor’s and they called an ambulance.”

Silence hangs between us. I want to give him space to say what he needs to, but it’s hard not to go over and hug him.

“She almost died,” he says, walking over to a chair in the corner of the room and sitting down. “Her back and both arms were broken. The doctors didn’t think they’d be able to get the swelling in her brain down.”

I close my eyes, aching for him. Thirteen years old. He had to be terrified seeing his mother like that. Nothing I’ve ever been through compares.

When I open my eyes and look at him, the anguish in his eyes is too much. My vision blurs and silent tears spill over. *This* is why he couldn't spank me harder—because his father abused his mother. And I was an asshole, demanding to know why.

“I am so sorry,” I say, unable to keep my voice level.

There aren't words to convey the remorse I feel. For what he went through and for giving him the silent treatment for the past month.

“She made it,” he says, his gaze finally meeting mine. “But she was in the hospital for more than a month and then in different rehabilitation centers.”

“And your dad?”

“He went to prison for eighteen months. I ended up moving in with my youth hockey coach and his family, and Heath lived with a friend's family. I was able to keep playing hockey, but he wasn't.”

A wave of nausea passes through me. That's why he wanted his brother to get a chance on a Triple-A team. If I had known...I probably would have put him on the Coyotes' Triple-A team, and not in exchange for any sort of favor.

I scoot to sit on the edge of the bed, where I'm facing him. “Did you ever live with your parents again?”

His jaw tenses. “No. My mom took him back, and the families Heath and I lived with wanted us to stay. Other than my brother, the Taylors are the only people I call family.”

“I WISH I knew what to say other than I am incredibly sorry,” I say, my throat tight. “You gave up so much to help me and you're right, I blow up all the time and don't explain anything.”

“Hey,” he says softly.

I look up at him.

“I don’t want you to apologize. I was the asshole. I could have told you all this a month ago, but”

“I could have given you grace,” I say fiercely. “I *should* have. You’ll have to explain to a woman you want to marry someday that you’ve divorced, all because I asked you to save me from a political enemy. That was on me. It was my problem. And you probably felt like you couldn’t say no. I mean, I’m your team owner.”

“I would’ve said no if I wanted to.” He stands and walks over, lifting my chin with his fingers. “And I never plan to get married, so that scenario will never happen.”

“You don’t?” My heart hammers as we look at each other.

“I don’t know shit about being a good husband or father. I never wanted to be either.”

I gently touch his wrist. “You do, though. We had something good going at first.”

His lips curve up in a grin. “For about forty-eight hours?”

I laugh because I’m not even sure it was that long.

The mood turns somber once again and I can’t help but say, “I’m sorry, Colby. For being an asshole and just...for everything.”

“I’m sorry, too. And what I told you...no one else knows about that.”

“No one ever will. I know it’s probably not worth much to you, but you have me in your corner now. Anyone who crosses you is crossing me, too.”

His smile makes his eyes sparkle. “You gonna fight for me, dove?”

“Yes.”

I have my bad qualities. I can be impulsive, and I have a hot temper. But I’m also deeply loyal to those I care about. Colby is now at the very top of that list.

He bends down and kisses me softly. Arousal surges throughout my body. I haven’t been touched by anyone in a

month, and I spent every night of that time fantasizing about the sex we had.

I grab a handful of his shirt as he kisses me deeper, his groan making my nipples hard.

“Do you want me?” he murmurs against my lips.

“So much.”

I tug on his shirt and he stands up, quickly unbuttoning it and tossing it aside. His pants go next, and then his T-shirt. He looks down at his socks, sighs, and quickly tugs them off.

I lift my own sleep T-shirt over my head and throw it to the floor, moving farther onto the bed.

Colby’s expression changes as he takes in my breasts.

“I’ve looked at that picture you sent me about ten thousand times,” he says in a low tone. “But it doesn’t compare to the real thing.”

He slides his boxers off and I quickly shimmy out of my panties, my gaze locked onto his sizable erection.

“I haven’t been with anyone else,” he says as he gets into bed.

“I knew you’d keep your word,” I say softly.

He moves between my legs, his gaze hungry. “I keep my word, but I also didn’t want anyone else. I wanted my hot-as-fuck wife.”

My lips part and tears pool in my eyes. I thought he hated me, but even when we weren’t speaking, he still wanted me. I’m not his one and only just because of our phony marriage.

“I’ve never had this,” I say, my voice breaking as I wipe away tears.

“What, dove?” he asks, his knee between my legs and his hands on either side of my head.

I can’t come up with the right words. “This. Whatever this is.”

“Do you like this?”

I cup his cheek and smile. “Very much.”

“Me too.”

His lips brush over mine as he pushes himself inside me, both of us groaning with satisfaction. When he pushes my thighs back and sinks in deeper, I have to fist the bedsheet.

It’s so good. His expression as he pumps in and out of me is pure bliss, a perfect mirror for what I’m feeling. This isn’t just physical. This time, there’s something more there. An intimacy that was an unexpected gift.

This is a high like nothing else. He was in pain, and he came to me. He confided in me. Trusted me. And now, I get to be the one who soothes his pain.

I sink my fingertips into his back, breathing hard. His eyes are locked onto mine as I say, “I’m close.”

“Come hard, little dove,” he says as he fucks me harder.

His words send me into a spiral of sensation. I cry out, wave after wave of pleasure washing over my body.

“Fuck,” he says, his expression strained. “Oh fuck...Mila.”

He tenses and I can feel him coming. I wrap myself around him, not ready to let go.

Laughing lightly, he kisses my lips, cheeks, and forehead. “I’ll crush you if I relax.”

“I can’t think of a better way to go.”

Reluctantly, I release him and he rolls off of me, laying on his side next to me. We just look at each other for a minute as he runs his fingertips over my stomach.

“Thank you for trusting me,” I say, breaking the silence.

“Thanks for being my soft place to land.”

He kisses me and I’m so filled with happiness that I have to be glowing bright enough to light up a room.

“Will you come back to my bedroom?” he asks.

I pretend to think about it. “I don’t know. This bed is pretty comfortable.”

He grins. “Oh yeah? I think I can keep you plenty comfortable in my bed.”

“You do have a knack for it.”

“Is that a yes?”

“Of course, it’s a yes.”

“Let’s go.”

He kisses me and gets out of bed, gathering his clothes from the floor. I slip my T-shirt—which is actually his—back on and get clean undies out of a drawer, stepping into them.

“Great game tonight,” I say.

“Thanks.” He smirks. “You know, as team-owner-slash-my-wife, you could start giving me blow jobs in exchange for goals.”

I laugh lightly. “A score for a score?”

“Exactly.”

I put my hand on his cheek and kiss him. “I’ll suck you off anytime you want. Goal or no goal.”

His eyes darken. “That’s what I like to hear.”

When we get to his bed, it’s not a blow job he wants, but more sex. And I’m more than okay with it.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Colby

“THAT’S NOT A WORD.” Mila furrows her brow as she reads the letters I just played in our Scrabble game. “English isn’t even my first language and I know that’s not a word.”

“Tokenize. To make into a token.”

She shakes her head. “That’s not a thing, and it’s not a word.”

“The fuck it’s not.”

She picks up her phone.

“No phones,” I remind her. “That’s seventy-nine points for me and it’s your turn.”

She grabs an olive from the plates of food on the coffee table next to the game board, followed by a piece of cheese.

“You make a mean charcuterie board, Harrison, but it doesn’t mean I’ll let you cheat your way into a win.”

I groan, picking up her wine glass and taking it into the kitchen to refill it.

“A man who refills your wine doesn’t sound like a cheater to me,” I call out to her.

It’s been almost a week since our talk, and things have turned around between us. I just got home from a road trip this

morning, and all I wanted to do was spend the evening at home with Mila.

“We can easily figure out if it’s a word by looking it up!” she says.

It’s probably not a word. I was hoping to get away with it because I can get so many points for it. I can’t admit that to her, though.

When I hand her glass back, she takes a sip and sets the glass on the table, standing up to stretch. I get a glance at her midriff when her shirt rides up, and I can’t help pulling her into my arms.

She smiles up at me, her eyes bright with happiness. “Don’t try to charm me into letting you cheat.”

“It’s not cheating; it’s you respecting my judgment,” I say, grinning.

“Oh, is that it?”

I kiss her, sliding my hands down to cup her ass. “You don’t want me to feel tokenized, do you?”

She laughs and wraps her arms around my neck. “I think with that face of yours, people buy into your bullshit because you make it look and sound so good.”

“You know a thing or two about that yourself.”

Her chin drops. “Bullshitting? Are you calling me a bullshitter?”

“I meant about making things look and sound good. When we were FaceTiming yesterday while you made that smoothie, you were talking about the new arena but you looked so sexy that I was fantasizing about fucking you on the kitchen island.”

“Really?”

There’s a hopeful note in her voice. Since we talked, she’s been softer toward me, letting her guard down. Knowing only I get to see that side of her makes me want her that much more.

I kiss her longer this time, forgetting about the game as she slides her hands beneath the back of my T-shirt, her fingers grazing over my skin.

Pulling back, I look at her. She has the most beautiful eyes. They're the shade of whiskey, framed by long black lashes. With high cheekbones and full pink lips, she could be a model if she wanted to. I never really saw her until we were married. She was just my off-limits team owner, and no one on our team would have dared to even look at her.

"I always want you," I say against her lips. "The more I get, the more I want."

She presses a soft kiss to my mouth. "I know what you mean. I didn't like you being gone four nights in a row."

"Come with me on the next road trip."

She smiles. "You want me to? I figured that would be weird for you, with me being the owner."

"I'd like it if you came, as long as you know I can't get any special treatment from you."

"Right." She gives me a mock serious look. "Absolutely no road trip sex."

I laugh a single note. "I mean no owner special treatment. I can't stay in the presidential suite with you while my teammates are in regular rooms."

"I understand." She pinches her brows together, considering. "But really, me coming on the road trip is owner special treatment. Other guys can't bring their wives."

I shrug. "Their wives don't own the team. You'll be at the games, too. You'll be there as the owner-slash-my-wife."

"I'll make at least part of the next road trip."

I kiss her again. "Good. I expect you naked in my bed with your ass in the air when I get to my room every night."

Her breath catches and her fingers sink deeper into my skin. "You might have to show me exactly where you want me to be."

I hum against her lips. “This is a very important issue; I should probably show you right now.”

“Perfect. Admit tokenize isn’t a word and I’ll be naked in bed within thirty seconds.”

I laugh and bend slightly, picking her up. She wraps her legs around my waist, smiling playfully.

“It might not be a word,” I concede. “We should probably make that call when you’re on the verge of coming.”

She laughs hard at that, leaning her forehead against mine. “Are you seriously going to make me admit it’s a word or you won’t let me come?”

I walk toward the bedroom, still holding her. “Only one way to find out.”



THE NEXT DAY, I walk into Quentin’s office around 5:00 p.m. He looks up from his computer, squinting with confusion.

“I thought you had a team dinner tonight,” he says.

“Canceled. Beau got the flu from his kid so we rescheduled it.”

He wrinkles his noses. “They really are just horribly expensive little germ incubators, aren’t they? I saw a clip the other day of a baby spitting up into its father’s mouth. No. Just no.”

“I take it you don’t have kids?”

He scoffs. “No way. My boyfriend has a niece and a nephew and we like to have them over for sleepovers. We sugar them up and send them back home. If I had kids of my own, I would be an alcoholic, just saying.”

“Hey, at least you’re honest.”

“You’re not here to see me, though, are you? She’s just finishing up her last meeting of the day.” He looks at Mila’s closed office door and then lowers his voice. “You didn’t hear

it from me, but she's not in the greatest mood. Her friend Lena was supposed to be leaving her husband who cheated on her. She called Mila this afternoon from a resort in France and said she can't do it because he took her on this trip to show her how sorry he is."

I cringe. "Yikes."

"Yeah, this guy is a snake. He hit on Mila at his own engagement party. Handed her a drink and told her he wasn't married *yet*."

"What an asshole."

He sighs. "Mila did everything she could. I heard her in her office begging Lena to leave him. Telling her she can do better. The bar is incredibly low."

I pick up a framed photo sitting on his desk. It's him and a dark-haired man, smiling and standing with their arms around each other with the Eiffel Tower in the background.

"Boyfriend?" I ask him.

"Yes, that's Jacob. Mila gave us that trip as an anniversary gift."

Quentin is one of the few people Mila trusts. I like that she rewarded him for his loyalty and hard work. He deserves it.

"That was nice," I say.

The door to her office opens and she walks out, immediately spotting me and smiling.

"Hey, you." She kisses me. "Aren't you supposed to be at a dinner thing?"

"It got cancelled."

Quentin stands, picks up a messenger bag, and waves at us. "I'm heading out. No fornicating on my desk, kids."

"Bye, Quentin," I say.

"See you in the morning," Mila says.

Once her assistant is gone, I pull her into my arms. "I think we should go out on a date tonight."

“Sounds like fun.”

“You pick the place.”

She considers, a little worry wrinkle appearing between her brows. “I just remembered I’m supposed to meet a friend for drinks tonight. I planned it since I thought you had a team dinner.”

“That’s okay. I’ll see if Ben wants to get some dinner with me.”

“The new kid?”

“New-ish. Yeah, I like him.”

“Is Dominic over losing his spot on the second line to him?”

I nod. “Pretty much. He can get his spot back anytime if he works hard enough.”

She looks up at me, her palms on my chest. “We can get dinner after I’m done if you want to, or you can meet up with Ben. I’m fine either way.”

“Are you kidding? I spend more time with that fucker than you, and he’s not even hot. I’ll wait for you.”

She smiles, looking pleased. “We can try that new steakhouse you mentioned. I’ll try to get us a reservation.”

“Okay.” I kiss her lightly. “Who are you meeting up with?”

She blinks, confused. “What do you mean?”

“You’re having drinks with a friend—which one? You’ve told me about a couple of your friends.”

“Oh. Lena. I don’t think I’ve mentioned her. We went to college together.”

I don’t react, but a red flag goes up in my mind. Quentin just told me her friend Lena is in France.

“How long do you think you’ll be?”

“Maybe two hours? She’s having problems with her husband and wants to talk.”

Either she has two friends named Lena, or she's an incredibly convincing liar. Immediately, I wonder if she's really where she says she is when I'm on the road.

"You want to text me when you're done?"

She nods. "Perfect. I'm so lucky to get to spend two nights in a row with you."

"I'm the lucky one," I say automatically, releasing my hold on her.

She gets her coat and bag, closing and locking the office door as we walk out.

On our walk to the stairway, she makes small talk, seeming as light and carefree as ever. Maybe Quentin didn't hear what he thought he did.

"I need to stop back by the weight room," I say as we climb the stairs. "I'll see you later."

I kiss her, she waves, and we take off in opposite directions. As soon as she's out of sight, I run the rest of the way to the weight room, where I knew I'd find Sergei lifting weights. It takes two of the college's players to spot him, and they both look like they're praying he doesn't need them to lift the bar.

"Hey, I need to trade cars with you until tomorrow," I tell him.

He grunts and returns the bar to its rack. "My keys are in my locker."

This is one of my favorite things about Sergei—he doesn't ask for explanations or talk things to death. He's a simple, straight-to-the-point kind of guy.

"No fast food in my car," he calls out as I'm leaving the room.

"Got it," I say.

Sergei's black Mercedes G-Wagon is his prized possession. He won't let anyone smoke within twenty feet of it, and he'd

shank anyone who tried to light up while riding in it. Teammates have accused him of having sex with it.

I swap out my keys for his and run to the parking lot designated for Coyotes players and staff. Mila is just pulling out in my Range Rover. I keep my head down as I walk toward the G-Wagon, unlock it, and get inside.

A stab of guilt hits me over following her. If she's really meeting a friend for drinks, I'll feel like a huge asshole. But my possessive side has to know if she's fucking around on me.

I stay several cars back, keeping my baseball cap pulled down low. She stops at a Chinese place and walks out with a bag.

What the hell is she doing with a bag of Chinese carryout? I pull into traffic and keep following her, my gut churning with worry.

Has the past week all been an act for her? Is she just placating me so I'll stay in the marriage until she finds another way to stay in the country?

I don't want to believe those things, but my hopes are shredded when she pulls up to a house on the outskirts of the city. It's a simple bungalow, and my first reaction is surprise that a billionaire like Mila would have any sort of clandestine meeting at someone's house.

I park across the street, watching through the car window as she walks up to the front porch and knocks on the door. A tall, buff dude with dark, short hair opens the door and she goes inside.

I lean my head on the steering wheel, feeling like a fucking idiot. Part of me wants to walk up to that door and pull the guy out into the road to settle up.

He might not even know about me, though. She might be playing us both.

I start up the car and drive away, unable to wait and see how long she spends inside with him. It doesn't really matter anyway. She lied to me. The trust we've been building between us is now gone. Again.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Mila

I PULL into Colby's garage, my curiosity piqued when I see a G-Wagon already parked inside. He texted me and asked if we could meet up here for dinner instead of going out.

Did he buy a new car? It looks exactly like Sergei's, which I've seen parked in the Coyotes player lot at the college.

Once parked, I walk inside, unable to keep the smile from my face. I'm afraid to jinx things by talking about it, but I'm starting to think Colby and I have something real. He's made me work on being the best version of myself. I'm giving myself and others more grace than I used to, and not letting my temper run away unchecked.

The Thai carryout he picked up smells heavenly. I shrug my coat off and hang it up, seeing a freshly opened bottle of my favorite red wine with a half-filled glass sitting next to it.

"Hey," Colby says, walking into the kitchen wearing nothing but athletic shorts.

"Hi." My smile widens as I approach him for a kiss.

He picks up the glass and passes it to me.

"Ah, you should have," I quip, taking it.

I use the opposite of *you shouldn't have* to thank him when he does something thoughtful, which is daily. It's kind of our thing and I like that we have little inside jokes like that.

“A little something for you,” I say, setting a small box of his favorite cookies on the counter.

“Thanks.”

He opens the box and takes a long smell of the white chocolate macadamia cookies inside, then closes it.

“How’s Lena?” he asks as he opens the bag of carryout food.

“She’s good.”

I take plates out of the cabinet, reminding myself that I really need to order a good set of dishes. Colby’s plates and bowls are all mismatched, some of them chipped.

“Hey, what’s with the G-Wagon in the garage?” I ask.

“It’s Sergei’s. I borrowed it.”

“Oh.”

That’s strange. I’m about to ask him why he borrowed it when he asks, “So who’s fault is it?”

“Whose fault is what?” I say absently as he unloads the contents of the dinner order. “Did they really need to give us twenty soy sauce packets?”

Colby bypasses the plate, popping off the lid of his beef curry and sticking a fork in it.

“You said Lena and her husband are having problems. So whose fault is it?”

I shrug. “It’s his fault. He cheated on her. His affair started when she was recovering from back surgery last year and she feels guilty that she was bedridden for two months.”

Lena gets my blood pressure up like no one else. I love her, but she puts up with too much shit from her husband. He has her convinced she’ll die alone if she leaves him.

“Is she having a good time in France?”

I was reaching for the lid of my fried rice when I freeze. Panic sets in immediately. How does he know Lena is in France?

“I’m not sure what you mean,” I say, busying myself with my food to avoid looking at him.

“You know exactly what I mean.”

I look at him, his expression calm and his gaze locked onto mine.

“I know you didn’t meet Lena for drinks.”

My heart races so hard I get lightheaded. I steady myself with a hand on the counter, trying to think on my feet. How can I talk my way out of this?

I won’t lie to him. But I can’t tell him the truth, either.

“I promise I wasn’t do anything you’d disapprove of,” I say. “I can’t say anything else about it.”

He sets his container of food down, walking over to the other side of the island. When he leans his hands on the counter and glares at me, my heart sinks.

“If it was nothing that I’d disapprove of, then you wouldn’t have lied to me,” he says.

“I know it seems that way, but it was a little white lie.”

He scoffs. “A little white lie about going to see another man. You’re busted, Mila. Just be fucking honest about it.”

I narrow my eyes, realizing why Sergei’s car is in our garage.

“You followed me.”

The knowledge brings tears to my eyes. They aren’t tears of sadness, but flat-out terror. I’ve been so careful all this time. It’s not a coincidence that as soon as I let my guard down with Colby, the worst-case scenario I’ve had nightmares about has come to pass.

No one can know about him. I’d die to protect him.

“How could you follow me?” I can barely get the words out. I’m on the verge of vomiting. “That’s such a violation of my privacy.”

He laughs bitterly. “Oh, you feel violated because I know where your boyfriend lives? Fuck you. We have unprotected sex every day. How do I know what this guy has or who he’s been with?”

I put up a palm. “I’m not sleeping with anyone else. I give you my word.”

“Your word?” He sneers. “You think your word means anything to me?”

His coldness cuts me deep. I wish I could tell him the truth, but I’m terrified he already knows too much.

“I trusted you!” His voice wavers with emotion. “I bared my fucking soul to you and I thought...” He looks away, his jaw tense.

It’s like I’m drowning, knowing I can’t save myself but fighting anyway.

“Everything between us has been one-hundred-percent real,” I say fiercely. “I...like you so much and I don’t want anyone else. This past week has been the happiest week of my life. You have to believe me.”

“You lied to my face.”

I close my eyes, desperate for someone to throw me a lifeline. I’ve never had a real partner, and the past week has opened my eyes to everything I’ve been missing. Colby is the first person on my mind when I wake up and the last one I think of before I go to sleep. He does small things for me every day that make me feel special, like getting my travel mug of coffee ready if he’s in the kitchen first.

Now that I know what it feels like to be cared for this way, I don’t want to lose it.

I keep my chin up and my voice level. “I lied for a good reason.”

He steps back from the island, throwing his arms out at his sides. “Is that how this works? As long as it’s a good reason, I can lie, too? Because I could’ve lied to you about my parents, but I” He looks away and clears his throat, tears shining in his

eyes. “I told you the truth. Do you know how fucking hard that was for me? And now I find out I shared that—something I’ve never told *anyone*—with someone who lies to me and doesn’t trust me.”

There’s nothing I can say to defend myself because he’s right. I should have been honest with him. At the very least, I shouldn’t have lied.

“I’m sorry,” I say softly.

The old Mila would have defended herself to the death. I would never let anyone convince me I was wrong. But Colby has softened me. I don’t want to be a person who shoots first and aims later anymore.

“Who is he?” he demands, flexing his hands into fists. “Does he know about me?”

I shake my head. “It’s not what you think.”

“I think you lied to me about where you were going and who you went to see and then went to see another man.”

I sigh heavily, on the verge of telling him the truth when he picks up his keys and grabs a hoodie from a hook in the mudroom. The slam of the door makes me jump.

Once I’m alone, I let my tears fall.

“OH, HONEY.”

Quentin steps onto his front porch and puts his arms around me. I press my face to his shoulder and cry.

When I finally step away, he keeps an arm around me and ushers me inside. I texted him as soon as Colby left, asking if I could come over. I’ve never been inside his house and I know I’m intruding, but I needed a little comfort.

“I’m sorry,” I say, sliding my coat off. “I won’t stay long.”

Quentin’s boyfriend Jacob walks into the room, passing me a glass of wine. “Stop that. We want you here.”

“Thanks,” I say, grateful for the wine.

I take a sip and Quentin motions me to follow them into the kitchen. It smells like a bakery, homemade noodles lying on every available counter space.

“Wow, it’s like a nonna’s kitchen up in here,” I say.

Jacob is a chef. He and Quentin spend a lot of time cooking together in their kitchen.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Quentin asks, topping off his own glass of wine and Jacob’s.

“Not really.” I sit down on a stool at the island.

Jacob moves around the small kitchen efficiently, taking containers out of the refrigerator and putting dishes in the sink. Quentin sits down next to me.

“We got this wine from the place near Colorado Springs I was telling you about,” he says. “What do you think of it?”

“It’s great. Sorry I’m in more of a drinking mood than a sipping one.”

He laughs. “We do a lot more drinking than sipping around here.”

Jacob moves a piece of noodle-covered parchment paper from in front of me on the island and sets down a plate. I look up at him, surprised.

“Roasted chicken and mushroom risotto,” he says, returning to noodle duty.

Fresh tears prick my eyes. It’s comforting to be cared for. I didn’t get a single bite of dinner at Colby’s and my stomach is rumbling.

“Thank you, Jacob,” I say, emotion welling in my throat.

I eat quietly, Quentin and Jacob working on the noodles and glancing at me occasionally to make sure I’m okay.

I’m not okay, but at least I’m not alone. When I finish my food, Jacob sweeps my dirty plate away, refusing to let me clean up after myself. Quentin takes me into their living room,

settling me into a comfy recliner and covering me up to my chin with a big warm blanket.

The room looks right out of a Pottery Barn ad, the walls a soft gray-green shade and the furniture different hues of brown. Picture frames and books line the shelves surrounding the TV and a fire crackles in the fireplace.

“We have an entire case of this wine downstairs,” he says, sitting down in the chair next to mine. “And my boss is pretty cool, so we can stay up as late as you want watching movies. Would you like to choose from my Cry It Out list or my Feel Better list?”

“You have lists?”

“I do.”

I smile, grateful Quentin applied for his job when he did. I had no idea how much I needed him in my life.

“Feel Better sounds nice,” I say, though I don’t think any movie will help me forget the hurt in Colby’s eyes when he caught me in a lie.

How can he think I’d ever sleep with any other man? No one measures up.

Quentin scrolls to find something on his phone. “*Bring It On, As Good as it Gets, Bridesmaids, The Princess Diaries, Mean Girls, Pitch Perfect.*”

“The only one of those I’ve seen is *Bridesmaids.*”

He wrinkles his nose, looking offended. “All the money in the world and you still don’t know good cinema.”

“I went to boarding school. We didn’t get to watch many movies.”

He picks up a remote from the coffee table. “A life without Regina George is no life at all. We’ll start with *Mean Girls*. Tell me to pause it if you want to talk.”

I won’t. There’s nothing to say. I either have to tell Colby the secret I swore to take to my grave, or I’ll lose him.

Jacob comes in with two big bowls, handing one to me and one to Quentin. They're both filled with freshly popped popcorn with M&M's mixed in. I close my eyes, taking in the scents of butter and melty chocolate.

"Thank you," I say. "Can you join us?"

"I'll be in after I clean up and turn down the guest bed for you."

"No, don't do that," I say firmly. "I'm not staying."

He nods. "Yes, you are. I'm making you banana walnut pancakes for breakfast."

"You don't want to miss those. They're yummy," Quentin says.

I swallow against the lump in my throat. "Thanks, you guys. I'll stay if you promise to come to a sleepover at my place soon."

Not that I have a place at the moment, but I'll have to buy one soon. Colby won't let me stay with things this way between us.

"Deal," Quentin says.

He presses play on the movie and I try to focus on it, but my mind keeps wandering to Colby.

I don't know if I can fix things between us. I'm going to sleep on it and see if I have a clearer answer in the morning.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Colby

“YOU LOOK LIKE HELL,” Dom says, sitting down next to me on a bench in the locker room.

“Thanks.”

“Just keeping it real, man. You hungover?”

I shrug. “A little.”

“Go stick your head in the ice tub. Your whole head. It helps.”

“I took some aspirin. I’ll be okay.”

We have a home game tonight, and I’m running on about three hours of sleep. When I left the house last night, I went to Mountain Top and drank alone for a couple of hours. Mila was gone when I got home and she hadn’t come back by the time I left this morning.

I’m just trying to get by until I can go home for my pregame nap. I turned my phone off and have been drinking lots of water. I’m in no condition to play a game right now, so I have to get my mind and body into a better place.

Mila’s deception hit me hard. Things between us were great. We never seemed to get tired of each other. Laughing, talking, eating...and the sex was off the charts. In the week things were good between us, I was either working, sleeping,

or spending time with her. I felt like a high school kid falling in love for the first time.

I want to believe there's an explanation for her lie, but if there is, I can't understand why she won't just talk to me.

"Thought you'd be dancing right about now," Beck says, leaning over from a couple of lockers down.

"Why?"

"You didn't hear? Your brother got called up. My buddy Clark texted me. Heath's going to be on the third line with him."

I'm too stunned to speak for a few seconds. Then I get up and grab my phone from my locker, turning it on. There are several texts and two missed calls from Heath.

I immediately dial him.

"I got the call," he says in answer. "I fucking got the call. Can you believe it?"

My eyes start to water a little and I look down, not wanting my teammates to see. "Of course I believe it, man. I knew you would. Congratulations."

"Tell Mila I'll make her proud."

I pause, her name making my heart pound harder. "What's she got to do with it?"

"She called Steve, the Anaheim owner, this morning and told him if he doesn't call me up he's..." My brother laughs. "A dumbfuck. I know I wouldn't have gotten this chance without you guys and I won't let you down."

I lean a hand on my locker, unable to speak. Even after the way I treated her last night, Mila helped my brother get his biggest break. I feel about two inches tall."

"When's your first game?" I ask, clearing my throat.

"Tomorrow." He moves the phone away from his mouth and yells out with excitement, then returns the phone to his mouth. "I'm playing tomorrow. I'm about to jump out of my skin, man. I can't fucking wait."

I shake my head, wishing I didn't have a road trip starting tomorrow.

"I'd be there if I could."

"I know."

"Are you going to call them?"

He knows who I mean. Our parents. Neither one of us talks to our mom much anymore, because it's too hard. And if we ever see our dad again, it'll be at his funeral, where we'll toast the end of a mean sonofabitch who beat his wife and kids.

"No," he says softly. "The only family I want at any of my games is you and Mila."

Hearing him call her family gets to me. It's the truth, but for how much longer? I have a feeling Mila will be willing to pay any price to escape me after the way I treated her last night.

"The first one we can get to, we'll be there," I say, though I have a bad feeling it'll be just me.

"Hey, I have to go. My new coach is calling me."

"Okay. Congrats, man."

"Thanks. I love you."

Our mom used to say that to us all the time. It's been years since anyone has said those words to me. They sound foreign, like something people say to others, but never to me.

"I love you, too," I say.

Dom claps me on the shoulder as soon as I hang up, grinning. "He got the call?"

"He got the call."

"That's great. They need him."

I nod, Mila front and center in my mind. I find a quiet corner of the weight room and sit there alone for a few minutes, thinking.

Why did she make that call? Was it guilt? My gut tells me it wasn't. No matter why she did it, I have to thank her.

I leave the locker room and walk straight to her office, finding Quentin at his desk.

“Is she here?” I ask.

His expression is guarded; his mood is much different than his talkative, merry one yesterday.

“I’ll see if she’s available,” he says.

He types something on his computer and then looks up at me, unsmiling. “She’ll see you. Don’t upset her.”

I shake my head and start walking toward her office.

“Just because I have small muscles doesn’t mean I can’t shank you,” he says.

“Noted.”

I walk into Mila’s office and close the door, my heart sinking when I see her. She’s wearing a black suit, her hair pulled back at the nape of her neck. Though she doesn’t need it, she usually wears eye makeup, but today she doesn’t have any on. I can tell her eyes are red and swollen behind her dark-rimmed reading glasses.

“Hey,” I say.

“Hi.”

Her tone is crisp. Part of me wants to tell her I’m sorry and she doesn’t need to explain anything to me. My pride won’t let me, though. I’ve shared my entire self with her; I need the same in return.

“Thank you for making that call for my brother.”

She looks back at her computer monitor. “I did it because he deserved it, not for you.”

“All the same, thanks.”

She takes off her glasses and sets them on her desk, narrowing her eyes at me. “Do you really think I cheated on you last night?”

“No,” I admit.

“I’ve never been emotionally reliant on another person. I was trying so hard to be...normal. Less defensive. I don’t go with the flow, but for you...I did.”

I nod, not sure where she’s going with this.

“Why can’t you just trust me?” she asks.

I sit down in front of her desk. “I do trust you. I didn’t get much sleep last night and I can’t think about anything else today but you. Our relationship hasn’t been conventional, and I...” I look away. “I’ve already let my guard completely down. Maybe you’re not there yet. But you won’t be able to get there with me acting the way I did last night. I’m sorry. And I won’t lie, it gutted me to see another man opening that door and you walking inside. But if you tell me nothing happened, I believe you.”

Her eyes widen with surprise. “You do?”

I nod, letting my gut guide me. “You’re honest to a fault. You said you’ve been faithful to me, and I don’t know if this makes any sense, but...I can feel that it’s the truth. I feel it when we’re together.”

She smiles and sighs at the same time. “I don’t know what to say. It means a lot that you trust me.”

“I want to be with you. We’re freakishly good at messing shit up in this relationship, but I’ve never not wanted to be with you. That’s what matters, isn’t it?”

“I’m terrible at relationships. But I want to be better with you.”

“Me too.”

I stand up and walk around to her side of the desk, where she meets me in an embrace.

“Why didn’t you come home last night?” I ask her, closing my eyes and breathing in the sweet, familiar scent of her perfume.

“I didn’t think you wanted me to.”

“I did. I always want you to come back to me.”

She relaxes against me. “I slept at Quentin and Jacob’s house.”

“That explains why Quentin just threatened to shank me.”

She laughs against my chest. “He did?”

“Yep.”

She leans back, looking up at me. “Do you have time to go somewhere with me?”

“Somewhere close?”

“Pretty close.”

I grin. “If *somewhere* is my bed, I was going there to take a nap anyway.”

“It’s not.”

“Well shit then,” I say, teasing her.

She laughs lightly. “But we can do both. My thing first, and then I’ll join you for that nap.”

“Deal.”

She gets her coat and bag and we walk up to Quentin’s desk together.

“Quentin, can you reschedule everything I have before two this afternoon?”

“You got it, boss.”

She slides her hand into mine and we walk out of the office, Quentin still giving me the evil eye.

When we get to the parking lot, she pushes a button and unlocks her Mercedes SUV.

“You got your car back?” I ask.

“Yep. The fire marshal finally let the building owner get the cars from the deck.”

She starts driving, and I soon realize where we’re going.

“I meant what I said. I trust you,” I tell her.

She smiles at me. “I trust you, too.”

Twenty minutes later, she parks a few doors down from the house she went into last night. I give her a skeptical look as we approach the front door together.

“Are you sure about this?”

She nods. “Completely.”

We walk up the stairs to the front porch and she knocks. The same man from last night answers, looking surprised.

“Mila...we weren’t expecting you.” He steps aside so we can walk inside.

The house has hardwood floors and simple furniture, with nothing on the walls. The curtains are all closed, lamps and overhead lights on.

She looks at me. “Colby, this is Vlad. I’ve known him since...well...”

Vlad is a tall, broad man with short dark hair who looks like a bouncer. He doesn’t seem like a guy who smiles much.

“Since you were born,” Vlad says.

“And Vlad, this is Colby Harrison, my husband.”

Vlad arches his brows and grins. “Your husband?”

He puts his hand out to shake mine, his fingers crushing mine. “She’s been keeping you a secret. I’m happy for you both.”

I feel like an idiot for accusing Mila of sleeping with him. He’s graying at the temples and has to be in his late forties, and he clearly doesn’t see her that way.

“How is he today?” she asks.

Vlad frowns. “Not good. You should come back later.”

“We’re going to pop in for just a minute.”

He nods and turns, leading us around a corner to a door that looks like it leads to a basement. We walk down a flight of stairs, reaching another door, where another man sits in a recliner, an automatic rifle sitting on a small table next to him.

He doesn't even blink as Vlad enters a set of numbers into a keypad.

He opens the door and we follow him inside, my hand instinctively wrapping around Mila's. I have no idea what's inside that room, but the rifle has me on high alert.

My lips part with surprise as I take in the scene before me. We're in a wide-open room with a tile floor, fluorescent lights glowing overhead. A little old man lies in a hospital bed, a recliner next to it.

He pinches his brows together and says something in what I think is Russian, his agitation clear.

"Colby," Mila says, squeezing my hand. "I'd like you to meet my grandfather."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Mila

I HATE that it had to be like this. If Colby could have met my deda five years ago, he would have met a wise man who loved me dearly.

With the progression of his disease, though, my grandfather isn't himself anymore. He hasn't recognized me in a long time. He requires around-the-clock nursing care. Sometimes he still thinks he's in his prime with enemies to deal with, so he has to be restrained to his bed for his own safety.

Ivan Pavlov's fall from power was mighty. He told me shortly after his diagnosis with Alzheimer's that it was penance for all the terrible things he did in his life. He predicted the disease would take him slowly, squeezing out every ounce of his dignity until there was nothing left.

He was right. He's incoherent much of the time now, and he needs assistance with everyday basic tasks. I made a promise to him when I had him smuggled out of Russia six years ago to save him from what was sure to be a painful death. There was a high price on his head when he announced he wanted to atone for his crimes, because other powerful oligarchs knew he could easily take them down with him. I contacted a private security team, mostly consisting of former SEALs, to extract him and bring him to the United States. I

swore to him that I'd always take care of him and that no one would see his decline.

No one but me and the small team I trust to keep him safe and comfortable.

"He doesn't speak English," Colby says to me.

We're standing at the foot of the bed. Deda is accusing us of coming here to kill him, but Colby can't understand him. The physician's assistant who cares for him during the day, Kelly, stands up from the chair she was sitting in, tucked out of the way in a corner of the room.

"He's having a rough day," she says.

Deda is skin and bones now, but he still tugs on his wrist restraints as hard as he can, his eyes wild with panic.

I approach his side and speak to him in Russian, telling him he's safe. For a while, when he stopped recognizing me, I'd tell him that I'm his granddaughter and he'd light up with happiness. As his condition worsened, he stopped believing me.

Kelly goes to his other side and tells him in broken Russian that everything is okay. He spits at her and I cringe. He has so little strength that the spit lands on his bedsheet.

As Kelly takes out a needle and injects medicine into his IV line, I reach into my bag and take out a small bundle wrapped in a scarf. As soon as Deda sees the blue Fabergé egg from his collection, he stops resisting.

Like the classical Sergei Rachmaninoff-composed music playing on a record player set up on one wall of the room right now, these priceless pieces of art always comfort him. I put it in his hands and he traces the gold lines that swirl around it, silent now.

We used to have dinner in the kitchen here several nights a week. Vlad, the son of one of my grandfather's dearest friends, swore his allegiance to my grandfather decades ago and he refused to leave him when he was extracted, telling the SEAL team they'd have to shoot him. Instead, they brought him, too. He'd cook my grandfather's favorite foods from home and the

three of us would play cards at the little wood table in the kitchen. Deda wouldn't talk much about his past, but he'd often tell me to disregard everything he'd ever told me about making sure I married a strong, powerful man.

Instead, he said, I needed to marry a kind one. I wish I could tell him the story of how Colby and I ended up married. The corners of his eyes would crinkle as he smiled and listened.

His eyes flick from the egg up to meet my gaze, the conflict he's feeling obvious. He doesn't know who I am or why I'm here, but he's starting to suspect I'm not his enemy.

I tell him in Russian that I brought my husband to meet him, and that he's kind. I can tell he doesn't know what I'm saying, and it's like an arrow to my heart.

Colby walks over, standing behind me and wrapping his arms around me. Deda's medicine is starting to kick in, his eyelids drooping.

We stand there until he's asleep, the egg still in his hand. Then I kiss his forehead and cover him up. Kelly gently takes the egg from his hand and sets it on a high shelf where other family photos and trinkets are displayed.

I take Colby's hand and we walk upstairs.

"I have tea and coffee," Vlad offers.

"Thanks, but I think we're going to go," I say.

Back in the car, Colby lets out a heavy sigh. "I feel so horrible. I fucked up again."

"You apologized."

He shakes his head, his expression tortured. "I shut you out for a full month over something I could have easily explained. And then right after we made up, I accused you of cheating when you were going to see your sick grandfather."

"I shouldn't have lied about it. And it's not easy to talk about the things we're ashamed of. My father said and did things in front of me that I've never told a soul about."

I start the car and drive away, Colby staring out the car window.

“No one can know about him,” I say. “It’s a matter of life and death.”

“I swear I’ll never tell a soul. That’s the one thing I can at least do right by you.”

He sounds bitter and angry at himself, which isn’t what I wanted. I glance at him.

“Hey. I took you there *because* you trust me. And because I trust you. I wasn’t trying to play gotcha and prove anything.”

“I know that. I just...” He shifts in his seat. “I thought I’d be the one putting up with your shit when we made this deal. But I’m the asshole.”

“We’ve had some misunderstandings, but everything is out in the open now.”

“Yeah.” He looks at me and I have to force myself to keep my eyes on the road instead of him. “You’re a great person, Mila. I misjudged you before.”

“You can make it up to me in bed,” I say lightly.

He doesn’t respond, sending alarm bells off in my head. This is supposed to be the part where we can’t keep our hands off each other because we just made up.

Colby’s in his own world, though. We ride in silence the rest of the way back to the arena, a sense of dread sinking into my chest and taking hold.

A FEW HOURS LATER, I’m in my box at the arena, trying to get lost in the action of the game. There’s no score with two minutes left in the first period. Colby, Beau, and Ford are poetry in motion, passing perfectly, but Nashville’s defense came to play. We can’t even get a puck in the same zip code the net’s in.

“Hi, Mila.”

I look up and see Elle Lawrence, Ford’s girlfriend, sitting down next to me.

“I have no comment on my marriage, rumors about my marriage, or literally anything else,” I say sharply. “Go try to ruin someone else’s life.”

She sighs softly. “I’m off duty tonight. Just here as Ford’s girlfriend. I was wondering if you and Colby would like to come to Tahoe with me, Ford, Beau, and Shelby.”

“There’s a lake there, right? Are you planning to drown me?”

She laughs. “Enough of the animosity between us. I want to be your friend.”

When she was writing columns for the *Denver Chronicle* about her opposition to the new arena, I considered her an enemy. Even after the arena was approved, I disliked her smugness.

But she is Ford’s girlfriend, and Ford and Colby are close.

“When?” I ask.

“In about six weeks. I can send you the dates if you want to check your schedule.”

“Sure.”

“Great. I hope you guys can make it.”

I swallow my pride, remembering that the new Mila isn’t catty and vindictive. Or at least, not *as* catty and vindictive as the old Mila.

“Thanks for the invite.”

I expect her to get up and leave, but she stays, jumping up with me to cheer when Ben scores a goal. She has a perfect opportunity to exit, but instead she sits back down.

“You know, sources are saying that our governor is in some hot water.”

I turn sharply, eager to hear more. “What do you mean?”

“Apparently he’s been using his influence to gain political favors. Not that anyone’s surprised, but he was secretly recorded in a damning phone call that will be made public soon.”

My heart nearly stops. A recorded phone call. If it gets out that I was about to be deported, my marriage to Colby will be under a fresh round of scrutiny.

And the way things are going now, I don’t know that we can survive another round.

“Is it about me?” I ask.

Her eyes widen. “No, absolutely not. I’m sorry if I alarmed you. It has nothing to do with you. I mentioned it because I know he did everything he could to block the new arena. I thought you’d be interested to know.”

“I am.” I relax and start breathing again. “I definitely am. Thanks for telling me.”

We return to watching the game, Nashville tying it up right before the end of the first period. Elle goes to the bathroom and I stand up to stretch my legs, wishing for a glass of the wine I had at Quentin and Jacob’s house the other night.

Peter, who doesn’t attend most games, comes running into the box, panting. He tugs on the collar of his shirt and then loosens his tie.

“My God, it’s a long walk from the office to here,” he says, putting his hands on his knees.

I get a bottle of water from the mini fridge and hand it to him. “What are you still doing working this late?”

He stands back up, opens the water, and takes a sip. “I did it.”

“Did what?”

He looks over both of his shoulders. “The problem is solved.”

“Can you be more specific?”

His eyes bulge with annoyance. “Your governor worries are over.”

I gasp, shocked one of his political connections came through. This means I don’t have to worry about being deported anymore.

“You’re a genius,” I say, making a note to give him a large bonus for this. “How much?”

He grins. “Not nearly as much as you’d think. I found someone he campaigned against who’s eager to make friends with his enemies.”

I hug him and he stiffens, a fatherly type who isn’t used to being hugged at work.

“I’m grateful to you,” I say, pulling away.

“Glad I could get it done. I had to hire a firm to review the arena contracts because I didn’t have time with this in my lap. It’ll be costly.”

“That’s okay. Whatever you need. And I want you to take at least a week off. We’ll hire an assistant for you if you need it. I want you to have better work-life balance.”

He lowers his brows, looking suspicious. Probably because old Mila judged anyone in the organization who didn’t work extra hours. But new Mila knows no amount of money can make up for time spent missing out on life.

“I’m serious,” I say. “Go home and don’t let me catch you at the office tomorrow.”

He nods and leaves immediately, probably wondering if I’m going to change my mind.

It’s going to take time for the people around me to truly believe it, but it’s true. A leopard can change its spots. My pen-throwing meltdown days are over.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Colby

“ON THE ROAD AGAIN,” Beau says as we sit down in seats on opposite sides of the aisle on the team plane.

The familiar lemon scent of the disinfectant that’s used to wipe down surfaces inside the plane makes me sigh deeply as I get out my headphones. That smell means we’re just starting a road trip. I’ll spend a lot of time trying to sleep on this plane as we fly to the next city after games.

Usually, I like traveling. It’s harder for the guys with wives and kids, but for the bachelors, several big cities in the span of a week or so simply means more opportunities to pick up women.

Some of my teammates will be swiping right and left on Tinder profiles before the plane finishes taxiing in Boston. That used to be me, trying to lock in a postgame hookup as early as possible.

Everything’s different now. All I want to do is stay in Denver so I can figure things out with Mila. She was already asleep when I got home last night and had already left for work when I got up this morning. I’d hoped for time to talk, but instead I’m leaving for Boston with more questions than answers.

I thought I knew who I was and what I wanted. Our relationship has forced me to face some hard truths, though. I

tend to assume the worst will happen. Growing up the way I did affected my mindset about relationships more than I ever realized. And the most difficult truth of all—I haven't avoided committed relationships all these years because I want to sow my wild oats, but because I'm afraid.

Dom's walking down the aisle in search of a seat. He stops and rips ass, grinning.

"I had chili yesterday, boys. Might be a long flight."

Groans sound throughout the plane and someone throws a foam ball at his head. He makes eye contact with me, silently asking if he can sit next to me, and I shake my head. Dom turns to Beau and gets the same response.

"Fuck you guys," he mutters.

No one's willing to sit by him, and he ends up in the last row of the plane, alone. Good. I'm not in the mood for his shit today.

I put my headphones in, starting a podcast my former teammate Harry just started doing. It's about life after pro sports, and he interviews other retired athletes.

Though it's interesting, my mind still wanders to Mila. I should have woken her up when I got home last night and told her all the things I've been thinking since meeting her grandfather yesterday. I could text her, but it feels too impersonal for what I need to tell her—that there's nothing fake about the way I feel about her.

"WHAT ARE YOU GONNA DO, Harrison? Call your sugar mama wife and tell on me?"

Austin McGill sneers, pulling away from the ref trying to hold him back from me as we both skate toward our penalty boxes. He's pushing my buttons tonight, and I'm letting him.

We're winning the game 4-2, and Nashville's fans are lit up about it. The fans near my penalty box are calling me every

name in the book. I'm not just a pussy, I'm a fucking pussy or a motherfucking pussy. A kid who can't be more than eight years old cups his hands around his mouth and yells "pussy bitch" at me as I shake my head. His parents must be proud.

As soon as I get out of the box, the second period ends. As we skate off the ice, I look up into the VIP boxes, scanning them for a woman with smooth dark hair and red lips.

I'm not surprised when I don't see her. Why would she come? I was an asshole to her yesterday when I ignored her hint at makeup sex. I was so stuck in my own thoughts.

It takes all my focus to listen to Coach Maddox and keep my head in the game when we return to the ice. I get a lucky opening and score in the third period, and I make sure I smile at the fans who chirped at me when I was in the penalty box.

We win the game and the mood is light in the locker room after, guys laughing and joking. I'm happy about the win, but still feeling unsettled. We're flying to Vancouver tonight, where I'll live this day all over again, hopefully with another win. I don't want to wait another day without letting Mila know how I feel, though. There's no privacy for anything but a text, but a text is better than letting her think I'm angry or don't care.

As soon as I'm able to, I get my phone out to send a text. I see several unread texts she sent me during the game.

Mila: I have good news. Divorce papers are being drawn up for us to discuss when you get back. You mean a lot to me and I'll never be able to thank you for everything you've done.

Mila: Austin McGill is all dick and no balls. Nice hit on him.

Mila: Great game!

I stare at my phone screen, feeling numb. She's so done with my shit that she's willing to risk deportation rather than stay married to me. I'm walking proof that sometimes people who look like they have it all actually don't have anything that really matters.

Divorce. That was always the end goal, so why does it feel so fucking wrong?

I shower quickly, finishing before everyone else and putting on some boxers. Then I take my phone into the bathroom, make sure it's empty, and stand in front of a wall that will allow me to see anyone who walks in.

Mila sounds surprised when she answers my call. "Hey, everything okay?"

No. Everything is fucked. But I don't have time for a long conversation.

"That text you sent me about the papers...is it because of yesterday?"

A pause, and then, "No, not at all. It's because that favor I've been trying to get came through."

My heart hammers as I consider my next words. It's so fucking hard to open myself up and risk getting shot down, and it's harder when we have to talk in code just in case anyone is listening.

"I don't want it," I say, putting the truth out there. "The thing with the papers. Would you consider not doing it?"

She inhales sharply, silent for a few seconds. "I...yes, I'd consider it, but we need to talk about it when you get back. I never want you to feel...trapped, I guess."

"I don't."

Ben walks into the bathroom, still not dressed after showering.

"Hey, you've got to get out," I tell him.

He furrows his brow, confused. "I have to take a shit, man."

"I need five minutes. It's important. Stand at the door of the bathroom and don't let anyone in."

Though he gives me an aggravated look, he says, "Fine. Five minutes."

“What was that?” Mila asks.

“I took over the bathroom so I can talk to you without everyone listening.”

“You sound stressed.”

I scoff. “Yeah, you think? After the way we left things yesterday and your text, I’m going out of my mind here.”

“Do I make you happy?” she asks, a sad note in her voice. “Because I feel like I just stress you out and make you mad.”

My shoulders slump and I exhale hard. “That’s on me, not you. I want to do better. Be better. But only if you want it, too.”

“Of course I do.” Her voice breaks. “I’ve shared more of myself with you than I ever have with anyone, because of my feelings for you.”

Hope flickers to life inside me. “What feelings?”

She hums with amusement. “Depends on the day. Lust, frustration, elation, disgust, sadness...love.”

She says the last word softly, like she’s afraid of exposing herself. The hope inside me is a full-fledged fire now, blazing with possibility.

“Love?” I ask.

“Harrison, what the fuck?” someone yells into the bathroom. “I have to piss!”

I scowl as I say, “Hang on,” into the phone and then cover the mouthpiece with my hand.

“Piss in the shower, fuckface! I’m on an important call!”

“I’m gonna piss in your locker.”

I ignore the voice that sounds like Sal’s and return to my call with Mila. “Sorry about that. You were saying?”

“You know what I said.” There’s a smile in her voice. “I don’t think there’s a single emotion I haven’t felt with you.”

“Same here. But why disgust?”

“You splash pee on the bathroom floor. It’s gross.”

“I can work on that. I’ll get a funnel or something.”

She groans. “No, I don’t want your piss funnel on the bathroom counter.”

“I’ll counterbalance the pissing by waking you up with my face in your pussy every day I’m home.”

“I can live with that.”

I want her so fucking bad right now. Why are there so many miles between us?

“I told you about...you know...because I thought you wanted it,” she says.

“I don’t.”

“Okay, that’s...I’m happy you called to tell me. I miss you.”

“I miss you too, babe.”

“I’m about to shit my pants!” Ben yells into the bathroom. “Your five minutes are up.”

Assholes. It’s impossible to have any privacy on road trips.

“I have to go,” I tell Mila.

“I can come to Vancouver tomorrow for the game, if you want me to.”

Ben stomps into the bathroom, glaring at me. “I’ve been holding in a shit brick since the second period.”

He goes into a stall and shuts the door, groaning as he drops his pants, sits down and farts loudly.

“I definitely want you to,” I say, feeling lighter than I have in a long time. And happy. Really happy. “I can’t wait.”

Sal comes in next, both middle fingers in the air as he looks at me. I shake my head.

“I’ll see you soon, then. Have a safe trip to Vancouver.”

“Okay, and...” I clear my throat. “That thing we were talking about a little bit ago...not disgust but the other thing...”

I feel it too.”

“I want to hear more about it tomorrow, when you aren’t in a bathroom with your teammates.”

“You will.”

“Good night.”

“Night.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Mila

“WE’LL BE FASTENING our seatbelts for landing soon, Mrs. Harrison. Is there anything you need?”

I smile at the flight attendant on my plane, liking the sound of *Mrs. Harrison*. “No, thanks.”

I’ve had butterflies since waking up this morning, knowing I get to see Colby tonight. I was surprised when I got his call last night, and I cried happy tears after we hung up.

What we have is completely different from the no-strings-sex arrangements I’ve had with other men. Those were always on my terms, when and where *I* wanted to get together. No feelings. I never could have trusted that any man wanted me for anything but my money anyway.

It’s different with Colby. We’ve had good times and bad, but the bad ones have brought us closer. He knows me in a way no one else ever has, and I don’t want to let go of that.

The plane lands and a black SUV picks me up on the tarmac, taking me to the Vancouver arena. I’m wearing my jersey with Colby’s name and number on the back, black leggings, and tennis shoes, my hair freshly blown out.

Vancouver’s team owners, a couple named Tony and Julia Lawson, invite me to sit with them in their owner’s box. We have dinner before the game, served buffet style, and I sit next to Julia after filling a plate.

“Congratulations on your marriage,” she says, beaming. “You sure picked a handsome one, girl.”

“He is, isn’t he?”

She arches a brow, amused. “I can tell you at least one teenage heart was broken to see Colby Harrison off the market. Our seventeen-year-old daughter, Bea, moped for a whole day over it.”

I laugh. Colby’s blue eyes, blond hair, and classic good looks have always gotten him features in magazines, usually shirtless. A famous photographer took a nude photo of him for a big body image article, Colby grinning and holding a hockey glove over the family jewels.

He’s so much more than a hot body and good looks, though. I’ve been daydreaming about the possibility of us making our relationship work. Taking trips together and making dinner on snowy winter nights. There are so many things I’d love to do with him. Dancing lessons. Snorkeling. Riding camels and seeing the pyramids. Maybe even having a family.

It wouldn’t be right away. The two of us need to be sure we truly want what we have together. If I ever have children, it’ll only be when I know I can raise them in a loving home, completely different from the way I grew up.

Julia tells me more about her daughter and her other two kids, her husband on the other side of the booth but still looking over at her and smiling every few minutes.

“You guys are really in love, aren’t you?” I say.

“Twenty-one years ago, on our wedding day, I thought I loved him as much it was possible to love another person. But I can honestly say I love him more now than I did then. It’s not always easy, but it’s always worth it.”

The lights go down for the pregame video show and we move to our seats in front of the glass, Julia sitting in between me and Tony. He reaches for her hand, stroking his thumb over her knuckles.

I want what they have. A love that grows deeper and stronger with time. Someone I love so completely that I don't know if I can live without him.

The butterflies in my stomach clamor to attention when Colby skates onto the ice. He glances up at the luxury boxes, looking for me. I wave at him like a giddy high schooler, not caring how I look.

It's hard for the players to see this high up, but whether he sees me or not, he knows I'm here.

Once the puck drops, I lean forward, my full attention on the game. Our second line is playing better than ever since Coach Maddox switched Dom and Ben. Dom is a leader, and the second line had two leaders. What he considered a demotion was really just a realignment. Every offensive line is important at this level. Coach Maddox told me in a private meeting that Dom also needed an attitude adjustment, and from what I've heard, the move hasn't helped.

Sometimes the drama of team ownership is like a soap opera. I wouldn't change a thing, though.

We win the game 2-1, and I can finally relax. Our backup goalie, Drew Horner, had to take over after Sal was injured in a collision in the third period.

Tony asks an usher to take me down to the tunnel where I can meet up with Colby. As soon as he steps outside the locker room and his eyes find mine, my heart leaps.

He wraps me up in a hug, the smell of his soap and aftershave making me warm all over. Though he looks damn good in his black suit, white dress shirt, and dark blue tie, all I can think about is getting it off of him. Feeling his skin on mine.

He cups my face in his hands and kisses me, gently resting his forehead against mine.

"I missed you, little dove," he says against my lips.

"I missed you, too."

"Let's go to the hotel."

I nod and he takes my hand, leading me down the hallway. We keep our heads down as photographers snap photos, not saying a word until we're inside the black SUV that will take us to whatever hotel the front office staff booked for the team this trip.

"Thanks for coming," he says as I snuggle into his side.

"Thanks for winning and making it worth the trip."

He laughs and kisses my forehead. "You might not be so glad you came when you see the hotel our cheap-ass owner is putting us up in."

I gently fake punch him in the stomach. "I happen to know your team owner is a lovely, generous woman."

"She can be. Unless you take the last Pop-Tart. Then she grows fangs and horns; it's terrifying."

I look up at him, my brows arched in amusement. "Own it, Harrison. You didn't just take the last one, you left the empty box in the pantry. That's a misdemeanor in some states."

"You like hardened criminals?" he whispers against my lips.

"How hard are we talking?"

He grins and kisses me, this one more passionate than the one outside the locker room. Our driver is a pro though, acting like we aren't even here.

The downtown boutique hotel is an old, beautifully restored building with marble floors and modern décor. Colby already has a room key and I already had my bag delivered here, so we take the elevator directly to the room, our hands roaming on the elevator ride.

I have to jog to keep up with him as he directs me to our room with my hand in his. He opens the door, steps inside, and turns to face me before I can follow.

"I need to put this on you," he says, taking something out of his pocket.

It's a strip of black fabric, and I give him a puzzled look. "Can I come inside first?"

He reaches toward my face with the fabric. "Not without the blindfold."

"A blindfold?"

My heart pounds erratically as he covers my eyes. My instinct is to take it off, but I trust him, so I take a deep breath and let him lead me into the room.

The sweet perfume of fresh roses fills my nose. Did he have flowers delivered for me?

I'm grinning like a fool as he takes both my hands and leads me further into the room.

"Okay, give me just a couple of seconds," he says, clearing his throat.

I wait, the anticipation of his surprise making me giddy.

"You can take the blindfold off now," he says.

When I do, my jaw drops. Fresh red rose petals cover every surface in the room. The entire floor, the bed, the pillows, the tables. Everything is covered in rose petals. And Colby is down on one knee, a small box in his hand.

Tears pool in my eyes as he takes my hand. "Mila, I know it's been a whirlwind, and I know I have things to work on, but..." He takes a deep breath and I squeeze his hand. "I love you and I want us to be sitting in front of a fire playing Scrabble fifty years from now. Will you stay married to me?"

He flips the box open and reveals a huge oval sapphire ring, diamonds encircling the main stone.

"It's like your grandpa's Fabergé egg," he says, taking it out of the box.

My face is contorted as I start to ugly cry. All I can do is nod, my throat tight with emotion. He slides the ring onto my finger and it's a perfect fit.

Then he stands and picks me up, carrying me over to the bed. He kisses me as we lie down, his knee between my

thighs. The scent of roses is everywhere as he pulls off my shirt, unfastens my bra, and takes one of my nipples in his mouth.

I moan softly, fisting his tie to pull his body closer to mine. As things heat up, I loosen the knot of his tie and pull it over his head, tossing it aside, and then start working on the buttons of his shirt. As great as he is at foreplay, I want the real thing.

He finishes removing his shirt, followed by his undershirt. Then he gets out of bed and removes the rest of his clothes, finally pulling off my shoes, socks, leggings, and panties.

“I’ll never forget the way you look right now, wearing nothing but my ring on your finger,” he says as he gazes at me, his eyes filled with reverence and lust.

I hope I never forget the way he looks in this moment. If my memories start to fade in my old age, like my grandfather’s memories have, I hope this one will be the last to go.

Colby moves his body over mine, slowly sliding inside me and groaning, his lips hovering just out of reach. Our bodies move in perfect unison, hips thrusting and hands grasping.

It’s different this time. We’ve both laid ourselves bare, exposing our fears and secrets. Our hopes and vulnerabilities.

When we reach the peak, we do it together, his groan vibrating against my chest as I spiral over the edge of bliss. Surely it can’t be this amazing every time.

We stay entwined for a while, side by side. I feel myself starting to doze off, but then Colby says something.

“I want you to take my last name, dove,” Colby whispers. “Say you will.”

I smile, opening my eyes. “I will.”

He kisses my forehead, nose, cheeks, and lips. “I’ll make you happy, Mila. I promise.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Colby

SIX WEEKS LATER

“Mila, I’ve decided to retire,” Beau jokes, grinning. “I’m staying right here for the rest of my life.”

It’s tempting. The cabin we rented in Tahoe for the six of us has twelve bedrooms, seven bathrooms, an indoor pool, killer lake views, and an outdoor hot tub that could easily fit eighteen people.

“We should buy this place,” she says from beside me. “Then we can all come here anytime we want.”

“I don’t think it’s for sale.”

She smiles. “Baby, for the right price, *everything* is for sale.”

It’s chilly outside, but the heated hot tub feels amazing. Mila’s wearing a red bikini that makes me hot every time I look at her. I may have fucked her in our bathroom while she was wearing it this afternoon. Twice.

“I’ll never understand,” Ford says from the other side of the hot tub, a bottled beer in hand. “How the hell did you get her to marry you?”

“Hey,” Mila says, a note of defensiveness in her tone. “Colby’s smart and funny and generous. How can anyone not love him?”

I smirk at Ford. “Answer your boss. How can you not love me?”

He answers me with a middle finger. Even though we all agreed up-front that we’re just three couples having fun together this weekend, it was weird for Beau and Ford to be hanging out with Mila at first. Shelby and Elle were great, but my buddies needed time to warm up to it.

They got there, though, and our first night here was amazing. Beau and Shelby hired a chef to come cook dinner for us and it was an authentic Italian meal. Tonight, we’re going to learn how to make traditional Mexican sopes, and a

dance instructor is coming to teach us to rumba and tango. The expansive great room has wood floors and is big enough to be a bowling alley if we want it to.

“Who needs another drink?” Beau asks, standing up.

“I do if it’s a piña colada,” Shelby says.

He lowers his brows at her. “Babe, I’ll have to crack open coconuts for those.”

“Am I supposed to feel bad?”

He rolls his eyes and grins. “Okay, fine, but only because you’re my baby mama.”

“And don’t you forget it,” she says lightly. “Your baby mama will also take a bowl of chips with the drink.”

“As long as your baby daddy gets some love in bed tonight.”

She laughs, her eyes sparkling. “Depends how good the drink is.”

“Mila, Elle? You guys want a piña colada?”

“Sure, I’ll take one,” Mila says.

“Yes, please and thank you,” Elle says.

Beau goes into the house and the rest of us sit in silence for a minute, taking in the view. It’s spectacularly beautiful here. I like the idea of Mila and I getting a place here, though I want something cozier than this.

We’ve only had one small argument in the past six weeks, and it was about who was supposed to turn the coffeepot timer on, so it was minor.

I check my phone for calls or texts, finding a message that piques my interest.

“Did you see the text from the realtor?” I ask Mila.

“No.” She picks up her phone to look at it.

We’re looking for a new place. She wants a home she can display her art in, preferably with a wine cellar, and I want a place that feels lived in with room for us to grow.

“Five bedrooms,” she says, scrolling through the photos. “Ugh, the kitchen. But we could remodel it.”

“Wine cellar, though.”

“Ohhh...I just got to those photos. Okay, I like it.”

“Great views,” I say, one of the photos showing a sunset over the mountains right outside the living room. “No sex room, though. We could always add one.”

“I’m sorry, a sex room?” Ford asks.

“We’re not having a sex room,” Mila says, not looking up from her phone.

“Sure, we are. She’s got sex room money.”

She laughs. “It’s not about money. A sex room is just weird. We can have sex in any room we want.”

“True, but can we hop in a sex swing in any room?”

Elle bursts out laughing. “Sex swings are weird.”

The boys and I have been hitting the whiskey hard today, which may explain my continued insistence on a sex room in our new house.

“I’m going to have a room within the room, like with a secret door. You go into the room and it’s like some MI-6 *Mission Impossible* shit with all the guns on the walls, but they’re all sex toys. A dildo wall. A whip wall. An anal plug wall.”

Mila and Elle are both laughing now.

“I’ll let you explain this to the realtor,” Mila says.

“He’d get it,” I assure her. “Jared doesn’t look like he gets much ass. I think he’d appreciate a room dedicated to pleasure.”

“Oh, I’m sure.”

Beau walks out with a tray of drinks, a little umbrella tucked into each one. The women take them and Ford pops the tops on the beers for the guys.

Mila holds her drink up and looks around at each of us.

“To new friendships,” she says.

Elle is the first one to raise her glass and clink it against Mila’s. Some of these people are new friends for me and others I’ve known for a few years.

But something tells me we’ll all be there for each other for a very long time.

“SHE WAS GOING to get deported, wasn’t she?” Ford asks me the next morning when the two of us are taking a run. “That’s why you guys got married.”

“What makes you think that?”

Mila can’t get deported anymore, but I still think we need to keep our secret. Our marriage is real now, but it didn’t start out that way.

Ford stops and takes a towel from his waistband, using it to wipe his sweaty face.

“It explains why none of us knew you guys were dating,” he says, still catching his breath. “Because you weren’t. You were single and you were a good solution to her problem.”

He’s not even asking me. He’s already convinced.

“I love her,” I say.

“I know. And she loves you too. I can see it all over both your faces. I’ll never say anything about my deportation theory, by the way. But it came to me last night when we were all sitting in the hot tub. I knew you never would have made a move on her and she wouldn’t have made a move on you.”

“Get over yourself, Sherlock Holmes. She’s my wife and that’s all that matters.”

He shakes his head. “I can’t believe you got married before me.”

We both get a drink of water and resume our run.

“Are you and Elle planning on marriage?”

“At some point. We’re not in any hurry, though.”

“It’s different than I thought it would be,” I admit. “Marriage.”

“How so?”

“I love that she’s mine. She’s got my last name now. I never get tired of her. Like even right now, I can’t wait to get back to the house and see her.”

Ford nods. “I get it. I’m that way with Elle. When you have a person, it’s different than just having a girlfriend, you know? Elle’s my person.”

“It’s good to see her and Mila getting along.”

“Those two are so much more alike than they realize,” Ford says, chuckling. “Who wants to tell them?”

I cringe, wiping sweat from my brow. “Good luck with that one.”

“WHAT IF I had no hair, only one eye, warts all over my body, and no fingers?” Mila asks me that night.

I pretend to consider. “Yeah, no. But we could still be friends.”

She feigns indignation and we both laugh. We’re relaxing together on a chaise on one of the cabin’s huge decks, Mila curled up on my lap while we play her new favorite game—Would You Still Love Me?

“Okay, my turn,” I say. “Would you still love me if I got bit by a radioactive mosquito and turned into a superhero named Mosquito Man?”

“Possibly. Would you look like a mosquito?”

“Yep. Bulgy eyes and...fuck, I don’t know how many legs mosquitoes have.”

“I’d still love you,” she says.

“Bullshit.”

“I would. I’d figure out how to fuck a mosquito and we’d live happily ever after.”

She rubs her arms, chilled from the night air, and I pull a blanket over us.

“Did you know that only female mosquitoes feed on blood?” she asks, her head on my chest.

“Why am I not surprised?” I crack.

“Males feed on nectar.”

“Because we’re the sweet ones.”

“Would you still love me if I got put under a magical spell and my pussy made your dick completely numb?”

I make a humming sound as I think about it. “Completely numb like no possible chance of coming?”

“Right. For you. But I still could.”

“What about your mouth?”

“My mouth would have the same effect.”

“I see. I’d still love you as long as I could tap that ass, I guess.”

She laughs, pulling the blanket up to her chin. “You have a one-track mind.”

I tighten my hold on her, wishing this trip wasn’t ending tomorrow. It’s the most time the two of us have ever had with no work or other distractions.

“Would you still love me if I’m not a good dad to our kids?” I ask quietly, my chest tight.

She lifts her head to look at me, her expression serious. “You’ll be a great dad to our kids. You’ll love them and laugh with them and teach them everything you know. You’re nothing like your dad.”

“Thanks. I’d never treat our kids like my dad treated me, but...I never had a good example, you know? It’s...hard, I guess.”

“My mother never gave me a hug. I rarely even saw her. I think we’ll just have to figure parenthood out together when the time comes, like we’re doing with marriage.”

She always knows what to say. I love that about her.

“I think we’re doing a damn good job being better than our parents so far,” I say.

“We are.”

I kiss her softly. “I love you, Mrs. Harrison.”

“And I am quite fond of you as well, Mr. Harrison,” she says with a smile.

“Quite fond?” I tickle her until she’s breathless from laughing.

“Okay, okay. I’m crazy in love with you. Heart eyes, all day every day.”

I kiss her again. “That’s my girl.”

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Brenda Rothert lives in Central Illinois with her husband, children and dogs. A former print journalist, she has written more than fifty romance novels. Her print and e-books have been translated into German, Italian and Portuguese, and her audiobooks have been translated into German.

She loves to hear from readers through her website or her Facebook Group, [Rothert's Readers](#).

