



WILD PUCKER

A TORONTO NORTHMEN NOVEL

HILARY ROSE

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For Taylor Swift, and all the other girls who love love stories. And for all the Swifties; enjoy the Easter eggs.

Trigger Warning

This book contains mature themes and is recommended for readers 18+.

It contains explicit sexual content and strong language.

While my books are mostly light-hearted and funny, this one has some dark content and deals with trauma. It contains discussions about rape, statutory rape, addiction and abuse and may not be for all readers.

Prologue

Pulling Ponytails

Lily

Eleven Years Ago...

Chase Wilder is a jerk.

He's a big, mean, stupid jerk. And so is my brother Luke. And their friend Eric, he's a jerk too. They're all just a bunch of jerks.

I'm so freaking mad and stomping around the backyard in my fury isn't helping. My eye snags on a nice, big rock in Mom's garden. So naturally, I pick up the cool and heavy stone and launch it at the treehouse that I'm not allowed inside. It thunks against the wood siding before dropping back down the grass.

Luke pops his head out of the window, looking down at me with a scowl.

"Go away, Lily. We're doing important stuff up here."

Ha. Important, my hiney. I'm not stupid. I might be three years younger, but even I know what sixteen-year-old boys do inside treehouses on their phones. Not that I want to look at naked women, but Chase, Eric, and Luke always leave me out of everything.

"It's my turn, and Riley is going to be here any minute," I yell back. We're having a girls' night, and my brother is already ruining it.

"We'll be done by the time she gets here. Just go away, you little midget," Eric taunts from above. Eric Stone is a bully. I don't know why Luke's even friends with him. They're hockey buddies, but there's something not right with that boy. He's just plain mean.

"Hey man, leave her alone." I hear Chase's voice, and something inside me lights up at his defence, but it dims when

he adds, “She’s just a kid.”

Chase may be a jerk, but he’s a beautiful jerk. All the girls think so. With all that unruly black hair and turquoise blue-green eyes, he’s unnaturally good-looking. If his skin was a little paler and had a bit of sparkle, you could mistake him for a hot vampire. His braces came off this summer, so he has a perfect smile to add to the package. It’s not fair.

I may have a teeny, tiny crush on my brother’s best friend, but he’s still a jerk for hanging out with Luke and banning me from my own treehouse. I’m not delusional. I know nothing will ever come of my stupid feelings. All Chase will ever see me as is Luke’s little sister—the little girl with braces and a ponytail for him to pull.

I huff and go back into the house to wait for Riley. Mom’s smiling out the kitchen window, shaking her head at us and making sandwiches for everyone.

“Mom,” I whine, “Luke’s being an idiot.”

“I’m sure you don’t want to be up there with the boys anyway, Lily.” She laughs while spreading mayo out on a piece of bread.

“Do you know what they’re doing up there?” This question only makes Mom laugh harder. She definitely knows what they’re doing up there.

“Honey, I’m the mother. I know everything. I do the laundry. I know everyone’s dirty secrets. Boys will be boys.”

Gross! I don’t even want to know what she’s talking about.

By the time Riley arrives, the boys have disappeared, and we decide binge-watching movies on Netflix is how we want to spend our evening. We plan to consume as much popcorn and chips as humanly possible while watching sappy love stories and romcoms.

“What next?” I ask as the credits for *Never Been Kissed* start to roll, and everyone’s gone to bed.

“Titanic?” Riley suggests.

“No way! Too long and too depressing.”

Trying to pick a movie on Netflix is harder than choosing only one favourite flavour of ice cream. There are too many choices and I spend more time scrolling through options and reading movie blurbs than watching anything. It's too hard to choose just one. And for some stupid reason, my brain fails to understand that it can only watch one thing at a time and not ten things simultaneously.

"Wanna go into the treehouse and read some tarot cards?" I ask Riley, throwing down the remote.

"Yes!"

Giggling, we quickly grab a few blankets, flashlights, and a lighter for my candles. I don't think it makes a difference if the candles smell like coconut to the spirits. It's all about ambiance.

I realize I didn't think this plan through when we reach the treehouse ladder. I only have two hands, and I can't very well climb up with a flashlight, candles, blankets and snacks weighing me down. I'll break my neck if I try to climb and balance our supplies at the same time. It's a decent-sized treehouse with a roof, a door, windows and everything. The floor is even carpeted, and it's big enough to sleep in if we want to. My dad and uncle built it for Luke and me. We don't see Uncle Eddie that often because he plays in the NHL, but a few summers ago, he helped build our little hideaway.

"You'll have to pass this stuff up to me," I tell Riley, shoving everything into her arms. I scurry up the ladder, open the door, and immediately scream, which makes Riley scream, which also makes the thing lying on the treehouse floor jolt up and start screaming.

"Oh my god, what is it? Are you okay?" Riley shrieks from below.

"Chase?" I hiss at the same time. What the hell is Chase doing sleeping in the treehouse at one o'clock in the morning?

He looks at me wild-eyed and worried, like he thinks I'll get him into trouble. Granted, my parents are likely hurtling down the stairs right now, but they're not going to freak out or

anything. That's when I notice Chase isn't his usual, strikingly handsome self. He has a bruise on his right cheek and a split lip. He looks like he's been in a fight.

"Are you okay?" I ask, reaching out to touch his cheek. "Why are you sleeping in here?"

"It's nothing," he says gruffly, gathering his things and making like he's going to leave. He doesn't have much; just a sleeping bag, a bottle of water, and a couple granola bars.

"What's going on, Lily?" Riley calls up.

"It's just Chase," I answer and turn back to the boy in question. "It's not nothing. You're bleeding and bruised."

"Just stay out of it, okay?" His sharp tone makes me recoil. Trying not to look hurt or offended, I climb back down the ladder to let him out. Mom and Dad are running outside in their housecoats when his feet hit the ground.

"What's wrong?" Mom huffs in a panic. When her eyes land on Chase and the state of his face, they immediately soften. She gets this weird look like she understands something I don't. "Get the first aid kit, Matthew."

I have no idea what is going on. Mom just leads Chase into the house to fix him up, no questions asked. Naturally, Riley and I run after them.

"What happened to Chase?" I ask Mom.

"Nothing," Chase repeats as Mom dabs rubbing alcohol on his lip and Dad watches narrow-eyed from the corner. "I fell and got locked out of the house. My dad's working nights, so I couldn't get in."

Mom shoots Dad a look. The one that says, 'I don't believe a word coming out of this boy's mouth.' I agree. Chase is lying. I can always tell when he's not telling the truth because his words fly out of his mouth too quickly; like if he says the lie faster, we won't notice.

"Well, not to worry," Mom smiles, cracking one of those instant icepacks. "We'll fix you up, and you can stay in the guest room, Chase. Girls, you can run along and return to your

seance or whatever you were doing with the candles and tarot cards.”

A blush burns my cheeks, and I turn away, grabbing Riley’s hand and leaving Chase with my mom and dad.

Over the next few weeks, our guest room becomes Chase’s bedroom. He may as well move in permanently for all the time he spends at Maison Valentine. Sometimes he goes home, but he always comes back, and it makes me wonder why his dad doesn’t miss him. Wouldn’t a parent miss their only son if he’s never home?



Chase

Four Years Later

Jeff Wilder is a son of a bitch.

Unfortunately, he’s also my father. Before I moved out, we lived three streets over from the Valentines in a crappy, two-bedroom house that’s since become a rundown shithole. Dad’s let everything go to shit since Mom died, including his life. The only thing he didn’t let go of was my hockey career. It’s the one thing Mom wanted for me, and it’s the only promise he kept.

She died when I was ten.

Jeff wasn’t always a mean, angry drunk. When Mom was alive, he was the best father a kid could ask for. We were the family that picture frames used as placeholders. We were happy until Mom found out she had a brain tumour. Even then, we were sure she’d make it. She always made it. She was so alive; the glue that kept us all together.

And then she wasn’t.

Sometimes I wonder if Mom knew she wouldn’t make it through brain surgery. Maybe that’s why she made Dad promise to keep me in hockey and see our NHL dream through. She obviously didn’t think asking him to promise to love and care for me was necessary. Why would she? How could she have known her death would ruin us?

It started with booze. Dad would drink for days and miss work. I later found out Mom had an extensive insurance policy that helped fund my hockey career but also enabled his liquor addiction. By the time I was twelve, Dad must have thought I had grown big enough to withstand his fists because that's when I became his punching bag.

I'll never forget the first time he hit me. The Valentines had dropped me off after hockey practice, and I'd come home to a passed-out father and a half-naked woman on the couch. It was the first time I'd seen my dad with someone other than my mother and it made me furious. I threw a towel over the woman, called her a cab, and forced her to leave. When Dad woke up, he was livid. I'd yelled at him and called him a drunk. I told him Mom would hate him if she were alive. That was when he drew his fist back and knocked me out cold.

At the time, my only escape was hockey and the days I spent with the Valentines.

Angie and Matthew didn't ask questions, but I think they knew my cuts and bruises weren't from the rink. Everyone in this town knows my dad was, and is, a miserable drunk. To this day, I can't stand their pitiful glances. There's only one thing I hate more than the nosey people in my hometown, and it's the look of adoration Lily Valentine used to give me; like I was her hero just for telling Eric to shut up and stop teasing her.

Luke's sister is cute, but if she knew how twisted and tainted I am on the inside, she'd run screaming. The whole family would. If they knew how fucked up I am, they'd be disgusted with me. If they'd known one of my dad's girlfriends used to jerk me off in my bedroom when I was fourteen while my dad was passed out in the next room, they'd have thrown me out of their house. Even I was disgusted with myself. I didn't know any better. I was just a kid, but the sick part of me enjoyed it.

If the Valentines knew that when I turned fifteen, as a birthday present, that same woman—twice my age—spread herself out naked on my bed and taught me how to fuck, they'd be sick. I knew it was wrong, and looking back I can't even tell you how it happened. I just know I didn't say no. I might not have

wanted to fuck my dad's girlfriend, but a big part of me wanted to punish him before I left to play junior hockey.

When I was drafted into the Ontario Hockey League, girls begged me to fuck them. And I did. I'd finally left this shit town and my deadbeat dad and started living in a city where people adored me. I'd happily take any willing female to bed. I fucked my billet family's daughter, and when her mom wanted in on the action, too, I let her and went behind everyone's back. I was almost sixteen, angry and horny, and Anna was hot. At that age, pussy is pussy, even if it's twenty years older than you.

Our secret lasted two years, and when we were caught it was a shit show. I was traded out of the organization and labelled a 'troubled player.' I lied about when the relationship started and took most of the heat, but I didn't care. I was already drafted by the Florida Gators and months away from leaving Ontario for good to play in the NHL.

I fucking love Florida. The weather is hot, and the women are hotter. Although my agent said, in no uncertain terms, that he didn't care who I fucked so long as I was discreet, and they were my age. The team is shit, but I have loads of time to win a Stanley Cup at some point in my career. Right now, I kind of like having my summers start early. Florida didn't make the playoffs this year, but that didn't stop me from lighting it up on the scoreboard in my first year as a pro. I'm in the running for the Calder Memorial Trophy for Rookie of the Year.

I thought Luke would surely be the league's top rookie until Eric took a cheap shot at him during their first game against each other. I was livid. He could have broken Luke's neck, and we still don't know if Luke will play again. He's been rehabbing like a motherfucker but hasn't been cleared to play. When Florida played New York for the first time after Eric returned from his suspension, I dropped the gloves before the first whistle blew and knocked his front teeth out. *Fucker.*

I always knew Eric was a jealous shit, but I never thought he would almost kill one of us. All three of us are back in town this spring, and if I see Eric, I'll knock the rest of his teeth out. I wasn't planning on coming home at all, but I wanted to help

Luke get back on the ice. We're going to do some training together, and hopefully by the end of the summer, Luke will get the green light to play.

It's been hard for him. Hockey is everything to us, and I know it's been rough on his fiancé, Sarah. They've been together since our junior hockey days, and Luke proposed after he made the big club in Toronto. I couldn't believe he wanted to be tied down so young, but he wanted his parents' love story. If I'm being honest, I think he's making a big mistake. Sarah's a bit of a bitch who likes to spend his money a little too much, but Luke's convinced she's The One, and there's no talking him out of it.

I pull my rental car up to Luke's condo building. We're headed home for a few weeks and Luke can't drive yet, so I'm his DD. We're staying at Casa Valentine to visit and catch up with family. Just like old times. Plus, it's time to check in on Dad, make sure he hasn't drunk himself to death, and give him enough cash to pay his bills for the year. Mom's insurance money has long been liquified and consumed, and I can't bring myself to let him die on the streets, homeless.

I pull into the parking garage of Luke's wicked downtown condo. Toronto real estate comes at a premium, but being the number one draft pick in the NHL's top market has some serious perks. One being a lucrative entry-level contract and a boatload of endorsement deals. He recently bought this place and is moving out of the rented apartment he shares with Sarah.

When I reach his unit at the top level, I hear yelling from inside.

"It was a mistake!" Sarah's voice cries. "It won't happen again."

"I don't care," Luke roars. "Go fuck all of Toronto if you haven't already. We're done."

This doesn't sound good. I knock on the door and realize it's already opened a crack. I push it open the rest of the way and see Luke steering Sarah toward the hallway.

“Excellent timing, Chase. Sarah was just leaving. For good.”

“Chase! Help me talk some sense into Luke,” she whines. “He’s going to throw away three years of our life over one tiny misunderstanding.”

“There was no misunderstanding,” Luke growls through gritted teeth. “I came home early to tell you I was cleared to play again, and you were fucking the guy who almost ended my career.”

Holy shit.

“That doesn’t sound like a misunderstanding,” I point out. “That sounds like you’re an asshole.”

Sarah shrieks some more, but we manage to get her out of his new condo. I’m assuming the incident in question happened at their old apartment, seeing as this place has minimal furniture to fuck on. Unless they used the granite countertops.

On the drive to the Valentine’s home, Luke fills me in with the details of what happened. The long and short of it is Luke came home early from physiotherapy two days ago with good news and found Sarah and Eric going to Pound Town in their bedroom. With Luke’s career up in the air, it looks like Sarah was covering her bases, trying to ensnare a backup sugar daddy. I always thought Sarah liked Luke’s paycheque more than his actual person.

“Sorry, man,” I say, pulling onto the highway. “That’s rough. But at least you’ll be back crushing the competition next season, and you know the chicks will be wild to tap that ass.”

Luke lets out a bitter laugh. We talk about training, and I talk about Florida for the rest of the drive. Luke’s phone buzzes a dozen times with texts from Sarah, but I think fucking Luke’s ex-best friend pretty much put the nail in the coffin of that relationship.

When we start drifting down familiar streets, my stomach twists into knots, and I decide to stop at my dad’s house before the Valentine’s. When I pull into the driveway, everything looks exactly the same. The light blue paint is chipping off the siding. Shingles are coming loose off the roof, and the lawn

hasn't been cut for a decade. Everything is falling apart, overgrown, and shitty.

Dad's junky pickup is parked in the driveway. I remember him driving me to hockey practice, the smell of beer or vodka rolling off him in waves even in the morning. He'd critique my game if he was sober enough to watch, and when I'd missed a pass or shot, he'd lock me out of the house and force me to shoot puck targets in the driveway for hours. The dents in the garage door are still there.

If I'd had a particularly bad game, Dad would switch things up and I'd become the target. He'd force me to stand in the net with no pads and just a helmet while he shot pucks at me. I'd cover up the purple welts with socks and hockey tape, and when Luke's mom asked how I'd gotten such horrendous bruises, I'd lie and blame hockey practice. When she bought me better equipment to protect my body from slapshots and I still showed up black and blue at her house, I think she started to suspect the truth. But, by that time I was already spending most of my time at the Valentine's and reporting my dad would have put me into the system.

I reach across Luke and open the glove compartment to grab the envelope of cash before walking to the front door. I knock once, then let myself in. When I step inside, I'm hit with a wall of stench. A mixture of body odour, stale beer and liquor, garbage, cigarettes, and weed.

I find Dad in the living room on a couch wearing a stained wife-beater and dirty, ripped jeans and I kick his legs lightly to wake him.

"Huh?" He grumbles, bloodshot eyes flashing open. "Chase, ya little shit. Come to gloat over your dad?" He smiles, his teeth stained yellow. He probably needs to see a dentist, not that he'd go.

"Here's your money," I say disgusted, throwing twenty-five grand down on the coffee table. "I've already paid your mortgage for the next eight months and put enough money on your water, heating, and electrical bill to last you until the new year."

“Just twenty-five?” My dad sneers. “All those hundreds of thousands of dollars they pay you in the NHL isn’t enough to give the man who got you there a little more?”

“You didn’t get me anywhere, Dad,” I spit out, grinding my teeth. “Mom and the Valentines did.”

“Don’t talk about her.” My dad’s voice is low and hard.

“Who? Mom? Nicole Wilder? The woman who died wanting us to be happy?”

Dad stands abruptly, almost losing his balance. He moves to take a swing at me but I step out of the way and push him back onto the couch before turning away.

“My offer will always stand, Dad.” It’s always the same. I drop off the cash and remind him that even after all the shit he’s done to ruin us, I’ll still help him. “When you’re ready to be a man and face your problems, I’ll help. I’ll pay for rehab and whatever other treatment or counselling you need, but you have to take the first step.”

“I don’t need your help.”

“No,” I sigh, turning away. “You just need my money.”



The Valentine house is still the same as it always was years ago, and to me, it’s home.

Angie pulls me in for a big hug, the kind that makes you feel like you’re on the brink of being smothered or swaddled. She squeezes me tight, and I can smell her sweet perfume; a mixture of florals and something citrusy. She leans back and looks me over with a wide grin. Matthew clasps my hand and then leans in, giving me a firm pat on the back. They congratulate me on my season and ask a million questions about what it’s like playing hockey in a southern state. Then like true parents, they grill Luke about his doctors, treatment, and when they think he might be back on the ice. Eventually, Angie brings up Sarah.

“I knew she wasn’t right for you, Luke.” Mrs. Valentine tells her son once their breakup is out in the open. Pretty sure the

rest of the family shares Angie's sentiments—Sarah was always bad news.

We spend the rest of the afternoon catching up and laughing while Luke's mom plies us with homemade cookies and lemonade. It's usually Lily cooking and baking with her mom in the kitchen, but I haven't seen her since arriving home. I've barely seen her at all over the last two years, but that hasn't stopped her from sending me daily texts. They range from the perfunctory "Hey, how are you?" to funny memes and TikTok videos.

"Where's Lily?" Luke asks the question that's on my mind.

"She and Riley are upstairs getting ready," Angie answers, pouring some more lemonade. "It's prom. The girls are going all out for their big night, and you better believe I'm ready for a photo shoot of my girls. They're going to look stunning."

"Does she have a date?" I ask, unsure where the question came from. Luke and I didn't go to our prom because we were too busy playing hockey.

"Derrick is taking her," Angie smiles warmly. Clearly, this dude has her stamp of approval. "They've been dating since Christmas. He's such a nice young man, and Lily's been over the moon."

I wrack my brain, trying to remember who this guy is until it clicks. *Derrick? As in Derrick Richardson?* The gangly, little science nerd who used to trail after Lily like a lost puppy.

The sound of feminine laughter stops me from saying something insulting about Lily's date. Luke and I stand at the same time when twin squeals of delight come from the top of the stairs. Lily's giggle is unmistakable, low and unladylike, and my eyes follow the sound.

Until they land on *her*.

I'm expecting a short, pint-sized girl with blonde curls and a wide smile. I'm expecting little Lily Valentine, who used to tease me and her brother and play with an Easy Bake Oven.

I'm not expecting the woman walking towards me. She's gotten taller, but not too tall. Her smooth legs are on display in

a sparkly blue dress that only reaches mid-thigh. Her skin is tan and flushed with excitement, and her big, blue eyes, the colour of sea-glass, light up in surprise when she sees me. A genuine smile stretches across her face, flashing me a set of perfect white teeth. Her braces are gone, and the effect is stunning.

Her hair falls in blonde waves and ringlets around her face and down her swan-like neck. All her youthful awkwardness has disappeared, replaced with soft curves and rounded breasts.

I swallow down a foreign feeling I don't want to name. I'm not attracted to Lily. My dick isn't twitching like it wants to say hello to my best friend's little sister. No way. It's not happening. At. All.

"Luke! Chase!" Lily laughs, launching herself at us. She throws her hands around my neck and pulls me in for a hug. My arms go naturally around her, and without thinking, I inhale. She smells like coconut and sunshine, and I force myself to let go. "When did you guys get home?"

Riley joins us in the foyer as everyone starts laughing, taking pictures and talking, but I'm at a loss for words. I just stand there, stare and nod like an idiot. I'm on autopilot. I speak when asked a question and pose when Angie wants me in pictures with Luke and Lily, but I can't stop my eyes from roaming all over Luke's sister.

The doorbell rings, and Lily lights up. Something hard and jagged twists in my gut, knowing her smile is for the boy on the other side of the door. All I can do is watch as Derrick places a corsage on Lily's wrist, and she beams. Then another boy appears and repeats the process with Riley.

Derrick is not a gangly science nerd anymore. Well, he might still be a science nerd, but aside from the thick-rimmed glasses, he's filled out.

Before I know it, the couples disappear into a limo and I watch Lily drive off. I want to chase after her but stop myself. She's Luke's baby sister. She's practically my sister, or I try to tell myself that.

Lily Valentine is everything good and pure in the world, and I'm nothing but a tarnished, screwed-up asshole. I can never have her. She's my best friend's sister, and I would ruin her. After everything the Valentines have done for me, I couldn't do that to them. She deserves better.

I'm a completely fucked-up mess inside, and I will never let myself stain Lily with my toxicity.

That night I attempt to sleep, trying not to listen for the front door letting me know Lily is home safe and not in some nerd's twin-sized bed. But the sound of her return never comes, and a sickening feeling washes through me. Somewhere deep down I know with bone-chilling clarity, Lily Valentine will be my undoing.

1

Eating Cake

Lily

Nine Months Ago

I've known Chase since I was four when he and my brother started playing on the same hockey team. At first he was just another boy hanging around the house, except he would share his Oreos with me when Luke would try to eat mine.

When I was ten, and he and Luke were thirteen, those feelings started to shift. He was the most beautiful and tragic boy I'd ever seen. After his mom died, Chase became quiet and reserved. It was a startling change for a boy who used to laugh as much as he breathed. I missed his laugh, so I'd made it my mission to be silly and goofy, hoping I could hear it again. It worked most of the time.

And therein lies the problem, I've always been Luke's goofy little sister, and that's all he's ever seen me as. I've been in love with him since forever, and it's all his fault. He made it impossible not to love him. He practically lived in my house growing up, and he's always been the kindest, funniest, most thoughtful boy I've ever met, except when he was being thoughtless.

Like when he would bring over girlfriends and kiss them in the front hall right in front of me, breaking my heart each time. Or when he left to play junior hockey and made headlines for all the wrong reasons. Chase turned into a destructive boy, and every time I read about the girls he was screwing around with, it made me want to scream.

I've always been too young, too sweet, and too much of Luke's sister for him. I could never compete with the women

who greet players with open legs and breasts overflowing from their low-cut tops.

Maybe my expectations are unrealistic. Maybe I've deluded myself into thinking Chase is something he's not. Maybe I've built him up in my head as a prince charming and someone he's not. Maybe I'm in love with a figment of my imagination and Chase is just the face I've put on him.

In high school I tried to forget about him. I tried to convince myself he was just a childhood crush. I didn't wait around for him because I knew he never thought of me when he was out banging his harem of women. He's never had a steady girlfriend, but he's never had a shortage of female company. And while I may have been desperately in love with him, I was never pathetic. I lived my life, and he lived his.

But the worst thing about NHL players is you can never escape them. They're basically celebrities in Canada, and when you share a hometown with two of the NHL's biggest and brightest rookies, everyone wants to talk about them. Even though Chase was in Florida, news constantly trickled back home and the women he'd been with loved to chronicle their exploits online.

So I did my best to move on. I dated and made my own mistakes. One of those mistakes was Derrick. He was my friend and science lab partner first. I knew he wanted more, and I thought, *why not? Why shouldn't I be with someone who truly wants to be with me?* We dated for the last two years of high school. He was my first kiss and my first lover.

He loved me. I knew he did. And I don't regret being with him, but I always knew it wasn't the right fit. It crushed me to hurt Derrick like I did. When I broke up with him before leaving for culinary school, he cried. He was totally wrecked, but because he's such a good guy, he respected my wishes and let me go.

Then there was Aaron, the selfish, obnoxious jerk who thought he was the next Gordon Ramsay without the British accent. We dated for two months, and when I wouldn't put out or share my recipes with him, he dumped me. But that didn't stop

him from telling everyone in our class I was a terrible lay and embarrassing the ever-loving shit out of me.

Asshole.

I cringe, thinking of the memory and the knowing looks and sniggers from the males in my classes. A girl can only take so much. I'd had enough cucumber rubbing and zucchini stroking when I threw down my knife and faced our class.

"Fuck you guys," I'd yelled. "If you think Aaron's cock is the size of a cucumber, you're fucking dreaming. He couldn't hit a G-spot if it kicked him in the face. Especially not with that baby carrot he calls a dick."

The class erupted into laughter and Aaron almost had a seizure. His face was so red I thought he might explode. When Beth, another one of Aaron's conquests, stood up and added, "It's true. Aaron's peen is the size of my pinky finger. And he's a two-pump chump." The class lost it.

I never had another problem with Aaron or any other guy in my class after that. A few of the girls might have thought I was their hero for saying something.

Sighing, I look around the crowded room full of glittering dresses, men in tuxedos, and expensive glasses of champagne. I spot Holly near the stage where bachelors from the Toronto Northmen will be auctioned off, including Chase and Luke. She looks like she might be sick. She and my brother have been unofficially dating in secret, which is how he got wrangled into this charity auction even though he's not single.

But Holly has nothing to worry about. If I had to guess, my brother is head-over-heels in love with her. My entire family is. Holly is one thousand percent better than the last gold-digging, see-you-next-Tuesday that he almost married. She's kind, hardworking, and so sweet she'd give you a toothache unless you get on her bad side. Plus, she's stunning. Actually, she's part of the reason I'm here tonight. Luke let me and my bestie Riley borrow his credit card to outbid any women looking to get their claws in him tonight.

I just forgot to mention that he may also be purchasing his best friend. For me. Within thirty seconds of meeting me tonight, Holly's best friend Avery devised a plan to help me make a play for Chase during the auction. She's kind of an evil genius.

I'm wearing a killer black and white cocktail dress that shimmers in the light and shows off just the right amount of toned leg, and Riley helped me with my make-up, as usual. She's here mulling about, waiting to make a bid on Luke. We split up just in case someone recognizes me as Luke's sister. We can't have donors knowing we rigged the auction or thinking there's some weird brother-sister thing going on. Barf. We may be from a small town, but not that small.

"You ready to turn heads or what?" I spin to see Avery striding toward me with an evil grin. "Chase is going to go green with envy when he sees you bidding on other men in that dress."

That's her plan. I'll bid on every bachelor in the auction—except my brother—and pretend I'm not interested in Chase. Then, I'll go in for the kill at the last minute.

"We'll see," I mumble into my champagne glass. There's nothing like a little liquid courage. "I'm probably just making a fool of myself. Luke's pathetic little sister, trying to grab the attention of a hot hockey hero."

"Oh please," Avery rolls her eyes. "Chase has been looking at you like he wants to peel you out of that dress with his teeth."

I sigh again. I doubt it. I really do. If Chase wanted me, he could have me. I just hope I'm not making a huge mistake. A girl can only make herself look pathetic so many times for a guy before she truly is pathetic.



Chase

That fucking dress.

My eyes scan the crowd and land on Lily. She's fucking stunning. Her skin is luminescent in the light, shimmering like the silk of her dress. It's a black-and-white fantasy, showing

off every curve of her body and driving me mad with wanting her.

Why is she even here?

Luke probably invited her, and she's become fast friends with Holly and Avery, who are in charge of all our team's social media and publicity, but I can't take much more of this shit. I've forced myself to stay away from her, but she keeps popping back into my life. I limit my visits to the Valentine home to times I know she won't be there. It's why I skipped Thanksgiving this year. I knew she'd be there, and I'd want her more than the damn turkey and stuffing.

A mic hums on as Henry Bollington takes the stage to organize everyone and begin the auction. I notice Lily take her seat and expect Riley to sit beside her, but she's seated across the room near the front. The rest of the seats are mostly filled with thirsty women, or as I like to call them, The Titty Brigade. Cleavage seems to be the order for the night.

I've participated in bachelor auctions before. They're the perfect way to raise loads of money for charity because there is no cheque a desperate rich woman won't sign for a night with a young athlete. The disclosure agreement says sex is not involved in the transaction, but in my experience, sex is always on the table. The last time I did one of these in Florida, I ended up fucking a forty-something plastic surgeon who was fresh off a divorce. She wanted to make her ex-husband jealous, and I think she accomplished that goal. He walked in on me fucking her from behind against her kitchen island. When she offered to tip me, I realized how low I'd sunk.

It's just another example of how screwed up I am and how wrong I'd be for Lily.

Hunter LaRoux, our goalie, is up first. Henry starts the bidding at one-thousand dollars. A middle-aged woman in the front row lifts her paddle. Another woman in the back, about ten years younger than the first, joins the bidding. I'm about to turn away when I see a slender hand rise and call out, "Four-thousand dollars."

Heat, vicious and cruel, courses through me at the sound of Lily's voice. *What is she doing?* She bids more and more money, and my fists clench at my sides. I'm ready to put a fucking hole through a wall.

"What the fuck is your sister doing?" I growl at Luke. He looks as furious as I do.

"I don't know," he curses. "She's only supposed to help Riley bid on me."

Thankfully, Hunter goes to the woman at the back of the room. He's probably relieved he gets to wine and dine the attractive, young brunette rather than the cougar.

Next, Logan McLeod steps onto the stage and the bidding starts again. After the first few bids, Lily's hand flies into the air, this time shouting out her bids with gusto. Logan shoots her a smile and a wink, and Lily returns it with a blindingly bright one. I'll pummel Logan the second he steps one foot off this stage if he even thinks about touching her. But I'm saved from murdering my teammate by a gentleman in the middle who wins the bid.

Daniel Drake goes next. He's one of the youngest guys on our team. We call him Sunshine because he looks like a blond surfer from California. I almost expect the bid this time, but seeing Lily's paddle go up first, right out of the gate, for Sunshine makes me want to rush the crowd and drag her out of here. If she's going to bid on my entire fucking team, she better be prepared to bid on me too.

I mean, she better not bid at all. Luke would strangle me.

Daniel is sold to a mother-daughter team of bidders and walks off the stage. I'm up next. I grab a drink of water and try to calm the fire licking through my body. I straighten my white tux and crack my neck as Henry calls me onto the stage.

"Okay, ladies and gentlemen, it's time for our last two bachelors of the night," he says, rubbing his hands together like he's getting to the real goods. He's like a greedy pimp selling us to the ravenous vipers in attendance. "He's the Northman's top scorer, and he's got a flow that would make a

Head and Shoulders model jealous. Oh wait, he was a Head and Shoulders model. Please welcome Chase Wilder!”

I strain to smile as I take the stage. I hated that fucking commercial. It just won’t die, especially in the locker room. All the guys take on endorsement deals; it just so happened that mine involved a shower scene, and my teammates love to grind my gears about it.

On stage, my eyes immediately find Lily’s. She looks away, down at her program as if she’s uninterested in what’s happening. *What the actual fuck?* The cougar in the front row starts the bidding, followed by a corporate-type-looking man in the middle. Bids fly back and forth, but Lily just sits in her chair, avoiding my gaze.

“Seven-thousand dollars to the lady in red,” says Henry pointing at the cougar. “Going once, going twice...” I’d rather go to dinner with the corporate guy than the woman who will probably try to give me a hand job under the table before the first course ends.

“Ten-thousand,” a familiar voice interrupts before Henry finishes the final call. My eyes dart to Lily. For someone so small, she looks like an Amazon warrior wielding her paddle like a javelin, her blue eyes ablaze with want as she looks at me.

I’m not stupid. I knew Lily had a crush on me when we were kids, but the idea of her wanting me now almost sends me into a tailspin. My chest expands with longing and desire as Henry announces Lily as the winning bidder. Lily beams like she just won something of value and not some tainted piece of shit.

My eyes dart behind me and find Luke. He’s pissed and looks like he wants to tear my throat out. Lucky for me, he’s on the chopping block next and can’t make good on the threats flashing in his eyes. I exit the stage and make my way toward Lily, wondering what the fuck I’ve just gotten myself into.



Lily

I won.

I can't believe I just won. I bought Chase at auction, and now he's mine for the rest of the night and for at least one date after. Although, he doesn't exactly look happy about it. In fact, he looks downright miserable.

Never mind my brother, who looks like he wants to jump off the stage and put me in a headlock like he used to when we fought as kids. Too bad he's stuck up there waiting for Riley to make her big purchase. The auction starts, and so does the bidding. I watch in horror as the bidding rises over ten-thousand dollars. This is going to be an expensive night for my brother's credit card. Luke glares at Riley, urging her on. Poor guy looks desperate for her to spend all his hard-earned money. Finally, Riley wins the bid, and I glance at Holly, who looks slightly ill.

I quickly make my way to the registry table and hand over Luke's credit card with a smile.

"Well played," Avery grins, sneaking up behind me. "You definitely have the killer instinct."

"Thanks. I think." I give a nervous laugh and gaze around the room. Chase is beelining his way toward us, and Luke is collecting Riley at her seat. I need to get out here before my brother murders me. "Can you do me a favour? Give this to Riley," I hand Avery the credit card. "She's the redhead with Luke."

Avery takes Luke's card. She knew I was planning on abusing my brother's credit card, but she didn't know Luke had instructed us to buy him too.

"That sly devil."

I smile back. As if my brother would allow himself to be bought by anyone other than Holly.

"Can I have a word with you?" Chase moves into my space, linking arms with me, dragging me off before I can answer. He pulls me out into the hallway without another word, searching for somewhere private. His eyes dart around, taking in all the happy Christmas couples and charity goers like he's looking for a place to hide.

I'm steered down another hall and then another until we come to a door that opens into an empty room full of spare chairs and linens. I couldn't have picked a more unromantic setting if I tried.

"What the hell are you doing, Lily?" Chase demands as soon as the door shuts behind us.

"I thought it was obvious." Well, I did until now. Maybe this was a huge mistake, and Chase will always see me as his friend's sister and nothing more.

"Do you want your brother to castrate me? You're his little sister." The words hit me like a slap in the face. I *hate* being Luke's 'little sister.' As if I am not my own person and only exist as an extension of my brother.

"I'm not twelve anymore, Chase. I haven't been for a long time." Something primal flashes in Chase's eyes, and whatever it is sends a thrill rioting through me. "I'm twenty-four-fucking-years-old. I'm a woman, and if you can't see that, then maybe I bought the wrong bachelor."

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"It means I'm sick and tired of being Luke's little sister. I have needs and wants like any other woman. It means I'm done having you ignore me like I don't exist. We used to talk all the time, Chase." The words come out pained. We used to be close until Chase decided he was too cool to humour me anymore. Does he have any idea how pathetic I feel always being the one to message him or call when he doesn't ever make an effort to do the same? Chase was always Luke's best friend, but he was my friend too. "I thought we were friends, but now you avoid me like I'm the plague."

"I don't avoid you," Chase counters, but we both know it's a lie.

"Yes, you do! And I'm sick of it. I'm not going to be the pathetic girl who dresses up in the prettiest gown she can find, hoping the dumbest boy on the planet will finally look at her."

I stare at him, his blue-green eyes boring into me. The expression on his face is strained, like he's trying to battle

something inside himself and losing. Something is bothering him because his hair is askew from running his hands through it too many times tonight. It's one of his tells.

"You don't want me, Lily," he says in a low voice, breaking the silence between us.

"You don't get to choose what I want. I do." His pained expression deepens, and I'm beginning to think Avery is wrong. Chase doesn't want me, and now he's trying to let me down easy.

My cheeks burn so hot with embarrassment that I'll be shocked if my shame isn't tattooed there for the rest of my life. I need to get out of this room before the itch at the back of my throat worsens and tears start to cloud my eyes.

"I'm sorry," I say in a rush, pulling away from him and moving toward the door to make my inglorious exit. "Oh my god, I get it now. I'm such an idiot. Forget this ever happened. I'm going to the bar where I can drink myself into temporary amnesia and hopefully be taken home by someone who doesn't know I'm Luke Valentine's sister."

I turn quickly and reach for the door handle until, suddenly, Chase's hand grabs onto mine and yanks me back to him. Balance lost, I crash into his very hard, very solid chest. I inhale on instinct, curling my hands into his jacket. He smells like mint and rain and the ocean all at once. I don't know who decided this man should smell so good, but fuck, it makes me want to wrap myself in him and live there for a while.

When I look up into his face, I suck in a breath. Is this the look Avery saw? Dark and smouldering, like he wants to eat me alive? *Please, god, yes. Tell me I'm not hallucinating.*

"You are not going back to the bar. And you're definitely not going home with someone else."

"Why not?" I challenge.

"Because you're mine."

My brain doesn't even have time to register Chase's words before his lips crash onto mine. Shock freezes my body for one moment, but then my frontal lobe starts working again,

my endorphins kick in, and I kiss him right back. Oh god, am I ever kissing him back. His tongue parts my lips, I moan into his mouth as I let him taste me, and I do the same. He's all white wine and the flavour of the spearmint gum he chews incessantly. Chase pulls my lower lip into his mouth, nipping it with his teeth before soothing the sting with his tongue.

I've never been kissed like this. *Never*. Like he wants to consume me, possess me, and absolutely ruin me for kisses from anyone but him. And I love it. I want to live in this kiss, bathe in it. My hands twine around his neck and into his hair while he grips my lower back and pulls me closer. He backs me into a wall, the hardness between his thighs pressing into my stomach. Heat floods my core, and I can't stop the wanting whimper that escapes me.

I know it's wrong to compare, but the difference between kissing Chase and Derrick is like the difference between getting a tiny shock of electricity from static and being struck by lightning. Being with Derrick was pleasant. He was nice, kind, courteous, and always gentle with me, even when I wanted more.

Derrick was perfectly fine. I loved him, but I wasn't *in love* with him. He was my friend, and when it came to sex, it was pleasant. But not passionate. And, despite his best efforts, it always left me wanting and unsatisfied. Sex with Derrick was like being inside a bakery. You can see and smell everything. You can even watch the baker bake every beautiful cookie and cake until it makes your mouth water. Until you crave a slice of cake so badly you can almost taste it. But you never get to eat any goddamned cake, and it's incredibly frustrating. So frustrating that you eventually resent the baker and the whole fucking bakery.

I just want to eat some fucking cake.

Cake that I don't have to bake myself. And I'm great at making myself cake, but sometimes I think it would be nice to have someone else mix the batter and lick the icing off my spoon.

Who knows, maybe I'm one of those girls who can't come during sex. Even with Aaron I didn't feel the zing of lust and desire that I feel with Chase. We never got passed the kissing phase of our relationship, but the few times we engaged in handsy make-out sessions, I didn't even feel a tingle down there. When he used to rub his hands over my thighs and press his palm into the spot where he thought my clit was, I knew what he was trying to accomplish, but he never succeeded in reaching the goal.

It's stupid when you think about it. I don't understand why men don't just communicate with a woman and ask her what she likes. They act like finding a woman's clit is the equivalent of finding a pot of gold at the end of a rainbow. Virtually impossible and perhaps even make-believe. But seriously, it's *right there*. And when I hear stories about women humouring their boyfriends or husbands by going to the doctor to have a *weird little lump* on their lady bits checked, I don't understand how the human race ever procreated in the first place. *It's not cancer, you dumb ass. It's my clit.* Communication really isn't our strong suit. Maybe men really are from Mars and women from Venus, and we are speaking two different languages.

Chase is an inferno where Derrick and Aaron were tiny sparks to a flame that never caught. I feel like if he were to touch me, really touch me, I would detonate.

Chase grabs my wrists and pins them above my head, never taking his lips from mine. He's forceful in a way I've never experienced, and I like it. It's exciting and new, and I want more of it.

"Is this what you want, little Lily?" He asks, using my old nickname while grinding into me.

"Yes," I breathe as he runs kisses down my neck, never letting go of my wrists. "I want you, Chase."

A crash from the hallway interrupts whatever delicious thing he planned on doing next. Much to my dismay, he stops and stares at me for a moment, and I am pretty sure I'm an utterly dishevelled mess. His eyes dart to his large hands holding tight

onto my wrists pinned against the wall. Like the flip of a switch, something in him goes cold, forcing him to jump back from me like he's been burned.

"What?" I ask, confused. "What's wrong?"

"I'm sorry, Lily. I'm so fucking sorry." The look on Chase's face is a mixture of worry and something else I can't name. "I didn't mean—we can't do this."

Before I can't get another word in, Chase turns on his heels and leaves. He just disappears. I'm left dazed, confused, and incredibly turned on. What did I do wrong when everything felt so intensely right?

I have no idea what just happened, but I want more of it.

Nothing and everything has changed.

And Chase Wilder is still a jerk.

A gorgeous, beautiful jerk who makes my pulse race.

2

Cooking for Show

Lily

Present

I take a deep breath and straighten my jacket. Every time I wear my white chef's uniform, with its double-breasted buttons, a sense of pride fills my chest. I've worked my ass off for this. I spent four gruelling years in culinary school and two years cooking under some of the best chefs in the world to learn the art of cooking.

It's an art and a science. The art comes in the presentation of the food. People always say you eat with your eyes first, and a great chef knows how to make even average food look exquisite. The science comes in knowing what spices and flavours complement each other. But the real trick is curating the ability to transform any ingredient into something people will moan in delight over.

I check and recheck my knives for sharpness. They could easily take off a finger or two, and that's just how I like them. I may or may not have sliced the tip of my thumb off a time or two, but that's neither here nor there. It grew back.

I've got this.

I know I do.

This is my chance. My big break. I haven't spent the last six years of my life working towards this goal to flame out now. I glance around the room at my competition. Holly said there would be at least two other chefs competing to become the Toronto Northmen's personal chef. They're both older men, and I know they've discarded me as the token woman of the group. Men always underestimate me, and I like it that way. I'm the unsuspecting assassin.

When people look at me, they see one of two things—A smallish, blonde sprite of a woman with curly hair, or Luke Valentine’s little sister. I never thought the two entities would merge, but here I am. Holly and Avery have assured me this position is not guaranteed. They may have gotten me in the door, but I have to earn my place with the team just like everyone else.

This year the team is hiring a professional chef to work alongside a nutritionist to create meal plans, recipes, and food for the NHL’s most popular team. This past spring, the Northmen went all the way to game seven of the Stanley Cup Finals and lost after a funny bounce in overtime to St. Louis.

It was a heartbreaker. My brother, the captain of the team, was devastated. Everyone could taste victory on the tips of their tongues, only to have it ripped away. And now the team’s hungry for a win.

I hope they’re hungry for some five-star cooking, too, because even though Luke is my brother, there is no nepotism here. The players tasting today need to love my food if I’m going to win this job.

Three chefs are vying for this position, including myself. We are all preparing three signature dishes: an appetizer, a side, and an entree. The dishes will be served to six players, the head coach, Holly and Avery, and the team owners: Monica and Mitchell Starling. They will grade each plate from one to three, one being the best dish and three their least favourite. The chef who scores the highest overall will get the job.

And the taste-testing is blind, so there is no way anyone will know which dishes are mine. My cooking will be easily identifiable because it will be the best.

I peek out into the dining area. The team is using the restaurant inside the Northmen’s arena for this little competition, and everyone is already waiting. Luke and my soon-to-be sister-in-law, Holly Sparks, are chatting by the bar, and newlyweds Ryan and Avery Gunner look cozy sitting at a table. Hunter LaRoux, the team’s goalie, is standing with Avery’s twin stepbrothers, Ollie and Ozzy Decker. Until this summer, the

Decker twins were the property of the New York Diamonds. But after their contracts expired, they decided to sign in Toronto to be closer to home and play for the team they grew up idolizing.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot the last of the six players walking toward Holly and Luke. My heart rate accelerates like it always does at the sight of Chase Wilder. And as usual, he looks delicious. I've barely seen him since December when I bought him at the auction and he gave me the most erotic kiss of my life. Time and distance have done nothing to dull the ache inside my chest that I associate with wanting him.

My intention has always been to come to Toronto and pursue a career here after I finished my internship at a fancy Muskoka resort. And if Chase just happened to be living in the same city as me, great. Now is my chance to get a shot at two of the things I want most—Chase Wilder, and to be recognized as one of Toronto's top culinary talents.

I survey the kitchen again, checking that I have all my ingredients ready. The other two chefs are already chopping, peeling, and boiling water. The first is an older man with greying hair, a goatee, and a beanpole body. His name is Jacques Franc, and he keeps insisting that he's French, but his accent sounds fake to me. I've lived in Paris and never heard an accent like his, and it's not because he's Quebecois. Quebec French and France French are two different languages, but I don't think this dude speaks either. If I had to guess, he's a Jack, not a Jaques.

The other chef is Rich Rowley. He's younger, with tanned skin, dark hair, and a dad-bod. His jacket barely covers his stomach. He clearly enjoys eating his creations as much as he does making them.

I grab my notebook and start preparing my appetizer. I have one advantage over these guys: I know a lot about hockey players. My brother is a hockey player, and so is my uncle Eddie. I know what they like to eat and a lot about their diets. Way back in the day, players were all-in on carb-loading. They'd eat lots of pasta before games to build stores of energy,

but research has drastically changed over the years, and I plan to add some science to the flavour of my meals.

“You ready to wow us with your mad skills?” a voice asks from behind me. I whirl around to see Holly and Avery grinning at me.

“You bet!”

“We wanted to wish you good luck,” Avery says as Holly rings a small bell to get every else’s attention.

“Good afternoon, chefs,” she addresses the three of us. “I’m Holly Sparks, and this is Emerson Avery-Gunner. We have a few housekeeping items to review before the tasting begins. First, the servers will bring out your appetizers at the same time. You’ll need to make ten portions for each course you serve. Avery and I, along with six players, our head coach John McCall, and the team owners will be tasting your dishes. We all have one of these.” She holds up a scorecard. “We will be conducting a blind taste test. We won’t know who cooked what dish and will score them from one to three.

“After the meal, Avery and I will take a tally, and the highest-scoring chef will be offered the position. Are there any questions?”

No one lifts a hand, so Holly and Avery leave after letting us know our appetizers should be ready to go in twenty minutes, followed by our entree and side dish. Avery doubles back quickly and reminds me to make extra of whatever I’m cooking so she can take some home with her after we’re all done.

I laugh and promise to set some aside, then get down to work at my cooking station.

My appetizer is two dishes but in smaller portions. It’s a beet and arugula salad with roasted almonds, cucumber, red onion, and cherry tomatoes tossed in a homemade honey balsamic vinaigrette and topped with goat cheese. It’s paired with an heirloom tomato soup and a wedge of wholegrain garlic toast.

I quickly make ten portions, using a set of fancy appetizer dishes that are half plate and half bowl. Then I garnish the

salad with a drizzle of balsamic glaze, and the soup with a sprinkle of pepper and a sprig of parsley. It looks stunning.

I don't pause to watch any of the tasters try the food and immediately get started on my main course and side dish. Initially, I was going to do surf and turf, but after reading everyone's dietary restrictions, I scrapped the idea because Monica Starling and Hunter LaRoux are allergic to seafood.

I glance around the kitchen to see what the men are making and am surprised to see Jacques cooking some sort of pasta dish with shrimp. I wonder if he even read the preference sheet.

I grab my knife and start halving tricolour fingerling potatoes, leaving the skin on and throw them into a mixing bowl with olive oil and a garlic puree I whipped up earlier. It's just a mixture of garlic, herbs, and spices that I created specifically for my potatoes. As quickly as possible, I spread them out on a baking sheet and throw them into the oven to cook, the smell of garlic and herbs wafting out of the kitchen and making my mouth water. I'd never admit to this, but once in a while, I dip my garlic potatoes in ketchup. Even professionals like to eat dirty sometimes.

Next, I start a classic French chicken. The leg is de-boned except for one knuckle of the drumstick. I leave the skin on and pop it into the oven so it can cook through before I butter-braise it in a pan to crispen the skin. Lastly, I blanch some asparagus and start my hollandaise sauce while the potatoes and meat cook in the oven.

As time ticks down, I set out some ceramic square plates that I had heating. Whenever I cook for groups of people, I always heat the plates so the food stays warm. I grab the potatoes from the oven, now soft on the inside and crisp on the outside, and set them aside so I can start creating some food art. I drizzle and dot some of the garlic mixture on the bottom of the plate and then layer the potatoes on one side. Next, I set one piece of chicken on each with the crispy skin facing up and fan out the asparagus. Last but not least, I grab miniature gravy boats, fill them with my hollandaise sauce, and set them on the

corner of the dish. I garnish it with a few spirals of fresh beet curls and send the finished product to the dining room.

All I can do now is wait and watch, so I creep out of the kitchen to spy on my tasters. They're seated at a large round table, laughing and talking animatedly. I watch Hunter and Monica push Jaques' seafood pasta away but take a bite of his side, which is some type of bruschetta. Rich grilled a beef fillet with a veggie puree, and I begrudgingly admit that it looks good.

I bite my lip, watching everyone eat while silently willing them all to choose my dish as number one. After the plates are pushed to the side, the scorecards come out. The deliberation doesn't take as long as I thought, and Holly and Avery quickly collect them. They move to a separate table and open a sealed envelope with the names of each chef and their corresponding dishes.

It's only about five minutes before Holly and Avery call us back into the dining room, but it feels like an eternity. My heart is beating so fast it's making my ears ring. I want this so badly that I can barely see straight.

"Thank you all very much for taking the time to cook such outstanding meals today," Holly smiles at the three of us. She's not making eye contact with me, which worries me. If I'd won the competition, wouldn't she look at me? Wink at me? Something? "The scores were tallied, and the decision was unanimous.

Holly pauses dramatically as if this were some sort of reality TV show and looks at Jacques, Rich, and then me. I swallow, darting my eyes around the room and finding Chase leaning against the wall by the bar. Staring at him does nothing to calm my thundering pulse.

"Jacques, Rich, thank you for your time today," Holly says politely before turning to me. "Lily, congratulations and welcome to the team."

Everything stops, and I just stare at Holly, then Avery, and then everyone else in the room, unable to speak. Jacques throws down a kitchen towel and storms from the dining room. Rich

shakes hands with everyone, thanking them before excusing himself. I still don't know what to say.

Deep down, I knew I could win. *I knew I would win.* There was no way I was letting this opportunity pass me by, but I still can't believe I just landed a job that's one step short of being my dream job. It's not my own restaurant, but it's a massive step towards making a name for myself, working for one of the most well-known organizations in North America.

"I won the job?" I croak. Holly and Avery nod, massive smiles stretching across their faces.

"You did." Avery laughs, throwing her arms around me.

The next thing I know, everyone is laughing, chatting and congratulating me. Luke grabs me and locks me in a bear hug, rocking me back and forth. "I knew you'd do it, Tater Tot," he says, using one of my nicknames from when we were kids. I get it. I'm shorter than he is, and when I was two, I may have tried shoving a tater tot up my nose and got some of it stuck up there. Mom needed tweezers to get it all out.

"We knew you'd blow this out of the park." Avery beams, grabbing a bottle of champagne and popping it open. "Time to celebrate!"

"Well done," Monica Starling glides over. She is the most polished middle-aged woman I have ever laid eyes on. I've heard from Holly and Avery that the Starlings, despite their wealth and status, are some of the most down-to-earth, friendly people you'll ever meet. "That salad was phenomenal, and the chicken was to die for. I might start travelling with the team more often just so I can eat their food."

I blush at the compliments. Coach McCall says much of the same, and before I know it, I'm surrounded by people praising me and asking for seconds.

"Luke, dude," Ollie Decker grins, slinging an arm around me. "Your sister is a total knockout. She can cook, and she's hot." My cheeks burn at his words. Ollie is a good-looking man, and he's captivating with his unusual eyes, one blue and one brown. "I call dibs."

Luke's eyes narrow, and he growls. Or at least, I thought the sound came from him until I realize Chase is standing, white-knuckled behind him.

"No one is calling dibs on my sister," Luke says coldly, pulling me away from Ollie as Ozzy laughs and joins our group.

"Why not? We let Ryan have our sister," Ozzy jokes.

"Lily is not available," a deep voice interrupts the twins' playful banter. Chase Wilder has entered the chat.

"I'm not?" I glare at him. Who is he to stay if I am or am not available? He certainly hasn't made any effort to take me off the market. "I don't recall saying you could have an opinion on the matter. I am single, after all."

A muscle in Chase's jaw pulses, and seeing it gives me a feeling of satisfaction. I raise an eyebrow as if saying, *I'm right here if you want to change your mind and finally make a move.*

"No one on the team is dating my sister," Luke seethes. Oh, he's mad, and so is Chase. Good. "She's off limits."

Just as I am about to give Luke a piece of my mind, a new voice joins the conversation. "I hope that rule doesn't extend to the entire organization. Is kitchen staff excluded?"

My eyes follow the voice and land on one of the most stunning men that have ever crossed my path. He's tall—like really tall—making me feel even smaller. I'm not outrageously short at five-five, but this guy is a skyscraper. His shoulders are strong and broad, covered in a well-fitted dress shirt. *He's got style.* When I meet his eyes, they are a shocking shade of ice blue, especially in contrast to his reddish-brown hair. Paired with his deep voice and maybe just the tiniest hint of an accent, he's sex appeal wrapped up in one hot package. This dude looks like he walked right off the set of *Outlander*.

Yes, please!

"Samuel McCrae." He smiles, taking my hand and raising it to his lips. "It's a pleasure to finally meet the chef I'll be working alongside all year. I'm the team's nutritionist."

“Lily Valentine,” I stutter. Seriously, Samuel is hot. Nervously, I glance at Chase, who looks like he wants to punch Samuel in the throat. Good. It’s about time he had some competition. I don’t plan on waiting forever for Chase to decide if I’m good enough for him, and Samuel seems interested. “And, yes, kitchen staff are most definitely excluded from my idiot brother’s mandate. Contrary to popular belief, my brother doesn’t control my dating life.”

“Well then, I think you and I will get along famously. Between your culinary skills and my food science know-how, we’ll have the league’s best kitchen.”

“Or the hottest,” Holly mutters under her breath, and I can’t help but wonder if she might be right.

3

Kicking and Scheming

Lily

The next three weeks go by in a blur of cooking, finding a place to live, and setting up my life in Toronto. The last few months have been hectic as all hell. Between finishing my final internship, the Northmen making it all the way to game seven of the Stanley Cup Finals, and then immediately jetting off to Turks and Caicos for Avery and Ryan's surprise wedding this summer, it's been somewhat of a whirlwind shit show. Not to mention finding a place to live with Riley in the city now that we are both working here.

Initially, Holly had the great idea to let me move into the spare bedroom of the condo that she and Avery share. They pay a ridiculously low amount of rent because it's owned by Avery's stepbrother, who were playing hockey in New York for the last several seasons. But that idea went down the tubes when Ollie and Ozzy signed with the Northmen and decided to reclaim their condo for the start of the season. Holly is moving in with Luke on the top floor of the same building, which would have eventually happened anyway because they're getting married this weekend and are disgustingly in love.

In another fortunate turn of events, the unit next to Luke went up for sale and was immediately purchased by Ryan for himself and Avery. Everyone's offered me their spare bedroom, but something tells me living with newlyweds won't be my cup of tea. And when Ollie and Ozzy offered to honour the original plan and let me live in their apartment, Luke vetoed that idea before the twins were finished speaking. My intuition makes me think that living with two bachelors in the prime of their NHL careers would be just as tedious as living with newlyweds. A person can only listen to the soundtrack of skin slapping together so much before their ears want to fall off.

Don't get me wrong, Ollie and Ozzy are great. But they're also a little messy and have a habit of bringing women home, or so I'm told. Avery has the inside scoop on her brothers and assures me I never want to find out what living with them is like.

As it turns out, everything worked out for the best because I wasn't the only one who landed their dream job. After spending the last two years as a substitute teacher, Riley finally secured a full-time teaching position at an elementary school downtown, which means I get to live with my best friend.

I've spent every spare moment this summer apartment hunting in Toronto, which is somewhat daunting and outrageously expensive. We wanted to keep a reasonable budget, but when we discovered that our combined funds barely afforded us a hole in the wall, we had to rethink our options.

Holly and Luke came with us a few times to look at places and it did not go as expected. One apartment in a so-so neighbourhood, somewhat close to both our jobs, initially looked promising. It wasn't a penthouse with all-new appliances and a jacuzzi tub, but it was livable. Unfortunately—or perhaps fortunately—when we walked down a few hallways and noticed several pest control notices on tenants' doors, Luke, in no uncertain terms, refused to let me live in a “bedbug-infested shit hole.”

I can't say Riley or I were overly enthused about living there, either.

And so, despite my pleas of wanting to make it on my own, Luke decided to “diversify his assets” and purchased another condo one block away from his in a new development. According to Luke and Holly, my brother has an ungodly amount of money just sitting in a bank account, and buying real estate is a great way to see a return on his investment.

Riley and I are still paying rent, even if it's less than half the going rate. I refuse to take handouts from my brother, no matter how much money he makes. And the money I'll be earning with the team isn't anything to sniff at. In fact, every

time I look at my contract, salary, and benefits, I get downright giddy.

And I'm not going to lie, it's a pretty awesome place to live. It's a two-bedroom, two-bathroom condo with an open-concept floor plan, and a stunning kitchen with a gas stove and top-notch appliances. Obviously, as a chef, the kitchen was the dealbreaker for me. It doesn't hurt that the building also has other amenities like a rooftop patio, concierge, and a gym.

Everything seems to be falling into place, but I'm totally exhausted. Ever since I was hired, I've spent every waking minute of my day talking to players and team personnel, learning their likes, dislikes, and dietary restrictions.

I've also been spending an inordinate amount of time with Sam. To put it plainly, he's amazing and we get along like two peas in a pod. He's great to work with, listens to my ideas, has a sense of humour, and is really nice to look at. Holly and Avery weren't kidding when they raved about how wonderful he is when they first hired him at the start of summer. They got to know him mostly through email and Zoom calls, which of course, is how they found out how hot he is. Although I don't know how they missed his accent. Maybe I have sensitive ears, but I definitely hear some Scottish influence under his Canadianized brogue.

On day one, I laid down some ground rules about crossing lines and maintaining boundaries with Sam. We're coworkers, so we both agreed that being just friends is the best avenue to venture down. And I may have mentioned that I am interested in someone else.

Speaking of which, I've barely seen Chase since moving, except to get his food preferences. But I'm hoping things will change this weekend because he'll be forced to spend time with me at Luke and Holly's wedding. He's the best man, and I'm a bridesmaid. There's no way he can avoid me.

Luke really went all out for his wedding. Everyone's heading up to Muskoka to a private resort he rented exclusively for the wedding party and guests. It's the last bit of free time the team will have before the season starts.

I glance at the clock as I rush to get ready for work. I'm meeting Sam to finalize some menus for training camp and pre-season. Riley, the lucky bitch, has summers off. But I don't envy the amount of work she does during the school year, planning, marking, and teaching lazy, snot-nosed students. Most days, she's up at the ass-crack of dawn to make it to school on time. The funny thing about this city is that even Toronto is an hour away from Toronto. Traffic is a nightmare.

"Thank god it's Thursday," I say, walking into the kitchen. Riley is sitting at the island in a pair of her infamous princess pyjamas. Most people say she looks like a Disney Princess, so her jammies are her way of embracing it. "I'm so relieved everyone is taking Friday off to head up to the resort early. I don't want to get caught in cottage country traffic and be late for my brother's wedding."

"Right?" Riley nods, sipping coffee, then pouring me a traveller mug. She knows me so well and I love her for it.

"So, what are you up to for the rest of the day?" I ask.

"Getting ready for the wedding, packing, plucking, and shaving every stray hair off my body. My skin will be smooth as a baby's ass, and I plan on looking hot as fuck for the reception. There will be loads of young, hot, single hockey players there, and I don't want to miss out."

"Yes, there definitely will be. Is there anyone you have your eye on?" I grin knowingly. Rumour has it Riley went starry-eyed over Avery's brother Ozzy when she bumped into him at Holly and Avery's new place of business—Sparks and Avery Sports Specialists or SASS for short. And she all but drooled over him the entire time we were away at Avery's wedding.

"Maybe," she mumbles and tries to act nonplussed. "I mean, I wouldn't be terribly sad to run into Ozzy or accidentally-on-purpose fall onto his dick."

I laugh. Riley is crushing hard. Some might even say her crush rivals my own for Chase. "What about you? Do you have any clever schemes to get Chase to do the horizontal mambo with you?"

“Boo, no,” I sigh, looking for something quick to eat in our fridge. Yogurt it is. “Chase is playing hard to get, and I don’t know why. I get the whole ‘your bother is my best friend’ thing, but he needs to get over it already.”

“Hmmm.” Riley looks at me funny like she’s scheming. Riley has a very distinct scheme face. It’s a narrowing of her eyes and an up-tilting of her lips like she’s trying to think too hard. “How are things going with Sam at work?”

That was an abrupt subject change. *Or was it?*

“Fine...” I say, trailing off. “Why?”

“No reason.” Silence takes up the space around us, and I know Riley has more to say. “Except that he’s extremely good-looking and clearly has the hots for you.”

“We’ve agreed to just be friends.” Well, I decided. He didn’t seem too keen on the idea.

“That’s all well and good, but Chase doesn’t need to know that.”

“What do you mean?”

“Okay, hear me out,” Riley starts, and usually when she begins her explanations with “hear me out,” it’s followed by an extremely terrible idea. “Sam is a super nice, super good-looking dude. He’s clearly interested, and you like him, just not in a let’s-get-naked way. He’s fun to hang out with, so...” she pauses for effect, “why not ask him to the wedding as your date?”

“That’s a terrible idea.”

“No, it’s a brilliant idea. Chase will lose his shit if he sees you with someone else.”

“Okay, but I have to work with Sam, and I don’t want to lead him on. I’d only be asking him to make Chase jealous.” Seriously, this is a horrible idea. Sam already asked me out once, to which I politely declined on the basis of professionalism. Asking him to my brother’s wedding so I can use him as a weapon to incite jealousy is just mean.

“Then tell him the truth and ask him to do you a solid. Tell him you just need some arm candy.” Riley is nuts, but she’s also an evil genius, and it might just work. “You’re allowed to bring a plus-one.”

“You’re my plus one.”

“No, I’m a guest. So technically, we’re both allowed a plus-one. I’ll call the resort and change our reservation to two rooms. Your brother has the whole damn place booked, so it’s not like it will be an issue. We can give Sam his own room, and you and I can still bunk together. Unless—”

“There won’t be an unless.” I roll my eyes.

I grab my yogurt and coffee and leave Riley to her smutty book and scheming. The whole way to work, I mull over her idea. It does have merit. I’ve seen Chase’s jealous side, and it’s delicious.

By the time I’m pulling out my arena fob, I like the idea even more, but I’m hesitant to ask this of Sam. We’ve established a good work relationship and I don’t want to ruin it.

“Hey there, Shortcake,” Sam greets me as I walk into our office. When you’re surrounded by tall-ass hockey players and other vertically enhanced people, I guess you’re forever doomed to inherit nicknames that make you feel short. Sam is pretty tall and it makes our office seem smaller when he’s in it. His size is much more reasonable when we’re collaborating in the kitchen. Over the last few weeks, we’ve conquered a month’s worth of meal plans. Some of the menus I’ll be preparing, and the others are for players to take home and try for themselves—god help them.

I have to admit, our workspace is pretty sweet. We have a cozy office with brand-new Mac desktops where we do meal planning and research, plus a massive kitchen where the magic happens. Most of our time is spent reviewing menu options and player files. Each player filled out an extensive form detailing likes, dislikes, allergies, and a bunch of other questions that will help me better understand what type of tasting palette each player has.

The next few hours are spent going through ingredient lists and order forms. We need food delivered for training camp, or else I'll have an arena full of hangry hockey players. I go through a checklist and order a few extra things in case I want to do something creative last minute that's not on the menu.

Sam and I discuss putting together a presentation for the players outlining essential nutrition and the dos and don'ts for eating before and after games. You'd be surprised how many athletes don't know the correct way to fuel and replenish their bodies after a strenuous workout.

Hockey players literally sweat out pounds of water weight during a game, especially goalies. And during the playoffs, when games can go into several overtime periods, players end up stuffing their faces with weird shit during intermissions to keep their bodies going. Last playoffs, one goalie looked like he had just returned from playing Survivor after winning a game in quadruple overtime. He lost twenty pounds of water weight in one game. Other players were pounding protein bars and squirting mustard directly into their mouths to replenish lost electrolytes. Disgusting. I enjoy a good protein bar, but mustard? No thanks.

"So, any big plan for your last weekend of freedom before all hell breaks loose?" Sam asks, leaning back in his chair and smiling. He has a great smile. Nice, white teeth and very genuine. Why couldn't I fall for a guy like him? He's perfect. Except for the fact that he doesn't give me the butterflies or buzz of electricity I feel around Chase.

"It's my brother's wedding weekend. We're all headed up to the Rosseau Resort after work today. Holly and Luke are already up there enjoying some pre-wedding alone time." They left on Monday to go over the final details and do coupley things that I have no interest in knowing about.

"That's right, the big Valentine-Sparks union. Knowing what I know of your brother, it sounds like it will be pretty good shindig."

I laugh. Luke does like a good party. Sam chuckles too, and I can't help but glance sidelong at him and wonder about

Riley's idea. Maybe it wouldn't hurt to ask.

"Do you have any big plans?" I ask.

"Naw. I'll probably just chill out and catch up on some TV shows." I nod at him, fiddling with the pen in my hand.

"We're friends, right?" I blurt out and immediately feel like an idiot.

"I think so," Sam says, lips tilting upwards in a playful grin.

"Okay, well, can I run something by you?"

"Shoot."

"And you can tell me if I'm out of line because I know you asked me out, and I said we should just be friends, and I mentioned there was someone else." I ramble a little and take another breath while Sam waits patiently for me to continue, interest painting his gaze.

"Well, this someone is going to be at the wedding, and my friend Riley got this crazy idea in her head that I should bring you as my date to make him jealous. Because, I mean, I'm sure you know this, but you're pretty nice to look at. But I don't want to put you in an awkward situation or ruin what we have going on here. Maybe this is a terrible idea, but—"

"Lily," Sam interrupts me, putting a hand over mine. He chuckles again, and I blush. "It's not a crazy idea. Your friend sounds quite brilliant. If I were this other man, seeing you on someone else's arm would make me wild with jealousy."

"It would?"

"It would."

"So you'll come?" I squeak, pretty sure my eyes are wide as saucers.

"Yes, I'll come on two conditions." His intensely blue eyes stare into mine as he grins. He really is handsome.

"Anything," I breathe.

"The first is that you play the part along with me. We can make whoever this fool is jealous together." That makes sense.

If I want to sell this, I need to pretend I have it bad for Sam, and maybe my acting skills will be good enough to push Chase right over the edge of sanity and into my arms.

“And the second?”

“You let me take you out on a few dates—real ones—after we get back.” I’m about to decline, but Sam holds up a hand to stop me. “I understand you’re into this guy, but if he can’t see what’s right in front of him, maybe he doesn’t deserve you. Maybe you deserve someone better.”

I blush at his words and, despite myself, there is a flicker of something in my belly. Not butterflies—or indigestion—but something.

“And I promise that no matter what you decide after we go out a few times, we’ll still be friends unless you decide you want something more.”

I chew my bottom lip. People always say they’ll be friends after crossing a line, and it never works out, but I’m in control here. I can go on a few dates with Sam and be platonic. I know I can. I’m just not sure he can.

“You promise we’ll be friends no matter what I decide?”

“Scout’s honour,” he says solemnly, putting his hand over his heart. I laugh at the absurdity of the gesture.

“Okay then, we have a deal.”

“No, Shortcake, we have a date.”

I laugh again and gather my things so I can head home and finish packing. I give Sam directions to the resort and remind him to text me when he gets there so I can meet him in the lobby with his room key.

By the time I get home, I’m already second-guessing myself and wondering if I’ve made a colossal mistake. This is a risky move, but people always say *big risks, big rewards*.

Operation Win Chase Wilder has commenced.

4

The Wedding Date

Chase

“**Y**ou ready for this, man?” I ask Luke, clapping him on the back. We’re out on a dock decked out in wedding decorations, making sure everything is perfect.

Luke has spent a fucking fortune on his wedding and planned this weekend-long event to the tits. Holly would have been happy with a simple ceremony in someone’s backyard, but Luke wanted the wedding magazine centrefold experience. The entire resort has been overrun with Valentines and friends and family. No one without an invite is getting into this wedding, especially the press. Holly and Avery will be curating what goes out into the world via the team’s social media accounts.

The ceremony is taking place on the waterfront of Lake Rousseau, and Luke and Holly couldn’t have picked a better day. The weather is perfect. Not too hot, not too cold, and not a damn cloud in the sky. There is a small t-shaped floating dock with a wood-framed wedding arch covered in ferns, gardenias, and roses. I know the names of all the flowers because it was my job to tick everything off a checklist. It looks like something out of a fairy tale, which I guess is the point.

The dock is lined with white and blue rose bouquets leading down the aisle to an arch and small pedestal where Ollie will act as officiant. He joked that he may make a business of marrying people now that he’s ordained. This is his second wedding this summer after he married his sister to Ryan in Turks and Caicos.

White chairs are set up in curved rows facing the water, with wireless speakers hidden throughout. Ollie will be mic’d up along with the bride and groom. There is a small boathouse where Holly and her bridesmaids will walk to the beach and down the dock aisle. Avery is her maid of honour and Taylor,

Holly's sister, and Lily are her bridesmaids. I'm acting as best man, and Jake Owens and Hunter LaRoux are groomsmen.

Everything looks ready to go, including the groom.

"Are you kidding me?" Luke grins. "I can't wait."

It's true. Luke is crazy in love with Holly. We had dual bachelor and bachelorette parties in the Caribbean. It was an evening full of plastic penises and sex toys, where Luke absconded with his wife-to-be before midnight, and the newlyweds, Ryan and Avery, disappeared too. I spent the rest of the night watching Lily dance provocatively with Riley and rub up against half-dressed, oil-up men that I wanted to drown in the ocean.

Lily is driving me insane. She's a temptation that's becoming impossible to resist. It was easier when she was away at school and I was playing hockey in Florida, but now I have to see her every fucking day. I feel like I'm being punished. And watching my teammates drool over her and her food gives me the urge to put my fist through their faces.

Luke's already laid down the law around his sister. She's off-limits to any of the guys on our team, including me. I'm pretty sure he already suspects me of lusting after Lily, mainly because it's true and Lily hasn't exactly made a secret of pursuing me. That ship sailed when she charged ten-thousand dollars to her brother's credit card to buy me at a charity auction. It was the one and only night my resolve crumbled, and I kissed her.

I lost my mind. That's the only explanation I have for my slip in control. If someone hadn't knocked over a planter in the hallway, I probably would have fucked Luke's little sister up against a storage room wall. I was disgusted with myself, so I fled. But I'll never forget how I had her wrists pinned above her head, bruising her skin red.

I'll never touch Lily again. I won't demean her like that. If she knew all the shit I've done over the years, she'd be repulsed by me. Hell, I'm repulsed by me.

“Only a few more hours,” Luke says, taking a deep breath and looking over the water. “Only a few more hours and Holly’s mine forever.”

“I’m happy for you, man. You deserve it.”

“Thanks.” Luke goes quiet and glances at me. He surveys my profile as if taking my measure. “You know, Chase, you deserve it too.”

“Naw, I’m not a one-woman kind of guy.”

“Aren’t you, though?” Luke says, narrowing his eyes. “I haven’t seen you take a woman home in months. In fact, I haven’t seen you even look at a woman since December.”

I don’t respond to him. Mostly because he’s right. Ever since the charity auction, I haven’t been able to stomach fucking around like I used to. Oh, I’ve tried, but every time a woman gets close, all I can think of is Lily’s lips. Her lust-hazed blue eyes and little moan when I pressed my aching cock into her belly. It’s fucked me up even more than I was before.

“Look,” Luke starts. “I know you had a fucked-up childhood. You never talk about it, and I know your dad’s a piece of work. I don’t know half the shit that went on in your house, but I knew the bruises weren’t just from hockey.”

I clench my fists at my sides. I don’t want to talk about this, but I don’t stop Luke, either.

“If you want to talk about it, I’m here for you.” He claps his hand to mine and pulls me in for a bro hug. Just when I think he’s going to let go, he pulls me tighter to whisper in my ear. “But if you fuck around with my little sister and break her heart, I will end you.”

With that, Luke releases me and starts walking down the dock back toward the resort. He stops a few feet away and calls back to me.

“You coming? This wedding doesn’t start until we’re dressed and get Avery’s stamp of approval.”



The wedding goes off without a hitch. Holly looks stunning in her white dress that glitters in the setting sunlight. I think Luke might lose it at one point, but he manages to get through the vows without any waterworks. Holly is another story. She cries. Avery cries. All the bridesmaids cry except Lily. She smiles so big at the bride and groom that I think her face will split in two.

She looks radiant in her navy blue gown that hugs her in all the right places. The fabric is light and clingy, stretching over one shoulder and reaches just above her knee. For a woman that's not exactly tall, Lily has stunningly long legs. They're like an optical illusion. When she walked down the aisle with her little bouquet of Northmen-coloured flowers, something squeezed inside my chest. I expected her eyes to find mine like she always seems to do when we're in the same room, but instead, she searched the crowd for someone else.

I followed her gaze to the rows of guests until it landed on Samuel McCrae, the team's nutritionist, who I know for a fact was not invited to this wedding. Which means Lily brought him. As her date.

Ollie pronounces Luke and Holly man and wife, and as they kiss, Lily glances over at the ginger dude who's preening like a fucking peacock. I know that look. He looks like he wants to claim Lily for himself. He wants to piss all over her like a dog and stake his claim, and it makes me want to launch myself into the rows of guests and rip his fucking throat out.

After the bridal party files down the aisle and makes an exit, I circle back. Everyone is laughing, hugging, and taking photos. It doesn't take me long to spot Samuel smiling and talking with Mrs. Valentine. *Now he's meeting the family? For fuck's sake.*

"Oh, Chase," Angie welcomes me into the conversation. "Aren't you supposed to be getting your photo taken?" I am, but she doesn't need to know that.

"The photographer is starting with Holly and Luke," I lie, hugging Angie. She's been my stand-in mom for as long as I've known Luke, and she never skimps on affection.

“Samuel,” I nod to the smarmy bastard. The worst part is I don’t actually think he’s a bad guy. He’s just not the guy for Lily. “I didn’t expect to see you here.”

“I didn’t expect to be here,” he smiles, and I can’t help imagining what it would be like to knock his teeth out. “But Lily and I have been hitting it off in the kitchen, and I’m not one to turn down a weekend with a beautiful woman.”

A vein in my forehead starts to pulse. *Lily asked Samuel here, and they’re spending the weekend together.* I bite my tongue to stop myself from asking if this little getaway includes room sharing and try to think of a roundabout way to get an answer.

“Well, my daughter has always had wonderful taste in men,” Angie laughs, placing a hand on his arm. I doubt she’d still have that opinion if she knew her daughter wanted to take a ride on my hockey stick.

“I thought Lily was coming with Riley,” I say nonchalantly.

“Yes, the ladies drove up together because I had some last-minute things to finish before leaving.” The knot in my gut eases a little until Samuel keeps talking. “It’s lucky that Luke has the whole resort for the wedding party. Lily had no trouble changing her reservation to accommodate me, and Riley didn’t mind that I stole her date.”

“Riley’s a darling,” Angie agrees. “And let’s be honest, I doubt she minds flying solo at a wedding full of handsome hockey players. It’s about time that girl met someone nice.”

“Aren’t you supposed to discourage your daughter and her friends from chasing after boys?” Samuel chuckles, taking a sip of the champagne being passed out by cocktail waitresses. He snags an extra off a tray and hands it to Angie. *Charming bastard.*

“Young man, I have two full-grown children and no grand babies to spoil. I’m going to shamelessly matchmake my one remaining child until I’m holding a baby in my hands.”

“Well, I think your chances of grandchildren have increased exponentially now that Holly and Luke have tied the knot,” he laughs.

“Who’s this young man flirting with my wife and putting outrageous ideas in her head?” a deep, jovial voice joins the conversation. Matthew Valentine seamlessly slides an arm around his wife. They are the most in-love husband and wife I have ever seen, even after years of marriage. I know they are the example Luke aspires to, and he’s well on his way to becoming his parents in about twenty years.

“Matthew, this is Samuel McCrae. Lily’s date. They work together with the team. He’s the nutritionist we’ve heard so much about.”

Matthew takes Samuel’s hand and gives it a firm shake. The fact Lily’s been talking to her family about him makes me insanely jealous.

“Ah, so this is the man my daughter keeps comparing to the guy from the TV show you watch, Angie,” Matthew laughs. *Fucking Outlander, kilts, and Scottish accents.* Sam barely even has an accent. You can’t even tell unless you listen really hard. “My daughter thinks very highly of you.”

“And I think very highly of your daughter. She’s one of the most impressive chefs I’ve ever had the pleasure of working with.”

I can’t stop the low growl that comes out of me.

“Chase,” Matthew says. “I didn’t even see you there. You looked very dashing up there with my son.”

“Thank you.”

“What do you think of the team’s new nutritionist and chef duo?” Matthew asks, shooting me an appraising look like he’s trying to tell me something telepathically, but I have no clue what exactly.

“He’s very knowledgeable, and I’ve always loved Lily.” Angie’s eyes widen, and Matthew smirks as I realize what I’ve just said. “Her cooking! I’ve always loved her cooking.”

“We knew what you meant,” Matthew chuckles and winks, then starts to steer his wife away. “Angie, let’s leave the young men to fight over our daughter and sneak away for a quickie.”

“Matthew!” Angie shrieks, slapping her husband’s arm. She scolds him, but her reprimand lacks sincerity. We all know the Valentines are notorious for their public displays of affection that edge on indecency.

The pair disappear towards the cocktail area, arm in arm, but they don’t, in fact, disappear out of eyesight. Angie knows better than to leave because, guaranteed, the photographer will start looking for them as soon as they do.

I turn my attention back to Samuel, who smiles after Angie and Matthew. He’s wearing a well-tailored blue suit, white dress shirt, and navy tie that matches Lily’s dress. I want nothing more than to take that tie and strangle him with it.

“It’s nice to see a couple clearly still in love after so many years,” he says, motioning towards the Valentines.

“What are your intentions toward Lily,” I bark, cutting through the bullshit to get straight to the point. I don’t have time for pleasantries. I know I’m going to be pulled away any second for pictures.

Something like understanding flashes in Samuel’s calm, blue eyes as he takes me in. “Ah, so you’re my competition.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Tell me something, Chase,” Samuel begins, narrowing his eyes. “What are *your* intentions toward Lily?”

“She’s like a sister to me. It’s my job to make sure you’re not a douchebag.” The lie rolls off my tongue effortlessly.

“Brothers don’t look at sisters the way you look at Lily, Chase. Let’s not insult each other’s intelligence and call this what it really is.”

“And what’s that?”

“We’re both falling for the same woman.” I want to deny it but stay quiet. “Lily is an extraordinary woman, and if you can’t see that, then all the better for me. She’s not going to wait around for you forever, and when she’s finally done getting over you, I plan to be there to sweep her off her feet.”

“If you hurt her, I’ll end you,” I hiss.

“I’m not the one hurting her. I like Lily. A lot. And I think we could have something special, but you’re in the way of that. If you’re not interested in her, let her go. She deserves to be happy.”

“And I suppose you think you can make her happy?”

“I do, in fact.”

With that, Samuel turns and leaves. I stare after him grinding my teeth and cracking my knuckles. The stupid thing is, I want Lily to be happy. Of course, I do. I just don’t want her to be happy with him. Or anyone else.

I’m so fucked.

I grab another glass of champagne off a tray and start making my way toward the photographer when Angie creeps back over and slides her arm through mine. I glance around for Matthew, who’s already posing for photos.

“Walk with me, Chase.” She smiles, patting my arm. “What do you think of Samuel?”

“I think he’s an ass,” I grunt, causing the woman on my arm to laugh.

“Of course, you do. The real question is, *why* do you think he’s an ass? Because from what I can see, Samuel is a true gentleman. Lily could do a lot worse.”

Yes, she could. She could end up with me.

“I just don’t like him.” I sound like a petulant child and I know it.

“Oh, Chase.” Angie stops walking and pulls me aside under a tall maple tree. “You’re a good man too. You’ve always been like a second son to me, and I want you to be as happy as my own children.”

“I am happy.” I lie, and Angie shoots me one of her skeptical looks that says she’s not buying what I’m trying to sell.

“I may not know everything that went on in your house, Chase, but I know it wasn’t good,” Angie says sadly. “If I could have, I would have stolen you away from your father

because I love you, and so does Matthew. As far as we're concerned, you're our son too. You've grown into a good man, and we are so proud of you, Chase." My throat tightens as Angie speaks. She pauses for just a moment, giving me the side-eye. "Mind you, there were some questionable years thrown in there, but even Luke's made some choices I didn't exactly approve of.

"I know my daughter," she continues. "And I know for her, it's always been you. I used to watch Lily trail after you and Luke and wonder if you'd ever reciprocate those feelings. As a mother, I'd hoped you would because you never want to see your daughter heartbroken. But I also hoped for you because you deserve to be loved, and my daughter has a huge capacity to love."

"I'm not good enough for her." The words come out unbidden, and I immediately want to take them back.

"Oh, my darling boy, but you are." Angie puts a hand to my cheek. It's soothing and warm like a mother's touch should be. "Love is love. If you think my daughter might be the one, fight for her. And if you don't, let her go. Let her be happy with someone else."

Before I can respond, the photographer is waving us over. I lead Angie over to the rest of the wedding party, who are all taking their places for a group shot.

My eyes naturally stray to Lily. She's smiling, hugging Holly. Seeing her so happy makes my chest hurt. I've always wanted her, probably for longer than even I realize. And I want her to be happy. I want her to have everything she's ever wished for and more. But I can't help thinking, try as I might, I'd just end up making her miserable.

*Let's Dance***Lily**

Sam is an excellent dancer.

We glide over the dance floor like water, our hands linked as we two-step to the left and right. He lets go of one hand and spins me, my dress twirling as I circle out and then back into his waiting arms. I laugh, loud and uninhibited. I love dancing. And I've never met someone who actually knows how to dance other than just bobbing and thumping about to the beat.

Sam surprises me by grabbing my waist and lifting me up, swing dance style, dipping me to each side. Everyone around us is clapping and cheering us on. We're putting on a show, and I love it.

It's been a fantastic day. I never thought I would have this much fun at my brother's wedding, but Sam is wonderful. He's charming and funny and everything a girl could want. Half the women here are probably in love with him. Between his good looks and his dance moves, he's a total dream. And I want to feel something for him. I think loving him would be easy, but I tried forcing love once with Derrick and it didn't work. There was always something missing.

"Don't look now, but Mr. Wilder is brooding in the corner." Sam smirks and dips me again. I was surprised when he pinpointed Chase as the man I'd been pining for all this time. He's too smart for his own good, and whatever game he has me playing tonight, it's working. Chase looks miserable. I almost feel bad for him. Almost.

It took everything in me to not look at him during the ceremony and focus my attention on Sam, who insisted my indifference would drive him mad. I almost succeeded in completely ignoring him, but I couldn't help glancing his way at the end of the ceremony when Ollie pronounced Luke and Holly as husband and wife.

He looked breathtaking, flashing a dashing smile at the newlyweds, with hair that had been mussed at some point during the ceremony. Chase has always had a bad habit of torturing his hair when he's thinking too hard or nervous. I've often had to resist the urge to tuck stray strands back into place. And his eyes have a way of up-turning at the corners when he's genuinely smiling. Seeing him happy makes my heart ache to be closer to him.

I glance up at Sam, a man who is clearly interested in me. Who is kind and caring and who I love being around. He's perfect, and it makes me wonder what's wrong with me that I can't be excited to have captured the eye of such a great guy. Maybe I need to let go of Chase to truly appreciate what's in front of me. Maybe my fixation is stopping me from giving a man like Sam a real chance.

"Uh oh, looks like you're overthinking," Sam teases, leading me off the dance floor. I'm breathless, flushed from spinning, and grateful for the glass of ice water waiting at my table.

"Excuse us, Samuel," a cheery voice trills behind me. Avery breezes into the seat next to me, followed by Holly, Riley, Taylor, and her girlfriend Tyra. "But we need to have a quick intervention with your date."

"By all means," Sam says, standing up and excusing himself from the table.

Riley links arms with me and proceeds to drag me out of the reception hall onto a balcony overlooking Lake Rosseau. The sky is dark and clear, and the moon and stars are out in full force. It's beautifully romantic, and instead of enjoying it with some arm candy, I'm stuck with five other women.

"What game are you playing?" Avery questions, narrowing her eyes at me. These women are like human lie detectors. There's no way I'm getting away with fibbing, but that doesn't stop me from trying.

"I don't know what you mean."

"Nice try." Holly rolls her eyes and turns to Riley, who looks like a deer caught in headlights. "Riley, what's going on? This

is my wedding. You can't lie to the bride."

Riley mouths "sorry" to me before launching into our harebrained scheme to make Chase jealous. *Some friend she is.*

"You sneaky, brilliant bitch." Avery grins. "I didn't think you had it in you, but I'm impressed."

"Does Sam know you're using him for nefarious purposes?" Tyra asks. She's a stunning Hollywood A-Lister, and she and Taylor make an annoyingly beautiful couple. They got together in the spring after Tyra came out to the public, and her agent turned into a psychopath stalker.

"Of course, he knows," I say, slightly offended. "I would never have enlisted him to help me without him knowing my purpose."

"And he was okay with it?" Taylor asks, confused. "Because he's either a fantastic actor or crazy into you."

I glance at Sam over by the bar, charming Holly's mother who's attached to my Uncle Eddie.

"Wait! Are you into Sam?" Holly squeals, following my line of sight.

"No!" I say a little too fast. "Not really. I don't know. I'm confused." I groan.

And I am confused. I want to like Sam, but I don't know if it's because I like him in a let's-get-naked way or because I miss the feeling of being wanted by a man. I sigh, running my hands over my face, pulling the skin down.

"I like the way Sam makes me feel. I like that he cares and makes an effort. He makes me laugh and treats me like I'm something special. He's funny and good-looking, and we have a lot of fun together."

"But," Riley says, filling in the unsaid word I was thinking.

"But Chase makes my heart race. When I close my eyes, it's Chase I picture." I frown, staring into the crowd of dancers. "But Chase avoids me and has made it clear he's not willing to

see what this thing simmering between us is. He won't chance ruining his friendship with my brother."

"Don't worry about Luke," Holly reassures me. "I'll take care of him."

"Maybe I've deluded myself into thinking he wants me," I sigh. "Maybe I've blinded myself to other options because I've been infatuated with the idea of Chase for so long that I can't tell the difference between truth and reality."

"Don't be ridiculous." Avery huffs before pointing directly at Chase, who is hunched over a drink at the wedding party's table. "That boy is mad with jealousy. Anyone with eyes in their head can see he wants you. He just needs to get over himself, pull up his big boy pants, and take you to O-Town, Orgasmville, the Hoe-down Showdown, the—"

"We get it," I cut Avery off before she gets carried away.

"But..." Riley grins mischievously, drumming her fingers together like a supervillain, "it wouldn't hurt to explore things with Samuel in the meantime. That man is delicious."

"Do you think there could be more with him?" Tyra asks, looking over at Sam appreciatively. Tyra is gay, and even she enjoys the fine specimen that is Samuel McCrae.

"Maybe. I'm definitely attracted to him." I chew my lip and look from Chase to Sam, unsure of myself. "And I owe Sam a few dates when we get back."

"Say what now?" Avery questions.

"When I propositioned him to be my date to make Chase jealous, he made me promise to a couple of dates to change my mind."

"Smart man." Taylor smiles. She looks so much like Holly that it's actually frightening. They'd almost be twins if she didn't have light brown eyes. "He's fighting for you."

"So go on the dates with him and give him a chance. Either Chase will lose his mind and realize he's in love with you, or you'll finally get over him and fall in love with Sam. It's a win-win situation," Riley says as if it's that easy.

“Excuse me, ladies,” Ozzy says, cutting into our girl gang meeting. He tosses his most devastating smile at Riley, who blushes so deep her cheeks match her hair. “But my sister seems to be hogging all the beautiful ladies in the room to herself, and I know for a fact her husband is looking for her.”

Avery’s eyes immediately roam the room and land on Ryan, who lights up when he sees her. She excuses herself and is swept away into a slow dance. Avery and Ryan went through a rough time getting back together this spring. They’re so sweet and in love it makes my teeth ache.

“Riley,” Ozzy grins. “I think this is our song.”

“We have a song?” Riley says a little breathlessly, listening to the first notes of a “Betty Davis Eyes” cover play over the speakers. There’s nothing quite like an eighties love ballad.

“We do now.”

Ozzy whisks Riley away like the suave lady’s man that he is and starts spinning her around the dance floor. Luke comes to collect his wife, and then Taylor and Tyra join the couples on the dance floor too. I watch everyone, trying not to let envy seep into my bones.

“May I have this dance?” Sam’s voice whispers from behind me. Wordlessly, he takes my hands and whisks me into the dance, placing my arms around his neck before wrapping his around my waist. We sway back and forth to the music comfortably. When his arms pull me a little closer and grip me a little tighter, a small current of awareness zings through me.

“Are you having a nice time, Ms. Valentine?” Sam asks, leaning back slightly to look into my eyes. His are clear grey-blue and so full of heat it makes me blush.

“Yes,” I say, my voice low. My heart rate starts to accelerate when Sam’s eyes drift down to my lips. Reflexively, my tongue darts out to moisten them. Another burst of heat flashes in his eyes, and that’s when I know.

Samuel is going to kiss me.

Samuel is going to kiss me, and I’m going to let him.

The sound of a throat clearing, too loud to be natural, shocks me back to reality. I can still feel the heat of Sam's breath on my lips; we were that close to kissing. I turn my head and see Chase staring daggers at us. The blush staining my cheeks deepens as if I've been caught doing something I shouldn't.

"May I cut in?" Chase asks. He doesn't wait for a reply before stepping between Sam and me, blocking my date from view and all but dragging me away from him.

"That was rude," I say, pursing my lips up at Chase.

"Good," he grunts as another slow song pours out of the speakers.

Taylor Swift's "Mary's Song" starts to play, telling the story of a little girl and a little boy who grow up together and fall in love. I listened to it all the time as a teenager. It's horribly ironic considering my situation, and I want to think it's a coincidence until I see my mother nonchalantly strolling away from the deejay. I'm surprised she didn't request my anthem, "You Belong With Me."

"What are you doing, Chase?" I sigh, looking up at his face. His actions and reactions are hot and cold, making me crazy and confused.

"I'm dancing with you."

Conceding the point to him, for now, I lay my head on his chest and let myself be swept away by the song's words. I can't stop myself from inhaling his familiar scent and letting the feeling of being in his arms wash over me. His hands are locked around my waist, and he pulls me closer until our torsos are perfectly aligned. We just fit. He's much taller than I am, and where a taller woman would have laid her head on his shoulder, I'm perfectly content to press my ear to his chest and listen to his heartbeat. It thumps against my cheek, strong yet erratic, as if being around me makes his heart beat faster. The thought sends a thrill racing through me.

"Why are you dancing with me, Chase?" I ask, rephrasing my first question.

“Can’t the best man dance with the groom’s sister, who also happens to be his friend?” His answer is a prime example of a deflection tactic.

“Is that what I am? Your friend?”

“I don’t know what you are, Lily,” Chase grinds out like he’s finally losing some of his carefully crafted composure. “I know you looked so damned beautiful walking down that aisle today that I wanted to throw you over my shoulder and have you all to myself. I know I wanted to rip my eyes out every time I saw you looking at that jackass you call a date. You looked at him like you used to look at me. I didn’t just want to cut in and steal you away from him. I wanted to break both his hands for daring to touch you and rearrange his face for trying to kiss you right in front of me.”

“You were jealous,” I state, which only succeeds in making Chase more irritated.

“Of course, I was jealous, Lily. What did you think? That I would enjoy seeing another man’s hands on you?”

“I don’t know, Chase. I’ve made it abundantly clear that I want more than friendship from you, and I feel like all I’m doing is embarrassing myself. I’m still just your best friend’s pathetic little sister, who you’re trying to let down easy.”

“That’s not what I’m doing,” Chase growls, pulling me tight again.

“Then what?” I pull back, exasperated and fucking confused. “What do you want from me, Chase? I’m not going to wait around forever for you to decide I’m good enough for you. Especially when I have a genuinely nice guy who wants to spend time with me and actually makes me feel like a woman, not just Luke’s little sister.”

“It’s me that’s not good enough for you, Lily,” Chase forces the words out. “I’m too fucked up for you.”

“We’re all fucked up, Chase.” I grab his face and force him to look me in the eyes. I see his anguish, and I want to make it go away. “I’m the only person who gets to choose who’s good enough for me. So, for once in your life, be honest with me

about this. What do you want from me?” For a long minute, he just stares at me, taking in my features like he’s trying to memorize this moment.

“Fuck me,” he groans. “I want you, Lily. I tried so damn hard not to, but I want you so fucking badly that it scares me.”

Blood rushes through my ears, making me wonder if I’m hearing Chase right. But, when hands cup my face, and his lips come crashing down on mine in a claiming kiss, all I can do is stand up straight and kiss him back.

Our first kiss was all frantic lips and pulsing need, but this one’s different. The need, want, and desire are still there. But after the initial crush of his lips against mine, it turns gentler. Chase’s kiss is soft, smooth, and sweet. It’s the alter-ego of the rough, passionate explosion of a kiss we shared in December, and I want more of it. I want all his kisses.

Knowing we’re drawing the stares of other guests doesn’t stop me from kissing Chase back with all the pent-up and frustrated feelings I’ve held back for years. When his tongue gently runs along the seams of my lips, I don’t even think. I open for him and pull his tongue into my mouth, tasking him long and deep.

Somewhere in my mind, I know we have a full audience. I sense a murmur of interest ripple through the dance floor, but I ignore it. This kiss has been a decade in the making, and it’s for Chase and me alone.

“Luke!” I hear Holly’s voice hiss from somewhere in the periphery. “Don’t you dare!”

“You fucking asshole,” Luke roars as he rips us apart, promptly planting a fist in Chase’s face.

He lands on the floor with a thud and doesn’t get up. One and done.

“Luke!” I shriek. “What the fuck?” I lean down and pull Chase into a sitting position, but he’s like a dead weight. “Can someone get me some ice?” One of the servers dashes off as a crowd gathers around us.

“Luke! I swear to god, if you take one more step, we are not consummating this marriage tonight!” Holly is beside me in an

instant. We hook arms under Chase's armpits and drag him onto a chair.

"Valentine!" A deep, masculine voice barks from the crowd. The team's coach, John McCall, joins the pandemonium. "What the fuck were you thinking? Training camp starts in three days. If you break your hand or Wilder's face, I will fucking murder you!"

Luke huffs, shaking out his hand, clearly still angry. I lightly tap Chase's face, and he opens his eyes. Well, he opens one eye; the one Luke punched is starting to swell. The server comes back with the ice, and Luke moves to grab it for his hand.

"It's not for you, jackass," I clip at my brother, taking the ice and gently pressing it to Chase's eye.

He's dazed. I know because he smiles goofily at me and says, "Lil' Lily, you have the softest lips I've ever kissed." Luke growls, and I shoot him my best death glare.

"Hey, no fair, Valentine," Ollie jokes, joining the fray. "You said your sister was off limits."

"Don't even fucking start with me," Luke snaps.

"Are you okay?" I ask softly, pressing the ice to Chase's eye.

"Excellent." He grins, head lolling. "My dad's fists are ten times harder than Luke's."

His words shock me, and even Luke loses some of his steam. My mind races to all the times I saw bruises on Chase growing up, and my heart lurches in my chest. *"I'm too fucked up for you."* Chase's words come back to me, and I wonder how much of the wounded boy from our childhood Chase has hidden away inside.

"Alright, shows over." Dad strolls over and pulls Chase up to stand. "Time for bed, big guy."

"Is Lily coming?" Chase grins. How hard did Luke hit him?

"No, son, Lily's sleeping in her own bed tonight." My dad chuckles. He looks at me, and I can't stop the blush from racing across my cheeks.

“Wait,” Chase says, stopping. “What about him?” Chase points an accusing finger at Sam.

“He’s sleeping in his own bed too,” my dad reassures him, shooting me another poignant look.

“Good,” Chase preens, puffing out his chest. The whole effect is ridiculous because he’s walking sloppily and has a napkin of ice pressed to one eye.

Mom, Dad, and Chase disappear into the hotel, and I wonder if I should follow them and ask the concierge to have someone wake Chase up every four hours. No doubt, he has a minor concussion.

Music starts again, and everyone goes back to socializing and dancing, except for Holly and Luke, who are arguing in the corner. She slaps Luke’s shoulder and then jabs a finger into his chest. I can’t help but smile. Holly will serve him some justice.

“Well, that was interesting,” a voice interrupts my thoughts. Sam sits down next to me. I smile at him, but he can tell it’s forced. His eyes are kind and open, even though I just kissed another man right in front of him. *What a mess.*

“I’m sorry,” I sigh, and I am. I know Sam has feelings for me, and maybe I have low-grade, mild feelings for him too. But my heart yearns for Chase.

“Don’t be sorry.” He grins, taking my hand. Sam has lovely hands, well-shaped and warm. “Don’t count me out just yet.”

And with that, Sam excuses himself and exits the reception, leaving my heart and my head thoroughly confused.

6

The Buzz

Chase

My head feels like it's going to cave in, and there's something wet on my face. I try to open my eyes, but only one manages to work properly. The other one, the one Luke punched into the back of my skull, is swollen shut with a warm, wet cloth covering it. I assume it used to be filled with ice that's long past melted onto my face and pillow.

I groan loudly, knowing no one can hear me. I've been alone most of the night except for Angie coming to check on me every four hours to ensure I hadn't slipped into a coma. It's not the first time the Valentines have nursed one of my head injuries. Between hard hockey hits and the ones I took from my father, Angie and Matthew Valentine are used to seeing me banged up.

I trudge to the bathroom and brush my teeth. My eye is purple, and the brow has swelled over the lid. It looks like someone hit me with a brick, not a fist. Luke packs a mean punch, but it was worth it. Kissing Lily was as perfect as I remember it, which is a feat in itself. I've been living off the memory of our first kiss for months, and was sure nothing could ever live up to it.

But I guess the cat's out of the bag. Everyone at the wedding knows I've got the hots for Luke's sister. If I'm honest with myself, Lily and I have always been in the same orbit. As a child, I was drawn to her inexhaustible happiness and energy. No matter how miserable I was, Lily was always a ray of sunshine. And as we grew up, I tried... I tried so damned hard to ignore the beautiful woman she'd become. But, like always, she never gave up on me.

She's always been there cheering me on. It drove Luke crazy when Lily would come to Northmen games in a Gators' jersey with my name on the back. She'd send me texts after a big win or a crushing loss, and I lived off those little bits of Lily,

whether I wanted to admit it or not. I craved those texts, memes, and images of her every damned day. I never thought they'd stop coming.

Until this weekend.

Watching Lily dance with that ginger asshole made me want to break him in half. It was the first time I believed Lily might actually move on, away from me, into the arms of another man, and I couldn't let it happen.

I won't let it happen.

And I'm terrified.

I'm terrified I'll fuck this up like everything else I've ruined except my hockey career. I'm terrified Lily will see how fucked up I am inside and run away screaming. I grew up on a steady diet of dysfunction and pain so I don't know how a normal relationship works. I feel like I'm destined to fail. But maybe the worst I can do is try?

I strip out of last night's clothes and crank up the hot water in the shower, relishing the sting of water hitting my body and letting it wash over me. I take my time drying off and change into a pair of board shorts and a tee so I can go down to breakfast and talk to her.

A beeping at my door draws my attention. It swings open, and Luke walks in with a fresh ice bucket. I glance at the alarm clock on the bedside table. It's only seven-thirty. My guess is most guests are either still in bed or hungover.

"Oh good, you're up," Luke grumbles, striding towards me. He hands me a bottle of water and ibuprofen before he fills a Ziplock bag with ice. "According to my wife, sister, and parents, I owe you an apology."

I just glare at him, lightly pressing the bag of ice to my eye and wince. It's sore and tender, and I probably look like garbage.

"And according to you?" I ask before throwing back the pills with some water and swallowing.

“According to me, my best friend was making out with my little sister at my wedding.”

“She’s not twelve anymore, Luke. She hasn’t been for a long time.” I don’t think Luke likes my reply because he makes a growly sound at the back of his throat and cracks his knuckles.

“She’ll always be my little sister, and I’ll always be her big brother,” Luke says, running a hand through his hair. I notice bags under his eyes from lack of sleep, and I don’t think it’s because he was up all night enjoying his new wife. “I always thought we were on the same page. We practically grew up like siblings. I thought you saw Lily the same way I do. Like a sister.”

“I might be fucked up, but I’m not that fucked up. If I had a sister, I wouldn’t be kissing her.”

Luke laughs and shakes his head. He looks me in the eyes—eye—and sighs before sitting on the bed with me.

“How long has this been going on? Because I swear to Christ, if you tell me that you and Lily have been sneaking around for months, I’ll lose it.”

“It’s complicated.”

“Then uncomplicated it for me.”

“Lily and I have always been close. We’re friends. Even when we were kids, we had a connection. You were my best friend, but she was my light. After my mom died, your family became the only good thing in my life, and Lily was at the heart of that. She was younger and may not have understood what she was doing at the time. But for every welt, bruise, and cut she helped to bandage, she literally put me back together.”

Luke asks about my dad, not meeting my eye, as if asking about it for the first time is a mistake on his part. Like he’s ashamed for not asking sooner as if there was something he could have done to stop the abuse.

“Jeff Wilder is a sad, pathetic man,” I say, swallowing hard. “He wasn’t always that way, but after Mom died, everything went to shit. Every time he looked at me he was reminded of

her, and I think he hated me for it. It started with a spanking here and a smack there. But it just got worse.”

I think back to the first time my dad ever hit me. Really hit me. It was one year after Mom died, and I’d just got home from a game. Luke and I were in our third year of AAA hockey and in the playoffs. We’d lost a game to a team below us in the standings, and Dad was pissed. I’d missed a shot in overtime, and he saw the loss as my fault.

The car ride back home was completely silent. I was distraught. Not because the team had lost but because I’d let my dad down. As soon as we walked into the kitchen, I dropped my hockey bag, shoulders sagging and said, “Sorry.” He didn’t say anything back. He just raised his hand and slapped me so hard my teeth rattled. Then he made me get up off the floor and hit me again. He screamed at me and told me Mom would be ashamed of how I played and that if I kept playing like a loser, I’d never make it to the NHL like she always wanted me to.

“My mom made Dad promise to see my hockey career through, so in his own twisted way, I think he thought he was helping.”

“Helping you by beating the piss out of you?” Luke scoffs, disgusted.

“He’d only really lay it on after games. If I’d miss a shot, mess up a pass, or not skate hard enough back-checking. Remember that year your mom bought me new equipment because she thought mine wasn’t good enough?”

“Yeah,” Luke says hesitantly, knowing what comes next.

“My equipment was fine, but my dad wanted to teach me to be tougher, so he forced me to stand in front of the net with no gear and deflect pucks. If I missed, I’d take a puck anywhere my dad thought it would hurt most. It’s why I’m so good at deflecting pucks now.”

Luke’s eyes are full of pity. I fucking hate it, so I ignore him and keep talking.

“But no matter what, when I’d come to your house, there was Lily, bright-eyed and bushy-tailed, ready to help bandage me up. When I went away to London for junior, I thought for sure she’d forget about me, but she didn’t. She’d send me the most ridiculous stuff, cheering me on, and we became friends. For a long time, she was still Little Lily Valentine, my biggest fan. But when I came home the spring after our first year in the NHL, she wasn’t little Lily anymore. She was a woman, and I knew I had to get the hell out of there.

“Your family is the only real one I have. I didn’t want to disrespect you by tainting Lily with my sullied hands. She deserves better.”

Luke stares at me for a long while before speaking again.

“Okay,” he says, and that’s it.

“Okay?”

“Okay.” Luke nods, pausing. “You’re right. Lily does deserve better. But so does Holly. So does Avery. Most of the women in our lives deserve better. But for some crazy reason, by some stroke of luck, they love us. They chose us. I don’t know if my sister loves you, but she likes you a whole lot. And right now, my wife, sister, and immediate family think I’m an asshole. So, ‘okay.’”

Luke stares me down. I stare right back with my one good eye. He’s my best friend, captain, and teammate; I don’t want to lose his friendship or respect. When Luke cracks a smile, a weight I’ve been carrying for years lifts off my shoulders and chest.

“I don’t have to like it,” Luke says. “But, if Lily has to be with someone, it might as well be my best man. Better you than that hulking, ginger asshat.” The mention of Samuel makes my stomach turn. Lily belongs with me, not our team’s bloody nutritionist, no matter how nice the guy is.

Luke claps me on the back as he stands then grabs my hand, pulling me up off the bed into a bro hug. “But, if you break her heart, I’ll break you in half. Don’t fuck this up.”



The BUZZ by Cassidy Tippett

The “Wild” Wedding of Luke and Holly Valentine (née Sparks)

Toronto’s Sweethearts, Luke Valentine and Holly Sparks, have officially tied the knot. The couple, who recently became the city’s most darling love story, held a private sunset ceremony at the Rosseau Resort overlooking a beautiful lake.

The groom, one of the NHL’s top salaried players, appears to have spared no expense for his nuptials, renting out the posh resort for his friends and family’s exclusive use. But that didn’t stop this reporter from getting insider details.

Rumour has it, the groom’s sister, Lily Valentine—who was recently hired as the team’s chef... no nepotism there—stirred up a scandal after bringing the team’s nutritionist as her date. The pair allegedly heated things up on the dance floor just before the Northmen’s star winger, Chase Wilder, cut in to whisk her away.

And this, my dear readers, is where things get juicier than a butter-basted turkey. Wilder, the notorious one-night-stand-wonder, exchanged a scorching kiss with the groom’s sister for all to see. And the younger Valentine indeed appeared to enjoy the best man’s attentions. That is until the groom planted a fist in his eye and knocked him out cold.

And what about poor Samuel McCrae, Ms. Valentine’s date?

Well, Lily Valentine might have upstaged her brother at his own wedding. Is she the team’s new bachelorette? And how many thirsty Northmen will be vying for her attention when the puck drops this season?

Let us know what you think! Should she choose the wild Mr. Wilder? Or the handsome highlander, Mr. McCrae? Leave your comments below.

Lily

I throw my phone down on the table beside my coffee. How the hell does Cassidy Tippett do it? That bitch must have eyes and ears on the fucking walls. Every year she gets insider info about the team for her gossip column. Last fall, she was the

first to speculate about Luke and Holly. And when Ryan got traded to the Northmen, she broke the story about Avery and him getting back together.

She's crazy good at her job.

I look to Riley, who's ploughing through a massive plate of eggs and bacon from the breakfast buffet. I've never seen someone demolish food like Riley. She has a superhuman metabolism.

"Did you leave any food at the buffet?" I ask, shooting a look at her mountain of food.

"Har, har." She rolls her eyes. "I like breakfast. So what?"

"You forget, I live you with. I know for a fact you like lunch, late lunch, early dinner, dinner, and late dinner too."

"Asshole." She sticks her tongue out at me. With my ninja reflexes, I grab it and yank. I shout triumphantly and stick my tongue out at her in return, but I should know better. Riley's hand shoots up and pinches my tongue. We're both struggling, like two idiots when a masculine throat clears in front of us.

"Well, this is attractive." Ozzy grins while Riley and I let go of each other, nonchalantly wiping our hands on our napkins. His eyes drift over to Riley's plate and widen. "Ms. Winters, you're my kind of woman."

Riley blushes, and I swear to god, red is her natural colour around Ozzy. She's got it bad for Avery's brother. Even I have to admit he's a good-looking dude with his roguishly long, sand-coloured hair and whisky eyes. His smile has a boyish quality, amplified by the slight gap between his two front teeth.

"I was wondering," Ozzy purrs, "if after breakfast, you might like to take advantage of some of those paddle boats outside and go for a ride?"

Riley smiles and nods like a lovesick puppy. She's forgotten to use her words.

"That means yes," I answer for her and snicker. "Riley would love it if you took her for a ride."

“Lily!” Riley shrieks, smacking my arm.

“What? You would! It’s not like it’s not true.”

Ozzy chuckles as we bicker and tells Riley he’ll meet her on the dock in an hour.

“You’re terrible.”

“I know, but you love me.” Riley rolls her eyes but doesn’t disagree. “Plus, I need someone to take the attention off Chase and me. So, if you could do something scandalous with Ozzy, that would be great.”

“Have you seen Chase this morning?”

“No, and I haven’t seen my brother either. Hopefully, they haven’t killed each other.”

“What about Sam?”

“No,” I groan. “And I have no idea what I’m going to do. Apparently, all of Cassidy Tippett’s gossip-mongering followers think I should drop Chase and, I quote, ‘hook up with the Highlander.’”

I pull up the article on my phone and let Riley read it. When we get to the comments, I’m surprised to see even more people have posted. There are over a thousand comments ranging from people cheering me on, to women who are still devastated that Holly’s taken my brother off the market to your garden variety internet trolls.

Somehow the article has pictures now too, which should be impossible because Luke and Holly asked everyone not to post anything on social media while at the wedding. There’s a rat in our midst. I stare at a picture of Chase and me kissing and blush. That kiss was so incredible that I want to print this picture and have it framed. I’d put it on my bedside table and look at it every night before falling asleep.

I’m surprised how many images Cassidy Tippett was able to acquire. And considering Cassidy, Avery, and Holly have some Regina-George-type history, I’m shocked she was able to infiltrate a family event. They were high school frenemies, but I don’t think Cassidy has any connections to the wedding.

Maybe she's just that good at ferreting out details. There are even pictures of Luke and Holly's first dance and my almost kiss with Sam. At the bottom of the article, she's added an online poll, "Wilder or Highlander: Who Should Be Lily's Lover?"

The votes are split about sixty-forty in favour of Sam.

Riley and I start to scroll through comments.

PrincessUnicorn111: Go for the Jamie Fraser lookalike and let him whisper sweet nothings into your ear all night. #JamieFraserLookAlike #Outlander

Northwoman1967: Chase Wilder all the way, Ms. Valentine! He's too hot to pass up! #Wilderforthewin

LuckysGurl6969: Boo! Sparks and Valentine will be divorced within a year, and Lucky will be back banging bunnies. #CallMe #IHadHimFirst

Toronto416: Lily isn't that hot. Why are all these guys even interested in her? Must be nice to have a famous brother to get you a job and a boyfriend. #nepobaby #keepingitinthefamily

HaggisMan17: Go for the Scot! Real men wear kilts, and we've got huge...

I stop reading. Some of the comments are just too mean. Both Holly and Avery went through this when their relationships went public. It's one of the downsides to dating hockey players. There are shitloads of miserable, judgemental people who want to bring you down and throw hate.

"What a bunch of bitches," Riley curses, grabbing my phone and typing like a mad woman. When she hands it back, I choke out a laugh. Riley's screen name kills me.

WintersIsComing: Fuck you, bitches! Lily is hot AF. I'd do her in a heartbeat if I was into women. You're all just jealous she has not one but two hotties chasing after her. Get a life, you trolls. #BeMineLilyValentine #LukesHotSister #SexyChef

“Very subtle, Ms. Winters. Do you teach your students how to clapback too?”

“Ha! The shit that comes out of my students’ mouths is ten times worse than anything I say. Plus, no one knows it’s me posting. Winters is a common enough last name.”

Riley and I continue eating while more guests crawl into the dining room for food and coffee. I think more than a few people are sporting hangovers, but there’s still no sign of Luke, Chase, or Sam. To be honest, I’m glad for the reprieve. I’m not sure I can face any of them right now, mostly because I don’t know what to do.

Chase will probably pretend the kiss never happened, just like he did in December, and Sam will likely flirt with me incessantly until I agree to date him.

I’m so confused.

This is such a hot mess.

“Have I mentioned what a terrible idea this was?” I shoot at Riley while slouching in my chair with a sigh.

“Are you kidding me? Bringing Sam was an amazing idea! I’ve never been more entertained in my life.”

“So happy that my sad, tragic love affair brings you such joy.”

Just then, Avery and Holly breeze into the dining room. Avery looks around from table to table until her eyes meet mine. She beelines towards me, Holly on her tail, like two women on a mission.

“You, Lily Valentine, are brilliant,” Avery preens, which is never a good sign. She has that maniacal look in her eyes. “And Holly and I have an even more brilliant idea.”

*The Bachelorette***Lily**

“**W**hat do you think of *The Bachelorette*?” Avery asks, staring at me like a maniac. She has the I-have-an-evil-genius-plan glazed look in her eye, which means I’m about to be talked into doing something idiotic.

But honestly, what kind of stupid question is that? Both Holly and Avery know I love *The Bachelor* franchise. We all do. We have girls’ nights for the explicit purpose of screaming at the TV while bitching about the drama and contestants on the show. Every season and every episode is “the most dramatic in *Bachelor* history.”

“You know I love it,” I say hesitantly. I feel like I’m consenting to something without knowing what the fuck is going on.

“Have you read the article in *The Buzz*?” Holly asks, waving her phone in my face.

“Yes, and I want to know how she does it? Who leaked those photos?”

“We don’t know,” Holly shrugs as if battling Cassidy Tippet for a scoop is pointless. “But the story’s gone viral. Everyone is obsessed with your love triangle.”

“It’s not a love triangle,” I insist, discretely looking around the dining room. Sam still hasn’t shown his face, and Chase is MIA. “Sam and I are just friends. I only brought him to make Chase jealous.”

“And it worked famously,” Riley adds. “But now you kinda like Sam too, and you still owe him a few dates.” I shoot her a look. Why can’t she just shut her mouth? I’m confused enough as it is.

“Exactly,” Avery draws out with a grin, and she says it like I’m supposed to know what she means. At least seventy

percent of the time, I have no clue what's running through her crazy ass head. "You owe Sam dates, and all of Northmen Nation is invested in your love life thanks to last night's entertainment."

"That's an exaggeration. No one cares who I date."

"I beg to differ," Holly cuts me off, tapping the screen of her iPhone. "Over three thousand comments and counting says otherwise."

Three thousand! I grab my phone and pull up the article again. *Holy crap*. She's right. More and more comments are popping up every second. People are debating and arguing over whether I should date Sam or Chase. The poll Cassidy posted has over ten thousand votes. Chase has caught up a little, but Sam still leads the popular vote fifty-two to forty-eight. And it looks like Cassidy has added more fodder to the article. She's included short bios of me, Chase, and Sam. *Seriously, where does she find this shit?* She even has information about Derrick Richardson and my dating history. *What the fucking fuck?*

I scroll down to Chase's profile. Cassidy details some of his sexploits, including the incident in London with his billet family. I was devastated when I had to read about Chase sleeping with this billet mom and her daughter. I wasn't under any illusion that Chase was celibate or waiting for me, but the whole situation was lurid and wrong and not anything like the boy I thought I knew.

Sam's profile is shorter and much more favourable. There is no way Cassidy is being unbiased. She's painting Chase as the bad boy and Sam as the knight in shining armour. No wonder people are clicking on Sam over Chase. After reading this shit, I'd click on Sam too. He's the sexy part-Scottish guy who opens doors for women and walks elderly ladies across the road while holding their groceries. By all accounts, choosing Chase will just lead to heartache. Sam is the safe choice, and Chase is the bad boy with the devilish grin, eagerly waiting to stomp my poor little heart into itty bitty pieces.

I turn back to Riley, Holly, and Avery. They're looking at me expectantly, but I still don't know what game they're playing.

"We have an idea," Avery chimes too brightly, and I already know I'm not going to like this idea. "Do you remember '*The Blue and White Life*' segment I did with Ryan last spring?"

"Lily," a calm, masculine voice I'd know anywhere, calls my name from the doorway to the dining room, effectively cutting Avery off. Chase, along with Luke trailing behind him, walks swiftly toward me. A few other guys enjoying the buffet nod in greeting, including Ollie, who is stuffing his face with waffles with Hunter LaRoux and Daniel Drake. My parents, who I didn't realize were even here, wave from the other side of the room.

God, it's like having a live audience for my humiliation. And Chase looks awful.

His eye is purple and swollen shut. With training camp starting this week, I can only imagine how pissed off Coach must be. But even with the bruised face, Chase is still the most handsome man I've ever seen. I can't stop my heart from beating overtime at the sight of him.

"Speak of the devil," Riley mutters and takes a bite of a blueberry muffin.

"Can I talk to you?" Chase asks nervously. He's never nervous, so I don't know if this is a good "can we talk" or a bad one.

"Anything you want to say to Lily, you can say in front of us," Holly declares, like this is her business. "I'm the bride. No secrets at my wedding."

"Your wedding was yesterday," I point out. "You can't keep playing the bride card."

"I'm the bride. I can play it for as long as I want."

"Out with it," Riley demands, pointing the bottom half of her muffin at Chase. She's eaten the tops off at least four muffins, leaving the crappy bottoms for someone else.

“Can we do this in private, please?” Chase’s eye pleads with mine. I’m about to agree when Luke butts in before I can answer.

“Actually, I like this scenario. I’d like to hear this too. Please go on, Chase.”

Chase growls, shooting daggers at my brother, or at least his best approximation of daggers with one swollen eye.

“Fine! You and your fucking grand gestures,” Chase barks at Luke, but then he takes my hands in his, causing little shots of electricity to shoot down my arms. “Lily—”

“Wait!” Avery yells, grabbing her phone and pointing it at us. “Okay, proceed.”

“Are you recording this?” I screech at her.

“I’ll explain after.” I’m getting a serious case of foreboding.

“Lily,” a lightly accented voice calls from the doorway, mimicking Chase’s entrance from a few moments ago. *What the fuck is happening to me right now?*

“Oh, thank god! This shit is gold,” Avery all but squeals in glee, panning her iPhone camera at Sam as he walks towards our group. This is too much.

“Lily,” Sam repeats my name. “Can we talk?”

“We’re already talking,” Chase shoots at Sam and then turns back to me with a smile that looks slightly ridiculous with his one black eye. “Lily, I realized something last night. Well, I realized something a long time ago.” A crowd of my family and Chase’s teammates starts to form around us. Avery and Holly are now recording this from different angles, increasing my anxiety.

What the actual fuck are they doing?

“Other than Luke, you’re my best friend,” Chase continues, and my breath catches. Is he doing what I think he’s doing? Please, god, please say he’s asking me out. My eyes glance to my left at Sam. He looks so crestfallen that I feel a twinge of something in my heart. “I tried so damn hard to ignore the woman you’ve become, but you just wouldn’t let me. I kissed

you last night because I was jealous. I kissed you last night because I wanted to. And I want to keep kissing you for as long as you'll let me. I'll probably mess this up, and my life is a hot mess, but you make me want to be better for you. If you let me, I'd like to try to be the man you see in me."

I can't breathe.

I one hundred percent can't breathe. Chase Wilder, the boy I loved growing up and the man I'm still falling for today, just told me he wants to be with me. My heart is thundering in my chest. I finally take a breath and look to my brother for confirmation this is this real. Luke shrugs, smiles, and nods as if to say, "I can live with it." I look back at Chase, with his beat-up eye and scruff on his jaw. His one eye is wide open, the colour of the most intense clear, blue-green sea, so full of hope it makes my heart pound harder.

My eyes shift to Sam. He looks back and gives me a sad smile. He's such a good guy. If I gave him a chance, maybe I could fall for him. I'm about to say something when Avery butts in yet again.

"Stop!" She yells and turns to Sam, iPhone held high. "What did you want to say?" Sam takes up the spot beside Chase, then gently takes my hands from his to make his case.

"Lily, I know you have feelings for Chase," he begins. He looks so sincere and honest. "And I am sure he's a great guy, but so I am. Getting to know and work with you this past month has been amazing. You're amazing. I'm not asking you to choose between us, but I am asking you for a chance. I know we have something special, and we owe it to ourselves to explore it."

"Shit just got real," Riley whispers to my mom, who nods in agreement. The room is silent, so obviously everyone heard her.

"And that's where we come in," Avery and Holly say simultaneously. Oh, hell no! Looking at their cameras and thinking back to their questions about *The Bachelorette* and the team's vlog, I know the next words out of their mouth will end in my utter humiliation.

“We were thinking,” Holly says hesitantly.

“That,” Avery takes over. I swear those two share the same brain. “Seeing as you already owe Sam some dates, and Chase has finally come up to snuff, we could have a little fun.” She leaves out the part where the fun comes at my expense.

“What do you mean you owe him dates?” Chase demands, pointing an accusing finger at Sam, all but snarling.

“Lily owes Sam a few dates for coming to the wedding with her to make you jealous,” Riley blurts out. *Seriously!* I shoot her a look that says, *I thought you were my best friend.*

“You mean you’re not really interested in him?”

I grimace, but that’s not entirely true either anymore.

“She wasn’t,” Holly says. “But now that she’s seen how great Samuel is outside of work, she’s considering him. Both you and Sam are in the running for Lily’s heart.”

“And we need some new material for ‘*The Blue and White Life*,’” Avery adds. “Plus your love triangle just went viral. Everyone wants to know who Lily will choose, and right now, the poll has Sam winning fifty-four to forty-six, with over twelve thousand votes and counting.”

“What?” Luke and Chase yell at the same time. Holly hands Luke her phone, and they both scroll through the article and the accompanying online poll. I can’t help but chuckle when Chase starts tapping and refreshing the page to vote for himself, trying to even the results.

“How the fuck did Cassidy Tippet get photos of our wedding?” Luke asks to no one in particular, but loud enough that everyone in the vicinity can hear him. Nearly everyone from the wedding has trickled in to enjoy breakfast and the current entertainment on display.

Luke and Holly look around the room, searching for the guilty party. No one comes forward until Holly’s mom, Mary, looks sheepishly at us.

“It may have been my fault,” Mary admits, walking toward us with my uncle on her arm. “I forgot about Cassidy’s gossip

column; her mom and I are friends. I didn't think twice when Arlene asked for some wedding pictures. I thought Holly, Avery, and Cassidy were still friends from high school."

"Mom!" Holly shrieks. She throws a hand to her forehead and rubs her temples. "We were not friends! We were arch-enemies. Cassidy was the Regina George of our high school. She's a mean girl!"

"Who's Regina George?" my dad asks. Mom sighs and starts explaining the pop culture significance of *Mean Girls*. This morning has officially turned into a gong show.

"Well, what's done is done," Avery sighs. "Now we have to take the story back and control the narrative. So, this is what Holly and I propose. We think the new season of 'The Blue and White Life' should focus on Lily. Technically, she's a part of the team now, so she can include her work. Last season, Ryan's posts about food had the highest number of views. People are interested in what the team eats.

"But more people are interested in this." Avery motions between Chase, Sam and me. "I think we should do a Bachelorette-style competition. Both Chase and Sam will have three dates. We can work around the hockey schedule to make it fair and alternate dates. Holly or I will chaperone, record video for the vlog, and maybe do a few Lives. Lily, your job will be to keep an online diary to share with your followers. You won't be allowed to go on dates outside of the competition, but obviously, day-to-day interaction is excluded because you work closely with both Sam and Chase."

"You want me to write a diary for everyone to read?" I ask incredulously. The whole point of a diary is to write down your innermost thoughts and work through your issues privately. It's not to share them with every judgemental, nosey idiot so they can dissect and comment on it.

"Yes, but you're in control," Holly says sympathetically. "You choose what gets posted in the online diary."

"And who chooses what gets posted on the video blog?" Sam asks, finally saying something about this horrendously ridiculous idea.

“Avery and I do,” Holly states like it should be obvious.

“When would this all start?” I ask hesitantly because I am not agreeing to this.

“As soon as training camp starts,” Avery says. “If you’re all in agreement, Holly and I will send a press release and announce everything on all the team’s socials. Only people who subscribe to us will have access to the content. We’ve already got the green light from the Starlings. Monica thinks it’s a brilliant idea.”

“You’ve already taken this to ownership?” I shriek. If Monica and Mitchell Starling want this to happen, I can’t say no. They’re the team owners. They’re everyone’s boss.

“Holly and I pitched the idea this morning. I also contacted a few businesses, and we already have sponsors interested. Tourism Toronto is on board to help plan dates as long as we showcase some tourist attractions, and we have a few designers who want you to wear their clothing on camera. I’m sure we’re going to get more interest as we go along.”

“I’m in,” Sam says, smiling. “If it gives me a fair shot at Lily, I’m all in, with the condition that twenty-five percent of any sponsorships related to the dates I take Lily on get donated to the Alzheimer Society of Canada. And if I win, the team also makes a sizeable donation.”

“Done,” Avery agrees, then turns towards me. “This man is a walking dream, Lily!”

I can’t believe this. This is insane. I look at Sam, who smiles kindly at me. God, how can I say no? The team is backing us, and now we’re donating to charity. I glance at Chase. He looks furious like he wants to throw me over his shoulder and whisk me away from this madness. A shiver of anticipation runs through me.

“Come on, Lily,” Riley nudges me and grins. Her red hair shines in the early morning light, making it look like she’s on fire. She pulls me aside and speaks in a low voice. “You deserve this. You deserve to have two amazing guys fight for

you. You said you were confused about Sam and Chase. Maybe this will give you some clarity.”

I look at both men again. Sam hopeful, and Chase furious. Maybe Riley is right. Maybe I deserve to be romanced by these men. Maybe the connection I’ve developed with Sam is real. Maybe I need clarity. Maybe, even though it’s unorthodox and probably a terrible idea, this crazy scheme will give me the clarity I need to choose one of these men. Maybe, maybe, maybe, there are too many maybes.

“Okay,” I finally say, and Holly and Avery whoop in triumph.

“What?” Luke and Chase yell again.

“I said, ‘Okay.’ Riley’s right. I need clarity, and if this is for a good cause and charity, I’ll do it. If Sam’s dates support the Alzheimer Society, Chase can choose a beneficiary too. If we’re going to do this, we may as well be doing good.”

“My winnings can go to the Canadian Mental Health Association,” Chase says, and I can’t help but wonder why he chose that specific organization.

“Is there anyone else who wants a shot at my sister?” Luke calls out sarcastically to his teammates in the dining room. “Why don’t we get a dozen guys to date you, Lily? Why not a full twenty-five like the real Bachelorette? Why not turn your love life into a fucking circus?” Daniel Drake moves to stand but sits back down when Luke points at him and growls, “Don’t even fucking think about it.”

“Settle down, Luke,” Holly rolls her eyes at her husband. “This is a good idea.”

“Fine,” Chase speaks over Holly and Luke’s bickering, finally agreeing. I can’t help but think this is anything but “fine” to him. He turns to me, a fierce look on his face. Oh no, this situation is definitely not *fine*. “But make no mistake, Lily. You’re mine.”

With that, Chase turns and heads for the buffet with Luke. Riley disappears to go paddle boating with Ozzy, and Holly and Avery sit down to start planning. Sam takes a seat at the

other side of the table, shooting me a comforting smile. I give him a weak one in return before glancing back at Chase.

Make no mistake, Lily. You're mine.

The words repeat in my head, echoing what Chase said before he kissed me in December. *You're mine.*

I shiver from head to toe with anticipation. This is either the most exciting thing to ever happen to me or the worst idea to have even been thought into existence.

*Got a Short List of Ex-Lovers***Chase**

I breathe in the crisp air of the arena as I skate around the two hundred by eighty-five feet sheet of ice. It's just me, the rink, and the skates laced on my feet. The rest of the team and hopeful rookies won't be on the ice until tomorrow.

I've always found something calming about being alone in an arena; just me, myself, and I. I control my breathing, my movement, and my mind. I can clear my head and just skate, or I can get lost in my thoughts and think things through.

I haven't seen Lily for four days, which is probably a good thing because the shiner Luke gave me is fading, but I still look like I went one round too many with a UFC fighter. We've texted, but we haven't talked, and I fucking hate it almost as much as I hate this joke of a dating game Holly and Avery have us playing. But the real kicker is that for the first time in my life, this isn't a game to me. This is Lily, and there is no fucking way I'm letting her walk away from me and into the arms of another man.

There's no turning back now. Cassidy Tippet's article blew up the internet, and when Holly and Avery posted the teaser trailer for *The Blue and White Bachelorette*, they broke it. People are going batshit crazy for more. The video of Sam and I asking Lily to choose one of us has exploded online. People are subscribing in droves and commenting like their lives depend on the outcome of my love life, which also means businesses wanting to get on board with sponsorships have boomed.

A small part of me has to admit it's a brilliant idea. Holly and Avery see this as a way to expand the Northmen's female fanbase. And I can't disagree. Sports and romance, who'd have thought it would make such a lucrative cocktail? I keep reminding myself part of this is for charity. Otherwise, I'd

probably kidnap Lily and tell Sam to fuck off and find his own soulmate.

“Hey, lover boy,” a voice calls from the bench, breaking my concentration. Holly is standing at the gate with a folder in her hands.

“What’s up?” I ask, skating over.

“I have a few things for you to sign before we can move forward with things.” Things being this dating farce.

“What kind of things?”

“Just legal gobble-dee-gook. The legal team is crossing our T’s and dotting our I’s so nothing backfires.”

I open the folder and start skimming the agreement. It sets out the parameters of *The Blue and White Bachelorette*— they’re seriously calling it that. Lily, Sam, and I have to sign an agreement that states we are all consenting adults and fully understand the terms and conditions set out in the contract. I flip the page and study these terms and conditions.

The first few subsections detail how the dates will work. Sam and I will alternate dates with Lily, taking her on planned excursions that correspond with our sponsors. At the end of the dating period, Lily will choose between us at a home game against the Las Vegas Aces.

The contract also states that Lily is not allowed to disclose her choice to anyone. Regardless of how the dates progress, she must complete all six dates. She can’t cancel or end the dating process early, even if she’s made up her mind. The main reason for this stipulation is to fulfil agreements with advertisers and sponsors who have paid for content.

By the time I get to the last page, my eye starts to twitch.

“Are you kidding me?” I glare at Holly and point to the contract’s last page, which details how dates are supposed to flow. I read aloud, “As participants progress their romantic relationships, kissing, touching, and romantic gestures throughout the dating period are encouraged. Should the participants choose to engage in a relationship of a sexual nature, both parties agree to obtain verbal consent and

acknowledge that any sexual congress is outside the scope of what is considered a date.”

The thought of Lily utilizing this clause with Sam makes me seethe.

“Think of it as an extracurricular sleepover,” Holly says innocently, which doesn’t make me feel any better because any sleepover I’ve ever had with a woman has ended with everyone naked. “It doesn’t mean she’ll take anything to the next level. It’s just an opportunity, outside of the dates, for Lily to explore her relationships with both of you.”

I take the pen and sign the damn contract, then leave the ice for the locker room, Holly’s heels click-clacking after me.

“Thank you, Chase,” she beams at me. I wave her off, but she keeps following me to my player’s stall. She doesn’t bat an eyelash as I start taking off my equipment. “If it’s any consolation, the ball’s in your court. Lily’s been half in love with you for most of her life. She has heart eyes for you. The game is yours to lose.”

“This isn’t a fucking game, Holly. This is my life.” I run my hands through my sweat-dampened hair. I can’t fuck this up. I can’t lose her when I’ve finally earned a chance to be with her. “I’ve fucked up so much already that I don’t know what she sees in me. I’ve done some pretty shitty things in my life, things Lily would be disgusted by, and you’ve pitted me against a fucking wonder boy.”

“Chase,” Holly starts but then stops. I can see the pity in her eyes, and it makes me sick.

“I don’t even know what a healthy relationship looks like, let alone what one feels like, Holly. I know what my father’s fists feel like. I know what disappointment feels like. I know what it feels like to be fucked for my fame. I know how to use people, but I don’t know how to love them.”

“You’re wrong.” Holly sits down beside me, taking my hands in hers. “You know how to love, Chase. You love Luke and Angie and Matthew. You love your teammates and being on the ice with them, playing the game you love. And you love

Lily, Chase. You have a big heart and an even bigger capacity to love,” she says before standing and giving my chest a pat right over my heart. “You just need to believe it.”

I clench my fists and swallow hard. Holly stands and gives me another smile. Luke is a lucky man, and as much as I hate to admit it, I’m jealous of what he and Holly have. It’s what I want with Lily.

“In case you were curious,” Holly says turning before exiting the locker room. “Lily is upstairs in her office beside the kitchen doing some last-minute planning for training camp.” Holly gives me a pointed look. “Alone.”

With that, Holly breezes out the door, leaving the scent of apples in the room. My heart pounds as I rush to shower and change in record time until I’m rocking back on my heels in the elevator, making my way up to see Lily.

I poke my head into the kitchen. Over the summer, the organization renovated a section of the upper level of our practice facility to include a gourmet, commercial-sized kitchen, a pantry, an office big enough for several people, and a tasting room. The guys love the tasting room. It’s essentially a team dining hall where we get to eat the best food of our lives. Lily will have her own small team preparing food for us in this space.

Players will be on a strict diet from the start of training camp to the end of the season. Summers are our time to let loose a bit and pig out, but, you know, everything in moderation. We all know that when we arrive at camp, we’re expected to be fit. There have been a few times when a player has come in overweight and out of shape after a summer of partying a little too hard. It’s not cool to fail your first physical because you’re a fat fucking idiot.

Which is where Lily and Sam come in. They’ll feed the team before practices and meetings, then send us home with meal plans so we don’t eat stupid shit. Once the season starts, it will be much of the same, except Lily will also teach us basic cooking skills. She and Sam have created an interactive program where we can access team recipes, instructions and

videos, and log our meals on an app to ensure we are consuming the right amount of micros and macros in our diet. Sam will review our meals and adjust them as necessary. The goal is to get a competitive edge through what we fuel our bodies with.

I inhale deeply as I walk into the kitchen. Something smells good. I spy a few pots on the gas stove, and it looks like something is in the oven. The sound of someone humming is coming from the back of the kitchen near the offices, and I try to stealthily move my way toward Lily.

I spot her at a glass desk with her MacBook open, listening to music and typing away, oblivious to everything else around her. She's wearing one of those white coats you see chefs wearing on TV, and her blonde curls are pulled back into a messy ponytail. I can't stop the smile from stretching over my face as I listen to her sing along to the music. But I'm pretty sure she's got the words wrong.

"All the lonely Starbucks lovers, they'll tell you I'm insane," she sings, and I chuckle to myself. Lily loves Taylor Swift, so much so that Luke and I started listening to her too. Her music is contagious and catchy.

"And you call yourself a real Swiftie," I say from the doorway. Lily squeaks and jumps up from her seat, her chair rolling away from her desk.

"Chase! You know I hate it when people sneak up on me," she huffs, putting a hand to her heart. "And you know I'm an OG T-Swizzle stan. She's the bomb-dot-com."

"Then you should know there is no such thing as a 'lonely Starbucks lover.'"

"Yes, there is!" she insists and sings the chorus back to me. I just shake my head and laugh.

"She's saying, 'Got a long list of ex-lovers,'" I correct her. I only know this because I thought the lyric sounded stupid and made no sense. So I Googled it. I also thought it was Starbucks lovers, but I don't tell her that.

“She is not! Is she?” Lily sits back down at her computer and pulls up Google. “That would make so much more sense,” she mutters and types simultaneously. When the lyrics for “Blank Space” appear on the screen, I refrain from saying I told you so. “Oh my god, you’re right! I’ve been singing it wrong for years! I just thought she really liked Starbucks.”

“It’s her fatal flaw.” I nod and add, “Starbucks is like drinking burnt gasoline. Tim Hortons is clearly the right choice.”

“Amen,” Lily laughs, gazing up at me from her chair. This is the Lily I love. The goofy, easy-to-talk-to friend who’s always there to cheer me up no matter what. Something tightens in my chest when her eyes sparkle with humour. If you look closely, you can see a ring of darker, almost turquoise, around her irises. It’s mesmerizing. She also has a tiny birthmark under her right eye that’s a shade darker than all the little, light freckles sprinkled across her nose. I want to kiss every single one.

“Whatcha up to?” I ask, trying to distract myself from getting up to no good and putting my hands all over her.

“Just some meal planning. Did you know that Daniel Drake is also allergic to seafood? And Ollie and Ozzie refuse to eat mushrooms no matter how they’re prepared? Coach McCall doesn’t like pork. Luke will eat almost anything, but I swear the rest of this team is full of picky eaters.”

“Sounds about right. You must know by now that hockey players are the worst drama llamas around.”

Lily laughs and shuts her computer. She stands and stretches, then just stares at me. Her gaze stops on my eye, and she winces before reaching out a hand to brush her fingers lightly over the bruise.

“Does it still hurt?” she asks. I lean into her touch. Her fingers on my skin are like a soothing balm.

“Nah. Luke hits like a girl.”

“Then girls must hit pretty fucking hard because you went down like a sack of bricks.”

“I did not!”

“You really did,” Lily says with a wince. She stops for a moment before saying, “I’m sorry my brother hit you.”

“I deserved it. I did kiss his sister at his wedding.”

“You really did,” she echoes and takes a breath. I’m not sure she realizes it, but her body starts to lean in closer to mine. She’s so close I can smell the coconutty scent of her shampoo. “Is this crazy?”

“No,” I answer, not sure what she thinks is crazy, but instinctively reciprocating her nearness. “I don’t know about you, but right now I feel more sane than I have since I saw you walk down the stairs in that damned green prom dress a million years ago. You made me want to strangle that snivelling science nerd and steal you away.”

“Derrick was not a snivelling science nerd,” Lily laughs, pulling back. “He was sweet and nice and—”

“Boring,” I finish her thought. Lily frowns, biting her lip. I wouldn’t mind biting her lips right about now.

“Derrick wasn’t a rockstar, but he was kind, and he loved me. And when you spend years waiting for someone else to realize you exist, having a boy—any boy—pay attention to you feels like a dream.”

I’ve said the wrong thing, and I know it. Lily’s miffed. Her eyes seem to shimmer with heat, and the tips of her ears go red when she’s angry. Abruptly, she turns and walks to the other side of the kitchen and starts putting random utensils away.

“I loved Derrick,” Lily states matter-of-factly, and the words make my gut feel leaden. “But I wasn’t in love with him. He was my friend, and I thought if I tried hard enough, the feeling of being in love would come. I thought if I kissed him enough, I’d get the butterflies you’re supposed to have at eighteen with a nice boy. And when they didn’t, I thought maybe I was holding back because I was too fixated on an imaginary ideal of what love was supposed to feel like because my parents have that kind of love.”

The stone feeling in my gut starts to get worse. The more she talks, the more I realize how much I’ve hurt her over the years

by staying away; pushing her away. I don't want her to keep talking. I don't want to hear any more about Derrick because I know what comes next.

“By the time prom night rolled around, I was tired of holding back. I was tired of waiting for a dream. Because the boy that did give me butterflies was making no effort to hide the fact that I would always be Luke's little sister. Little Lily Valentine. He was too busy banging billet moms and girls taking duck-lip selfies to ever notice me.” Lily turns back to me, shooting me a sad smile. “Don't look so shocked, Chase. I practically stalked you online after you left. I was proud of you. I wanted to read every little bit I could about your life as a big NHL star. I wish I had never stumbled across the puck bunny forums. But once I saw them, I couldn't not read what was posted. I probably could have done without all the explicit details of your sex life.”

“Lily, none of it meant anything,” I plead with her, but she keeps talking as if I didn't speak at all.

“So, when I walked down those stairs and saw you on prom night, I put on my brave face. I thought if there was ever going to be a time when you'd see me as a woman, it would be in that dress.” She pauses, huffing out a sad laugh as if reprimanding herself for being stupid. “My date was right outside my front door, but the man I wanted was standing right in front of me. Then, you just... stepped back. You stayed silent and let me go. I don't know what I expected. You were my friend, and I deluded myself into thinking all the messages we sent each other meant something. That maybe I meant something to you.”

“You did, Lily. You do,” I choke out, not meaning for the words to come out so gruff. “Every message, every text, every stupid emoji riddle and meme you sent kept me going. They were my lifeline.”

“Derrick placed a corsage on hand, and we left you behind. We danced all night, and I refused to be sad because I had this great guy who worshipped me in the only way he knew how. When the last song ended, Derrick kissed me and let me

decide: his car keys for a ride home, or a hotel key to the suite he'd rented for us."

I want to tear my ears off before she can finish this story. I want to beg her to stop, but I know listening to her truth is only one small amount of penance I owe her.

"I smiled at him, taking in his boyish grin and glasses, and chose the hotel key. We didn't know what we were doing, and we laughed and fumbled through most of it. It was our first time, and I could tell Derrick wanted to please me. It was sloppy and awkward and perfect, and I don't regret it. But I do regret letting our relationship continue that summer because I ended up hurting him."

I hate myself right now. Somehow, I ruined Lily's first time. I ruined it because it was supposed to be me, and I was too chicken shit to act on my feelings. I was young, dumb, and immature. But it's not an excuse.

"Lily," I croak. "I wish I could go back in time and change that night."

"I don't," Lily says, but something else is eating away at her. "Derrick was a wonderful first. But sex was the beginning of the end for us. He wanted so badly to please me, and it made him feel inadequate that he couldn't. When I broke up with him, I tried to explain that it wasn't his fault. It was me. Some women just aren't wired that way."

Alarm bells go off in my head. *Is she saying what I think she's saying? That a man has never made her come?* What fucking bullshit. If it was Derrick's first time, he probably had no clue what the fuck he was doing. Even if they did it a hundred more times after that, he still likely had no idea how to make Lily purr like a kitten. You'd think a dude that book smart would've at least used that big brain in his head to do his research or at least fucking talk to Lily and ask her what she liked.

"What do you mean 'some women aren't wired that way'?" I ask, advancing on her at the same time.

“Don’t try to embarrass me, Chase,” she says, backing away. “Even later at school, I dated a guy a few times. He said I was cold. We didn’t have sex, but he was never successful with his hands either.” Jesus Christ. What a fucking idiot. I’d like to kick that guy’s balls into this throat right about now.

“And what about you, Lily?” I back her into a corner. We’re wedged between the fridge and the pantry. I’m close enough that I feel her breath accelerate, and I’d bet my entire salary that if I palmed her tits, I’d find her nipples hard and aching just like my cock is right now. “When you touch yourself, are you wet? When you play with your clit and rub it just how you like, do you come?”

Her pupils dilating and clouding over with desire is all the answer I need. The heat flowing between us is intoxicating, and there is nothing I’d like more than to show Lily just how right her wiring is. Right here. Right now.

“Yes.” The word is like a caress on my lips. We’re so close. All I have to do is lean forward an inch and my lips will claim hers.

“And when you’re touching yourself, who do you think of?”

“No one.” The brazen lie makes me grin wolfishly.

“Liar.” I grind my hips into her so she knows just how hard she makes me. So she knows the power she has over me. Her breath catches, and she shudders on her exhale. I slip my hands around her waist and prop Lily up on my thigh. She instinctively thrusts forward on my leg. It’s fucking hot, and I’m not sure she even realizes she’s doing it. “Tell me the truth. When you use your fingers to get off. When you pump them in and out of your sweet pussy and press a palm to your aching clit. When you close your eyes as you break apart and come, whose face do you see on your eyelids?”

Lily’s eyes shoot open as she rocks her hips, grinding against my quads. The heat between her thighs is merging with my own, making me want to strip her bare and feast on her until there’s not one shred of doubt in her mind that she’s fucking perfect.

“Yours,” she gasps, arching her back in a way that pushes her tits level with my mouth. “I think of you.”

Those words shatter my last shred of resolve, and I wrap my arms around Lily’s back, pulling her forward and crushing her chest against mine. I don’t waste another second before my lips capture hers, nipping, teasing, and tasting. My lips, my hands and my entire fucking being only have one purpose—to worship this woman’s body as if it was made for me alone.

*Frisky Business***Lily**

I never thought I'd be into dirty talk, but Chase's voice asking me how I touch myself makes my whole body flush with want. I'm wavering between utter embarrassment and being utterly turned on. I can't believe I said what I said. I can't believe I told Chase Wilder that the only person who's made me come is me, and when I do, I think about him.

And he's kissing me. Hard. And I'm kissing him back. I feel a hundred things all at once. Like my brain is short-circuiting. Like I'm made of fire. My happy endorphins start to overload until my entire body is electric and alive. I have all the feels. This kiss is everything I've been missing since the last time our lips and tongues decided to say hello to each other.

A loud moan echoes in the kitchen, and I'm almost embarrassed when I realize it's me. *Almost*. But I've wanted this for so long that I can't seem to muster enough awareness to care. Chase presses me against the refrigerator, the cool steel is a balm to the inferno burning between us. It's too hot in here and my jacket feels like an oven, cooking me from the inside out.

Chase's tongue plays a wicked game with mine, coaxing and soothing, teasing and tempting. My hands find their way into his hair. I grip it and pull slightly, forcing a growl from him. The masculine sound makes me shiver and goosebumps prickle my skin. I want more. I want to touch him and feel his skin on mine.

My hands rove Chase's back as he kisses my jawline and neck. He wedges his thigh higher between my legs and I can't stop my body's reaction as I grind down on him, trying to find the friction I'm craving. My fingers find the bottom of Chase's tee and move to pull it up. I want to run my hands over his chest and the taut muscles of his stomach. God, I want to lick him from head to toe. Chase is the type of man I bet would taste

like candy. Like a fucking dream. He's like the rainbow rocket of popsicles. Just when my hands finally meet the hot skin of his abs, he grabs my wrists and pulls them away, pinning them above my head.

"I want to touch you," I pant, struggling to get out of his grip. But my resistance is weak because being at his mercy like this makes me hotter.

"This isn't about touching me," he purrs, nipping my earlobe. "It's about me touching you. It's about proving that my touch is the only one you'll ever need. You're going to come for me, Lily, and you're going to love it."

I hum in tentative agreement arching towards him, anxious and just a little bit nervous.

"It's okay," I say. "I don't want you to be disappointed if I don't."

Suddenly, Chase stops and pulls back. I start to protest but he silences me with another press of his lips against mine. A sweet kiss, not one of his usual soul-devouring kisses.

"Let's get a few things straight," he says, voice serious. "You could never disappoint me, Lily. You're perfect." My throat suddenly feels tight, but I swallow and nod. "Next, you are the most responsive, sexy woman I've ever known. There's nothing wrong with you and I will prove it right here, right now."

Before I can protest, Chase scoops me up and carries me into the office, kicking the door shut. My heart stutters like it might malfunction as he spots the small loveseat near my workstation. He lays me down, kissing me again and again. I love his weight above me and the calm but determined movements of his hands working on the buttons of my jacket. Within seconds, Chase's hands are on my breasts and I didn't know this could feel so good. I relish the heat of his palms through the thin fabric of my white t-shirt.

I don't know if Chase is a boob guy, but mine aren't big. They're small B-cups, and the knowledge that Chase has

probably been with women a thousand times more polished and beautiful than me makes me shy away.

“Oh no, you don’t.” Chase grins, pulling me back. “I have to worship these.” Then, he’s lifting my shirt over my head and unsnapping my bra like a pro. For a moment, he just stares at my naked chest and hard nipples, making me nervous all over again.

“Fuck, Lily,” he breathes. “Beautiful doesn’t do you justice.” I blush at his perfect words, and of course, he would know all the right words to say because why wouldn’t he? With his tongue working my nipple, I realize he has all the right moves too. I squirm as he focuses on one breast, then the other. Seriously, I don’t remember this ever feeling so damn good. I never thought I was a boob-stimulation woman, but when Chase touches me, I light up like a switchboard. I’ve never understood why men are obsessed with breasts, and in the few times someone’s played with mine, I had to stop myself from laughing. Guys are so into touching boobs, and I could take it or leave it. I’d much rather a man focus on the magical bean between my thighs. But right now, I’m definitely having a tit-to-clit epiphany.

Chase kisses a path down my stomach to my belly button and smirks up at me when he reaches the top of my black pants. He looks so confident and roguish that it makes every muscle in me coil, begging for release.

Logistically, I know where this is headed. Or, at least I’m pretty sure he wants to put his mouth where the money is, so to speak, as he undoes my zipper and shimmies my pants down my legs. I don’t stop him, but I automatically tense when he lowers himself between my thighs. Being the attentive man he is, Chase notices the shift in my demeanour.

“What’s wrong?” he pauses, propping himself up on the loveseat, looking at me with concern.

“You don’t have to do that,” I say, motioning towards my pussy which is still covered by a slip of cotton decorated with little watermelon slices. Hell, I wish I’d chosen better underwear this morning. Thank fuck, I’m up to date with my

grooming. I'm one of those women who obsessively shave everything on the daily. There's just something lovely about being smooth everywhere.

"Do what?" he asks, feigning ignorance. He knows what I'm talking about and he's making me say it. I've never had a guy go down on me before. Derrick never tried, or he didn't want to try. And the thought of Chase doing it for the first time both thrills and terrifies me.

"This. That. You know," I repeat, motioning toward my lady bits. "I know guys don't like it, and I've never had it done to me before, so you don't have to." Chase gives me an incredulous look like I've just started speaking a different language. Embarrassment creeps over my skin as I flush.

"That's bullshit," he states matter-of-factly. "I will always be completely honest with you, Lily, especially when it comes to sex. Right now, there is nothing in this world I want more than to taste you. I want to eat your pussy like it's a fucking chocolate cake and have you come on my tongue."

I gape at him as heat floods my panties. Oh, god, that mouth! No one has ever spoken to me like this, and I think I like it. Derrick was always very proper in the bedroom, even when I tried to convince him to be more adventurous. The one time I attempted to give him a blow job, he stopped me and told me he didn't want to "degrade me" like that. It didn't matter that I wanted to do it or that I didn't find it degrading at all. He had to have been the first man in the history of the world to turn down a willing woman offering head. It was a blow to my fragile ego. Derrick was a missionary man, and that got old fast when I wanted to try other things, but his rejection stopped me from asking.

I mean, yes, there are things I'll never have the desire or urge to try. I'll never be into threesomes or orgies; I have zero interest in sharing or being shared. I highly doubt there will ever be a situation where I'll want to be choked, fisted, or paddled. I'm into pleasure, not pain. A slap or love tap? Yes. Handcuffs? Yes, please. I could get into a little *Fifty Shades* of sexy times. And there are definitely things I'm curious about

trying sexually, but Derrick never let me explore any of them with him, which made me think I was doing something wrong.

Chase's lips find mine again, and his hand cups me through my underwear.

"You like it when I talk dirty to you, don't you, Lily?" he chuckles. "I know it because I can feel how hot and wet you are. I can see it when your eyes darken with interest like you want to ask for more but aren't sure how. Do you want me to kiss you here?" Chase asks, grinding the heel of his palm into my clit. The sensation makes me jump and moan at the same time.

"Yes," I breathe.

"Yes, what? Tell me what you want, Lily."

"Yes. I want your tongue on me, in me."

"Tell me you want me to eat this pretty little pussy."

I hesitate, and Chase chuckles as if daring me to be dirty. He knows I never back down from a dare. "I want you to eat my pussy, Chase."

Heat flashes in his blue-green eyes, and in one smooth pull, my underwear disappear. The cool air hits my heated, damp skin, and I suck in a breath.

"Mmm," Chase hums, lowering himself between my thighs and kissing the tender skin around their apex. "I'm glad no one has ever tasted you, because this," he says, slipping a finger inside me and curling it toward my G-spot, "is mine."

I huff out a breath and clamp down on his finger. He strokes me once and then twice before adding a second finger. He places teasing kisses close to where I want him most until finally Chase spreads me wide and gives me one long, luxurious lick. My eyes roll back into my head, and I have to force my legs to not clamp down on his neck and risk strangling him.

He pushes my legs farther apart, holding me at his mercy with his tongue. I can barely breathe as sensation after sensation

hits me in a deluge. It's too much and not enough. It's delicious and dirty, and I can't get enough.

"Oh my god," I moan, squirming, but Chase grabs my pelvis and ass and pulls me closer. "Oh my fucking god." Chase chuckles, and the vibrations of it on my clit drive me wild. I've been missing out. How do people not do this every day? What am I saying? People probably do, do this every day.

"Come for me, Lily," Chase purrs, stroking me with his clever tongue.

Before I can take another breath, that distant but familiar feeling starts to build at the base of my spine, low in my abdomen. It coils tighter and tighter like an elastic band being wound up until it threatens to break. And then, I do. The orgasm bursts through me like a damn breaking, my hips raise off the cushions, pushing harder into Chase's face. Shock waves radiate outward, pulsating through every delicious inch of my body.

When I finally come back down to earth, lax and satisfied, Chase looks supremely smug, but he doesn't brag. He smiles at me, tucking a strand of loose hair behind my ear and says, "That was the most beautiful, sexy thing I've ever fucking seen."

I laugh. I laugh because I'm happy and satisfied and just genuinely glad to be alive, here with Chase at this moment. But then I remember he hasn't been satisfied. He didn't—

"What about you?" I ask, sitting up and putting my bra and tee back on. I look around for my underwear, notice them on my desk, and quickly grab and slip them on. "Tell me what you like. Derrick never let me... you know." I motion to the erection he's clearly sporting. He has a pretty significant bulge showing through his jeans.

"The more you tell me about Derrick, the less I like him. I never liked that guy." Chase says, lips thin. "We can worry about me another day. This time was all about you."

He stands, pulling me with him and kisses me. A bolt of shock sizzles through me when I taste myself on his lips. I don't

know why that turns me on, but it does.

“But I want to,” I protest, trying to pull him back to the couch, but Chase refuses to budge.

“If I take off my pants, Lily, I’m going to fuck you over your desk, and you deserve better than that.”

The idea doesn’t sound bad to me. Maybe a little uncomfortable, but after the encounter we just enjoyed on the loveseat, I wouldn’t object to more. I’d bet my left tit that sex with Chase will be amazing. Mind-blowingly amazing. Maybe even life-altering.

But Chase doesn’t change his mind. He kisses me one last time and then leaves my office, which I suppose is a good thing because I’ll get exactly zero work done with him here.

Sighing, I turn back to my computer and organize the team’s weekly meal plans. About twenty minutes later, my phone pings. Expecting a text from Chase, I grin. But my heart sinks when I read it. It’s a group text between Holly, Avery, Chase, Sam and me.

Holly: Hey, Lovebirds, it’s go time. We are ready to kick off the season and the BWB (Blue & White Bachelorette). All the paperwork is complete. Thanks for signing off on everything. Our first date is scheduled for Thursday. Sam will go first since the team is away in Ottawa for a preseason game.

Avery: Sam, if you can come to the SASS offices tomorrow, we will plan everything together. As mentioned, due to sponsorships, we must check some boxes when creating the date agenda.

Holly: Lily, we have a stylist coming to SASS on Tuesday to prep you. Free clothes and makeup! Yay! Please be here at 2pm, after you’re done with the team’s lunch, so we can have you outfitted.

Sam: Sounds like a plan. I can’t wait to see you, Lily. I know no matter what you wear, you’ll be stunning, like always ;)

The texts keep coming, and I force myself to read them.

Chase hasn't responded.

How can I go through with this? Anxiety cramps my stomach as I stare at the spot where Chase and I just did deliciously naughty things. Then I think of Sam and guilt immediately floods my system.

What the fuck am I doing?

It's too late to back out now, but I can't help but feel like this will end very badly. I just hope it doesn't end with me heartbroken.



The next few days go by in a blur of meal prep and nutrition seminars with the team. Every training camp invitee is getting schooled on how to fuel their bodies. Sam and I work seamlessly together. The rookies know surprisingly little about nutrition beyond the basics, but Sam is patient and kind with them. He explains everything from portioning to calorie deficits and surpluses, what foods to eat for building muscle mass and calculating micro and macronutrients. Some rookies are so young they look like bean poles compared to veterans like Luke and Chase. If they want to cut it in the big league, they'll need to change their diets to support their body's growth and their careers.

Sam is an absolute professional and never brings up our upcoming date, even though it's looming ahead. Neither he, Holly, nor Avery will tell me what we're doing, but I hope my meeting with the stylist will give me some hints. They wouldn't outfit me in a cocktail dress if we're rock climbing. Fuck, I hope we're not going rock climbing. I hate it. I don't have the upper or lower body strength for that shit. Coming from a hockey family, I'm athletic and enjoy working out regularly. But ask me to do a pull-up, and I'll just hang there like a cat clinging to dear life.

As I walk into the SASS offices, I admire all the work Holly and Avery have done since taking over JP Lighthouse. They've downsized and expanded simultaneously. Instead of

working with more athletes, SASS works almost exclusively with hockey players. In some cases, they'll take on a client outside of the sport as a favour. Last spring, they worked with Tyra Price after she came out as gay and her agent went off the rails. They might still be working with Tyra in a smaller capacity, but mostly because we're all friends and Holly's sister, Taylor, is dating Tyra.

"Well, well, well, if it isn't Toronto's most eligible bachelorette," a cheery voice teases from behind SASS's reception desk. Spenser Patton is the office gatekeeper and one of the best-dressed, best-looking men I've ever seen. He's fit, fabulous, and flamboyantly gay, much to the dismay of the female population.

"Hi, Spenser." I smile, but it doesn't quite reach my eyes. This whole situation is wearing on me. "I'm here to see the stylist."

"For someone about to get a bunch of free designer clothes and makeup, you look decidedly unenthusiastic about it."

"It's not that," I start, but I'm not sure what to say. "It's the situation. I don't know why everyone is so invested in who I date. I'm not that interesting. In fact, I'm fairly certain I'm boring."

"You are not boring, darling. You have two of the most gorgeous men in the city vying for your attention. One is a notorious bad boy one thought would ever settle down, and the other looks like Jamie Fraser and is a total golden boy. I mean, swoon!"

I roll my eyes. I get it. Chase and Sam are great guys. But doing this just feels wrong. I don't want anyone to get hurt, and I can't envision how this will end well or with Sam and I staying friends.

"I'm only doing this for charity at this point," I sigh because it's true. If a big chunk of money wasn't going to two important causes, I would have cancelled this entire fiasco.

"So you already know who you're going to choose?" Spenser asks innocently.

“Don’t answer that,” Avery’s voice booms as she and Holly stroll towards me. “You know she can’t disclose her choice until after both men have had all three of their dates. It’s in the contract.”

“Oh boo! Don’t spoil my fun!”

Holly and Avery link arms with me and drag me into their office, shutting the door behind them. The entire floor is very modern looking. Lots of glass walls, sleek furniture, and Apple products. As soon as they unhook their arms, I plop down into a fancy, white leather couch across from their matching desks.

“So, how have things been at training camp?” Holly asks, genuinely interested. She was a hockey player before trading in her skates for a desk.

“Busy. The new guys are so young and naive. They’re still in the I-can-eat-anything-and-everything phase, and they’re used to having their parents or billets cook everything for them.”

“And how’s Sam?” Avery pries, preening like a cat, as if I’m going to tell her we’ve been cooking more than food in our kitchen.

“He’s great with the players, and we work well together. He’s helpful, professional, and organized. We’ve got a good system.”

“And?” Avery draws the word out.

“And nothing.”

“Gah, you’re not fun. No lovin’ by the oven? No forking around or spooning?”

I laugh at her terrible puns and just shake my head, much to her chagrin. Cooking for the whole of the Northmen’s training camp invitees is challenging work. I’m too busy to mess around—well, except for that one time.

“Have you talked to Chase at all?” Holly questions, grabbing three bottles of water from her mini fridge and passing them out. The way she asks the questions makes me think she

already knows about what, or rather who, went down in my office, but I'm probably just being paranoid.

"A little," I say, evading the question. I twist off the cap of my water and take a huge gulp, hoping she won't ask again. But she and Avery eye me like they can smell my lie of omission.

"You little hussy," Avery cackles and I feel the blush rushing up my neck and cheeks. It's times like these I hate that I inherited my mother's complexion. She's a blusher too. Even with a tan, I can't stop the red wave that crashes over my skin like a scarlet letter. And I haven't done anything wrong. I'm not an adulteress. My name isn't Hester Prynne, but I still feel guilty. "Spill."

"There's nothing to spill," I insist as more blood rushes to my face. God, just thinking about Chase, the words he spoke, and the way made me feel gets me hot and bothered.

"Oh, there's definitely something to spill," Holly grins.

"Come on, Lily. You know all our dirty secrets. Hell, last March I walked in on Holly's O-face when she and Luke desecrated our couch."

"Avery!" Holly shrieks. "You're one to talk! You have a sex tape floating around on the internet."

"TMI. Luke is my brother! I don't want details." I cringe. I love Holly like a sister, but I don't need to know what she and my brother do behind closed doors.

"It's not a sex tape. Well, I am having sex with Ryan in it, but I'm pretty much fully clothed, and I didn't post it online. Nor did I know I was being filmed. Plus, Ryan and I have been working on getting the damned thing scrubbed from the web."

"Good luck," I mutter, digesting what was just said and then narrow my eyes at Holly. "Wait, which couch are you talking about? Is it the couch you gave Riley and me?"

"Don't change the subject," Avery barks, turning the inquisition back to me. "What happened with Chase?"

"None of your business."

"I don't care! I still want to know."

“He visited my office the other day,” I say, trying to appease her. Isn’t the fucking stylist supposed to be here already?

“And?” Holly and Avery press on.

“And, we may have done a few things.”

“Like?”

“Like... stuff!” I yell, throwing my arms in the air. Then my mouth runs away with itself like the water they just gave me is a truth serum. “I may have mentioned that I didn’t think I could have an orgasm outside of the battery-operated variety because Derrick was never successful at getting me off, and Aaron called me an ice queen. So Chase took it upon himself to prove me wrong and started to undress me. I tried to stop him because I thought men didn’t like going down on women, but apparently they really do. And when he started talking dirty to me and using his tongue in a way I didn’t even know was possible, I all but detonated under his mouth. But he wouldn’t let me return the favour or touch him, and now I’m confused because I thought all men liked blow jobs. Well, except for Derrick, because he thinks it’s degrading toward women or some shit. I don’t know. I’m just really confused. And now I feel guilty because I’m supposed to be dating Sam, too, and I don’t know what to do.”

Silence envelops the room as Holly and Avery stare at me, mouths open and flapping without words. I think I’ve shocked them into silence. There truly is a first for everything.

“There are so many things wrong with what you just said. I don’t even know where to begin,” Avery says, anger lacing her voice. “Actually, I do. Who is the lying bag of dicks you call Derrick?”

“He was my first boyfriend, and he’s not a bad guy. He was really nice,” I whisper. My voice gets quiet when Avery gets her angry-bitch-face on.

“Fuck nice! If he implied you couldn’t come for any reason other than his lack of skill, he’s a lying bag of dicks. If he wouldn’t go down on you and told you men don’t like eating

at a vagina buffet once in a while, then he's an even bigger lying bag of dicks. Plus, there's always flavoured lube!"

"And what kind of a weirdo turns down a blow job?" Holly adds, looking truly confused. "From you? You're hot, Lily."

"I know, right?" Avery agrees. "If I had a dick, I'd let you suck it."

Sometimes I wonder how Avery and Holly's minds work.

"Derrick said giving head was degrading to women, and he didn't want to treat me like that."

"Bullshit! It's sucking cock, and if you want to do it, do it! Unless he was planning on porn-starring you until you gag, come on your face, and pull your hair while he chokes you, then it's not degrading."

"Um, no, thank you." I shudder. Avery has a point. When I think of sex, whether oral or whatever, I imagine sharing my body with someone while enjoying and sharing pleasure. I don't think of porn.

"And I know for a fact men like going down on women," Holly states plainly. I try and fail to stop her before she shares information about my brother that I have no desire to know. "Well, at least Luke does. I don't have anyone else to use as a point of reference, but Luke's really good at it, and he seems to like it. Quite a lot, actually."

"Please stop," I groan, covering my ears, but I look from Holly to Avery and ask them the question that's really bugging me. "But why won't Chase let me touch him? Every time I try, he grabs my wrists and stops me."

"Hmmm, maybe he's into being dominant," Avery suggests. "You know, like *Fifty Shades* type shit?"

Holly looks at me like she wants to say something but stops when the stylist knocks.

"One minute," I yell, standing in front of the door. "Are you sure we have to do this? I feel like this isn't fair to Sam."

"Then make it fair," Avery says. "Give him a chance."

“And be honest with him,” Holly suggests. “Tell him how you feel about Chase and see what he says.”

Sighing and no less confused than before, I let Holly and Avery introduce me to Chantel Corteau, my stylist. I spend the next three hours trying on expensive clothing, make-up, shoes, and doing whatever else I’m told. Avery cracks open a bottle of wine, and as we drink I find myself fluctuating between horror, hope, happiness, and hopelessness.

*Kicks for Kisses***Lily***The Blue & White Bachelorette Blog**Hey Everyone,*

First, I wanted to thank you all for your encouragement over the last couple of weeks. I'm flattered you're all so interested in my love life, and I appreciate all your kind words. But, to the trolls who post nasty comments and rude messages, I suggest you unsubscribe and get a life.

Secondly, I wanted to take a moment to remind everyone that my dates support two great causes: The Alzheimer Society of Canada and the Canadian Mental Health Association. These two charities can use all the help they can get, so if you can donate, no matter how large or small, please follow the links at the bottom of this page.

Tonight is my first date with Sam, and I am super excited and curious about what he has planned. He refuses to leak any information or give me any clues. Boo! Tonight's date is sponsored by Tourism Toronto and the Monique Boutique. MB is a fantastic little store on Yonge Street that sells comfortable yet elegant fashion. I've been told the dress code for tonight is cute and casual... whatever that means. You'll be able to see my outfit if you follow our date posts!

I know many of you are questioning how I can openly and honestly date two men at the same time. The truth is, I don't know. I suppose it's a lot like regular dating. I'm going to get to know both of these great men and then choose the one who's right for me. He doesn't have to be perfect. He just needs to be perfect for me.

I hope you all enjoy watching Sam and me tonight! We'll see what happens.

Good luck to our Northmen hopefuls who are taking on Ottawa tonight in our nation's capital!

XOXO

Lily

Sam is picking Holly and me up in twenty minutes in a hired car. I never realized how much planning and prep goes into creating social media content until it became my reality, and this isn't even near the scale of an actual reality TV production. In fact, there is no TV involved. Holly will be recording parts of our date using her iPhone, which will immediately be fed back to SASS HQ. Adam, their tech whiz, will quickly edit and post our date in five segments to BWB subscribers on all our socials. Adam's also set up an entire website with exclusive content where anyone can read my blog, look at photo galleries, or check out our sponsors and paid partnerships.

Chantel, my stylist, applies an extra coat of gloss to my lips. I told Holly and Avery I could do my own makeup, but they insisted. Mainly because our cosmetics sponsor wanted the credit.

"There," she says with a smile, closing the biggest makeup case I have ever seen. I didn't even know half the stuff she used existed. Powders, primers, highlighters, foundations, blushes, bronzers, and on and on and on it went. "You look perfect."

I glance in the mirror. "Damn, Chantel, you're good." My hair lightly curls around my face and shoulders. I refused to have them straighten it in the same way I refused to have them try to turn me into someone fake. No hair extensions, no insane eyelashes that look like spider legs, and no weird chemicals or injections of any kind. I'm doing this, but I'm doing it my way.

I slip into my outfit; a pair of dark-wash, ripped, skinny jeans that cost more than my grocery bill for the week, a clingy cream-coloured tank, and a full-zip yoga jacket with a cool water-colour floral pattern. I slip on a pair of ballet flats to match, and I'm ready to go. The outfit is trendy, comfortable,

and can easily be worn for any number of activities. I still don't know what we're doing, so I'm happy with the practicality of my clothing.

"You look hot," Riley says from my doorway, in her jammies. Riley is one of those people who promptly change into track pants and a tank the moment she crosses the threshold of our apartment after work. If I taught miserable, moody kids all day, so would I. "I'm ready for romance! I'll be watching all night and wanna see some action."

I roll my eyes and walk into the living room where Holly is waiting.

"Okay, Lily, just a few things before Samuel gets here," Holly says, and I swear a part of her had transformed into a drill sergeant. "Can you call him Samuel?"

"I can try, but you're going to have to tell me why."

"The overwhelming consensus is that Samuel is sexier than Sam."

"She's right," Riley interjects with a nod. "The extra syllables increase sex appeal."

"Okay." I roll my eyes. I can see how some people may think that. I can handle it.

"When they go to dinner, do Samuel and Lily actually get to eat the food?" Riley asks.

"Of course, they get to eat the food. Why wouldn't they?"

"On *The Bachelor* and *The Bachelorette*, they only get place-setting food. I heard that they're not supposed to eat it."

That's ridiculous and a waste. Good food should not be wasted. It should be enjoyed.

"As you know, any type of physical contact is encouraged, but if you could give me a heads up so I can catch it on camera, that would be great. Also, when we get to where we're going, make sure you let your hosts speak and do their spiel. They need to get their plugs in for promotional purposes."

I keep nodding as Holly keeps talking. How hard can it be?

At six o'clock on the dot, Samuel knocks on my door. When I open it, he stands in the frame looking for all the world like the perfect date, from his dark jeans to his flannel button-down shirt. He cracks a grin as soon as our eyes meet, and when he pulls out a small bouquet of flowers, I can't stop the blush.

"Thank you," I say, smiling, taking the flowers into my kitchen to put in water. Holly is already busy recording. We're supposed to pretend she's not there and never acknowledge her, which is just fucking weird, in my opinion. "You're looking very dapper in your blue jeans and flannel. Very Canadian."

"Canadian? It's Scottish! This isn't just any flannel, lass," Sam says, laying on an accent thicker than I've ever heard. "This is the McCrae clan tartan. I thought the shirt was less flashy than a kilt."

I laugh. Sam has a great sense of humour. It's one of the things I like best about him. I'd have loved to see him in a kilt, but the red, navy, and green plaid button-down looks pretty strapping too.

"So, are you finally going to tell me where we're going?" I ask and grab my purse.

"We are going to a football game," Sam beams and my face drops. I'm not a football fan. Hockey, yes. Football, not so much. "And dinner, of course."

"I didn't know the Argos were playing tonight."

"Not that football!" Sam makes a face like I've insulted him. "Footie! The beautiful game."

"Oh, thank god!" I laugh. I like soccer. I played competitively until the end of high school and occasionally join pick-up games when I have time.

"Have fun," Riley calls from the couch. "Don't forget to be naughty. Entertain me!"

"Ignore her." I whisper loudly to Sam.

Twenty minutes later, our first segment is live, and people are posting comments like mad. According to Holly, we have over

two hundred thousand followers. On the drive to the restaurant she tells Sam and me about TorontoLicious, an event where local restaurants set a price-fixed menu to encourage patrons to try their food. Sam was given a list of participating restaurants and chose one close to Toronto FC's field.

It's a cute little eatery that's longer than it is wide, with navy blue tables and white chairs. It has trendy lighting, including some ultra-modern chandeliers. A long bar with a massive glass wall of liquor runs along one side of the room. It's backlit with glowing blue lights, and the accumulative effect is stunning. The bar is busy, but the hostess takes us to a private table, away from the crowd, that's quiet enough Holly won't have any trouble recording us. We're mic'd up with noise-cancelling tech, and Adam can edit out any additional sound.

Sam pulls out my chair and seats me. Our waitress greets us, explains the promotional menu, and pours us some wine.

"So," Sam grins, looking at the menu, "when you come to restaurants, are you a food snob because you're a chef?"

"No. I'm not a critic unless the dishes are absolutely terrible." I glance over the menu and spot a few things that interest me. I love making food as much as I love eating it. "You're a nutritionist, Samuel. Do you only eat healthy food?"

Sam smirks at me. "I like a big cheeseburger and fries as much as the next guy."

"Good, because this could never work if you told me you inhale kale and only eat egg whites."

The waitress returns and I order an appetizer Caesar salad with extra croutons. I never order Caesar salads from chain restaurants because they tend to glob on horrendous amounts of generic dressing. But this one looks delicious, with fresh romaine wedges and a house-made dressing emulsified using olive oil, garlic and other spices. I get the mushroom pappardelle with white truffle and Grana Padano cheese for my entree. Sam orders the same salad and the dry-aged ribeye with fingerling potatoes.

The salad is excellent, and so is the warm bread and Himalayan pink-salt butter they bring out with it—I love me some bread and butter. Sam is easy to talk to and charming, and I can practically see followers fall in love with him as dinner goes on. I avoid talking about work and do my best to ask meaningful questions. By the time our entrees arrive, I know Sam’s family came to Canada when he was six, which is why he has a slight accent that’s not nearly as strong as his parents. He still has family across the pond and visits once a year.

“I’ve lived in Canada my whole life,” I say, then sigh in pleasure as I take a bite of my pasta dish. It’s creamy and flavourful and delicious. I note the flavours, tucking them away in the back of my mind when I’m creating my own menus. “But, I’ve had the opportunity to travel. I’ve been to Paris and Italy to study their food, and I’ve been to the UK. But I didn’t get to visit Scotland.”

“You’d love it,” Sam says with certainty. “It has a wildness to it, and it’s not as bustling as parts of England. I’ll have to take you someday. I have family in Edinburgh and Glasgow.” I smile at the invitation. I’d love to go to Scotland, and I’m sure going with Sam would be amazing, but—just but. I throw food in my mouth to avoid the awkwardness.

“How’s your steak?” I ask, changing the subject. It looks incredible and has a side of hollandaise sauce for dipping. I kind of wish I had ordered the steak.

“Delicious,” Sam replies, taking a big bite. I wonder if I offer him a taste of my pasta if he’ll share.

“Would you like to try mine?”

“Sure.” I twirl a thick pappardelle noodle onto my fork, making sure to get some mushroom and sauce and hand it over to him. “Very good.”

I wait for him to reciprocate and offer me a bite of his steak, but it never comes. Usually, the best part about going to restaurants is sharing food. Everyone orders different dishes and then try each other’s food. I resist the urge to shoot Holly

a look because I know she knows I was fishing for a taste and am annoyed, in a hangry way, that I didn't get one.

The rest of dinner goes by quickly. Two more segments are posted online, and I refuse to watch any of them until I get home because I don't want to get in my head. I keep reminding myself to act normal. Most of the time, I forget the camera is even there, but I know if I start watching the segments back, it will make me crazy.

My phone buzzes just as the car pulls up to the stadium. The best thing about having a driver is we don't have to worry about parking.

Riley: I can't believe that ass didn't let you taste his steak. Everyone knows plate sharing is an unwritten rule.

Lily: I know, right?

Riley: He could have fed it to you in slow motion. Food porn is gold on social media.

Sam opens my door again, giving me a hand out of the car. I suppose his chivalry makes up for his food hoarding. We're led through a hallway by a few guards. This is definitely not the general public entrance. We're the only ones coming in this way. We turn down a tunnel, which I realize is the one the players walk out of onto the pitch. When we finally step out onto the field, thousands of fans cheer us on. I glance around, and people are holding up signs cheering for Toronto, but my eyes widen when I see a few of them are for the BWB and me. Fans are fast and industrious with their signs, and I am one hundred percent sure this is the work of Avery and Holly. They just can't resist a good photo op.

“CHOOSE CHASE!”

“LILY PICK ME INSTEAD!”

“GREAT SCOT! SAM IS HOT!”

“CHASE IS YOUR PICK. HE'S GOT A BIGGER... “

I chuckle at the last one. Though I've never seen either of my dates' equipment, I have heard, via women on the internet who love to overshare, that Chase is well endowed.

A few players are kicking balls around on the field for warm-ups. Sam and I wave to the fans and Holly motions for us to head out onto the pitch when an FC player in red jogs over. I recognize him from interviews with reporters. He's the team captain, Joe Alaric, and he has the most beautiful brown skin I've ever seen.

"Hey guys," he says with a thick British accent. Joe came to Toronto after playing Premiere League in the UK. "Glad you could make it. Want to throw on some boots and kick a few?"

Sam's eyes go wide as saucers. He's totally fan-boying right now, and it's adorable.

"Yeah! Absolutely," Sam practically squeals, shaking Joe's hand. "I'm Samuel McCrae, and this is Lily Valentine."

"Nice to meet you. The team's been following you guys and not just this dating thing you're doing. We've been checking out your meal plans too."

Joe and Sam start talking about nutrition as we are led to a bench where cleats in our size magically appear along with some socks. It's been a few years since I've played, so I'm out of practice. But kicking and passing a soccer ball is like riding a bike.

We jog onto the field where a few guys pass me the ball, and I pass it back.

"Hey, look here," one guy shouts. "We've got ourselves a pro!"

"Hardly! I doubt house league and varsity soccer count. If you're looking for the athlete in my family, it's my brother."

We stay on the field for about ten minutes, kicking balls around, fans cheering the entire time. Massive TV screens stand at both ends of the pitch, and cameras follow Sam and me.

Just as we go to make our way off the field, Joe calls us back over. I don't realize he's holding a microphone until his voice booms over the stadium speakers.

“Oye! Don’t run off just yet. The fun is just starting. How about we play a little game before kick-off? Are you two a gambling sort of couple?”

A shiver of apprehension washes over me. I’m unsure how to answer his question, but with fans watching and chanting, I’m kind of obligated to play along. Before I can respond, Sam answers for both of us.

“Of course,” he smirks, lapping up the attention. “What did you have in mind?”

“Let’s take some penalties,” Joe says, pointing to the Toronto keeper warming up between the goalposts. “A shootout between Lily and Samuel. Best two out of three, the winner claims a prize of their choice.”

The fans go wild, cheering and blowing air horns.

“What do you say, Lily?” Sam asks. “Think you can beat me?” He waggles his eyebrows, making me laugh.

“Oh, I know I can.”

Holly’s probably died and gone to heaven. She couldn’t have planned this date any better. Viewers are going to eat this shit up like Lindt chocolate.

We walk to the penalty dot and shake hands with the goalkeeper, who jokingly asks us to take it easy on him. I jump up and down a few times to loosen up, trying to expel all my nervous energy. I can do this. I used to take penalty kicks all the time in high school. It was my job. I was the team’s designated kicker for penalties and corners.

“Who’s first?” Joe asks into a mic.

“Ladies first,” Sam answers, motioning me toward the penalty dot. I grit my teeth. Of course, he would make me go first.

“Get ready to lose Samuel McCrae. I hope you don’t mind losing to a girl.”

The trick to taking penalties is to keep your body as straight and centred as possible. The net is too big for the keeper to cover all of it, so he needs to make an educated guess where he thinks you’ll shoot the ball. If you lean to one side or the

other, it might tip him off. Unless you're bluffing. Next, you avoid eye contact for the same reason.

Out of habit and superstition, I lean down and slap my shins twice each before straightening. Then I lift each cleat one at a time. Left tap, right tap. It's the same ritual I did in high school. I take three steps back and one to the right, pick a corner, then shoot.

I'm surprised at the force and accuracy that I kick the ball. It's been a while, but I don't seem too out of practice as it flies swiftly into the top left corner. The keeper guessed wrong and dove right. The crowd goes crazy. Joe's playing commentator and everyone laughs at his jokes about the goalie needing to up his game. Then Sam takes his turn. He scores, tying us at one each. We both score on our next shots, too, which means it comes down to our final kick.

I pick a bottom corner and kick. The goalie dives, this time guessing the right, and deflects my ball away from the goal. The crowd sighs.

"Oh, so close! Finally, Johnny Ho makes a save," Joe teases his teammate. "Well, Samuel, it's all on you for the win. No pressure."

Sam winks at me before walking up to the ball. He looks to the net, backs up and takes his shot. I hold my breath and watch the keeper move in the same direction as the ball, his hand just barely touches it, but it's not enough, and the ball trickles into the back of the net.

"Winner!" Joe booms over the microphone, urging the crowd to cheer as he waves his hands up in the air. "Samuel, my man, what shall you claim as your prize?" Sam looks at me and smiles. And even though I wish he'd spark even a few butterflies or make my heart stutter, he doesn't.

"Hmm," he says as if thinking hard. "What do you think?" Sam waves to the fans, who cheer even louder. "What should Ms. Valentine have to forfeit?"

I know what's coming even before the chant from the stands begins. Instead of excitement, hesitation and reluctance build

in my gut. I glance quickly at Holly, who is wielding her iPhone like an executioner running the guillotine. I hope she runs out of battery.

“KISS! KISS! KISS! KISS!” echoes through the stadium as Sam saunters over to me. I smile because it is expected of me, but I’m kind of annoyed. I can’t turn him down in front of this crowd. He won fair and square, but it pisses me off that my choice has been taken away. Kisses are supposed to be organic and exciting, not forced, especially first kisses.

I place my hands on Sam’s shoulders, lean on my tippy-toes and kiss his cheek. The crowd boos.

“Come on now. I think we can do better than that,” Joe laughs.

“You don’t have to, Lily.” Sam sounds so disappointed that all the annoyance and anger I feel deflates. He’s my friend and he means well. Sam is the quintessential nice guy, and I’m supposed to give him a real chance.

I think back to our almost kiss at Luke and Holly’s wedding. I wanted to kiss him then. I was curious, and I suppose a part of me still is. How can I make an educated, fair decision if I don’t give Sam a chance? So I tip forward again, slipping my arms around his neck, placing my mouth on his.

The kiss is warm and soft. I feel him smile against me and hear the roar of the fans around us. His lips travel over mine, teasing, testing, tasting, and a pleasant hum of awareness slowly starts to buzz through me. It’s not the raging inferno that sizzles between Chase and me, but it’s something.

He pulls away before the kiss can go any further, and I blink up at him with cautious curiosity.

The rest of the date goes by in a flash. We eat popcorn and cheer when Toronto scores. We laugh and talk, and I genuinely enjoy myself. When our driver pulls up to my apartment, Sam walks me to the front of the building, but he doesn’t try to kiss me again. We say goodnight, and as the car drives away, I feel even more confused than ever.

*Cougar Warning***Chase**

I won't watch it.

I refuse to watch Lily's date with Sam, but that doesn't stop Luke from telling me I need to up my game. It also doesn't stop him from mentioning that she not only kissed Sam, but she enjoyed herself.

The thought of Lily kissing someone else makes me seethe. I want to stomp my foot like a two-year-old and throw a temper tantrum. This entire situation is shit. Sam gets to spend more time with Lily than I do because they work together, for crying out loud. Technically speaking, I work with Lily too, but I don't share an office space with her. Even though everyone insists they remain professional at work, it still doesn't sit well with me. I mean, if what Lily and I got up to in her office is any indication of professionalism at work, then I'm fucked.

My date needs to be better.

Now that the team is back in Toronto for our last preseason games, I need to focus all my energy on Lily. I'm only playing in one of the team's final warmup matches. Veteran players usually sit out during the preseason so the coaching staff can watch the youngsters battle for the final roster spots. I plan to use my extra time to woo Lily, starting tonight. Our date isn't until tomorrow, but I know she'll be in the wives-and-girlfriend box watching the game. And it just so happens, so will I.

But first I have to plan my dad with Lily. I flip through a few brochures that Holly and Avery left for me. We're planning our date this afternoon, and it's a little last minute because the team's been away for three road games.

Our date needs to be awesome, something better than a stupid soccer game. Sam should know Lily's sport of choice is hockey. We get three dates each, so I have to make sure I

create the better ones. One of mine is close to Halloween, so I already told Holly and Avery I plan to dress up and take Lily to a haunted house. But that doesn't help me choose what to do tomorrow. The only perk to this entire shenanigan is that no matter what I pick, we'll be accommodated because none of the sponsoring businesses want to miss out on an advertising opportunity.

"Chase," Avery says, breezing into the office, Holly following behind her. "Glad you could make it."

"As if I had a choice," I mutter. She and Holly take a seat behind their desks, facing me. Holly looks at me expectantly, eyes darting to the brochures.

"So, what do you think? Where do you want to take Lily tomorrow?"

I look down at my options. Toronto has a host of tourist attractions. Museums, aquariums, a castle, themed restaurants, landmarks, and theatres. There is too much to choose from, and Lily would probably like them all. My advantage is that I've known her for most of my life. We have a history, and that should help me strategize. I have tons of ideas for future dates, but I'm hesitant to voice my plans for my first one.

"What's the game plan?" Avery asks expectantly.

I can't believe I am about to suggest this, but I need to show Lily how serious I am about this; she knows me as well as I know her. I need her to see that I'm in it to win it. I need to go out on a limb, be brave, and show off my proverbial balls. I need to be fearless.

"I was thinking of The CN Tower," I say in a strangled voice. Even the suggestion makes me sweat. "Maybe have dinner at 360 The Restaurant and do the Edge Walk with her."

"Excellent choice," Holly beams, but Avery looks at me with narrowed eyes.

"It is an excellent choice. So, why do you look like you want to hurl all over our expensive desks?"

"Because I'm terrified of heights," I choke out as I give a whole-body shiver.

“Excuse me?” Holly says, confused.

“I’m not a fan of heights.”

Avery and Holly share another look. I swear those two can speak telepathically because their faces are saying:

Why would he want to have dinner in a revolving restaurant over one thousand feet above the ground?

Why would he voluntarily strap himself into a bungee suit, walk along a five-foot ledge, and balance over a one-hundred-and-sixteen-story drop?

“Why?” they ask in unison.

“I don’t know why. I’ve just never liked heights. Not rollercoasters. Not cliff jumping. Nothing. Anything over ten feet is too much.”

“Not why are you afraid of heights,” Avery sighs like I’m the most exasperating person on the planet. “Why do you want to take Lily to one of the tallest buildings in the world if you’re scared of heights?”

“Because I want to show her I’m in this for her,” I explain. “Lily knows heights aren’t my jive. So I’m showing her I’ll do anything for her, including facing my worst fears.” It’s almost true. Heights are my second worst fear. My worst is telling Lily the truth about my past and all the fucked up things I’ve done and then seeing the disgust on her face.

But I don’t tell Holly and Avery that. I just let them grin and coo about my romantic idea as they fawn over the details. Avery suggests we do the Edge Walk before dinner because eating before dangling over the city might not be the best idea I’ve ever had. They make some calls, and before I know it, everything is ready to go. You usually have to book months in advance for both the restaurant and the walk. But getting preferential treatment comes with being a hockey player in this city. And participating in a dating game with hundreds of thousands of followers doesn’t hurt.

I leave the office feeling confident and queasy at the same time. It’s too late to change our plans, and I want to show Lily the type of man she makes me want to be.



After the team hits the ice for the first period, I leave the locker room and start to make my way up to the WAG box. It feels weird not playing. I'm not used to watching my teammates on the ice without me. I feel out of place in my dark blue suit, light purple button-down, and matching striped tie when my team is dressed in their equipment.

We all wear suits to the rink. It's part of the team's and league's game day dress code for all players and coaching staff. Some guys like to have fun with it. Luke and I are two of those guys. We go out of our way to look extra suave when we arrive at the arena. Luke has an astounding assortment of dress suits from solid back to white, plaid, and even deep purple with black swirls. When you get paid top dollar, you can afford a good tailor.

A few of the guys compete with each other for the title of team fashionista. We all like to show off for the camera from time to time, especially when we go to charity events. Ollie and Ozzy have gone above and beyond, clearly wanting to make their presence known. They arrived on day one in matching custom-made suits printed with the Northmen logo. I would never admit this to them, but those suits were fucking cool, and I kind of want one.

"Looking good out there, Wilder," Paddy says while shaking my hand. He's one of the security guards who work the bottom level of the arena where the locker rooms are. He ushers people in and out of the elevators that go to this level. Only a select few have security clearance and keycards to come down here, or go up to the boxes.

"We're trying," I answer back with a smile.

"We're going to go all the way this year," he says with certainty that only Northmen fans have. "We should have had it in June. It was just an unlucky bounce."

I agree, stepping into the elevator, trying to ignore the sting that the memory of that "unlucky bounce" brings back. Grinding it out all the way to game seven of the Stanley Cup

Finals, only to lose in overtime when a bouncing puck trickled into the net, is still heartbreaking. We were so close we could taste it. It could have gone either way. It just didn't go ours.

If I'm being honest with myself, both teams deserved to win. Even I can admit St. Louis had an amazing story, equally as good as ours. It was going to be the ending to one of two fairy tales: Toronto wins the Cup and ends a drought that's lasted for over fifty years, or St. Louis wins their first-ever Cup after being the worst team in the league halfway through the season, only to right the ship on the back of a rookie goalie and winning it all.

They won it all.

This year, we'll win it all.

I pause outside the WAG box and spy inside. Holly and Avery are chatting with some of the other players' wives. Now that Holly and Avery are official WAGs, they love to cause a ruckus and instigate general mischief that ultimately leaks into our locker room. Girls talk, and when Holly and Avery overshare all the details of their romantic lives with their new husbands, it makes all the other guys look bad. Jake Owens' wife, April, suggested he start taking her out on more dates or else she'd stop putting out. Ryan and Luke laughed and told Jake he didn't need to go out on dates because he's always too busy getting busy and making babies. April's already popped out two kids that the team likes to spoil. The oldest is an adorable girl who wears princess dresses, and the youngest is a boy with the bluest eyes you've ever seen on a kid. It's obvious he doesn't have an issue with his wife putting out.

I scan the rest of the box looking for Lily and spot her sitting next to Holly's sister Taylor, another SASS minion. For some reason, it suddenly strikes me how close-knit we all are. SASS and the team have woven together seamlessly. We are a family, whether related by blood or not.

I stroll into the box, some wives nudging each other and winking. I wink back, making my way to Lily. When she turns and her eyes meet mine, a blinding smile stretches over her face, and my breath catches.

“Taylor,” I say with a nod as Holly’s half-sister politely excuses herself and vacates the seat next to Lily. “Lily,” I greet her, casually leaning in and brushing a kiss over her lips. The box goes suspiciously silent all of a sudden as if everyone has become more interested in us than the game. “Mind if I watch with you?”

“Of course not. It will be just like old times.” She grins, patting the seat beside her. “We’ll watch, and I’ll tell you everything Luke is doing wrong.”

“I don’t know why the Starlings don’t put you behind the bench instead of Coach McCall. You can be our cook and coach.”

“Right?”

Lily grabs a basket of popcorn and plops it down between us. We did this exact thing at the Valentine’s house when we’d watch Northmen games together. After Luke and I were drafted to our junior hockey clubs, Lily would watch our games either at the arena or online and send us constructive criticism before, during, and after to keep us modest. Even now, I get at least one text from Lily daily, varying between snark, sass, and other Lily-isms.

I pause for a moment, just watching her and wondering. How would I feel if those little messages, those little pieces of her, stopped coming? What would it be like if she stopped sending me her self-made memes of me falling on my ass, getting hit, or doing something stupid on the ice? Or if she stopped sending me Instagram pics of fat pugs that look like loaves of bread? Or sharing TikTok filters that reveal what Taylor Swift Era you’re in. *Those filters are somehow freakishly accurate.*

I would feel empty.

“Jeez, don’t look so serious. You’re giving me the heebie-jeebies.” Her teasing interrupts my thoughts, and I shake out of it. Lily is here with me now. I just need to make sure it stays that way.

“Well, it’s a serious faux pas to hog all the popcorn,” I retort, grabbing the basket she inadvertently placed back in her lap

and shovelling a handful into my mouth.

“That’s not on your meal plan,” she accuses, narrowing her eyes.

“Neither are you,” I murmur in her ear. I can feel the shiver of shock course through her body and see the hair on her arms stand. “But that doesn’t stop me from wanting to eat you like dessert.”

Point for me.

Lily’s eyes widen as she blushes. Her tongue darts out to wet her lips, and I feel myself gravitate closer to her. Unfortunately, I also sense several pairs of eyes all zeroed in on us, hanging on our every word. Or just the ones they can eavesdrop on.

“And when do I get my dessert, Chase?” Lily hums, desire and lust blooming in her eyes. She’s so close the coconut smell that’s uniquely her tickles my nostrils. Even from that slight brush of our lips, I can taste the grape lip balm she chose today. Lily has three Chapstick flavours she cycles through: grape, raspberry, and mint. “I’ve been practicing my big girl words, and I want to taste, excuse me, test them out on you.”

Point for Lily.

I stand abruptly just as the horn blows, signalling the end of the first period. Holding my hand out for Lily, I pull her to my side, tucking her arm into the crook of my elbow. “Shall we go for a walk around the concourse?” I ask, leading her out of the box and away from prying eyes. She follows, shooting me another one of her best smiles.

“So,” she starts as we begin our circular route, full of busy food and merchandise vendors and fans. “Do I get any hints about what our date involves tomorrow?”

“Nope.”

“Okay, what should I wear?”

“Whatever you want. You look beautiful in everything,” I answer, and I mean it. “How was your date with Samuel?”

“Didn’t you watch the segments?” Lily questions, genuinely confused by my lack of interest in seeing her with another man.

“No. I take no delight in seeing you date another man. Besides, Luke loves rubbing it my face so much that I don’t need to see it for myself.”

“Oh? And what did my dear bother tell you?”

“That I need to up my game because Samuel kissed you, and you liked it. Did you?”

“Did I kiss him, or did I like it?”

“Both.”

“Yes, and yes.” Her words are like salt being poured onto an open wound. I tense, and I know Lily can feel it. “I’ll be honest with you, Chase. I’ll always be honest with you both because you guys are my friends first.” Right now, I hate the word “friend” because what I feel for Lily goes far beyond wanting to wear friendship bracelets.

“I’m confused,” she huffs, pausing near a beer cart off to the side. A young fan spots me, tugs on his father’s jersey and points. The dad looks up at me, eyes wide as his son steers him over to us. I quickly smile, sign the kid’s jersey, take a quick picture and send them on their way before Lily continues. “I’ve never dated two men at the same time. Two men who are both my friends and who I don’t want to hurt. So yes, I did have a nice date with Sam. But he’s not you, and I’m not sure I’m looking for nice.”

Something warm and powerful blooms in my chest at her words. *He’s not you.* No, Sam isn’t me and anyone who isn’t me doesn’t belong with Lily. I’m about to say those exact words when a high-pitched, breathy female voice fills my ears, making my blood run cold.

Fuck, no!

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Chase Wilder. I haven’t seen you since you left London and became a big NHL star. You never came back to visit me.” Why would I visit a woman who took

advantage of a young, angry, horny hockey player when she was supposed to be doing the opposite?

Anna Munro saunters towards us, wearing a Northmen's jersey that's a few sizes too small for tits her size. For a woman her age—she has to be pushing fifty—she looks good. Her hair is thick and slightly curled, light brown without a hint of grey. Her skin has aged, but it's smooth, like she may have had some work done. She's definitely had lip injections since the last time I saw her before leaving my junior team disgraced.

I shoot a quick glance at Lily, who looks anything but impressed. Anger radiates off her in waves. This is exactly the type of thing I wanted to avoid; my past being dredged up, ruining my future.

“Ah, so this is *the Lily* you talked so much about when you lived with us.” Anna smirks, pretending to be friendly, while hiding the viper inside. “I've been following your little dating experiment online. It's cute. Although I must admit, I never thought Chase could be a one-woman man.”

“You don't know me, Anna,” I snarl. “You knew a very angry young man looking for an outlet for his anger.”

“Yes, well, you did like it rough if I recall correctly,” she purrs and leans into me, smiling coyly. Lily stiffens at my side and I want to drag her away. “Darla misses you. You broke her poor little heart.”

I very much doubt that. Darla is a replica of her mother. She was a young girl looking for a meal ticket, hoping to snag a rising hockey star. She wasn't even angry at me when she found out I was fucking her mother on the side. She didn't care. And when the story went viral and made her look like the victim, she lapped it up. She was the heartbroken girl, and I was the heartless bastard. And maybe that's who I was back then, but that's not who I am now.

“If anyone broke your daughter's heart, it was you,” Lily bites out, murder in her eyes. “You slept with her boyfriend. You took advantage of someone you were responsible for caring for.”

“Semantics.” Anna brushes Lily off.

“One year,” Lily snaps back, her voice like a whip.

“One year what?” Anna takes the bait.

“One year younger, and what you did would have been a crime. Chase would have been under the age of consent, and you’d be in prison.”

“Think what you want, little girl, but a leopard doesn’t change his spots. Chase has certain tastes, and eventually he’ll crave the things you can’t give him.” I grip Lily’s arm harder than I realize, and she squeezes back. “When you tire of vanilla, Chase, come find me.”

Anna turns and walks away, leaving the heavy scent of her musky perfume. It’s the same scent she wore when we first met, and the smell makes me sick.

I turn to Lily, scared to see the repulsion in her eyes.

“I’m sorry, Lily,” I start. “That was—“

“I know who that was, Chase,” Lily cuts me off, eyes blazing in anger. Not anger at me, I realize. Anger *for* me. “She took advantage of you. She may not have forced you, but she knew what she was doing, and it was wrong.”

I don’t bother mentioning that Anna Munro could have been charged with statutory rape, but I lied to the police and told them our affair started after I turned sixteen and not when I first arrived in London a few months before my birthday.

The buzzer sounds to mark the start of the second period, and we walk back in silence. I don’t know the right words to say to Lily. I knew this would happen, and yet I hoped it wouldn’t. I let Lily walk into the box alone, making an excuse about having to get back down to the locker room. We both know I’m lying.

On the elevator ride down, it’s all I can do but pray I can prove to Lily I’m not the same miserable, broken boy who left home all those years ago.

Reaching New Heights

Lily

The BUZZ By: Cassidy Tippet

Cougars on the Prowl Looking to “Chase” down Northmen?

Ladies, hide your young gentlemen. You’ve officially been warned. Last night a cougar was spotted prowling the hallways of The Vault—the home arena of the Toronto Northmen.

Perhaps some of you will recall that several years ago, before Chase Wilder was an NHL superstar, he was a young phenom chasing his dream as a major-junior hockey player. And until recently, Mr. Wilder also loved chasing women—granted, women love chasing him too. One woman in particular, twenty years his senior and a former billet mom, caught him in her clutches. Or I should say, she was caught with him while Wilder was also dating her daughter.

It was quite the scandal—soap opera and telenovela worthy. Wilder quickly and quietly left junior hockey to join his NHL team in Florida, where he promptly continued his playboy ways, thankfully, with women his own age.

These days, Wilder is trying to mend his wild ways by setting his sights on his best friend’s little sister: girl-next-door and team chef, the very sweet Lily Valentine. If you subscribe to The Blue and White Bachelorette—and why wouldn’t you?—then you already know how that drama is unfolding.

But things got even more interesting last night, and the plot thickened.

Cradle-robbing-billet-mom, please enter stage left.

A woman, who we will refer to as A.M., made an appearance at the Northmen’s preseason game—Wilder was scratched and cozily watching alongside Ms. Valentine from the WAG box.

And if you think running into an ex with your new lady love is awkward, imagine doing it when your former lover was a handful of days away from being hooked on some jailbait. No one wants to read that age-gap romance.

What does Ms. Valentine think of all this, you might ask? Let's just say she was less than impressed and returned to her seat solo.

One can only hope Wilder's first BWB date doesn't include any more of his past paramours, young or old.

I've never considered myself a violent person—until last night.

I also never thought I would agree with Cassidy Tippett, but her words ring true: Anna Munro is a cougar and borderline child abuser. And I wanted to goat-punch her in the throat.

I don't know what Chase was thinking. Actually I can imagine what he was thinking. He was a horny sixteen-year-old boy, away from home for the first time, who was offered free sex. Of course, he jumped on the opportunity. What guy wouldn't?

But it doesn't make it hurt any less. Chase isn't that boy anymore. At least, I don't think he is. Anna Munro doesn't know *my* Chase.

She knows him in ways you don't, the bitch in my head mocks me, and I do my best to shut her voice out.

"You did like it rough, if I recall correctly." Anna's words echo in my mind. Perhaps she knows Chase in a physical way better than I do, but just because I haven't slept with him yet doesn't mean our connection isn't stronger than anything he's experienced in the past.

And what exactly did she mean? I don't want to know what they got up to, but a part of me is curious. How rough is rough? I already know Chase likes control, and I'm into that. Just thinking about how he owned my body and took charge of my pleasure makes my skin sing. The obvious course of action would be to ask him, but there's no way I can do that in front of the cameras, and it's not something you ask over text.

Chase is picking me up in an hour and Chantel will be here any minute, along with Avery, who's filming tonight. Riley's at school, and I'm biding my time by buzzing around the apartment, cleaning in a silk robe and flip-flops. I'm a nervous cleaner. It's a disease that Riley loves because our apartment is always spotless.

A knock sounds at the door, and before I know it, I'm plucked, pampered and ready to be paraded in front of the camera. Chantel dresses me in a nice pair of stretchy, dark jeans and a white long-sleeve top with a mauve floral print. It's comfy and casual, which is my preference, but it doesn't give me any clues about what Chase has planned for us. Avery reviews the filming protocols again—pretend she's not there—and then reminds me to allow the sponsors to say their bit. I listen, but I'm a million miles away.

I'm nervous and I shouldn't be. *This is Chase*. I've known him forever, but this is our first actual date, and I've wanted this for so long that I don't know what to do with myself now that it's here.

“Beautiful,” a masculine voice interrupts my thoughts. The object of my desire walks into my apartment grinning, making those damned dimples pop and my heart melt. I can't stop myself from smiling back. “Ready to go?”

“Only if you tell me where we're going,” I say.

“You'll see.”

Chase leans in and kisses me lightly. It's just a brush of our lips and does nothing to satisfy me. I definitely wouldn't mind dragging him away to my bedroom and finding out precisely what he likes.

Chase fidgets uneasily in his seat as the hired car cruises through the city streets. Is he nervous? I've never seen him be anything other than confident, calm, and full of swagger. I glance outside the window to try and glean where we're headed. We're driving into the heart of downtown, which doesn't tell me much because that's where most of Toronto's best attractions are. Finally, the driver stops near the Northmen's arena and lets us out.

“What are we doing here?” I ask, confused.

“We’re not going to the rink,” Chase answers, taking my hand. His entire body is tense. I can feel his anxiousness everywhere. All his muscles are taut, strung like a bow ready for release. It isn’t until we turn the corner and I look up that I realize where he’s leading me.

“The CN Tower? I thought you hated heights. Why would you bring me here?”

“We’re doing the Edge Walk together.”

I look at Chase incredulously. He attempts to smile, but it’s strained and looks like he’s just swallowed a dirty sock. My gaze travels upwards. The tower stretches up so high it seems like it’s swaying and makes me dizzy. I don’t understand. Chase despises heights. He wouldn’t even go on the kiddy rollercoaster when Mom and Dad took us all to Canada’s Wonderland as kids. I’m amazed he’s even able to get on planes and travel with the team.

“Why?” I ask again.

“Because you’re worth it,” Chase says, his voice regaining some of its confidence. “Because I’m willing to do anything for you, including facing one of my biggest fears. I can do anything as long as it’s with you.”

His words stop me in my tracks. My throat gets tight and my chest feels like it’s expanding outwards. I blink back the moisture in my eyes and beam at Chase. No one has ever done anything like this for me. I can’t stop when I throw my arms around his neck and squeeze him tight.

“You’re suave, Mr. Wilder,” I tell him, trying to play it cool to disguise what must be a look of complete adoration on my face. “You definitely know how to impress a lady.” I shoot a look at Avery. She’s probably having mini orgasms at the clickbait he just provided. If I was a stranger watching this, I’d have already fallen in love with Chase, just a little bit, at his words. And, if I’m honest with myself, I think I just did.

The journey up to the top of The CN Tower for our Edge Walk takes about an hour. It’s full of safety instructions, waivers,

and more safety instructions. Chase looks slightly ill as the instructor explains how everything works. We are given red and yellow suits akin to a prison onesie, with various cables and cords. Basically, we'll be double strapped to the side of one of the tallest buildings in the world. If the first cable fails, the second locks into place, and unless you weigh fifteen hundred pounds, you're not going anywhere.

Usually, the instructors take up six people at a time, but because we are special, it's just Chase, me, and Avery— but she doesn't really count. She's suited up, but she's not actually participating.

I grab his hand and squeeze as the elevator takes us up to the top deck where we will hook onto a track above a small, five-foot platform and walk along Toronto's highest edge to get the best view of the city and Lake Ontario that money can buy.

"You ready for this?" I ask with a grin. Chase looks sick, but he's putting on a brave face for me. "You've got this in the bag, Wilder."

The observation deck is stunning in itself, and the views are out of this world. All of Toronto is stretched out before us. I can see the arena, the baseball stadium with the roof open, the waterfront, the dozens of skyscrapers that make up Toronto's skyline, and the maze of streets often clogged with cars and people commuting downtown. I've never really appreciated how beautiful our city is, and I've rarely considered how a big city could be beautiful, but it is.

I'm a small-town girl at heart. I've shifted from a town with a population of less than twenty thousand to a bustling city of over two million. I've gone from wide open spaces, farmland, and the quiet sounds of the country to streetcars, high-rise apartment complexes, and the racketing chaos of a metropolis.

And I love it.

I'm also starting to love the man in front of me, and it's so much more than the puppy love I felt for him growing up.

Chase is standing back from the enormous windows overlooking the city, teetering from foot-to-foot. I walk over to

him, grab his hand, and pull him over to the windows. He follows, albeit hesitantly. Even through the bulky suit, I can see his heart pounding in his neck. I place my hands on his cheeks and force him to look into my eyes.

“Trust me,” I whisper, drawing his forehead down to mine. “You are one of the most incredible men I have ever met, Chase. Don’t let fear win.” Something soft passes over his gaze, and when his eyes meet mine, I melt for him. I pull back just a little, push up on my tippy-toes, and brush a kiss across his lips. It’s not a kiss meant to incite passion. It’s meant to lend courage, but even that short meeting of our lips ignites my blood and makes me want to climb him like a tree. Instead, I move my mouth to his ear and whisper a promise.

“Come with me now, Chase, and we’ll come together later.”

His eyes go molten, sending a thrill shooting through my body. That I have this effect on him empowers me to be daring.

“What are we waiting for?” Chase bellows at our instructor. “The lady wants to dangle with me. Let’s do this!”

I laugh and Chase smirks, shooting me a wink. Even though I still see the fear in him making his movements ridged, he’s trying to cover it up for me.

Slowly, we move onto the ledge. It’s windier than I thought, and the coolness sucks my breath away. We are so high up that everything below looks like tiny pinpricks. I once read that if you dropped a penny off the CN Tower, the velocity of it hitting the sidewalk below would demolish part of it. I test the ropes on the track, just in case. I don’t want to imagine what I would look like on the sidewalk if I fell from this far up.

“Okay, love birds,” our guide Carl says. “Time to walk the edge.”

It’s only five feet, but it’s the longest five feet I’ve ever walked. Chase and I tippy-toe to the edge, doing a slow shuffle-crawl the whole way. Carl motions for us to give our ropes a test and lean forward. I have no qualms about heights, and even my stomach flips around like a fish that just hit land.

“I think I know why dinner comes after and not before this,” I chuckle, glancing downward. Seeing the long, long plunge down to earth makes me dizzy. I can only imagine what’s going on in Chase’s head.

“Okay, first we are just going to lean back,” Carl directs us. We place our heels on the metal edge, our backs to the city. I grab Chase’s hand and squeeze tight. He squeezes back. Hard.

Almost like we’re doing a trust fall, we start to lean backwards. There’s an awful moment when I wonder if the rope will catch right before it pulls taut. If anything goes wrong, it’s an incredible, once-in-a-lifetime free-fall down to street level.

But, of course, the rope stretches tight so Chase and I are hanging over the city. It’s insane and exhilarating. I let out a whoop of excitement and laugh. This is one step away from flying. The wind whips my ponytail around my face, making me laugh even harder. Avery is standing a safe distance away with her phone, giving me a thumbs up.

At a snail’s pace, Chase and I shimmy along the track. Our instructor has us do a few more maneuvers. My favourite, to Chase’s horror, is called “Toes Over Toronto.” Instead of leaning backwards, we flip around and lean forward, looking straight out over the city. It’s breathtaking, and not just because the wind beating against us sucks the air from my lungs. When we turn back around, Carl starts taking pictures of us in different poses.

“Let’s give the people what they want,” Carl shouts over the wind. “Kiss the girl!”

“What do you think, big guy? Do you have it in you? Or are you too scared to come over here and kiss me?”

Chase never could resist a challenge. He scoots over faster than I’ve seen him move all day, angles his body towards me, and presses his lips to mine. If I thought kissing Chase with both feet planted on solid ground was good, then kissing Chase with nothing but a thousand feet of air below us is earth-shattering.

Despite the cool air, his lips are warm and soft. He pulls my lower lip into his mouth, nipping me softly. Goosebumps break out over my skin. I want to take his face in my hands and deepen the kiss, but one hand is locked in Chase's grip and the other is on my rope. A cough sounds just as Chase runs his tongue along my upper lip, and I'm tempted to open for him.

"Let's keep this PG for the folks watching at home," Carl chuckles at us, causing me to blush. I risk a look in Avery's direction, and she lowers her phone, grinning at me. She makes an obscene gesture with her hands and then throws a hip thrust in for good measure. I roll my eyes and laugh. Chase laughs right along with me.



Dinner is fantastic.

360 The Restaurant is disgustingly cool. It's classy, but not so much so that you feel like you can't touch the table setting without ruining it or getting the stink eyes from the staff.

Chase seems much more relaxed, even though we're technically still over a thousand feet above the ground. I wonder if food tastes better up here. Even the bread tastes amazing, but I've always been a glutton for gluten.

"Is it just me, or is this bread like stupid good?"

"It's not just you," Chase smiles, stuffing a warm, buttery piece into his mouth. "It's delicious."

Our waitress arrives and pours us white wine before taking our orders. We both order appetizers. I get the beet salad with buffalo mozzarella, and Chase orders the seafood chowder.

"And for your mains?" the server asks.

"It all looks so good," I hum, biting my lower lip in debate. "The ribeye and lobster sound to die for, but so does the pan-roasted King Cole Duck, and the ricotta-spinach tortellini sounds delicious too."

"We'll take one of each of what she just said," Chase smiles at the waitress.

“That’s three entrees, Chase.”

“You’re right.” Chase glances down at the menu. “We’ll get the chicken caprese too.”

“Chase!”

“What?” Chase puts a hand to his chest in mock outrage. “I’m a growing boy. You said it yourself. It all sounds delicious. We might as well try it all while we’re up here. You’re a chef, Lily; you should know fancy restaurants give baby-sized portion sizes. This way, we can share and taste it all.”

I try to hide my smile and fail miserably. He’s not wrong. The more expensive the restaurant, the less food you get. You’d think that with all the money you’re forking out, they’d give you a ton of food, but that’s not the case. I’ll never forget visiting Luke when he first moved to Toronto. I took him to a fancy restaurant and he ordered the most expensive steak on the menu. When the waitress asked if he’d like sides with his meat, he almost burst a gasket.

“What do you mean nothing comes with the steak?” he raged. “I’m paying eight-five dollars just for steak? You can’t throw in a potato or a few broccoli crowns for free?” It was a good meal, but Luke was so sour over the fact that he had to pay an extra ten bucks for side dishes.

If I ever have my own restaurant, I will serve delicious five-star food and lots of it. Everyone goes home with a satisfied smile, a food baby, and a doggy bag.

When our appetizers come out, Chase immediately grabs a fork.

“Since when do you eat soup with a fork?” I ask, narrowing my eyes and pulling my salad closer.

“About the same time you started eating salad with a spoon,” he replies, motioning to my hand. I laugh, and we dig into each other’s food.

By the time our entrees arrive, Chase has shuffled his chair closer to mine so we are sitting side-by-side rather than across from each other. The waitress brings us empty plates with our

food so we can fill them with little bites of goodness from each dish.

I immediately aim my fork at the lobster and butter.

“Hey! What do you think you’re doing to that lobster?”

“Devouring it.” I plop a big piece into my mouth and moan.
“So good.”

Even in the fading light of the restaurant, I see Chase’s eyes darken at my moan. I can’t stop myself from doing it again when I taste the ribeye too.

Chase smiles at me like a predator, making my pulse spike. Saying nothing, he takes a bite of his food. His face stays completely neutral even when his free hand creeps up my thigh. I jump at his touch, but his hand holds me firmly in place. My mouth goes dry as he strokes my thigh, higher and higher. My breath catches and my mind goes blank when his hands skim oh so close to where I want him.

This is indecent, but I’m so turned on right now I can’t bring myself to stop him. The table hides everything that’s going on underneath, and unless the paparazzi have grown wings, no one knows what’s going on except us.

I huff out a breath and shudder. A little whimper escapes my lips. I glance around the dining room, but no one pays us any attention. Except for Avery who is one table over, camera in hand. She raises an eyebrow so high I swear it touches her hairline while smiling like a cat who’s caught the canary.

“Want to try the chicken?” Chase questions, offering me his fork. I open my mouth and he feeds me. As he pulls the utensil away, his clever fingers brush the centre of my pussy over my jeans.

“Mmmmm,” I moan again. I can’t believe I’m doing this right now. I need to stop, but I don’t want to.

“Good?” Chase grins, repeating the movement.

“So good,” I huff. If he keeps stroking me like that, I’m likely to do something crazy like strip out of my pants and mount him at the table. In a restaurant. In front of hundreds of

thousands of followers. It's that thought that sobers me and I shift in my chair, trying to casually knock his hand away.

"Can you pass me my water?" I squeak, pulling away. Thankfully, Chase's hand recedes, and he hands me my ice water. I take a hearty gulp, trying to cool the arousal coursing through me.

"You're vibrating," Chase says a minute later, and I jump. My face must go beet red because he motions toward my phone. If it's possible, I blush even harder and grab my cell to put it away, but he stops me. "I don't mind."

It's a text from Riley.

Riley: I'll have what she's having.

Beside me, Chase chuckles, and I shoot him a glare.

"Be careful, Mr. Wilder," I preen devilishly, setting my phone down just as the waitress comes to our table with a dessert menu.

"Can I get you two some desserts and coffee?" she asks expectantly.

I glance over the selections of chocolate goodies, cheesecake, and pies, leaning into Chase as if I'm trying to share the menu. I point to various items on the list with my index finger while my other hand disappears under the table. I tauntingly stroke the inside of Chase's thigh and feel him relax and tense at the same time. Two can play this game.

"How about some cheesecake and chocolate mousse?" I ask, at the exact moment I cup Chase's hard cock through his jeans.

"Fuck!" Chase shouts, and I burst out laughing. "I mean, yes! Fuck yeah, let's get dessert."

I smother another laugh and dare a look over at Avery. She's shaking with silent laughter.

"You heard the man," I say to the waitress. "We're all in on dessert. Bring on the sweet stuff."

*Sneaking Around***Chase**

I give Lily a closed-mouth, unsatisfying kiss at the door to her building. It's all for show, and Avery knows it. I see Lily safely to the elevator before jumping back into the car and telling the driver to drop Avery off before me. She gives me a knowing look as she tucks her phone into her purse.

"You must really like dessert," she says from across the seat.

"Love it," I deadpan.

"You realize Luke is going to cut your hands off if he finds out what was going on under that table, right?"

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

She just arches an eyebrow.

I take out my phone and pretend to check my email. I text Lily instead.

Chase: You have five minutes to call an Uber and be at my apartment when I get there, or else I'm coming to get you myself.

Lily: I'm already en route.

Chase: Good girl.

By the time we pull up to Avery's building, I'm two seconds away from pushing her out of the car while it's still moving. But I'm a gentleman, so I wait until we come to a complete stop.

"Goodnight, Chase." Avery waves. "You can go back to Lily now."

"I still don't know what you're talking about," I repeat myself.

"Right."

The drive to my condo feels like forever, even though it's less than three blocks away. My knee bounces the entire time. I feel hot and cold, and I'm already hard. I want Lily so fucking badly. My skin feels too tight for my body and I want out of these clothes and into Lily. But, as the car slows, I start to sweat and second-guess myself.

I need to rein myself in. I need to take my time. I need to be gentle. My mind races with all the things it thinks I *need* to do. Lily isn't a puck bunny. I don't want to hurt her. My mind starts to run through all the women I've fucked and who've fucked me. All the ways I've been turned into used goods. I'm a fuck boy. It's what I'm good at, and if Lily expects something different, she will be disappointed.

She's already in the lobby when the car pulls up. I just sit there for a few minutes watching her. She's sitting on a bench by the mailboxes, tapping her foot. Then she grabs her phone, holds it up like a compact mirror, and fusses with her hair. *As if she's not already stunning.* Next, Lily reaches back into her little white purse, pulls out a lip gloss, and dabs it on her lips, making me wonder what flavour it is. A second later, she stands suddenly and starts pacing.

It's the cutest fucking thing I've ever seen.

She's too good for you, boy. A voice that sounds too much like my father's echoes in my head.

She'll want you to make love to her, Chase. And you only know how to fuck. Hard. This time, it's Anna's voice, and she's right. I don't know how to make love. I've only ever known how to fuck.

Lily stops pacing and looks outside. She sees the car and stares until I have no choice but to open the door and get out. Her face lights up as soon as she sees me, and her smile hits me right in the chest.

"Hey," she says shyly.

"Hey," I answer.

"Are you going to take me upstairs, Chase? Or am I sitting in your lobby all night?"

“Are you sure you want this?” I ask. My voice comes strangled and rough. “Me, I mean?”

“Yes,” she whispers, laying her head against my chest, wrapping her arms around my waist. She inhales as if trying to breathe me in. “I’ve always wanted you, Chase, and I’m not embarrassed to admit it.”

“I’m not perfect, Lily.”

“I don’t want you to be. I want you just like this. A little naughty and a little nice.”

“I’m not nice.”

“Maybe not, and maybe I’m not all that nice either.” She pulls back, looking into my eyes. “I’m tired of people treating me like a child or some delicate thing. I’m a woman with desires and needs. I’m not all sweetness and innocence.”

I take Lily’s hand in mine and walk her to the bank of elevators. The ride up to the top floor is quick, and I mentally file through everything inside my apartment, trying to remember how clean I left it. I’m not a messy person, and it’s not overly large—just an eat-in kitchen, living room, powder room, and a master bedroom with big windows with a luxurious ensuite. I pride myself on my bathroom. It has a jacuzzi tub, big enough for two, and a walk-in shower with a massaging showerhead and waterfall option.

I have a cleaner come once a week to ensure everything is kept tidy, but there’s never much of anything to do. After Mom died, taking care of the house was left to me, so naturally, I transferred those skills to my own home.

Lily’s never been here, though. We’ve FaceTimed a few times, but she’s never physically been in my home. It makes me nervous to contemplate what she’ll think when she sees it.

“Welcome to my lair,” I joke, opening the door and ushering her inside.

She walks inside and looks around after kicking off her shoes. Slowly, she strolls into the kitchen area, her gaze assessing my cooking equipment. It’s all stainless steel, with a gas stove and a double-door fridge. She smiles when her eyes zero in on the

wine fridge built into the kitchen island, which is set up like a mini-bar. Along part of my countertop, I have a tiered shelf of spirits and hanging glasses, along with a blender and other cocktail paraphernalia.

“Did you miss your calling as a bartender?” Lily asks while running a finger over the black marble countertops veined with gold. The backsplash is white tile with back-lighting, creating a soft shimmer on the marble. “Very nice.”

“I took a bartending class in Florida and it stuck with me.”

Lily’s eyebrows raise in surprise, but she continues to check out the rest of the apartment, from my eighty-inch, wall-mount TV to my black leather couch and sleek, modern white and black end tables.

By the time Lily reaches my bedroom door, my stomach clenches in dread or anticipation; I’m not sure. Her eyes immediately go to my four-post California king bed with black satin sheets. I know it’s cliché, but I’ve always liked their smooth, slippery feel over my skin. The wood of my bed frame is dark, like the rest of the furniture in my room. Most of the things inside my apartment are dark, with minimal splashes of colour. Her eyes widen a little when she notices the swaths of red folded neatly by the headboard. Silk scarves.

Lily’s eyes flick between me and those scarves. Her tongue darts out to moisten her lips, and the action has my cock saluting in approval.

She takes a slow stroll around my room, glancing from dressers to night tables. I wonder if she notices the utter lack of anything personal adorning my walls. I have very few sentimental items lying around. Just a few hockey pucks, my Olympic gold medal, and three framed photos. Naturally, her keen eyes spot the pictures immediately.

Walking over to my bed, Lily plops down and examines the photos on my bedside table. One’s of the whole Valentine brood and me when Lily’s parents took us camping. It was the summer before Luke and I started our rookie years playing junior hockey, and it was one of the happiest summers of my life. We went whitewater rafting and it felt like a grand

adventure. We were splashing over massive rapids, crashing through the water, and the entire time none of us could stop laughing—even when we were assaulted with mouths full of river water.

The biggest picture is of my mother before she got sick. She's in our backyard before Dad let our property go for a shit, sitting on a swing tied to the big maple tree. Her smile is wide and her face is bright like there is nowhere else she's rather be. I have her greenish-blue eyes; only hers turn up at the edges and carry a sparkle like she's keeping a secret and wants to share with you.

I was standing behind Dad when he took the picture, smiling back at Mom. She looked at us like we were her two favourite people in the universe, because we were.

Two months later, the doctors found the brain tumour. Two weeks after that, Mom never came home.

"You look just like her," Lily whispers. Her fingers run over the image as if trying to trace the likeness between us.

The last picture, in a small frame hidden behind the others, is Lily on her prom night. The same night I realized she was the woman I wanted but could never have. Mrs. Valentine made her stand on the porch in her dress and corsage, a lilac tree behind her. I swear I can still smell those flowers and feel how my heart wanted to leap out of my chest.

"Where did you get this?" Lily asks, picking up the photo and staring at it with a rueful smile.

"Your mom gave it to me, along with the camping pic. I think she wanted me to have pictures of the family when I went away to play hockey."

"I was so nervous that night," Lily says, placing the frame back on my night table. "Derrick and I had been together for a while. I knew he wanted to take the next step, and I was ready too. I wanted to, but then I saw you and I couldn't help but wish it was you instead.

"And I felt so damned guilty. Derrick was so nice. He was patient and kind, and we were friends." Lily had said as much

before, but hearing it again doesn't make it any easier.

"I waited up for you that night," I mumble more to myself than to her.

"What?"

"I waited up for you. I stared at the ceiling all night, waiting to hear the front door open and for you to come home. It made me crazy knowing he was touching you when I wanted to so badly. I hated myself because I knew I wasn't good enough for you and wanted you anyway."

"Why?" Lily asks, eyes wide. She places a hand on my cheek, forcing me to look at her.

"Why what?"

"Why do you think you're not good enough for me, Chase?"

"I've done things, Lily. Things that would make you sick."

"I don't care."

"I'm not a perfect gentleman like Derrick."

"I don't want you to be one. I've already had that, and it was wholly unsatisfying." Lily looks up at me and smiles like a vixen. "I've always been the good girl, and sometimes I think it would be just a little bit fun to be bad, daring, and reckless. To experience passion, pleasure, and intimacy all the same time. And I want that with you."

My entire body lights up, muscles straining, blood burning.

"Why me?" I question in disbelief. I can't wrap my mind around the fact that Lily wants me.

"Because I trust you," she says simply and shrugs. "You've always been one of my closest friends, and I don't think I'm the only one who feels this pulse beating between us. I've never experienced a connection like this with anyone but you. And even if you don't believe it, Chase, I know you're a good man."

I'm not. I want to tell her. I'm a man who lets women twice his age fuck him like a stud horse. Who's fucked women whenever and wherever they want it. I don't know what real

intimacy looks like, and I don't know if I can be the man Lily sees. I don't want to hurt her. I'm scared shitless that I'm going to fuck this up like I've done so many times before.

But I want to try. I want to try to be that man she sees. The one Lily thinks is worthy of her.

I pull her up from my bed and draw her in towards me. She comes eagerly, throwing her arms around my neck and placing her body flush against mine. I want her. I want her so fucking badly I feel like my dick is going to bruise from straining against my jeans.

I tangle my fingers in her hair and pull lightly. Not hard enough to hurt but firm enough for her to notice the resistance. Her eyes flash, meeting mine. *She's enjoying this.* My body sings in approval as I slam my mouth down on hers to drink her in. Our tongues battle for control, mine plundering and her matching me stroke for stroke, causing fire to burn in my veins. My hips jerk forward of their own accord, my cock hard and heavy, pressing into Lily's core.

A moan tears out from her lips as she breaks our kiss, her hips grinding into me in answer to my thrusts.

"This is madness," she huffs, out of breath. "It's never been like this."

"Like what?" I grin at her.

"Like I want to combust and melt into you at the same time. Like I could come just from dry humping you." She lets out a soft laugh. "A few weeks ago, I wasn't even sure I could come during sex. But with you, I'm so overwhelmed with feeling, with pleasure, I can barely control myself. It's stimulation overload. Either I was doing sex all wrong, or you're a magician."

"I'm a magician," I joke, and Lily laughs again. It's a bright, tinkling sound that makes me feel ten times lighter. "And you weren't doing sex wrong, Lily. Your partner was."

"Derrick wasn't that bad." Lily's defence of him sets me on edge. "He just didn't know what he was doing. Neither of us did."

“He should have. We live in a world where answers can be found with a few clicks of a mouse. He should have watched a fucking YouTube video on how to pleasure a woman and made sure you were taken care of first. Every man, especially a so-called gentleman, should know the Golden Rule.”

“And what’s that?”

“Ladies first.”

Lily bursts out laughing again, leaning back a little to look into my eyes. Her hands are still entwined around my neck, and I want them to stay there. As if she can read my thoughts, her fingers tangle into my hair as she draws patterns along my nape.

“See, Chase,” she grins onto my lips, placing tiny kisses there before moving to my stubbled jaw, “you are a gentleman at heart.”

I grunt in response as if to say, *hardly*. To make my point, I back Lily towards my bed, unhook her arms and push her down onto the sheets. She leans up on her elbows and crooks a finger at me, shooting me a come-hither stare.

I prowl towards her. My hands find the edge of her shirt and lift to reveal her flat stomach, then the swell of her breasts, before removing it entirely. Next goes her bra, and the second her breasts are free for my eyes to feast on, nipples hard and dusky pink, I groan.

“You are so fucking perfect, Lily, that you make my mouth water.”

“They’re just boobs,” she rolls her eyes. “And they’re not big or perfectly symmetrical like the ones you and Luke used to look at up in the treehouse.”

“They’re perfect,” I say and take one in my hand, kneading it gently while I take the other with my mouth. Lily sucks in a breath and arches her back. She offers herself up to me, and I greedily take it all. I can taste the salt of her skin and smell that faint scent of coconut she somehow embodies. It drives me wild.

I lathe my tongue down, down, down, between the valley of her breast to her belly button. Then I'm yanking down her pants and throwing those to the floor to join her shirt. Pressing a smile on her pubic bone, I can't stop my grin when I see her underwear. They have the Northmen logo on the front and my number, eight, in the top corner. I would bet my left nut my name is printed across her ass.

"See something you like?" Lily teases, watching me stare at her panties. I growl and press a kiss low on her stomach.

"I like seeing my name on your ass."

"It was either you or Drake, but they didn't have his pair in my size."

I growl again, nipping her hip before catching the top of the material with my teeth. I slowly pull her panties off, inch by aching inch, watching her strain, lift, and arch towards me as I descend. Trailing my fingers down her silken legs as I go, I taunt and tease with every touch.

When I'm finished, I sit up and look at my handiwork. Lily's wearing nothing but a smile, lying back naked on my bed. It's the best fucking thing I have ever seen in my life. She props herself up on her elbows and grins back at me.

"My turn to undress you," she says cheekily, getting up off the bed and prowling towards me. She reaches for my belt and I take a step back to unbuckle it myself. But Lily reaches for me again, stopping me. "I want to do it."

I stare at her and swallow. How can I tell her I don't like being undressed when she looks so eager? I definitely don't want to explain why I don't let women take off my clothes or why I rarely let women touch me during sex. I'm a pro at fucking, but I like being in control. I choose when and where a woman's hands can go on my body, and I prefer to have them pinned above their head or restrained.

I'm going to fuck this up.

"Okay," I say and drop my hands to my sides. I try to relax, but as soon as Lily's hands touch my belt buckle, I tense and grit my teeth. She must not notice because she slides the belt

from the loops of my jeans before throwing it to the floor. The thunk of it hitting my rug forces me to clench my fists at my sides.

I try and fail not to think of manicured nails, long and red, scratching down my chest and a husky voice purring in satisfaction when they wrap around my cock for the first time. I couldn't stop myself from liking it, from enjoying the way she stroked me and coming after the third pull.

And then, after she left, I got sick.

She left my bedroom and slipped back into my dad's, while I ran into the bathroom and puked my guts out. But I didn't stop her the next night or the one after that. And I didn't stop her when she put her mouth on me. I didn't stop it when she climbed on top of me and rode me, hands and nails pressing into my chest that barely even had hair on it yet. I didn't stop it because it felt good. It felt good to be fucked, and it felt good to hurt my dad, even if he didn't know it was happening.

“What's wrong?” Lily's voice shocks me back into the present. Her forehead creased in confusion as she stares at me, waiting for an answer, hands at her sides. I have no idea when she stopped touching me, but my shirt is open, all the buttons undone. “Did I do something wrong?”

Hurt flashes across her face as she backs away a step. Even though most of my clothes are still on, I'm the one who feels naked as I swallow and say, “I need to tell you something.”

*Truth Hurts***Lily**

Something's not right.

I'm standing completely naked in front of Chase, one hundred percent turned on and ready for sex. He looks like he's going to be sick. I must be doing something wrong. Maybe Chase is used to women just ripping off his clothes or doing something sexier, but I don't know how to be that kind of sexy, and it's clearly making him miserable.

I've never seen him this tense before. Every muscle in his body is clenched. I'm unsure of what to do because whatever I'm doing is clearly not right. The more I touch him, the worse it gets, and I'm beginning to doubt everything about myself.

"What's wrong?" I ask, stepping back. I've never felt so naked in my life, and it's not because all my clothes are on the floor. "Did I do something wrong?"

Chase swallows hard. "I need to tell you something."

"Okay," I say hesitantly and glance around for something to cover myself with. I spot a hoodie draped over a chair and slip it on. It's massive on me and reaches my knees, but it's better than standing naked in Chase's bedroom feeling awkward for a conversation I probably won't like. "If I'm doing something wrong, you can tell me. You can tell me anything, Chase."

"It's not you, Lily," he sighs, running a hand through his hair, mussing it. Something like pain etches his face, and all I want to do is fix whatever is broken. "It's me. There's nothing wrong with you. I..." he pauses as if looking for the right words. "I don't like to be touched sometimes."

I just stare at him for a moment, waiting for him to elaborate, but he stays silent.

"Okay," I reply, confused. "Can you explain? Because I'm not sure what you mean."

“I’m fucked up.” His voice is strained and agonized. “I had a fucked up childhood, and I did fucked up things, and now I’m just all fucked up.”

“But what does that mean, Chase? You’re not making sense. What does that have to do with me touching you?” I remember all the times we’ve been together intimately. He’s always the one in control. He never lets me touch him beyond a kiss, and every time I’ve tried, he takes my hands away by pinning them above my head or at my sides. I thought I was doing something wrong, but clearly, something else is happening here.

My dad’s fists are ten times harder than Luke’s. I recall Chase’s words from the wedding.

I think back even further to all the times he came to our house with bumps and bruises. I always assumed they were from hockey and roughhousing with boys. Maybe I was too young and naive to think of it then, but looking back on it now, all the signs were there. The cuts and bruises. Sleeping in our treehouse and then practically moving into our spare bedroom.

Chase was abused by his father.

“Your father abused you,” I say flatly.

“Yeah, he did. My father liked to use his fists. He was angry at life and took it out on me, but that’s not why I don’t like being touched by women.”

My heart breaks for Chase. His mother died when he was so young, and it ruined his father, obviously more than anyone ever knew. When his mother died, Chase didn’t just lose one parent; he lost both. I want to wrap my arms around him and hold him. I want to make it better, but I don’t know how. All the ways I usually show physical affection, hugs and kisses, and just being close to someone won’t work with him because he doesn’t like being touched.

And that’s when I realize what he said. *But that’s not why I don’t like being touched by women.* By women. The words echo in my mind over and over again. I put myself in Chase’s

place and think, mind racing. If I didn't like being touched by men, why would that be? I know the answer immediately, but it hurts my heart even more to even think it.

Oh, Chase.

My throat tightens, and it's hard to swallow, but I have to hold it together. The last thing Chase would want to see on my face is pity. I know because it's the last thing I would want to see on someone's face too. And so, I pick the next best emotion. Anger.

"Anna Munro?" I say the name with a hard voice, as a statement and a question.

"No. Anna added to the problem, but she didn't create it. I was already fucked up before I went to London, and I was well aware of what she was doing when she turned her seduction on me."

"Then who? When? Where?" My stomach roils as I ask the questions too quickly for him to answer all at once. Chase left to play junior hockey right before his sixteenth birthday. If what I think happened—bile rises in my throat.

"It started when I was fourteen." Chase's voice is flat, and the bottom of my stomach falls out. I've never heard his voice so bleak. Lifeless. He leads me to his bed and sits down with his back to the headboard. I sit beside him, legs crossed, careful to give him space but close enough to let him know I'm there if he needs me.

The words that pour out of him crush me.

"She was one of my dad's girlfriends. I don't know if you remember the woman that stayed with us sometimes. She had fake blonde hair, so blonde it looked white, and you could see the roots sometimes. She had those fake nails too. Long and always painted red. To this day, I hate red nails." Chase takes a deep breath through his nose before continuing. "It started innocently enough. A brush of a hand here or there, slight enough that I thought it was a mistake a first.

"Then it would be a hand on my thigh while watching a movie or at dinner. But I didn't think anything of it. She'd drink with

my dad, and he would get blackout drunk. I think he was probably using drugs then too. One night, when he was passed out on the couch, she crept into my room with her red nails and red lips and just smiled at me. It was one of those smiles that make your hair stand on end because you know something's not right, but you can't stop it.

“She sat on my bed and just started to rub my cock through my boxers without saying a word. It was the first time anyone other than me had touched my dick. And I knew it was wrong, but I let her do it anyway because it felt good. Sometimes she'd ask me to touch her too, and I would while she'd just keep smiling at me.

“On my fifteenth birthday, my dad barely got through dinner before he was snoring. By that time, I expected her visits, but that night was different. She came into my room wearing one of those loose-fitting sundresses. It was one of those ones women wear in the summer when it's really fucking hot. She closed my door, slipped the dress off to pool at her feet, and stood in front of me completely naked. Then she undressed me and told me to lie back. I barely knew what she was doing before she was on top of me and I was inside her. She fucked me, and I liked it. I let her do it because it felt good, and I was pissed at my father. So pissed that I let his girlfriend fuck me over and over and over again until I hated myself for it. When I moved away, I did it again with someone else.”

Anger radiates through my body. *Chase was raped*. He was raped while the man who was supposed to protect and love him was passed out drunk. The unfairness, cruelty, and wrongness of everything he's endured all this time enrages me. He's suffered in silence alone for years, believing he'd done something wrong. That there was something wrong with *him*.

I choke back my fury and the tears threatening to spill over the lids of my eyes. I don't know how to comfort him, and that makes me even more angry. And the reason why I don't know how is because any comfort I show him might make it worse. What I think is comforting might be agony for him.

“I'll understand if you want to leave,” Chase says, his voice stripped bare and emotionless. “I warned you I was fucked up,

Lily. I told you you'd be disgusted by the things I've done."

I recoil at his words. How can he think I'd be disgusted by *him*? He's been the victim of so many injustices that my mind doesn't know where to start or stop. He was a child. He was a vulnerable child who'd lost his mother, was brutally abused physically and mentally by his father, and then repeatedly sexually assaulted by a sick and twisted woman.

And he survived.

He's a survivor.

Somehow, despite everything done to him, Chase has not only survived. He has *Thrived*. He's become an amazing hockey player and man who donates to charities and gives back to underprivileged youth. He's a survivor who, in his own quiet way, whether he realizes it or not, gives back to at-risk kids so they might not have to endure the same things he did growing up. How could he ever think any of that would push me away? How can he not see that this only makes me love him more?

Because I do love him. I love Chase and want nothing more than to help heal his battered and bruised heart and soul.

Carefully and slowly enough that he could stop me if he wanted to, I place a hand on Chase's cheek. "None of that was your fault. You were abused and raped."

"Men can't be raped," Chase scoffs, believing the words. "My dick was hard, and I came."

"You were a child who didn't fully understand what was happening. You were taken advantage of by an adult you should have been able to trust. You were raped, Chase. Just because your body performed a natural function and reaction doesn't change that fact."

Chase stares ahead as if trying to digest what I've said. As if he's trying to see his situation through my eyes. I can see the questions and unsureness on his face as his mind tries to work through everything.

"Think about it for a minute. If a man, at least twice my age, started touching me at fourteen and manipulated me into

having sex with him, even if I thought I wanted it, what would you call it?”

Rage passes over Chase’s face as he considers my words. I take his hands in mine and squeeze, praying he can feel how badly I want to help him work through this. It’s not going to happen overnight, and he should definitely think about seeing a therapist, but he’s one of the strongest men I’ve ever known.

“I’d call it rape.” Chase swallows hard, his voice cracking on a whisper. Then, he looks at me, realization lighting his eyes. “Was I raped?”

I nod, tears filling my eyes. “You were, and you’re a survivor, Chase. Disgust is the last thing I feel for you. More than anything else, I feel pride. I’m so proud of you because you’ve survived and endured more than anyone should have had to growing up, and you’re still one of the best men I’ve ever known.”



Chase

She’s stunning. And fierce. And beautiful.

Dressed only in my shitty, old hoodie, Lily is the most fascinating creature I have ever seen.

She’s a warrior. My warrior.

My soul is shredded and bare. I’m raw and confused, and yes, I’m still fucked up, but she looks past all my scars and still sees me. When everyone else sees broken pieces, she sees a puzzle and wants to put me back together. And I want her to. I want her to make me whole again because I am pretty sure she’s the only one who can. She’s my missing piece, and we just fit.

“Talk to me, Chase,” Lily says, eyes blazing. Not with the disgust I was so sure I’d see, but with something else I can’t name. Something that makes the weight of everything I’ve been carrying all these years seem lighter. “Tell me what I can do. I want to help you.”

Lily pushes off the headboard and scoots down the bed to sit in front of me. I straighten so we are facing each other, cross-legged. From the moment we sat on this bed, I've been aware of how careful she is about where and when she touches me, always asking for permission with her eyes before her skin makes contact.

I don't want her to be hesitant or afraid of touching me. I want to want her touch because I trust her. I reach out to her and pull her into my lap, placing her legs loosely around my waist, and curl mine behind her. She lets me control the movements and follows my lead. My hands find hers, and I align our palms. Mine are so much bigger than her small ones, and her fingers are slim and delicate, whereas mine are rough and calloused from hockey. When I turn her hands over, I trace the lines of her palms, and she shivers at my simple touch. When my hands move to her wrists, I grip them before leading them up to cup my face.

I place her warm palms on my cheeks and lean into her touch, relishing the softness of her skin in contrast to the roughness of my jaw. Inhaling, I close my eyes, focussing on her coconutty scent, and remind myself this is Lily. I guide her hands to my chest and do my best not to tense at the touch. *I'm in control*. Lily's hands are controlled by mine, and she makes no movement without my guidance. We sit there for what seems like endless minutes, her hands flat against my chest, rising and falling with my breath and the staccato beat of my heart.

When I close my eyes and slowly draw her hands over, across, and down the muscles of my abdomen, I clench in response.

"Look at me, Chase," Lily whispers, and I open my eyes. There she is, hair down, curling around her shoulders, blue eyes bright with sincerity. It's the face I've memorized; each freckle on her nose, the stray one below her left brow, and the tiny birthmark under the right eye. "Keep looking at me. Don't look away, and don't close your eyes. This is me. I'd never hurt you. I'll never let anyone hurt you again."

I smile. Somehow, this small, firecracker of a woman wants to slay my demons to keep me safe, and even though I'm more

than twice her size, I believe her. I've seen her protect her family and friends with fierce, unfaltering loyalty. She's a force to be reckoned with.

Slowly, I let go of her wrists, leaving her hands on my chest, never letting my eyes leave hers. I brush a curl away from her forehead, lean in, and kiss the birthmark I've admired for years. Lily shudders, and when she closes her eyes, I seize the opportunity to kiss her eyelids. My lips travel downward to find hers and I kiss her gently. Once. Twice. Three times. The entire time her hands stay still, one palm on each of my pecs, growing hotter with each passing second until I swear her handprints will be branded on my chest.

Finally, Lily moves, reaching her arms around my neck and pulling herself closer. My hands find her back, then the bottom edge of the hoodie she's wearing. Skin meets skin as I run my fingers along the perfect curve of her spine. Over and over, my fingers play a pattern over each vertebra until they find the twin indentations just above her ass and knead in.

Lily hums, tightening her legs around my waist, rocking into me. My cock is straining against my jeans, begging to be released. Heat simmers between us as I shuck off my shirt. Lily leans away, untangling from me before standing and pulling me with her. She doesn't break eye contact as she carefully takes my hands in hers before placing them on top of my jeans.

"Take them off, please," she asks and orders simultaneously. I do as she says, shedding my boxers along with them. I'm standing in front of Lily, completely naked in all ways, as she looks her fill. Her eyes move over every inch of my skin, pausing at the V of muscle leading down between my thighs to the hard length of my cock.

She's not shy about looking, and when she licks her lips, pulling the bottom one between her teeth like she always does when she's debating something, I chuckle.

"What's so funny?" Her eyes dart back up to mine, humour sparkling in them.

“You.” I grin back. “You always chew your lip when you’re unsure about something.”

“So?”

“So,” I say, moving to kiss the lip she was just worrying. “You were doing it just now. What’s got you so worried?”

“Nothing.” She pauses and then smiles. “Well, I’m not going to lie, and this will probably inflate your ego to an insufferable level, but you’re bigger than my last boyfriend.”

A thrill of pure pleasure rockets through me at what her words imply.

“Are you saying I’m your boyfriend? Have I won you already after one date? What will all of Samuel’s fans say?”

A flash of regret flashes over her face, and I kick myself for mentioning the ridiculous contest Holly and Avery dreamed up to drum up sponsorships and business.

“I can’t get out of it.” She frowns, blowing out a breath like a deflating balloon. “I already asked if I could. Holly and Avery are on the hook for several sponsorships, and the charities are counting on the money.”

“I know,” I say, not liking it one bit but understanding it, nevertheless.

“But, I need to tell Sam. I don’t care what the contract says. I’m not going to string him along and play with his emotions like that.”

“Maybe let’s not talk about him right now.”

I kiss Lily again, silencing her as I plunder her mouth with mine. She matches my tongue stroke for stroke, but I know she’s holding back. Her hands are at her sides as if she’s unsure of what to do with them or if she should touch me at all.

“I don’t want you to be afraid to touch me,” I say, putting her hands back on my chest. “If I don’t like something, I’ll tell you. And the same goes for you. If I do something you don’t enjoy, stop me.”

“Okay.”

I kiss my way down her neck, but the damned hoodie is in my way. I grab it, lifting her arms as I go, before tossing it behind us. Finally, we’re both blissfully naked, and I’m walking her back to the bed. When the backs of my knees hit the mattress, I lose my balance and we crash together. Lily lands on top of me, and I can’t help my body’s immediate response. I go rigid, and Lily scrambles off me.

“I’m sorry,” she says automatically like she’s done something wrong when she hasn’t.

“I’m fine,” I grit out, and it comes out harder than I mean it to. She looks at me for a long moment, biting that damned lip again.

“Chase, we don’t have to have sex tonight.”

“I want to,” I bark out. “I just prefer being on top and in control.”

Silence fills the room, heavy and loud with my unspoken words. *I can’t stand having a woman on top of me because it makes me sick.*

You were raped. Lily’s words echo in my mind again and again. I don’t want it to make me feel like less of a man, but it does.

“Can we try something?” Lily asks, her voice calm and soft. I nod. “Lay down.”

I do as I’m told and lie back, naked and hard, and just stare back at Lily. Tentatively, and never breaking eye contact, she puts her hands on my chest again. She runs her fingers through the hair there, careful not to use her nails, and then moves lower, over my abs, and then lower still. By the time she reaches my happy trail, I tense, and she stops before moving back up. She continues her soft, easy ministrations until I relax.

“Show me how you like to be touched, Chase.” Her eyes motion downward, and she blushes as if she’s the embarrassed one. I move to grip my cock in my hand, but Lily stops me,

placing her hands in mine, giving me all the control, yet again. “Show *me* how you like to be touched.”

I take her hand in mine and wrap it around my cock. She doesn't exert any pressure and lets me control how hard she squeezes and how she moves. I take her fingers and guide them over me how I like until I find a pressure and rhythm that makes me groan in pleasure. The entire time, she looks straight into my eyes, never once letting her gaze fall to where our hands are working magic on my dick. Together. My breath hitches as the nerve endings in my spine begin to tingle. I grip her hand tighter until my balls go tight, and I come in hot spurts all over her hand and my stomach.

Holy fuck. That was hot.

Lily grabs a Kleenex from my bedside table and carefully cleans us. I watch and wait patiently for her to finish so I can return the favour. But instead of letting me touch her, she quickly leans over me, switches off the lamp and grabs the satin comforter, pulling it over us.

“What are you doing?”

“I'm going to sleep, Chase. We're even now.” I choke out a laugh at her words, but I don't move to try and change her mind. I know when I'm bested. Lily rolls closer to me, tentatively curving her body into mine before laying her head in the crook of my arm and her hand lightly on my chest.

“Is this okay?” she asks with a yawn. I've never slept with a woman before. In the literal sense, that is. My bed has always been my own, and I preferred it that way. But with Lily's body curled into mine, her soft curves to my rough edges, I can't stop the feeling of contentment that washes over me.

“Perfect,” I whisper onto her hair. “It's perfect.”

*We Need to Talk***Lily***The Blue and White Bachelorette Blog*

Good Morning, BWB fans. Last night's date was definitely swoon-worthy. It's not every day your childhood crush, who also happens to be your big brother's BFF, tells you he wants to face his biggest fear with you.

Chase Wilder, you are a smooth operator. I think all our followers agree, your date was a BOSS MOVE! And ordering everything on the menu was especially delicious.

Well played, Mr. Wilder. Well played.

I had a wonderful night with Chase, and despite rumours spread by my unreliable roommate, who thinks she's hilarious, Chase was a perfect gentleman when he dropped me off at home. Solo.

Mr. McCrae, you've officially been put on notice. I'm expecting skydiving, ballroom dancing lessons, or meeting a celebrity.

No pressure, though!

I can't wait to see what you have planned next to sweep me off my feet!

XOXO

Lily Valentine

I'm dreading this conversation with Samuel.

The team is opening their season on the road, and we have our second date this week. We're also working together this afternoon. Now that the team's roster is finalized, Sam and I need to complete meal plans and dietary requirements for the players. And with the guys away for three days, it gives us the time to do just that.

Unfortunately for me, since Chase is gone with the team, I'll be sexually frustrated for three days. But it gives me time to get creative and think of ways to help him work through his aversion to female touch. I don't want to pressure him or make him uncomfortable. Getting him to admit he was sexually assaulted was a huge step, but he still thinks it was somehow his fault. And I have a sneaking suspicion he believes it makes him less of a man. I need to help acclimate him to my touch, which is no chore. Someday, Chase will love being touched by me, but the rest of the female population can continue to be hands-off.

Before he left, I made a casual suggestion that he talk to someone. It doesn't have to be the team doctor, but I think he should at least consider speaking to a professional. As much as I want to help him heal, I don't have all the tools and skills that a therapist has.

"When you break a leg and need to rehab it, do you do it all yourself?" I pointed out this morning. "It doesn't make you less of a man to ask for help, Chase. If anything, it makes you more of one. Admitting you need help, or that you need someone to talk to, is a very courageous thing."

He promised to consider it and then kissed me until my toes curled before he had to leave to catch his plane to New York. Toronto is playing tonight and then travelling to Carolina before coming home.

I open the door to my office, my eyes immediately straying to the loveseat where Chase and I got frisky. I blush and shake my head to clear my thoughts. I came into work early to mentally prepare myself for the very awkward talk I need to have with Sam, not fantasize about Chase's mouth all over my body. I promised to give Sam a chance. A fair shot. But, if I am honest with myself, this entire fiasco was never fair because I've always been in love with Chase.

I feel guilty. I feel so damn guilty it's eating a hole in my stomach. Sam is a perfect man. He's just not perfect for me.

I plop down in my chair, huffing out a breath between my hands that cover my face.

“Rough morning?” Sam’s lightly accented voice calls into my office, causing me to jump up like I’ve been electrocuted by the sound. He’s the picture of calm, cool masculinity, leaning against my doorframe in light khakis and a navy polo.

“Sam! I wasn’t expecting you this early.”

“I wanted to get a head start on the nutrition manuals we’re creating for the players.”

“Right,” I say and randomly straighten items on my desk.

“Looked like you had a good date with Chase last night.” Sam strolls into my office and sits himself down on the loveseat. He’d hate me if he knew what I did in the exact spot he’s sitting. I feel like he’s going to end up hating me regardless.

“I did.”

“I guess I need to up my game.” His smile is so hopeful that my gut clenches. “I don’t know about skydiving, but I’ll try to think of something.”

I smile weakly before rounding my desk and sitting down next to him. I don’t know what to do with my hands, so I fold them in my lap. But when I anxiously start wringing them together, I sit on them.

I hate this entire situation. *The Blue and White Bachelorette* is a shit show, from the videos to the damned diary blog I’m forced to write. It’s more fiction than anything else, and nothing even close to what my honest diary confession would look like.

“We need to talk,” I blurt out and mentally slap myself for literally saying the preface to every breakup. Ever.

Sam takes a deep breath and smiles. When I look him in the eyes, I know. He knows.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, glancing downward. “I wanted to give you a real chance. I honestly did. You’re so nice and funny, and you’re definitely not hard on the eyes, but—” I trail off and shrug my shoulders.

“But you’re in love with Chase.”

I look up at him again, knowing truth and guilt are shining there. “But I’m in love with Chase,” I agree and smile sadly. Sam looks disappointed but not angry.

“Well, you can’t blame a man for trying,” he says, resigned.

“Do you hate me?”

“No, Lily,” he smiles again, pulling my hands out from under me and holding them in his. They’re warm, dry, and firm, just like a man’s hands should be. “I could never hate you. Am I disappointed? Of course. But I’d rather you be honest with me than pretend. Chase is a lucky man.” He pauses, looking around my office. “So, what are we going to do about these dates, then?”

“Well, we still have to go on them,” I sigh. “Holly and Avery have too much sponsorship money banking on this, and there are the charities to consider too.”

“Right,” he nods, then grins like he’s hatching a plan. “How are your acting skills?”

“Mediocre at best. Terrible at worst.”

“I say we give the people what they want. We have to at least make it look good. No one wants to watch a platonic couple force themselves to try and fumble through dates. We have the keys to the city to do whatever we want. Let’s have fun with it.”

“Okay,” I agree hesitantly. “But I’m not lying to Chase. I promised I’d come clean with you today. We just can’t let anyone else know what’s happening because we signed contracts that we need to fulfil.”

“Don’t worry so much, Lily.” He smiles again, and I swear to god that by the end of this farce, the only person in Toronto not in love with Sam will be me.



I make it home just in time for the start of the game. Sam and I worked all morning and late into the afternoon putting together nutrition packages for the team. Technically, it’s up to Sam to deliver on the nutrition side of things, but after basically

dumping him, I wasn't going to bail and leave him to do all the work alone. And really, our work goes hand in hand. I can't cook to the team's nutrition guidelines if I don't know them like the back of my hand.

"This has to be the longest walk of shame in the history of the world," Riley sasses me from the couch. She already has the game ready to go with snacks. I haven't seen her since yesterday morning because I obviously didn't come home last night, and Riley had already left for school when I popped in to change before work.

I don't dignify her jab with a response.

"So," she prompts, leaning over the couch, giving me an eyebrow waggle.

"So what?"

"Ugh! Stop evading and start dishing. Despite what the masses saw last night when Chase dropped you off," she adds air quotes around her words as if I don't know I didn't come home. "I'm your roommate. I was here in bed, all by my lonesome, and you were not."

"Thanks for that, by the way. Glad you're feeding the rumour mill." I pull out my phone and read her latest comment out loud. "'WintersIsComing: *It's ten o'clock. Do you know where your roommates are? Because I don't. Here's hoping she's playing the horizontal mambo and not being mugged in an alley!*' Are you kidding me, Riley?"

"I thought it was clever," she balks, hand to her chest like I've wounded her. Ever the dramatic princess. I can't stop my lips from turning up at the side. "And, to be fair, it's not a rumour if it's true." She has me there.

"Well, I'll put your mind at ease. I wasn't mugged." She squeals and claps, but I cut her off before she can escalate to couch humping and obscene hand gestures. "Nor did I do the horizontal mambo with Chase."

Riley immediately deflates. Literally, it's like someone put a pin in her and then kicked a puppy. I glance at the TV. They're still singing national anthems, so I run into my room and

throw on a tank and track pants. By the time I trust-fall into the loving arms of the couch, Riley's ready to attack again.

"Me no understand?" she says, cross-eyed in a weird cavewoman voice. "What the hell were you doing over there? Playing Scrabble?"

Riley may be my bestie, but in a way, so is Chase. It's not my place to share his secrets with anyone until he's ready. I would never betray his trust like that.

"We talked."

"You talked? Like dirty, sexy talk? Was he all like, 'Come here baby, and ride this perfect face of mine until you come all over my tongue?'" She lowers her voice, putting on her best dude-bro voice, and I can't help but laugh and blush simultaneously. "Oh my god, did you sixty-nine?"

"That's not what he sounds like." I roll my eyes. "We just talked," I repeat. Riley looks so crestfallen that I actually feel a little bad for her. She probably spent her entire day imagining how this discussion would go, replaying all a million fictional conversations in her head. Have I mentioned Riley is slightly unhinged?

"I waited all day for juicy deets, and all you give me is, 'We talked.' I'm living vicariously through you right now. I wanted something sexier."

"Well, I did give him a hand job if that makes you feel better."

"Why didn't you lead with that! Of course, it makes me feel better." She has the decency to pause for about a millisecond. "How big's his dick?"

I burst out laughing. If I had a dollar for every time I've predicted the inappropriate, stream-of-consciousness thoughts that blast directly from Riley's brain and out of her mouth, I'd have a down payment on a car. I shove a mound of popcorn into my maw to stall answering while Riley bounces at her end of the couch.

"It's definitely a handful," I smirk. "Maybe about this big." I approximate length and girth with my hand, and Riley's eyes widen.

“Lucky girl! I wish I had a dick that big to sit on for a while.” Wine spritzer sprays out of my nose. The things this girl says.

“You’re insane. I’m surprised my mother let me hang out with you when we were kids.”

“Are you kidding me? Mama Valentine would be sitting here with me telling you to jump on that already if she thought you wouldn’t disown her.”

She’s probably right. My parents aren’t exactly shy about sex. They’re very sex-positive.

“Ha! If I disowned my mother, she would just adopt you.”

“Meh. I’m no fun right now. The only pleasure I’m getting right now comes from the joy of embarrassing my students.”

“Ozzy’s not pushing your pleasure button?” I joke. I know those two hooked up at the wedding. I think paddle boating will forever be used as a euphemism for sex. I don’t think they even made it into the water. “Not man enough to tempt you for round two?”

“Nine.”

“Nine what?”

“It would be round nine.” My eyes bug out of my head. It was one afternoon! Go, Ozzy! Riley’s eyes dart to the TV where, as luck would have it, the camera follows Ozzy around the ice. Her face falls. “The sex was so good, Lily. I didn’t even know sex could be like that. I swear to god, having sex with Ozzy split my life into two vastly different eras—the before, sad-sex era and the aftermath, nympho era. Eight times, Lil! EIGHT-FUCKING-TIMES. He’s ruined me. He’s absolutely ruined me. Him and his unicorn cock.”

I nearly spit my wine all over the TV. Again.

“I’m serious,” she shrieks and throws a handful of popcorn at me. “I’m an addict. You’re going to have to stage an intervention. For my vagina. She doesn’t want any other peen but Ozzy’s.”

“I don’t see what the problem is,” I say. “If the sex was that good, why can’t you just have more of it?”

“He hasn’t called me at all since we’ve been back in the city.”

“Call me crazy, but couldn’t you just call him? Is your dialling finger broken?”

“It’s the principle! I’m the woman. He should pursue me. And maybe he doesn’t want to see me again. We didn’t make any promises or plans.” She pauses dramatically. “Maybe I should have listened to my mother.”

“Bite your tongue!” Riley’s mom is the biggest bitch on the planet, with a holier-than-thou attitude so bad you can’t stand more than sixty seconds of it before your brain completely shuts off.

“I gave away the popsicles,” Riley moans, not making any sense.

“What are you talking about?”

“I gave all my popsicles away for free, and now no one wants to buy the whole ice cream truck.”

“Did you want Ozzy to buy your ice cream truck?” I ask. I always thought Riley was a free spirit. Never to be tied down. Maybe I was wrong. “And can we stop talking in metaphors, please?”

“I don’t know,” she sighs, eyes shifting to the TV again. “I thought I just wanted sex. But…” she pauses, blowing a breath out through her lips. “Now, I don’t know. I told him I just wanted to have fun. He agreed. Maybe he doesn’t want more than that.”

“I hate to point out the obvious, but you’re not going to find out if you don’t talk to him.”

“I don’t want to be *that girl*.”

“What girl?”

“The one who says she only wants a good time but then watches you breathe while you sleep, counts the laugh lines around your eyes, and wonders what your children would look like.”

I've never seen Riley so distraught about a guy before. How did I not notice my best friend was having an emotional meltdown these past few weeks? Am I a bad friend? Maybe I've been too caught up in my own drama to realize that my best friend is having a quarter-life existential crisis.

"And it wasn't just the sex, even though it was really, really good. Amazing. Ozzy is fun and funny, and he gives me the vajayjay tingles. This is fucking terrible!"

I laugh. "So, how many laugh lines does Ozzy have?" I tease, and Riley glares at me, pursing her lips shut like she's trying to hold her breath.

Silence.

"Seven!" she screams, making me jump. "Three on the left and four on the right. And when he's sleeping soundly, he takes exactly thirteen breaths before twitching his nose. He has a little scar that looks like an anchor under his chin and a patch of skin behind his right ear that has no pigment. And, if we ever have kids, we'd probably have twins because twins run in his family. Two little boys with his sandy blond hair and my light blue eyes. And then we'd need to have a little girl too, with crazy curly red hair because everyone knows you can't have an even number of kids."

Silence.

Riley's eyes are wide and wild. She claps a hand over her mouth like the insane amount of verbal diarrhea pouring out of her mouth wasn't intentional. Poor Riley. For years, she tried to dodge love. She's been too independent, rational and cool to need anyone beyond friends or a hookup. I'm trying to digest everything she's spewed out while reconciling this new Riley with the old one I know and love.

"Since when do you want kids?" I ask because she's always been a big proponent of the single, childless life.

"I don't!" she cries out, dropping her head into her hands. "I hate kids with their sticky hands and snot-covered faces. That's why I teach. I get to play with them for a few hours of the day and then send them home to scream and cry at their

parents. But every now and then, my brain wonders what twenty-three of my chromosomes would look like smooshed together with twenty-three of Ozzy's. What the fuck is wrong with me?"

"Oh, Riley," I say and scoot over to her side of the couch, giving her a hug. She squeezes me back and then slides down my torso, placing her head in my lap to use me as a pillow. I pat her head consolingly, combing my fingers through her hair. "There's nothing wrong with you. You're allowed to change your mind and alter your plans. You're allowed to fall in love."

She huffs out a long sigh, and I mimic the sound right along with her. We sit in sisterly solidarity, hearts twisted up, happy, miserable, hopeful, and confused all at the same time, and watch as the Northmen trounce New York.

*Trust Fall***Chase**

We slaughter New York but tank in Carolina, and Coach is pissed. The Storm is a bottom-dweller team, and we played like sloppy assholes. Our new backup goalie, Maxime Beauchamp, was between the pipes tonight, which is no excuse because we laid him out to dry. We'd have lost eight to one if it weren't for him. We were lucky to only be beaten by three.

Coach is going to ride us hard when we're back in Toronto. We leave bright and early, but all I can think about is Lily. She's been texting me the entire road trip, and I can't wait to see her again. Her date with Samuel was tonight. Even though she told me she unofficially broke things off with him and that they're just acting for the camera, it doesn't sit well with me. I don't trust that guy. He's too suave for my liking, and I wouldn't put it past him to try and sway Lily. I trust her and have no interest in watching any of the BWB segments.

My phone starts buzzing.

"Hey, hot stuff," Lily smiles as I answer her FaceTime. "Nice goal tonight. Too bad the rest of the team shit the bed."

"Thanks for not sugar coating it." I chuckle.

"You know that's not my style."

"How was your date with Sam?" I ask, even though I don't really want to know.

"Meh," she shrugs. "We went to Ripley Aquarium and saw some fish. The dolphins were cool, and he made a big show of holding my hand and pulling me close when our picture was taken in front of the green screen. It was a little too gimmicky if you ask me."

"And if I asked your thousands of devoted followers?"

“They’d say Sam is hot as balls and has a sexy voice.” Talk about not sugar coating it.

“Did he try to kiss you?” I pry, gritting my teeth.

“Jealous much?”

“Yes, I’m jealous! I don’t like other men touching my stuff.”

Her cheery, overly happy laugh makes my chest squeeze.

“Yes, we kissed. But before you get all territorial, it was closed-mouthed and more on the side of my lips than on them. Sam did this fancy trick he learned in university drama class, where he basically kissed my cheek and dipped me at the same time. It was all very *Gone with the Wind*.”

“I still don’t like it,” I grumble, grimacing into the phone.

“Would it make you feel better if I told you I was thinking about you the entire time?”

“Maybe. Depends on if you tell me what you were thinking and how dirty it was.” I glance around the hotel room, double-checking I’m alone. You can never be too careful when you’re rooming buddy is your girlfriend’s big brother. Luke’s still not back from the hotel hot tub and sauna. I think that’s his code for when he FaceTimes Holly for some long-distance loving. Road-tripping stripping.

“It’s your lucky day,” Lily grins, biting her lip. *Fuck*. When she does that, it makes me immediately hard. “Because I was thinking of all the ways we could have fun trying different methods of touch. But mostly, I want you to indulge me with something first.”

“I’m listening,” I say into the phone, interested in what she has in mind.

“Well, I couldn’t help but notice you have sturdy bedposts, and those silk scarves could come in handy. And I know you know this, but in the past, anything but the missionary position was frowned upon, so I was thinking...”

“You were thinking,” I coax her, “use your big girl words, Lily.”

“That I would be open to being restrained while your wicked mouth had its wicked way with me.” Fuck me. This woman. The thought of Lily tied up, legs spread wide for me like a buffet, makes my dick so hard it hurts.

“That can be arranged.” Lily smiles and licks her lips, shifting her body. I try to discern where she is by looking at the things around her, but FaceTime doesn’t lend itself to seeing much more than faces. She shifts again, and I know she’s enjoying this. “Lily? Are you wet right now?” She bites her lip and nods, squirming. “Are you alone?”

“Yes,” she whispers like she’s embarrassed and blushing like mad. The way her cheeks redden, like she thinks she’s doing something naughty, makes me chuckle.

“I always knew I’d end up corrupting you, Lily.”

“Maybe I want to be corrupted. I don’t want to be a good girl anymore.” She pauses for a moment like she’s thinking of all the things she’d like to try, and my mind races with suggestions. “But only with you. I only want to be corrupted by you.”

“Good.” My voice comes out gruff and possessive, and I couldn’t care less. Every part of my being, my soul, is screaming, *mine, mine, mine*. “Let me see you. What are you wearing?”

She pauses, eyes widening a little.

“Can I call you back?” she blurts out.

“Why? What’s wrong?” She looks panicked.

“Nothing. I, ah, I—” she scrambles, searching for words to fill the silence. “I need to change. I didn’t think this through before I called you. I’m wearing the least sexy thing you can possibly imagine.”

I try to keep my face neutral, but my lips start to twitch. I think my eye might begin to twitch, too, because she purses her lips at me.

“Show me,” I grin.

“No.”

“Be a good girl and show me. I think you’re sexy in everything.”

Sighing, she stands up from her bed and holds the phone away far enough that I can see her pyjamas. I bark out a laugh before I can help myself, and she scowls and moves out of my line of sight.

“Show me again!” I demand.

So she does. Lily’s wearing an oversized t-shirt with two pugs dressed like the Disney Princesses from *Frozen*. They’re sitting between a snowman and written across the bottom in sparkly letters, it says, “I LIKE WARM PUGS!”

“Stop laughing,” she yells into the phone, although her lips are twitching too. “I told you I didn’t think this through! I was calling because I wanted to talk to you. I miss you. I wasn’t calling to... you know. I’ve never done that before, and now I’ve made a hash of it.”

“You miss me?” I ask, latching onto her words. I ignore the rest because it only serves to remind me how much of an idiot Derrick is and how much of a bigger idiot I am for not pursuing Lily sooner.

“Of course, I miss you, Chase. Aside from Riley, you’re my best friend.”

My heart does that strange squeeze-expand-contract thing again, and I smile wide into the phone.

“I miss you too.” I think back to all the times Lily and I have talked on the phone, just like this, minus the sexual innuendos. Even when she was in Europe, we’d talk at least once a week despite the time difference. And no matter what, come hell or high water, I’d get my daily text. I don’t know why I didn’t realize it before, but she’s become my favourite person, my best friend too. Just in a very different way than her brother. She’s a best friend I want to kiss, whose skin I want to taste every inch of.

I swallow hard at the thought and she notices.

“What are you thinking about?” she asks coyly.

“I’m thinking about tasting every last inch of your skin with my tongue and then starting all over again.”

“You’re abso-fucking-lutely not,” a deep male voice yells angrily from the door. Luke’s eyes narrow at me sitting on my bed. I grab a pillow and place it over my massive boner, compliments of his sister.

FUCK. I didn’t even hear the door click.

“Is that Luke?” Lily shrieks.

“Unfortunately, yes,” I grumble.

Luke strolls over and grabs my phone out of my hands, which is a risky move if you ask me. For all he knows, Lily could be naked, sprawled out on her bed, awaiting my instructions.

“Aren’t you supposed to be on a date or something?” Luke growls.

“That ended hours ago, dumb-dumb,” Lily throws back. “Aren’t you supposed to be watching game tape because your team sucked big porno cock tonight?”

“No. I was busy pleasuring my wife from afar,” Luke smirks, and I swear I can hear Lily’s eyes roll and gag. “I’m just that good. I can make my wife come from a thousand miles away.”

“That’s funny,” she preens into the phone, making Luke narrows his eyes.

“And why’s that funny?” Oh, Christ, he’s set himself up for this one.

“Because Chase can make me come from a thousand miles away too!”

The last thing I see before the screen goes blank is Lily sticking her tongue out at her brother.

Luke’s face turns so red I think he might have an aneurysm, especially with the vein in his forehead bulging out like that. I can hear his teeth grinding as he glares at me. I think he might crush my phone into dust, but he just throws it down beside

me a little harder than necessary, then turns abruptly and walks into the bathroom.

We don't talk about the conversation he partially overheard when he returns, but when he spies me texting, his eyes narrow.

"Dude, I'm not going to sext your sister while you're in the room," I say before realizing my mistake. I should have just kept my mouth shut.

"Do you want me to break all your fingers?" He glares at me, eying my thumbs menacingly.

"Coach would flay you alive if you did," I shoot back. "Plus, there's always voice-to-text."

"Then I guess I'm ripping out your throat too."

I glare back at Luke. I know he's pissed, but seriously, I thought we were past this shit.

"Why are you giving me such a hard time? I thought you were okay with me and Lily."

"I am," he shouts, crossing his arms over his chest, puffing it out. He looks like a two-year-old having a tantrum. "I just don't have to like it."

"Don't like it, or don't like me?" I bark the question because I need to know. I need to know if he thinks I'm not good enough for his sister. If he thinks I'm just another piece of shit.

"Of course, I like you. You're my best friend. You were the goddamned best man at my wedding, for fuck's sake." He shifts uncomfortably in his seat. "I'm just having a hard time digesting this. I need time to get used to it."

"Well, try harder because I'm not going anywhere."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means that I'm in this for the long haul. It means I know I'm not good enough for Lily, but when she looks at me, I see the man she thinks I am. And I want to be that guy. I want to be better. For her. It means I'm scared shitless and I need my best friend. I'm terrified I'm going to fuck this up because I'm

still fucked up and working through a lot of shit, okay? But she's helping me. It means I'm pretty sure I'm in love with her. And I think, maybe, she's in love with me. I have no fucking clue why, but I'm going to try my damndest to make her happy."

Letting out a long breath, I dare a glance at Luke. I think I've shocked the shit out of him. I didn't know that speech would pour out of me until it did, but it's all true. I am in love with Lily. I've probably been in love with her for longer than I realize. And, if she'll have me, I plan on marrying her someday. I know it in my bones. I know it like I know I was born to play hockey. I was made to love her, and she was made for me.

"Well, shit," Luke says. "I guess I can't argue with that." He gets up, walks over to the mini fridge, and pulls out two beers. He throws one over to me, and we crack them open. After a few sips, Luke chuckles. "These beers are probably twenty bucks each, and they're shit."

"Yup," I agree, knocking my can against his, but they don't have the satisfying clink that bottles have.

Luke is silent for a minute, staring at me from the side of his eye. He looks uncomfortable for a few seconds but manages to put the awkwardness aside and get out the words he wants to say.

"I know you had a shit time with your dad, Chase, and if you want to talk about it, I'm here."

The words mean a lot to me, and I nod in acknowledgement.

Luke turns on the TV and starts flicking through the channels. He stops on a rerun of *Law and Order: Special Victims Unit*. Olivia Benson is badass, and Luke and I like old-school crime shows. We watch as the episode plays out. With each minute, my chest tightens, and my stomach churns. When the cops finally take down a woman who's been molesting her boyfriend's fifteen-year-old son, sweat is beading on the back of my neck. The plot line is eerily close to my real-life one.

I look at Luke. He's completely invested in the show, shaking his head, huffing at the characters, and puffing his chest out in outrage.

I take a breath, turn to him and ask, "Do you think a dude can be raped?" His eyes dart to mine, then back to the TV.

"That," he points to the TV, "is rape. That's a kid. He doesn't know what he's doing, and the woman is a fucked up psycho." He pauses for a minute, thinking before continuing. "Do I think a full-grown man can be raped? I guess it depends on the situation. I don't think my dick is getting hard if I'm not into it, but I don't know. Our bodies have natural functions that we can't stop even if we want to, so I guess so."

I nod and just stare at the TV. I watch as the boy is reunited with his father. The dad hugs and holds his son, tears in his eyes. He apologizes over and over again, promising to never let anything happen to him again. I swallow hard, wondering what my dad would have done if he knew the truth. Wondering if he would have even cared.

"Why?" Luke asks, glancing between the TV and me.

I go still, holding my breath. This is it. This is where I tell my best friend what happened to me all those years ago, or I don't. I'm standing on the edge of a precipice, hovering over a long plunge to the rocks below. I can back away from the edge, or I can jump. If I back away now, no one will ever know. I can stay on the cliff forever. If I jump, I may splatter on the rocks, or someone might catch me. There are no guarantees. But I've been up here for a long fucking time, and it's lonely here with just me and my demons. And staying up here hasn't done me a lick of good so far.

I turn to Luke. My best friend. If I can't trust him, I can't trust anyone.

"Because that," I croak, throat dry, pointing at the TV, "is my story. That happened to me." Luke's eyes alight with anger, pain, and something else. Something like shame, but it's not directed at me.

“Why didn’t you say anything?” he chokes as if strangled.
“My parents would have done something.”

“Because I was embarrassed and ashamed and confused. I don’t fucking know. And your parents had already done so much for me. I didn’t want to be a bigger burden on them.”

“You were never a burden, Chase. You’re my brother. You’re like a second son to my mom and dad. They would have murdered whoever it was.” He stops as if wracking his brain, thinking back to that time in our lives. “Who was it?”

“It doesn’t matter anymore,” I say, shaking my head.

“Like hell, it doesn’t,” Luke growls. “You can still go to the police, Chase.”

“Just leave it.” He looks like he wants to argue but backs off. For now, at least.

“Does Lily know?”

“Yes,” I swallow. “She knows.” I don’t elaborate on how the subject came about.

“Do you want to talk about it?” Luke asks awkwardly. I can tell he’s unsure how to broach the subject, so I shake my head, and he seems to understand.

The silence stretches between us, but the awkwardness is gone, and our attention goes back to the TV. Luke’s right. He’s my brother. And knowing he’s here and has my back is enough.

*Thanksgiving 2.0***Lily**

“Happy Thanksgiving!” I smile into the phone. Mom and Dad have finally evolved into the digital age and are using FaceTime. Up until recently, I frequently took FaceTime calls—and I use the term loosely—where I would watch my parents’ ears in varying shades of darkness until they got used to holding the phone so the camera was in front of their faces, rather than pressed up against the sides of their head. Thankfully, that phase is over.

“Happy Thanksgiving, honey,” Mom replies, Dad by her side. “Any plans? Are you cooking a feast for the entire team?” No, thank god. Most of the team is enjoying a day off the ice because tomorrow is back to work against Boston. Coach McCall gifted the team one day of rest after their road trip, with an optional skate this morning.

Boston games are always brutal.

“Holly and Luke are hosting a little shindig,” I say. For the first time ever, Holly is trying to make a turkey. It’s her first holiday as a married woman, so she and Avery volunteered as tributes to host a small dinner. Although their idea of a small gathering is wildly different than mine. The guest list includes me, Chase, Holly, Luke, Ryan, Avery, Taylor, Tyra, Ollie, and Ozzy. And I invited Riley purely for entertainment’s sake. As far as I know, she’s still refusing to call Ozzy, so while Holly plays hostess, I plan on playing matchmaker.

“That sounds nice,” Mom smiles. “I can’t believe just last year, Luke brought Holly home to meet us, and now they’re married. Just think, soon we’ll have babies to spoil.” I roll my eyes. Since Holly and Luke got engaged, my mother has been infected with baby fever. It’s no secret my parents want to graduate into grandparenthood sooner rather than later, but I’m relatively sure Holly is leaning towards later. But I swear to

god, if Mom doesn't see a baby bump by Christmas, she'll swap out Holly's birth control for prenatal vitamins.

"I wouldn't hold my breath, Mom. Luke and Holly want some alone time before procreating. They're not in a rush."

"Well, there's always the other option," she says hopefully.

"What's that?"

"You and Chase can have babies instead!"

"Mom!"

"Angie," Dad warns, but his lips are twitching. "Lily and Chase aren't even married yet."

"Dad! Oh my god! You guys are horrible. Chase and I aren't even officially dating, and I'm still dating Sam." I don't bother mentioning that we're only fulfilling our contracts for the charities involved.

"Oh please," Mom rolls her eyes, shooting Dad a poignant look. "I'm your mother. You've been in love with Chase since you were practically a baby. I've been planning your wedding for years. And never tell Luke and Holly this, but when you two have kids, they'll be my favourite."

I don't even know how to respond to that statement.

"I'm hanging up now," I say, but naturally, my mother manages to get the last word.

"Have fun! Feel free to have lots of unprotected sex!"

The screen goes blank. *Thank god.* My parents are nuts, but I love them.

My phone starts buzzing again. I'm about to ignore it, thinking it's my mother calling back to provide me with more unsolicited parenting advice for my unborn children, but Holly's name flashes across the screen, so I answer.

"Lily?" I always think it's weird when people call you and open with your name as a question as if they don't realize *they're calling you*. I don't point this out to Holly, though, because her voice sounds like it's somewhere between hysteria and an all-out meltdown.

“Yes,” I laugh.

“Oh, thank fuck,” she curses and sighs in relief at the same time. “Where are you?”

“At home. Why?”

“Because I need you here. Avery and I have a table set for eleven, and we’ve just realized neither of us has a fucking clue what to do with a turkey, let alone a nineteen-pound one. Do you stuff it before or after you put it in the oven? How do you know when it’s done? If I put it in now, is that long enough? Is four-fifty too high to set the oven?”

I try not to laugh. It’s nine in the morning. If Holly and Avery put the turkey in the oven now at four-fifty, we’ll be eating ashes if they don’t burn the condo complex down first.

“Sit tight,” I say. “Don’t touch the turkey until I get there. I’ll be over in fifteen. Do you have lots of white wine?”

“Do you cook a turkey in wine, or baste it, or whatever you do to turkey?” Holly asks sincerely. *Poor, clueless woman.*

“No, Holly,” I laugh again. “We baste ourselves in the wine.”



“I don’t know how you do it,” Holly sighs, taking a sip of her Riesling. She, Avery, and I are in her kitchen, and everything is cooking. Riley is in the living room with Tyra and Taylor, and there are three empty bottles of white wine in the sink. The boys decided to join the optional morning skate, which was basically their excuse to leave all the cooking to us.

“Cooking’s my jive,” I giggle, taking another sip from my glass. I’m definitely feeling a buzz, and it’s only early afternoon. Nothing wrong with a little day drinking, in my opinion. Avery moves to uncork another bottle, and I share a secret laugh with myself.

“What’s so funny?” Holly asks, narrowing her eyes on me. “I mean, besides the obvious, that we don’t know shit about fuck when cooking big meals. You just saved our asses.”

“I was just looking at all our empty wine bottles and thinking how disappointed Mom would be.”

Holly glances at me worriedly. “Why? I was going to ask her to come, but she said we’d wait for Christmas to do another big family celebration, and my mom’s officially BFFs with your mom now, so no one is alone. Do you think she’s pissed at me?”

“Holly, as far as Angie Valentine is concerned, you can do no wrong. Unless you fail to provide her with a grandchild,” I laugh, and Holly blanches, glancing at the wine bottles again. I nod. “The day you stop drinking alcohol is the day my mother maxes out all her credit cards at Baby Gap.”

“But I told her Luke and I aren’t ready for kids,” she says, worry creasing her forehead.

“I know,” I groan. “Thanks for that. Now she’s set her hopes on me. She told me, and I quote, ‘Have fun and feel free to have lots of unprotected sex.’ Now that Chase and I are together, she’s already been on those baby generator websites where you upload a couple’s faces to see what their kids will look like.”

“But you and Chase aren’t together,” Avery says, narrowing her eyes at me. *Fuck!* That wasn’t supposed to come out. “You’re still dating Samuel too.”

“Well, according to my mother, Chase is the clear front-runner,” I say, attempting to backtrack.

“And according to you?” Holly asks, plopping down on the couch beside Taylor and Tyra, who join the conversation seamlessly with Riley. I glance around at the ladies and debate just telling them the jig is up.

“Oh, come on,” Riley rolls her eyes. “We all know Chase is the clear winner here.”

“We really do,” Taylor agrees, leaning into Tyra. Seriously, those two are so damned cute wearing their matching sweaters and coordinated outfits. “When Samuel didn’t share his steak with you, I knew he was toast.”

“And the Edge Walk date,” Tyra puts a hand to her heart. “Brilliant! Better than the movies,” she winks. “I would know.”

I bite my lip and chew, momentarily wondering if I should spill and tell the ladies the truth. That I’m in love with Chase. I open my mouth but am cut off before I can answer.

“Contractually speaking,” Avery raises an eyebrow. “You shouldn’t say what you’re about to say.”

“And speaking amongst friends?” I counter.

“We all know you’re in love with Chase,” Holly and Avery say at the same time, while everyone else nods in agreement.

“Worst. Kept. Secret. Ever,” Taylor deadpans.

“Seriously? Am I that obvious?”

“So obvious.” Riley laughs.

“Dish,” Avery commands. “We all know you Uber’ed back to Chase’s after your date. What’s Mr. Wilder packing in the hockey stick department?”

I blush. I can’t stop myself. Heat creeps up my neck and face, which, of course, makes Avery gleeful.

“I knew it! Wilder is wild in the sack!” Avery says, looking quite proud of her apparent talent for dick prediction.

“So, how was it?” Holly prods. “Did he live up to your expectations?” My awkward pause gives Holly leave to continue, which ultimately means I’m about to hear more about my brother’s sexual prowess. “Luke definitely blew my expectations out of the water. I thought my first time would be like pulling off a Band-Aid, and I told him as much, but it was more like orgasm central.”

“I’m not a virgin, Holly,” I remind her.

“No,” Avery adds. “But we all know your first and only other lover was rubbish.” I don’t bother trying to disagree. “So, was I right? Is Chase a total Christian Grey? Did he Dom-Sub your ass?”

I shift uncomfortably in my seat. Everyone's eyes are on me, and I know I've gone fifty shades of red. I'm never going to tell them what Chase confided in me. That's his story to share if and when he's ready. If I have to embarrass myself to keep his secret, so be it. Riley already knows Chase and I haven't done the dirty. If I don't say something soon, she will.

"We didn't have sex," I mumble. The room goes so silent I can hear the convection oven whirr. "We talked. Mostly."

"Mostly," Holly latches onto the word like it's a life raft, and she's just jumped off the Titanic. "That means you didn't just talk."

"Oh, for fuck's sake, she gave him a hand job," Riley blurts out before grabbing the bottle of white chilling on the coffee table.

"RILEY!" I shriek. She only smirks and shrugs as if saying, *What? It was coming out one way or another.* Everyone else looks at me expectantly, like I'm going to go into explicit detail about how hard I stroked him and if his dick slants to the left.

It doesn't.

I try to think of something to divert the attention away from me. I look at Riley casually sipping her wine and grin evilly. Her eyes widen in horror. She looks like she is about to launch herself on top of me to try and silence me. But my mouth moves faster than her body.

"Riley had sex with Ozzy eight times at Holly's wedding, and she wants to have his babies!"

"You bitch!" Riley screams, but her words lack sincerity. Sort of. My diversion tactic works like a charm as everyone's heads swivel toward her. Seriously, this is better than watching a tennis match.

"It's true?" Avery barks. "I knew you had a thing for my brother, but I didn't know it was that bad."

"Have you guys been sneaking around since Holly's wedding?" Tyra asks. Riley looks like a deer caught in headlights. She's completely overwhelmed.

“No,” she squeaks. “It was only the one, ah, eight times.”

“Ozzy hasn’t called her,” I supply, and Riley shoots more daggers at me.

Disaster averted, my love life slinks into the background as we all focus on Riley, her sex-a-thon with Ozzy, and her stalker-esque fantasies about having his children. By the time the guys come home, the food is cooked, and we’re all most assuredly drunk or well on our way. We’re all ready for some in-meal entertainment between Riley and Ozzy. The second he walks in the door, everyone’s eyes zero in on him in the most painfully obvious way that I almost feel bad for him.

Avery promised not to say anything to her brother, but her natural compulsion is to meddle, and she looks like she wants to explode. I swear I can hear the silent words she’s throwing at her stepbrother. *You utter moron! You don’t bang a woman eight times and then not call her. Especially when she’s one of my friends, and especially if she lies through her teeth and says she only wanted it to be a one-time thing.*

I sympathize with Ozzy because I am pretty sure, at the time, Riley believed she wanted a fun fling until she realized she didn’t. But I’m also pretty sure that Ozzy Decker looks at my friend like she’s a mixture between a cupcake he wants to eat and the Stanley Cup he wants to win. If I had to put money on it, I’d say he wants more than a fling too.

Chase spots me right away and smiles. He makes his way over to me like Ryan and Luke gravitate toward their wives. He leans down and kisses me on the lips before squeezing into the chair I’m sitting in and rearranging me so my legs are in his lap. I’m surprised at his effortless comfort level, but I suppose the best way to get used to me is to actually touch me, even in casual ways.

“You’ve been drinking wine,” Chase grins, licking his lips. I lean forward to kiss him and return the favour.

“You’ve been drinking Gatorade,” I say back, then pause for effect and chew my bottom lip. “Grape, I think.”

“Enough of that,” Luke chides and waves a hand in our general direction. “Let’s eat. I’m starving and can’t wait to try my beautiful wife’s first-ever self-made Thanksgiving feast.

I bite my lip and smirk at Holly and Avery, who glance at me imploringly. I keep my mouth shut and smile to myself. It’s not for me to steal their thunder, though I suspect Holly and Avery will need to learn how to cook a bird before the next holiday rolls around.

We all sit at the table, which is actually a combination of Holly’s and Avery’s table from across the hall, brought together to accommodate eleven people. Like everything Holly and Avery do, they went furniture shopping together and bought the same one, so they fit perfectly.

Chase pulls out my chair, and as he pushes me in, he bends to whisper in my ear, “You cooked the entire dinner, didn’t you?”

“Why would you say a silly thing like that?”

“I saw the pleading, don’t-out-us looks those two gave you.”

“I didn’t do everything,” I mutter so only he can hear. “Holly mashed the potatoes, and Avery set the table.” Chase laughs.

I glance at the table setting and notice some last-minute alterations made by Avery. She’s made place cards for everyone using fancy napkins and a Sharpie. Subtle. Not surprisingly, Riley is wedged between the Decker men at the head of the table; Ozzy to her left and Ollie to her right. All the other couples are appropriately seated side-by-side.

Within seconds of sitting down, everyone digs in. Wine is poured, and Luke grabs the carving knife. He offers it to Holly first.

“Would you like to do the honours?” he asks like a good husband who obviously didn’t cook this meal and just showed up when the hard work was done. Men generally have an outstanding talent for disappearing when food needs to be cooked and reappearing when it’s ready to eat. Unless a barbecue is involved.

“No way,” Holly shakes her head. “I’d butcher it and probably take my finger off in the process.”

Luke leans down and kisses Holly, a little too long for the dinner table. “Then I’ll do it and save your poor, clever fingers. I like them too much to see one go.”

“Barf,” I say before putting my favourite finger on display for my brother. “Stop kissing your wife and cut the damn bird already.” Because my brother is annoying as fuck, he stops to kiss Holly again. So I take the opportunity to piss him off. “If you don’t feed me in the next sixty seconds, I’ll find another use for my mouth with Chase.”

Luke’s head snaps up, and he glares. I smile sweetly back at him. Chase chokes on his wine, and Luke sharpens the knife while looking pointedly at the man I plan on officially making my lover tonight.

Finally, food meets plates, and we all dig in. Sighs of pleasure fill the room, and I can’t help but grin in satisfaction. I love watching people enjoy the food I’ve cooked. There’s something utterly satisfying about watching people moan and groan over the fruits of my labour.

“This is fantastic! It tastes just like Mom’s, but somehow better,” Luke says in amazement while taking another forkful of stuffing. Holly giggles awkwardly and shoots me another look.

The next hour is spent chatting, eating, and laughing. The conversation alternates between hockey, potential charity events Holly and Avery have brewing, and what’s happening in Hollywood with the movie Tyra is filming.

“So when’s the wedding,” Ollie joins the conversation out of the blue, shovelling a spoonful of mashed potatoes and gravy into his maw. Everyone stares at him in silence. Who the hell is he talking to?

“Um, I don’t know if you missed it, but Holly and Luke got hitched last month, bro,” Ozzy says. Ollie looks up and around the table, one blue and one brown eye sparkling with mischief, until he stops on Taylor and Tyra.

“I saw several TikTok posts from celebrity gossip creators that you two lovebirds are secretly engaged.” He waves his fork

between them and winks. Taylor blushes, and Tyra smiles placatingly. I know for a fact Taylor has been having a hard time with the press. She's not a fan of the paparazzi.

"Yes," Tyra deadpans, making everyone choke for about two seconds before she continues. "Taylor is also carrying our baby. I'm the first gay woman to knock up my girlfriend naturally through osmosis, but the National Enquirer also suspects that Drake could be the father."

Everyone laughs. These guys should know better. As hockey players in Canada's hottest hockey market, they get as much gossip printed about them as real celebrities do.

"So you're not engaged?" Holly asks Tyra, narrowing her eyes before turning to Taylor. "Because I am your sister, I would hope I'd be the first to know."

"Not engaged," Taylor answers with an eye roll. "God, I swear you're all wedding crazy. Haven't we had enough weddings in the last four months?"

"I like weddings," Ollie smiles. "I make an awfully efficient officiant." He waggles his eyebrows at his joke and then turns toward Riley and Ozzy, who seem to be ignoring each other.

"What about you two? When are you to getting together?" The couple in question's eyes bug out of their respective heads, but Ollie's not done. "Because if I have to listen to my brother piss and moan about the redheaded vixen, who was the best sex of his life, but who he won't call because he doesn't want to seem desperate, I'm going to call Riley myself and take her out. We're identical twins, after all, and I'm the charming one."

"Like hell, you are," Ozzy growls, throwing down his fork and knife. He looks ready to strangle his brother, while Riley suddenly seems extremely pleased with herself.

"And that's our cue for dessert!" I stand and laugh, pulling Chase along with me towards the kitchen, where the pie is warming in the oven. "The faster we feed them pie, the faster we can leave," I whisper, leaning into him. "I have plans for

you, Mr. Wilder. Ones I think you'll be very, very, thankful for."

*Bow-Chicka-Wow***Chase**

The elevator ride up to my place is long and silent. Lily's twitchy, and so am I—a mixture of trepidation and excitement, longing and fear. The air is thick with desire and hesitation. I want Lily so badly I'm scared I'll blow my load in the first sixty seconds. Not to mention I've got ten months of celibacy to burn off and almost eight years of wanting her to satisfy.

It's awkward.

I've known Lily my entire life, but after tonight, there's no going back, and I wouldn't want to. Telling Lily about my past, in some ways, has been liberating. She knows the worst parts of me, and she's still here. She still wants me. Lily's everything and more than I thought I would ever have. And yet, I still can't shake the feeling I'm going to fall short of her expectations.

I can't live with disappointing her.

When elevator pings doors open, I lead Lily down the hall to my apartment in silence, her hand in mine. I love her hands; so small, delicate, and creative. I want to want them all over my body. I want to be normal. For her.

I open the door to my apartment and lead her inside. The place's quiet bareness makes it painfully obvious how sterile my living space is. I wish it had more personality, but I never saw a need to decorate beyond the basics. Now, I wish my apartment was homier and more welcoming.

We kick off our shoes and head into my kitchen where Lily sits on a stool by the island and starts to drum her fingers on the marble countertops.

“So,” she half smiles, half huffs, “this isn't awkward at all.”

I bark out a laugh. Leave it to Lily to cut right to the chase. She never did buy my bullshit.

“You want something to drink?” I ask, opening the fridge. “There’s not much in the way of selection, but I have Gatorade, water, and orange juice.”

“Chase,” Lily says with a smile. I turn to look at her just as she slides off her stool and saunters over to me. I swallow hard when she closes the door to the fridge and lightly places her arms around my neck. “Exactly one year ago, I was sitting in a hot tub with Holly telling her about this guy I had it bad for, who I thought never saw me as anything more than a little sister.”

“Oh yeah?” I grin, circling my arms around her waist. If anyone walked into my kitchen right now, they’d think we were slow dancing. “Is he a good-looking fellow?”

“Average,” she teases. “He likes to think he’s a bad boy, but underneath it all, I think he has a heart of gold.” I’m about to interrupt her, but she places a finger over my lips, stopping me.

“He’s not perfect. He has some flaws, like being too hard on himself. But I think he might just be perfect for me.”

She leans in, balancing on her tippy-toes and places her lips on mine. The second I feel her soft warmth, I’m a goner. My arms tighten and pull her closer to me. I have to remind myself to be gentle. To slow down. To take my time. But the way Lily responds and moans into my mouth makes me want to be ruthless and crazy and take her right here against my kitchen island.

I scoop Lily into my arms and carry her to my bedroom, kissing her the whole way. When I set her down on my bed, she smiles up at me, making my heart constrict in my chest. I want this so badly with her. In the past, all I cared about was getting off, being in control, and moving on. This is entirely different for a multitude of reasons, the main one being that I’ve stripped myself bare for this woman.

Slowly, Lily undresses for me, removing her clothing piece by piece, and my eyes can do nothing but watch in fascination as this stunning creature shows me through her actions all the ways she wants me.

“If you say anything about the food baby I’m carrying, I’ll murder you in your sleep,” Lily jokes, patting the very slight bulge where the Thanksgiving dinner we just ate currently resides.

I laugh at the ridiculousness of her suggestion. As if I’d find her anything but utterly fucking breathtaking. “You’re fucking stunning, Lily. Give me a decade, and when I retire, I’ll rock the most outstanding dad bod on the planet. I don’t know if you’ve noticed, but hockey players aren’t known for maintaining their rock-hard abs after hanging up their skates.” It’s true. Most hockey players excel at getting fat after calling it a career. That’s what happens when you go from burning thousands of calories a day and eating like a horse to maintain muscle mass, to being a lazy fuck but still stuffing your face with food. I don’t plan on doing that, but it’s a rude wake-up call for some guys. “One day, it’s all chiselled jawlines, six-packs, and asses of steel. Then the next, you wake up with a beer belly and two extra chins.”

Lily laughs. “You paint such an attractive future for us. I guess I’ll just have to enjoy it while I can.” She stands and walks to me before tentatively lifting my shirt over my head. Instinctively, I grab her wrists before she can move for my belt buckle and pants.

“Is this okay?” she asks. I nod and release her as she carefully slides my jeans down my legs, letting me step out of them. My cock is painfully hard in my boxer briefs, and when Lily removes those, too, she stares up at me from her knees and licks her lips.

Fuck me.

“Can I touch you?”

I swallow hard and nod again, leading her back to the bed before sitting on the silk comforter. She stands between my thighs, looking down between us. The soft creamy, tanned skin of her thighs contrasted with the thick muscled skin of mine. Lily’s pussy is perfectly bare, and I ache to be inside her, but I want this to last. I want to give all of myself to her.

She holds out her hands to me in offering. “You’re in control. Put my hands anywhere you want them.” I take her warm wrists and feel her pulse beating a rhythm with mine. She lets me guide her as I place the flat of her palms on my shoulders and then run them down my chest. When her fingers graze my happy trail, my abs clench, and my eyes slam shut of their own volition. “Don’t close your eyes. Look at me, Chase. It’s me.”

So I do. I stare into Lily’s big blue eyes and see everything I need to know about her there. Her sincerity. Her honesty. *Her love*. My body relaxes, and I move her hands lower until she kneels in front of me. I place her hands on my thighs and loosen my grip enough to give her some freedom of movement but tight enough that I could stop her if I wanted to.

Time freezes as her eyes lock on mine and her hands rest on my quads. My cock is thick and hard between us, begging for her attention, but she waits for my instruction.

“I want to taste you, Chase,” she whispers, moistening her lips and my dick jerks in response. I lean back slightly, placing my hands on the mattress, spreading my knees wider for her, nodding my consent. Tentatively, Lily’s hands grip my cock, giving it a stroke. A breath of air huffs out of me as she slowly jerks me off, reminiscent of how I showed her before. And then, she leans in and licks me from base to tip.

I almost jump out of my skin, and when her beautiful fucking hot mouth envelops the head of my cock and takes me as deep as she can go, my eyes roll into the back of my head so hard I think it might cause brain damage.

“Is this okay?” Lily asks, pressing pause on the best blowjob of my life.

“Fuck, yes. Don’t stop.”

She smiles and continues her ministrations, rolling her tongue around the crown of my cock before sinking down my shaft, sucking and hollowing out her cheeks to accommodate my length. She uses her hands on what doesn’t fit while acclimating to having me in her mouth. I resist the urge to thrust into her and instead grip my hands in her hair and pull gently. She hums in pleasure, and I swear to Christ, I can feel

the vibrations of her little moans in my fucking soul. When the tip of my cock hits the back of her throat and Lily's eyes water, I pull back, but she's a determined little thing and keeps working me hard.

Her hands continue to stroke me in tandem with her mouth, and when she moves lower to cup my balls, I'm about ready to explode. My body starts to move on instinct, muscles tensing, spine tingling, balls tightening, and before I can warn her, I'm fistfucking Lily's hair and coming down her throat in hot spurts. She takes it all like a champ, and when I'm done, she smiles up at me like the cat who got the cream.

"You know, for someone who's never done that before, you're pretty fucking amazing at it," I say with a chuckle, and in the back of my mind, I can't help thinking what an idiot Mr. Missionary-Style is. He missed out on a ton of untapped potential.

"Just because I haven't given a blowjob before doesn't mean I've never seen one before. There's this thing called porn," she starts, throwing sass at me. "It's very educational, if not unrealistic. But still, a girl can learn a thing or two."

"You watch porn?" I ask, and something about Lily sneaking off to watch people do the dirty really fucking turns me on.

"Chase, everyone watches porn once in a while, if not out of curiosity, then to help things along when they're flying solo." *This girl is going to kill me.* Laughing, I pull Lily onto the bed beside me and kiss her, long and hard, and when my tongue meets hers, I taste myself on her. It's fucking hot.

"Thinking about you getting yourself off watching porn is sexy," I groan into her mouth.

"If I'm honest, I prefer my porn of the literary variety." She smiles back. "There's nothing like a good one-handed read."

"Just what kind of books are you reading?"

"The best kind," she whispers with a mischievous smile.

Our hot kisses continue until Lily is writhing underneath me, her wrists pinned above her head by my hands. But I want to touch her. I want to enjoy her body, and I want her to enjoy

this too. My need for control wars with my desire to have her in all the ways I want, as an active participant and not just someone submitting to what they think I want.

In the past, fucking was always a means to an end. An easy way to get off and then get out. I made sure the women enjoyed themselves, but I took what I wanted, how I wanted it, and then quickly moved on. Lily isn't like the women from my past. She isn't a means to an end; she's my endgame.

"Chase," she begs, and it's like a plea and a question all at once. "I want..." Her words taper off like she's unsure of what she wants, or she's embarrassed to ask for it.

"What do you want, Lily?" I prompt her, leaning back and releasing her hands. Her lust-filled, hazy gaze shifts around my bedroom, and I follow it.

"I want you to touch me. Everywhere."

"What else do you want?" I ask because I know there's more. There's curiosity in her eyes, and she's been glancing at my silk scarves too often to be a coincidence or passing interest.

"I want you to use those on me," she says, nodding to the bindings. "I want your hands all over me, but if you let go of my wrists, I don't trust myself not to accidentally do something you don't like." My heart and gut squeeze. I know Lily wants to be adventurous with her sex life and try new things, but the fact that she's always thinking of my needs before her own does something to me I can't put into words.

I only hope that one day I can give her everything she wants and all the things she deserves. That with time, I will forget my past that haunts me, and her love will erase all the things I hate about myself.



Lily

I can't believe I just asked Chase to tie me to his bed and have his wicked way with me. But I also can't believe I just had his dick in my mouth and admitted that everything I know about blowjobs I learned from porn and books.

But the fact of the matter is, I want to get wild with Chase Wilder. I have a long bucket list of things I want to try because Derrick never wanted to have anything other than basic, instruction manual sex. And it wasn't what I would classify as good. Sometimes it was sweet but never satisfying, and now I want it all; the good, the bad, and the dirty. Especially the dirty.

I eye the red silk folded neatly on his bed and shiver. There's something outrageously erotic about being at the mercy of another person. Logistically, I know why they're there. I understand Chase's need for control, and every time I think about what he's endured, rage boils through me. The desire to help him heal is so powerful I'd do anything to make him feel safe and loved. To make him understand that I trust him, not only with my body but my heart as well.

"I trust you, Chase," I say, my voice sure and bold. At this point, I'm already sitting completely naked in front of this man, and I feel like I've stripped myself down emotionally too. I couldn't be any more naked if I tried. "I want this. For you and for me." His gaze roams over my body hungrily before he kisses me again, tongue delving into my mouth and hands sliding up my arms until they meet my wrists.

"Lay back," he commands, and I do as I'm told. Carefully and achingly slow, he takes one of my wrists and gently ties the scarf around it before moving to the other and looping them around bedposts. The knots aren't painfully tight, but they provide enough resistance to restrain me. I'm at his mercy. "Fuck, you're so beautiful, Lily, laid before me like a goddamned goddess. I don't know what I ever did to deserve you, but whatever it was, it was worth it."

I flush at his praise and tug at my restraints, testing them. The silk tightens on my wrists as the rest of my body slides against his bedsheets. God, this is the hottest thing to ever happen to me, and I'm so turned on right now I think I might combust. "As much as I enjoy your voyeurism, if you don't start touching me, Chase, I'm going to SheHulk myself out of this and get myself off." The bastard laughs. *Laughs.* I'm two

seconds away from becoming a contortionist when he feathers his fingers across my torso.

“Holy shit,” I gasp, as every single nerve ending in my body stands at attention. He barely touches me, but every part of me is on high alert.

“I’ve been told restricting your mobility heightens your awareness. Maybe next time, we’ll use a blindfold to intensify the sensation.”

Um, yes, please. I’d agree to just about anything right now, but I’m pretty sure if Chase intensified the sensations rocketing through my body right now, I’d die. I’d just die dead. RIP me.

Before I can reply with some snark, he leans over me, cupping my breasts, his thumbs brushing over my nipples which are so fucking hard they could cut glass. And when he bends to lick and take one into his mouth, I arch off the bed into him.

“Good girl.” Oh my god, did he just *good-girl* me again? This is the best kind of torture. “Relax, Lily. Enjoy this. We’re not in a hurry.”

“You might not be, but I’ve had the female equivalent of blue balls for ages.”

“What about foreplay?”

“Fuck foreplay. This is the longest foreplay in the history of the world. I’ve got about a decade of wanting pent up in this body, and if you foreplay me any longer, all that’ll be left of me is a wet stain on your expensive sheets where I used to exist.”

“In that case, I better get to work.” *Thank fuck.*

Chase begins to kiss his way down my body at his own pace, which is about ten times slower than I’d prefer. It’s like he’s driving twenty in the fast lane, and I’m revving my engine, laying on the horn, urging him to go faster. If I had use of my hands, I’d push his head down until his tongue met my pussy and then tell him to get to fucking work.

Finally. *Finally.* His lips meet my inner thighs, and I all but cry out in relief when his clever tongue takes a long, languid lick.

I buck up into his face, and I'm too far past caring how this looks or if I accidentally knock his teeth out with a hip thrust. He's a hockey player. He's bound to lose a tooth or two.

Chase pushes my hips back into the mattress and continues eating me out. I crane my neck to look down at him, and when my eyes meet the blue-greens of his, I can feel his smile. I can literally feel him smiling into my pussy. I don't know whether to laugh, scream, or cry. Or some garbled combination of all three. A full-body shiver starts at the top of my head and rushes to the tips of my toes. This is so dirty. *I fucking love it.*

When Chase pumps two fingers into me and curls them forward at the exact time he sucks my clit, I think my soul leaves my body. I come so hard that I silently scream, arch off the bed and nearly dislocate both shoulders. Before I can settle back down onto earth, I hear the crinkle of a condom wrapper, and he's moving up my body, his cock hard and hot against me.

I strain up to meet him, but it's not quite enough. He's notched against my opening but not fully where I want him.

"Are you sure?"

"Are you insane? Yes, I'm fucking sure."

In one smooth thrust, Chase is inside me, and our hips meet. My eyes go wide at the fullness and friction of our bodies finally coming together. This is what I've been waiting for. We were meant to be together like this.

"Holy shit," he grits out, stilling for a moment. *Holy shit is right.* Who needs drugs when you can have this? He kisses me before starting to move again, in and out. I struggle against the silk scarves, wanting to hold him so badly I'm burning with it. I'm going to rub my wrists raw before the night's out, and I couldn't care less. The wet sound of skin meeting skin echoes through the room, and every part of me throbs, wanting release again. Every slide back seems to hit a spot inside me that makes my brain want to melt, and every drive forward causes his pelvis to brush up against my clit.

I'm going to come again.

Chase picks up his pace, sweat forming on our bodies. If I could reach up and lick him, I would. I honestly don't know what the fuck is happening right now. *How is this my life?* Pleasure tightens and coils in my core, and when he pushes in one, two, three more times in hard thrusts, I let go, meeting him thrust for thrust until my body is gripping his so tightly, it might never let go. He groans into me, filling the condom, his lips crashing down on mine in a very sloppy yet perfect kiss.

Only the sounds of our breathing fill the room, and we just lay there for a few moments in stunned silence. Carefully, Chase reaches up to my wrists and unbinds me. There's some chafing on my skin, but who the fuck cares? I don't. I'll take this seven days a week, three-hundred and sixty-five days a year. I'm ruined, and I love it.

"Ah," I say, not quite sure what words to use after that performance. "So that happened."

"That definitely happened."

"Um, was it just me or was that the best sex to have ever happened in history of ever?"

"It wasn't just you."

"Okay, good, because I'm going to need several repeats just to make sure." Chase laughs, and when he looks at me, something catches in my chest. I never thought having sex with someone I consider one of my best friends could be so easy and fucking spectacular at the same time.

I want to lay in this bed forever, but reality sets in. "I have to pee," I say, and then start laughing uncontrollably. I can't help myself. I'm so deliriously happy that I might literally pee myself but I can't stop giggling. Everything I've ever wanted is right in front of me, and even though there's still so much Chase and I need to figure out, for the first time in my life, I think I might get it right.

*Fifty Shades of Freaky***Lily**

The BUZZ By Cassidy Tippett

Time's Ticking on Lily Valentine's Dating Experiment

The Blue and White Bachelorette has taken Toronto by storm, and with only one date left for Lily Valentine, everyone is wondering who she'll choose. In case you missed it, Lily concluded her final date with Samuel McCrae, the dashing Canadian Scot whose voice could melt panties, this week. His resume boasts a Toronto FC game, a night at the Ripley Aquarium, and an after-hours art party at the Art Gallery of Ontario.

Not to be outdone, Northmen bad boy, Chase Wilder, has one date left to sway Ms. Valentine to the dark side. His dates included a swoon-worthy trip up the CN Tower and, more recently, a night at the Royal Ontario Museum to check out some dinosaur bones. What's next on the agenda to conclude hockey's most popular dating game? With Halloween creeping up on us, one can only assume that Wilder will do his best not to scare his pretty prey away.

And, in case you want to catch the conclusion of this love triangle, Lily Valentine will declare the winner of her heart live at the Toronto Northmen's home game next week against the Las Vegas Aces.

Who is your favourite to win this high-stakes game of love? Leave a comment below.

Torontogurl22: If Lily Valentine doesn't choose Chase, I'll take him every day of the week.

Jinxy111: Great Scot, Sam is hot. He's the clear winner.

SarahShoes12: I don't understand all the hype. It doesn't matter who she picks. They'll break up within a month.

RachelWright43: Lily is too vanilla for a bad boy like Chase Wilder. As someone who's sampled the product, she's way too sweet for his level of spice.

I throw my phone down on the kitchen island at the arena. I hate reading Cassidy Tippett's bullshit column and the comments accompanying it, but I can't help myself. She always seems to have an inside scoop into what's happening in Northmen Nation, and even I have to admit she's good at her job. Although, her information and sources are sometimes questionable.

"Rough day?" Sam asks, walking to the kitchen. I've just finished the pre-game meal, and I'm about to have a few of the line cooks carry it out into the team meeting room on heated serving trays. There's lots of herbed chicken, sautéed veggies, and spiced whole grain rice.

"I guess so. Let's just say I won't be sad when this whole thing ends and I don't have to read about myself in gossip columns anymore."

"I get that," Sam agrees. Over the last few weeks, he's become a good friend and, while I know he wishes there was something more than friendship between us, he's been nothing but supportive and kind this entire time. "Look on the bright side. You and Chase will finally be an official couple in a week, and all the buzz will die down."

There's no one left in the kitchen except the two of us, so I smile shyly back in agreement. I almost can't believe it myself. Chase and I will finally be a *we*. I've barely seen him since our incredible night together, other than our museum date, and that was sadly very PG because the team was leaving for a short road trip the following day. We're one date away from finishing this thing, and I'm more than ready to give away the charity cheques and be done with it. Remind me to never let Holly and Avery con me into doing something so stupid ever again.

“Thank you, Sam. You’ve been such a great friend to me through this whole thing. I know, somehow, there’ll be an amazing girl waiting for you at the end of this. Just not me.” He grins back, and it’s not the usual wistful one he gives me. It’s genuine and hopeful, and it washes away some of the guilt I feel for dragging him into this.

“I think you might be right.” I cock my head to the side and look at Sam. *Is he blushing?*

“Shut up! Did you meet someone?”

“I did. But you can’t laugh. Her name is Sam.” I can’t help myself. I laugh anyways.

“Sam and Sam? I love it. Have I met her before? Where did you guys meet?”

“At the art gallery,” he says sheepishly, and I laugh even harder because, of course, he did. “It was after our date. She knows Holly and Avery and helped organize our visit.” My mind immediately files through all the people we met at the AGO until it snags on a very cute, very pretty woman, probably about my age, with the features of a red-headed pixie. I thought she looked familiar.

And then it hits me. I know Sam’s Sam.

Last year, when Holly and Avery started working with the Northmen, an aggressive, misogynistic Russian player named Boris Kashlinov got kicked off the team. He beat up his girlfriend and tried to tell everyone she fell down the stairs. But after he assaulted Holly during a charity hockey game, he was charged. Sam was his girlfriend, and she was way too young and pretty for an abusive asshole like Kash.

“Oh my god, I know Sam,” I say, but then stop short because I don’t know how much Sam knows about her past, and it’s not my place to tell her story.

“Yes, I know. She told me she recently got out of a bad relationship with a former hockey player. I don’t know everything, but I know enough. She doesn’t seem overly keen on starting anything with me, though.”

“Oh please,” I say and roll my eyes. “That girl deserves someone as wonderful as you. Half of the city is in love with you. Don’t let her push you away. I’m sure you’ll charm her one way or another.”

The corners of Sam’s lips turn up optimistically, and I hope everything works out for them. I’m a firm believer that everything happens for a reason and that good things come to those who wait. Sam and Sam are probably perfect for each other, and I’m about to say as much when I’m interrupted by a few of the players storming into my kitchen.

“Hey Lil, you got any ketchup?” Ollie asks, eyes roaming the countertops and shelves.

“Um, no, I don’t. Absolutely not. What do you need ketchup for?”

“For dipping, obviously.”

“No,” I ground out on a full-body shiver of repulsion. “No, no, no. I did not just cook you a gourmet meal so you could slather sugary tomato paste all over it. What are you? Eight? It’s not chicken nuggets. It’s a panko-crust, doubled-breasted piece of chicken marinated in garlic and herbs for twenty-four hours. You don’t need ketchup.”

“I told you, dude,” Tyler Zingle says, walking behind Ollie. “You don’t ask a chef for fucking ketchup. Even I know that, and I grew up in a trailer park.” Tyler is one of the team’s American players, and his sister Sunny is a regular at games. He has a touch of a Southern accent, but it’s not as strong as his sister’s because he spent most of his formative years living with billet families once he started playing hockey.

“Come on, Lil, hook me up with some of that contraband ketchup,” Ollie tries again. “I’m not the only one who wants it. Ozzy, Pebbles, and Bam Bam want some too.” I roll my eyes yet again. Hockey players and their nicknames. Every player on the team has one, and hardly anyone gets called by their real names.

“Fine,” I capitulate, opening the door to the fridge and handing him a bottle of Heinz’s finest. He takes it and hoists it above

his head like it's the Stanley Cup, then walks back towards the meeting room with Sam and I following.

Today, we are handing out new meal plans to the players. Sam and I reviewed everyone's preference sheets, dietary restrictions, and allergies to create foolproof plans for each player, including calculating the micro and macro nutrients they need to consume to maintain weight, lose weight, or build muscle.

Some of the younger players are still growing and trying to bulk up, so we've designed diets that aim to help them do so safely. We've even drawn some up for the coaching and training staff.

"Does anyone have any questions?" I call out to the group as they enjoy the mountains of food on their plates, readying themselves for the game against Philly tonight.

"Yeah," one of the rookies, Carter Callahan, calls out. "Where's Wilder taking you for your last date? I've got money riding on the outcome and need to know if our boy has the advantage. No offence, Sam." A bunch of the guys laugh and catcall.

"None of your fucking business, assholes," Chase answers. "You can find out with everyone else."

"Oh, come on. We're your teammates, and that's our captain's little sister, which basically makes her our little sister. We need to make sure you're wooing her properly," Ozzy jokes as he squeezes ketchup all over his food. *Gross.*

Just then, Holly and Avery breeze into the room, clipboards in hand. "Actually, they're going to Casa Loma's haunted house, and you're all invited," Avery smiles.

"We're all helping to raise money for the food bank as part of the Scare Hunger Away initiative. There will be prizes for best costumes," Holly adds. "But don't get your hopes up because Luke and I are winning."

The team hoots and cheers. Hockey teams are notorious for loving Halloween and going all out for their parties. I'm

surprised Holly and Avery could throw this together in such a short amount of time.

“It’s a family-friendly, VIP ticketed event hosted in the Casa Loma ballroom. Tickets go on sale tonight, and it’s open to the public, so get ready to smile, sign autographs, and raise a shit load of money.”

“There you have it, boys.” Avery smiles. “Eat your food, then go out there and kick Philly’s ass tonight.”



Chase

One week. It’s been one week since I had Lily in my bed, and waiting and wanting more of her is torture. It’s the one downside of being a professional hockey player; our schedules are ridiculous. Between practices, meetings, and road trips, there’s barely time to do anything but eat and sleep. And with *The Blue and White Bachelorette* wrapping up this week, we’ve had even less time. The closest we’ve come to spending time alone with one another was our date to the Royal Ontario Museum. But with Holly and Avery tagging along with their cameras in our faces, it wasn’t what I would call quality time.

We’ve seen each other in passing at the arena when Lily and Sam are cooking and helping the players with their meal plans, but it’s not like I can just grab her by her cute little chef’s jacket and kiss her senseless, even though that idea has merit. We’re still bound by our contract obligations to keep our relationship unconfirmed until the official announcement in a few days. In the meantime, the entire team is buzzing with excitement over our last date, which coincides with the team’s Halloween party. And that’s why I’m getting dressed up like a cowboy.

Lily and I spent an inordinate amount of time bickering over costumes during the team’s last road trip. I don’t know what it is about the Valentine family, but they are outrageously competitive. When you add Holly to the mix, I wouldn’t be surprised if she tried to sabotage the entire team just so she and Luke could win. Lily would not stop texting me with

potential ideas. All the while, the team was losing spectacularly in Florida and Tampa.

Lily: If we don't beat Holly and Luke, I'll never hear the end of it. Our costumes need to be something ground breaking.

Chase: Agreed. I don't want to lose to your brother any more than you do. Do you know what anyone else is going as? We can't have any duplicates.

Lily: Riley is dressing up as Princess Peach, and she doesn't know that Ozzy and Ollie are going as Mario and Luigi.

Chase: Oh Jesus, is that why they've been growing those god-awful moustaches?

Lily: Yes. Avery let it slip, so I subtly hinted to Riley that she should go as Peach.

Chase: You devious little matchmaker.

Lily: What can I say? Those two have it bad for each other. What about Ryan and Avery? Do we know what they're going as?

Chase: Clark Kent and Lois Lane.

Lily: Unoriginal. We can beat them, no problem. Tyra and Taylor are dressing up as an angel/devil duo, which is super cute. But we can do better.

Chase: A bunch of the guys are going as Power Rangers and Ninja Turtles.

Lily: Unsurprisingly, Sam is going as that dude from Outlander.

Chase: So he's wearing a skirt?

Lily: It's a kilt.

Chase: Same thing.

Lily: I heard LaRoux is going as the Joker.

Chase: Yeah, Stryker is going as Thor.

Lily: Hot Thor or Fat Thor?

Chase: Haha. The one with the actual six-pack, not the beer belly.

Lily: Holly and Luke are our only real competition, and she's not letting anything slip.

Chase: How are your bad-ass bitchery skills? I have an idea.

And that's how I ended up growing out my scruff, buying a pair of aviators, and ordering a customized belt buckle that says, "Yellowstone Ranch." I have a prosthetic "Y" scar branded on my pecs, a button-down flannel, a beat-up Yellowstone jacket, boots with spurs, and a cowboy hat. I don't look bad as Rip, if I do say so myself, and I just know Lily will slay Beth.

"Hey there, cowboy," Avery says as I step out of the hired SUV. She's dressed as Lois Lane, but her blonde hair doesn't really match the comic book version I imagined. My eyes immediately glance around, looking for Lily. "She's just inside the gates waiting for you. And I've got to say, the costume choice was brilliant."

I smile, and we walk along the sidewalk to Casa Loma's entrance. It's one of Toronto's most famous landmarks and pretty much takes up an entire block. Every Halloween, it turns into a touristy haunted house with creepy people who try to jump-scare you. The castle is fully decorated with lights, props, gore, and the like, but tonight the entire place is reserved for the Northmen and anyone who purchased tickets.

We turn the corner and I spot Luke and Holly standing with Lily outside the castle gardens where the haunted maze begins. Every time I see Lily, she takes my breath away. Her blonde hair is messy, bangs pushed to one side, and her big blue eyes are smokey and rimmed with dark makeup. She's sexy as fuck and dressed as the version of Beth that's just a little bit roughed up, with a bruised cheek and split lip. She's wearing dark jeans, some type of low-cut bustier top that makes her tits look fantastic, and a black leather jacket.

Fuck, she's hot.

“Hey there, Beth.” I grin and lean in to kiss her.

“Don’t mess up my makeup, Rip.” She winks.

I hear Avery talking to one of the reps from Casa Loma while filming the promotional portion of the evening and then take a good look at Holly and Luke. He’s wearing a well-fitted blue suit and tie, but it doesn’t look any different than the ones we usually wear on game day. Holly is dressed in a silky red slip dress and high heels, with her long dark hair slung over her shoulders. She’s dressier than usual, but I have no clue who the fuck they’re supposed to be.

“Who the fuck are you two supposed to be?”

“Come on, dude,” Luke scoffs. “We’re Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele.”

“You’re *Fifty Shades of Grey*?” Lily laughs. “Gross. You, brother, are no Christian Grey.” Her lips turn up, and she lightly squeezes my hand as if sharing a dirty little secret with me, and I can’t help but smirk back.

“Are you kidding me?” Avery rejoins our group. “A rich, depraved bad boy and an awkward virgin? I’d say they’re a perfect match.”

“Avery!” Holly yells, slapping her friend on the arm, but Luke just looks smug. Holly suddenly jerks like someone just electrocuted her. “Ohhhh my god, don’t, Luke.”

Avery’s, Lily’s, and my eyes immediately and suspiciously turn toward the couple in question. “What the actual fuck is going on?” Avery asks.

“Nothing,” Holly squeaks, but then she jumps again and kind of leans into Luke for support. “Luke, stooooop.” Her whispered words are broken, breathy and elongated, and just plain weird. “Oh fuck... I knew. This was. A terrible. Idea.”

“Oh my god, Holly! Please tell me you and Luke aren’t method-acting tonight,” Avery says, eyes darting to Luke’s hand, which I now see is holding some sort of remote.

“We don’t do things by halves,” Luke grins.

“Oh, fuck off. Give me that,” Avery says, grabbing the tiny remote from Luke’s hand and slipping it into her pocket. “I’m not letting you torture my best friend with fucking remote control panties all night. And you,” she turns to Holly, “You better not have Benoit balls rolling around in there, or I’ll slap you silly. The last thing we need is yet another sex scandal on this team.”

“Oh, barf,” Lily groans. “Really, Luke? You’re an idiot.”

Luke just laughs, and I can’t help but chuckle to myself until Lily elbows me in the ribs.

“What are we all laughing at?” Ryan, dressed like Clark Kent, asks, walking towards us to join our group of ridiculousness.

“Nothing,” Holly quickly says. “We were just getting ready to go in. Do you have the camera, Avery?”

She gives Holly one last stink eye before ushering us all into Casa Loma’s haunted gardens. Lily’s hand grips mine, and she smiles up at me with complete trust in her eyes. *This girl.* Holly, Luke, Ryan, and Avery trail behind us as we prepare to be scared shitless before joining the rest of the team inside the banquet hall and drinking ourselves silly with a bunch of Northmen Nation.

*Monster Ball***Lily**

“I can’t believe you just left your wife to die with an axe murderer,” I tell Luke. Unlike the rest of us, who remained somewhat calm inside the underbelly of this haunted castle, Luke decided to scream like a little girl, push Holly aside, and run away when a Ghostface dude wielding a bloody axe jumped out at us. I bet Holly is regretting her choice of husband right about now.

“I didn’t leave Holly to die,” Luke argues. “I thought I was dragging her with me.”

“Luke, you literally threw her hand down like it was on fire and bolted. If this was a movie, Holly would have been stabbed eighteen times, pleading, ‘Why? Why did you do this to me, Luke?’”

“Oh, shut the fuck up,” Luke snaps back, but I have to admit, Holly does not look impressed right now. In fact, I’m pretty sure she’s rethinking the whole Christian Grey and Anastasia Steele thing they have going on.

“Christian Grey would never have left Anastasia behind like you did,” I goad, laughing, because sometimes I just like seeing my brother squirm before he’s thrown in the dog house. “And we all know Rip would sacrifice himself a hundred times before letting someone hurt Beth. And Superman turned back fucking time to save Lois Lane. You’ve got a long way to go, buddy, before Luke Valentine digs himself out of this hole.”

I cackle inside as Holly glares at Luke and shimmies over to Avery and Ryan. I hope Avery got that on camera, even if it’s just incriminating footage we can whip out when it suits our purposes. Luke’s going to have a lot of buttering up to do, the jackass.

Within five minutes of us walking into the banquet hall, stories of Luke's horror-filled epic fail have most of the team laughing their asses off. Everyone is dressed up, drinking, jovial, and having fun. The room is filled with black lights, pumpkins, and other creepy decor. Two large bars sit at opposite ends of the room, selling alcoholic and non-alcoholic specialty drinks that glow in the dark. I'm not sure I want to know what type of toxic waste was poured into that punch to make it that colour.

There are probably about two hundred and fifty people here, and a massive donation booth outside the main doors. By the looks of it, the Scare Hunger Away fundraiser is a massive success. There are fans dressed as everything from their favourite hockey players to characters from their favourite Netflix show to couples dressed like peanut butter and jelly. Young fans and old, loyal fans are all roaming around getting autographs or dancing to the live deejay.

The room is buzzing, and so am I. I'm not sure if it's from the cocktail in my hand or the sexy cowboy at my side. The haunted house was fun, but I was so distracted by Chase's hand gripping mine and the pent-up energy thick between us that I barely noticed anything else. Plus, I've never been one for horror movies or things with jump scares because I have the annoying habit of nervous laughing. Take me to a scary movie, and I guarantee every time the rest of the theatre is gasping or screaming, I'll laugh maniacally. Sometimes I think my brain isn't wired quite right.

"Ready for some dancing, Beth?" Chase says, leaning down close to my ear, and I shiver. If I had a say, we'd blow this popsicle stand and be naked right about now. All this pining and waiting has me horny as fuck.

"Do we have to?"

"We do because Holly is fucking scary when we don't meet her schmoozing quota."

"I mean this with love for my sister-in-law, but fuck Holly."

"Hmm, no, thank you. I'd much rather fuck you." Chase grins as he pulls me onto the dance floor as Michael Jackson's

Thriller transitions into a slow song. His arms curl around my waist as mine hook around his neck, and we sway side-to-side, my head on his chest.

I do my best to smother my libido by thinking about anything other than getting Chase naked and let my gaze wander around the room. Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a woman at the bar dressed as Harley Quinn. She's surveying the crowd, alternating between taking pictures and typing something into her iPhone. There's something vaguely familiar about her, but the costume is doing nothing to help me figure out where I've seen her before.

As the song ends, our last steps bring us near Avery and Ryan. They look like they want to get out of here just as much as I do.

"Hey, Avery, do you know who that is?" I ask, pointing to Harley Quinn, and she follows my finger. Her eyes narrow, and she clenches her jaw.

"Oh, hell no," she says, making a beeline toward the woman in question and naturally, we follow. Avery isn't exactly the shy, subtle type, and she's nothing if not entertaining. "What are you doing here?" she asks accusingly.

"It's a public event, Avery. I bought a ticket."

"Yes, it's a public event. For fans. Not for gossip-mongering media members who blow smoke up everyone's ass. You'll write this charity event as an orgy or a satanic ritual where we sacrifice virgins."

"Virgins are yesterday's news, just ask Holly."

"You're a real bitch, you know that? Always were, always will be."

It takes me a second, but I finally place her. I've never seen her in person, but I now recognize her from the photo on her news column. The Buzz. It's Cassidy Tippett. She's pretty in a Regina George, Mean Girls kind of way. I can totally picture her preening around high school halls, pretending her shit didn't stink. And, from what Holly and Avery have told me,

that's precisely what Cassidy Tippettt did in high school, along with making their lives a living hell.

"Yes, well, I'm a bitch who gets the story." Cassidy gives us a big, fake smile before turning to me. "Want to give me the inside scoop on which man will win your heart in a few days?"

"Not a chance." I smile back.

"How about you, lover boy? Want to go on the record?" she asks Chase. "I had a very enlightening conversation with a woman you know quite well. She was dressed like a Playboy Bunny and had some fascinating things to say about your past paramours." She leans in, pretending to whisper, but everyone can hear her. "Someone's been a very naughty boy, Mr. Wilder. Kinky. I like it."

My hand grips Chase's as he stares at Cassidy mutely, jaw tight.

"I'll take that as a no," she laughs. "Never fear. I'm sure if I hang around here long enough, someone will scare up a scandal. You SASS ladies always do such a good job of keeping me in business." With that, Cassidy picks up her cocktail glass, salutes us and walks off, pigtailed and ass swaying in her little booty shorts and fishnets.

"God, I hate that woman," Avery says, taking a large gulp of her drink before dragging Ryan off to get a refill at the bar. I tug on Chase's arm to follow, but he's rooted in place, staring across the banquet hall. My eyes follow his until they find what he's looking at—a woman in high heels, a sparkly, skin tight bodysuit with a fluffy bunny tail and ears.

Anna Munro waves and winks from across the dance floor by a table of desserts, lifting a champagne glass to her lips and smiling. Dread, anger, hate, and something insidious pool in my gut. Anna might not have been the first woman to hurt Chase, but she certainly had a hand in creating the scars and trauma he's dealing with now.

I feel Chase tense beside me. I'm not sure if he feels uncomfortable around Anna or if he thinks I feel uncomfortable around her. Well, he's about to find out.

“Absolutely not. No,” I say, raising my voice, unhooking my arm from his and making my way over to Anna before she decides to come after Chase. I don’t care if I’m making a scene. “Leave. You’re not welcome here.” She shoots me a saccharine smile like she has no idea what I’m talking about.

“I bought a ticket just like everyone, Ms. Valentine. I’m a paying donor.”

“Yeah, I don’t care. Chase doesn’t want you here. I don’t want you here, and any parent with a teenage son doesn’t want you here either. This isn’t American fucking Pie, and you’re not Stiffler’s mom.”

“Oh, stop being so dramatic.” Anna rolls her eyes, stepping closer. “Jealousy doesn’t suit you. It’s not my fault Chase likes his women mature.” I grit my teeth and lower my voice. I honestly don’t understand what her endgame is showing up at games and events. Money? Some weird, twisted desire for second-hand fame? Clout?

“We both know this isn’t a matter of two consenting adults with an age gap. You seduced a minor in your care. There are two words for that, statutory rape.”

Her eyes narrow, lips pursing. “He was an adult.”

”*When you were caught.* I’d bet my left tit that your relationship didn’t magically evolve into something physical the second Chase blew out his birthday candles.”

“Prove it. It’s your word against mine—the word of an envious little girl with a crush on her brother’s best friend.” My hackles raise. Everyone around us is enjoying their night, dancing, sipping their drinks, and chatting animatedly; ignorant of the tension turning sour beside a table full of sweets.

Anna smiles and bends to whisper in my ear. “Chase will always be a broken little boy, but believe me when I tell you, he fucks like a man.”

I see red. And by some divine karma, a waiter carrying a fresh batch of the violently green punch everyone’s been imbibing is walking past. Mercilessly, I grab the entire bowl and empty it

over Anna's head. Her stupid bunny ears slip off onto the floor, and her costume looks like toxic waste.

You know that moment in movies where the record player screeches to a halt, and the entire room suddenly goes eerily silent and stares? Yeah, that's this moment.

"You bitch," Anna shrieks as her hand slaps across my cheek. I don't even feel it. Instead, a manic grin stretches across my face as I step forward and lift a double-decker cake off the dessert table and launch it at Anna.

"There you go, bitch. You can have your cake and eat it too."

"I'm going to fucking kill you, you little slut."

I'm pretty sure we're about a millisecond away from a proper catfight for the ages when arms wrap around my waist and lift me away. I flail, kicking my legs out. "Bring it on, bitch." I turn towards Chase and yell, "Let me go. I'll take her down so hard her bunny tail will lodge so far up her ass, it will come out her throat."

"Oh Jesus Christ, here we go again," Holly says as she and Avery run toward us. The entire room is in a state of shock and pandemonium. A security guard is escorting Anna away, and I notice several Northmen players laughing and cheering.

"Lily, what the fuck?" Luke thunders, glancing at Chase and me.

"I think it's time to go," Chase says. "As much as I appreciate you defending my honour, I think we've provided enough entertainment for one night."

And that's when I notice all the phones pointed in our direction. *Oh fuck.* At the centre of it all, Cassidy Tippett's bright white smile is directed right at me. She gives me a thumbs up and mouths the words *thank you*, before snapping more photos and walking away.

Sucker Punch

Lily

The BUZZ By Cassidy Tippett

Let Them Eat Cake: Northmen Fundraisers Just Keep Getting 'Wilder'

It looked like a scene from a Yellowstone bar brawl at the Northmen's Scare Hunger Away Halloween fundraiser. Players, friends, families, and donors all enjoyed a fright-filled night at Casa Loma after Toronto's very own Blue and White Bachelorette decided she wanted to throw down in a catfight.

Perhaps Toronto's sweetheart was getting a little too into character with her beau, as the couple dressed to impress as Rip and Beth from the hit TV show Yellowstone.

Just who dug their claws into Ms. Valentine, you might ask? It was none other than the queen cougar herself, Anna Munro, who was, unsurprisingly, dressed as a Playboy Bunny.

In case you didn't know, the scandalous Ms. Munro is the former billet mom of Chase Wilder, with whom he shared a brief affair. At the time, the then teenaged Wilder was also dating Ms. Munro's daughter. And if you think this sounds like something off a daytime talk show, you'd be right.

It's unclear what started the spat between Ms. Valentine and Ms. Munro, but one can assume whatever prompted the Beth wannabe to dump a bowl of punch over her nemesis' head definitely revolved around the man on her arm.

It certainly makes one wonder if there isn't more to the story between Anna Munro and Chase Wilder. But if there's one thing this author knows for sure, it's that by hook or by crook, the truth will come out.

I wake up to a very hot, very naked body beside mine. Chase is still asleep beside me in my bed, and I take a moment to just stare at him. I know watching someone while they sleep is creepy and stalkerish, but I can't help myself. He's completely relaxed, his mouth slightly open, and the stubble on his jaw just a little darker than last night.

God, last night. I can't believe I went all Beth Dutton on Anna Munro's ass. No doubt, tongues will be wagging. Oh well, there's nothing I can do about it now, and I am sure Holly and Avery are already putting a spin on the entire event. The only thing I need to worry about is tonight. It's officially November, and the team is playing the Las Vegas Aces, which means *The Blue and White Bachelorette* is finally coming to an end. I posted my last blog, and all that's left to do is hand over some cheques and officially take Chase off the market.

I glance over at his sleeping form again. After he took me home last night, I invited him upstairs. Riley was still at the party, and I wasn't going to waste a night of having the entire apartment to ourselves. I want so badly for Chase to be completely comfortable with me. I want to experience everything with him, and I want him to trust me with his body. I hope his aversion to me touching him and his need to take control will fade with time. Last night, we attempted some cowgirl action, but Chase wasn't into it. He immediately tensed with me on top. So, I pulled a Missy Elliot—flipped and reversed it—and tried reverse cowgirl. While he seemed a little more relaxed in that position, it still wasn't great for him.

We ended up fucking in the shower against the cool shower tiles and then again with him pounding into me from behind. Don't get me wrong. It was fabulous, and I'm not complaining about the orgasms, but the trauma Chase went through is sitting on his chest and suffocating him. He needs to talk to someone with the skill set to help him work through it. As much as I wish that person was me, I know it's not.

My eyes wander over to the windows. The sky is just starting to lighten with early morning light. We should probably get up soon and get ready to head to the rink. There's an optional

morning skate for the team, and then Sam and I are hosting a short cooking class for the players. Someone needs to teach the guys basic knife and cooking skills so they can utilize the meal plans and instructional videos we have posted on the team portal.

“Hey you,” Chase says, cracking an eye open and smiling. I can’t help but return his grin, and when his hand skims up the side of my bare hip and lower back, my nipples harden instantly. God, he’s so fucking hot. He just does it for me. Chase pulls me close and kisses me, not caring that we just woke up, and I probably have morning breath. Then again, I don’t care that he has morning breath either, so I guess we’re even. “What time is it?”

“Just after six,” I answer, shimmying closer and noticing his hard length against my lower abdomen. “Someone is definitely up and ready to start the day.”

“Yeah, well, someone really likes you.”

I laugh, but it’s cut off by Chase kissing the ever-loving shit out of me. I arch into him before he flips me on my back, his hands instinctively finding my wrists and pinning them to the mattress. Slowly, he kisses down my body and every cell in my body goes on high alert. This girl’s not going to lie; I love it when Chase goes down on me. I didn’t know what I was missing until he came along with his magical tongue.

His lips trail kisses along my ribs, across my stomach, and then his tongue traces around my belly button. By the time he reaches my hipbone, I’m shaking with want. Sometimes I’m not a patient person. One of those times is when Chase is two inches away from my pussy, and I’m seconds away from nirvana. He lets go of my hands and then pushes my legs open wide. I crane my neck and then prop myself up on my elbows to watch as he literally dives in head first and gets to work.

“Oh fuck,” I huff, my arms immediately giving out and my head flopping back onto the pillow. Chase’s mouth should be a state secret. A CIA interrogation tactic used to pry secrets from international spies.

His tongue laps at my clit before sliding down to my entrance and back again. He knows precisely the right pressure and speed to drive me insane. It's too much and not enough at the same time. Like I said, I can be impatient, and right now, I just want to come.

He chuckles into me, pausing. "It's not a race, Lily."

"It's not, not a race," I retort. I mean, the sooner I come, the sooner I can do it all over again.

He gives me a self-satisfied grin and then goes to town on my clit. It's seconds before I explode on his tongue, my hips lifting off the bed, bucking into him. After I drift back down to earth, my eyes roam over his body and zero in on his long, hard cock.

Not that I'm an expert, but I think Chase has a real nice one. Just the right size to hit all my pleasure buttons. I've never done a scientific study or anything, but sometimes when I read my smutty books and the heroine says the dude's cock is nine or ten inches long, and she can't fit her hand around its girth, I worry. Do women actually know how long nine or ten inches is? I chuckle to myself and then smile deviously at Chase and his perfectly sized peen.

"I want the good stuff," I say, and he laughs. "And I want you to tie me up again." Being at his mercy is such a fucking turn-on, I can't even begin to describe why. It just is. I trust him completely with my body. He'd never hurt me, and I am one thousand percent comfortable being at his mercy. I want him to understand how much I trust him and eventually reciprocate it.

"I have a few scarves in my dresser," I say, pointing to the drawer. When I bought pretty swathes of silk in Paris, I never imagined using them for this, but now I think they're the best fashion investment I've ever made.

"Are you sure?"

I nod, and within seconds Chase is lightly fastening my wrists to my bed frame. He's always careful not to tie anything too tight, and the attentiveness he shows me in bed amazes me. He

always puts me first, making sure I'm okay with anything and everything he does.

"Condom?" he asks.

"In the drawer."

"We used the last one last night."

"Fuck it. I'm on the pill."

He hesitates for a second but then smiles wide. "I'm clean, and I've almost always used a condom." He doesn't say so, but if I had to guess, I say the only times he hasn't used protection was when he was too young to know what he was doing. The thought sends rage coursing through my body, but I push it aside because it has no place here with us.

Chase leans down and kisses me as he pushes inside me. We let out a collective exhale. He's perfection. This is perfection. We are perfection. *He was made for me.* The thought filters through my brain, past the pleasure building in my body and settles over my heart. God, I love this man. He deserves to be loved like only I can love him, and I plan on doing it for the rest of my life.

His thrusts start slow as he runs his hands down my torso before settling them on my breasts. He squeezes them gently, and I bow into him, loving how his movements elicit pleasure from every inch of my body.

At first, he takes his time until I'm urging him to move faster. His pace quickens as he thrusts into me, and the desire to grasp onto him is so strong that I pull harder against my restraints. Pleasure pools in my core and low in my spine. *I'm so close.* Chase pounds into me with reckless abandon, hoisting my hips up to give him better access and the change in angle hits me just right. We're both out of control, pushing, pulling, and fucking until I feel Chase pulse inside me as he comes, and I strain upwards to follow him.

Unfortunately, my orgasm is cut short by the sound of silk ripping from my bed frame and wrist and the feeling of my fist punching myself in the eye.

"Ouch, FUCK," I scream.

“Shit, are you okay?” Chase quickly unties my other hand as I cradle my face with the one I just punched myself with. It still has part of my sky-blue scarf attached to it.

“What the fuck is going on in here?” Riley yells as she practically kicks open my bedroom door. Everyone pauses in a tableau of awkward horror. I’m sitting up naked, holding my half-tied hand to my eye, Chase’s ass is out for the entire world to see, and Riley is just standing in the doorway, taking it all in like a voyeur. “What in the kinky fuckery kind of shit are you guys into?”

“Riley! Can’t you knock?”

“You just screamed like someone was dying in here, and you want me to knock first?”

“She makes a good point,” a masculine voice says from behind her. “It totally sounded like something painful was happening and not in a kinky good way.”

“Is that Ozzy?” I ask Riley, raising the brow of my good eye. The one I just sucker-punched is already swelling. Chase discreetly pulls my bedsheet over us, but everyone’s already seen everything.

“You bet it is,” he says smugly, slinging an arm around Riley. And that’s when I notice they’re not wearing many clothes either. He smiles big, giving Chase a thumbs up before gazing at me. “Dude, what happened to your eye? Did Chase bukkake you? That’s not very gentlemanly of you, Wilder. I at least give Riley some warning.”

“Oh my god, shut up, Ozzy. I can’t believe I slept with you,” Riley says, rubbing her temples like she has a headache.

“Again.” I laugh even though the right side of my face hurts like a mother fucker. “You seem to be making a habit out of it.”

“Shut up,” she yells back at me, sticking her tongue out. “Ozzy, go get Lily some ice. I need to get ready for school. And you two, put on some damned clothes.”



Chase

Lily looks ridiculous. Her cheek and eye are swollen, and she has a purpling bruise forming around it. It looks like someone sucker-punched her and gave her a black eye. And I doubt anyone would believe she did it to herself. In fact, Luke took one look at his sister this morning when she walked into the arena and immediately asked who he needed to kill. Holly and Avery wondered if maybe they missed someone throwing haymakers during Lily's brawl with Anna, and I just feel like a fucking idiot.

This is all my fault. I may not have thrown the punch, and even I can see the humour in this morning's events, but at the end of the day, Lily wouldn't have a black eye if I wasn't such a fucking mess. I need to get over myself. I need to leave the past in the past and be fucking normal for once in my life, which is why, for the first time ever, I'm going to talk to the team doctor.

Dr. Brooks is good people. She's professional and to the point, and she never lets any of us bullshit her about injuries. She's the sole reason most of us haven't had career-ending injuries or played through ones that could have caused permanent damage. If Stacy Brooks thinks you need time off to heal, she forces you to sit out. She never puts winning over a player's health, and she refuses to clear a guy to play unless she's one-hundred percent certain he's ready.

"Hey, Doc," I greet her hesitantly. I'm showered and ready to head up to the kitchen with the rest of the guys, but I hung back and waited for my opportunity to speak with her privately after our morning skate.

"Chase, how can I help you? Is something ailing you?" She smiles wide, looking me over, checking if I'm favouring a bad ankle or sprained wrist.

"I, ah, wanted to talk to you about something personal, if that's okay." She gestures with her arm welcoming me into her office, and then shuts the door behind her. I sit on a comfy brown leather chair in front of her desk and glance around. I've been in here several times before, and I know I'm stalling.

But I don't know the first thing about asking for help, and this is awkward as fuck. "How are Aiden and Gracie?" I ask, motioning to the framed photo of Dr. Brook's kids.

"They're great. Gracie is in her music phase and learning guitar, and Aiden is doing his best to become the next Toronto Northmen draftee."

"You should bring him out sometime. The guys love having kids at practice once in a while."

"He'd love that." She smiles encouragingly, letting silence fill the room. I just sit there, hands in my lap, not quite sure what to do or how to ask what I want to ask. "I'm assuming you didn't come here just to ask me about my kids."

"No, I didn't." I pause again, glancing at Dr. Brooks and then just get on with it. "I wanted to know if there was someone I could, maybe, talk to about some things I've been struggling with from my past. Lily suggested that talking to someone might help me work through it."

"Absolutely, Lily is one hundred percent correct. I know a few excellent therapists if it's strictly mental health related. Or if you need a little more help with this issue, there's always the NHL Players' Assistance Program." The NHL Player Assistance Program is primarily for guys struggling with addiction; that's not for me.

"No, it's not drugs or alcohol or anything like that. It's more personal crap from when my mom died, living with my dad, and some of the stuff that happened when I played junior hockey."

"I see. Well, this is all strictly confidential, of course, but is there anything you can tell me so I can get a better idea of who to refer you to? And believe me when I say this, Chase, there is nothing to be ashamed of for asking for help. You're certainly not the first hockey player to ask, and you won't be the last. In fact, I wish more of you would come in a talk more often, even if it's just performance or hockey related."

"I, um, my dad isn't a nice guy. He kind of fell apart after my mom died, and I had some shitty stuff happen to me because

of that. He brought a woman who wasn't a good person into our life." Sweat starts to bead on my neck and back, and I start fidgeting. How does a two-hundred-pound hockey player, built of muscle, explain that they were sexually assaulted as a kid? "There's, ah, some stuff I don't like when it comes to being physical with women, and I want to get over that."

The room is silent for what seems like forever, and I refuse to look Dr. Brooks in the eyes for fear of what I might see there. When I finally do, it's empathy and understanding mirrored back at me. She smiles sadly and nods.

"Alright, Chase," she says sympathetically but without any hint of pity. "I think Dr. Brighton would be a good fit. She's highly qualified, and I know her personally. She helped me through a difficult time after my sexual assault. Well, perhaps it's more accurate to say we helped each other."

My head jerks up. I expect Dr. Brooks to look as broken as I feel, but she just stares back, strong and confident. Like whatever happened to her in the past has no hold on her now.

"One in three," Dr. Brook says sadly. "One in three women experience sexual assault of some kind, and while the odds for men are lower, it doesn't make it any less valid or harmful." *One in three?* That's over thirty percent, and it probably only includes reported incidents, which means the actual number is likely a shitload higher. Anger surges through my body, and moisture floods my mouth, making me nauseated. "I'll make the call and text you the details. And don't worry, I'll work everything out around the team's schedule."

I nod once and stand, making my way toward the door. My mind is racing with statistics and probabilities. *One in three.* That means it's likely several of the women in my life, and probably some of the men, have been victims. I've stayed silent for over a decade, and I can't help but wonder if my silence has harmed more than just myself.

"And just so you know," Dr. Brooks starts before I leave her office, "there is no statute of limitations on sexual assault in Canada. We're not victims, Chase. We're survivors."

*Gossip Girl***Lily**

“Are you ready for your big night?” Sam asks from across the kitchen. We have about ten minutes before our sacred cooking space is taken over by boisterous hockey players with next to no cooking experience. Luke is an exception to the rule. For the most part, hockey players are spoiled from when they’re kids to when they’re drafted.

Unfortunately, that means by the time they make it to the big show, they have no domestic skills. Most guys can’t even do their own laundry without turning all their whites pink or grey, and their cooking skills are limited to Mr. Noodle and frozen crap you can throw in the microwave.

“You know I am,” I reply. Tonight is the night I get to choose Chase once and for all. I am more than ready to hand out some cheques and be done with this entire thing. I walk over to Sam and wrap my arms around his shoulders, giving him a big hug. “Thank you for everything. You’ve been such a good friend.” Sam hugs me back and then grins. He really is a handsome fucker, and he can cook to boot. “Sam is a lucky girl.”

He blushes, and I smile even bigger. “Is that a blush, Mr. McCrae? Don’t hold out on me. Spill the tea.”

“Let’s just say things have a way of working themselves out for the best. You got your man, and I got my girl.”

I laugh and throw in another hug because I couldn’t agree more.

“Whoa, what’s going on in here?” a male voice calls from the doorway. I step away from Sam and roll my eyes at Ollie, Ozzy, and ten other players walking into the kitchen. We have several cooking stations for everyone to work in pairs and learn valuable life skills.

“What does it look like?” I retort.

“It looks like home-ec class,” Carter Callahan says, eyeing the utensils and ingredients like they might explode. He’s an eighteen-year-old rookie who currently lives with April and Jake Owens. Jake is nearing retirement and it’s pretty status quo for young guys to bunk with veteran players when they’re still getting their feet wet in the league.

“That’s not a bad analogy,” Sam answers, sharpening a knife. “But think of it this way, young Padawan. If you want to impress your lady friends, there’s nothing sexier than a man who’s good with his hands in a kitchen.”

“I second that,” Holly calls as she and Avery click-clack their way into the kitchen, phones in hand, ready to create their next viral social media post. “Luke’s a superstar cook, and he wowed me with my favourite meal on our first date.”

“Yeah, well, everything he knows he learned from me, so you can thank me for that.” I politely butt in.

“Ryan’s also very talented in the kitchen,” Avery nods and then shoots her husband a sly smile. “His countertop skills are second to none.”

“Oh Jesus, please tell me you didn’t have sex on our countertop,” Holly whisper yells.

“We didn’t,” Avery laughs before adding, “We did it on Luke’s.”

“TMI, little sis.” Ollie groans, and Ozzy puts his hands over his ears like earmuffs and starts chanting, “La, la, la.”

I can’t help but laugh. This team is like a big group of squabbling siblings, and I love it. I’ve never been a part of an organization so tight knit. Even the owners, Monica and Mitchell Starling, enjoy mingling with their players and coaches. The Toronto Northmen is a first-class organization, where everyone from the players to the Zamboni driver feels like they’re a valuable part of the team.

“Alright, alright,” I holler and motion for everyone to pair up and pick a spot at a cooking station. “We need to get cooking before you need to leave for your pre-game rituals. I’d hate to infringe on your weird superstitions.”

It takes a few minutes, but the guys settle in and calm down while Sam and I review the items in front of them along with the safety instructions. The last thing we need is Coach McCall murdering us because one of his players chopped off his thumb dicing onions or suffering third-degree burns from touching a hot element.

We're making two simple dishes. The first is a chicken and vegetable linguine, and the second is a teriyaki beef stir-fry. Both have lots of protein and check off a lot of the nutritional boxes we want the players to cover.

Sam reviews knife skills with the players and the importance of having good, sharp knives in the kitchen while I review how to properly portion and measure all the ingredients. For the most part, the players seem to be enjoying themselves. Even Holly and Avery are participating because, god knows, those two need all the help they can get.

I circulate the room, checking on everyone's dishes and stop at Luke and Chase's station. Holly wasn't kidding, Luke is talented, and Chase isn't half bad either. As I walk by, I wink at Chase with my good eye and Luke grunts.

"Gotta admit," Ollie says, "that black eye makes you look pretty badass, little Valentine."

"Yeah, well, my right hook packs a big punch."

"How do you punch yourself in the face?" Carter Callahan asks. I can't help it when my gaze meets Chase's, and a secretive smile curves my lips. Luke narrows his eyes.

"That's for me to know and you to never find out." The guys chuckle, but Ollie and Ozzy share a look that tells me Ozzy definitely told his brother about the scene he walked in on this morning. I need to grill Riley at the game tonight about this whole Ozzy situation. She's obviously coming to watch the big BWB finale, and then we're watching the boys slaughter Vegas with the rest of the WAGs up in our box. That girl better give me all the juicy details because I want to know if she and Ozzy are finally getting together and what the fuck is going on.

Before long, and with only a few minor mishaps, everyone starts plating their food and digging in. Watching people enjoy food I've had a hand in creating gives me such a serotonin boost, especially when it's a group of guys who, a little over an hour ago, had no clue what they were doing.

"Holy shiitake mushrooms," Tyler Zingle moans from the back corner with his partner Hunter LaRoux. "This is fucking amazing." He's eating some of the teriyaki beef, which ironically has shiitake mushrooms in it. I've always loved a good stir-fry.

"I can't stop eating it," Ollie says, happily shovelling linguine into his face. By all accounts, our cooking class is a grand success. Everyone is focused on enjoying the fruits of their labour, and with any luck, they'll all remember how to replicate the recipes at home. But, even if they forget, we have a step-by-step guide on the player portal where they can get ingredient lists and instructions and watch videos using the team's personalized player app.

The room is quiet for a few blessed minutes as everyone feasts on their pre-game meals. Until phones start buzzing. At first, it's just one or two dings and chimes. Nothing too out of the ordinary. But then Holly and Avery's phones start pinging like they have eleventy-billion text notifications all coming in at once. And in my experience, when everyone's phones start going off simultaneously like a forty-four-piece orchestra, it's never a good sign.

"That fucking cunt," Avery whispers under her breath, but every single one of us hears her. When Avery uses the C-word, I know it's not good news. Her eyes dart between Chase and me, and my gut clenches.

Picking up my phone, I look at the notification: *BREAKING NEWS: Superstar Hockey Player & Heartless Son—Has the Wild and Destructive Past of Chase Wilder Finally Caught Up to Him?*

Bile rises in my throat as I glance at Chase. His cheeks redden with anger as his eyes scan his phone. Immediately, I open the link to Cassidy Tippet's latest piece of trash reporting.

Chase Wilder, one of the Toronto Northmen's superstar forwards, has been a fan favourite since his arrival several years ago. His high-octane play on the ice often made management and fans turn a blind eye to his antics off it.

It's no secret that Wilder is a ladies' man, and although Lily Valentine's recent effort to make him her own personal reclamation project, one has to wonder if the troubled hockey player is beyond saving.

Before Wilder made his NHL debut, he was already making headlines for all the wrong reasons. His off-ice exploits have been well documented, including his affair with a woman twice his age and her daughter. While playing junior hockey in London, Ontario, Wilder dated his billet family's daughter, only to two-time her with her own mother. And even though the sordid details were well known within hockey circles, Wilder graduated to the NHL and took his womanizing ways to South Florida.

This author has contacted several of Wilder's alleged past conquests, all of whom wished to remain anonymous. But the things these women revealed would make even the most notorious philanders blush. Late-night partying, drunken hookups, and even some risqué bedroom romps involving handcuffs and plenty of other novelties you can purchase at your favourite online sex boutique are just some of the stories coming from Wilder's past. It's juicier than a Fifty Shades novel.

It appears that some of his wild ways were curtailed when Wilder joined the Northmen, but with the reappearance of Anna Munro, his very own Mrs. Robinson, one might wonder if he's back to his old tricks.

Wilder is currently participating in The Blue and White Bachelorette, a dating farce created by Sparks and Avery Sports Specialists, the firm controlling the team's social media. Again, one has to wonder how many scandals the Northmen organization will allow Holly Sparks-Valentine and Emerson Avery-Gunner to cause before cutting them loose. Then again, when you're married to the team's leading defenceman and goal-scorer, standard rules don't apply.

And while most of this is old news, Wilder's childhood might be the most shocking of all. Growing up in a small town just north of Toronto, Wilder's mom died of cancer when he was just ten years old, leaving him in the care of his father, Jeff Wilder.

You'd think that with only one parent left, the bond between father and son would be strong. And as a multimillionaire athlete, he'd ensure his dad had the best care.

That's certainly not the case.

This author can tell you from a first-hand interview with Jeff Wilder that Chase has written off the man who raised him. The elder Wilder lives in a run-down house with barely the basic necessities available to him. He suffers from physical and mental health illnesses due to his battle with alcoholism and addiction. When asked if his son has done anything to assist with his recovery, Mr. Wilder said his son rarely visits and has left him alone to grapple with the demons of losing his wife.

How can a son be so heartless? Mr. Wilder says that as a child, Chase struggled with anger issues, often becoming physical, hitting, punching, and even using a hockey stick to assault his father. The physical abuse became so traumatic that Mr. Wilder admits he was relieved when his son left home.

While there have never been any incidents of physical abuse reported, can a leopard really change his spots? And with Lily Valentine showing up to work sporting a black eye this morning, the question on everyone's mind has to be, is Chase Wilder a man out of control?

WHAT THE ACTUAL FUCK?

My blood might actually be boiling. How dare she. I've never wanted to physically harm anyone in my life, but if Cassidy Tippett were in front of me right now, I'd show her exactly how I got my black eye and punch her fucking face in. That bitch! That horrible, gossip-mongering, lying, sneaky, fucking bitch.

“This article is bullshit,” I say to no one in particular. Everyone is just awkwardly standing around, not sure what to do. Several guys are glancing at my eye and then over at Chase, and I know *they’re wondering*. They’re wondering if any of Cassidy Tippett’s bullshit is true.

“I accidentally punched myself in the face, okay?” I yell, not making any of this better. Me telling everyone I punched myself is probably worse and even less believable than a battered woman saying she “fell down the stairs.”

“It’s true,” Ozzy says, corroborating my story. “I was there. She really did punch herself in the face. I even had to get her some ice.”

“And this,” I hold up my phone with the article on the screen, “is bullshit. None of this is true, or at least whatever facts Cassidy Tippett reported have been twisted and skewed so far from the truth it’s ridiculous.”

Several of the guys nod in agreement. Most of them have been victims of Cassidy Tippett’s sensationalization, but the damage has been done. Every fan reading this article will have an opinion on it. I don’t even want to look at the comment section.

As the players file out of the kitchen, I can’t help but wonder, *how did she know?* Where did she get her information? When only Chase, Holly, Avery, and I are left in the room, we stare at each other for a few minutes. *This is a fucking nightmare.*

“What are we going to do?” I ask Holly and Avery. This is their specialty. They’ll know what to do.

“We are going ahead as planned. Everyone knows Cassidy Tippett is a raging, raving bitch. No one will believe this trash.” Holly waves her phone in the air as if saying it out loud will somehow discredit the article.

“And how did she know about my black eye?”

“We’ve been posting videos from cooking class. I’m assuming it was a last-minute addition before she published,” Avery says.

“And what about the stuff about Chase’s dad?” Throughout this entire fiasco, Chase has been eerily quiet. His lips are turned down, pursed together in a frown, but he hasn’t said a damned thing. If I were him, I’d be losing my shit right about now.

“She went to my dad’s house.” His voice is low and defeated. “My guess is she paid him. I’m a co-signer on my dad’s bank accounts, and I got a notification this morning that there was an eTransfer of five-thousand dollars accepted into his account. I didn’t think anything of it.”

“But why would he do that to you?” Holly asks, dumbfounded.

“Because some of what’s in that article is true.”



Chase

Unease and disgust roil in my stomach. This is my fault. I’ve tried so hard to bury my past, but maybe it’s finally catching up to me.

“What do you mean some of the article is true?” Avery questions, her brow raising in disbelief. “We’re not idiots, Chase. You may have sowed some wild oats in the past, but we know you’re not a violent person.”

“No, I’m not, but Jeff Wilder is. The things he mentioned in the article are all things he did to me as a kid. He became very abusive after my mom died and got into a lot of drugs and alcohol. It’s why I spent so much time at the Valentine’s.” The look of horror on Holly and Avery’s faces makes me want to crawl into myself. No one wants to admit what a fuck-up their dad is or how badly they’re fucked up themselves.

“I pay all my dad’s living expenses and give him twenty-five grand a year to spend on whatever, but I know he just uses it for booze and drugs. I refuse to give him anymore unless he agrees to go to rehab.”

Lily takes my hand in hers, linking our fingers together and squeezes. She wants so badly to fix me. To help me. But

maybe Cassidy Tippett is right. Maybe I'm beyond saving. Maybe I'm not worth it.

“And the stuff about Anna Munro is true, and it started a lot sooner than what everyone thinks.” My body goes rigid as I think back to the days when I was stuck living between the shit hole my home had become and the escape the Valentine house was to me.

I think back to *her*. I haven't said her name out loud for over a decade. It doesn't do any good to dredge up the past, especially when it is already long gone and buried. Barbara Bell died of a drug overdose after I left for London. Some might say it was divine karma, but she was just as twisted and fucked up as she made me. And Anna Munro just filled in the space she vacated. The world is full of sick fucks; when one dies, another just steps into their place.

The room is silent, and I know what everyone is thinking. I know the questions racing through their heads. Everyone is wondering just how fucked up my childhood really was. They're wondering if I was abused and how often. They're wondering how hard my dad beat me and why no one noticed or said anything. They're wondering who to blame and whose fault it was. The same questions that have plagued me for years are the same ones everyone thinks about when I bring up my past, which is why I prefer not to talk about it at all.

“Okay,” Holly starts, and the sadness in her eyes just about undoes me. “Avery and I will work on this. We'll figure something out. Don't worry.”

After they leave, Lily and I stand alone in the kitchen. She's still gripping my hand like she knows if she lets go, she'll let me go.

“You can't pick me tonight, Lily,” I say quietly with a sad smile.

“What do you mean?”

“I mean, everyone in the arena is going to be looking at you and looking at me and wondering if I'm the monster Cassidy Tippett made me out to be.”

“Then let’s show them you’re not.” She pauses and turns to face me, looking me right in the eyes. The bruise marring her face stands out, mocking me louder than words ever could. “I love you, Chase. I’ve always loved you. Even when I was just a kid and you were pulling on my pigtails, hiding in the treehouse with Luke looking at pictures of boobs. I loved you then too.”

I chuckle, but the sound lacks realness.

“Don’t do this,” Lily says, tears welling in her eyes. “Don’t give up on us. We deserve this chance.”

“I love you too, Lily. You’ve always been my lifeline. You were my light when I was at my darkest.”

“Then fight for us, Chase. Don’t walk away. Don’t ask me to walk away.” She pleads with me as tears fall down her cheeks, and I hate myself for asking this of her, but I need to figure my shit out. Right now, I’m not the man she deserves, but maybe one day I could be.

*The Choice***Chase**

I'm so fucking proud of Lily as she stands in front of thousands of people, her head held high and hands two large cheques to the Canadian Mental Health Association and the Alzheimer Society of Canada. Holly and Avery decided it only made sense to give both charities the money rather than choosing one over the other. They've rolled out the red carpet for a pre-game ceremony and photo op.

"And here to make her final decision is Lily Valentine," Holly hands over the microphone to Lily. The entire spectacle is strained and awkward because of Cassidy Tippett's article, and I know the decision she's making isn't one she wants.

"Thank you, Holly. And thank you to Monica and Mitchell Starling, the entire Northmen organization, and all of our sponsors for their generous donations." Lily takes a breath and looks at both Sam and me before continuing. "Over the last several weeks, I have had the opportunity to date not one, but two amazing men. I honestly could not have asked for two more kind, genuine, fun, and, as you all can see, handsome men." A laugh ripples through the crowd at Lily's joke, and she takes a long breath.

"Tonight, I'm supposed to make a choice. But as I stand here, looking into a crowd with many more women, and young girls than usual, I've decided to choose something different." She pauses, a hint of sadness in her eyes, but then she blinks and it's gone. "I choose me. I choose myself. As a woman, there's nothing wrong with putting yourself or your career above a relationship. And it also doesn't have to be one or the other. We can have both if we are strong enough to pursue our dreams and have the love and support of those around us.

“Sometimes the decisions we must make are not the ones we want to. We make them because they’re the right ones, not because they are the easy ones.” Lily turns and smiles at Sam and me, and her eyes find mine when she says her next words. “Love isn’t always about getting what you want when you want it. Sometimes it’s about sacrifice, patience, and timing. I can be patient because when you’ve waited your whole life for someone to love you back, what difference does a little more time make?”

Chatter and clapping fill the arena as Lily hands the mic back the Holly and walks carefully off the ice. My eyes follow her as she goes, my heart swelling.

When you’ve waited your whole life for someone to love you back, what difference does a little more time make?

Her words echo in my mind. Lily Valentine will never give up on me. She’ll wait for me. I just need to become the best version of myself for her and be brave enough to do that.

NHL Breaking News:

After a 3-1 win over the Las Vegas Aces, in which Chase Wilder scored two goals and had one assist, he announced that he’s taking a leave of absence from the team to deal with personal matters. It should be noted that Wilder is not entering the Player Assistance Program, and his leave is not related to any issues with substance abuse.

It has also been confirmed that any allegations stemming from the article written by Buzz reporter, Cassidy Tippett, are false, and the organization is seeking legal counsel to file a defamation suit against the gossip columnist.

*Setting the Story Straight***Chase***Six Weeks Later*

Someone from the sound crew adjusts my lapel mic while a makeup artist touches-up something on my forehead, probably sweat. The lighting in here is hot as fuck, but the reporter sitting across from me smiles patiently. Scarlett St. James-Kaur is one of the most highly respected and professional journalists in her field.

A few years ago, she was just starting as a broadcast reporter when she broke a story about corruption and abuse within the Canadian Hockey Association. She worked extensively with victims, players, and investigators to uncover the truth behind the cover-up of player sexual misconduct and under-the-table hush money payments to victims. She won several prestigious awards for journalistic integrity, and her career has skyrocketed.

When it comes to giving a voice to the voiceless and speaking difficult truths, there's no one better than Scarlett St. James-Kaur. She's made herself a household name. And it just so happens that Holly and Avery have a working relationship with her from when they were all students at Western.

"Relax, Chase. This interview will go a lot smoother if you remember to breathe." The raven-haired, dark-eyed woman across from me smiles. As far as reporters go, Scarlett isn't exactly what you'd expect from a typical TV personality. She's cool, calm and professional, but she's not cookie-cutter. The hot pink streak of colour in her hair and the tiny diamond nose stud are unexpected. She still looks the part in her business skirt and matching blazer, but her black Converse instead of heels and everything else about her says, *Fuck the Patriarchy and the status quo*. She has stage presence, and not

just because she's a beautiful woman. Her take-no-shit attitude commands the room.

"Right," I say, breathing through my nose and then out through my mouth. My therapist, Dr. Brighton, and I have been working on breathing techniques. Dr. Brooks was right. She's excellent at what she does. Evie Brighton is one of the easiest people to talk to that I've ever met, and over the last six weeks, we've worked through a shit ton of shit, so much so that I'm finally ready to share my truth with the world.

Therapy is no joke. It's hard work. But, as Dr. Brighton says, "You get what you put into it." I wasn't sure what to expect from the whole experience. A part of me thought it might be a whole bunch of woo-woo, kumbaya, hand-holding crap, but I was wrong. When I took my leave from the team, I wanted to get my life in order. I wanted to make peace with my past and move forward so I could be the man that Lily deserves. Because she deserves someone who can give her everything she wants, including a healthy sex life and true happiness.

And I am beginning to understand that I deserve those things too.

There is no miracle cure for trauma, but I've learned that bottling everything inside is a lot like drinking poison then fighting your body's natural response to expel it by whatever means necessary. Keeping everything inside just made me sicker. Talking to Dr. Brighton has helped me work through a lot of the things holding me back. And Lily's been there too, as a friend. I know that's not what she wants, and it's not what I want either, but for now, it works, and I think I'm finally ready to move forward.

Lily's come to a few sessions with me. I wanted her there, and Dr. Brighton suggested it. She's my support system; not a crutch, but someone I love, trust, and respect. Someone I know won't judge me. Someone who believes in me and believes that there's something better waiting for us at the end of this journey.

Slowly but surely, we've worked on my issues with certain types of touch. While the memories and internal scars will

always be there, they've faded.

"You ready?" Scarlett asks from the plush chair across from me. We're in a room with a neutral backdrop, two comfortable navy lounge chairs, and a small wooden table with glasses of water. The cameras, lighting, and everything else are set for the biggest interview of my life. It's set to air when the NHL breaks for the holidays next week. This isn't exactly the Christmas special everyone expects this time of year. "We're pre-recording, so try not to be nervous. We can edit anything out that you don't want."

I nod and take a sip of my water. Scarlett motions to the crew and a little red light flashes on top of the cameras to let me know they're recording. She starts by introducing herself and me before giving a short recap of some of the allegations Cassidy Tippett made in her article weeks ago and my hockey career. I think she'll jump right into the hard questions, but instead, she starts easy, warming me up before we go deep.

"So Chase, tell me how you go into hockey."

I smile and think back to my childhood when my mom was alive. She was my number one fan, cheering me on at my games. "My mom got me into it," I chuckle. "She was a huge hockey fan and strapped skates onto me as soon as my feet were big enough. And, I had this friend, you might know him, Luke Valentine. He was this scrawny, mediocre kid, and his team needed someone to score goals."

Scarlett laughs. "Did you always want to be an NHL player?"

"Not necessarily. I never really thought about it much until my mom got sick." I glance at the camera and awkwardly rub my hands on my dress pants.

"Can you tell us more about that? What happened to your mom, and what was she like?"

"She was the best mom in the world, and I know everyone says that about their mom, but she really was. She was the glue that held the family together. I'm an only child, so I guess you can say I was a little bit of a momma's boy. But, when I was ten, we found out she had a brain tumour. She went into

surgery and never came back out.” My throat tightens at the memory of watching my mom rolling away on the hospital bed before surgery. She was smiling and waving like it was no big deal. Like she was going to get her nails done instead of having doctors drill into her skull to remove her cancer. “Her last wish was for me to make it to the NHL and for my dad to help get me there. It was the only promise he kept.”

Scarlett continues to ask me questions about what happened after my mom died, and I explain how my life changed. How my dad changed. Everything from the excessive drinking to the drugs, the women, and until we ran out of money and the house started to fall apart. When we get to the parts about my dad’s physical abuse, I take another big gulp of my water.

“I was too small to fight back for a long time. But he’d get mad at everything, especially if I’d missed a shot during a game or if my team lost. I think, in some twisted way, he thought he was helping me. Making me tougher. Forcing me to be the best hockey player I could be so I’d make it to the NHL like my mom wanted.”

“And no one knew about the abuse?” she asks, face stoic but with sympathy in her eyes. The whole room is so quiet you could hear a pin drop. Every person here is listening to every single word that comes out of my mouth with rapt attention. I guess it’s not every day that a famous hockey player spills his most painful secrets to the world.

“I think some people suspected it. But I made excuses and said my bruises were from hockey. Luke’s mom bought me new equipment because she thought mine was too old and not up to par.”

“And as you got older, what was your relationship with the Valentines like?”

“Their home was my escape. I’d spend as much time as I could at Luke’s. We were best friends and played on the same hockey team, so Mr. and Mrs. Valentine drove me to most of our games. Any chance I had to hang out with Luke, I took it until I was practically living there. I think Angie, Luke’s mom,

knew something wasn't right, but she never complained. She always took me in, no questions asked."

"Do you ever wish the Valentines or someone else, a coach or a teacher maybe, called Child Protective Services on your father?"

"That's a hard question to answer. By the time the abuse got really bad, I was only a year or two away from leaving home to play junior hockey. If things had been different, I might not be sitting here today."

The questions continue, and I answer as calmly and succinctly as possible. It's weird rehashing my life's story for everyone to watch, analyze, and interpret. I don't want to say the wrong thing or seem too emotional or emotionless. So, I just talk and do my best to say what comes naturally. That is until she asks me the question I've been dreading. Scarlett and I reviewed the interview questions beforehand, but it's not the same as talking about it on camera.

"What can you tell me about Barbara Bell?"

I stiffen and grip the armrests of my chair and then take a deep breath in, count to three, and then release it.

"Barbara Bell was the woman who sexually abused me from the time I was fourteen until I left home to play junior hockey." The room goes still, and to me, the silence is so loud it's like a freight train is running through my mind. Sweat accumulates on my palms, and I rub them on my pants again, but Scarlett doesn't push me for more. She just calmly waits for me to speak again.

"She was my dad's girlfriend at the time, but most nights, he'd get blackout drunk, and that's when she'd come to my bedroom. I was a miserable, confused, and angry fourteen-year-old kid. I might not have said no, but I didn't say yes. I knew it was wrong, and I remember puking my guts out that first time she... you know."

"Did your father ever find out?"

"No, he was too drunk or high to know what was going on, and it wasn't long after that, that I started spending more time

at the Valentine house.”

“And what about when you moved to London to play junior hockey? What happened then?”

And so the interview continues. Scarlett asks questions, and I answer. I tell her about my destructive behaviour in London, underage drinking and partying, sleeping with Anna Munro and her daughter, and the myriad of other girls that hung around the arena looking to hook up with a hockey player.

“When the scandal about you and Anna Munro was revealed, you were eighteen. Did anyone ever question you about when the affair actually started?”

“I think some people wondered, but no, no one wanted to make a messy situation any messier,” I say and think back to how livid my coach and the team’s management were when the story was published. I think they just wanted to sweep everything under the rug and make it go away. I was leaving for Florida anyway, so they probably just wanted the shitstorm I created to go with me.

“And when did your relationship with Anna Munro begin?”

“Just before I turned sixteen.”

“So, you were underage?”

“Yes.”

“And who started that relationship? You or her?”

“Well, I was dating Anna’s daughter at the time, but she didn’t seem to care. She approached me, and I didn’t exactly say no.”

“Chase, are you aware that the legal age of consent in Canada is sixteen, and the relationship you just described is not only considered statutory rape, but also sexual exploitation?”

“I didn’t at the time, but I do now.”

Slowly but surely, the hard questions taper off and Scarlett leads us back to more comfortable territory. She asks about my time playing for the Toronto Northmen and how much I love it. She asks me about my leave of absence and how therapy has helped me work through the trauma from my childhood

and adolescence. We discuss my involvement with *The Blue and White Bachelorette* and how that experience led me to this moment.

As the interview winds down, the questions get easier and easier. Tension starts to leave my shoulders, and my body finally starts to relax.

“When can Northmen fans expect to see you back on the ice?”

“I’m making my return after the break.”

“Excellent. I am sure everyone will be thrilled to hear that. Even though the team has done well without you, I’m sure they will be happy to have your scoring touch back.” Scarlett thanks me, telling me how brave I am for speaking my truth and how my honesty will go a long way towards helping other victims of sexual abuse and assault come forward. “I just have one question left for you, Chase. Why did you agree to participate in *The Blue and White Bachelorette* this season?” Scarlett asks with a knowing smile.

“Because I love Lily Valentine. Because I’ve always loved her, and I hope that one day I can be the man that deserves her.”

*Sexual Healing***Lily**

I grip Chase's hand tightly as the last words from his interview with Scarlett St. James-Kaur fill my ears, and the screen fades to black. Tears rim my eyes and fall down my cheeks as I just stare at the screen, and a commercial starts to play. We're sitting in my living room watching his story air for the first time on live television. I'm so fucking proud of him that I think I might explode with it.

"I love you too," I sniffle and throw my arms around him. I want to kiss him, but Chase and I haven't been physical since he started therapy, other than the experimental touching we've done with Dr. Brighton. We agreed to be friends until we were ready to move forward, and I'm hoping that's sooner rather than later.

"Me too! I love you guys." Riley jumps on the couch with us and wraps us in her arms like a lovefest sandwich. Count on Riley to cut the emotional tension with her ridiculousness.

The last seven weeks have been really fucking hard, but Riley's been super supportive. It's been an emotional rollercoaster and going home for Christmas was awkward and complicated. My parents knew Chase and I weren't together—while still kind of being together—and by some miracle, my mom was able to resist the urge to ask a million questions. But that might have been because she was too busy asking Holly when she should start buying baby gifts. At the time, my parents didn't know why Chase took a leave of absence from the team, but now that his story has aired, everyone knows. And I can only imagine that the proverbial shit will hit the fan now.

"So, are you two finally getting back together or what?" Riley asks as she wiggles her way between us and drapes one arm

over each of our shoulders. “I want Mom and Dad back together!”

I roll my eyes. “We are taking things slow.”

“Oh, come on, you’re getting back together. I know it. You know it. He knows it. Everyone knows it.”

“Oh yeah? And what about you and Ozzy. When are you guys officially getting together?” I retort.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Really? Because I’m pretty sure he Super Mario-ed the fuck out of your Princess Peach on Halloween, and I’d bet money that you Ho, Ho, Ho’ed his jingle balls for Christmas.”

“I did not!”

“Did too,” I yell. I get the sense that Chase feels slightly awkward sitting with us. But snarky banter is our love language, and he should know this by now. “You guys have been on-again-off-again and fucking like rabbits since Holly and Luke’s wedding.”

“Do you kiss your mother with that mouth?” Riley snipes.

“Do you kiss your mother with yours? What flavour is your gloss? Cocksicle?”

“Fine,” Riley says in mock anger, trying to cover up a laugh as she coughs and crosses her arms over her chest.

“Fine,” I say back, narrowing my eyes at her.

“Fine,” she repeats. We have a stare-down. Each of us glaring at the other, pursing our lips and, for all intents and purposes, trying not to laugh our asses off. Chase looks back and forth between us, but I don’t break eye contact with Riley. This is our thing.

“Fuck it, fine. I’m going to the gym, and when I get back tomorrow morning, you two better have banged it all out by then.” Riley dramatically stomps her way to her room for precisely the two seconds it takes her to grab her purse. She walks by the couch to the front door and throws on her

ginormous winter coat and boots right over top of her girlie little PJs.

“I hope you’re happy,” she huffs. “But I also love you. I’ll see you in the morning with two smoothies and a box of muffins, and I’ll expect a full report.” And with that, Riley leaves wearing the least athletic “gym” outfit I’ve ever seen.

“Is she really going to the gym?” Chase asks, confused at the scene that just unfolded in front of him. “Because she didn’t take her gym bag.”

I just laugh.”Of course, she’s not going to the gym. The only workout she’ll be doing is the naked kind.” I look at my watch. “And nobody works out for twelve hours. Get with the program, dude. Riley and Ozzy are bumping uglies tonight.”

“Those two, eh?”

“Yeah, those two.” No one seems to know what’s going on with them. Not even Riley and Ozzy. It’s like they’re doing some kind of weird cat-and-mouse thing while pretending neither has feelings for the other. It’s the longest game of foreplay in the history of the world.

Chase and I sit in awkward yet comfortable silence until I snuggle in close to him and lay my head on his shoulder. “I really am proud of you. You’re so fucking brave that I can’t even articulate what I want to say. Scarlett did an amazing job with the whole thing.”

“She did,” Chase agrees, pulling me closer. “I hope we get more stories from her instead of Cassidy Tippet from now on.”

Over the last several weeks, The Buzz and Cassidy Tippet have stopped buzzing. That might have something to do with the defamation lawsuit Chase and the Toronto Northmen filed against her. She’s still insisting that all her information came directly from Chase’s dad, so, and I quote, “How was I supposed to know he was lying?” Oh, I don’t know. Check your sources? And, maybe don’t pay an addict thousands of dollars for a story because they’ll likely say whatever you

want them to just to get the cash. Which is what we all know happened.

I went with Chase to visit his dad when we went home for Christmas but he asked me to wait in the car. It was devastating to see his childhood home reduced to what any real estate agent would call a teardown. You could tell the driveway and lawn were overgrown and cracked, even with snow covering most of it. The porch was all peeling paint and rotted wood. Shingles were falling off the roof, and the gutters overflowed with leaves from many autumns.

I spotted Jeff peeking through the window and my heart broke a little. He just looked sad and guilty, eyes cast down and flat. The alcohol and drugs had done a number on him. For a man in his fifties, he looked closer to seventy. When Chase returned to the car, he sat in the driver's seat in shock. He said my parents had been over to the house several times and were helping Jeff clean and take things to the dump. I'm sure this was after my mom screamed at him a little bit. Or a lot bit. Angie Valentine isn't one to beat around the bush, and when it comes to her kids, even one's she didn't give birth to, she goes full-on momma bear.

"He admitted to taking the money from Cassidy," Chase said. "He was high when she was here, and it sounds like she baited him into giving her the story she wanted."

"It's not his fault, you know? The story, I mean. Everything else kind of is," I said. And even though I want to hate Jeff Wilder's guts, a part of me just feels sorry for him. He's a sad, lonely man with no one. He's an addict that probably thought he had no way out. There's no doubt in my mind that he believes he's fallen too far to ever come back. I can hate him for all the horrible and destructive things he did to his son, but I can't hate him for falling prey to a gossip reporter's broken moral compass.

"He said he'd try rehab."

"Really?" I was shocked. After almost two decades of failing as a father and refusing help, I wondered what had changed. Maybe it was a combination of my mom's harsh reality check

and Chase warning him about his upcoming televised interview with Scarlett St. James-Kaur.

Jeff Wilder was admitted to an intensive rehabilitative care centre on Christmas Eve, where he will detox and get the help he needs to overcome his mental health problems and grief. Chase has checked in a few times over the last week, and my mom and dad plan on visiting him after the worst of the withdrawal period is over.

“If we’re lucky, Cassidy Tippet’s days as a journalist, if you can even call her that, are over. Scarlett is way nicer, and her brand of journalism actually helps people. She’s ballsy and brutally honest, and not that it matters, but it doesn’t hurt that she’s hot.” I laugh.

“Thinking of jumping ship?” Chase asks, smirking down at me. “I think she’s single and shoots for both teams.” I giggle and elbow him in the ribs.

“Maybe, but there’s just one little, well actually one big, problem with that scenario.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Yeah,” I say, voice low, leaning back to look Chase in those startling blue-green eyes. It’s might be the first time that his expression is light, happy, and hopeful. The dark heaviness that so often clouded his eyes is mostly gone. “There’s this guy. I’ve kind of been in love with him forever, but we’ve been on hiatus for a while. I love everything about him, and I’m so grateful that he trusted me as a friend enough to help him through a really tough time. But I miss touching him. I miss being touched by him, and I really want to kiss him right now.”

Chase doesn’t answer with words. He leans into me on the couch so we’re almost nose to nose, his lips just millimetres from mine. When our mouths finally meet in a delicate brush of lips, it’s like the entire world finally exhales after holding its breath. The kiss is soft and patient, but it quickly turns hotter when I slide my tongue into his mouth to taste him.

God, I missed this. Missed him. Missed us.

Chase leans me back onto the couch as I wrap my arms around his neck and pull him down. Before I know it, we're making out like teenagers trying to soak up every last second together before their parents come home and catch them. But we're not in a rush, and I've waited weeks to have Chase again. I only want to do this if he wants it too, because once we cross this precipice again, we're never going back.

"Is this okay?" I ask breathlessly, pulling back from him.

"Yes, Lily. It's more than okay. It's everything." And then he's kissing me again and removing my camisole, his lips trailing down my neck to my breasts. Just when I think we're going to get to the good stuff, Chase stands abruptly and hooks his arms under my knees and shoulders to carry me toward my bedroom.

"What are you doing?"

"I'm not going to fuck on the couch when there's a perfectly good bed a few steps away. I need more space for everything I want to do to you."

"Yes, please," I laugh.

Chase gently drops me onto the bed before shucking his shirt, pants, and boxers. He's already gloriously hard, and even though he's been off hockey for over six weeks, he clearly hasn't missed any days at the gym or on the ice. Chase has the sexiest body I've ever seen. His arms are strong and defined, and I now understand what Riley means by forearm porn. I'm pretty sure his abs are the stairway to heaven. Seriously, this guy could be all twelve months of the calendar, and as that thought crosses my mind, I tuck it away for later to mention to Holly and Avery. *Why don't we have a Northmen calendar?* My brother can stay out of it, but the rest of the guys would sell calendars fast as fuck.

"What are you thinking?" Chase grins down at me. *Busted.*

"I was thinking that you'd make a really nice calendar boy." The bark of laughter that escapes his mouth makes me laugh too. I can't help it. He looks so happy. So free. The difference between the dark and troubled man from only a few weeks ago

to this laughing man, quite literally standing naked in front of me, is dramatic and startling.

“I love you, Lily,” Chase chuckles, pressing a kiss to my lips and leaning down into me and the bed. My heart skips and accelerates every time he says those words because a part of me can’t quite believe this is real life.

“I love you too. But I think I’m still wearing too many clothes.”

Without a word, he helps me remove the remaining offending clothing from my body until we are both completely naked, his lips doing delicious things to my neck and collarbone. When he reaches my breasts and takes one nipple into his mouth, I moan in pleasure, gripping the bedsheets. *Fuck, that feels good.* I want to reach up and touch him, run my hands and nails over his chest and let them roam wherever they want, but I resist.

I’m so used to being careful and letting Chase call all the shots that I don’t want to ruin this. Even though we worked on touching with Dr. Brighton, I don’t know what he’s ready for or wants.

“You’re thinking too hard again,” Chase says, smiling down at me.

“I can’t help it,” I glance away, feeling guilty, but he tilts my head back towards him, looking me in the eyes.

“What’s going on in there?”

“I want to touch you,” I blurt out. “But I don’t want to make you feel uncomfortable. I want to do whatever you like. Whatever you’re ready for.”

His eyes soften as he swallows before sitting up straight in my bed. I think he’s going to pull away until he rests his back against my headboard, pulls me into his lap and wraps my legs around his back. We’re sitting up, facing each other; nearly all of our skin touching. I feel his hot, hard length resting against me, but I can’t seem to look away from his face, even though I want to squirm. To move. To do something that will ease the tension coiling inside my core.

“I trust you,” he whispers hoarsely, taking both of my wrists in his hands. At first, I think he’s going to pin them behind my back. Instead he opens my palms and places them flat against his chest, slowly guiding them over him until he lets go entirely, freeing me to roam wherever I want. I don’t break eye contact with him as my hands flutter over his pecs, down over his abs, and then back again. Or when I reach down between us and stroke his cock. He jerks in my hands at that first touch and then leans back, breath shuttering in pleasure.

I kiss Chase and stroke him until he’s almost shimmied down onto his back with me straddling him. For the first time ever, I’m completely in charge, and Chase isn’t tense or gritting his teeth. He’s relaxed, enjoying my touch, and the relief I feel makes my throat tighten and moisture coat my eyes. I’ve wanted this so badly, not just for me, but for him.

“What’s wrong?” Chase asks, trying to sit up, but I stop him, placing both my hands on his chest to keep him where he lays beneath me.

“Everything is so right that I don’t have words. I only have feelings. I only have this.” I lean forward and kiss him gently while grinding myself down on his cock. And when I reach between us, guiding him into me, sinking down on his length, inch by aching inch, we both hold our breath until I’m fully seated and finally exhale.

Perfection. We’re perfection.

Leaning forward, I rock my hips into Chase, sliding his cock into my pussy, up and then back down again, bracing my hands on his chest. He reaches up for my breasts, stroking and playing with my nipples until I’m moaning incoherent gibberish. God, I’ve wanted this for so long that I want to rush and go slow at the same time. My pace quickens until the wet sounds of our bodies coming together fill the room, and Chase starts to pump his hips upwards, meeting me thrust for thrust. The friction we create drives me wild, and when he slides one hand down my stomach to circle my clit, I cry out, my pussy clenching around his cock like it never wants to let go. *Tell me about it, sister. I don’t want this to ever end, either.* I’m not sure when I started having conversations with my vagina, but

this man apparently makes every part of me want to scream out in pleasure.

Chase chants my name as he pumps into me, his hard thighs underneath me pushing me upwards one last time as he comes. His hard thrust lifts me right off the bed, and the feeling is so intense that my body forgets how gravity works. I pinwheel my arms as I lose my balance and tip over, bouncing once off the mattress before hitting the floor, taking the bedsheet with me and knocking over the lamp on my bedside table.

“Oh shit, Lily, are you okay?”

I can't help it. I start laughing. Hard. Like uncontrollable-tears-in-your-eyes, breathless laughter. “I'm—” Breath. “Fine—” Breath. He pulls me back onto my bed, and I take one look at him and the mess we've made and laugh even harder. “I think our crazy, monkey sex is hazardous to my health. First, I give myself a black eye, and then you dick-check me off the bed.”

“Dick-check?”

“Yeah, like a body check, but with your dick.”

We start laughing again, and the most incredible, light, airy feeling fills me up like helium. I feel like I could float right out of here, and I don't know if it's just the sex endorphins pinging around inside me like fireworks or how much I love this man, but it's the best thing in the world. We laugh until I feel like I've done a thousand crunches and happy tears dry on my cheeks. I slip to the bathroom to clean myself up and let Chase do the same. When he returns, he crawls into bed with me, pulling me tight to his chest to cuddle.

“I like this.”

“Screwing my brains out?” I joke.

“Well, I like that too,” he chuckles, pulling me closer. “But the cuddling. It's nice.”

“It is,” I agree, as my eyes start to get heavy and my breathing evens out. “But all your sexiness makes me sleepy. I just need to look at the insides of my eyelids for a few minutes, and then we should do this all over again.”

*Karma is My girlfriend***Chase**

I skate across the ice with the rest of my team for the first time in weeks in front of a sold-out crowd. Since I took my leave of absence, I've still been skating, working out and practicing, but it's not the same. The adrenaline rush I get wearing a Northmen jersey in front of our insanely loyal fans, all with signs and painted faces, screaming and chanting, "Let's Go, Northmen," is a feeling that can't be replicated anywhere else. The only thing better is the feeling I get with Lily.

She's everything. And, for the first time in my life, I finally feel like my ducks are in a row. Before, my ducks were wandering all over the fucking place, out into oncoming traffic, and I was scrambling around trying to make them line up. It was exhausting and tearing me apart from the inside out. Dr. Brighton has helped me realize that asking for help isn't a weakness. It's a strength. I still have bad days, and sometimes doubt creeps in when I lay awake in the morning watching Lily breathe. I wonder how or why she can possibly love someone like me. Someone who's done incredibly stupid and fucked up shit. But then, she opens her eyes, and they're the brightest blue I've ever seen. She smiles at me like I'm the only thing in her orbit and the only thing she'll ever need to make her happy, and the doubt subsides.

Throughout these last weeks, she's been everything to me, showing patience, kindness and love whenever I needed her. She never questioned or pressured me about timelines or when I thought I'd be ready to try again. She waited with a big smile, always being a friend, a confidant supporting me no matter what. I think that's when I truly realized what love is. Lily is my best friend. She knows me better than anyone other

than her brother, and she *sees* me. The good, the bad, and the really fucking ugly parts too.

“Do you still remember how to skate, Wilder?” Ollie calls as he whizzes by me on his skates. I laugh.

“Yeah, dude, we’ve been holding down the fort for you. You better go out and score a hatty for us tonight.” Ozzy adds, following his brother. The entire team and organization have been extremely supportive of me. Everyone from the Starlings to Coach McCall, even the trainers and equipment managers have been behind me one hundred percent, no questions asked. And they’re just as eager to have me back.

“I don’t know about a hat trick, but I feel pretty good. No rust on these skates,” I reply, squatting down into a frog stretch. I know this stretch is one of Lily’s favourites. She calls it “the Magic Mike hump the ice stretch.” I chuckle just thinking about it.

“Oh, come on, at least a Gordie Howe hat trick. Give your adoring fans something to cheer about.” Ollie winks. A Gordie Howe hat trick is when a player scores a goal, gets an assist, and has a fight in the same game.

“I’ll tell you what. I’ll score the goals, and you and Ozzy can drop the gloves. I need to keep this face pretty for my girl.” The brothers roll their eyes at me in an expression that’s so similar I feel like I’m doing a double take in *The Matrix*. Ollie and Ozzy are identical except for Ollie’s one blue eye.

“Are you guys stretching or just putting on a show for the ladies?” Luke asks and then joins us. I just smile knowingly at him. “I knew it. This is Holly’s favourite too. She especially likes it when I do it with her underneath me at home.”

“Dude, you’re just asking for sister jokes now.” Ozzy laughs, and Luke scowls back but then shrugs.

“I’m over it. And I like this guy,” he says, nudging me with his shoulder. “If I have to put up with some asshole fawning over my sister for the rest of my life, it might as well be this asshole. At least I like him.”

The buzzer sounds to end warmup, and all the guys skate back toward our bench and the locker room. We have about fifteen minutes before the puck drops on the first game of the second half of the season. This is when games start to really count, and the playoff push starts. We're sitting first in our conference, but points are so tight between the top and the wildcard spots; less than ten points are separating us.

Since the salary cap era started, teams need to make sure their entire roster fits the league-mandated budget, so the margin between winners and losers has shrunk to almost nothing. Gone are the days when organizations could pay millions of dollars to whoever would take it and load up on superstars. Now, every team has roughly eight-five million dollars to spend on twenty-two or twenty-three active roster spots. The only workaround is if someone gets injured long-term or another team eats a player's salary in a trade.

It's a hell of a job being the number cruncher for an NHL team and one I definitely don't envy. But, as a player who wants to win a Cup, when I signed my last contract with the Northmen, I chose to take a hometown discount over seven years so the team had more money to spend concocting a winning formula. So far, it hasn't brought home Lord Stanley, but I have a good feeling about this year. We came as close as you could get last year; overtime of game seven. Now that the boys have a taste for it, we're hungry to finish the job.

Over the next sixty minutes, we destroy the Detroit Roadrunners eight-to-one. It's an absolute spanking, and ironically, I score a hat trick. It couldn't have been better for my first game back unless Hunter LaRoux bagged the shutout. But he's happy with the win.

"Excellent game, boys," Coach McCall says from the centre of the room. "We need to keep this energy rolling through the next four months until playoffs. We know the goal, so let's not take our foot off the gas pedal." The guys cheer and let out a few whoops before Luke stands up, still in his skates.

"Tonight was a hell of a game." Luke smiles at us. "Over the break, I decided we needed to do something special for the guys who really show up this time of year. The warriors who

leave it all out there on the ice. So, I'd like to start a new tradition by picking The Beast of Game. This player might score a big goal, get an assist, swing momentum by dropping the gloves and defending a teammate, or just be a beast on the ice. And tonight, that wild beast is none other than Chase Wilder."

The room erupts with laughter and cheers as Luke pulls out a massive, gold and silver, doubled-headed Viking axe from behind him. The Northmen logo shines on the axe, and our name is engraved down the hilt. It's really fucking cool, and as Luke hands it off to me, I realize it's also fucking heavy. Thankfully, I see that the edges of the blades are dull; otherwise, one of us might inadvertently decapitate a teammate.

"Slay," Ozzy roars from beside me, and the rest of the team joins him. I've seen other teams do something similar with letterman jackets and huge bedazzled wrestling belts, but Luke's outdone himself. This is just fucking cool.

The guys take a few extra minutes to settle down and shower before Holly and Avery pop into the room to ask a few guys to head over to the press podium for interviews, including me. I get the usual questions about the game and how it felt returning to the ice. Naturally, there are some questions about my interview with Scarlett St. James-Kaur. I answer everything in stride and with patience. And by the end of it, I just want to grab my shit and go see Lily, where I know she'll be waiting for me in the friends and family room down the hall.

"You were amazing," she squeals, jumping into my arms when I enter the room. A bunch of the other players' wives, girlfriends, and family members are there too. "Three goals in your first game back. My man is the stud of the team."

"So I take it you two are back together." April Owens grins, and I slide my arm around Lily's waist possessively. "It's about time. Don't tell Holly and Avery this, but that entire Bachelorette thing was stupid as fuck."

"I heard that," Avery calls from somewhere near Ryan.

“Well, it was,” April yells back. “As hot as Sam is, everyone knew this one was in love with Chase from day one.”

“Who’s hot?” Jake Owens asks as he walks over to his wife. They just had their second child last summer, and if I had to guess, Jake will probably retire this year or next.

“You. I could climb you like a tree right here, right now.” April puts an exclamation mark on her words by jumping up on her husband, wrapping her legs around his waist and kissing him hard on the lips. “Time to go home. These pregnancy hormones keep me in a perpetual state of horniness.”

“You’re pregnant again?” Lily asks, curiously looking at April’s belly. It’s still flat, so I can’t imagine she’s that far along.

“God, I know. I feel like I’m always pregnant. But this is it. We’re done. Jake is getting the snip this after this season.”

“Congratulations, man,” I say, patting Jake on the back while his wife tries to pull him away.

“Thanks.” He smiles so big and proud that there’s no doubt he’s entirely too impressed with himself and his incredible ability to knock up his wife. When I turn back to Lily, my eyes drift down to her midriff of their own accord, and my mind can’t help picturing a tiny bump there someday. I’ve never allowed myself to wonder if I ever wanted kids. My father failed so spectacularly at fatherhood that it’s hard to imagine being one myself.

“Uh oh, you’re thinking too hard,” Lily says.

“Do you want one of those?” I ask.

“One of what?”

“A baby.”

“Someday. Maybe.” She smiles up at me. “But don’t let my mom hear you mention anything even close to that word. She’s already told me our kids will be her favourite grandkids.”

“What?” a male and female voice exclaims in unison. Luke and Holly appear behind Lily, who looks skyward as if to say,

Here we go.

“Nothing,” Lily says. “I didn’t say anything.”

“Yes, you did. You said your kids will be Mom’s favourite.”

“Well, I mean, can you blame her? Look at us. Chase and I are going to make some really cute babies.”

“Not as cute as mine and Holly’s,” Luke insists, and I’m starting to wonder if this is taking the whole sibling rivalry a little too far—talking about non-existent, future offspring that may or may not be the cutest. *Clearly, our kids would be cuter.*

“Who’s preggers?” Avery asks, eyes immediately zeroing in on Lily like laser beams. “Did Chase already knock you up?”

“What? No.” Lily says. “We’re talking about whose hypothetical babies will be the cutest.”

“Pfff, that’s easy. Riley and Ozzy’s kids will look like genetically modified cartoon babies,” Avery states, effectively ending the debate. “Where is Riley anyway? I’m sure Ozzy is ready to follow her around like a lost puppy.”

“She went home. She has school tomorrow.”

As talk of scary, perfect babies takes over the room, somehow, the conversation shifts back to reality, and we all agree to go out for drinks at O’Donnell’s; the scene of the crime where Holly and Luke met. It also serves excellent wings, fries and beer, and is a team favourite for postgame fun.

The bar is crowded when we arrive, but Mickey, the bar owner, always saves us a few tables at the back near the old-style jukebox. Most of the guys came out tonight; even Sam and his new girlfriend, Sam, decided to join us. When I first saw her, I thought she looked familiar, and that’s when I realized the pint-sized woman with the pixie cut was Boris Kashlinov’s ex. The one he abused. I smile at her but don’t mention that I recognize her. I doubt she wants to reopen old wounds. Plus, she looks healthy and happy, and as much as I hate to admit it, Sam is a good guy. They look good together.

“Mind if I join you?” a female voice asks, and I look up to see Payton Kane. A police detective and a member of what Holly

calls “The Bitch Pack,” which is basically just a group of women who sit around gossip and watch reality TV together. Over the last year, the group has grown close after several dramatic ups and downs.

“Payton.” Lily shoots up and hugs her friend. “I haven’t seen you in forever.”

“Don’t pretend like you didn’t invite me,” she rolls her eyes and then looks at me. “Good to see you again, Chase.”

Payton sits down at the table with us and makes some small talk. It’s clear that although Lily may not have seen her recently, the pair have been talking back and forth over the last few months, and like April Owens, Payton thought the entire Bachelorette debacle was bullshit.

“What was Holly and Avery thinking? We all knew you were in love with Chase,” she says matter-of-factly. Apparently, I’m the only person on the planet that didn’t know Lily had her heart set on me since we were kids. “I distinctly remember having a conversation during one of our soirées about you wanting to seduce Chase and Riley fucking the shit out of Ozzy.” I do a spit-take, and beer starts trickling out my nose, making my eyes water. “Sorry big guy, did I offend your delicate sensibilities?” She pats my back as Lily looks on in horror.

“Payton!” Lily screeches, eyes wide. “What happened to girl code?”

“Pfff, it’s not exactly a secret and Riley and Ozzy aren’t here, so who’s going to tell?” This Riley and Ozzy thing gets more and more interesting every day. I know that Ozzy hasn’t been going out with the rookies and single guys on the road all year, but neither Riley nor Ozzy has made any sort of commitment. They mostly just argue and disappear to have sex somewhere.

“Anyway, that’s not why I dropped by.”

I glance over at Lily and notice she’s wringing her hands like she’s nervous about something.

“Do you two mind if we go somewhere to talk privately? Mickey said we can borrow his office,” Payton asks, and I raise my eyebrows. I slide out of the booth with Lily and follow Payton down a hallway into a modestly-sized office with one tiny window, a large desk littered with ledgers, bills and supply orders, and a couple of chairs.

“I watched your interview with Scarlett St. James-Kaur,” Payton starts. “It was really well done.”

“Thanks.”

“How’s everything else been going?”

“Good.” I give one-word answers knowing we didn’t come to the back of a bar to discuss my interview.

“Well, this one,” she motions at Lily with her thumb, “has been busy over the last several weeks. If she decides to give up cooking, she should consider putting her detective skills to good use.” My eyes shoot over to Lily, who still has that guilty look on her face.

“I was just so angry, Chase. You can’t be mad at me,” she bursts out. “You were busy with your own stuff, and I couldn’t just sit there and do nothing, so I started doing some digging.”

Payton laughs. “You did more than just dig. You created an entire case file on Anna Munro, complete with witness statements, contact information, pictures and texts, then handed it over to me.”

My eyes bug out of my head as I look at Lily.

“She’s a predator. Someone needed to do something. God, I hated seeing her smug face when she showed up at your game and then again at the Halloween party. That woman needed her comeuppance. It was karma. I just delivered it.”

“You delivered what exactly?” I ask slowly.

“Like I said, Lily did a little detective work. She started contacting other players that Anna billeted over the years, which apparently led her to several other former male athletes willing to come forward with their stories.” I listen to Payton explain how Lily has spent all her free time talking to

strangers and gathering emails with old texts and photos from men who had interactions with Anna Munro when they were teenagers.

Thinking back, I remember seeing Lily working furiously on her computer a few times when I was over at her place, but I assumed she was just working on meal plans and other team-related stuff. I had no idea she was going all Don't-Fuck-With-Cats on Anna.

“Anyway, to make a long story short, I passed on all Lily’s work to the London Police, and they arrested her today. Unsurprisingly, several other victims came forward with their own stories after your interview aired. You’ll likely be called by the case officers and probably as a witness later. Anna Munro has a laundry list of pending charges against her that will undoubtedly become convictions and land her name on a sex offender registry.”

The room is silent for a moment while I absorb this news. I mean, I knew that doing the interview and naming names might stir the pot a little, but I never thought Anna would actually be punished for what she did to me. I never thought that people would *believe* me.

“Anyway, I’ll let you two talk for a minute while I go fill up on gin and tonic.” Payton leaves us alone in Mickey’s office, and when I turn to Lily, I’m shocked to see fear on her face.

“I’m sorry. I just couldn’t let her get away with it. I just couldn’t, Chase. She’s a monster. She’s—”

I silence her with a kiss. Never, in my entire life, have I had someone fight for me. Fight with me. Have my back one hundred percent and believe in me like she does. This woman is a force to be reckoned with, and I wouldn’t want her any other way.

“You’re not mad at me?” Lily asks when I release her from the kiss.

“Are you kidding me? You’re amazing. I love you, Lily. You swooped in like an avenging fucking goddess and kicked ass. That’s sexy as hell.”

“Oh, okay. Good, because I couldn’t help myself and if anyone ever thinks they’re going to hurt you again, they’ll have to go through me first.”

I can’t help but laugh. “My own personal bodyguard.”

“Yeah, well, karma’s a bitch, and sometimes I need to be one.”

“Hmm,” I say, smiling into Lily’s lips and then add in a singsongy voice, “Karma is my girlfriend.”

“It’s so hot when you talk Swiftie to me.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.”

“You want to get out of here?”

“Absolutely.”

And with that, I grab Lily’s hand, bypassing everyone clinking beer mugs and cocktail glasses, and make for the exit with the woman I plan on making happy for the rest of our lives.

Epilogue

It's a Love Story

Lily

Three Months Later

“Talk about lifestyles of the rich and the famous,” I say as I walk through Tyra’s Hollywood Hills mansion. I feel like I’m in an episode of *Selling Sunset*. Her house is luxury personified. “Seriously, I’m scared to touch anything.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. Touch whatever you want,” Tyra says, rolling her eyes.

“Says the woman holding a glass of red wine on a white couch,” Holly laughs.

“Meh, what’s the point in having money if you’re not going to spend it?” That’s such a rich person thing to say. But she has a point, and Tyra has done an excellent job of spending her money on this house. It’s a five-bedroom, six-bathroom bungalow with a stunning view of Los Angeles. Did I mention it has an infinity pool? Oh, and this is technically a work trip. *What is my life?*

The Northmen are on their West Coast road trip. I travelled with the team to Arizona, Las Vegas, Anaheim, and San Jose providing all-star meals on the road, mainly dependent on grocery delivery services to our hotels. It was a shit load of work organizing meals, pre-ordering food, and preparing it, but it was all worth it. Chase said the team meals have been essential for team building, especially before the playoffs start next month.

I’m happy to finally have a few days off in LA before the team’s last road game against the Rebels, which is Avery’s husband’s old team. It’s his first time back playing in LA since he was traded to the Northmen at last year’s trade deadline, which is part of why we decided it was time to tack on a girl’s

trip to the tail end of this road trip. Holly, Avery, and I were already travelling with the team. Riley is off school for March Break, and Taylor, Holly's sister, didn't need an excuse to visit Tyra, who happily opened up her home to host us all.

The rest of the team is staying in a hotel near the arena. The players still have morning skates and practices to attend, but they get a little time off to enjoy the city and sunshine. It's still wintery and cold in Toronto, and we all need a little Vitamin D. Well, I may have been getting a little too much Vitamin D thanks to Chase—I crack myself up. That man can go for days, and I'm not complaining. Lots of orgasms make Lily a happy girl. So much so that I start referring to myself in the third person.

We get two full days in LA to relax and recuperate before the team is back in action, and then we're all flying home to Toronto. So the boys are doing their thing, and us girls are doing ours.

"Who wants champagne?" Tyra asks the group from her stunning kitchen. She has one of those kitchens where all the appliances are camouflaged into the countertops and cabinets. I opened a cupboard I thought was for glasses and realized it was the fridge.

Tyra holds up a fancy bottle and uses her thumb to pop the cork like a rocket.

"Is that Veuve Clicquot?" Avery asks, eyes bulging out of her head. "Isn't that stuff like stupid expensive?"

"Just take the drink," Taylor laughs, accepting a flute from Tyra and kissing her on the cheek. "Over the last year, I've learned to pick my battles. If Tyra wants to spoil you, she'll just do it. Plus, the bottle's already open, so we might as well drink up."

"Hell to the yes," I salute, downing my champagne. It's delicious with just the right amount of bubble. Fruity with notes of pear, apple, and a slightly spicy finish. My eyes wander around the room, and I notice Riley's barely even sipped hers. "Drink up, Riley! It's your March Break. Let

loose. Get drunk! I want to see some Girls Gone Wild shit up in here.”

“You can have mine,” she says, slightly green. “My stomach is still upset from something I ate on the plane.” We picked up Riley from the airport this morning. She obviously couldn’t travel with the team while she was still teaching, so she jumped on a plane as soon as school was out.

But something is off with her. She’s been weird since she and Ozzy fell into one of their “off” periods in their on-again-off-again romance. But I can’t blame her. I’d be pissed, too, if Chase suddenly decided to become the face of a singles dating app and took a brand deal with Connor and Chloe Tate, TikTok’s biggest sibling FBoy and FGirl.

“So what are we doing first?” I ask excitedly. This is the first time we have had time off in months. Holly, Avery, and Taylor have been travelling with the team most weeks. I’ve been travelling and cooking my ass off for a bunch of hockey players with hollow, never-ending stomachs. And Riley has been up to her eyeballs in whiny students and miserable parents who think their children can do no wrong. This break is well deserved. “The Hollywood sign? Are we going clubbing?”

Everyone looks at each other and smiles knowingly. *What do they know that I don’t know?*

“Well, I’m kind of a celebrity.” Tyra smiles in fake modesty. “And Chase may have asked me to pull some strings so we could all go to this very popular, very sold-out concert tonight.” Oh. My. God. This isn’t happening. This. Is. Not. Happening. She’s not saying what I think she’s saying. There’s no way. No one can get tickets to this concert. I tried. I waited for hours online, in waiting room after waiting room, to get tickets, only to have the site crash, crushing my dreams along with it.

“Shut up! Shut all the way up. He did not.”

“He did.”

“No, he didn’t. *No, you didn’t*. If you’re getting my hopes up right now only to tell me we’re going to some stupid concert like John Mayer, I will strangle you.”

“We’re not going to see John Mayer.” Avery laughs, and I swear to god, I start to vibrate.

“Are you taking me to see Taylor Swift?” I scream, even though I don’t mean to. I can’t control the volume of my voice. I’m having an out-of-body experience. Tyra nods, and I think I might actually explode with excitement.

“We’re all going. The boys are meeting us outside in an hour with a limo.” Holly grins, and I start to sweat. I didn’t bring an outfit. I didn’t make any friendship bracelets. I’m not ready to go see Mother!

You need to calm down (Ha! See what I did there? Insert shameless use of Swiftie lyrics). It takes several seconds for me to compose myself. I feel like this moment is the culmination of my entire childhood and adolescence.

I’ve peaked at twenty-five.

After coming back down to earth, Tyra explains how Chase and Ryan asked her if she could get us tickets. And, because Tyra Price is Tyra Price, she didn’t just get us tickets. Holly, Avery, Taylor, Riley, Luke, Ryan, Chase, and I are spending our evening in the fucking VIP tent.

Chase is the best boyfriend ever, and I need to tell him.

Lily: OMG, you’re the best boyfriend ever. I love you.

Chase: I take it Tyra told you where we’re going tonight.

Lily: Yes, and you get free blowjobs for life!

Chase: No arguments here.

Lily: Okay, bye, I need to get ready. See you soon.

I also have the best friends ever. Not only did they help Chase surprise me with this, but they brought me a pink ombré sequined dress and sparkly cowboy boots to wear. And Riley has been forcing her students to make friendship bracelets—

which is not technically child labour—so we have a big Ziplock bag full of them.

By the time the limo rolls up Tyra's driveway, the combined shimmer the four of us are emitting from all our sequins, sparkles, and glittery makeup can probably be seen from space. When the door opens, and Chase steps out in a pair of black shorts and a black button-down with red snakes all over it, I launch myself at him. He's *Reputation*, and I'm *Lover*.

This is literally the best day of my life.

"Whoa, slow your roll there, little sister," Luke says. "I may have agreed to be a Swiftie for a night, but that didn't include watching you make out with my best friend."

"Oh shut up. Everyone here is a Swiftie. Don't even bother trying to deny it." Everyone is dressed as different Taylor Swift eras. Luke and Holly are both *1989*-themed. Ryan and Avery are dressed like they just walked out of the *22* music video. Riley is *Speak Now*, and Tyra and Taylor are all rainbows for *Lover* like me.

Everything goes by in a blur. We get to the stadium and are led to the VIP tent, where I notice several other celebrities. This is LA, after all, and who doesn't want to see a generational icon put on an epic three-and-a-half hour-long show spanning ten eras and over a decade of song writing?

I spend most of my night screaming lyrics and reminding myself not to grip Chase's hand so hard that I break it. This is an emotional rollercoaster, and I may have cried a little when Taylor first popped out on the stage. The level of euphoria pouring through my body right now should be illegal.

"I'm going to the bathroom," Chase says into my ear just as the Fearless set starts. I smile, kiss him on the lips, and wave him off. No way I'm going to the bathroom. I don't care if I have to hold my pee for the entire concert.

"This is the best night ever," I yell at Riley for about the eleventh billionth time tonight. We're jumping up and down to the music, laughing, having the time of our lives, when I turn and see Holly and Avery doing something with their phones.

“Are you guys working right now?” I ask in horror.

“We’re just taking some video for our socials.” I roll my eyes. Those two never stop working.

It seems like Chase is gone for a really long time, and I start to worry that he’ll miss one of my favourite songs. *Let’s be real. Love Story is every teenage girl’s favourite song.* The beginning notes start to play, and Chase is nowhere to be seen, so I grab onto Riley’s arm, sway back and forth with her, and sing along. By the time the bridge hits, the entire stadium is rocking, screaming their hearts out, waiting for Romeo to get down on one knee.

And that’s when I feel it. A light tap on my shoulder. My heart starts to thunder in my chest as I turn around and see Chase bent down on one knee, a beautiful round-cut diamond ring in his hand.

Seventy-thousand people scream, “Baby, just say yes,” at the same time I do, throwing my arms around Chase.

“Yes! Oh my god. You’re insane!” I laugh and cry at the same time. I will never forget this moment. Never ever, ever. Like ever. He slips the ring onto my finger, and it’s a perfect fit. Holly and Avery smirk at me, phones recording the whole thing because, of course, they did.

“I love you, Lily.” Chase smiles into my lips as he kisses me. “I want to spend the rest of my life loving you.”

“I love you too!” I laugh, so overwhelmed that I don’t know what else to do. I’m so full of emotion right now that I feel like my brain is trying to do too many things at once. “I can’t believe you did this.”

“I can’t believe you’re mine.”

I can’t believe it either because I’ve loved Chase Wilder for almost my entire life, and now, I get to keep loving him for the rest of it.

Epilogue Two

Oops

Lily

We're going to be late for our flight back to Toronto. Holly, Riley, Avery, Tyra, and Taylor are all waiting for me and the airport Uber that's picking us up. Tyra's flying to Toronto with us for a few weeks to spend time with Taylor, so we're all scrambling with our bags and making sure we didn't forget anything.

"Hurry up, Lily," Holly calls from the foyer. "The app says the Uber is almost here."

"Okay, I just have to pee."

"You always have to pee," Riley snickers.

"It's a nervous habit. I can't help it."

I roll my carry-on into the hallway and run into the bathroom. I can't help that I have to pee eighteen times before getting on a plane or going to bed. I just do. After I flush and wash my hands, I quickly scan the bathroom for any items I might have forgotten. My eyes widen when they land on the trash. *Is that a—?*

"Driver's here," Avery yells, but I barely hear her because I'm reaching into the trash bin and pulling out a *pregnancy test*.

A positive pregnancy test.

Holy. Shit. Someone's knocked up.

My mind whirls through the possibilities. Is Holly pregnant? It's probably not Avery. Tyra and Taylor are also unlikely candidates. It's not me.

"Lily, the Uber guy is here," Riley says, bounding into the bathroom with no care for my privacy. To be fair, she's seen it all anyways.

I stare at her.

She stares at me. And then, her gaze wanders down to the atomic bomb of a pregnancy test in my hands. My eyes narrow on her and then shift downward to her midsection.

Riley's eyes whip back up to mine, and I just know. *I know*. And she knows that I know. Grabbing the test from my hands, horror in her gaze, she immediately throws it back in the trash, one word on her lips.

“Fuck.”

Acknowledgement

Books are fucking hard to write.

Every time I start one, I trick myself into thinking it will be easier or the process will be smoother. It's not. But I write because I love telling stories. Sometimes it's emotionally exhausting, but when you're finished, you feel like you've gone through a cathartic experience.

I also write for you all—the readers. I may not be the most popular author in the world or make millions of dollars. I'm not on the NYT Bestsellers list (yet), but I have a wonderful community of readers who love my books and enjoy my level of crazy.

Are my books realistic? No. But do they make you laugh? 100%. If I can help readers escape for a few hours and have a good laugh, I've done a small part in making the world a better place.

Thank you for reading my books and coming with me on this wild journey.

About The Author

Hilary Rose



Hilary Rose is a teacher who lives near Toronto, Canada. She has her master's degree in sports journalism but decided she enjoyed writing about fictional hockey players more than real ones. She is a passionate hockey fan who sometimes gets a little too emotionally invested in her team's wins and losses. She's a huge Swiftie who spends far too much time sweating on her Peloton because she can't sit still for more than a few minutes—unless it's to write her next book.