



Winning Match

An Arizona Rattlesnakes Novel

EDEN DUNN

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CONTENTS

1. [Luca](#)
2. [Jaxon](#)
3. [Luca](#)
4. [Jaxon](#)
5. [Luca](#)
6. [Jaxon](#)
7. [Luca](#)
8. [Jaxon](#)
9. [Luca](#)
10. [Jaxon](#)
11. [Luca](#)
12. [Jaxon](#)
13. [Luca](#)
14. [Jaxon](#)
15. [Luca](#)
16. [Jaxon](#)
17. [Luca](#)
18. [Luca](#)
19. [Jaxon](#)
20. [Luca](#)
21. [Jaxon](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[The End](#)

[Also by Eden Dunn](#)

[About the Author](#)

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WINNING MATCH

Do I want to win this match or not...

Jaxon Roark is my opposite in every way. I'm the controlled hockey captain, and she's the flaky, clumsy artist. And the lines are already drawn in the sand—stay the hell away from her.

That's the word from the big bosses.

Except it's damn near impossible to do when she needs a model for her art project, and I've drawn the short straw. She's in my dreams, and she's there when I wake up, wearing barely anything except a paint-covered smock.

Sucking on her cherry lollipop.

I'm used to discipline, and I'm used to knowing my opponent. She's the only one who can keep me on my toes with her surprises. Although neither one of us wants a real connection, we can't stop circling, and it's making me dizzy.

It's no wonder I'm falling for this forbidden siren.

Winning Match is book 8 in the Arizona Rattlesnakes series

LUCA

I strode through the upper offices of the Arizona Rattlesnakes stadium like I owned the place and without any second thought. I didn't actually own the team or the building; I was on my way to a meeting with one of the co-owners right then. Joshua and Jeremy Harris, the brothers, had made their fortune in office supplies and then bought themselves an NHL team.

Having money at your disposal had its privileges.

It allowed people to indulge their whims and fancies, things that would make others open-mouth gawk.

I might have a hefty chunk of change in the bank, I thought as I kept up a brisk pace, but the thought of spending it on private jets or sports teams made me uncomfortable.

As the captain of the Rattlesnakes, I liked to consider myself the next guy on the ladder, and it had taken me a good bit of time to become accustomed to the spotlight on my shoulders.

I'd gotten this position not because of favoritism or because of luck. It was deserved. I'd clawed my way to the top with a reputation for being demanding but fair. I knew my way around a rink, and I knew my guys, their strengths, and their weaknesses.

The only thing I didn't know is why Josh called a meeting with me today.

I pushed any nerves at the thought of an official meeting with my bosses into a small box inside of me. I was the captain for a reason.

I had to remember that.

Although, I hadn't been the most likely choice when my buddy Coffee, our former captain retired. Shit, Coffee probably hadn't gotten called up to meetings with the big boss, with only a message to *hurry*.

Never a good sign.

At least, in my opinion.

Since I was good at what I did, good at reading a room, and my ability to listen to my intuition, I tried to never go anywhere with expectations. I let other people lead the way with their actions. The ice was my strength, and I tried not to be the loudest or showiest guy anywhere.

Years of military school taught me discipline, and I had to admit, though I never would to my father, I made sure to use everything I'd learned as an asset.

Unlike some of my guys, I wasn't the one to go off, half-cocked, in a fight or a barroom brawl. I wasn't the one to make headlines for hooking up with a starlet.

I used the self-discipline now to square my shoulders.

I'd never be that guy.

"Hey, Corrinne," I called out as I made my way into the office.

She smiled sweetly at me from behind her desk, her strawberry-blond hair done up in an intricate bun at the back of her head. *You want to talk about discipline*. Corrinne Winters was our PA, and she kept this place running like clockwork.

"Hey, you. You're early as usual. Too bad Josh got you beat! He's expecting you in the conference room," she replied.

So I could see, considering the conference room had glass walls on three sides.

Time to get it together.

I loved hockey, and I loved this team; I wanted to play with them as long as physically possible. When I retired, like

Coffee? I had no idea what the hell I'd do.

And no sense in worrying about it yet.

"Just head on in," Corrinne continued with a cheerful chirp.

I shot her a salute and tried not to worry. Early and yet Josh had gotten here before me. Having had the mantra beaten into me from early childhood that if you were not ten minutes early to any appointment, you were late, I always made it a point to check my watch.

Corrinne wasn't surprised.

Too bad I was; Josh never beat me here.

On the way down the hall toward the conference room, I passed a hot blonde bombshell sucking like crazy on a red lollipop. She smiled at me around the stick before heading past Corrinne and out the door, her boho skirt and layers of bangles swishing and jingling as she moved.

Neither one of us paused to talk, and I didn't turn around to watch her walk away, despite the odd and overwhelming desire to do so. How odd. I never had that reaction to women.

Odder still was the fantasy growing inside my head with each footstep of those pink lips wrapped around my own lollipop. Hell to the yes, but the force of it had me stopping in my tracks.

I didn't sleep with local women and never strangers. Those were facts.

There was Joshua up ahead, waving me into the conference room as he finished up a call on his cell.

A tall guy in his late thirties, he and his brother were the spitting image of each other. I'd only ever seen Josh clean-shaven, but right now, he sported a beard, which was an entirely new look for him and gave me a bit of pause.

Somehow the growing beard seemed at odds with his neatly cut designer suit.

Maybe I'd razz him about a little.

I liked Josh and Jeremy a lot. Some NHL owners were hands-off, only in it for the prestige, didn't come to games, or else raging assholes. The Harris brothers loved hockey. They bought the Rattlesnakes when we were on a losing streak and somehow managed to turn us all the way around lately.

I grabbed a seat across from him, knowing I spoke for myself and the boys that we were happy to be here, to work for Josh.

He clicked off the cell and set me with a look that spoke to one of *those days*.

"Luca, sorry about that. I swear, the worst part of this job is dealing with vendors. Do I really care where we source our hot dogs from?" Joshua scoffed. "No, I do not. It's the kinda thing you don't think about when you say to yourself, 'Hey, I want to buy a hockey team.' Hot dogs." He shook his head.

"It's tough to be you," I teased because, honestly, he was a billionaire with a hot wife and a lovely family. He had a stable marriage, enough money to go on vacation wherever he wanted, whenever he wanted, and a community that respected him. Ain't nothing tough about his life at all.

"Yeah, it sucks." His wide smile told me he didn't believe it, either. "Sorry. I know better than to complain since I brought this on myself."

I waved him away. "No worries." My knee threatened to bob up and down with anticipation, and I slammed a hand down on top to keep the movement silent. At least the table was wood so Josh wouldn't catch the unacceptable display of nerves.

Not nerves, exactly, but tension.

The look in my eyes must have given me away because he hurried to say, "So, I need to ask you a favor. Mia's cousin, Jaxon, is in town. She's staying with us while she gets settled, so she'll be around a bit." Josh glanced down at his phone again in expectation.

"Okay, nice to have a family visit," I offered.

Unless you were my family.

Mine was made up of gruff military men, and their visits were anything but nice, on the opposite side of the scale from relaxing.

“I don’t mean to sound impertinent, Josh,” I continued, “but I have no idea why you’d want to talk to me about your relative visiting you.”

Or why it was my problem.

He sighed, sounding long put out. “Jaxon is in her twenties, and she’s had a rough run of life so far. To the point where I feel overprotective. Anyway, I need you to talk to the team, tell them that she’s off-limits. I don’t want anyone’s grubby mitts touching that girl while she’s still healing. If they so much as ask her on a date, then there will be hell to pay.”

“Wow, you’re serious.”

“Deadly.” He nodded gravely. “And you have to do it without Mia getting wind of it because she would kill me. But she’s like a little sister to me, and she’s sweet, and she’s coming from a bad breakup and doesn’t need guys hitting on her.”

Josh had gone red-faced and blotchy by the end of his speech.

That was a lot of words from my usually low-key boss, which told me everything I needed to know. Jaxon’s safety was important to him.

I refused to point out how most of the guys on the team were now in relationships because we had a whole second-string roster of single guys. Only my friends, the ones I hung out with the most, were taken.

Still, corralling them all fell under my jurisdiction.

“Sure. No problem,” I replied. My knee stopped bobbing, and the nerves settled. A task. I could handle a task.

“Great.” Joshua sounded relieved. “I really appreciate you doing that for me, Luca. You’re a good guy.”

I smiled at him and said, “I like to think so.”

“She’s here, so I’ll introduce you.” Josh slapped his hands down on the desk as he stood, shoving his cell in his pocket.

Right now?

He wanted to introduce me to his wife’s cousin...now?

Joshua led the way out of the conference room and back toward the open lobby area where Corrinne held court from her desk. Rather than leaving, the lollipop girl leaned—correction, *sprawled*—across one half of the desk with her hip cocked and her eyes lit in laughter.

“Jaxon Roark, this is Luca Stone, our captain,” Joshua began.

Jaxon lifted off the desk and tripped over herself, her arms windmilling to catch herself before she found her balance.

I’d taken two steps forward to help before she managed to get steady. Josh stood to the side, laughing under his breath.

“Luca, meet Jax, my cousin-in-law,” he finished.

“It’s good to meet you,” I said, extending my hand.

The jewelry around her wrist jingled like a bell as she lifted her hand to take mine.

“Nice to meet you too.” Her voice was smooth and deeper than I’d thought because of the sweetness of her features. The skin of her hands, velvety and smooth, brushed up against mine, and although I had the urge to keep hold of her, I forced myself to let go.

“Welcome to Tucson,” I continued.

Her face broke out in a grin as she ran the hand I’d held through the short strands of her light blond hair. “Thank you. It’s been pretty nice so far.”

Her lips had been dyed red by the sucker, now long gone.

“Call about the hot dogs, Joshua,” Corrine called out to him.

“Holy mother of...” He broke off on a groan and raked a hand through his own hair. “Jax, I’ve got to handle this. Luca

is a good guy. He'll give you the tour and bring you back here.”

“I will?” I muttered out loud.

Joshua was already off to deal with the hot dog people, who were now calling the office instead of his cell phone. I wouldn't want to be him.

Although, apparently, my plans for the afternoon had been hijacked because I'd be giving a tour of the barn to Jaxon.

We stared at each other for a moment before she chuckled, the skin around her eyes crinkling with her smile.

“I'm sorry to impose on you,” Jaxon said with a shrug. Her bracelets jingled even with the slight movement. “Josh promised he'd show me around today, so that's why I'm here.”

I pushed aside everything I'd thought to get done, focusing on her with what I hoped to be a confident air rather than the put-out frown my face wanted to make. “It's fine,” I assured her.

“Do you want coffee, Luca?” Corrinne asked. “We just had some delivered.”

Jaxon shifted back to the desk to grab her cup. What the hell?

I walked off with a good old-fashioned coffee, no cream, no sugar, while Jaxon slurped what smelled like an overly sweet chai latte. Which did not surprise me at all the way she'd gone to town on that sucker. The woman was probably prediabetic from all the sugar.

“How are you settling in so far?”

Being this close to her, trapped in the elevator heading down to the locker rooms to start the tour, forced me to remember my initial thought: how I'd wanted those lips wrapped around my cock.

Now it made me want to blush.

I had no business wondering about a stranger and even less when the stranger turned out to be Mia's cousin.

“You know, it’s always tough when you want to start over,” Jaxon replied. She gazed up at me, a heavy hooded look, her blue eyes expressive. “I’m good at traveling, but starting over always brings a set of challenges.”

I nodded in agreement, unsure what to say and a little uncomfortable opening up.

“Have you been to Tucson to visit Mia before?” I asked. Better to keep Jaxon talking.

“Um, yeah.” The doors to the elevator opened with a ding. “I’ve been here a few times. Stayed in a pueblo once.”

She tripped over the threshold and spilled her coffee all over me. Before we even made it to the locker room.

The shock of it, the liquid dripping down my back, and the temperature change had me gawking at her. The chai slid down my ass crack and all the way along my—

I hissed out a breath.

“Oh my God!” Jaxon exclaimed, wiping my ass with her hands to clean me off before she, apparently, realized that feeling me up wouldn’t make things better. “I am so sorry. Are you burned?”

“I’ll be fine,” I said with gritted teeth.

Shit, my skin did tingle. No more than a slight sunburn would tingle but the sloshing in my boxer briefs? It put me on edge.

“I mean, I look like I took a giant crap, but I have a change of pants in the locker room, so it’s no big deal.” I tried to brighten my tone for her sake since a look at her showed her face despondent and worried.

She took in my ass for a minute. “I’m really sorry, Luca. It does look like you popped your pants,” she replied.

Felt like it too.

“Don’t worry about it.”

I waddled forward.

The girl was a hot mess, but definitely hot, with her wide eyes and pink cheeks.

I'd just have to make sure I watched my back, front, and all sides around her. Some people were magnets for chaos, and Jaxon must be one of them.

I led her into the locker room and gave her the basics of how it was all set up before I left her wandering the showers. Grabbing a pair of sweats from my locker, I changed for approximately two seconds and came back to find Jaxon done with her coffee.

Back between her lips was a fresh lollipop.

"That can't be good for your teeth," I started to say. Except she didn't need a man telling her, one who wasn't her boyfriend or her daddy.

My mind shifted right back south, where it absolutely should not go, before I reminded myself who the fuck I was escorting.

Self-control, self-control.

I stuffed those feelings back into a little box inside of me and stared at her with clinical detachment.

"So, what do you do for work?" I asked as we made our way to the rink.

"You'll think it's dumb, but I'm an artist," she said around the sucker. "Like, a full-time artist."

I glanced sideways at her. "Why would I think it's dumb? If that's what you love doing, you have to chase the dream, right?"

She tilted her head to the side, confused by my response. I guessed not everyone in her life had been supportive.

"Well, thanks." She made some sound of appreciation in the back of her throat. "That's really sweet of you to say."

"Believe me, when you tell people your dream is to be a professional athlete, most of them laugh in your face. I get it."

At least, that was how it had been for me. Most of the laughter had come from my parents. No one made you feel more shame from their derision than the people who made you.

We reached the ice, and Jaxon extended her hands to indicate the expanse. I opened my mouth to talk her through the basics of the game right as she twirled like Julia Andrews on a hilltop in the sound of music.

“And yet here you are!” she called out. “You’re living your dream.” She purposely blew out a breath to watch the white swirls in the air in front of her. “I think it’s amazing.”

The cold air made her nipples peak, and it was pretty damn obvious she was not wearing a bra. I swore under my breath, low enough she wouldn’t hear me.

Yeah, no wonder Joshua wanted the guys on a leash.

Jaxon personified a young, naive, hot girl. Excessively naive.

“Yep, here we are,” I agreed. I shoved my hands in my pockets because all the other things I’d like to do with them were not allowed. “Where will you work since you’re planning to stay in Tucson full time?”

Jaxon continued to twirl, her arms out at her sides and her joy a tangible thing. At least until she stepped foot on the ice and immediately went into a tailspin, landing hard enough to have me wince.

“I’m hoping to find a teaching job,” she said, struggling onto her hands and knees.

Giving me a great view down her shirt, which I did my best to ignore.

I caught a flash of the supple globes of her breasts and immediately turned my face away.

“A teaching job will fund things while I build my portfolio. I’ve got an interview at the downtown community center later this week. They have a position open teaching kids and young adults to paint.”

I really had no idea what she meant, and what came out of my mouth was, “Good luck. You’ll knock ’em dead.”

In the end, I had to intervene and pull her off the ice myself, her hands scraped and her cheeks full of color.

As fast as humanly possible, I concluded the tour and took her back up to the office with my duty done. There was no need for me to stick around or do more, such as offering to take her around town to some of the more infamous sights. A little space between us would do a great deal before I drove myself nuts, picturing a regret and lust-filled afternoon where I dragged her back to the locker room and fucked her against my locker.

Not good.

Not good at all.

Whoever this woman was, whatever it was about her, she messed with my head. I never had these thoughts at work.

“Are you sure you have to go?” Jaxon asked. “I don’t see Josh around, and he drove me here.”

Joshua had indeed fled the building.

“The hot dog king of Tucson wanted an emergency meeting,” Corrinne said with a straight face.

“There’s a hot dog king?” I asked, genuinely bemused.

“I guess so.” Corrinne shrugged. “Sounds a little effed up, but it’s true. Josh booked it out to meet him. Said he’d be back in about an hour.”

An hour. My stomach dropped.

“I don’t have a car. I came with Josh,” Jaxon continued. “And I prefer my bicycle in general.”

“Well, you’re going to need a whole lot of stamina and sunscreen to bike year-round in Tucson,” I said, partially dreading being alone in a car with her and secretly delighted to get to know her. The second one scared me the most. “I’ll drop you off at home.”

“I don’t want to put you out...” Jaxon trailed off, and the hopeful smile tilting her lips north undid me.

“Come on. It’s no trouble.” I placed my hand on the small of her back to guide her out of the lobby. Her midriff top meant I connected with soft skin. I swallowed over a groan. “It’s sort of on my way.”

“Sort of?” she questioned.

“Near enough.” It was *not* on my way at all, but I had a feeling Jaxon had no money on her, and an Uber to Mia and Joshua’s place would be expensive.

If I had a sister, I’d want someone to look out for her as well.

“I really do hope it’s no trouble,” Jaxon said.

We took the stairs this time, although it made no difference. She missed a step and slammed right into my back, driving me down three steps where I almost missed the landing.

What could I do to distract myself while driving from the scent of patchouli and vanilla? Or the sight of her creamy thigh through the slit in her skirt.

“Let me show you a few of the sights,” I offered.

A quick tour. If I had to remember the history, I wouldn’t focus on her. It was great in theory until she turned and bent one leg up on the seat, her skirt bunched up to her hips and her leg on display from ankle to thigh.

She turned to face me with her back to the passenger door as if I was the fascinating one. No doubt my description of city hall was *that* riveting.

“Tell me more,” she said when I paused for air. “Tell me everything. You have such a soothing voice, Luca.”

I squirmed in an undignified and unmanly fashion.

Thank goodness I pulled into Josh and Mia’s driveway soon enough.

“I appreciate you. It was really kind of you. I know Joshua railroaded you into giving up your morning. Thank you.” She handed me a lollipop out of her pocket for payment. “Sorry about the coffee incident earlier. I can be kind of clumsy. I’ve always been that way.”

“Are you safe to exit the vehicle, or should I come rescue you?” The possibility had merit, and I immediately shut it down, readying myself with a million excuses in case she said yes.

She did not. Rather, Jaxon laughed out loud. “I’m okay, I promise. You have a good day.”

Surprisingly, she exited the truck without incident. I waited until she was safely inside the pool cabana behind the main house before I drove off, her scent wafting over to me.

Off-limits. Nothing in common. Too young, too clumsy, too flighty for me. Yet the deep attraction remained, along with the spark of something exciting I knew I had to ignore.

Even if I believed in such things as The One or the love of your life, I still wouldn’t risk my hockey career for a woman. Not right now, and probably never.

I planned my life with the same rigidity and control as my hockey games. As such, I only allowed myself to hook up with women during the summer. I satiated myself over those few offseason months, which left me free to focus once the season began in October.

Women were a distraction, and I could not be the best if distracted. Jaxon might be cute and alluring and totally fuckable, but she was not for me, no matter what I might want in the heat of the moment.

A few miles of distance had my resolve strengthening to the point where I no longer felt the intuitive nudge inside of me, the one begging me to take a closer look at her.

Our afternoon training session on the ice started with a pep talk from me as I faced my guys, and it wasn’t my usual one.

“Mia has a cousin in town.” I paced in front of the guys, gathered in a line on the ice in front of me. “Her name is

Jaxon. You may speak to her, and you may buy her a drink after a game if she agrees. You may not flirt with her, touch her, date her. Boss's orders."

The guys looked a little stunned. I'd never had this kind of talk with the guys before. *Still*. Having met Jaxon, I was genuinely motivated to keep every one of these assholes away from her.

"Am I clear?"

They all replied in unison. "Clear, Captain."

A few of them looked as though they wanted to argue or ask for more information. No one said a word.

"Also, if Mia hears we had this little chat, you don't want to know what the consequence will be. Understood?" It sounded fucked up saying it out loud. Yet, orders were orders, and this one came from the top.

They nodded their agreement.

"I hate to be the one to have to say this, except it's important enough for Mr. Harris to ask of me, which means it's important for you to follow through. She's going to tempt you." I probably should have stopped talking, even though she tempted me. "Keep your composure and focus on the game." I blew out a breath. "Okay, enough of that bullshit. Let's go practice some drills the other teams won't see coming if we play our cards right."

And then I did what I'd always done: I put all distractions out of my mind and hit the ice.

I belonged there, gliding along the frozen expanse. My world made sense there, and after the morning I had, I needed to get back to what made sense.

JAXON

Mia greeted me as I changed direction at the last minute and slipped in the back door of the main house.

“Yo ho ho and a bottle of...where’s my favorite cousin?” I called out to her in a singsong.

She padded out of her office, directly off the dining room, and glanced at me from head to toe as though to ask what the hell I was wearing. At least, I thought she would, until she surprised me by changing tactics.

“Did I see Luca outside?” she asked.

I lifted a brow. No doubt she already knew the answer to her question.

“Yes, you did. Joshua had to see a man about a hot dog.” I paused for dramatic effect. “So Luca dropped me off.”

“My, my.” Mia’s gaze turned assessing. She linked her arm through mine and led me further into the huge kitchen.

This house was unlike anything I’d ever seen.

Mia and I grew up poor. Dirt-level poor where we counted our pennies and used food stamps. We’d envied people in double-wide trailers. That was how poor.

This place overwhelmed me on multiple levels. Her kitchen was literally the size of our old trailer where we’d grown up.

Together, raised by our gram. It made us as tight as sisters and as thick as thieves.

How could I begrudge her or Joshua their successes? But...I wasn't quite used to a life of opulence, and I needed to keep my wits about me and not get too comfortable.

My stay here was temporary, and when I struck out on my own, I'd be looking for a one-bedroom condo in a decent part of town. Something that size, not a seven-bedroom, six-bathroom mansion with a pool house.

"My, my what?" I asked her.

"Luca's cute, isn't he?" Her voice drew me away from my musings and into the present.

"Yeah, definitely."

She'd see right through any lie, and what the heck, she was right. Luca had struck me through like a bolt the moment he passed me in the office hallway. It took every ounce of self-control I possessed and a thousand more I did not to not turn around and stare at his ass when he walked away.

Especially when I later found out just how tight those perfect little round cheeks were, my hands on them.

Good-looking, built, and a voice like dark chocolate.

Did I tell Mia that I'd already had my hands on that butt when I stupidly tried to clean the coffee spill? Plus, there was much to admire about him.

"You know, Luca is not only the team captain, which means he's smart and observant, but he's a sweetheart. A really good guy." Mia stopped at the counter and grabbed a pitcher of water. "You two should hang out."

I rolled my eyes. "I think he thinks I'm a total ditz. Anyway, he's not my type, way too uptight." Yeah, sure, like that would convince me.

He might be uptight, but there was something so sexy about his control. It made me want to push his buttons and see how he bends. How to get him undone.

"Maybe he needs the right woman. I'm just saying." Mia handed me a glass, and I took a long sip to cool my parched throat. Not from the heat. I was used to the heat. But from

being trapped in a truck with Luca while he begrudgingly explained some of the historical points in town.

He wasn't a good tour guide, but I'd listen to him read the back of a milk carton. That voice of his...wowzah.

He made a girl thirsty.

"The right woman might be able to—" Mia started.

I held my hand up in the universal stop sign and plopped down at the eat-in nook in the corner of the kitchen. "Mia, you already know because we've been over this, but I've sworn off men!" I forced myself to laugh. "Just because Luca is good-looking doesn't mean I'm going to fall at his knees and try to get him to plan a wedding."

My stomach curdled at the thought.

Any wedding in general, and even the mention of it made me want to hurl these days after I walked in to find my ex-boyfriend shredding my art. When I went to stop him, he'd broken my arm.

Yup, I sure knew how to pick 'em.

Men, at least. I'd dated men *and* women in the past and had my fair share of good and bad experiences, but never anything like I'd gone through with...

I wasn't blind, though. I knew a hottie when I saw one. Like when I saw my ex-girlfriend, Cat, for the first time. Even though things hadn't worked out for us didn't mean I'd ruled out dating another woman again. Right now, I was not interested in a relationship with *anyone*. Period.

Mia pouted like my refusal to date Luca put her out personally. "You're no fun. How can I live vicariously through you if you won't live?" she asked.

"Joshua not enough for you?" I teased.

She waved a hand dismissively. "More than enough, but you know I've always been a hopeless romantic, and I want to see you happy and healed. Is that so wrong? I think not."

"Way to make it all about you, cuz." I laughed.

Luca might be cute in an I-have-a-stick-up-my-bum way, but he was not my type. Clearly. He seemed the complete opposite of the typical A-hole men I went for. Because that was what I *always* went for.

Plus, too uptight. He would never be okay with my whole vibe of being free and cutting loose. Too bad.

“Anyway,” I continued, clearing my throat. “I managed to spill coffee on his butt going up some stairs and then spent a few minutes patting it dry before I realized I was inappropriately touching him. So, I think he’s put me in the crazy person column.” I stared solemnly at her. “There is no getting out of that column once you’re in it.”

Mia just about died laughing, to the point where she had to stop to catch her breath and wipe tears from her eyes. “What I wouldn’t give to see that in real life. Wow. You felt up Coach Stone.” She snorted. “That guy never has a hair out of place. He must have gone nuts.”

“I wonder if he’d be chill on the inside or if he’s always so stick in the mud,” I mused out loud.

“I’ve never seen him any other way,” Mia insisted.

She was right about him not having a hair out of place, although I might have had a sex dream or two about mussing him up that night.

It made things a little awkward the next time I saw him. Mia packed me into the car along with the kids, playing I Spy out the window, and we all trekked over to Coach Darren’s house for a cookout.

Luca had just come in with the boys from a round of golf and drinks. Had he broken a sweat?

Nope. Not as far as I could tell. Cool as a cucumber, that one.

Had my mouth gone dry the moment I saw him and our gazes connected across the crowd?

Yup.

Dry enough I had to grab a mineral water for myself and chugged half of it before burping my guts up.

I'd always been decently good with crowds. You had to be on the art scene, especially in a place like New York. There were always people coming in, groups changing, that kind of thing. New up-and-coming artists to learn about.

The cookout at the coach's was no different.

It might take me a long time to memorize because there were kids, babies, and WAGs, right along with the team members.

The Snakes, it seemed, embraced group activities. Even the second-string players were starting to head in with their partners and families.

Luckily for me, a woman called Sasha took me under her wing. "You'll get used to it. It's kind of a lot at first." She surveyed the crowd like a captain with her ship. "Trust me. If you think of it like a frat house, then it takes some of the pressure off. And no one is going to judge you for being a little nervous."

"I'm not nervous," I replied.

She was not wrong, but I didn't mind, really. I liked people, and I'd gotten increasingly isolated in my old life in Tennessee after I moved out of my girlfriend's apartment in NYC.

A whole new crowd might be just what I needed to break in my life here in Arizona.

The coach's yard didn't extend too far, but he backed right up to the golf course, which gave the illusion of extra room. All of which we needed as the crowd sprawled out away from the pool and barbecue area.

"Do you have to be gorgeous to join this crew?" I asked Sasha, taking in the guy and girl candy offered. "I swear, I've never seen so many beautiful faces in my life! It's enough to give me a heart attack."

“If you do have to be gorgeous, then you fit right in.” She hip-checked me, and I instantly liked her more. Blond, but not exactly bombshell. More like California chic with golden skin and big blue eyes. “You are such a sexy girl, and the way you just own your body.” She sighed, clucking her tongue. “I wish I had half of your confidence.”

I wore a red strapless dress that hugged my body from below my armpits, over my breasts, and then fanned out to hit my knee. Braless, as usual, and I guess that was probably pretty obvious. I may have dressed with the idea of getting a little bit of Luca’s attention.

Nothing fancy, either, just something nice from my sparse wardrobe.

“This? It’s nothing.”

“It’s glorious, and you hush. I don’t want to hear you say a single thing,” Sasha interrupted. “I’d kill to be able to get away without a bra.”

“It’s a blessing,” I agreed.

The dress wasn’t working so far. If I didn’t know better, I’d think stick-in-the-mud Luca was avoiding me, but everyone else seemed very friendly. I joined the buffet line behind Luca—I really was a lucky girl—and managed to spill my coleslaw all down his shorts when a couple of excited kids bumped into me.

His back stiffened, the rest of the world slowing, and the coleslaw spilled in slow motion.

One minute my plate was flat, and the next, mayonnaise, carrot, and cabbage decorated the back of the Rattlesnakes captain. I wanted to slap myself. “I’m so sorry. You’re not going to want to be around me.” I reached for a napkin, but he kept me at arm’s length before I could go scouting for slaw down his pants.

Everyone in the general vicinity found it amusing. Everyone except Luca.

“You trying to get my pants off again, Jaxon?” His voice dropped to a low growl. Sexy and predatory, and I felt it in my

core.

“I’m sorry,” I insisted, gripping the napkin hard enough to shred it. “I’m not usually this clumsy...it only happens around hot men.”

He ducked out of the way when I went to wipe those very firm buttocks. I managed a swipe, though.

“You think I’m hot?” He smiled once before his lips thinned into a straight line.

“Sure.” I shrugged, trying to play it down. “Half of Tucson thinks you’re hot. I’m part of a majority.”

“I don’t date,” he informed me.

The abruptness of his statement took me by surprise. I found myself blinking up at him, working hard to disguise the surprised expression.

“Me either. Not that I was asking you out, buddy. It was an off-handed compliment and not a marriage proposal.” I swallowed down the bit of hysterical laughter wanting to bubble out.

Luca seemed to have more to say, but he bit it back and walked away instead. Right in the middle of our conversation.

“Smooth, girl.” Mia stood beside me. “He’ll cool down. Not a fan of mess, that one. You see?”

“Then I’m definitely not someone he’ll like.” Too bad too. There was something about him I found myself unable to shake.

“You are not *that* much of a mess. And he likes pretty much everyone. He comes off gruff, but he’s not.”

I scoffed, playing it off further. “So you say. You know him better than I do.”

I tried not to think about how I might be the exception to her rule as I felt his dark stare on me from the corner of the yard he’d retreated to.

No, I didn’t want to date Luca or anyone else right now. Still. Being surrounded by happy and functional couples at this

party... I couldn't help but wonder what it must be like. To arrive at an event like this with a nice woman or a great guy, like Luca, on your arm. To know that at the end of it all, he'd take you home, peel your clothes off, and, if the way he now looked at me was any indication, make you scream his name so loud the neighbors heard.

My cheeks pinked at the very idea, and I took a sip of the best chardonnay I've ever had to hide the blush.

Too bad I'd never know. With him, at least.

LUCA

It didn't seem to matter where I went. The lollipop-sucking, crazy hot, equally clumsy Jaxon Roark made an appearance. The coleslaw down the crack of my ass was just the first in a long line of mishaps that seemed to follow in her wake. She was a war tanker leaving disaster behind her, and the disaster always struck me.

Oh, she tripped everywhere.

She dropped things and laughed it off.

She called people by the wrong names time and again.

Yet somehow, if she had food or drink in hand, it fell on me like a magnet. Never Bates or Will or even Rico, always me. Try as hard as I might to avoid her, but it made no difference. She'd integrated smoothly into the inner circle, one of Sasha's new besties, it seemed. She showed up at game nights and parties. She showed up when I thought I was having a drink with the boys at a bar.

It started to seem like a conspiracy, which got me to the point of declining more invitations than I accepted. Not enough to make anyone suspicious, of course; if the others thought I needed a break from peopling, then it was all part of the normal, for me at least.

On one hand, I appreciated that the gang made an effort to accept her as their own. All of them. We were a giving bunch, and the women were always happy to open their arms to another clucking hen into their midst. I liked that. As a guy from an all-male family, it was new to me.

We accepted the others for who they were without forcing change on anyone.

When you got the Snake family together, it seemed we were all misfits—doing our best to find our place and finding it among each other.

For the most part.

Jaxon was the latest lost puppy to wander into our midst, and we were puppy-aholics. Ready to adopt. Foster fails. We loved bringing new people into our group and expanding what we knew about each other.

Joshua and Jeremy told us to welcome Jaxon, and even if the warning hadn't been issued, we would have anyway.

Welcome, but do not touch.

That didn't make this any easier for me. If her food and drink were drawn to my clothing, the same felt true for me to her. Her laugh drew me through a crowd, and no matter where she went, I picked her out. Her bright hair in a damn adorable pixie cut was my beacon. The sound of her bangles jangling on her wrists all called to me.

I parked my car in the half-full lot at Prickles and stared at the exterior of the building for a long while. Gathering my thoughts and making sure I was grounded before getting out of the car.

Not rounded, not gathered, and my head too damn full of the lollipop-sucking fiend.

I wished I wasn't so attracted to her. I wished that everything inside of me didn't tell me to look at her, to consider her. *The One*. The concept sucked.

It was inconvenient, and I did not do inconvenient. Too self-aware, I told myself.

I hated that she got in my head, especially when I considered how little in common we actually had.

Drumming my fingertips on the steering wheel, I closed my eyes, slowly breathing in and out until the vision of her

faded from my head. Once I felt ready, I pushed out into the heat and went inside Prickles for something delicious.

I rarely indulged

Just a little something deep-fried and full of fat, and I'd be good to go for the rest of the day. Hell, the rest of the week at this point.

The radio pumped a colorful assortment of songs both inside and outside the adorable cafe, both seating areas filled, but definitely more people inside than out. The air conditioning tended to be a big draw. I was a fan of sweating, so I decided to get something to go and maybe hold a little picnic for myself.

There were some great trails in the area.

Greasy food, a little walk, and I'd be good as new.

Jaxon who? I didn't know any Jaxon.

The glass door swung shut behind me, and I drew in a breath. So many people crowded around the little bistro tables with their orders of fried pickles and grilled cheese sandwiches, both of which the place was famous for serving.

I spotted a familiar face in one of the booths in the middle of the dining area, and Mia caught my gaze half a second later. She lifted a hand in greeting, waving me over. Crap. That wasn't good. She was the last person I wanted to run into today, which meant I should have chosen literally any other place to grab a snack.

Now I had to go over and say hello.

"Have you ordered yet?" she asked when I stopped by the table.

I shook my head. "Literally just got here and saw you."

"Then why don't you order, and we can sit together?" She smiled. "The place is pumping today. I was lucky to grab a table when I did. You don't mind sitting with me, right Luca?"

Lord. *I'm in for it now.*

I murmured a negative under my breath and went to do as she suggested. The order came together in my mind while I waited in line, and finally, once I had paid and gotten a wait time, I made my way back to Mia's table.

"What are you doing out and about today?" she asked cheerfully.

Trying to avoid running into anyone I know, I thought to myself.

Then I should have known better to come here too. Everyone loved Prickles. Sasha damn near came here every day.

"Treating myself to some bad food," I answered.

"Treat is right," Mia replied.

"But there you are with your healthy chicken salad sandwich and extra vegetables." If that was a treat for her, then she ate a better diet than anyone on my team.

Her grin spread across her pretty face. "I'm stuffing my face before I have to go and grab the kids from school. Late lunch, early dinner. A little alone time. Take your pick. I come here when I want to get away. And unlike you, I'm not a professional athlete, so I need to watch what I eat."

"You look fine to me." I nodded along with her words. "I know what you mean. Pretty loud place to lose yourself, though."

"You have to wrangle the guys on the ice, and they're basically like big kids themselves. So you definitely do know what I mean. Oh!" Mia hustled to chew through the bite she'd just taken, looking way too excited. "I wanted to talk to you about something."

I frowned at her. "Sounds ominous."

"No, it's nothing bad. It's actually a really good thing. You know my cousin, Jaxon." She let out a tinkling laugh. "Of course, you know her. She goes everywhere with us."

All the saliva dried in my mouth. There she was again, if not in person, then popping up in conversation. "Yes, I've seen

her around,” I told Mia. “She’s a real joiner.”

Mia chuckled again and said, “She loves to be in the center of everything. I feel like it’s the only thing that really charges her social battery. She is the opposite of me that way.”

“Me too.” My voice came out in a grumble. Although I was willing to bet that if I got to know her a little better, I’d find we had more in common than we wanted to.

“Well, Jaxon has a job doing community art classes. She’s really psyched about it. It’s a full-time gig she’s got going on, doing classes for kids and seniors. Locals. It’s a start to something really great, or so she says.”

“It sounds like a pretty fantastic start, yeah,” I agreed.

She’d slipped right in there too. And working with the community that way...I could see how it would be right up the woman’s alley. She didn’t need caffeine or drugs. Jaxon was an extrovert to the core.

“I’m sure you didn’t bring this up to tell me the good news.”

“I did not. It seems to me, in talking with the others, that this is exactly what my cousin needs to build her name. The county is actually doing a prize. I’m not really sure on the specifics,” Mia said with a wave of her hand.

“I am.”

Eleanor popped into the seat beside Mia and snagged a chip from the other woman’s plate. She shot me a wide chippy grin in greeting.

“The city council started a program to help underprivileged neighborhoods and areas get into the arts. People can apparently compete for a fellowship from the same place where the program gets its funding. The prize isn’t much, only a couple thousand dollars, but the person who wins gets all sorts of opportunities for new grants, and they get to paint the side of a building downtown.”

I pursed my lips, considering. “Sounds pretty impressive to me,”

Eleanor laughed out loud and grabbed another chip. Mia seemed okay with the stealing, though. Their kids took classes together, so they had bonded over after-school programs.

I should have known that Mia wouldn't be alone for long.

"Are we expecting anyone else for lunch?" I asked.

I really hadn't anticipated this being a social visit and had to stop myself from glancing at my watch to see how much time had passed and wonder when my order would be ready.

"Just the two of us for right now," Mia replied. "Willa said she might join, but you know how she gets when she's in music-writing mode. The chick wouldn't be able to remember her own name."

"Anyway, I like this program for Jaxon. It seems like if she wants to build her name and reputation, then she's in exactly the right spot," Eleanor continued. "And the Tucson Art Prize is not too far away."

"What do you mean?" When the women got together, it was like they had their own speech. The way I saw it, of course, it wasn't far away. It was downtown, right?

"No, I mean, it's only a few months away from happening. If we can talk Jaxon into entering." Eleanor glanced at me before flagging down a passing server and placing an order for her usual.

Whatever that meant.

The server greeted Eleanor by name, so she must be in here all the time as well.

"If it's only a few months away, do you think she'll be able to do something in time?" I asked.

Even months felt like a tight deadline for a woman like Jaxon. She was so damn flighty. Everyone knew it.

"She can if we help her."

Suddenly both Eleanor and Mia were staring at me.

I didn't know what they meant, but the way they looked at me, I knew it probably spelled trouble.

At the same time, the same server who brought Eleanor's cup of hot tea—on a hot day, because the woman was an animal—delivered my meal as well.

A high-pitched squeal sounded from the direction of the door, and when I glanced over my shoulder, Sasha waved to the three of us, her arm arcing wildly over her head. Crap. I wanted to duck before she saw me, but it was too late. Was Jaxon with her?

A glance in that direction showed Sasha by herself for once.

“My cue,” I told them. “Time for me to go. Enjoy the rest of your day, ladies.”

They allowed me to leave, in Mia's words, with little fanfare and a bid for me not to get into trouble.

It left me wondering if they were able to read my thoughts or if my face had been too transparent.

Anything involving Jaxon was trouble, and I didn't need to be in touch with my intuition to understand the need to keep my distance. As much as something inside of me drew me closer to her, logic begged me to run in the opposite direction. I'd always been a man who relied on logic.

It made sense, and it kept people safe.

JAXON

I clapped my hands together in pure glee at the news. “They really want me to come?” I asked my cousin. “They’re not just saying it to be nice? Because if they want me to stay home for reals, then I totally can.”

Mia nodded along with my babble, and I saw the ghost of her eye roll in the reflection of the window. She scrubbed the dishes with more grace than most people danced ballet. “Of course, I’m sure. They like you a lot. They’re not just being nice, okay?”

I groaned, which turned into something like an aww as I stretched my arms overhead. “That’s really sweet of them! You have great friends, Mia, you really do. Even though I’m a total mooch.”

“A mooch you may be, but they wouldn’t have extended the invitation if they didn’t like you a lot. You’ve made it to Manicures and Mimosas on your own worth, Jaxon,” she replied. “It’s not like this big thing where you have to prove yourself, but I thought it would make you feel good to know.”

Going with instinct, and also partially because I knew my cousin wasn’t big on random sloppy displays of affection so it would rankle her, I reached out and pressed my front to her back. I wrapped my arms around her torso before sloppy kissing her cheek with much fanfare.

“You’re too much,” I murmured. “You know?”

“So are you,” she retorted.

I squeezed her until she gasped and then broke away to lean against the countertop beside her.

I was slowly settling into the area, though I very much felt like I was just piggybacking off of Mia's life. She'd done really well for herself, and not just because she'd married a guy rich enough to buy a dang hockey team. Money helped, but Mia loved Jeremy, and she'd been hustling since we were kids. She came by this life through her own merit and not because she was a trophy wife.

I felt guilty for even thinking the word even when it did not apply to her.

She worked hard for everything she had. Not only did she raise great kids, she had become part of the community.

And her pool house was way better than the double-wide in Tennessee. Any day of the week. The small cabana-style place felt like a dream come true, with a large room with a bed and a small kitchen, separate bathroom.

Practically opulent!

All of the space just for me and not to share with anyone else.

I'd stayed in the trailer until Gram died, and selling it had stolen a piece of my soul even though it was a dump. It was still the only home I'd ever known. No matter how far I traveled, I always found myself back at the trailer.

It had never been the same without Mia, though. It hadn't felt like a home once she took off for greater adventures.

I'd missed her terribly. Even Gram often spoke about how she missed the times when the three of us would stay up late listening to the sounds of the trailer park around us, wondering what our neighbors were up to, and making up stories.

"Your friends are a great group. They really are," I told Mia.

"They really are," she repeated with a grin. "And we've all been talking and think you need to enter the Tucson Art Prize."

I paused on my way to biting off a piece of apple. She saved the statement for last and let it fly like an arrow hitting a bullseye. “Come again?”

“The Tucson Art Prize. It’s the—” she began.

“I know what it is,” I interrupted. Nerves and excitement began to twin in my system. “I heard about it when I signed on for the community director position.”

“Well, the girls and I have been chatting with each other, and we think you should enter and win.”

I scoffed, both pleased beyond measure and incredulous that they were talking about me, let alone planning a victory. “Like it’s so simple. Dude, come on. That’s crazy! What a harebrained idea. Most of them have never even seen my work.”

Not to mention my creativity had taken a serious nosedive lately.

I couldn’t bring myself to sketch a thing, not even on the beautiful blank pages of my new book.

“Are you kidding? I told them all about how talented you are and how great you are at inspiring other people to pursue their creative endeavors.” Mia finished scrubbing the last cup before rinsing it and adding it to the drying rack with the other dishes.

“I love the way you beef me up with your friends, but it’s true. They’ve never seen my work, so they’re going on your lies. I’m sure you’ve managed to make it sound like I’m the next Picasso or something.” I nibbled my lower lip and put the apple back in the bowl of fruit with the rest of its comrades.

Mia also didn’t know just how shot my confidence felt. From my ex-boyfriend. From life. From thinking I’d done everything exactly right only to fail anyway.

Sometimes I felt like nothing but a fraud just from teaching art classes to old people.

I hadn’t created anything new in the past five months. The last doodle I’d done, not in my new book, had looked like a

toddler had grabbed some graphite and made a dang mess.

“Can you tell me a little more about the rules for the contest?” I asked Mia. “At this point, you might know more about it than me since you’re trying to pimp out my goods for your friends.”

The comment made her laugh the way I knew it would. “Pimp you out, sure. That’s exactly what I’m going to do because you deserve it. This year it seems the medium of choice is paint, and the subject has to be portrait.”

“Human?”

Her eyes crinkled. “Yes.”

“Face or full body?” I asked.

“Full body. And the prize is pretty great from what I heard. I don’t know all the details, but I remember thinking how perfect this opportunity is for you. Jax, you need this. It will do you a world of good, and it will help you expand your brand,” Mia insisted.

“What if I like being the youngest in a room of little old ladies?” I joked. “It’s a great gig.”

“Until you’ve got a lack of models and old Mr. Whoever drops his drawers and volunteers.”

I shuddered at the thought because I’d been on the receiving end of just such a situation. The human form is a wonderful thing at any age. I hated the propositions that always seemed to follow from old Mr. Whoever. “Okay, yes, you’re right there. Let’s hope I’ll never be at a loss for models.” And speaking of models— “I have no idea who I would even paint, Mia.”

Although she didn’t know this, I started to focus solely on painting nudes over the past several years. It really helped me get into the spirit of a project by seeing my model laid bare. Nothing hidden, nothing kept from me. Only the secrets behind the eyes and those I loved exploring in multiple mediums.

Mia grabbed a fresh glass from the cabinet and walked over to her fridge. She'd gone the extra mile in terms of organization and ice. Yes, ice. The woman had a whole half of the freezer just for different shapes and flavors of ice, and she grabbed a star mold of lime and cucumber-infused goodness to add to her water.

Like she was some kind of social media influencer in addition to Super Mom.

"You'll find something," she replied. "I know you will. I'm sure I can help you if you can't find a lead."

"I'm new to town. I certainly don't know anyone who would be willing to spend hours posing with their bits dangling out for me."

Mia's eyes widened. "Naked?"

"Cat out of the bag?" I shrugged and grinned, refusing to be embarrassed about it.

"Well, I guess if you need a prime specimen to sketch in nothing but their birthday suit, then one of the guys will do it." Mia sounded much more assured than I felt looking at her. "No problem."

"Are you kidding me? You can't ask them to do that! You can't just waltz into the locker room like, okay, who has muscles in all the right places. Although sometimes it's more interesting if they're abnormal in some way," I told her.

"Only you. Or no, not only you. I'm sure you're right, and it would make for a good character study. But that's off-topic!" Mia took a sip of her fancy-schmancy water with her fancier ice, and my grin widened.

"You really think one of the guys would agree? Without their wife or girlfriend acting like a babysitter while I work?" I asked her.

"Don't worry," Mia replied. "I have a plan."

I loved my cousin more than anyone else on the planet. There was a ten-year age gap between us, which made the outside opinion one that we wouldn't get along. Too much

time and distance between us, so it might be hard to get on the same page.

Not so with us.

I trusted her more than anyone, too, so I knew that when she said she had a plan, she meant it. Mia would never lie to me or say something just because she thought I wanted to hear it.

Plus, we were both raised in Gram's double-wide trailer. And I knew that Mia had taken a job as a teen so that Gram could afford to keep me there.

I also knew Mia looked sweet as pie, and beneath the peaches and cream exterior lurked a heart full of devious tenacity.

"Don't manipulate anyone," I warned her.

Then snorted to hide my laugh.

"Oh, so you're telling me you don't want a hot hockey player to model for you?" Mia asked. "Sure. Right."

"No. I didn't say that at all."

We chuckled together, and I used my laughter to hide the direction of my thoughts. I wondered what Luca looked like beneath his uniform. And if he'd be willing to drop said uniform for my benefit or not. It wasn't like I'd gotten hooked on him or anything. He'd been nice to me on the tour and a good trooper when I kept dropping food on him. Although we hadn't gotten to repeat our conversations from the first day I met him. Whenever we ran into each other, he nodded politely at me and went about whatever it was he wanted to do, usually on the opposite side of the room from me.

"You know, I highly doubt the girls are going to appreciate me taking their man and exposing him for the world to see. At least, the world of Tucson," I continued.

Mia's chuckle tapered off. "There's a whole second string of players for the Snakes, Jax. All of them ripped."

"And most of them missing teeth?" I suggested.

“Missing teeth aside, we’re going to get you a great model, and you’ll win the prize.” She sounded insistent.

“Just like that?” I asked.

She nodded once and said, “Just like that. You’ve got this, cuz. I believe in you. And because I said it out loud, it’s certainly going to happen now. I’ll manifest it.”

“Don’t tell me that’s how you got out of the trailer park,” I joked. “By wishful thinking.”

“No, that was hard work and luck. In addition to wishful thinking,” she corrected.

My own brand of wishful thinking filled my head with images of what Luca’s very tight buttocks might feel like without his coffee-stained pants. Like magic, a familiar thread of my old creativity rose in the void in my head. It trickled down my spine and my neck until it pooled in my chest. I knew exactly how I’d want to position him too. What kind of light might look best on his face to illuminate the strong planes of his features...

He’d never agree. Not in a million years would he agree. Not the type to be free with his body. It was a damn shame. Except I knew from experience that getting caught up on a potential partner usually meant they were bad news for me. And I’d made enough bad decisions to last me a lifetime.

Wanting a cigarette desperately bad, to the point where my fingers flexed, and my skin itched, I reached for the lollipop I knew I had in my pocket and hurriedly shoved it between my teeth.

Although Mia noticed, she said nothing.

LUCA

I usually enjoyed a visit to Eleanor and Tommy's farm. Wide open spaces and fresh air were a nice change from the places where we spent most of our time; in stadiums, buses, and planes.

Today the woman in question had organized a group trail ride for us through the hills bordering her property. A lot of the guys appreciated the time with their families, and the kids loved the horses.

The goats too.

In what could only be called a smart business decision, Eleanor added goats and rabbits to her menagerie right along with the horses and chickens she already had. She also expanded from trail rides and lessons to community outreach with the schools.

The kids in the massive extended Rattlesnake family, big and small, were a little obsessed with the animals.

"Why the hell you smiling like that?" Darren asked, shooting me a sideways glance.

"Maybe we should make one of those hot, shirtless guy calendars," I told him. "You know, with the baby farm animals? I've heard more than one of the women say their ovaries might explode when they see their man with a baby goat or a rabbit on their lap."

Darren scoffed, but he didn't automatically shoot down the idea.

“Might help to drum up some new butts in the seats at the barn,” I finished.

“I’m not taking my shirt off.” It was the end of the discussion for Darren. “I’ve got a bit of a dad bod going on right now.”

“Chicks love dad bods.” I shrugged.

“Willa’s been pushing me to go back to the gym with you guys to get healthy.” Darren grimaced, rubbing a hand along his lower abdomen. Which certainly didn’t look pudgy to me, but what did I know?

He pulled into the last empty spot in the parking area, the tires kicking up dust. Most of the others were already at the farm with his wife and daughters riding along with Celia and Will.

Darren had drawn the short straw of the carpool bit because it was just the two of us, and sometimes I wondered if we’d have anything to talk about if it weren’t for hockey.

Darren had been really close with Coffee, the Rattlesnake captain before I’d taken his place. I might be damn good at my job, but it wasn’t the same, and I knew it.

He flicked his chin toward the outside, and the handful of people already gathered around the riding rink.

We’d have to go out in multiple groups since there were so many of us.

The horses were saddled and ready, waiting for us to mount up. The kids hung from the fence railing, watching, howling, talking about whatever it was kids found interesting.

Even though I didn’t have kids, I didn’t hate being around so many of them. Part of me was actually a little jealous of the guys with their families.

Did I want one of my own?

I still wasn’t sure, but the idea stuck with me. Having that kind of bond with another person, not being alone in the world forever. Still, being single was a blessing. My lifestyle wasn’t

conducive to having another person around right now, to care for someone else and give them my time.

I could use the sex.

A lot of it.

But I didn't need any further distractions.

Today, however, I had Jaxon as a distraction. My gaze shot to her straight away, hanging on the fence along with the kids and sucking on her lollipop. She looked wide-eyed, cute, wearing tiny shorts and a halter neck hippy-style top. One pull of those strings and her gorgeous breasts would pop free. *Fuck, stop thinking about her tits*, I reminded myself. There were children present.

I fell into step beside Darren, and the sound of her laughter trickled through my system.

The woman laughed like she didn't have a care in the world. Maybe she really didn't have a care in the world. I didn't know enough about her life to do anything more than make an assessment.

I only knew if I lived out of my cousin's pool house, hunting for a permanent job and residence, I'd be stressed out of my mind.

And speaking of her cousin...

Mia strode out of the barn with a riding helmet in her hands. "Okay, everyone gathered here! I've got all your names in the hat." She shook it for good measure. "Gather around, and we'll pick a winner."

Jaxon hopped down off the fence. "What are you doing?" she asked lightly.

"And why?" I wanted to know, shuffling over to join the circle around Mia.

"That thing we talked about, remember?" Mia winked at Jaxon.

Seemed to me that everyone else, except me, seemed to know what the fuck was going on. Which I hated.

Somehow, in these past few days, I'd been moved to the outskirts of our happy gang. I'd always been an observer, content to watch the others. I hadn't seen this coming, though.

"Jaxon needs a subject to paint for the art prize, and it's going to be one of you," Mia explained. "It's a pretty big deal, one I had to convince her to enter in the first place. She's still a little reluctant, so I know a great model is going to help convince her this is a great decision."

Jaxon looked uncomfortable. "I tried to tell her it was fine, but Mia insisted. And we all know how she is when she sinks her teeth into something."

"What is the prize?" I asked.

An art model...a sliver of awareness tugged at me, begging me to sit up a little straighter and pay attention. I shoved the voice side. The odds were in my favor. There were a lot of other names in the riding helmet, along with mine.

"Big stuff. Big deal," Bates explained in so many words. "Portraits only."

He never went out of his way to speak unnecessarily, so it would have to suffice for the time being.

"Apparently, it will go a long way toward establishing me as a local artist if I win this prize," Jaxon said. The way she looked, the way she tugged on that lollipop, I had a feeling this was Mia's idea, and Jaxon herself just played along.

"Drumroll, please," Mia commanded. "We're going to pick the lucky winner!"

Rico used the fence post like a drum, and Mia reached dramatically into the depths of the helmet. I held my breath because I did not want my name pulled for too many reasons to count, the least of which was not knowing what I'd sign up for.

It also meant more time with Jaxon, and more time equaled more hassle.

What else would she spill on me? A gallon of paint?

Paint thinner?

I avoided looking at her again while I waited to see what name Mia would pull.

She held her hand aloft, the slip of paper bright against the cloudless blue sky. “Luca!”

How did I know? How did I fucking know?

Of course, my name was pulled from that hat, and I couldn’t help but think by the look of pure glee on Mia’s face, she had somehow rigged it.

“Damn,” I muttered quietly.

The entire squad of kids began to howl in celebration.

“I can’t think of a more perfect model for this!” Mia continued. “Congratulations, Captain.”

“Yay!” Jaxon jumped up and down clapping, and the movement made her tits bounce and her bangles jangle. Luckily, none of the horses spooked at the sound of the movement.

I tried not to look at the jiggle and failed.

“You’re the perfect man for a nude modeling gig.” Darren slapped me on the shoulder and laughed. “Weren’t we just talking about this? Better you than me.”

“Wait a minute...It’s *nude* modeling?”

“You didn’t know?” Jaxon asked, genuinely surprised. “Mia, didn’t you warn them what was going on? I thought you said—”

“I didn’t even know why my name went in the hat until it did,” I interrupted.

My feet weighed a million pounds, and there was ice in my veins instead of blood. Nude, in front of Jaxon, with my dick out for the world to see...

Fuck no.

“Mia said she...” Her voice trailed off. I’d been played, I was certain of it, but maybe Jaxon had been as well.

I glanced over to Joshua, who ground his jaw in fury as he made his way toward us. “I really don’t think this is a good idea,” he started.

“Don’t look at me, man,” I replied, crossing my arms over my chest. “This is all your sweet little wife’s doing.” And clearly a setup. Every adult here knew it, and no one wanted to say it out loud.

Certainly not Mia, who looked as innocent as strawberry shortcake on a summer afternoon.

Josh ran his hands through his dark hair and muttered something under his breath. He couldn’t ream me out because he knew I was right.

“*Mia.*” His voice dropped to a low, angry growl. Not one I was used to hearing from him.

“Look, honey, Jaxon needed a model, and we decided the guys would volunteer,” she told him. “This contest is a really big deal for her! You wouldn’t want to hinder her chances at winning by giving her a substandard model. Would you?”

“Nobody told me about it. Or poor Luca, apparently,” Josh argued. “It doesn’t seem fair to spring this on the man. He came here expecting fun.”

At least my boss had my back.

“Look, you can redraw if you want, but I’m clothes on or not at all,” I informed Jaxon. “Shirtless is fine.”

Compromise, I assured myself.

That way, Jaxon wouldn’t be insulted that I didn’t want to work with her, and Mia could save face.

“It’s just a body. It’s very natural,” Jaxon assured me. Still wide-eyed and innocent. “It’s nothing to be ashamed about. But I get it.”

“Yeah, well, it’s my fucking body. And I didn’t agree to that. To any of it.” I didn’t even care about the children present.

I needed a drink.

Storming off toward the house, where I caught a glimpse of Tommy on the back patio, I headed in his direction, and a couple of the guys followed me.

“You may not want to show your dick, but you don’t have to be one,” Rico told me. “You were harsh.”

“How am I the bad guy here? If you want to help her so much, Rico, you can do it,” I informed him, pulling the top off the much-needed beer that Tommy handed silently off to me.

“Sounds like a day to get drunk,” he said.

I chugged half the can before I answered him with, “Fucking right.”

“Come on, Luca. Just because you have a needle dick doesn’t mean you need to be ashamed.” Rico thought he was funny.

“You’ve seen my goddamned dick enough in the locker room to know that isn’t the issue.” I bit out the words.

“I also saw you on a nude beach or two last summer in the Caribbean. You’re no prude, man, so why not just do it?” *Colton*. He must have been hiding in the house with Tommy.

“I don’t want to do it. Okay?” I sounded like a petulant toddler, and I felt like one. My needle dick wasn’t the issue.

Jaxon only had to breathe around me to get me hard. Sitting naked for her? Not a good idea. Josh hated it too, which helped my argument.

And there was Jaxon, walking over to join us, her lips turned down in a frown. “I really thought you knew about the nude part. Mia told me she’d talked it over with all the guys today,” she started.

“Not me.”

Tommy handed Jaxon a seltzer like she needed to cool down.

“The women probably all talked about it and told their men, but no one thought to tell me,” I replied.

“I see now.” She took a sip of the seltzer and held the can to her cheek. The cold made her nipples pebble beneath her shirt. I wasn’t the only one who noticed. “I’m sorry, Luca, if you felt put out in any way.”

“I guess our boy has a case of stage fright. It can happen to anyone.” Rico teased as he slapped me on the spine. Once. Hard.

“Look, it’s not that. Not everyone wants their junk painted and immortalized on canvas,” I explained. I shouldn’t have to explain, though.

They should have my back without me having to go in depth about why this made me uncomfortable.

“I would be painting *you*, Luca, not your junk specifically,” Jaxon explained. Like it somehow made things better.

“Well, then, me leaving on some shorts shouldn’t matter,” I countered, knowing I sounded like a jerk.

“It’s hard to know because I don’t know how I’d paint you or pose you until, well, until we start.” She sighed, looking me up and down. I stilled. I wasn’t a piece of meat. “I do get why you’re mad. It wasn’t cool of anyone to spring this on you.”

I nodded because I believed her. She’d been taken by surprise, the same as me, and there was nothing but guilt in those pretty eyes of hers.

It would be easier to stay mad if she was a bit more belligerent. “It wasn’t,” I agreed.

“Doesn’t mean you can’t be tough, man.” Colton shoulder-checked me. Also hard. I growled at him. Since when had the guys started to rally around Jaxon instead of me? Not that there were clear lines drawn in the sand but damnit. “We all know you’re the strong silent type, but we also know you’re no prude.”

“Didn’t you model naked for *Men’s Health*?” Rico piled on.

I glared at him. “That was different.”

He arched a brow. “How?”

I got paid for the ad, and it was good exposure for my sponsors and the Rattlesnakes in general. Not to mention tasteful. I refused to say any of that out loud because it made me sound like a money-hungry prick.

There was nothing in this thing with Jaxon for me except helping the woman I needed to stay away from. “It just is,” I said.

I set the empty beer can down on one of the picnic tables and headed off. I’d play with the baby goats or something to calm down. Except I wasn’t alone for more than five minutes before Jaxon found me.

Rather than acting prude, like they had called me, she went down flat on her stomach with her head on her hands like a pin-up.

I saw all the way down to her cleavage.

“LISTEN. Is this because you’re worried I might spill coffee on your junk?” she offered it lightly, and I appreciated her attempt at humor. “Because we can make a no hot beverages rule. I promise.”

“It’s not. Though, honestly, it’s a good idea to keep you away from hot beverages.” I smiled at her. She was so damn pretty.

My feelings were not her fault.

“You don’t have to do it, Luca. Don’t feel bad. Live modeling isn’t everyone’s jam. The whole thing was one of Mia’s harebrained schemes. When we were kids, she had so many of them. I thought she’d changed. Anyway, It’s not like I’d win or anything.”

Shit. She sounded so forlorn that something inside of me tugged in her direction.

“Why not? You shouldn’t talk down about yourself.”

She kicked her feet in the air behind her, and the movement brought the goats closer. One of them bounced on her. “I’m not trying to. I’ve never won anything in my life, and prizes like this attract artists from all over. There are big names in this competition, and I haven’t painted anything in a long time.”

“You won’t know if you don’t enter. I’m sure you’re a great painter.”

“Ha!” She laughed brightly. “You have no idea if I am or not.”

I scrubbed the ears of one of the goats. “True, but I do know no one ever gets great without practice. It doesn’t matter how much natural talent you have.”

One of the babies went to headbutt Jaxon in her cleavage, and she laughed harder, picking him up to roll on her back and hold him above her.

“Anyway, not your problem. You’re off the hook, Luca,” she said as she blew kisses at the goat.

“I don’t want you to miss out on the opportunity because of me.”

How the hell had she gotten me to melt? Was I seriously considering this?

“I’m sure. It’s not your problem.” She sat up and placed the baby goat on the grass. My little guy had fallen asleep on my lap. “Aww, he loves you. Anyway, have fun on the trail ride! I know I will.”

She hopped up and walked away, her peach-shaped ass swaying as she went, and I had to sit still because I had a half chub and a goat to deal with.

Once I had myself under control, Mia met me halfway back to the house with another beer in hand like a peace offering. “I didn’t mean to trick you,” she started to say.

“Yeah, you did. But I’ll take the beer.”

She smiled. “She’s single, and so are you.”

“Mia...” I trailed off, and the sound turned into a groan.
“Stop.”

“She needs help, and I figured you wouldn’t mind. I didn’t mean to put you in a bad spot. You know I love you like a brother, Luca.” Given how my own brothers treated me, that wasn’t saying much. “And I love her too and was just trying to help.”

“You know I can see through that pout. You are trying to make me feel guilty.” I gave her my death stare, and all she did was giggle at me.

“Is it working?”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake, we can give it a try.”

She let out a whoop, and all heads turned. “He’s all yours, Jaxon.”

“That.” I pointed at her. “Is absolutely not what I said.”

Still, her cousin raced over. Tits bouncing as she hugged me. It was a very bad idea I’d talked myself into, and I was a weak fucker for agreeing.

JAXON

I paced the pool house as I waited for my *reluctant* muse to show up.

I kind of felt bad for Luca. Poor guy had really been tricked into posing for me, the surprise on his face genuine when Mia had plucked his name from that hat. Which made my own shame grow and spiral into something negative, an anchor dragging me down.

The lollipop was suddenly a poor substitute for a cigarette.

The same way it had been at the farm, where not even the promise of open air combined with baby goats could fix what ailed me.

Sure, I wanted him for my model. Did I want him to feel obligated to help me? Nope. Well, yes, but not to the extent that he felt he was under duress.

I'd have a hard enough time summoning my creativity for this. Especially given the pressure on me to do a good job.

Without Luca's cooperation, I might as well throw in the towel now.

There was no way to prove it, but I felt pretty dang sure Mia had rigged the competition. She probably wrote Luca's name on every single slip of paper in the helmet. Of course, she'd ditched the evidence somewhere I wasn't able to find it.

Whatever it was, Luca had been duped. *Me* too.

Everyone had known the situation except for Luca, although Mia assured me she spoke to the important players.

Did the captain not count?

And sure, he could be a bit of an ass about things, but not everyone was open to nude modeling. I got it.

My bare feet slapped against tile as I kept up the literal pace.

I'd done a fair bit of nude modeling in art school. Volunteering for it got me a fee reduction for the courses, and I'd never been afraid to be naked. Heck, I spent more time naked and skinny-dipping in summer than I did with clothes on.

That was me.

I PULLED on the end of my paint dress, the same one I liked to wear when I got down and dirty.

It wasn't even that I thought I had the assets, or the body, or anything of the sort. I just admired the human form for the amazing machine and art it was.

Luca Stone was my polar opposite, so the fact he felt different should surprise no one.

Except that wasn't entirely true.

I shoved the insistent niggling voice of my intuition aside to focus on the differences. Which, I figured, made working with him easier.

He was neat and tidy like he'd just arrived from boot camp. Unlike me, with my low waist skirts and jingle jangle bangles. He was a leader and a team player, and I was a solo artist. A lone wolf. I always had been.

Luca Stone lived a life run by rules and structure, and as Mia had been at pains to tell me, he was actually *punctual*. Oh, and he valued punctuality in others. I hadn't been on time for anything in my life. According to my grandmother, I was even born two weeks late.

Even today's meeting with Luca, for instance...he wasn't late. My nerves just kept me moving. I knew for certain he'd

be on time, and he wouldn't ghost me because he wasn't that guy, and of course, he wouldn't want to piss off the team owners either.

So Luca not being into naked posing wasn't surprising. And as Mia had *also* explained, the guys on the team were NHL level because while I knew nothing about hockey, you couldn't grow up where I did and not know football. The Rattlesnakes had to be careful of their image and how it was used. Her team was fine with me painting him, but he had sponsors and fans to consider. Maybe he'd get some grief from them down the track.

His reluctance made perfect sense. And his frustration. Except he shouldn't be mad at me. I didn't create this situation. That was all Mia and her friends. They meant well and were trying to help me, but it was at his expense.

So I actually wouldn't blame him for not showing up today to talk with me. Though, as a man of his word, I'd be surprised if he flaked.

The thought of painting Luca got me tied up in knots for reasons I didn't care to think about.

Something about the man himself, the way he moved, talked, stared...

Luca shouldn't be my type, but he was hot, and just being near him affected me more than I'd care to admit to anyone.

Yeah, better to stay away.

Not that I had much luck.

I may have spent a good chunk of the evening before surfing the net for Luca sightings just to get a better idea about my model. I spotted him on the cover of magazines, on sports TV, and battered and bruised after a few rough hockey matches, but rarely was he seen on the arm of a woman. Interesting.

Although I wondered why he kept to himself rather than playing the field of romance, no way would I ask him. Not about any of it. He seemed uncomfortable enough when the two of us were alone lately.

The ease of our first meeting had disappeared somewhere along the line.

Why?

I paused in my pacing to stare out the window. Another glance at the clock. Fifteen minutes to go.

Over coffee earlier, Mia told me in offhanded terms that Luca didn't date, at least not during the season. She said he wasn't the guy who took a puck bunny back to his room, or if he was, she thought he was wildly discreet because no one ever knew about his trysts.

The very idea fascinated me. Luca was a man in his prime and simply oozing testosterone. I was sure women threw themselves at him. He had the discipline to resist?

It was a concept I'd never mastered. Maybe that's why I fell from one disastrous relationship to the next.

My hand went out my lower belly and stroked in calming circles like it would cool the fire there. A fire born of desire or a desperate need to be creative again, I wasn't sure.

As for me, on the other hand, I got so wound up by the idea of painting him that I'd taken the time to give myself a little early morning relief. It was clear Luca didn't particularly care for me as a person, and I shouldn't like him either.

Having a crush right now put my plans for the future at risk because I always went all in, jumped feet first, and the rest of *me* took a bit of a backseat.

Too often, my libido and my brain were at a disconnect. That definitely explained my checkered dating history.

I huffed out a laugh and turned from the window, only to jump at the rap at my door. The hand on my stomach immediately went to my heart, and its frantic, off-pace beat.

Nine minutes till time.

Luca was early, of course.

And I wanted to jump in the air and dance because I'd actually gotten the space ready for him with time to spare. Go

me!

Wiping my sweaty palms down my skirt, I called out, “Come on in! The door is open.”

The door swung open and gave me a great view of his silhouette, darkened by the glow of the midmorning sun behind him.

“Morning,” he grumped out.

My mouth went dry at the sight of him, hair damp and hotter than I remembered in a simple gray t-shirt that highlighted his impressive chest, black shorts, and some sneakers.

He looked ready for action and braced for impact, whatever it may be.

I had no doubt he’d be able to catch me if I flung myself into his arms.

Not today, I warned, pushing said libido down to a box in the back of my mind. I was going to act like a goddamned professional, even if it killed me.

Especially not when a different part of me already assessed him as a model, as a muse.

“Hey there.” I gestured for him to come forward. “Thanks for coming to me today. I’m about ready, and we can work on our schedule today, too, for the future sittings. There’s no way I can get it all done in one go, of course, not when I’ve been out of the game for some time. It’s just a process. You know? And I...” I was rambling, and I knew it.

Luca made me nervous, but not in any way where I felt unsafe. And not butterflies, either, because I knew from experience that butterflies were an anxiety response in my body.

Nerves, though, those made me spill things on him whenever he was around me.

Such as today, when he took a step forward to shut the door, and I almost knocked over my paint tray.

“Sure,” he said easily. “I can send mine to your electronic calendar, and we can sync things up.”

“I’m more of a pen-and-paper diary girl,” I replied. “I like the written word.”

“Of course you are.” His voice dropped to a moody mutter.

“Sorry if that annoys you.” I blinked at him. He definitely did sound annoyed, for whatever reason. “Please come in. Don’t be shy.”

“It doesn’t annoy me,” he clarified. “It would just be easier to do it electronically. I have my whole life synced up that way.”

Luca took a step forward, and the air in the house condensed down into something solid and tangible, making it hard to breathe. The entire space shrank around us.

It was just a pool house, one room with my bed in the corner, a kitchenette, and a bathroom, but it never felt tiny until right now.

“Well, only for you. I’m not super tech-savvy,” I replied. “Call it the scattered artist thing. I have to leave notes for myself everywhere.”

I turned away to organize my paints, but mainly so I could break from his stare. It bored through me with anger, frustration, or annoyance, but I hadn’t done anything. Not yet.

I hadn’t even spilled.

“Yes, right. Me. The guy who has been bamboozled into helping you. Me, the guy with the full schedule as opposed to you, who isn’t even ready for this sitting.” Luca left his arms hanging loose at his side but used his chin to gesture to the paints still in their containers, the canvas-less easel stand.

“Wow.” I needed a cigarette desperately bad. My mouth went dry, and my teeth gnashed together. To fight against the need, I peeled the plastic off a lollipop I kept handy and took a suck for comfort. The grumpy alpha was already stressing me out. “Who pissed in your Wheaties? I’ll have you know I am

much more prepared than I'd normally be, and I did it for you."

"I'm just a busy guy. I've already done four hours of training and physical therapy and a meeting with my management." He shrugged. "This was unexpected, to say the least, and I never thought we'd be doing it at my boss's house."

"Obviously, you are a busy man, so big and important." I shouldn't poke the bear. Despite my own annoyance at his annoyance, I did poke, if only to see how far he'd go. Or ease the little bit of tension in my chest at his words and his presence. And honestly, all I'd done was wake up, get myself dressed, and have coffee with Mia. He was way busier than me, and him stating the fact didn't really make him an ass. He wanted me to know not to waste his time. I got it.

"Sorry." He let out a frustrated sigh and ran a hand through his damp hair.

I'd like to run my own hands through there, and I'd say right now, the chances of that ever happening were exactly zero.

"I'm not sure what you want me to say because I can only apologize so much. Especially considering my cousin is the one who bamboozled you. Meeting here, I thought, would help you feel more comfortable."

"I'm doing you a favor."

The space between us tightened further.

"Yeah, you are, and I don't need a reminder." I kept my voice purposely chipper.

Don't push his buttons.

I did want this to be as professional as possible. Luca was a friend of Mia and Joshua's, their employee, and truthfully, he agreed to model for them, not me. The same people who fed and housed me.

"Okay, well, do me a favor and strip down. There's a towel in the bathroom. Then go ahead and sit on the chair there. I

already set it up.”

Where the light would be best, the glow coming in from both sides of the house where I thought it would create delicious shadows on him.

Luca’s brow furrowed down. “Already? No small talk? You’re not going to buy me dinner? Offer me a lollipop, at least?” He made no move toward the chair as he attempted to lighten up, so that’s good. “What’s with the lollipops anyway? I never got a chance to ask you.”

Funnier than I expected, I thought as I studied him, and hot in his own measured way.

Focus!

“I have them because I quit smoking, and they help me when I’m stressed. Rather than going for a cigarette, I go for a sucker.” I drew it out of my mouth with a loud pop for emphasis. “They wouldn’t be approved by your personal nutritionist, but they help with stress if you want one.”

I grabbed the second pop I’d stashed away and held it out to Luca.

He stared at it for all of one second before he took it from me. “Great, I’ll take one right now if that’s part of their magic.”

“I hope it helps.”

Okay then.

My fingers grazed his.

We might have nothing in common, and he might not even like me, but there was some chemistry there. We both felt it if his answering scowl told me anything. Apparently, he scowled when he was turned on. Was he like that in bed, I wondered, all grumpy and bossy? *Do not think about that, Jaxon.*

No way he didn’t feel it too.

A black look overtook his face, and Luca grabbed the pop and stormed off toward the bathroom. It gave me an excellent

view of his fine ass walking away. Maybe I'd paint him from behind?

“Unless this candy is laced with alcohol, it won't help,” he replied at the bathroom door before slamming it shut with terrible force.

Okay then, indeed. I stared at the closed door and huffed out a laugh, focusing on the sweet taste of the cherry flavor.

Anticipation buzzed through me.

While I waited, I readjusted the paints and brushes, grabbed my sketchbook and graphite, and repositioned the chair at least ten times.

Luca Stone naked before me like the hockey god he was? Yes, please. But only to look and not to touch. What did the sharp planes of his body look like? Did he have tattoos or scars? And what kind of downstairs business was he sporting?

Curiosity was killing me, getting me further wound up.

And then I waited. And waited and waited. Mr. Business sure took his sweet time in there. What was he doing in there?

How long could it take one man to strip off his shorts and a top?

LUCA

I shoved the bright red lollipop down my throat all the way to the end of the stick, where I held it firm and lapped at it. Sucking on the fucking thing with my dick hanging out, buck ass naked in the bathroom as I tried to get my own lollipop in order.

I'd washed my hands a dozen times like the cold water would clear my head as I stripped down to nothing. The towel Jaxon said waited for me lay discarded on the toilet tank, and I stared dejectedly down at my junk.

My traitorous junk.

Serious problem time, and this wasn't something I could take care of in seconds. I'd gotten a damn boner the moment I saw Jaxon in her tiny white sundress splattered with paint. A sundress that left little to the imagination. Perky little tits with hard nipples had stood to attention and welcomed me to the pool house.

Why would anyone choose to work with paint and wear white at the same time?

It made no sense.

So few things about her made sense, and yet it all fit together perfectly.

Then she'd touched me, and sparks flew, and my dick jumped from about twenty, a quarter chub, all the way up to full-blown rager. How the hell did it work like that? My dick was usually pretty well-behaved these days. But not today.

I kept sucking down the sweet cherry flavor and stared down at my dick, standing at full mast.

It bobbed a little as I watched. Ready for use and reporting for duty.

Not good. I had to stay in here until I got a handle on myself or else try to jerk off in her bathroom, with her outside the door waiting. Probably ready to beat it down and ask me what was going on.

I needed to keep this from her at all costs.

Did Jaxon know her usual painting outfit was see-through? I saw her tits and her lacy thong through it, and one look at both of those sent me scurrying into the bathroom like an animal instead of a man.

Talk about baser instincts.

My dick took over higher brain functions, and the only thought left in my head was the desire to rip the damn dress off of her and bury myself between her legs. Or her ass cheeks. Or her lips, stained bright red.

Was she trying to tempt me?

Was she trying to drive me out of my mind?

Did she know that I was not allowed to fucking touch her?

If any of those things occurred to her, then she simply didn't care.

I drew the sucker out of my mouth and dropped my head to the cool wall while I chanted military drills in my head the same way I had when I was in military school.

Get it under control. Duty over self. Any and all of it.

I wasn't sure how long it took me to get myself under control, but when I finally managed to peel my eyes open, down they went until I saw my dick was limp as a noodle. Not even a little thick.

I blew out a relieved breath. This kind of shit could. Not. Happen. Especially if what she said was true and it took more than one sitting for her to get what she needed from me.

And what she needed was not an erection.

No matter what else happened and no matter what Jaxon chose to wear while she sketched and painted, I'd keep the fucker soft.

Seriously, I'd beaten off twice in the shower before I came here, so you'd think I'd be fine. But no. Apparently not. No amount of forearming made me prepared for her.

What the hell was my deal?

I chucked the fuzzy end of the pop into the trash and grabbed the towel right as Jaxon banged on the door.

“What are you doing in there, Luca?” Her voice came through clearly, joyful and lyrical, and a bit confused. “Do you need any help?”

More help than you know.

“I'm fine,” I barked out. “I only needed a minute.”

“You've been in there for about five, so I started to worry.”

Although I didn't see her and had no indication of what she looked like right then, I thought I felt her smile. “It's okay to be nervous about your body,” she continued. “A lot of people are embarrassed about being naked in front of someone else for the first time. Is that what it is?”

“This isn't the first time I've been naked in front of a woman,” I growled at her through the door. “Are you kidding?”

Did she think I was some shy virgin? Yeah, that wasn't my reality. I kept to myself during the season, but over the summer, all bets were off. I left town, and the people who knew me behind and partied like there was no tomorrow. I took women, sometimes more than one at a time to my bed, and I celebrated their bodies and my freedom.

“Oh gosh! Oh no, that's not what I meant. I was implying it was more about an educational setting. Sex is different,” she replied through the door.

“Please don't talk about sex,” I muttered.

My dick twitched again, and I bit down on my lip, hoping the pain would pull me out of the sensations shooting through me at the word. *Sex*.

“With sex, you’re going on instinct and desire and emotion. It’s all about the heat and the life and the passion,” Jaxon said. Not hearing me. “This is a study of your form and the beauty of it. Would it help you to think of it more in anatomy terms?”

Nope, not one bit.

“You can trust me. I’m not going to say anything that might come across as judgmental. I mean, I’ve dated men and women before, so it’s not like I’m a stranger to human bodies.”

The thought of Jaxon with a woman really didn’t help, so I tried to put that little tidbit of information away for later.

Eventually, I thought I had enough of a leash around my primal urges to open the door and face her.

And there stood Jaxon with her gaze on my eyes and her breasts pressing against the see-through material of her dress. I glanced down and nearly bit my tongue off before I managed to get back to her face.

Maybe I’d discreetly ask one of the girls if they’d be able to pass on the word to wear a bra in the future?

Maybe not.

I did like the view.

It was a mixed bag of blessing and torture.

Jaxon smiled at me, her face splitting, a cute little gap between her front teeth I hadn’t noticed before. “How about you sit on the chair for now, and I’ll try it with the small talk? It might help you get used to the whole process a little easier. It’s not going to be easy for you to keep your body in one pose for hours.”

I arched a brow. “Are you going to be able to focus for that length of time?” I asked. Or would I somehow find myself with a crotch full of paint?”

She dropped her head back and laughed. Loudly and without restraint. The sound was so unrestrained and full of joy I automatically wanted to join her despite my nerves.

“I’ll do my best. I don’t know why I keep spilling stuff on you, but just in case, I’ll keep all hot beverages away from you.”

I did as she asked and crouched over the stool, sitting my naked ass on the wood as Jaxon moved to an easel she’d set up a few feet away.

“Go ahead,” she urged. “Remove the towel. I swear I’m not going to judge you.”

The twinkle in her eye said otherwise, that she’d have some thoughts.

Gritting my teeth, I tugged at the towel and let it drop at my side. Forced my attention back to her face.

The military drills chanted on repeat, and I did my best to focus on them and not her while Jaxon circled me.

I would not make eye contact. I would not look at her. Keep the dick in check.

“You have really impressive shoulders,” she said with a cluck of her tongue as she took me in. “Has anyone ever told you that?”

“My best features,” I joked dryly.

“I’m especially impressed with this little circle of freckles you have on your right shoulder. Did you know you have these?”

I jerked when she trailed a nail over my skin. I didn’t think she’d come close enough to touch me.

“It’s almost like one of those...well, fudge, what do you call them? A labyrinth? No, that’s not right. A mandala?” she continued. “It’s interesting because it stands out so much more than any of your scars.”

“I have no idea. It’s not really an area I look at in the mirror with any frequency.” My jaw clenched.

“Then you’re going to have to take my word.” She circled around in front of me again and crouched so that she was eye level. “Tell me why you’re nervous.”

I shook my head, staring at the spot between her eyebrows. “I’m fine.”

“I really try my best to put all my subjects at ease before I work with them. If there is anything I can do to make you feel more comfortable, then please let me know,” she said. “Is the temperature okay? Do you need water or something before we start?”

Then she was back to touching me and running her thumb along my lips. “Why do you have red here? Lollipop lipstick?”

Wear a goddamn bra.

I said none of those things out loud.

“Temperature is fine. No water. And yes.” Succinct was the best method of dealing with her. “Has anyone ever told you that you talk too much?”

Jaxon slapped her hands on her thighs as she rose. “All the time. I babble when I’m nervous, and I know I do it, but I can’t stop myself.”

“So why do you keep doing it?” I asked.

“Because it’s who I am.” She sounded just as unapologetic as she looked. “I try to make it a daily thing, like a mantra. I am myself no matter the circumstance or the people I am around.”

I tried not to squirm when she grabbed her pencil and scooted closer to me. Or when she licked at her lips and left her tongue peeking out of the corner of her mouth, clamped between her teeth. She studied me long and hard and—

If I wasn’t careful, I’d have something long and hard for her to deal with.

The military chants grew louder in my head when she popped her tongue.

“Great,” she muttered under her breath. “Fabulous.”

“What’s great?” Not this situation. Not the fact that I’d agreed to this personal hell and so brought the torture on myself.

“Your kneecaps,” Jaxon replied.

My eyes widened. “You’re kidding.”

“What? No one ever told you that you have great kneecaps? They’re wonderful! All bony and misshapen because of your many hits and falls on the ice, I’m sure. It’s not a bad thing either, but I love those little interesting things that make each body unique.”

“Which is why my knees are not great. Not for my purpose, which is to skate.” My teeth were back to grinding, and if I wasn’t careful, my dentist was going to charge me an arm and a leg for more damage to his greatest achievements, as he called the work he’d done for me.

Jaxon went all misty. “Exactly. Your kneecaps are chef’s kiss.” She made the motion.

“They’re far from perfect,” I argued.

“Which *makes* them perfect.”

There was no arguing with her.

“It’s going to get easier,” she assured me when she touched the tip of the pencil down on paper for the first time. “I’m just going to get a few preliminary sketches down before I start on the canvas. This is like dipping my toes back in the water after being afraid to swim for a while.”

“Sure you don’t need a lolly?” I asked her.

She giggled a bit, but most of her focus had transferred to the sketchpad. “I have some reserved,” she muttered. Already distracted. “But yeah, Luca, it’s going to get easier to sit for me. The first time is always the hardest but know that whatever I see is going to stay between us. There is no one else around to look at you.”

“Just the rest of the fucking city once you enter your painting in the contest,” I griped.

“You don’t trust me to be tasteful?” she wanted to know.

“No. I don’t.”

She quirked her head to the side. “At least you’re honest.”

I let out a sigh of relief when she finally situated herself behind the easel with a little distance between us, her sketchpad where the canvas should be.

Where I didn’t have a front-and-center view of her dusky nipples. Not to mention the belly button ring and a few tattoos around the swell of her hips and above her ass.

Man.

Those were a story I’d like to explore with my fingertips, with my tongue.

I’d never had such a visceral reaction to a woman before, and I somehow instinctively knew, the way I had when I first saw her, that I never would again.

JAXON

Well, poo.

I clamped my tongue between my teeth and tried to lose myself in the creative process the way I always had in the past. Normally it was an easy process where I let go of all thoughts. I focused entirely on the pressing need to draw, to paint, to allow my hands to follow through on what my mind and eyes saw, to marry it with my own vision for whatever piece I worked on.

Today it was tough.

So tough because I found myself wanting to know more about Luca beyond what he'd shown me, to ask questions and peel back the layers of him.

I definitely thought the scrumptious hockey captain had been mildly attracted to me when I first met him, aside from the annoyance. Call it a gut feeling or call it fate, whatever. I was a big believer in the stuff either way. We'd been pulled to each other, and I wondered if his annoyance came as much from trying to avoid it as it did from not wanting to have coffee spilled down his butt crack.

Love at first sight was more than just a pretty fairy tale for me because I experienced it every time I started dating someone. The love never lasted, and I tried not to stay bitter about it.

But was I bitter about Luca today? You betcha.

His large but limp dick told me a different story than the one I'd been hoping for, the one I'd been telling myself: no

attraction. Not even a sliver. The electric pulse when we'd touched hands had left me wanting and a little achy, definitely moist in places that need not be moist right now.

For him? A permanent scowl etched on his face.

Not that I allowed myself to stare at his large but limp dick, but I'd always been a fan of uncircumcised men and Luca...yowza. I loved it. I wanted to rub it between my hands like I was starting a fire out in the wilderness and watch it grow.

The fact that it wasn't growing at the sight of me was kind of disappointing if I was being honest. It went hand in hand with my weird fascination with pushing his buttons if I had to guess.

"Are you okay?" I asked as I situated myself on my own seat and prepared to get started sketching his full body. Serious business. "You still look very...tense."

Tense was one word for how he sat, the way his muscles tensed and his shoulders looked as hard as rocks.

"How about you just get on with it? Please," he added to soften the blow.

Masculine and uncomfortable. It was a heady combination for anyone. As an artist, I knew exactly how I wanted to start with him based on his posture and the way his eyes darted everywhere but at me.

"I hope you don't mind if I just move you..."

I trailed off, but Luca still jerked when I touched him, shifting those fabulous knees into a beam of sunlight that cast shadows on the contours of him.

Perfection.

I wasn't sure I'd ever had a model that looked like him or if I ever would again.

I wiggled my toes, biting my tongue again and holding the pencil half an inch from the paper once I got myself back into position. I'd already filled the first five pages of the

sketchbook with rough lines. Now I wanted to get the first draft down on the actual canvas.

This was the tough part. Oh, boy. The pressure of making this piece perfect would inevitably stall me from starting, and after so much time passed since my last major work—

Would I be able to do this?

Would I be able to make something beautiful that people actually wanted to see?

To say my ex sapped away my creative spirit was giving him more credit than he was due. I was still myself and still a whole person.

Who happened to experience a crisis of confidence after finding herself single again. But the weight of the months where I did nothing artistic weighed heavier on me now.

No big deal, I tried to tell myself. It was a little stumbling on the road to success. Everyone stumbled. What mattered was getting back up again and doing the best job you were able to do. If my best wasn't up to the standards of others, then I had to work on not caring what they said.

What they thought.

Not caring if Luca took one look at the piece I put together and was embarrassed.

I wasn't alone in feeling like a failure because everyone, no matter who they were or what they did, had days like those. Weeks and months of them. Maybe even years.

What mattered was how I chose to move on with my life and how I chose to grow myself and my creative pursuits.

You're wasting time.

I set my shoulders, smiled widely at Luca like it would somehow help us both feel more confident about this and put the first line on the paper.

“Are you ready for this?” I asked for no reason in particular.

His scowl deepened. “Do you have to ask?”

He looked like he was itching to head out the door, naked or not.

Sketching him was the easy part, I found out. Getting the lines in there and boldly defining the angles of his face, his muscles, his bent legs. Those were clinical.

When I finally felt confident enough about the body, I moved on to the face, and that was where things got a little trickier.

Luca was hot in all the right ways. Not conventionally handsome, but his looks were interesting enough, unique enough, to make me look twice. Okay, twenty times, but who was keeping score here?

Today he appeared so awkward I was not sure how I'd make this work.

The body came out really nicely in the first few drafts I did of him in the sketchbook, I thought as I looked back at them, hesitant to commit to canvas.

I went along with real budding excitement until I got to his face.

Luca clenched his jaw hard enough to snap a tendon or crack a bone or something horrible. "I don't want to rush the creative process, but how much longer are we going to be here today?"

His eyes were dark and narrowed, and his skin blotched from whatever it was he wanted to keep inside.

"Do you have to go to the bathroom?" I asked him.

Luca glanced up at me sharply, and something like real fear flashed across his face. "I'm fine," he repeated.

I cocked my hip and wiggled my pencil like a magic wand. "Are you sure? Because from where I'm standing, you are the opposite of fine. You're both pale and blushed at the same time, and your muscles are tensed hard enough to give you some serious issues. Almost like you have a stomach ache. I'm not going to get the right emoting if you're in a weird mood, you know. This has to be a comfortable space for both of us."

“Then maybe we should take a break.” Luca stood, and one of his hands automatically draped in front of his penis. Not like it covered the whole thing despite the size of his hands.

I tried not to sigh with disappointment, but a small bit of air squeaked out regardless. I could *really* use a smoke. He probably wasn't used to sitting for such long periods of time.

A glance at the clock showed me we'd been here for an hour already.

It was a better idea to call time on this for today, which I told him.

“Okay, actually, let's call it for today. I didn't get as far as I wanted to be, but that's my fault entirely. Nothing to do with you. Next time we'll just go for a little longer,” I said. “Was the temperature in the room fine for you?”

Slow and steady. I didn't want to scare him off before we really dug our teeth into this project. Which was what I needed to keep my eye and my focus on: the project. The prize. The competition and not on the fact that I kept glancing at his dick, wishing it would grow to its full and, surely, beautiful length.

What kinds of things did he like, I wondered.

What turned him on?

Not me.

But I sure would have liked watching him with one of my lollipops.

“Yes,” Luca agreed. “You let me know when you have time, and we'll schedule another session. I'll put it in my electronic calendar, and you'll...grab a Post-it note. I don't know.”

I clucked my tongue at him again, loving the way he jerked like I was throwing those little noisy fireworks things at him. “You're the one with the grueling schedule there, mister. You let *me* know when you're free, and unless I'm teaching a class that night, I'll work around you.”

He nodded tightly and grabbed his towel from where he'd left it and rushed into the bathroom to change. This time it only took him a minute before he bolted out the door with a quick goodbye. He hadn't even tied his shoelaces.

Oh well. If he tripped, it wasn't my fault. I still waited a good beat and a half before I was sure he'd gone before I packed up the paints I hadn't gotten to use and went to go see Mia.

Thank goodness for me—I didn't have far to go for a quick visit.

I pushed in through the sliding glass doors that separated the pool area from the dining room and found Mia in her office off the dining room. "Hello!"

She glanced up at my arrival and flashed me a smile. "How did it go?"

When she saw my outfit, her grin shifted into full-on laughter.

I held my arms out wide and spun in a circle for her. "You like?"

"Holy shit, Jax, were you trying to give the man a heart attack?"

"What?" I blinked innocently at her. "What's wrong?"

"Not only is the dress see-through, but I can see everything. Your undies, your nips, the whole shebang," she continued. "Did you do it on purpose?"

She was already used to me being me, so she turned back to the laptop in front of her and typed away furiously. The room reflected her aesthetic in tones of rose gold and blush with white walls and plush accents.

There I stood in the doorway with my bare feet and paint-splattered, see-through dress.

"I thought it would be a perk if he dropped on the spot, but hey, this is what I paint in," I replied. "I've worn this outfit a dozen times or more. It's not like I went out of my way to make him drool."

“*Did* he drool?” Mia stopped and swiveled around in her rolly chair. “Speaking of, how was Luca? And his anatomy? He’s not around, is he?”

“You’re seriously asking me about the man’s package when you’re married to smokin’ hot Joshua.” I rolled my eyes. “You, my fine cousin, are raunchier than meets the eye.”

She shrugged and said, “So sue me. And spill.”

“I might be able to tell you something, but he wasn’t sporting any wood.”

“What?” she blurted out. “He must be dead inside.”

“I can’t speak to his aliveness or not. All I can tell you is that he went into the bathroom, and when he came out, he was limp and nervous.”

I personally found it shocking the more I thought about it, especially now that Mia had pointed out that my outfit should have garnered an entirely different reaction.

Not to mention my already deflated ego was a little put out.

Cat, my most recent ex, had been a great girlfriend. We’d enjoyed six months together before we both realized we wanted different things and parted ways mutually. Cat and I loved each other and broke up with respect and feelings intact.

The ex-boyfriend, the one before Cat? Not so much. *Preston*. His name felt like acid on my tongue.

He’d told me I was ugly and no one would ever be attracted to me but him.

It took me way too long for the alarm bells to really be heard, and then, ding, ding, ding: emotional narcissistic abuse.

For some reason, Luca’s lack of a mast today made me think about Preston.

Horrible, ridiculous Preston.

Who might be right after all. Maybe nobody else would find me attractive.

I was just a dumb, untalented artist. Why would I even for one second think a hockey god like Luca would be attracted to me.

“Hey.” Mia dragged me back to my senses. “I don’t like that look on your face.”

“I think this was a bad idea. It’s not like I’m going to win...”

She raised her hand like a stop sign. “Don’t do that, Jax. It was the first session, and it was kind of awkward. So what? Luca is a great guy, like, seriously one of the best people I know. He will be a great model once he chills out a little, and you are a great artist.”

“Perhaps.” I worried my bottom lip and really, really wanted a cigarette.

“Look, Rome wasn’t built in a day, and neither was the Sistine Chapel, or Mona Lisa painted.” She was right; you couldn’t just demand your muse show up.

“True.”

“And you and Luca will find a rhythm. Just give it a couple more tries.”

“Okay.”

She smiled at me and pulled me into a hug. “And by the way, any guy who doesn’t find you hot needs his head read. Luca does have his monk-like thing happening during the season. That’s probably all this was.”

“Maybe he takes an anti-Viagra pill?” I suggested, half joking. I doubted any man had ever wasted their time inventing such a thing.

“Exactly. Whatever it is, it has nothing to do with you and everything to do with him. Now how about a little day drinking to celebrate you getting started.”

I wasn’t about to say no to that.

LUCA

I almost couldn't stand it.

The guys got way too much joy out of my posing for Jaxon and decided it was the perfect outlet for teasing. Normally, I gave them nothing, preferring to keep my private life absolutely locked down. Being the butt of their jokes wasn't the norm for me.

If they had nothing to grasp, nothing to go on...then I remained above reproach on all levels.

I got it.

I was not usually a guy they poked at, my life neat and uncomplicated, so these assholes considered the situation a rare treat.

Liam loomed over me as a spotter while I lay on my back, lifting the bar above my chest. Thankfully, Liam remained much quieter than Rico and Tommy, who both seemed to find the scenario especially amusing.

"Did you feel like a piece of meat?" Rico asked from the rowing machine. "Come on. Tell us how it went. Give us all the dirty details."

"Maybe a sausage?" Tommy put his hand up from the machine beside him, and they high-fived each other.

Tommy used to be the one we poked fun at, tattooed and dark-haired, swarthy in a way that always put him on the front page of the tabloids. Rico had the same dark looks, coupled with golden skin and a reputation.

Those jerks liked being on the opposite side of things this time around.

“What are you guys, twelve?” I grunted at them from the bench. “It’s not my choice to do this. You know that. If I’d been given a choice, then I would have gladly given the pleasure of modeling to someone else.”

“We heard you had performance anxiety, and you were angry about it,” Rico replied.

“What?” Thank God for Liam because I damn near dropped a barbell on my chest. The air still wheezed out of me.

“We just heard you didn’t have a lot of wind in your sails. Which makes no sense because Jaxon is a fox.” Rico’s smile turned wicked, way too amused for his own fucking good.

“I was trying to be a gentleman,” I ground out. My fingers clenched around the bar until my knuckles went white. “Unlike her, if she’s telling the whole world.”

How could she? All that bullshit about wanting me to feel comfortable, about it just being her who could see me. And then off she went gossiping.

Had she really been so focused on the limp dick that she wanted to punish me by telling my guys? They’d never respect me again.

“It was probably just Mia,” Liam mumbled like a defense as I sat up, this training session just as messed up as everything else.

There was no salvaging it.

“Around here, that’s the same thing, apparently. Was I supposed to strut out there with a full erection and just point it at her?” I wanted to know.

“Might have made a difference,” Tommy teased. “We certainly wouldn’t be having this conversation, at least.”

I’d had enough.

Forgoing the shower and the rest of my workout, I dragged my ass out of the gym and charged over to Mia and Joshua's place. I had my session with Jaxon set for three. I was an hour early.

Too damn bad. She was about to get a mouthful, and I gave no shit who heard me.

I rarely got a head of steam on me like this one, but I was pissed, to say the least.

Talking about me the way she had? Not okay.

I rapped on the door to the pool house, waiting until the scramble I heard from inside got closer. Finally, Jaxon dragged open the door and stood there, wide-eyed, and startled.

"Ah, come in." She looked at me for a beat. "You're really early."

Her lips were already stained red from her suckers, and the sight of her, so startled, the sight of her licking her lips, did the trick immediately.

Not allowing myself to feel an ounce of regret, I stalked past her, pausing in front of her for a beat—so short, delicate—before I peeled off my shirt. I let the shirt drop and kicked off my sneakers, bending to follow with the socks, my shorts, and my boxer briefs.

When I turned to face Jaxon again, my heart pounded, and my raging erection pointed straight toward her like she was due north.

Today, not expecting me this early, she wore nothing but a white bandeau top and some mint-colored shorts. My cock instantly swelled at the sight of her soft body and all her creamy skin.

I gestured down to my cock. "Is that what the artist wanted?"

She licked her lips, so maybe it was.

"Well?" I pressed.

“I...I don’t know what to say.” Jaxon’s eyes roamed over me from my toes to my dick and up to my face. “Mia was gossiping? I’m going to take a stab in the dark and say you heard something about our session.”

Bingo. She’d figured it out.

“Mia and *you*,” I corrected. “How could you tell your cousin about me?”

“I’m sorry.” She at least had the decency to look a little chagrined before her eyes dropped to my dick. “I shouldn’t have said anything. I’m so sorry, Luca.”

“You should be. I’m doing you a goddamned favor, and then you’re out maligning me, knowing full well Mia gossips. From now on, what happens in the studio is only between us. Got it? This time you stick to your word, Jaxon.”

I needed to hear her say it, and I hadn’t realized how badly I needed it until the pregnant pause between us made me catch my breath.

“I got it.” She nodded. “Yes. You’re right. It was unprofessional, and I apologize. Truly. I am very sorry. I’ll make it up to you.”

The wind did not move from my sails, my erection bobbing, and Jaxon doing her best not to look at it.

She did, though, and a zing shot through me.

“Ah, yeah.” She shook her head, gathering her thoughts if I had to guess. “Since you’re here, let me get ready. You take a seat.”

I did as told and took my seat, and she circled me like a cat. Something changed. She didn’t shy away from looking at me, and damn me, I spread my legs wider to give her a look at everything.

Decency be damned. My ego had taken hold of me, and I had something to prove.

“You’re huge.” It was a statement of fact laced with admiration.

“You only get me one of two ways,” I replied. “Limp or like this. There is no middle ground where he’s concerned.” *Not with you.*

“Only two ways, huh?” She licked her lips again. It was fucking distracting, just like the peaked nipples I saw through the white top. This woman was born to torture me.

Everything about her burrowed under my skin. Straight to my cock, apparently.

“Well, if you were to get me, really get me, you’d get me all the ways. We’re just here for you to paint me.” I wasn’t sure if I said it as a threat or a promise.

She took it the latter way, judging by the way her pupils got large.

She turned her back to me, and I gave my dick a quick tug to readjust. Erect was fine, but blowing my load in front of the artist? Not so much. It wasn’t me.

At least, I didn’t think it was me.

I had much better control than this. Usually, but there was nothing usual about the way I reacted to the little minx that was Jaxon.

Jaxon bent to collect some paints, and that damn ass of hers was on display. What I’d like to do to it...I raised my eyes to heaven and started counting backward from one hundred in my head.

Military drills flitted through my mind and left just as quickly as I came down from my earlier boastful mood.

She circled me again, and when she reached my back, she ran a finger along my shoulders down between the blades, taut, just like the rest of me. Not to study but to caress and arouse.

“Jaxon,” I warned.

She rounded to a stop in front of me and parted my knees wider yet, then arranged me like Rodin’s famous sculpture *The Thinker*.

“I can’t imagine what you’re thinking about,” she joked. “To get this hard in front of me. Gutsy, Luca.”

“I’m not thinking about you,” I countered hotly. Not the way her tits beaded under the thin cotton of her top, and her lids were half closed.

I knew exactly what *she* was thinking about. She wanted me as much as I wanted her.

Bad idea, Luca.

“Really?” She placed a hand on each thigh, lowering to her knees between my legs. My breath caught again, and my heart stilled. “You’re not? Because right now, I’m thinking that since whatever happens in this room stays between us, for real this time, that we can have a little fun.”

A little—Oh, god.

My cock pulsed at the look on her face.

“Jaxon, I didn’t mean it like that. I wasn’t implying that we—Stop.”

Rather than listen, she slid her hands up my thighs so her thumbs dug in where they joined my hips and leaned forward to circle the tip of me with her tongue. My eyes crossed, and the rest of me hardened at the contact, shock and pleasure warring together. “I’m not one of your damn lollipops,” I somehow managed to get out.

“You *don’t* want me to lick you?” Her expression was full of surprise, and I recognized disappointment in her voice as if she was doing something wrong.

How the fuck could she think that? Of course, I wanted her.

Fuck. What was I doing?

I shouldn’t say the things in my head or what wanted to bubble out of my mouth.

Yet I found myself telling her, “Not only do I want you to lick me and suck me off, but I want to fuck that pretty mouth of yours.” It was like someone else had taken over my body.

Going on instinct rather than any kind of logic, I cupped my hand behind her head and moved her forward. “I’ve wanted you since I saw you walking outside Josh’s office.”

Jaxon smiled. “The feeling is mutual.”

She opened her mouth wide and took me in as far as she could, just like that. Swirling her damn tongue around my dick as she moved back and forth. The sensation was hot enough to have my stomach clenching, balls going tight.

I guided her in and out with my hand. She couldn’t take all of me. I wrapped one hand around the base of my dick, but she swatted it away and replaced it with her own.

“Bossy, huh?” I murmured. “We’ll see where that lands you later.”

She moved her hand and mouth in perfect rhythm, and I knew this would be fast. Holy fuck, Jaxon was sucking me off right in the pool house. And I let her.

We got to this point fast to begin with. I hadn’t even been here ten minutes.

She moved up and down the length of me, and her luscious mouth, her warmth, drove me insane.

Think of baseball. Football. Grandma. Anything to make this last.

She felt too damn good.

“I’m about to come,” I warned.

Instead of coming down her throat like I wanted to, the gesture too intimate for this quickie, I pulled her off, her hands grabbing at me to stop me while she panted on her knees.

“I wanted to taste you,” she whispered.

That almost made me come by itself.

“Really?”

I’d gotten used to women swallowing as a gift, not a desire.

“I really do.” She stared at the slick head of my cock. “But if you’re uncomfortable with it, you can come on my tits instead.”

Who *was* this girl? I’d been with a lot of women, and none of them said shit like this. Jaxon didn’t hesitate as she peeled down her top, revealing the perfect nipples I’d seen time and again, only through clothing.

I hauled her to her feet and latched on to one. Sucking and scraping my teeth against it before switching to the other.

“You like things dirty, huh, Jaxon? Turn around.”

She did so, and I pulled down her shorts. No underwear, of course. Just her perfect ass. Whatever her aversion to wearing underwear, I didn’t care.

I pulled her onto my lap, worried the chair wouldn’t hold us both, so I stood and walked to the edge of the bed and sat there instead with Jaxon on my lap.

I’d gone this far.

What else was I willing to do?

I spread her creamy thighs the way she had mine, stretching her legs across my lap so she was wide open and exposed.

My weeping cock wedged between the two of us, and I shifted to nestle it in the cleft of her ass.

I slid my hands up her rib cage and teased her nipples as I whispered in her ear, “The things I want to do to you.” So many things I hadn’t allowed myself to consider outside the realm of fantasy.

“Tell me. Tell me everything.” Jaxon arched her back, pressing her tits into my hands.

She felt like heaven and hell at the same time.

“You like dirty talk, bossy girl?”

“I think maybe I do.” She sighed. “I haven’t been with too many people who were into it, and they made me feel...wrong for those desires.”

I caressed her nipple. “No need to feel anything but turned on right now. I like dirty talk too.” I nipped at her earlobe. “And dirty sex. Do you like to fuck dirty too, or are you a vanilla girl beneath all the free-spirited front.”

“I’ll be whatever I want to be,” she replied breathily. “Wouldn’t you like to find out?”

I spoke to her like this thing between us would actually go somewhere. It couldn’t; not beyond the walls of this place. Still, I loved the idea of her owning her sexuality and speaking her truth.

Living a repressed life built its own kind of purgatory. I hated it for anyone, having been on the opposite end. Having to crush down my own thoughts and feelings and inclinations, the sensitivities my dad practically beat out of me, in order to follow in his military footsteps.

“A girl who sucks cock the way you do has a lot to offer,” I tell her.

“Then why did you stop me?” She groaned when I licked up the side of her neck.

“I didn’t want us to be over and done with so quickly. Plus, when you’re with me, you come first.” I slid a hand down to cup her mound, and her moan cut off in a strangled gasp.

“That’s another thing. I don’t always come. It’s not easy for me. And no one really takes the time,” she admits.

“Who the fuck have you been sleeping with?” I asked. I slid two fingers through her slick wet folds and deep inside her, crooking them before transferring my touch to her clit. “Actually, don’t answer that. It doesn’t matter.”

I was going to explode.

Jaxon tried to move forward, seeking more, so I wrapped an arm across her waist and played with a nipple. “Luca.” My name was damnation and salvation on her lips, those talented lips, and all I could think about was more. How I wanted everything. How it was a terrible idea to let it get even this far.

“Yeah, pretty girl,” I replied. “We’ll get there. But I haven’t decided whether to fuck you with my fingers or my tongue yet. Maybe both. And what about this ass?” I moved her up and down a little so my cock rubbed against her puckered hole. “I have a few ideas about it too.”

“Oh my gosh.” Her tight channel clenched around my index finger, and I crooked them towards the place I knew lay hidden inside her, a place maybe no one else had bothered to find yet.

“You like that idea, huh? Well, how about—” I bent her forward on my lap and took my arm from around her to reach between us. From this angle, she was spread out wide.

About as far from model and artist as we could get.

How easy would it be to remove my finger and fuck her from behind? We’d already crossed a whole lot of lines. We shouldn’t be walking toward this one now. Or ever.

We’d come too far for me to leave her wanting, though. Edging was its own pleasure but not today.

I reached in low and spread some of her wetness across her hole and up between her cheeks and sat her back so my dick slid between them. And she clenched again. For someone who said she didn’t always come, she was crazy responsive.

“Does that feel good, Jaxon?” I asked. My own orgasm lay so close to the surface that keeping it contained almost hurt.

“So good.”

“Tell me what you want, and I’ll do it.” For her.

She ran a hand through the short strands of her hair. I caught our reflection in a mirror on the wall. It was hot as fuck. She rode my fingers and chased her orgasm. My dick thrust up and down her cleft, getting all the friction it needed to explode.

“I want to come. *Now*. I want you to make me come.”

I touched her clit, moving in soft, small circles. That was all it took to have her quivering around me.

I refused to let up on moving my dick between her ass cheeks. Just as Jaxon came down from her high, I erupted, spilling my seed all over her back in hot jets.

A half-choked-out groan burned my throat at the force of the orgasm.

Jaxon collapsed back against me, and I kissed her neck.

Whatever the fuck that was...it had been insanely hot. I kept her pressed against me for a few minutes and waited for her to regain composure and feel what I feared would be regret.

Hopefully, she wouldn't be ashamed. I might be guilty as fuck for manipulating her since I'd had no intention of doing anything sexual when I came over here with a chip on my shoulder, but I was not ashamed.

"You're good at that," she finally said.

"Thanks." I couldn't move yet. "It takes two to tango, so any time it's not good, it's on both people."

"You don't have to say those kinds of things." She pushes a hand through her hair again. "It was hot for me, but you don't need to feed me a story."

I turned her head a little roughly to get her to face me.

"I'm telling the truth." Then I kissed her gently for the first time.

Our first kiss had come after one hell of a blowjob.

I couldn't have Jaxon. Even if I wanted to. It doesn't mean I wanted her to feel anything less than good about herself. "You know, I really did just come here to prove I wasn't a limp dick. I'm sorry."

She let out a throaty laugh. "More than proven, wouldn't you say?"

When she stood, I missed the warmth of her. I cleared my throat. "I might just clean up."

She blew out a breath, bending to grab her shorts and haul them up. The rows of cum on her back caught my eye. I

wince.

“Whatever you need.”

How the hell were we going to work together after this? Maybe we’d figure it out, maybe not, but I needed to get out of here. I’d snapped. Not my proudest moment.

When I’d gotten presentable, I walked out of the bathroom to grab my clothes. Jaxon had dragged on an oversized shirt covered in paint. Adorable and disheveled. Drowsy and hot.

“As much as I’d like to stay, I don’t think it’s a good idea.” Not shame, no, but guilt for sure, and enough of it that I knew leaving was best.

“I get it,” she said, although she looked sad. “It’s not a problem. We’ll just reschedule.”

Not sure what else to say, I headed out.

I didn’t start today’s adventure, but I let it go way too far, and now I was not sure which of us I felt more disappointed in—her, for gossiping, or me, for losing control.

JAXON

So, *that* happened.

I poured myself a glass of water and wondered what the hell I'd just done. When I glanced up at my reflection in the mirror, I saw a wild-eyed girl with color dotting her face. Surprised but satisfied.

I'd thought Luca would be good with his hands, and he'd proven me right.

Normally? I wasn't that forward. Not without a clear green light from the other party to engage. I could count on one hand the number of times I'd made the first move with someone.

My sex life hadn't always been vanilla, though. Once again, it depended on the other person. And yes, I'd been with both men and women, but it didn't matter the gender. Some people enjoyed crazy hot sex, and others did not. Everyone had their preferences.

Mine seemed to be off-putting for some people.

Preston had called me weird and selfish when I expressed a need to have sex more often.

Those were not words one wanted to hear while naked. Or ever, really.

Hot oral sex in a mostly glass pool house in the middle of the day? Definitely up my alley. All kinds of dirty talk? Yes, please. Promises of further wicked adventures? Thank you kindly.

Luca checked all the boxes, in addition to being forbidden fruit.

I'd tried to bring up new things in the past with toxic and crappy Preston, and he'd gone out of his way to make me feel like some kind of a freak.

If good old missionary wham-bam-thank you-ma'am sex, once a week, was good enough for him, then apparently it was supposed to be good enough for me, and I didn't get a say in things. And then with Cat, things had been sweet and gentle and considerate in the bedroom, which was what I'd been looking for at the time.

She'd made me feel safe and desirable. Safe, yes, but I still hadn't been able to explore the pieces of me I'd been forced to put away.

This thing with Luca? This was something new for me. I wanted more, but he had stormed out like we'd done something wrong. Not like he hadn't enjoyed it, at least. More like we were one and done.

Which I hated.

In many ways, I got where he came from. Part of me felt like I'd crossed a line too. How many naked female models had been objectified like that over time? Forced into a compromised position by the person they worked for, the person in power?

And I'd given him some big talk about it just being the human body. The truth was, his body wasn't just like anyone else's. He was a mass of muscle and skin that was sexier than any I'd ever had the pleasure of seeing before, and I kind of got carried away.

I should not have said anything to Mia, not about my fears, Luca, or anything of the sort. I'd regret it for the rest of my life. The talk got back to him, as I should have known it would, and made him uncomfortable.

Regret wasn't the word I'd use for the oral sex, though, because my body still had a low hum from the experience. I

probably should have talked to him a little more about everything before falling to my knees to worship him.

I shivered.

I wanted to be on my knees in front of him again.

Oral sex was a pleasure. Not something to be ashamed about.

No one was currently home, so I shucked the clothing, having washed away the cum, and jumped in the pool.

When I felt cooled down enough to actually think, I pulled on some fresh work clothes and sat to do some sketches of his body from memory.

Hopefully, it would get me in a mood to paint rather than a mood to play.

It wasn't as effective as having him here, but it was almost like I had a sense memory of him, and the charcoal flew across the page. My crush had just gone up a notch.

Later, when I was lying in bed thinking about him and what we'd done, the feel of his hands on my body, the way he owned me, I sent him a text.

Jaxon: Thank you for today. Our next session this week should be at the community center. Mia says you'll be done with hockey stuff by 2pm tomorrow? I'll need you then.

I waited a few minutes, hoping he'd reply, and sure enough, my phone pinged with a message.

Luca: Hockey stuff? I doubt she said that.

Jaxon: Whatever. See you Tomorrow.

Luca: Sure. And about today. It was great but we shouldn't do that again. Ever.

My stomach dropped, and the cold weight of disappointment warred with anxiety even when I knew he'd say it. I wanted more of an explanation than I could get on a text, but I didn't fish for one.

Jaxon: Tomorrow, then.

I refrained from using the string of emojis I normally did and settled for a single smiley face.

Luca: Tomorrow.

I knew I'd get nothing else out of him. If what had happened between us was just going to be a memory, then it was a good one. I sighed to myself as I turned off the light and stuffed my phone in the nightstand drawer.

It was going to fuel my dreams for some time. I had no doubt about it.

At exactly two on the dot the next day, Luca walked through the door to my classroom at the community center. I'd taught classes for seniors and kids alike over the past few weeks, and although the light wasn't nearly as good, I figured we both could use a break from the intimacy of the pool house.

There was no chance of us doing anything inappropriate here. Especially not when my senior's class was at four immediately following this.

Today, he made sure the door was locked behind him, and straight away, he pulled off his shirt. Then his pants. He took a seat on the stool I'd laid out for him without so much as a hello.

We were up on the second floor here, so no one would be able to see him. Which I assured him repeatedly.

"I promise," I said, showing my sincerity with two fingers raised to the ceiling.

"Good, because I do not want naked pictures of me on the internet," he griped.

Back to the griping and more so than before. His fingers shook with barely controlled agitation.

"I don't know. Your body is nothing to be ashamed of," I replied as I adjusted my easel to the correct angle.

"Thanks." He ducked his head to hide his discomfort. "It's mine, and I decide who I share it with."

“Respect on that.” I let my eyes run over him. “Do you mind if I adjust you? I also promise not to touch you inappropriately. Okay?”

I approach him to adjust his pose, my hand on his knee, moving it just an inch first.

“As long as it’s just your hands,” he warned. “We can’t have a repeat of yesterday.”

“Sure. Whatever you want.” I must have sounded a little despondent because he snagged my hand as I turned my head back to the canvas.

“It’s not that I don’t want to.” His voice dropped low and went softer. “I just can’t. This has nothing to do with you, okay? I don’t want you to ever think there’s something wrong with you.”

“Oh, sure.” It was very hard to have this conversation when he was naked.

Luca also knew I was hiding something. “You’re not babbling. Which either means you’re not nervous or you’re very nervous. So...I don’t date during the hockey season. There’s a thing in sports where you don’t mess with your routine. Even if that wasn’t the case, though, this thing between us can’t go anywhere.”

I wouldn’t have called what we did *dating*, exactly. And then a little lightbulb went off in my brain. “You abstain for the whole season?” My jaw dropped as I stared at him. “Are you kidding me right now, Luca?”

The surprise in my voice was more than evident.

“Pretty much. Technically we didn’t actually have sex, so I’m hoping that won’t mess with my streak.” His brows furrowed into a dark line I’d gotten to rather like. “The team has a lot at stake.”

No matter how badly a part of me wanted to soothe the lines away.

“Wow. you really do have the self-control of a warlord,” I said out loud. “And all those puck bunnies, all around, all the

time...dang.” I hated thinking about the puck bunnies.

“Not for me.” Back was the growl I’d come to really appreciate, at such odds with the sensitivity in his gaze. “Now, are you going to paint or not? Time is ticking towards the entry deadline, and we haven’t exactly been productive.”

Mr. Routine was back in place, and now I saw it for what it was: a front for protection. “You know artists aren’t exactly known for working to a time frame, right?”

He gave me a shrug. “I don’t know any artists besides you, Lollipop.”

I turned my back on him, a girlish part of me shivering in delight. A nickname. I loved that he’d given me a nickname, something fun and friendly. We might not ever be friends because I wanted to jump his bones, but he was right.

I had a painting to finish and limited time to do it.

Luca sat for almost two hours and did not move. Not an easy thing to accomplish but all that discipline of his was mighty handy. I finished up when the door flung open, and several old ladies came barreling in.

“Someone locked the door!” the first of the old ladies chirped out. “Not to worry. I’m handy with a bobby pin. I got it open.”

Luca hurried to cover his junk with his hands and turned his back to the door to try to hide his dick.

“Oh, life modeling!” one of them cooed. “Luca, honey, is that you? It can’t be...my word, it is! How are you!”

Hazel Bennett. She was one of my favorite students because of her humor, and I knew she had some kind of connection to the Snakes, but it still took me by surprise how she addressed Luca so casually.

“Hi, Hazel.” Luca, to his credit, did not sound put out. “It’s good to see you.”

“What are you doing here?” Hazel rushed over to grip Luca’s free hand in her gnarled fingers.

“I’m helping Jaxon out. She needed a model.” If I didn’t know better, I’d say he was blushing, but he had his back to me, so I had no clue.

“That’s right! Willa told me about that. I’m her grandmother,” Hazel informed me. “My Willa is married to Coach Darren Thorne. You could say I’m the Rattlesnakes’ best fan!” Hazel let out a laugh.

I’d only run this class twice, but she had stuck out to me, and with the pieces falling together, I did my best not to snort at the connections. All these pieces of thread, part of the same tapestry, now coming together as fate tugged us closer.

How lovely! Willa was a firecracker, and I saw where she got her spark from.

“I didn’t know you were sitting for us, Luca. How exciting! My word, I’m flustered.” Hazel practically vibrated with excitement and fanned her face. I understood all too well because while I’d been the consummate professional for two hours, I wanted to fan myself as well. “I need to get set up immediately!”

Her little old lady friends were a few steps behind her, the group of them tittering together.

“I’ll say! I haven’t seen a naked man since Harold died unless you count art house movies,” another woman, who I thought was named Lois, chimed in. Wasn’t art house just *porn*? I really didn’t want to think about Lois watching those movies. Or any of the women in this room, really.

I had to lift my voice to be heard over the din of their voices. “That wasn’t exactly the plan. Ladies, ladies, please. Your attention! Luca isn’t staying.” I walked over to hand Luca his shorts over his shoulder. “We were just finishing up. He and I are working on a different project from the ones we’re doing in class.”

The women looked completely crestfallen, and I couldn’t say I blamed them. I hated seeing Luca cover up his fine body with a shirt too.

“How about this, Hazel? Since I hate to disappoint you,” Luca replied, hopping up. “I’ll stay, and you can draw me, but I’m wearing shorts the whole time.” His gaze flicked to mine. “Unless you had another plan for the day?”

My eyes misted. How kind. He had places to be and people to see, but he offered his time to the class.

Hazel looked happy enough to pass out. I moved closer in the event she actually did.

“We could drape a towel around him like a toga,” Lois suggested, looking at him and licking her lips. “You could be a Roman god!”

Luca gave another shrug, looking unbothered, and stepped toward me to lean in, his deep voice low and gravelly in my ear. “As long as my cock isn’t on display, I’m fine with it. Are you?”

I should not have been turned on by him saying *cock*, but I was. The truth? All the time I’d been working on the portrait, my mind flashed back to scenes from yesterday, as hard as I tried to banish them. We might not have all that much in common, but Luca did it for me.

Flat out.

And he was such a good sport, humoring these people as well. He had more dimension than I assumed when we first met. Those hidden depths again.

“I think we can arrange something,” I replied.

I shifted my chin to keep my expression from him lest he saw how he affected me.

Dominant and sweet. Darn it.

I found a sheet rather than a towel, and as the rest of the class filed in, the old ladies created a toga out of it.

“I look ridiculous!” he declared. There was no heat in his tone, even though he had a grumpy look on his face. He actually seemed amused and comfortable until Hazel snapped a picture of him with his phone. Luca held up a finger in

warning. “No photos! I’ll revoke your team grandmother privileges.”

“Oops,” she said with not a shred of remorse, just as his phone on the other side of the room began to buzz. He hadn’t been quick enough to shut Hazel down.

I spent a few minutes demonstrating some techniques to the class for painting the human body. To be honest, so far, we’d been focused on a jug with some plastic fruit beside it, so this was a bit of a leap for the class.

Still, they were all having fun, and I was a big believer that classes needed to marry fun and knowledge in order for the lessons to stick. Sure, there were a couple of people here with true talent, yet most wanted a relaxed afternoon trying something new.

An hour later, we took a break, and I handed Luca a large glass of water.

“Should I look at my texts, or am I better off not knowing?” he grumbled. His fingers brushed mine, and fireworks went off in my stomach.

“How on the edge do you want to live? I’d say you have a heaping helping of teasing waiting for you whenever you get to your messages.” I sighed, staring at the happy people at their easels. “Everyone is having a great day. Thank you.”

“It’s fine.” He cleared his throat, and a blush crept up my cheeks. In a voice so low I barely heard, Luca continued with, “I want you to know my decision to step back has nothing to do with you. That was the truth.”

And since he gave me the truth, I thought it only fair to do the same for him. Since no one was close enough to overhear... “My history always has me assuming I’ve done something wrong.” I hated to admit it, but I’d second-guessed myself a million times since the day before.

He looked genuinely surprised. “Not you. Don’t forget. You’re a badass.”

I wasn’t going to be able to talk without choking up or spilling more of the beans than I wanted to. I patted his

shoulder instead. “One hour to go, and then I’m buying you a drink. You’ve been an amazing sport. You’re not getting out of it, either.”

“Really, it’s not a problem, Jaxon. Well, it’s not until I look at my phone and see all the shit the guys give me. Again, not your fault. Those fuckers will be having a field day with this.”

He resumed his position, and the seniors began painting. Luca was definitely one of the good guys, despite his crassness and his ego.

Just my luck to finally meet one, and he’s unavailable.

What the heck was I talking about? *I* was unavailable! And planned to stay that way for the long haul no matter what the temptation.

LUCA

“Come on!” Jaxon tugged on my hand. “It’s going to be fun.” Her lips dropped in a little pout, and I wanted to nip her.

Especially since I knew just how those lips felt wrapped around my cock and sucking me off.

Fuck, my dick hardened again.

My poor appendage was exhausted from having to behave all day. Jaxon hadn’t worn a bra, but at least today, her clothing hadn’t been see-through. It was a small mercy, really, because I’d already seen her body, and my dick and I both remembered it all too well.

Wrong place, wrong time. Right girl.

I thought about the old women in class and how happy Hazel had been to see me. Yup, that did the trick and reeled me back in.

“Fine,” I ended up agreeing because she was so desperate to thank me, and I didn’t have the heart to disappoint her. “One drink.”

It was a bad idea to go out with Jaxon, but honestly, today had been ridiculous and fun, and I didn’t want it to end.

“Really? You’re not going to fight me on it?” She jumped up and down and practically yanked my arm out of my socket when she refused to let go. “Great! We’re going to have so much fun together.”

I thought about the fun we'd already had and kept my mouth wisely zipped shut. Especially since I was exhausted. Being tired meant I was more likely to slip up and say or do something stupid.

"You don't mind if I drive your car, do you?" She transferred her fingers to my wrist and tugged me along behind her, forcing me to hustle to keep up with her skipping. "I only have a bike, so it's been a while since I drove anywhere. Please? I've been on my feet all day, and I don't want to walk."

The woman honest to god skipped. I wasn't sure I'd ever met anyone as exuberant and joyful in my life. She made Elizabeth look like a cloudy day. And Sasha look like a child.

I had nothing against either woman, and I actually liked them both a great deal for their different personalities. But I didn't want to bang them.

Not like I did with Jaxon.

"Sure." I tossed her the keys and hoped I hadn't made a mistake.

She adjusted the driver's seat and took it slow all the way a few blocks down from the community center. The flashing neon sign above the door indicated a bar. She grabbed my arm again as if I might run away before she got me inside.

"You're going to think I'm gross," she said, lifting her voice to be heard above the rock music and thrum of voices, "but I really want beer and some chili fries."

Was the woman reading my mind?

"As long as we get extra cheese and it's messy," I said.

She released me only once we snagged one of the booths in the back, and we had our beer on the way.

"This place is special," I said, glancing around at the decor. What little there was of it. The bar reminded me of the place where Tommy liked to go, except there were no peanut shells on the floor.

A step up from dirt but still not the cleanest.

“Isn’t it great?” Jaxon sighed. “I come here after classes sometimes and have a drink before I go home. It’s not like I want Mia to see me lugging a six-pack into the pool house.”

“I’m sure she wouldn’t like you coming to this joint then biking home, either.” My brow furrowed, and irritation rose to beat against my collarbone.

“I never bike drunk,” she corrected me. “Trust me.”

And glanced up with a grateful grin when the server brought our beers and a steaming plate of chili cheese fries.

“I always make sure I’m good to go, and I leave in full control of my faculties and a full stomach.” Jaxon pointed to the fries. “These are great. I’m glad you agreed with me. I don’t know a lot of guys who say no to sloppy food, but you never know about people.” She eyed me up and down. “Especially guys like you.”

“Like me?” I asked.

“The uptight buttoned military type.” She flared her nostrils at me. “I practically smell it on you even if I knew nothing about you.”

“Then you probably already know I don’t drink midweek. Usually.” I held my beer up to salute.

She had me doing a lot of things I didn’t normally do. Like getting sucked off by a woman I’d sworn myself away from.

We munched on the fries, and I got more chili on my shirt and on the table than I did in my mouth. Jaxon looked about a second away from bending over the table and licking me clean. And I knew her tongue did amazing things. I liked the idea of it way too much.

We were halfway through with our fries and ready to order another round when she steered the conversation into deeper waters. Not somewhere I would have gone on my own, either, but I guessed she felt comfortable enough with me to talk.

“I’m sure you already know I’ve dated men and women,” she said, waving her fry around in front of her like she was

painting the air. “I’m sure someone told you. I don’t discriminate when it comes to love.”

“You’re an open-minded woman with a big heart,” I said, unsure what she wanted me to say or if she wanted me to act surprised. I already knew, and I didn’t care.

She was right: love was love.

No matter what package it came in. And I’d been with more than one woman at a time, and while they’d been into me, I knew they were into each other as well. I wasn’t one to judge.

“My last relationship was with a woman, and we parted on mutual terms. I realize now we’d gotten together because she is a pretty cool chick, and I needed to feel safer than I had with my partner before her.” Jaxon paused and chomped right through her fry. “Preston.”

I wasn’t sure I wanted to hear about him when the mere mention of his name had me suppressing a growl. Not because he’d dated Jaxon. Nothing like that. But because of the way she said his name.

The baggage and trauma attached to the two syllables.

“You don’t have to get into this if you don’t want to,” I said.

“It’s fine. The experience made me who I am and really got me into healing my trauma and working on my shadows. Which all makes for a happier me and a better artist,” she replied. She took a sip of her beer and winked at me as she swallowed.

“When I tell you he was a classic covert narcissistic personality disorder, know I only learned the term during my two months of online therapy. He verbally and emotionally beat me down without having to resort to laying a hand on me. I got away eventually when I realized I didn’t need to take his abuse, and I didn’t need to make anyone love me.” Jaxon reached for another fry and dragged it through a puddle of ketchup.

“What did he do to you?” I pressed.

“Typical stuff. He made it seem like he was so beat down by life, so lacking in confidence, and full of insecurities. He made me feel sorry for him, so that any little upset was my fault. And, of course, he called me ugly,” she replied. She tugged a lock of short blond hair above her ear. “He hated the hair, and he said he was the only one who would ever love me.”

I wanted to kill him.

I wanted to hunt the man down and kill him, which was very unlike me. I was usually pretty good at staying detached.

Jaxon fixed a bright smile on her face, which did nothing to disguise the quick flash of pain. “I’m okay now. I worked really hard to get back to myself and to find out not only who I was but who I wanted to be. I just thought maybe you’d like a little explanation about why I am the way I am now. Since I catch you looking at me sometimes like I’m this strange creature you can’t figure out.”

I shook my head. “There is no need for you to explain yourself to me.” And I hated whatever part of me made her feel the need.

“No, it’s not you, Luca. You’ve been weird but kind, and I appreciate it. I wanted to tell you. For me,” she clarified.

“I appreciate you telling me, then,” I said in return. I wasn’t sure I could remember, at least in recent memory, any woman who didn’t have a purpose for speaking about her exes. Whether it be to show me why they acted a certain way to smooth things over within our interaction or to get me to feel sorry for them.

Either way was fine because I recognized the intention behind their admittance. Usually.

Took me a while to get in touch with myself enough to hold space for someone else.

Jaxon wasn’t looking to excuse herself on any level. She simply *was*.

I found it intoxicating.

“How about you?” she asked.

“What do you mean?” I gestured for her to grab the last fry, and when she shook her head, I happily demolished it.

“I mean, is there anything you’d like to talk about, or do you want me to go on about myself all night?” She let an easy laugh loose. “I mean, I’ve got stories galore, but I don’t want to bore you. Heaven forbid I’m boring.”

“You never could be,” I replied automatically. “I mean, I’m not the relationship guy, so they’ve never molded me into...what you see.”

“Intriguing. Never in your life?”

“A few times in my younger years and none lasting more than a year. Then I became too caught up in my hockey career to devote any time to finding a mate.” Not only a girlfriend but a mate. That was the standard I held. “I went to military school, which instilled in me a singular focus on my goals.”

“Is that part of the no sex during the season thing?”

“I guess so. Athletes are very superstitious, and I think that’s part of how it started for me. But also, I don’t like drama and distractions, and women can be both.”

“Such a romantic!” she teased.

“Sometimes they’re positive distractions but distractions nonetheless.”

“It explains a lot about your temperament,” Jaxon teased.

I might have been offended if it wasn’t true.

“You traded one set of rules for another, but at least in ice hockey, you have a little more freedom.” Jaxon forced a shudder. “I’d never be able to be so regimented.”

“No, you wouldn’t,” I murmured. I couldn’t picture it. Not at all.

I shifted out of the way and narrowly missed a lap full of beer when Jaxon accidentally knocked into her bottle and spilled a quarter of it on me.

“Oops! I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be sorry.” I should have known it would happen. “I can’t see you working a day job, either. Nothing nine to five and every other weekend.”

She shook her head and replied, “Hell no. Picture me in an office trying to manage a team? I’d be the worst option possible! Military? Forget it.”

She made me laugh with her easy way of moving and speaking, and she left me no choice but to feel comfortable.

We chatted through our second round of shitty bar food that tasted amazing because it was so shitty before I told her I would drive her home.

Jaxon palmed the keys. “What’s the matter? You don’t trust me? I told you’ve got this.”

“I know you do. Maybe I just want to keep the conversation going.”

That gave her pause, and she considered me for a long moment before she nodded and drew a lollipop out of her pocket. “Interesting.”

All she would say, I thought as I walked her back to where I’d parked my car.

Interesting.

And it was interesting because it took me until we were halfway back to her place to realize I meant it. At the time, it felt like an easy platitude. Now it explained a few things to me.

About me.

No matter how many rules there were keeping me away from Jaxon, I knew inside of me that I wanted to get to know her more. It felt like breathing. I needed to hear her speak like I needed to draw in my next inhalation. Driving her home gave me an excuse to continue enjoying her company and get to know her better.

She hid nothing. Every bright and shining piece of her, every dark shadow or things other people would feel shame for admitting, she showed me.

Fifteen minutes later, I pulled into the driveway and around to the back side of the house so that the entrance to the pool house was only a few feet away.

“Let me get the door for you,” I said softly.

Jaxon waited patiently in her seat until I made my way around to the other side of the car and held out a hand for her.

“Well, thank you. You’re such a knight in shining armor.”

The way she teased me lightened a heaviness inside of me I hadn’t known I carried.

“It’s my pleasure,” I replied. *Honestly.*

“You don’t have to worry about walking me to the door, though, Luca. I’m perfectly able to make it there on my own.” Jaxon took a step closer. “Unless you’re interested in coming in and tucking me into bed?”

I wanted to kiss her.

More than anything, I wanted to taste those lips and see what kinds of sounds she’d make.

She’d sucked my cock, but...It seemed wrong, somehow, to indulge now.

I stopped myself from leaning in and doing exactly what I wanted when a figure shifted in the corner of my vision, and I knew. I knew.

Joshua had come outside on the back patio and stared us down like he was her dad.

“You have a good night, Jax,” I murmured. “Thanks for the company.”

“Thank you. I had fun,” she replied, waving me off.

I nodded to acknowledge Joshua, but his presence served as a good reminder for me. Jaxon was off-limits, and I knew

better than to do something I wouldn't be able to undo.
Anything more than we'd done.

Well, anything *else*. We'd already crossed the line once and enjoyed the hell out of ourselves. Pushing for more only asked for disaster.

JAXON

I was pretty sure they'd made a song about the rhythm of life and how it was a powerful beat or something like that.

My music taste wasn't the best, but that song seemed especially appropriate and a great anthem for me over the next few weeks. My life finally felt like it had found a nice and steady rhythm. Not too much work and not too much play but a great mixture of both where I went to bed at night happy and content.

A woman fulfilled.

I taught my classes multiple times a week—the little old ladies asked me about Luca all the time—and attended hockey games with the rest of my new friends. I hung out with Mia, watched the kids for her when she needed a break...

And I painted a certain sexy hockey captain in the buff.

I'd be lying if I said our sessions together weren't my favorite part of the week. Not only did I enjoy the spectacular view his body afforded me, but our conversations moved me. They made me think and feel, and his presence brought me a sense of comfort.

Sketching him, I felt like we'd been together for a decade. For two decades.

I saw my glass of water next to his on mismatched coasters, and I felt a sense of eternity. Which was shocking to me because I hadn't even known the man for half a year. We've only been talking for a few weeks.

I usually made it a point to operate from my full truth and nothing but my full truth, so help me god. But with the feeling...I played my cards close to my chest and not because I thought Luca wouldn't understand.

He was an old soul and sensitive. He listened to his gut, and he knew better than to judge someone from their appearance.

In that, we were kindred spirits.

I just wasn't sure how he'd feel if I told him I felt like I'd known him before. Not in this life but in multiple others before this.

A lot of people weren't really big on the ideology of multiple lives. So I smiled at him, and I sketched him when he had time.

Except for the past few weeks, he'd been gone for away games, and the more time went by between our sessions, the more worried I got.

I was starting to panic that I'd never be able to get this done on time.

The deadline for the contest was looming ever closer.

I checked my phone again, although it wasn't necessary. I had the dang text message memorized at this point.

All day session when I get back. I promise. My place.

His place.

I spent way too much time wondering if the house would match the man and all of his complexities. His tightly held control and his anger. The way he saw right through people and knew what they intended before they acted or opened their mouths.

The dreamy, spiritual man and the rigidly held military boy.

Luca Stone was such an interesting amalgam of things that it became quite fascinating for me to try to puzzle him out.

I drummed my fingers on my thigh in an erratic rhythm.

He better get back soon because, knowing myself, I'd wait until the last minute anyway to get this painting done, and a time crunch wasn't the best for my creativity. My process usually took months to get anything of what I considered prize-worthy textures.

With him gone, it put me at a little bit of a disadvantage.

Finally, the day came when he texted, saying he had a free moment.

I smiled and texted back immediately.

No working out? No other plans?

The three little bubbles showing he was typing popped on the screen. Followed by:

Only you.

Only me, huh? The words shot through me with a secret thrill, and although he hadn't meant it in any kind of romantic or sexual way, I preened. Was it so wrong for me to kinda wish it was only me?

Not that I was in any kind of good mental state to have a relationship, I reminded myself as I packed up my supplies and waited for him to follow up with his address.

I wasn't in a good mental state. Not yet, anyway. I still had a lot of healing to do in order to feel safe and comfortable with myself.

Besides, Luca worked for my cousin's husband.

Which had to mean something.

Right?

Too bad I'd never been good with rules.

My phone vibrated in my pocket with the address, which I typed into my map app and let the automated voice lead me out of Mia's suburb and along the winding desert roads.

Kind of far out, I realized, when the space between houses grew.

Luca wasn't the type of guy to stay in an apartment complex surrounded by closely packed neighbors like sardines in a can. Nor was he the kind of man who contended himself living in suburban sprawl, or hell as I liked to call it, with his neighbors a hair's breadth away and able to hear everything.

Every laugh, burp, fart, or sexual moan in the middle of the throws of passion.

No thanks, not for me.

Apparently, not for him either.

I took the last turn onto a nicely maintained asphalt road with several large houses at the start and then nothing but space.

Finally, I came to a curve in the road and found Luca's bright blue mailbox, exactly where his text said it would be.

The place wasn't massive, but it seemed to have more land than square footage. Which was pretty damn cool, in my opinion. Luca was waiting for me underneath the portico of his front porch, leaning there with an easy and masculine grace.

A predator. My mind conjured images of him shirtless—since I knew exactly how he looked—stalking some equally half-clothed female through the jungle.

I wanted to be that female.

I let my door swing closed behind me and stared up at the house. The architecture blended in well with the desert landscape, and I noticed he hadn't tried to fight nature. All of his gardening was part of the ecosystem.

"Great space," I called out.

He finally unfolded his body and jogged down the stone steps toward me. "I'll help you unpack."

I was already opening the back door and shouldering my art supplies. "It's okay, I got it," I assured him.

He took a pile of sketchbooks out of my hands. "I want to help," he said softly.

I stared up at him for the longest time and wondered why every bit of moisture in my mouth disintegrated.

Too bad the rest of his house didn't match the exterior.

Luca held the door open for me, and I made my way into the front entry hall. Correction: almost the entire first floor of the house was open except for a closed room to the right. The staircase led up to the second floor, but the rest of the house was one large room. Super neat.

So boring.

Not a photo on the wall, not a painting. Not a rug or a throw pillow. Only a massive couch and open space.

"So, how long have you lived here?" I asked, waiting for him to lead the way to whatever space he wanted to use for the day.

Luca stayed a few steps in front of me. "I've been here for eight years," he replied.

I wanted to die and nearly did. "Eight years?" I squeaked out. "You have to be kidding me. It looks asylum neat."

He shrugged. "I'm rarely ever home."

"Don't you *want* to make it a home, though?" Or at least put something on the walls to make his mark. Heck, painting the walls would go a long way toward improving the coziness of the house.

How could a person live with white on white? White tile and white walls and a white-painted ceiling? It felt like an extension of the hell of suburbia to me, the kind of decor a person would see in a magazine and want to copy.

"What's the point if I'll end up moving away at some point?" Luca quipped. "It's a waste of time."

Ahhh, I got it. That military childhood sure effed him up. I rounded my lips in a silent *O*, taking in the rest of the house as he steered me to the back and a small atrium near the rear lawn.

The light was fabulous back there, and I could see the now empty space as I'd use it: filled with plants and a mismatch of furniture. A little bistro table and a couple of super comfy chairs designed to sink into.

I'd set up my art studio in the corner, along with more plants. A ton of plants were a necessary thing with all these windows. A little bench, maybe a tall stand that I'd use to set my cup of tea or coffee on instead.

Oh yeah, this would be amazing.

"Is this going to be a good spot for you to work?" he asked.

I came back to reality amid a flood of excitement and tried to rein myself in because this wasn't my house. This was his, and he could do whatever he wanted with it. He and I were maybe friends, so I needed to rein it in and stop mentally moving into his home.

A few blinks refused to bring me back to reality.

"Oh yeah," I told him with a wide toothy grin. "This is great. I'm going to set up over here, so you grab something short to sit on, and we'll get started. Okay?"

The sooner the man sat, the better. I watched him out of the corner of my eye as I set up my portable easel. He looked exhausted.

Pale and wan instead of his usual healthy vigor. There were dark circles underneath his eyes, and from the way he favored his right shoulder, I knew he'd taken a hit at some point.

I saw further when he dropped the shirt and pants into a pile on the floor and made himself comfortable in the position he'd chosen. His dick was working just fine, it seemed.

There were bruises where there never had been before and a swollen knot the size of an ostrich egg—exaggeration but pretty dang big—near his knee.

"You played hard while you were on the road," I commented offhandedly.

Luca harrumphed. “Is there any other way to play?”

I got the rest of my paint set up and studied him, more for my benefit than for any kind of creative bent. I bit down on my thumb, gaze tracking between him and the sketch. Yes, today was the day for paint. I knew it in my bones.

“Who owned the shirt?”

I glanced up and over at his question, bringing the scowl lines on his forehead into focus. “What?”

“Who owned the shirt?” Luca repeated.

Today I wore an old man’s shirt and a pair of paint-splattered cut-off shorts. “Oh. It was my ex’s shirt,” I replied. “Full of holes and so out of date I thought it would make a nice smock for paint days.”

Luca’s scowl deepened. “Take it off.”

I chuckled, thinking he was joking. “Okay, sure, I’ll just strip down.”

“Take it off, Jax.”

Something in the timber of his voice had me shivering in a completely unexpected but good way.

“Bad karma,” he explained.

Sure, that might be one excuse.

Keeping eye contact, I slowly peeled the shirt off since it was a button-up, and I’d left the front loose. Underneath I wore nothing but an old black tank and no bra. My usual get up.

Luca eyed my chest for a brief moment before he reached down to grab the shirt he’d been wearing. He tossed it my way, and I caught it in one hand.

“There,” he said. “You can wear that one instead.”

I drew in a breath, and immediately his scent twined up my nostrils and into my system. My heart clenched. “What if I get paint on it?” I asked.

“I don’t care.”

I nibbled my lower lip, loving the way his eyes darkened as he tracked the movement. “You don’t care if I get a little messy, really?” Drawing his shirt overhead, I waited for him to answer.

I wanted to banish the shadows from his eyes. Not only the ones that had darkened when I told him about the origin of the ugly plaid shirt but the ones I’d seen when I first arrived. Whatever game he’d won on the road, it hadn’t been physically hard on him. Not alone.

“No,” he growled out. “Do whatever you have to do.”

I grabbed my paintbrush and flicked a bit of yellow straight across my chest.

“Like this?”

His growl sharpened, and I felt the sound in my bones. My shivering increased tenfold, and wetness pooled between my legs at the sound.

Breath catching in my chest, I flicked another line of yellow, and this time it went straight over my rapidly hardening nipples.

“You know you’re asking for trouble, Jaxon,” he warned.

“No, Luca, I’m not. This—” I broke off to dip the paintbrush in some red and flick it across his shoulder. “This is asking for trouble.”

He rose slowly, stalking closer and closer, and no matter how determined I was to not back down, I took a step in the opposite direction. He saw me.

His smile grew.

“You always like to push the envelope. Don’t you?”

“I wouldn’t call it pushing the envelope at all.”

He was close enough to touch, for the two of us to breathe the same air.

And this time, holding my eyes, he reached over to my side and trailed his finger through the paint I’d laid out on the palette. Before I had a chance to make a hasty escape, he’d

slithered his finger across my neck and down to my collarbone, dipping between my breasts.

“Now you’re the one asking for it,” I said.

I grabbed the tube of white and squeezed it as hard as I could. A spray of paint shot out from the top and went all over his naked chest.

And, I noticed with absolute delight his pubic mound right above his throbbing hard cock.

“Hey, watch your aim!” His indignant shout had me laughing again as the two of us scrambled for whatever weapon we could find.

Armed with nothing but a tube of white and my paintbrush, I widened my legs and used my body to cut him off from the rest of the supplies.

Luca was much faster than I gave him credit for, even with his bad knee and his ostrich egg bruise.

We flung paint at each other faster than outlaws in the old West during a shootout. Out of breath, I screeched when he dumped the entire glass of water I had gotten out for rinsing right down my spine. Like a startled cat, I arched my back and leaped out of the way. Right, sadly, into his open arms when he pivoted fast and caught me.

“You dare to think you’ll win this fight?” he taunted.

I squeezed the last of my paint over one of his nipples.

Startled and pleased and absolutely covered in paint from our fight when he bent down to capture my lips.

I arched closer this time, purring in the back of my throat and looping my wet, somewhat sticky arms around his neck. To bring him closer. To taste him and feel the bulge of his erection pressing against the crease of my legs.

Yes. I’d missed this. Being touched by strong and competent hands, by someone with absolute control and confidence in what they’re doing. Luca had all of those things in spades, and when he grabbed me for a kiss, when our lips

pressed together and his tongue slid along the seam of me to gain entry, I knew.

I wanted him in every way.

All this skittering around the issue would come to an end today.

He kissed me like a starving man, and I let him. I kissed him back the same way, practically purring when he slid paint-slicked fingers down my side and skimmed the edge of my breast.

“You’re filthy,” he muttered.

“Oh, you have no idea.” I wanted to wrap my entire body around him. “I’ll show you filthy.”

He growled and swept my legs out from under me. Luckily for me, he had such a tight grip on my upper body that he lowered us both to the floor seamlessly.

Oh, yes, I’d definitely missed this, I thought as he caged me between his arms and kissed me again. He ran his fingers between the swell of my breasts now, pushing the shirt I wore of his open and pulling my tank down low.

He took one nipple in his mouth, working it between his teeth until my breath caught in my chest, and I pushed closer to him. Wanting more. Craving him in a way I hadn’t felt in a long time.

Air hissed through my teeth as I reached between us, taking his cock in my hand. And realizing I coated his shaft in paint by working it.

I broke away from him and glanced down between us.

“As much as I adore the sight of your manhood covered in primary colors, I don’t think I particularly want it inside of me like that.” I met his eyes. “And make no mistake, Luca. I’m not leaving here today without having you inside of me.”

His eyes darkened, warmed.

“Please tell me you have a shower handy so we don’t trail paint through your house.” The look in his eyes had me

panting and ready to say fuck it and damn the consequences, but I didn't want paint in my pussy.

He pushed away from me, leaving my breast out in the open, and reached back for me. Luca hauled me not only to my feet but into his arms. I jumped a little to help him but being cradled by those massive, muscular arms...I felt desirable.

“Fuck the floor,” he growled. “I’m getting you wet.”

“Already there.”

I reached up to nibble the side of his neck.

He didn't miss a single step going up the stairs, and we somehow made it to the shower. I stripped off my paint-covered clothes as he started the water. I soaped his back, and he soaped between my legs, making sure we were squeaky clean. That was as far as we did make it, though. We fell into the bed, still wet and dripping, both of us laughing.

He covered my body with his. I opened my legs as wide as they'd go to receive him, loving the way he nestled perfectly in the area. His dick pressed against my stomach, and I moaned when he went back to nuzzling my breasts.

“This is a bad idea,” he murmured against my skin.

Like I cared anymore? I grabbed his dick, slicking the precum along the shaft and working him up and down. “Those are my favorite,” I managed to get out.

This wasn't going to be slow and passionate. Not that I wanted it either way. I wanted fast and hard and full of life. I wanted Luca to pound me until I forgot my name and had a hard time walking. He was definitely equipped for the job, as long as he didn't treat me like I'd bruise, peachy-like and fragile.

Going on instinct, I pushed against him until he fell on his back, and I reversed our positions.

“You're going to make me come,” I told him as I ran the head of his dick along my wet pussy. “You're going to do a lot of things to me. Later. Right now, I don't want to wait.”

His hands fell on my hips, gripping hard enough to bruise.

“Jaxon...” he started.

I silenced him with a kiss, then reached and took one of his hands, moving it to my neck.

“Later, I’m going to eat you out until you scream,” he warned, his eyes filled with intent. Dark and lusty. “Right now, I don’t want to wait.”

“I don’t want to wait either,” I replied. Then, “I’m on birth control. You’re clean?”

It took him a second to realize what I asked, and he nodded, swallowing hard enough for his Adam’s apple to bob. “Yes, I am,” he grunted.

I lined him up with my opening and lifted myself up. “*Good.*”

Then I slid down the line of his cock until he was buried inside of me, my body adjusting to his girth and length.

Holy fuck.

I gasped, my head dropping back on my neck as I worked my hips in little circles.

He wasn’t expecting me to ride him. That much was clear when I glanced down at him and saw the shock on his face. Then his eyes rolled back in his head when I started to move. When I lifted myself until only the head of his cock was still sheathed in my body and slammed back down. Luca squeezed my neck, just to the point where the slight amount of pain brought me so much pleasure.

Bareback. There was nothing like it, nothing like the feel of him, all velvety softness over his hard length. He filled every inch of me and then some, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. If anything, I’d needed his size. Then he started fingering my clit, and I lost control.

I had no objections when he reversed our positions once again. He threw me off of him before scrambling over to the side of the bed and pulling me on my stomach until my legs

fell off the side. He pushed my legs open as wide as they could go until I was splayed and open for him.

Damn.

His girth speared through me, and I slowly started to move back against him. Until he pressed me down, his hand on the back of my neck, and took over. He controlled the pace. The timing. The deep full thrusts were so delicious I wanted to cry out.

So I did.

I let myself be as loud as I wanted, groaning and keening when Luca spanked the side of my ass. In the past, I'd been admonished for being too loud.

Not with Luca.

Each moan had him going faster, harder.

Rougher without ever going over the edge into violence. He was as controlled with himself as he was with everything else, but I didn't want him to hold back.

Not the way I'd always been forced to make myself small.

I glanced at him over my shoulder, and he slowed his pace as our eyes met.

"Is it too much for you?" he panted. "I know I'm big."

Shaking my head, I said, "I want it all. As hard or as slow as you want."

"I don't understand."

"I want you to fuck me, Luca, like you do in your fantasies." It was taking a risk, saying that he fantasized about me.

But the way his lips curled when I looked at him over my shoulder, I knew I'd gotten it right.

"You're sure?"

Everything depended on the way I answered. He pulled back so that only the tip of him was inside of me, poised, waiting to hear what I said.

“Give me everything you’ve got.”

The floodgates opened.

He was a wild man. He speared into me at the same time he reached around and fingered my swollen clit again. One of his hands fisted in my hair while the other slapped the opposite side of my ass. His hands kept moving so that it felt like there were more of them than there were. On my clit, on my ass, on a breast. When the hair-pulling wasn’t doing it, Luca reached around to grab my neck. Squeezing but not too hard.

Just right.

Just enough that I lost the ability to think, to breathe, to know who I was in the moment because he claimed me from the inside out. Every thrust brought me closer to another climax.

And when he came inside of me, when his dick spasmed and expelled everything, I lay limp beneath him. Loving the way his sweaty torso pinned me to the bed. Loving just about everything.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered before kissing the back of my neck. “Thank you.”

Beautiful.

And for the first time in a long time, not only did I feel it, but I believed him.

LUCA

I had the hottest woman ever in my bed. Jaxon lay on her belly, her hands cupping her chin, smiling at me. Still naked, and it didn't seem to bother her in the least. She kicked her heels in the air, and the movement sent her ass jiggling.

She looked like she wanted to say something but kept her mouth shut. Too bad. I wanted to catch another glimpse of that cute little gap between her two front teeth.

I wanted a lot of things.

The paint war had been an experience almost as much fun as the sex itself. No, I corrected, dropping onto the bed beside her. The sex had been fantastic. The kind that made me act like a damn addict. I'd want it all the time.

Giving into temptation, I reached out and pushed her onto her back to cup one perfect breast. She closed her eyes, her smile widening.

"That was amazing," I said. "I'm not trying to be shitty or exaggerate, either."

To be with a woman who didn't contain herself, who moved freely with pleasure as her focus...how many women, or people in general, did such a thing?

If I had to break my no-sex during the season rule, I was happy to break it with Jaxon.

I'd crossed the line Joshua drew, though. And my place was a fucking mess.

I didn't care.

Jaxon was worth it all.

“It was.” She reared up and kissed me gently, her breast filling the hand cupping it. “Unexpectedly so.”

About to dive into the kiss, I paused, blinking at her, and broke away to ask, “You didn’t expect sex between us to be good?”

“I didn’t expect there to be sex between us,” she corrected lightly. “You were the one who said I should not expect another opportunity together. Yet here we are.” She flung her arms out to the side, and now her breasts jiggled as her ass had.

“Yeah. About that.”

I slowly slid my hand off her pale torso and flopped onto my back beside her, hands behind my head. Naked until I dragged a sheet over to cover my dick and balls.

“Uh-oh. I’m not going to like where this conversation goes, will I?” Jaxon shifted closer to press herself to my side.

“You might not. I think you need to know. Joshua specifically told us all to leave you alone. All the guys on the team.” The words left me in a rush.

Jaxon stilled, and I heard the tension in her voice when she forced herself to chuckle. “I’m not sure what you mean.”

“When you first came here. Joshua had me tell the entire team to stay away from you. To be nice, to make you feel welcome, but nothing more. He implied consequences.”

“He did what?” She bolted upright and sat cross-legged. It was quite a view from where I lay, and as distracted as I was by her pussy on display for me, one I’d buried deep inside only moments ago, I diverted my eyes to her own.

Which burned with fury.

I didn’t blame her one bit.

“It was kind of an edict from the man on high. I had to tell the rest of the team. Warn them, really.” I pushed my own body into a seated position with the pillows at my back.

“That’s what that meeting was about! The day I met you.” She pointed a finger at me. “I wondered about it because it had my intuition screaming, but I convinced myself I worried for no reason.”

“Bingo,” I said with a nod. Knowing, in that intuitive way she spoke about, that I needed to get it all out in the open. And she needed to hear the whole piece. “I didn’t think it would be a problem, but apparently, I find you irresistible.”

“Irritating,” she corrected softly, her forehead lined in a frown.

“Both. I’ll deal with Joshua.” I reached for Jaxon’s hands.

I didn’t want her mad or upset in any way, and I certainly didn’t want her to go hunt Joshua down. That would look very bad for everyone involved.

I also wanted her to stay. For as long as we had together.

She’d broken through my defenses, the ones I’d been forced to strengthen over time to be the kind of man my family demanded I be.

No, left with Jaxon at my side and a soft spot inside of me, I wanted to decide—what kind of person did I want to be for myself?

“You didn’t have any idea?” I asked.

“Clearly, I didn’t!” she huffed out. “I’m really upset about the whole thing. Surely someone would have let it slip by now, right? I mean, to say something that crazy and then for *everyone* to keep it a secret from me? It’s not okay, Luca.”

My buddies gossiped like old women, and their wives and girlfriends were no better.

“He had no right,” Jaxon blustered. “No right at all! It’s my life and my body. My choices. I decide who I get involved with, not Joshua.”

The pout on her lips was adorable, and I wanted to kiss it away. To smooth the rough spots for her.

She'd hate it, though, hate if I made a move right now rather than let her rage it out. I kept my hands on my own lap.

"You're right. He was just looking out for you, which is sweet in its own weird way, but you're right," I replied.

"I've worked really hard to trust myself again. You have no idea how hard it was for me after everything I've been through. I've made mistakes like anyone else, and I've learned from them. I know my mind, Luca like I know I want to be with you." She tilted her head to the side as she considered me, my reaction. "I'm an adult. I don't need babysitting."

"I know." I waited for her to come to me rather than make any more toward her. "I know. To be fair, before you jump down anyone's throats, some of our guys don't have great track records with women. I'm sure he only said something because of that, not because of you. Anyway." I stopped, cleared my throat. "Now, it leaves me in a tough spot. Do we want to risk causing chaos or not?"

Jaxon's blond strands stuck out above her ears. I got it; I'd be pissed if I were in her shoes. And it ticked me off to think about having to ask Joshua and Mia's forgiveness for getting involved with Jaxon on any level.

I was a grown-ass man too. Whatever I did or didn't do? No one's business but my own.

"Do you think he'd fire you?" she asked. She scooted closer, twisting to lay her back against my chest.

"It's sweet of you to worry."

Sweeter than I deserved. I owned the consequences of my behavior. Always. My father sure as hell instilled *that* into me.

"I don't think he'd fire me," I continued, "but he could make my life pretty miserable. Either way, I knew the drill when I got involved." I stroked my hands down her arms, savoring the softness of her skin.

"That sucks." She brushed against me, and my dick jumped, pressing into her. She turned to look over her shoulder and smile at me. "You being forbidden makes this even more fun."

“You’re right,” I agreed. “And I’m sorry. I probably should have told you that before I got...carried away.”

“You got caught up in the moment, and that’s fine. You don’t have anything to apologize for, Luca.” She snuggled closer.

I wanted to be a good guy for her. I wanted a clean slate between us, especially since Jaxon was the first woman I’d had sex with who hadn’t had to sign an NDA in a long time

“Still, I am sorry that this thing between us is not a possibility. I don’t want you to think I was using you.” There. I got it out in the open.

“I know. Don’t you worry about me.” She patted my knee. “I get it. I mean, it’s not like it’s anyone’s business what we do, right?”

“Yes.” She was right.

Plus, I did not speak about my sex life with anyone. I was a gentleman in that regard. A lesson I received from my mother.

“And we are going to be hanging out while I paint you,” she said, her voice getting brighter, more excited. “We have to spend a lot of time together. Better to air out our dirty laundry now while we’re both in a great mood.”

How was I going to hang out with her and not touch her?

At this point, I struggled to focus.

“You know, we don’t have to come to a full stop. We could just hook up while we work. You know. Our secret?” She played her hands over my knees and chuckled when my dick pulsed again.

I did not miss the way she licked her lips. The way her breathing went ragged again.

That ripe, naked body...

“You know, since neither one of us wants anything serious. So, no strings. Hookups after I get my painting done, and that’s it,” she finished, sounding decisive. “Case closed.”

“Really?” I was skeptical. That seemed a little too perfect.

“Absolutely.”

“I don’t do serious,” I told her. I’d already broken most of my personal rules for Jaxon, which was serious in and of itself.

In all my time at the Rattlesnakes, I’ve never had sex during the season. Not once. Hockey players tended to take their superstitions seriously. I wasn’t sure I really believed in those things, but a part of me wanted to. I abstained for several reasons.

Until Jaxon wrapped me around her little finger.

Did I mind?

Not terribly. Until it affected my game.

“Well, not in relationships, anyway,” she replies. “You’re a pretty serious guy in general, though. Although I’ve started to see a lighter side of you.” From the tone of her voice, I had to wonder if she liked the lighter side...or not.

“So?” I pressed.

My hands traveled from her breasts to her pubic mound and her core. I wanted my mouth there. Now.

“So what?” Jaxon asked lightly.

“Are you sure? About nothing serious?” It took a little bit of pressure off of me. Not much, but enough.

“One hundred and ten percent.” She laced her fingers through mine to guide my hand where she needed it, right along the seam of her sex.

All right, then. As long as we were in agreement...

I shook off the vague sense of discomfort and focused on the pleasure of her folds.

“Already wet for me, I see.”

“I don’t know what it is about you.” She bit her lip as I moved my digit up and down before sliding one inside. “You drive me mad. You let me be myself. You let me be open to whoever I want to become.”

It was an unconscious echo of the thoughts I'd had myself, the same ones I kept silent now and locked down tight.

Pleasure. Desire. Lust.

I shifted Jaxon so that she lay on her back once again and leaned down to take a pert nipple in my mouth, adding a graze of my teeth. Her channel tightened. I added a second finger and switched my attention to her other nipple.

Her hands lifted to my hair, tugging roughly. Her nails scraped my scalp in the most delicious fashion.

Whoever we wanted to be.

Whether together or apart, I knew I'd hold to the statement, working to figure it out.

I released her breast and lowered myself between her legs to nudge at her entrance. "Do you taste like sugar because of all those lollipops?" I teased.

"Wouldn't you like to know?" The words left her in a low purr I felt through my chest.

I closed my mouth over her clit and sucked hard. For someone who claimed to be hard to get off, Jaxon was ridiculously easy to push over the edge. I wanted it to take longer, to last the rest of the day, but her legs quivered beneath me in seconds, and her taste flooded my tongue.

I looked up to watch her face contort in pleasure as she rode through the orgasm.

Before she could collapse like a limp noodle, I flipped her over onto all fours and spread her hips wide, placing a pillow under her head. She was a vision like his. Her ripe ass, her swollen sex, and that tight little hole. I spread some of her juices there and circled a finger. She'd enjoyed the attention I'd show her ass that first day we'd fooled around.

"You shared this with anyone else?" I asked. Not sure why it appealed to me as greatly as it did.

"Nope."

I stilled for a moment before resuming the circling. Maybe that was it. Maybe it was claiming a piece of her she'd never given to anyone else, having it with me even if we amounted to nothing but ash and memories in the end.

“Are you interested in that?”

“Maybe,” she replied coyly. “Not today, though. I mean a little play maybe...”

I swiped the precum off my tip and added it to her fluids before I slid one finger in to the knuckle and pulled out. “Don't move.”

A claiming. That was what this entire thing amounted to. A creative rebirth for both of us with no clear destination in sight. I'd enjoy the journey. Just like I'd enjoy claiming her ass.

I took my sweet time grabbing some lube from the bathroom and came back to see her in the same position, not having moved an inch.

“Good girl,” I told her, but I swatted her ass anyway.

I loved that Jaxon was up for most things. She was wild and untamed, and I liked it.

I returned my attention to her puckered hole, now slick with lube, and only went in as far as before with my finger. I wasn't super into anal. Just her. Just me. Maybe I was not as uptight as she thought I was.

At least, not when it came to sex.

I used my other hand to slip two fingers inside her pussy and moved both hands in the same easy, coaxing rhythm. What I wouldn't give for a third hand to spank her on her wiggling ass. Too bad.

When I'd worked us both up, I pulled all my hands away to grip her hips tightly.

Without warning, I slammed into her pussy. Jaxon mewled beneath me as I pulled out, repeating it over. And over. I gripped the back of her head and the silken strands of her hair

in one hand, her hip in the other. Moving us both through a punishing pace until sweat slicked our skin.

When I got close to my own end, I reached around to stroke her clit.

“Come, Jaxon. Come on my dick.”

“I can’t,” she argued. Panting.

“You can and you will. Come for me.” I increased the pressure on her clit only slightly, keeping my circles tight.

Within seconds she followed my command and came hard around me when I spanked her again. The sensation would have brought me to my knees if I weren’t already on them, and it wasn’t long before my balls tightened, dick clenching.

I pulled out and came all over her back for the second time, gripping my dick in my hand and pumping myself through completion.

“We...might need another shower.” Those were the first words she said when she came back to herself, collapsing on her stomach.

“My pleasure.”

Without waiting for her to answer, I got to my feet and carried her there. Cleaned her up before taking her a third time against the cool tiles.

I didn’t know what kind of draw existed between us, only that we were both hungry for it. Starving. And neither one of us wanted to stop.

I knew we both wanted to create, whether it be something physical or a mental change.

Being with her in whatever capacity we both agreed on made me want *more*.

That was how I found myself organizing a lot of painting sessions for the portrait in the days ahead. Forcing myself to wait until she’d gotten what she wanted done on canvas before we lunged for each other.

We were insatiable.

Being together at her place could not happen, and left us getting creative in an entirely different way.

My place and truck were regular hookup spots, but one night, I booked us into the suite of a hotel. A room picked especially for the fireplace because of Jaxon's fantasies. How she'd always wanted to be taken in front of a roaring fire.

Tucson might not have any days cold enough to really warrant the burn, but her wish became my command.

I tried not to let my annoyance take the reins when we arrived for check-in an hour late.

"I lost track of time!" She'd just left me hanging at my place, thinking she was a no-show.

Time would never matter for her as it did to me. Which helped me reel myself back in, remind myself that this was a fling, so overall compatibility mattered little.

I propelled Jaxon down the hallway toward the room with my hand lightly on the small of her back. And every ounce of agonizing about the time disappeared when I opened the door, and she saw the fireplace for the first time. When she clapped her hands together and jumped up and down with pure glee.

"You remembered!" She turned to me with silver lining her bright blue eyes. "Oh, Luca, you really remembered."

"Some things are well worth remembering," I murmured. Everything she said stuck with me, even her inane wonderings when she got into the groove of her painting and kept up a strange stream of consciousness.

The room was done out like a log cabin in the mountains, and it was crazy for Tucson, but I didn't care. The look on her face made it all worthwhile.

"We should role-play," she said half an hour later when we'd cracked a bottle of champagne, and she had explored every corner of the room like an excited child.

"Role-play?" I heard my voice hitch as I responded.

"Yeah." She held the bottle high overhead. "You can be the sexy lumberjack who comes home to find me basking by your

fire, uninvited. You might need to punish me. I'm a damsel in distress who got lost in a snowstorm, and I should know better than to be out in the wilderness alone and unprepared."

Her fantasy had her giggling.

It was sexy as hell, but I had to ask, "Where do you get this stuff?"

"Romance novels." She smiled and pecked my lips, tasting of bubbles. "Go into the next room and give me five to get in position. I want to make this perfect." She squealed. "I'm so excited!"

I did as I was told, fighting against the urge to be embarrassed. Open and wild. Untamed. Those were the things I appreciated about her, no matter how awkward the scenario made me feel.

If she wanted this, then why not?

I'd already booked a huge suite for her. Why not go all the way?

When I returned, she was naked on the rug by the fire and made a big show of trying to cover herself with a blanket.

"Oh no, Mr. Lumberjack, I'm so sorry. I didn't know anyone was here! Can you help me?"

I was a terrible actor. Not that Jaxon was any better, as she did her best to stifle her laughter, but I played along and tried not to sound cranky. "What are you doing in my house, you minx?"

"I was lost, and my clothes were wet. I was trying to get dry. I can leave now."

My own chuckle burned my throat as she tried to rise and almost tripped over her blanket.

"You'll leave when I say you can leave." Okay, this was getting fun. "Now, come here."

When she got close enough, I flung the blanket away, revealing her in all her glory.

“Do you know what I do to people who invade my home?”
I growled.

“No, Mr. Lumberjack.” She faked being wide-eyed and afraid. “I’ll do anything to make it right. I’m so sorry.”

I grabbed her and hauled her over my shoulder fireman style. In reverse. Her head dropped in line with my dick, and I reached around and spanked her ass until it turned pink.

“Take my dick out and suck it,” I managed.

Ridiculous. Hilarious. And the most fun I’d had during sex in my life.

When Jaxon sucked me dry, I spread her out on the floor and worshiped her the way she deserved to be worshiped.

I didn’t know what the hell we were doing, but I was sure enjoying the fuck out of it. Whatever it was.

JAXON

Mia had been at me for *days* trying to get information out of me about the portrait and how Luca and I were getting along. She took the term *needling* to new heights, and my oddly zipped lips only added fuel to her fire. She knew something was up, and she wanted all the details. Details I refused to give her.

This was *mine*. What Luca did with me, what we did with each other, it was mine, and for the first time in my life, I found I didn't want to share it with anyone else.

I loved my cousin, but that woman could not keep a secret to save herself, and I needed to. The sexiest man in the world said we needed to be discreet, and since neither one of us wanted a relationship, I agreed.

I sat behind the wheel of Mia's borrowed car on my way to meet with the girls.

How embarrassing, thinking back on it, that I'd told her about my first sitting session with Luca. The gossiping made him angry, and now that I knew him better, I saw why.

Silly gossip it might be, and fun in the moment, but it had the potential to hurt people.

Luca was the captain on and off the ice. He kept a steady hand, embraced his position as the backbone of his team, and enjoyed everyone's respect because of it. My gossiping undermined him in an integral way.

I didn't want to do anything that caused him harm.

Pausing, I flicked up the volume on the radio and sang off-key along with the song, only knowing a few words and making up the rest of the lyrics. Arm out the window, I let my hand crest and dip through the air.

Mia kept asking about us, though. I kept telling her it was all going well, and Luca was a total gentleman.

And if a gentleman showed up on time and doled out the orgasms on the regular, then I was not a liar. The thought had me smiling and howling even louder.

And there, at the back of my awareness and growing louder by the day, the knowledge that our time together would be up soon. Then what?

Our painting sessions would inevitably stop, and I was going to miss him something fierce. We hadn't discussed any next steps. Which I assumed would be nothing because our plan was still intact. Our fling stopped once I was done with his portrait. We were on a deadline to expire

That body. The sex. Oh my gosh, I had no freaking idea sex could be hot and fun the way it was with him. Mainly though, I'd miss *him*. The way he smiled. The way he made me feel and the way we connected. The odd talks where we went deeper than either of us wanted to, pushed by the desire to connect.

Yep, I'd miss it all.

Luca came off gruff, yet he was kind and considerate. Sensitive. He knew things before they happened and had started leaning into his sixth sense.

He showed up with food, and he always sat longer than agreed if he didn't have other commitments. He'd been right when he'd said he was a busy guy. Between the team and all their travel, sponsorship commitments, and his community service work, he barely had any free time at all.

Squeezing in my sessions was no mean feat.

When we were done, he'd go back to his busy life without any holes to patch. What about me?

My move to Arizona had been a good thing, but I was so focused on the painting, and it was a hot subject that I hadn't made many plans for moving the rest of my life forward. I couldn't live in Mia's pool house forever. As soon as we were done with the painting, I needed to look for a place to live. It wasn't going to be as swanky as Mia's or any of the Rattlesnakes' homes, but it would be mine.

I clicked on the blinker and took a right turn into the parking lot. Part of the reason why I let the girls drag me out to an adorable tiki bar called Toucans was that if I planned to stay in Tucson, then I needed more in my life than just art classes when Luca walked away. I needed friends, and these women were the epitome of friendship goals.

It fascinated me how eclectic a group they were and how well they got along. From Cassidy, the serious statistician, and Willa, the musician, to Corrinne, the efficient PA, to Sasha, the student, there seemed to be room for everyone and their foibles.

It had been fun to dress up in something other than my painting clothes and do my hair and make-up. And it was fun to have some girl time. I'd had some great girlfriends during art school, but we'd all drifted in different directions and lost touch. This was my chance to start fresh.

I spared a final glance at myself in the rearview mirror and smacked my lips together for emphasis. I'd painted them the same color as my lollipop stain, partially as a whim and mostly because I could.

Let Preston call me ugly now. He didn't matter.

He'd never mattered.

Zadie and Willa commandeered a round booth in a corner. By the time I made it to the table, late as usual, they already had a couple of jugs of cocktails laid out. Appetizers were on the way, Sasha assured me, and the vibe was excellent.

"You guys. This is amazing! How do you find these places?" I smiled as I took in the women laughing and checking in on each other.

“It’s a gift,” Elizabeth, Bates’s girl, assured me. “Trust me. I can suss out great food no matter where I am.”

“It’s a skill I envy,” I told her with a laugh.

“So, how’s the portrait going, Jax? We haven’t heard a peep out of anyone about it.” Corrinne drew out the word *portrait*, which told me she was digging for gossip.

Corrinne had the most gorgeous strawberry-blond hair. I’d love to paint her one day, all that hair and her sweet smile. But nothing got past her. The woman was the glue holding the Rattlesnakes’ management together, Mia told me on more than one occasion.

I didn’t doubt that Joshua and Jeremy were chalk and cheese, so keeping those two on track must be a daunting task.

“It’s going pretty well,” I told her. “For someone who hasn’t painted in the last six months, I like to think I’m right on schedule. I might not win the prize, but I’ll meet the deadline at least.” Something to be proud of right there.

I’d come a long way from the timid artist I’d been when I packed up the trailer and got on a plane for Arizona.

“You have to have a little faith! You never know. After all, not everyone has a subject quite like Luca, now, do they?” Corrinne wiggled her eyebrows suggestively. Subtle she was not.

“That’s true. I do have to do him justice.” I forced my face into a grave mask and reached for my glass.

“You could just do him,” she said with a saucy wink, and I nearly spit my drink on her.

“Oh my god...” I could tell I was blushing and they all saw it as I patted the cocktail off my cleavage.

Corrinne narrowed her eyes at me, and I looked away. “Unless you already have. You sneaky lady, you have! Damn, girl, get it!”

Willa, on my other side, leaned in. “How could you *not* do him if he’s naked all the time?” she wanted to know. “I’ve never been one for self-control, so it would have shocked the

shit out of me if you somehow managed to keep your hands off a sexy, single man like that.”

“You can’t tell anyone.” The rest of the women seemed absorbed by something on Elizabeth’s phone, leaving the three of us in our personal bubble.

It was pointless to try to dissuade them. They knew. Why lie about it?

“It just sort of happened. And apparently, Joshua warned all the guys to stay away from me. So I don’t want trouble for him. It’s just a fling while I paint Luca. Nothing else,” I finished.

Sounding more like I had to convince myself than the two of them.

“Really?” Corrine sounded surprised that Joshua had gone so far.

“Shocking, right?” I took my straw between my teeth and sucked down some much-needed liquid fortification. Already fuzzy-headed, this would go straight through me. I was a lightweight. “I was surprised too.”

“Will you be able to just walk away from him no matter what Josh says?” Willa wanted to know, and she looked concerned as she asked.

“I have no choice. We agreed on a fling. He doesn’t do relationships. Not to mention I’m building a life here. I get to decide where I go and who I walk my path alongside,” I replied.

Convincing, sure.

“We always have choices,” she replied.

“Not always. I mean, I’m a thirty-five-year-old woman who wants a baby, and I haven’t got a man. My choices are limited,” Corrinne chimed in. “Sometimes we just go with the hands dealt by our life.”

“True.” Willa thought on that one for a moment. “But you still have options. A one-night stand, for instance.” She winked. “A sperm donor or you can ask a friend. Just like

Jaxon can decide whether she wants to follow that sparkle in her eyes when she talks about Luca or not.”

I could feel my blush deepen.

“None of those seem like great choices for me,” Corrinne admitted, taking a sip of her drink with a pout. “Although, you are right, Willa; they’re all options.”

“Look, I don’t want to make Luca’s life hard or piss off Joshua. None of the above,” I cut in. “I haven’t got much family, and I don’t want Mia in the middle. She’s done so much for me...not to mention I came here for a fresh start, not drama.”

It was all drama, no matter what choice I made in the end.

“Well, if you’re going to walk away, you better make the most of him while you can. And for the record, he seems happier than usual, so maybe you’re good for him and not ‘drama’ as you call it,” Willa added. “I’ve never seen him come to so many functions as he had since you came.”

“He’s just getting regular sex,” I told them, not wanting to get my hopes up. “I don’t think it’s me that’s special. A few good pounds makes everyone happier.”

Willa chuckled and held out her hand for a fist bump. “The mouth on you.”

“It’s not that, although I can see why you might think so,” Corrinne replied. “Now, what do you think of a one-night stand or sperm donor for my baby daddy? Which option sounds like it has more appeal?”

I was happy to change the subject, and luckily no one else asked about Luca. After a few cocktails, my lips tended to get looser, and I would hate to ruin what we had or get him in any trouble.

Besides, Corrinne and her baby woes...I wondered what it would be like to walk in her shoes and have those choices ahead. Mine seemed much smaller in comparison.

I chewed over what we talked about for two full days, thinking about it still when I knocked on the door to Luca’s

place. A quick sitting, an early session, before he went to the stadium for his game today.

He answered the door wearing nothing but a pair of boxer shorts. Bed hair. A sexy smile. Holy mother, he looked happy, and the sight of me had an enormous erection jutting toward me in a few breaths.

“Morning, beautiful. Do my eyes deceive me, or are you actually on time, for once?” He leaned over to take my bag, the canvas, and my supplies.

“I made it a real point to watch the clock. You look happy to see me in more ways than one.” There was no hiding the distinctive bulge in his pants.

“You know it, Lollipop. Seems my dick wants to make up for things I missed while I was in Seattle.” He kissed my temple as I walked past him, and it did all kinds of things to me.

Such a sweet, boyfriend-like gesture.

Nope. Nope nope! I bit down on my lip until the pain chased those ideas out of my head.

“Let’s get going. I know you have a busy day,” I told him.

“True. Not only do we have a game, my folks are in town.” Luca trailed after me with his arms burdened by all my stuff.

“Really?” I knew he wasn’t exactly close to his parents, and the look on his face told me everything I needed to know. Their visit wasn’t a welcome one but something he’d be forced to shoulder through.

“Yep. So *you* will be the highlight of my day.” He took his spot on the stool in what had become routine now, watching me while I set up. “You know what would really make me happy?”

Heat trailed from my abdomen down between my legs, my lady parts waking up. “We don’t have time for that,” I murmured.

The truth was, I was terrified I wouldn’t get this entire project done. The sketch part had gone well enough, and so

far, I'd gotten the first layer of paint onto the canvas. But the highlights, the shadows, the textures, and depth?

What if my old skills were too rusty to get me to the finish line?

Everyone in the Rattlesnakes family was so invested in me entering this contest. I didn't want to disappoint them or feel like I'd wasted Luca's time.

"You're probably right," he sighed. "Just get naked while you paint me. Give me something to look at while I sit here."

I glanced up at him and the tight smile on his lips. "That would be..." I trailed off.

"Hot. That's what it would be. Come on, you're half naked anyway. You wear these things to tease me."

It was a bad idea to waste any of the little time we had. Except he looked so hopeful sitting there.

Keeping eye contact, I grabbed my tank and yanked it over my head. I wasn't wearing a bra or undies, my usual get up, so I shimmed out of the long paint-splattered skirt and bared myself for him. Besides a few bracelets and a toe ring, I had nothing on.

I grabbed a paintbrush and twirled it between my fingers like a baton. "You ready?"

"Fuck, that's hot." He fisted his engorged cock. "Okay, get painting."

He was not wrong.

Free, exposed, and turned on, I watched him while he stroked himself a time or two and slowly relaxed into his usual seated position. With less than an hour before he had to leave, I did my best to focus. Five minutes before our time ran out, Luca's alarm rang.

"Well, shoot." I set my paintbrush down. "I feel like I just got started."

He crooked his finger to beckon me over, and the moment I stepped between his legs, he dragged me close to claim my

mouth in a bruising kiss. We fumbled for each other, hands searching, lips exploring until he had me bent over the arm of his couch.

A few strokes of the head of his dick against my entrance, and he pushed into me from behind. Ridiculous, I thought with a moan, how quickly I fell apart for him. The sounds of flesh slapping against flesh filled the quiet room until we both found our release.

Using up every bit of the allotted time.

“That was quite the foreplay,” he said once he pulled out, kissing his way up the side of my neck.

I straightened, and he turned me toward his arms to kiss me fully on the lips.

“You go ahead and help yourself to the shower while I head out. I really have to go. Will I see you tonight at the game?” he murmured against the side of my mouth.

I grabbed his face to keep him steady, kissing him one final hard time before I released him. “I’ll be there.”

Ever punctual, he was dressed and out the door while I was still getting feeling back in my body. The man trusted me to be alone in his house. That spoke volumes to how close we’d gotten. Fling or no fling, that kind of trust meant something.

I took a quick shower, my mind returning again and again to what had just happened.

My boundaries with him had all but disappeared. Despite my willingness to call this a fling and be happy for it, I didn’t really do casual or secret things. Not anymore. I certainly didn’t paint naked.

Who the heck was I now? Was I becoming the version of myself I wanted to see, or something else entirely?

One thing became startlingly clear: I’d gotten in too deep. Yet every time I saw Luca, we did something, took another step, and he drew me closer rather than keeping me far away.

I went willingly.

Rather than breaking down my setup, I kept painting, playing with the light, and imagining Luca still sat for me. Working on the bits I didn't actually need him for. At this point, I could probably finish the entire thing without him, a little truth I hadn't admitted to him and barely to myself.

Paintbrush clenched between my teeth, I took a step back from the canvas.

The portrait was good, better than I had hoped, and I crossed my fingers that I'd captured the essence of the man. It was not easy to do. A handsome subject did not always make for one that was easy to paint.

Luca had secret depths to him. Ones I wanted to convey. The strength and the discipline but also the kindness.

The piece wasn't quite where I wanted it for the contest and the judges, but I was getting close. That fact kept me in a good mood as I headed to the Rattlesnakes game with Mia, chatting about the progress I'd made.

Truthfully, I wasn't a huge hockey fan. Growing up in an all-female household, we hadn't watched a lot of sports, and I'd never really gotten into any myself. Still, I liked the Rattlesnakes games because of the atmosphere and the company. Knowing all the guys on the ice didn't hurt either, especially a certain captain who banged on the barrier to get my attention. Just once.

It was easy to pick his parents in the crowd. His father looked like he had a rod up his ass and wore a constant scowl, one that deepened when Luca greeted me. Yeah, Daddy did not approve of me. His mother looked sweet and submissive and not in the sexy kind of way.

Ignoring them was easy once the game started. Whistles blew, fights broke out, people were sent off.

"It's hard to follow the rules," I said to Joy, who was seated beside me. "It feels inconsistent to me."

"You'll pick them up. The main thing is, the guys need to score the most goals and try not to get sent off. Something a

couple of them aren't so good at. Tommy and Zach seem to spend a lot of time in time-outs."

"Like naughty children?" I ask as players flew past.

"Exactly." She laughed. "Although it's all part of a strategy. Your guy, for example, is rarely in the naughty corner. That's not his role."

"He's not my guy." I knew I sounded defensive, but he wasn't, even though I wished things were different.

"If you say so." She waved a dismissive hand my way. Yep, the way I looked at him probably told a different story.

Some guy from the Washington team, who wore an 11 on his jersey, shoved him with his stick right where his knee was injured. Son of a bitch had to have done that on purpose. I saw Luca wince, and a minute later, there was some kind of a brawl. Bates and Tommy were taking number 11 down, and Luca was hauled off, no doubt to check his shin.

My heart was in my mouth watching. It was thrilling and violent all at once. Now I really understood how Luca had gotten each and every scar on his body.

THE RATTLESNAKES WERE UP by one after the first period. We were in a box, so I hopped up and helped myself to a drink, bumping into Luca's mother by the bar.

"You must be Jaxon. Mia tells me you're painting my son's portrait." She gave me a small smile. "I'm sure you'll make him look very handsome."

"He's a great subject, and he's been very generous with his time. That man's schedule is insane."

"Exactly why he shouldn't be wasting time with you." The colonel had joined us. Clearly, he wasn't a fan of the arts.

"We're nearly done, and he'll be back to his old life," I said with a shrug.

"Ridiculous. It's bad enough he's wasting his life on hockey. Now this."

Wow, his father really didn't mince words, nor did he seem to have a lot of respect for Luca, which was crazy. Could he not see what a success he was. How much he'd achieved. Apart from captaining the Rattlesnakes, he was regularly called up to play in the all-stars.

Before I could leap to his defense, Coffee, the team's former captain, came to my rescue. "Your son is one of the best players in the league, sir. You should be very proud of him."

"I'm proud of all my boys," Mrs. Stone replied. Not exactly praise for Luca but better than her husband, who said nothing but made his way along the buffet.

Something about his father's attitude irked me the whole way through the second period. Luca played well, but it was clear his knee was giving him grief. The Washington team scored early, and it was only a goal from Zach in the final minutes and some amazing saves from Will in goal that had the Rattlesnakes winning by a goal.

By the time the game was over, I was exhausted, and all I'd done was drink beer and cheer.

When I met Luca outside the locker room, he looked like he'd been through the wringer, and he still had dinner with his father to go, poor guy.

So, I did not object when Luca dragged me around a corner and pressed me against a wall to kiss me. Nope. I did the opposite of objecting, practically climbing him like a monkey up a tree.

"You played so well," I managed to get out as he hauled me out of sight, his limp more than a little obvious.

"You think so?" He looked ridiculously pleased by the compliment.

I barely heard him speak from the way he buried his face in my hair.

Footsteps thudded closer and closer, Joshua's distinctive gait and Luca dropped me like a hot potato at the approach.

“I’m sure he went this way, Colonel,” I heard Joshua say.

Flustered, I adjusted my jacket, my hair, my eyeshadow. Trying my best to look put together and not myself.

“Shit,” Luca muttered, straightening himself up just in time for Joshua to appear with Colonel Stone beside him and the pretty brunette that was Hilary Stone trailing behind them.

I didn’t get much time to look, but I saw Luca’s similarities to his father, the same chiseled jaw. His mother’s sweet smile, which lit her face when she saw her son.

“There you are.” Joshua’s gaze darted between the two of us, narrowing in the process.

“Here we are,” I replied cheerfully before turning to Luca. “I’ll see you at the community center tomorrow, Stone. One more sitting and our prize-winning painting will be perfect!”

His father didn’t want him working with me, and he only knew the half of it. I made sure to be clear we were nearly done. My stomach riled, head filled with a strange and distant buzzing. Rather than stay and act like I had something to prove and nothing to hide, to myself and to Joshua, I tucked tail and retreated back the way they’d come.

I wasn’t dressed to meet the family. And from the last disdainful glance Luca’s father shot me, it confirmed a few things: Colonel Stone saw everything. Saw, recognized, and disapproved of me fraternizing with his son.

Still, giving in to curiosity, I stopped when I was out of sight and listened in. Luca told me before that his father was a cold hard-ass, and I was too nosy not to stay.

“What the fuck were you doing with the floozy, Luca? You think I can’t see the lipstick stains on your lips?” Colonel Stone scoffed. “I raised you to use more discernment.”

“Dad, firstly, Jaxon is Joshua’s family, so show some respect. Secondly, she’s not a floozy. Thirdly, she’s painting my portrait, nothing more. My lips are fucking chapped from the ice. So you can cool your heels.” Luca’s voice came out venomous and cold.

Truth, I thought, the dull thud of my heart growing louder than their voices. All true. And a slap.

“Don’t you dare take that tone with me, son,” Colonel Stone replied with equal chill.

“Excuse me.” Joshua made his escape in my other direction.

“I’m so sorry. I’m a grown man. Whatever tone I use is not only warranted but appropriate,” Luca continued. A pause, and then, “Hi, Mom. It’s good to see you.”

“What a wonderful game, baby,” Mrs. Stone replied. Tinny, strained. “Now, I’d like you to apologize to your father. Let’s not start this visit on the wrong foot.”

“I just feel—” Luca began.

“You’re a man and a goddamn NHL captain. You weren’t taught to feel. You were taught to think. Now think long and hard about how you want this to play out, Luca.”

I didn’t need to look to see Luca in my mind, holding it together, keeping a stranglehold on himself as he’d been taught to do. “I have nothing to apologize for,” he finally said.

I wanted to turn the corner and give old Colonel Stone a piece of my mind, a thorough tongue-lashing for raising his children to be machines who followed orders rather than feeling human beings. For talking to his adult son with such disrespect now.

Luca was right.

He didn’t owe his father, or me, an apology, I thought as I scurried away. I’d grab an Uber instead of joining my friends at the Schnapps distillery, where I knew they were all headed, and just go home.

“Are you certain there’s nothing going on with the blonde, Luca?” Colonel Stone pressed.

“Nothing.” Luca sounded absolutely positive.

Joshua sighed beside me, where he came to a stop but said nothing.

“Good.” Colonel Stone sounded smug. “Now we can have a decent, orderly visit.”

My chest tightened. I needed breathing space, thinking about everything on my way out the door to the parking lot.

“Later, Josh,” I called over my shoulder to my cousin’s husband. He was the closest thing I had to a brother in this world, and while I knew he cared for me, he was part of what stood between Luca and me. Cock-blocking bastard.

What had I been playing at?

Luca had never led me on. He’d never promised me more. I’d initiated our sexual relationship, and I’d come up with the terms, agreed to keep them even when he questioned me.

Did I think this fling would somehow last forever? Had I gone and read into it? *Sure*. All of it.

I fumbled in my pocket for a sucker.

Had I let my heart get in the way of my head? *Absolutely*. That was on me, not Luca. Just because he’d been the best not-boyfriend I’d ever had, even if it was fake, didn’t mean that was anything to blame him for.

He hadn’t wanted to lie to anyone because he hadn’t wanted to start this in the first place.

I’d started it, and I needed to end it because, apparently, I wanted so much more than Luca Stone could give me, and the longer this stretched on, the worse I was going to get hurt.

LUCA

“There’s something going on with you. Something is off,” I blurted out.

Not like I intended to actually say it to her face, and yet there we were, with two weeks until the deadline for the art contest, and Jaxon had her nose in the air again.

I rubbed at a small ache in my chest, the same one I’d carried since the run-in with my father.

Jaxon shook her head, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear but not looking at me. “I swear to all that is holy, Luca, if you ask me if I’m about to get my period, then I’m going to come over there and shove the bristle end of my paintbrush down your damn pee hole.”

I blinked at her. The woman never cursed and never threatened, and somehow her last sentence had both. “I was not going to ask about your period. I want to know if you’re okay.” I didn’t dare joke with her, recognizing the wall she’d slammed down between us.

“I’m fine.” She flashed me a smile with only a hint of acid at the edges. “Absolutely fine. I’m worried about getting this painting to be perfect. That’s all.”

“You’re not fine,” I muttered. I knew Jaxon, and I knew better than to believe anything she told me today.

She seemed distant. And when I pushed her about it today, she wasn’t forthcoming, which wasn’t like her at all. Normally she said too much instead of too little.

Something changed in the past couple of days. I shifted on my stool, uncomfortable and fighting the urge to cover myself. Which I hadn't felt in quite some time.

"If I did something, then please tell me," I said, loud enough to try to get her to look at me. "Otherwise, I have no idea how to fix this."

"Fix what? You did nothing," she replied. Each syllable weighed a thousand pounds. "So, nothing is wrong. It's stress."

Usually, I was the one off in my head, observing everything and keeping my thoughts to myself. Now our roles have reversed.

She withdrew in a way that felt like she'd taken a page out of my book.

There has to be more going on than she's letting me know. And although talking about it felt strange and foreign and made me itchy right between the shoulder blades, I pushed on.

"You'd let me know, wouldn't you?" I asked.

Shit, I hoped my parents hadn't said anything to upset Jaxon when they were in town visiting. My father had surely given me an earful when he heard about my nude modeling for the painter, but I liked to think he'd seen things from my perspective before he left.

Seen, heard, he'd made no mention of coming over to my side about any of it, but at least we hadn't resorted to an argument. Mom, as usual, stood between us like she was some kind of human shield to keep us from attacking. Or to bring us both back to neutral.

The peacemaker. The position she'd played her entire life.

I clenched my hands into fists. If Dad said something to make Jaxon uncomfortable, then we were going to have to have *another* conversation. And Dad was not big on talking. He preferred action.

"Maybe I'd let you know, or maybe it would be something to work through myself," Jaxon replied easily. She sounded

too noncommittal for my liking. “I’m worried about meeting the deadline, Luca.”

“You can do it.” Even though I had my doubts as well.

She wasn’t so good at keeping to deadlines most of the time. In fact, whenever she had someplace to be, people told her an earlier time to try to get Jaxon there by the right time.

She’d said she was in a good place with the painting, but when I snagged a look at it today, it seemed undone. Half focused.

“I appreciate your faith in me.” She stopped for a moment, flicked her eyes over at me. “And your concern.”

“Of course I’m concerned.” We were sleeping together, after all. What kind of asshole would I be if I didn’t notice a change in her demeanor?

I shifted again to scratch my knee while Jaxon went to town on the painting. I had no idea why she still needed me to sit for her since she had the basic outline and sketch done and had moved on to the meat of the piece. She told me once it was to make sure she got the shadows in the right place.

I had no damn clue.

After way too long a space filled with silence, I coughed to clear my throat. Wanting to see if she’d take the small cue and launch into one of her usual stories.

I’d heard about everything at this point.

A trip to the beach with her grandmother when she was young.

The time she accidentally peed her pants in a haunted house as a teenager.

Her boyfriends. *I hated those stories.* Her girlfriends. *Those intrigued me.*

There were no stories for the rest of the time, and when my alarm went off on my phone, and I stood to get dressed, Jaxon still said nothing.

“Hey,” I said out loud. “How about we go to dinner? Since our session ended. I could use a bite to eat, and I swear I heard your stomach rumbling from across the room.”

I still hesitated to touch her.

Jaxon turned slowly to stare at me, and there was nothing behind her eyes. None of her usual joy, no excitement. Only wooden necessity.

“Joshua wouldn’t like it,” she replied.

My stomach immediately filled with heat. What did Joshua have to—

Understanding dawned on me. *Fuck.*

It wasn’t anything new, her knowing about Josh, but what *had* changed were her feelings. And right now, they were hurt.

“Jax, you said you were fine with casual.” I had to touch her now. Had to make her understand how off-kilter it felt to have her bothered to have her pissed. At me, I saw now. For following the rules. “In fact, it was your idea.”

She turned away before I had a chance to take her by the shoulders and hold her. The way every part of me demanded to hold her.

Instead, I had to back off and give her the space she clearly wanted.

“I know it was my idea,” she snapped out. Then sighed. “Yeah, I know. I hate being reminded of it, but you’re right.”

I watched her stiffen, watched her straighten her spine.

“Maybe it was a bad one.”

I almost missed her whispered statement; she said it so low under her breath. It was a bad idea. A terrible idea because every part of me chose to be with her. Not just my dick but my heart as well.

Jaxon was my complete opposite in every way except the ones that mattered the most, and my life wouldn’t be complete without her by my side. But she had to choose it too. I wasn’t

going to try to push her into something when she clearly had second thoughts about it. About me.

“Let’s just paint and no more sex,” I said it hoping against hope she’d reconsider.

She had to know what she wanted, and I crossed mental fingers it was me. That she’d tell me to screw it, to screw everyone else, and to see where this went.

Except Jaxon said none of those things.

She sighed again.

“You’re right again. But I won’t need you to sit for me anymore.” The ax came down.

I stared at her back until it became clear she wasn’t going to say anything else, and finally nodded. “Okay, well, then the line is drawn. I won’t cross it,” I replied.

And I fucking hated that she’d cut me off. But I hated her in pain even more. Jaxon hurting was one of my worst nightmares come true.

“I promise,” I said, more to fill the space than anything else.

Because the words I really wanted to say were simple and clear: I love you.

I wanted to tell her, and I caught myself saying them before I swallowed them down. It wasn’t the time or the place or those things. Not when it would only complicate the situation and put her in an uncomfortable position.

It wasn’t fair to do to her.

“You don’t need to make promises, Luca.” Her voice sounded tired but also sharp. Was she still angry at me? “I know you’ll do what you say you’re going to do. You’re a man of your word, and we never said we’d go farther than what we did.” Her cheeks rounded as she held in a breath. “It’s fine.”

I’d never hated the word more than I did right now, watching her pack up her stuff in a slow, methodical manner. *Fine.*

There was clearly more going on, and more she wanted to say. More that both of us wanted to say, and neither one was willing to bend on the subject. I'd compromised as much as I was able to compromise, even when I knew being around her and not touching her would be torture.

To pull back from the intimacy we'd shared...it would be hard, but for the best.

There wasn't much to say afterward. I watched her pack, drawing my pants over my hips and tying the sweatpants while she finished up. We kept the conversation light about Mia and Josh's kids and how they were doing in school before we walked out of the community center and into the parking lot.

"You've got a lot to do, so I'll see you later," Jaxon said. She shot me a jaunty salute before heading to her borrowed car.

She missed my grimace entirely.

"Have a good rest of your day," I called after her.

She turned and walked backward the rest of the way. "You know I will." Her smile said otherwise. Yet again, I refused to bicker with her.

Bickering would lead to other things. It would be kindling in the fire I knew was always a split second from exploding between us.

My heart went with her.

"Fuck." I ran a hand through my hair and tugged on my ears, if only to try to get back into my body.

Time to draw on that old military background yet again. I'd given my word, and because Jaxon trusted me to keep it, I'd go out of my way to prove to her I'd toe the line.

I HAD the honor of wearing a big C on my hockey jersey. The one and only captain. Hockey wasn't like other sports because

on the ice, there was only one of me, and I didn't have to share the honor with anyone else. I was not the fastest skater.

That honor belonged to Colton.

Nor was I the best scorer or the biggest brute. There were several others with more skill than me out there.

I'd been contracted to take over from Angus "Coffee" Bean for one reason only: my skills. Pure, raw leadership skills.

I spoke to game officials, and I stood up for my guys when they made mistakes. I had the coach's ear. I used my confidence to lead the team closer to the Cup.

I sat for a long moment and watched the rest of the guys get ready in our locker room. I listened to them razz each other, make jokes, talk about their lives.

It was up to me to be the most knowledgeable about the game and the nuances of how we'd play. I understood the strengths and weaknesses of each man on my team.

Today we were going up against the Seattle team. We'd have to play a fast-changing game to keep ahead of them. My ability to adjust the game on the fly and play to my guys' strengths helped me get where I was.

Not being fuzzy-brained and twitterpated about some lady.

Especially not midseason.

Colton was dealing with his own stuff at home, Will had a new baby, and we were all doing the best we could given, well, life. I had none of their excuses. I'd gotten into a situation with Jaxon with my eyes open and made my choices.

The same way I made my choices on the ice with virtually no thought when I needed to change the game plan.

The boys needed me; they needed me to lead by example and to find the game within the game.

Fast-paced, full of finesse. The opposite team wasn't one we could just grind out.

Once we were all ready, I led the way out of the locker room with Coach Darren and Assistant Coach Andrew a few paces behind me. I'd done everything in my power to earn the respect of my team. Maybe not their admiration, but I knew if I made a judgment call, they were behind me in that. Just like they knew I stood with them at all times. I knew my guys, I thought again, the cheering of the crowd growing louder with each step we took toward the ice.

I worked hard, I studied harder. I knew my history and where I wanted the Snakes to go in the future. The first to arrive at practice and the last to leave.

I implemented the game plan my coaches came up with.

And against Seattle, I drowned. If the rink had melted and I'd been skating in the water, I couldn't have felt more underwater.

There were several bad calls I'd missed, to the point where Andrew had to tap me on the shoulder and remind me to speak to the ref. To let me know why it was a bad call.

Rico kept getting body slammed by one of the guys on the other team, and I was too focused on Jaxon to right the ship. To question the bullying tactics.

I stepped in with the message too late.

What the hell was I doing?

Of course, I thought, exhausted as the final buzzer sounded. This was why I avoided women during the season. They fucked you up. And my mistakes rippled through the rest of the team in an unforgivable manner.

"It's okay," Rico assured me for the thousandth time.

We managed to pull a victory out of our ass, and some of the guys were going out with their families to celebrate.

I wanted to be alone.

"It's not okay." I gestured toward the shoulder the doc was currently checking out. "You're hurt."

“It’s part of the game. You’re hurt too.” I was, of course. That damn knee just wouldn’t fucking heal.

He sounded as tired as I felt, and rightly so. He’d been bullied out there, and rather than stepping in, I’d let myself be distracted. I should be the one with the injury, not Rico.

“We all have days,” he insisted.

I shook my head, standing a step back while our team doc finished checking Rico and gave him the call clear.

They might have days, but I wasn’t allowed to. Even if I were, my background wouldn’t let me slip an inch. I’d been trained since birth to be the best I could be, and any slippage was a sign of weakness. Of failure.

Another, softer-spoken part of me tried to give myself a little grace on that point and conceded that I was only human. Which I might have been able to do for myself if the lapse in focus hadn’t resulted in some bad calls and body-slamming.

“How about you let me buy you a beer?” I asked Rico. “To make it up to you.”

He glanced up at me through the fall of his black hair and groaned. “Dude, I’m not going out. I’m heading home, going to have my woman wrap her arms around me and kiss me like a goddamn baby and call it a day. I might call it two days if no one cares.”

I helped Rico to his feet, noticing the way he grimaced. “You take some time.”

As usual, the security guys bobbed their heads at me on my way out of the barn, and the sun had already skipped behind the horizon.

The last to leave was right.

I’d stayed longer than usual because where did I have to be? It might have been to punish myself. Or it might have been hypervigilance to make sure I missed nothing else this time.

I’d toe the line, I thought as I made my way to my car because I had to. Because it was the best choice for everyone involved, and I could not afford more fuckups.

Not when it was more than my safety to think about.

When I got home to my silent house, it looked empty. It was as if Jaxon had never been here, except for a small splash of red paint on my wooden floor. I'd planned to clean it up, but instead, I stood staring at it. It was all I had left of her, and it was nowhere near enough.

JAXON

Mia twirled her spoon around in her coffee, and I barely noticed the way she stared at me. “So.” She pursed her lips. “You broke Luca?”

I glanced up at the mention of his name, which was exactly the reaction she’d wanted to get out of me. “What? No,” I told her. “I did nothing.”

“He was a hot mess at last night’s game. Missed a bunch of calls and seemed to make up for it by heckling the refs until everyone was red in the face.” Mia stopped circling her spoon for a moment, and silence reigned. “It wasn’t his finest hour.”

Guilt had me wanting to apologize immediately for something I hadn’t done. All Luca and I went over was the same ground where we both agreed on a direction for us. Nothing else. It didn’t matter that my stomach hurt constantly, and I barely wanted to eat. It didn’t matter that I looked at his painting, and the ache increased.

“It wasn’t me, okay?” I told Mia.

“Well—” she said again.

I groaned. “I really hate it when you start your sentences like that.”

“*Well,*” she repeated, “you’re not going to be able to lie to me. Please, Jax. With all the eye-fucking going back and forth between you two, there was no way you didn’t do the real thing.”

I stared her down for a moment to see how much of this was actual knowledge and how much was a bluff. But Mia always seemed to know things without having to be told, and she was serious this time.

Finally, I broke down. “Okay, you got me. It was a fling. A fun, silly fling where we both enjoyed each other until the end. But I didn’t break him.” I held out a warning finger to keep her from saying anything while I chugged half of my lukewarm coffee.

Ugh. Lukewarm. Luke. *Luca*.

Would everything continue to remind me of him for the rest of my life?

When I had nothing else to say and nothing to defend myself because, seriously, it was only a fling, and we both agreed on it no matter how shitty it felt, Mia spoke again.

“You and I are not built for flings.” She didn’t say it to be accusatory. She said it in the matter-of-fact way she had that forced me to confront my need to react. “It’s a simple fact, and it’s true. We might have had a few back in the day when we were young and too stupid to know any better. Now? We know better. You deluded yourself into thinking you’d be okay settling for less than you want.”

Pure emotional reaction instead of logic. Or taking into account how I really felt underneath the reaction.

Hurt.

Because she was one hundred percent right.

“Okay, well, maybe we aren’t meant for flings,” I said, “but that doesn’t mean we’re meant to be like penguins and mate for life.”

I narrowly resisted the urge to look down at my empty palm, where I kind of wished Luca would drop a pebble to declare his intentions like an adorable penguin. Except he already had declared them, and we both agreed stepping away from each other was the right thing to do.

The right thing.

If it was so right, then why did thinking about it make me nauseated?

“You have a strange look on your face,” Mia continued.

“This wasn’t how I thought coffee would go this morning,” I rerouted.

It was just the two of us in her large, lovely house. Joshua had gone off to the stadium for the day to check on the team, and the kids were at their posh private school.

It left my cousin and me free to talk about anything and everything we wanted to. If I wanted to talk about sex or jizz or anything intimate, the kind of stuff I always liked to talk to her about, we had privacy.

Except it wasn’t Luca’s parts I wanted to talk about.

It was his soul and his heart and the wonderful sensitivity he kept a secret from everyone else.

“Oh, hey. Did you know anything about Josh warning the guys off?” I asked Mia. She tilted her head to the side, confused, and I continued with, “Apparently, he told every guy on the team to stay the heck away from me and to keep their hands off.”

Twin spots of color blossomed on Mia’s cheeks, a sure sign she was pissed off.

So...*that’s a no.*

“Are you sure?” she bit out.

I nodded. “Luca told me. He wouldn’t lie about something so huge, especially since it seemed to really mess him up to be with me. He respects Josh a lot.”

“Is that part of the problem?” Mia surged her feet, and although I knew her glare was not for me, it was still a thing of beauty to behold and her best intimidation tool. “Is that why the two of you aren’t together right now?”

“I think it might be part of the problem.” I drop my gaze to my empty mug. “Luca also doesn’t want a girlfriend, and I’m

not sure I'm ready after everything I've been through. With Cat, especially with Preston. I'm not healed enough."

"If you keep thinking that way, then you're never going to be ready because you're always going to find some fault in yourself. Jax." Mia reached over to grab my hands and hold me in place because she knew me.

I wanted to move.

I wanted to pace the space and maybe dance it out. Do a few jumping jacks and act like a complete moron until this crazy energy was out of my body and anywhere else.

"Tell me what happened," she pressed. "I need to know." Her imploring gaze speared through me, and I realized just how much my cousin and I had grown apart since those days in Gram's trailer.

We used to stay up late and tell each other everything. Every wish and hope and secret desire, every fear and pain and bit of confusion.

Now the balance between us skewed in a new direction, and I hated it, as much to blame for the change as Mia. We'd gone on with our lives. The love was still there. It would always be there.

I had to work on the trust. "I mean—" I shrugged.

"What?"

"I'm not the source. I'm hearing it like a game of telephone, but Luca basically said that Joshua talked to all the guys and said they weren't allowed to come near me romantically."

"Not...no, not Joshua. What happened with your ex," she clarified softly. "What did the jackass say to mess you up?"

I forced a grin out. "Can we talk about my ex-girlfriend instead? I'd much rather focus on her than him."

She refused to answer, only stare me down harshly without breaking her hold as she took her seat again. There was nothing but compassion in her eyes. Only an openness for me to get my story out there in a safe space.

“I mean, it’s not like I’m the only woman in the world to get involved with a toxic guy,” I started. “There are so many people out there who have it worse than me.”

“That doesn’t make what you went through any less valid,” Mia reasoned.

“I know it doesn’t, but it feels wrong to complain about it.” It felt wrong that I was still damaged after all these years.

“Things started slowly. I’d tell him how crazy and out of control it made me when he flirted with someone else right in front of me. He’d wait until we were in a crowded room and do exactly that. Then look at me.” I bit my lip, remembering the first time he’d done so. Before everything started to go downhill.

“You mean he flirted on purpose?” Mia questioned. Her eyes were concerned, and her lips a thin line.

“Yeah. He always waited until we were in a position where I’d come off looking like the bad guy. You know? At home, it was crumbs. One day he’d be kind. The next day awful. Until days were mostly bad, and I was left feeling like I’d be nothing without him. I had to get out, Mia. I had to find myself again, and it took me a long time to do that.”

I was still trying to do that, I thought. Even my decent relationship with Cat following the bad one didn’t help me entirely figure things out. Which was why I’d come to Arizona. For this fresh start.

To figure out what I wanted and start trying for it.

“So yeah, mostly it was emotional, and I told myself I could handle it. Until he started making fun of my art.” I scowled. “Art is subjective. How the heck do you make fun of it? How do you call it trash? Just like beauty is subjective, but he called me ugly.”

I swiped at my burning eyes and realized I was crying.

“You know I started smoking again because I was so stressed out?” I told Mia. “I quit for about two years until Preston. Cat tried really hard to get me to stop, and I just couldn’t.”

And right now, I wanted a cigarette again. I pulled out another lollipop, knowing damn well it wasn't enough right now.

"He called me ugly, Mia," I repeated in a whisper.

How do you come back from something like that? How do you ever trust another person again when you've been thrown down such a deep black hole?

"Hey, you look at me right now." Mia grabbed my face and pinched my chin between her thumb and forefinger. "You are not ugly. Okay? You are gorgeous inside and out, and anyone who says such a horrible thing is the ugly one. And thank you for telling me."

I let out a breath, and my chest constricted. "It was tough. I wasn't sure I'd be able to get it all out."

"I'm sure there's more, but I'm not going to force you to say anything else."

Much more. Too many layers of baggage for me to unload in a single sitting, but I did feel lighter.

Especially when Mia and I were crying it out together.

I wasn't alone.

"Please, honey. If you listen to me about nothing else, then hear me right now. Are you listening? Jackie Bean?"

She sounded so much like Gram I wanted to cry, and the old nickname was nothing but a relic from a time gone by. "I am," I whispered.

"Please don't punish Luca for your past. For what you've gone through. He's not the same kind of man, and even if he was, you'd know enough now to run the opposite direction. You have your boundaries." A smile tugged her lips. "You know what you want, and you know who you are. You stand up for yourself, which is not something you were able to do before. You changed your mind. You want more. There is *nothing* wrong with that."

"I know." I was stronger now, and it had taken me a long time to find out the type of person I really was and where I

wanted to be in my life.

Step one had been selling the trailer, even though it was my last tie to my past.

Step two had been moving here. I got back on my feet thanks to Mia and this community she'd found. They rallied around me.

Step three had definitely been getting involved with Luca, and I knew I couldn't be mad at him anymore. Not when he was only playing by the rules I'd outlined for this thing between us. It wasn't fair for me to expect him to pivot when he had no idea I wanted things to change.

Was that what I'd been doing to him, though? Have I been punishing him for my past? Or have I been punishing *myself* more?

Mia and I finished up our coffee, and I went back to my little cabana pool house and, in the privacy of my room, I did something I didn't think I ever would.

I called my ex.

Not Preston. I wasn't ready to face him again, even if it was for the good of my healing. Maybe I'd never be able to face him again, and I had to be okay with that, too, as long as I forgave myself. Working on it.

I called Cat.

She answered on the third ring and sounded like I'd just gotten her out of bed. "Is this an emergency?" her sultry smoker's voice rasped over me, and although I was nervous about talking to her, I smiled.

"Hey, sugar plum," I cooed out.

"You only called me that when you knew I was going to yell at you for leaving your dirty dishes in the sink for a week." The sound of rustling came through the cell clearly.

"What are you still doing in bed?"

Cat groaned before replying, "Late night at an exhibit opening in Manhattan. Some guy who makes statues out of

trash people dump out on the street. It was pretty interesting, and I met cool people.”

“Sounds like a lot of fun. Reclaimed art is really fascinating. Explain why you’re still in bed after noon.”

“I’m allowed to do what I want as a grown-ass woman with an active social life,” Cat replied. “What I’m confused about is why you’re calling. Is something happening, Jaxon?”

What did I even say? That I wanted to call and ask my ex if I’d been shitty to her? If I’d punished her because of what I went through? None of those were sunny bright topics, and certainly not when they came out of the blue.

“Maybe I should call later,” I said, chewing on the inside of my cheek.

“Ah, that kind of conversation.” The rustling grew louder. “Let me get up and make some instant coffee, and then I’ll feel more prepared for this.”

She’d always been so good at meeting me where I was. “Yuck. You and your instant coffee. I have no idea how you drink that mud water,” I said with a shudder.

Cat chuckled. “Because it’s quick and easy, and it gets the job done without me having to pay an arm and a leg for it. Give me a couple minutes.”

We chatted about some inconsequential things until she had her coffee in hand, or so she assured me, and in my head, I pictured Cat on her balcony. Overlooking the street.

I’d called it the worst view in New York plenty of times.

“Okay, I’m settled,” Cat said at last. “What’s the news?”

“I wanted to ask you a question, but it’s not the easiest thing in the world for me to talk about.” Better to rip it off quickly and get it over with. “During our relationship...”

I trailed off, and Cat laughed again, the sound low and comforting. “Yes?”

“Did you ever feel like I was punishing you because of what I went through before we started dating?” The words

came out in a tumble of sound, and I sucked in a breath, prepared to launch into a much better description of what it was I wanted to know.

Luckily for me, Cat understood. She'd always seemed to understand. "I think in any relationship, there is a certain amount of relating to the other person in terms of the past because of what we went through or what we did not. For you, there were times when you expected me to react the same way Preston did, and when I didn't, you saw it as something almost wrong. You didn't trust it."

I winced at the cold truth in her voice, even delivered in her honeyed tones. "Crap."

"It's okay, Jaxon. We learn, and we grow, and I'd say we both did a fair amount of those things during our time together. But there was a reason why we mutually decided to split." She paused to take a sip of her instant grossness. "There were feelings on my end I thought would develop the more time we spent together, and they never did."

Lightning and butterflies. I remembered her talking to me about it, and although I'd agreed with her, as those feelings had never been present for me despite how much I loved her, but I'd gotten defensive.

"I hate to think you ever suffered because of what someone else did to me."

Cat took her time before formulating an answer. I'd always loved that about her. "Look, honey, we weren't meant to be together. Always better as friends. Remember? We both agreed on it. That's why we're still able to talk without any animosity toward each other."

Another agreement. I'd wanted to feel it too. To blame Cat because we weren't a match for a relationship. Except she was right, and I knew it.

"There were times you blew off the handle, and I recognized it wasn't something that happened in the present. Sure," she continued. "Except I never took it personally. You were the one who beat yourself up afterward. You were always

beating yourself up for things you felt or didn't feel. For things you thought I felt or did not. It was a cycle that you were working on, but I couldn't be a part of your journey. Not there."

I grumbled under my breath. "Why do you have to be so damn wise all the time?"

"It comes with age," she insisted.

"You're only thirty-five! It's not like you're that much older than me."

"Wiser, then. Where is all this coming from?" she asked.

I wondered at the wisdom, such as it was, of telling her about Luca and decided to keep things as bland as possible.

"I'm considering getting back out there," I replied.

"Good for you."

"Just like that? Good for me?"

"Why would I not say it?" Sarcasm dripped in her voice. "We each deserve to find someone who makes our soul sing. Do you think I'd hold it against you that you didn't feel it with me?"

Right again.

Our conversation took a turn into lighter territory afterward, and when I finally hung up fifteen minutes later, I felt lighter too. Not exactly better about myself, but on a more even keel.

Talking to Cat always helped me. She was the type of old soul who was able to sit and listen without interjecting or making things about herself. Which, sometimes, a person really needed.

She also never pulled her punches with me.

She told me what she thought I needed to hear, not what I wanted to hear. Now it was time for me to do the same for myself. To do what I needed to do in terms of handling myself.

Taking a hard look at the way I'd been acting.

Thinking about why I thought I was right.

And what I really desired in terms of a future, whether it included Luca.

Or not.

LUCA

I always hated playing in Vegas.

There was something about the crowds that set me on edge more so than any other barn. I figured the Golden Knight fans were just a little more intense than in other places. Well, not as intense as the playoffs, obviously, but during the regular rounds, there was just something in the air in this place.

It must be the Vegas vibe and the out-of-towners pumped to be on vacation. The locals met them where they were at, intensity-wise.

I recognized the thrum of feet and the low tone of a thousand voices, even from the locker room.

Damn noise gave me a headache.

And I hated playing when my parents were present and accounted for. Apparently, my dad had some reunion with his military buddies, so he was in town as well. I'd already seen them a few weeks ago, and it didn't feel like a repeat, especially when I was already feeling low.

Lucky me. Mom and Dad were at *this* game as well. And right now, I hated my life; my attitude on the ice wasn't exactly one to be proud of.

Rather than fly off the handle and go hot-headed like some of the other guys, I went in the complete opposite direction.

When I played back in high school, my local team nicknamed me Iceman because I stayed cool and ruthless.

I wanted the nickname to remain dead and buried in Maine, where I left it behind because it made me think of my father. Made me feel like I was just like him. The truth of the matter? I was the captain of the Rattlesnakes. It was my job to be that cool and collected guy.

Right now?

My stomach was in knots, my thoughts a tangle, and my future a dark and confusing shamble.

My job, I thought on our way up to the rink, to keep it all together when I wanted to lash out and give into every bit of anger and frustration bubbling together inside of me. Like a hot, rage-filled bear ready to tear through anyone who got in his way.

I was like a toddler, having a tantrum because my favorite toy had been taken away, and that toy was Jaxon. Not that I considered her as such. She was...important to me. So much more than I'd wanted her to be or anticipated from the start.

Damn it. I even missed her clumsiness. The way she accidentally spilled things on me.

She'd gotten under my skin, way under, in a way I knew I'd never be able to shrug her loose again.

I missed her desperately bad, and I didn't know how to process that. Ever since I'd cried myself to sleep through my first month of military school, I'd trained myself never to get attached to anyone enough to miss them. Ever.

It was how I stayed safe.

How I made sure to keep my focus on what I'd considered the important things. Work, my career, my guys. Their happiness mattered more than my own.

Somehow I'd let my fucking guard down, and Jaxon had snuck in. Not only snuck in but bulldozed her way into my heart and claimed it for her own.

How did I cope with it?

“Hey, Captain, wait up.”

Two beefy bodies moved on either side of me and trapped me between them.

The rest of the team went on without us as Will and Colton kept me cornered and behind, unable to move.

“The game is about to start,” I snarled at them.

And hastily shoved any hint of ire away. Coach Darren had torn me a new asshole after our last game, and I’d deserved every ounce of the verbal beat down. He’d given me a warning today that I needed to step the fuck up, and I knew he was right. I just didn’t know exactly how to do it.

Colton shared a look with his bestie. “We know that, dude, we know. But you’ve got to spare a minute for us.”

“You need to look cool, Luca. Even if it is an act. The Vegas guys will have watched the tapes and know you have a bug up your ass right now. Don’t let them use it against you.” Will spoke calmly. “They’ll also be gunning for that knee because they’re jerks, so be alert.”

He was also right.

This was the kind of talk I usually gave, not received.

“Sure,” I agreed lightly.

“And remember, just because your girl dumped you, there’s no reason to be a dick,” Will continued.

My gaze jumped down to the gold wedding band on the ring finger of his left hand. His girl had dumped him once, I tried to remind myself. He got his happy ending.

Bitterness wasn’t a good look for me, but I choked on it regardless.

“My girl didn’t dump me.” Technically she wasn’t my girl to begin with, and dump was a little harsh.

“Please. You were screwing Jaxon, and now you’re not. Your ass got dumped, Colton declared, smug bastard. “I guess she finally came to her senses about you. Huh?”

Will’s hand on my chest stopped me from making any move forward. Brought me back to myself.

“Don’t talk about Jaxon.” My voice dropped a menacing growl. “I don’t want to hear her name coming out of anyone’s mouth.”

“It’s great you’re raring to go but save it for the ice,” Will reminded me. “And calm down. One way or another, you’re going to have to get your head clear, or else. You’ll get hurt or get one of us hurt if you don’t go out there with focus. And, of course, you could just apologize and do some groveling and get her back.”

Too easily, my tentative control slipped from my grasp. I knew better than to let it get so far out of control, just like I knew better than to give in to my emotions.

Those same pesky emotions were gnawing at me, begging me to get in touch with Jaxon and convince her that there was a chance for us. No matter what anyone else said or what we’d agreed on at the start of this tithing.

I refused to listen. This was a prime example of why I didn’t date. *This* was why I’d avoided relationships because when they went to shit, so did a man’s game.

“We know.” Colton’s eyes softened. “We’ve all been there. It sucks, but you got to do your job, buddy. We’re all behind you one hundred percent, but facts are facts.”

I blew out a breath. “I’ve dedicated my entire life to hockey. I can’t screw that up too.”

Will shook his head and said, “You haven’t screwed up anything. Not yet. If you keep going on the path you’ve set for yourself, too damn rigid, then you might. You can’t live your whole damn life as a coiled spring.”

They took a step back to give me breathing room, and the three of us hustled after the other players. By the time we skated out onto clean ice, with a full arena of fans and noise, I felt more settled.

The announcers built suspense with the crowd by going through the lineup, our stats, our positions, our highs and lows. What kind of game could be expected today.

I let the usual rush of adrenaline and blood pumping through my veins bring me into the present moment.

Still, my game was off. Not as much as before, but enough that it almost cost us a victory. I wasn't the screaming red-faced asshole I'd been last time, but today I just couldn't find my rhythm. No matter what I did. My passing was off, and I couldn't read the plays like I usually did, which ended up with me taking myself out of the game.

I sucked, and everyone knew it.

Better to put one of the other guys on the ice to play the position I'd vacated. Someone fresh who had a better chance of being observant than I did.

I'd never let a woman affect me on the ice before Jaxon. Then again, I'd never been with a woman like her. I'd never been with one who mattered to me, either. This has been more than just sex.

I heard her voice in my head, asking me what kind of man I wanted to be.

The kind who deserved her.

We still won by a goal, but that was because my team was made up of amazing players, and they carried the bulk of the victory. I hated that. The captain was supposed to lead a team, not burden it.

The energy in the locker room was a bit off when we made our way back

I unlaced my skates and kicked them to the side, pushing off the bench to head to the shower. Rico slapped me on the back on my way past. I didn't miss the way his nostrils flared at my stench, a mixture of sweat, nerves, and stress.

"Hey, a win is a win, Luca. Never forget. We've had a solid plan so far."

"Approaching playoffs, we need to be better than average. We have a chance at winning this year." And every game we won got us closer to the Cup. Closer than we've been before because we'd started coming together as a unit.

Everyone had off games. Except me. I was going to get my shit in order if it killed me.

I clapped my hand over his, squeezing once in agreement, and headed off to soak my sins away. I let the water sluice down my body and washed the grime and the anger I felt down the drain.

Even knowing better than to sleep with Jaxon and get involved on any level, I'd done it. Getting to the top of my game with a tried-and-true system meant I was more than capable of formulating a plan and sticking to it.

And yet I'd done something out of character for me.

Why?

There was no reason this particular woman, one I had nothing in common with to the naked eye, should have been the one I let screw me up, and yet here we were. She'd gotten under my skin and into my heart.

I rubbed a hand over the area, returning to the image of her smiling face in my memories again and again.

Her laugh, her scent. Her strange way of being. She floated around like a butterfly, colorful and unhindered. The way I'd always wanted to be and the way I might have been once if military school hadn't turned my world into black and white.

Not even shades of gray.

Growling, I grabbed the shampoo and scrubbed it into my scalp.

I'd been a fool to think I was in control. She'd owned me from the first day I saw her sucking one of her damn lollipops. I'd just been too smug to realize it.

Ego. A big head. Things I'd fought long and hard against because they reminded me of my father.

After I towel-dried, I slipped into a suit, dragging the tie up to the base of my neck. No wrinkles and tight enough to cut off my air.

My parents made a reservation at one of the top Vegas restaurants, a place with multiple Michelin stars, so I had to suit up. Not even a buffet where I'd be able to stand up and walk away from the colonel when he started the lecturing, hard.

And the lecture would come.

No matter what I did or did not do, he'd find fault.

Just like, no matter how old I got, the colonel believed he was entitled not only to voice an opinion on my life but to force me to follow his path.

I'd be footing the bill for the fucking meal, but I long since made peace with that aspect of our relationship.

"You coming out, man?" one of the rookies asked me. "Or are you going to hide in there all night?"

"Nah, my folks are in town, which is never a thrill," I forced myself to joke back. "I might stay here until next week."

"You're welcome to come out with us. There are some great places here. Cheap booze, winning slots..." the rookie continued.

I didn't want to go out and get trashed with the young single players any more than I wanted to dine with my folks. I wanted to go get Jaxon and haul her to bed or take her to one of those Cirque du Soleil shows and watch her eyes get big.

Neither of those was an option.

Instead, I gathered the remaining shards of my failed game face and headed out to face my parents. Each moment in the backseat of the car, the driving service cutting through the city traffic, I used to prepare myself.

To see them.

For whatever they'd say.

LUCA

They were waiting for me outside the restaurant in their finery, and Colonel Stone scowled when I got out of the car. They were always fifteen minutes early wherever they went. And I was ten minutes early, which meant five minutes late to them.

My mind wandered to Jaxon. Her lack of punctuality would kill my dad.

No wonder he'd taken an instant dislike to her. Everything about her and her way of life was the complete opposite of him. The arts, he had no time for that. He had this very clear vision of what kind of America he fought for, and it wasn't one where people did anything other than be serious. All the damn time.

The look on his face this evening said everything.

And I took a special kind of delight in the fact that the maître d would not sit us at our table early. We'd have to wait for our allotted time like the rest of the patrons.

The place buzzed.

Several people and a few young teens stopped me for an autograph while I waited beside my folks. Smiling, I obliged them by signing their shirts and posing for a photograph. It wasn't my favorite part of the job, but it was essential.

"I don't know why they want your signature so damn bad," Colonel Stone grumbled. He adjusted his tie into a straighter line. "It's not like you're a real hero or anything."

“Wow, I haven’t even had a chance to ask how you’re doing, and you’re already starting in on me.” I couldn’t keep the comment to myself the way I ordinarily would have. I shook my head before leaning in to kiss my mother’s cheek. As always, she smelled like roses and baby powder. “Mom, you look lovely as always,” I told her.

She patted my cheek. “Thanks, baby.”

That was what I’d always been to her. I wondered if she’d still be calling me by the same name when I was in my sixties.

“Do not baby that boy,” my father replied gruffly, and I just winked at her.

I loved my mother, which was why I made it a point to agree to this dinner. My refusing to come would have made the colonel mad, and his anger, in turn, trickled out to the person closest to him.

He wasn’t a violent man, at least not with her, but when he got riled up, his rants went for way too long and bordered on verbal abuse. I was taking one for the team. So to speak.

The maître d signaled for us to follow him, and I turned back to my folks to make sure they’d seen the gesture.

“You played like a pussy today,” Colonel took great pains to tell me.

His tone drew the attention of several couples and a young family also waiting to be seated.

“Keep your voice down, Dad. There are kids here.” I eyed the family we left behind in the lobby. “Feel free to admonish me without the language.”

He did at least seem to take the hint, as he said without a single curse, “Don’t get smart with me. You were an embarrassment out there. If you had to walk away from the military for a dumb sport, you should at least be good at it. That’s what I’ve always said.”

“Yes, I’ve heard you plenty of times,” I replied.

“Not nearly enough for you to get it into your thick skull. I’ve seen you play better. What is going on with you?” he

continued to hammer at me. He stared me down with his flinty gaze, the ends of his mustache bristling before he groaned. “It’s that floozy. Isn’t it? I knew you’d fall for someone like that. Weak. Like you.”

Mom made a show of admonishing him with her lighter-than-air tap on his arm. “Mason, stop.”

“You think I don’t know what goes on in the boy’s head? Raised him, didn’t I?” Colonel continued. He hadn’t raised me, actually. He was a man who came in and out, and I was always happiest when he was out. And then he shipped me off to military school. I’d spent more time with my high school hockey coach than my father.

Luckily we reached our table, and I was happy to sit, to encourage Mom to fuss over how delightful and ornate the room looked.

There were ferns everywhere and black and white tiled floors through the smaller wood-paneled rooms that gave the otherwise cavernous space an intimate feel. I might have liked this place and had heard great things about the food had I not been subjected to my current company.

“Well, I’m told this is one of the best places in town, Mom, so I chose it with you in mind,” I told her.

“Thank you, sweetie,” she said as I pulled out her chair. “And I know your father will love the prime rib. He’s always been a stickler for good cuts of meat.”

“I’m going to check it out. Talk to the chef or something. Make sure it’s all on the up and up.” Rather than sitting, Colonel sauntered off, hands in pockets. Not the least bit concerned about us.

“Alone at last.” My mother beamed at me. “How are you, honey? Seeing anyone special? Forget whatever your father has said and talk to me.”

Even alone, I didn’t want to release a breath or my guard in any way.

It was a standard question to which I gave my standard response. “You know I don’t date during the season.”

I flicked my gaze up to the server who came to prepare glasses of water for the table.

Mom waved a dismissive hand. “Well, that can’t last forever. It’s not sustainable. You don’t want to be old and alone. Plus, you can’t help the timing of when you fall in love. I didn’t want to fall for your father. It just happened.”

I wanted to roll my eyes because picturing anyone actively falling for Mason Stone made me sick and confused.

“Oh, yeah?” I leaned back and let her tell the story because she didn’t get to talk about it often, and it made her happy to reminisce. How in the world she fell for his grumpy ass remained a mystery to anyone who knew them.

“I was finishing up my interior design degree, and we met at my cousin Jen’s wedding. Love at first sight for both of us,” she started, her face lifting in a beatific smile. “Very inconvenient. I had a great internship lined up, and he was being transferred to Virginia.”

“So you followed him.” I filled in the blank.

“Best decision I ever made. It was a risk, of course, but love’s worth the risk. You’re just like your father.” I tried not to spit take my drink on that comment. “Oh, you’re different too, but you love with your whole heart. When you meet The One, you’ll fall hard.”

Damn if she wasn’t right, I thought as my father returned. “You talking about love again, woman?” he scoffed, the sound as much a part of him as the trimmed mustache. “You know the boy doesn’t want to hear about your lovey-dovey stuff.”

Mom ignored him the way she always did. “Love makes the world go round. As you well know, dear, since we’ve been married for so long. Oh, I know you think the men and the machines are in charge, but you are so wrong. It’s love all the way.” She reached out for his hand, and eventually, a bit of the granite-faced facade crumbled, and the colonel reached for her, twining their fingers together.

“If you say so.” He sounded almost angry to agree that much.

That idea played in my head as I endured a meal where my father questioned every one of my life choices, and my mother tried to smooth it over with comments about the delicious lobster and the divine crème brûlée.

In the end, I'd had enough. I called it quits right as Mom suggested we head out to find one of those darling penny slot machines.

“Dad.” I stopped him on his way to the restroom. “Maybe it’s time for you to accept that I am an adult, and my choices, for better or worse, are mine to own. I’m not a military man, and I never will be. I’m an NHL hockey player, and I love my job.”

His eyes narrowed as he took me in. “Don’t try to get me off your scent, boy. If you’re trying to sway me to accept that floozy—”

“I don’t care if you accept her or not. But never, ever call her that again, or we will have a serious problem,” I interrupted and stood to go. “The bill’s paid. You guys stay as long as you like. I need to get back to the team.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to stay with us a little longer, baby?” Mom asked.

As sure as anything else.

I kissed my mother on her cheek and slowed my strides on my way out the door. Rather than heading to find the team, I walked. Found a quiet whiskey bar and settled in for a solitary session. Sure, I was an NHL player, but maybe that wasn’t enough for me anymore.

I had a lot to consider regarding my present and my future, a future where I wanted to be clear of all ties to my father and his military background. Control be damned.

What did I want?

Who did I want?

If I had any choice of futures, where did I see myself in a year, or five, or ten?

I had a hangover when we landed back in Tucson the following day. The headache worsened when I received word to haul ass into Joshua's office. Each foot I rode up the elevator saw my dread worsening and my mouth going drier than the desert.

"Ah, good, you're here," Joshua began once I closed the door behind me. "How about you tell me what the *fuck* is wrong with you, Stone?"

I stood as still as possible under his scrutiny, the way his brown eyes scoured me from head to toe. "I had an off game, I'm sorry. I'll do better," I said, taking the same seat I had when he'd told me his wife's cousin was off-limits.

I wished like hell I had listened.

I also wished I'd told him to stuff it up his ass because I made my own decisions. So did Jaxon.

"Right. Sure. The game." He ran a hand through his dark hair, tugging at some of the wavy curls. "That's not what I meant."

I narrowed my eyes. "Then be straight with me."

"Fine." He paused a beat. "Why did you dump Jaxon?"

A part of me expected him to bring it up, and I wasn't exactly prepared but better equipped to answer with, "You told me to stay away from her. Remember?" Perhaps he needed the reminder.

"She's sad. Which means Mia is mad. Which translates to withholding of all sex and affection. I'm not a happy man, Luca." No, Joshua looked beat down.

"I think that's a little bit too much information for me," I replied.

He sat down at his desk and brought the balance of power down to a more even level between us. I certainly felt better without him looming over me. "True, I told you to stay away from Jaxon. I thought I was doing a good thing and protecting a girl who's had some rough times," he began. "And of course, I'd never mean to stay away if you really liked her, if you have

something real between you. I meant...fuck. I meant not to screw her and walk away.”

When his energy became too much to contain, he pushed up again, and paced behind the desk.

“Now things are effed up for both of us. Get it? We both made mistakes because we’re—”

“Pigheaded?” I interrupted.

Joshua huffed out a small, dry laugh. “Yeah, exactly. I was going to say stupid, but either term works well in this case.”

“I didn’t mean to mess things up. We were just supposed to be having fun, but I guess we both caught some feelings along the way.” It felt easier to talk about it now. Since everything had come to an end.

“I get it. You didn’t want to, but now I don’t know, man. Just fix it.” Joshua pressed his fingers to his temples and rubbed circles. “I can stand the stress of my life, okay, Luca? I know how to handle the ups and downs of business, but there is just something about Mia and Jaxon being upset that I cannot deal with, okay? Just fix it. Get your head together and sort it out with her. You’re messing with both our professional and personal lives.”

Joshua had never been this forthcoming to me before.

This wasn’t a conversation I ever envisioned having with him, either. For a moment, I only watched him pace, took stock of the situation. “This might be a good time to think about the things you say,” I told him in a low, smooth tone. “Because people might interpret them a little bit differently than you anticipate.”

Rather than jump down my throat for questioning him, Joshua groaned. “You’re right. Okay? Is that what you want me to hear?”

I slowly rose from my chair. “I think it’s time for us both to take accountability and to handle our business.”

Josh thrust out his hand for me to shake. “Damn straight.”

Most of the guys were standing out in the parking lot when I made my way back to the truck. And by the turn of their heads at my approach, I knew they were waiting for me.

I held back the curse wanting to slip through my teeth. This was the day that just kept on giving.

“We’re hosting an intervention, mate,” Zach said loudly. “The girls said we had to.”

“And you’re too pussy-whipped to not listen to them?” I joked. There was no bite in the words, though, which drew a chuckle from Tommy. They were all happy as clams with their women, and for the first time in a long time, I was jealous.

I’d never claimed to be the funny one of the bunch.

“Not sure how much more advice I can take right now, to be honest with you all.” I sighed.

Striding right up to the gathered group, I run a hand through my hair. “Fuck this day. It’s not even noon.”

Mentally I prayed for them to take sympathy on me. We’d been through plenty of bad times together, but maybe the good ones would count in my favor, and they’d go easy on me.

“Come on, we’ll buy you a burrito.” Rico hooked his arm over my shoulder. “You need grease. You look like shit, and you never look like shit.”

He wasn’t wrong, so I let them lead me to a nearby hole in the Mexican joint that barely fit us all in. It was a favorite of Elizabeth, who was more than a little obsessed with the food scene in Tucson.

And she loved tacos.

It was a wonder she hadn’t fallen for Rico rather than Bates.

The lot of us fell into amicable silence as we inhaled our plates of rice, beans, tortillas, and meat.

“Fine,” Tommy grouched. “I’ll be the one to break the ice. You slept with Jaxon and messed it up. Anything else we need to know?”

I had no chance of avoiding this, none whatsoever. I cut right to the chase instead and told them, “We agreed it was just for fun, and then she decided to stop it before we went too far. I don’t see where I messed things up.”

“Except you already had. Gone too far.” Will nodded. “Classic mistake.”

“So tell her you want more.” Colton said this like it would be super easy to do. “If you changed your mind, the least she could do is listen to you. Hear you out. Worth a shot, anyway.” He shoved an entire corn tortilla packed with cheese into his mouth.

“She doesn’t want more,” I argued. “She would have said something if she wanted more. I know she has feelings for me, but it’s not enough.”

“You ask her?” Bates leaned back in his chair so much so that it creaked a little.

“It’s what we agreed on. I gave her an opening to talk, but she shut down, which is enough of an answer—” I started.

“You’re an idiot. She broke it off because she thinks you don’t want more, and she doesn’t want to be fucked over. So tell her you want all in. Problem solved.” Liam Montecinos had gone all in for his girl, so he knew what he was talking about. He shot me a loaded look. “Don’t be a coward.”

“I’m not a coward,” I insisted, but I didn’t sound convincing because I was not convinced.

“Just a chicken, huh?” Rico clucked at me a couple of times. “Never picked you for that. Cap.

He *had* to go and call me Cap. Just like a kick to the nuts it was. I couldn’t be the goddamned captain of the Rattlesnakes if the team didn’t respect me, and right now, they didn’t.

“I’ll fix it.” I wasn’t sure how exactly, but I needed to do it and fast.

And I felt damn lucky the men took me at my word.

JAXON

I'd done an excellent job of avoiding Luca. Sheer luck, if I'm being honest. It had been made easy by the fact he was in Vegas, and he was also avoiding me. It seemed we mutually agreed, without having to discuss it, to keep our distance.

We were a couple of knuckleheads.

At least, that was what Gram would say if she was still here. Every time I looked at the photo of her I kept in the pool house, I almost saw it rolling its eyes. She often accused me of being my own worst enemy.

Neither you nor Mia won the parent lottery, but she didn't take her losing ticket to mean she couldn't win later, and you, my dear, always have.

Was Gram wrong?

Not one damn bit.

Mia had taken her upbringing and used it to her advantage, her blunt and strong persona taking her far. I'd ditched the Tennessee accent, but that was as far as I'd gotten.

She used to tell me time and again not to let setbacks mean a total failure. There was always another chance to get up, to start fresh, to correct the mistakes of the past, and come out the other side with something better.

I didn't know how often she used to tell me the same thing.

I always blew her off, called her a crazy old woman. Affectionately, of course.

I'd pushed Luca away. Rather than talk to him about my changing feelings, and try to see if he might actually want to change and grow with me, I'd shut him out.

Not his fault, only mine.

Maybe he didn't want me, and perhaps a happily ever after wasn't in the cards for us, but we'd been friends at least, and I shut that down too. He'd deserved better than me running away because I caught feelings for him.

I'd told him I didn't need him anymore in a text like a wimp, but I did. Several of the shadows weren't matching, and I needed him back in front of me to see where I'd gone wrong.

Which meant today, I had no choice but to see him.

I still had a bit of work to do and only a few days until the entry deadline. It loomed ahead, causing me to lay awake at night with my eyes plastered to the ceiling and my mind racing. What else I might be able to do to give me an edge.

I knew several of the other entries for the prize. They were good. Really good.

So much better than me, and they'd not taken a six-month break from painting. None of them needed time to get over a piece of crap ex, plus sell their childhood home and move, plus quit smoking.

I reached for the lollipop in my pocket and stopped when I realized I didn't actually want or need it.

Huh.

A glance at the clock had me on edge again, though. Luca agreed to come to the community center. I wondered if he thought about it, how after today, we wouldn't be required to see each other. I mean, I'd thought we were done before, and we'd had no contact since. Sure, I'd watched him play just to get a glimpse of him, and I hated that he looked as battered as I felt.

The canvas rested on the easel in the center of the room.

In his absence, I'd been focusing on finessing the details. Honestly, he could probably keep his clothes on for this. Not

that I was going to miss my one last chance to see Luca Stone's perfect body because I wanted to concentrate on the flecks of gold in his eyes and the small lines at their corners. I wanted to be sure the small scar to the left of his nose was there and the freckles on his shoulder were exactly right.

Those details made him not just some hot guy but made him *himself*. Unique.

An ache in my chest caught my attention, the one that liked to take me by surprise every now and then. Or whenever I thought about Luca and started missing him.

I guessed I missed him so badly it hurt.

I'd chosen the community center because I knew those seniors would show up at some point, like clockwork, like the built-in chaperones they were. And I wouldn't be forced to talk to Luca or control myself, either.

Because I was weak where he was concerned, and I just wanted to touch him, even if it was the last time.

When my fingers twitched at my side, I reached for my paint brushes, already primed and ready to go, and twirled them in the air.

Did I...want to patch things up with Luca?

Maybe.

Torn between fear and desire, I felt stuck.

If this was a relationship going nowhere, which it wouldn't if he put the brakes on further, then we might as well stay done. It sure beat mucking things up further so that it would be super awkward at outings.

The friends-with-benefits stage was over.

Maybe we'd be friends again, but he'd made it plain he didn't want more. Talking to him about changing the terms would likely end in one of two ways: rejection or pity.

I didn't want either of those things.

I wanted *him*, and I wanted *more*, but I didn't know what it would look like in the end. I was never going to be the sweet

maternal type with two kids and a minivan. I actually didn't want kids. At least, not at this stage. The right man might change my mind down the road, but there was always adoption too.

Even if Luca wanted to offer *The Dream*, it wasn't the life I saw for myself. Travel, art, adventure, and love—that was what I wanted.

I didn't expect my version to be enough for a traditional guy, and though he'd been beyond accepting of me, Luca was a traditional guy down to the marrow of his bones.

Anyone who lived by a schedule like his had to have a plan for his life down to the nitty gritty. I had a feeling it involved things I wasn't going to be able to give him. Thus, the rejection.

Worst-case scenario, he'd feel bad for me for changing my mind and wanting more for us. So, my heart was bruised and battered right now, but at least I knew I wasn't holding Luca back from the life he no doubt wanted.

Decision made, then. Better for me to leave it alone. Leave *him* alone to make his choices and follow his plan.

A throat cleared, and I turned to the doorway he filled with his body.

“Hey.” He was early, of course, and his voice took me by surprise. Luca stood in the doorway, looking unwilling to take another step into the room. He looked tired but so damn fine. I wanted to kiss that scowl off his face. But I was going to be strong.

“You came.” I wasn't sure why it surprised me.

“Of course.” His lips thinned out to keep him from saying more, if I had to guess, and he finally stepped into the room. “How's your week been, Lollipop?”

He had to use the nickname. I turned so he wouldn't see the tears that pricked my eyes.

“Fine. Yours?” I licked my lips.

“Fine.”

Man. I squirmed. This was all kinds of awkward. Luca wore the simple t-shirt and shorts combination he favored for our sessions, and I wished I could rewind us back to the start and do this all again.

I wasn't sure I'd make different decisions. Probably not, because something told me I'd always fall for him in the end, but maybe I'd be able to handle it better.

"Well, you know the drill." I gestured to the stool. "Please sit for me. I need to check a few details and make sure everything is wrapped up before the deadline. You can..." I started to tell him to keep his clothes on, and some dark part of me stopped me from saying the words.

"Yep, I got it." He didn't speak again as he stripped off and assumed the position I chose for the painting. There was no need for me to touch him this time because he positioned himself perfectly. "This good?"

Tears burned the corner of my eyes for real now, and I blinked them away. "Yeah, all good."

I stood before the canvas and started to paint the highlights. Luca remained motionless, like a statue, his gaze on the floor at his feet. There was that self-discipline again. I let my eyes scan his body one last time, in the name of art, maybe, but certainly because I appreciated it even more than when we started this process.

I knew the curves of him intimately. Every angle and dip. I knew his taste and the timber of his laughter.

I'd personally experienced the power of his body and what it could do. Also, because I'd watched him on the ice. His body was an instrument he used with precision, and I appreciated every cut, every lesion, and every dent. All hard won.

I swallowed, my throat closing and my heart clenched, fixing those last few details before taking a step back from the painting. Wow. I didn't want to toot my horn, but...I'd done it. Not only a good study of the male form but emotion.

His, and mine.

“I think we’re good,” I said a few minutes before we were due to finish.

“Early for once, huh?” He smiled, the edges of the gesture strained.

“It’s a miracle,” I replied softly. “We both know how I am about time. And, ah, thank you for all the time you’ve given me for this project. I know you were...reluctant.”

Luca stood, his arms at his side rather than draped over his junk. “I was reluctant until I wasn’t. Sorry I made it harder than it needed to be.”

Stones settled in my abdomen where heat used to be.

“I’m sorry Mia tricked you.”

He bent to pick up his shorts, and his eyes locked with mine. “I’m not. I’ll never be sorry about that, Jaxon.”

I nodded and had to clamp down on the inside of my cheek to keep those tears from erupting. “Well, I hope it’s worth it.” I forced out a laugh. “I’ll be happy to even place. The grand prize seems like a dream.”

“Do I finally get to see it?” he asked.

“No. Not yet, anyway.”

The truth of the matter? I felt too raw, too vulnerable, to have to listen to his reaction to the painting right now. If he didn’t like it, I knew I’d never submit it. If he *hated* it, then it would somehow seem personal, like he hated me, and I just couldn’t bear the thought. “If it goes on display, then you’ll get to see it with the rest of the world.”

“And if it doesn’t go on display?” His eyes darkened.

It was a reasonable question. Not all entries got displayed, only the finalists and some other standout pieces.

“Then you can have it, and it’s yours,” I said simply. “Do with it what you will. I think it’s only fair for you to have the final piece in the end.”

“Appreciate it, though I’m not sure what I’d do with a naked self-portrait.”

“Your whole house is blank walls, Luca. I think you can find somewhere to hang it.”

We stood a few feet away from each other while Luca got dressed, and it might as well have been miles. If I kept the piece, I’d spend my whole life staring at it, wondering what I might have been able to do differently.

Or what would have happened if I’d been brave enough to try to convince him to take a chance on us.

“Hey.” I glanced up, and Luca entered my space, towering over me, so I had to tilt my head back to meet his eyes. Those intense eyes with the gold flecks that seemed to see deep inside me where no one else bothered to look before. “I want to talk, Jaxon.”

Tender. Too tender, as he took my hand in one of his, like a plea.

“Not right now,” I hedged. “Can you leave it as it is? Please?” I didn’t give him a chance to answer before I said, “Thank you again for everything you’ve given me.”

I let him off the hook to go where he wanted to go, do what he wanted to do. Luca continued to stare at me with his thumb tracing slow circles over my wrist. My pulse fluttered beneath him, and from the narrowing of his eyes, he felt it too.

We must have stood there for moments with my lungs pumping like bellows before a group of very loud seniors burst into the room.

Luca dropped my hands.

“Modeling again, honey? This must be my lucky day!” Lois stared at him like the cat that got the cream.

Luca donned his usual mask and replied, “Not today. I thought I might join the class as a student. See what it’s like on the other side of the canvas. I’m sure my mom would love a still life for Christmas.”

Wait, what?

I would have told him no if I knew what he meant to do, but the seniors were delighted, and pretty soon, he set up next

to Lois, who was more than happy to share her limited artistic wisdom with him.

“We’re doing portraits today, honey. We each had to bring in a photo,” she informed him. “I can lend you one of me.”

“Thanks. I have a subject in mind already.” Luca glanced over at me, and I knew exactly who he had in mind.

Do not blush, and do not let yourself get distracted.

This was harder than I thought.

I set his painting to the side where the others wouldn’t have a chance to peek at it and took my place at the center of the room.

Offering a few of my students guidance before they got started.

“It’s very different when you’re painting from a picture than it is from a real-life object you can study, something you can touch and manipulate,” I started, keeping my tone neutral. My pulse continued to race. “If you have any questions, let me know.

The time dragged as I did my best not to show him special attention.

He was the worst painter *ever*. I was not surprised by that. The man had never taken a class in his life, never picked up a brush. He was not creative.

Still, I admired the concentration on his face and the obvious commitment to this hour he’d chosen to give.

His girl with a lollipop made me laugh. It was, however, clearly me. My coloring, my hair, and she wore a white tank while lapping at a cherry sucker.

“It needs some work.” Hazel, on Luca’s other side, gave him a reassuring pat on the arm, maybe just so she could grope him. “But it has potential.”

“What do you think, teacher? Do I have potential?” Luca asked me.

No more Lollipop. Not anymore.

“Portraits are hard,” I replied, “and it’s not terrible for a first try.”

“What’s terrible is your ability to lie.” He laughed. “That’s okay. It was fun anyway.”

“Nothing wrong with fun,” I agreed. Ugh, my heart hurt. It hurt so badly I could barely breathe.

“Nothing wrong with taking things seriously, either,” he pushed back.

I huffed out what might have been a chuckle but was definitely a strangled groan. “Are we talking about art or relationships?” I didn’t want to hang around and find out.

I just had to make sure he didn’t get me alone after class, although he tried. Damn him, he tried.

“Jax, don’t run away.” Luca hustled after me.

“I’m not running away. I’m on babysitting duty. Mia and Joshua have a gala at the symphony. I said I’d help out.” Still, I hustled my steps down the hallway and out the front door toward where I’d locked my bike.

Luca sighed, the door slamming shut behind him because I had no doubt he already knew about the event. And no way he’d make me late for babysitting.

“Fine. But know this. You can’t keep avoiding me. We do need to talk.”

I finally turned around to face him, shielding my face from the sun to get a good look at him. Meeting his eyes even when it gave me the chills to do it.

“Not until I’m ready for this talk,” I told him. “Not until I’ve sent off my entry for the art prize.” And not until I could figure out a way to protect my heart, because it was already well and truly Luca’s to crush or to keep.

LUCA

I stared at my reflection in the mirror and groaned. I'd never been comfortable in those penguin suits. Not once in my life, even though I wore one any time I had a party to attend. Ties were a staple when I met with sponsors or team owners. I hated them all.

Colonel Stone always favored a bow tie, said they made a man look smart. And the edges should always be crisp and clean.

What would he make of tonight?

One look at Jaxon's painting, even though he knew I'd sat for it, and I'd surely get a bucket full of shit dropped right on my head. New day, new reason where he was concerned. Maybe if my brothers hadn't all followed him into the service, my path would be easier. It didn't matter. I'd made my choices, and he would have to accept them.

My expression shifted to something close to a glower, and I smoothed out the wrinkles until I looked, if not happy, at least back to neutral.

Tonight was an equally special occasion to any gala or sponsorship event. Even if I was the most overdressed of the bunch, I wanted to put my best foot forward and look presentable.

For *her*.

It was the night of the Tucson Art Prize.

I'd made sure to covertly ask around to see if anyone heard any piece of gossip about the race for the prize. No one had, unfortunately, which left me waiting for the big night.

The only thing I knew, I thought as I walked out to the car, gathering my nerve, was that tonight was the night. Heading downtown toward the community center where the reception and announcement would be held.

The text from Mia came in during the drive.

Jaxon had been shortlisted for the win.

I'd never felt so proud of her and wondered if she'd be amenable to me telling her or if it would be stepping over the line of friendship. The same line where she'd placed me on one side and her on the other, unwilling to even talk. I hadn't hounded her since the last day I sat for her, but the need was there.

To get to the bottom of the change between us and see if my suspicions were true.

But they can't be true, I thought as I turned into the parking lot. If Jaxon really did feel more for me, then she would have said something. The woman never shut up.

Friendship was such a scary thing sometimes because you never knew when you were about to step up to a line. And with someone like her, with a man like me, there had to be a line; otherwise, I wouldn't know how to act.

Tonight that meant that not only would all of the guys on the team be there to support her, but they'd bring their ladies and families with them. The entire gallery would be packed for the showing, most of the bodies belonging to her circle of friends.

Along with half of Tucson.

And everyone would see me naked.

The lot was already half full by the time I pulled in, and damn if I didn't recognize a lot of the vehicles there. Mia and Josh had gotten a front-row spot to the shindig. I spotted a few of my buddy's sports cars and trucks as well.

My reflection in the rearview mirror still showed me the dark grimace tugging my facial features toward my chin. It had come back. No doubt someone would snap a picture of me within minutes of walking through the door, and then it was only a matter of time until it was all over the internet. The Captain, his Scowl, and his Dick on Display.

Fuck minutes. *Seconds*.

A very large part of me, an embarrassing part, wanted to skip the whole thing to avoid seeing myself. Having the others see me and tell me about it. But I wanted Jaxon to succeed. She needed to know I supported her even if the way we'd come together had been strange and a little awkward.

She'd used me as a model, and, in my mind, it was up to me to be there for her and lend her support.

The suit and tie threatened to strangle me.

If I heard one joke about a birthday suit or one more because I heard enough of them when I first started modeling for her, then I'd lose it. A glance at my gold watch, a gift from Rico, told me it was time to get my ass out there, or people would start to talk. Five minutes after the start time on the invitation. I was starting to get like Jaxon.

Each step weighed a thousand pounds, and my chest constricted like an actual snake strangled me on my way to the door, and the decorated, open space beyond that had been turned into a ballroom of sorts.

A route I'd taken too many times before to count.

Except the woman I saw when I walked into the noise and the chaos, the woman who stole my attention immediately with an electric buzz, looked nothing like the Jaxon I'd come to know.

She had slicked her short blond hair back over her ears like some kind of femme fatale from a nineties flick. The dress she wore looked painted on, again with the no bra thing, a gorgeous blue silk number the color of my eyes and emphasized by chunky gold earrings. The silk flowed off her

shoulders, hugging her chest and her waist, then flowed out over her hips and cascaded around her feet like a mermaid tail.

She stole my breath even as she stood by my painting, and I wanted to choke. All my attention for her to the point where I barely recognized the model on the canvas as me.

Barely cared.

This wasn't the scattered artist who accidentally tripped over her own feet. She certainly looked a far cry from the woman who spilled coleslaw on me.

If I didn't know any better, I'd call her a CEO, someone so entirely in control of herself. She commanded the room, and her presence was a beacon of starlight on a cold, dark night.

It took me way too long to zero my focus on the canvas at her side. The rich colors brought to life the sill of me sitting in a rich and inviting way. And it turned out she didn't actually paint my dick. It was covered up by the angle. I was still pretty well...naked. But it was artistic. A study of the male form and every shadow, every crevice. Except the one I thought she'd focused on.

My heart jumped up to my throat as the rest of the room faded away, and there was only her.

Damn it.

It made what I had to do much easier. The simplest thing in the world, and it hit me like a slap in the face.

Friendship.

It was only the building block, the foundation, for what we had together. It wasn't a full stop. It was a green light, a place to build from. We had the friendship, and we had the sex down, I thought as I crossed the room to her side, heedless of the crowd.

My higher self must have already known. I'd come prepared.

She wasn't getting away from me this time.

“Luca Stone!” one of the nameless faces behind the cameras called my name. “The captain of the Arizona Rattlesnakes has come to the Tucson community center. Are there any artists you feel are slated to take the prize tonight, Mr. Stone?”

I ignored them all.

Even the media snapping pictures of me, of the crowd, failed to penetrate through my haze of duty. Duty to Jaxon, of course, and duty to myself and my feelings. My determination to keep away from her morphed into a different beast entirely.

Nope. She had nowhere to run. We’d have this conversation whether she liked it or not. Time for us both to step up.

Her scent hooked me right through the navel and lower. Higher. Everywhere. Soft and sweet and subtle, which she was not.

“I see I made it on display. How come you didn’t paint my cock?” I whispered when I got close.

Much to her credit, Jaxon didn’t jump. Her expression remained the same despite the cameras and the way I loomed over her.

“I seem to recall I did paint it that one time.” She spoke low and slow as she turned to me. “Right before I fucked you.”

Her voice held no inflection, her face showed little change, and she transfixed me.

I hoped the media weren’t adept at reading lips.

It was only a few of the local presses and several people I knew wrote online articles. But I didn’t need them to overhear our conversation and make a big deal out of this.

Especially when her use of the word *fuck* not only had me remembering that day but shot a bolt of pure energy straight down to said cock.

I force my grin away. “Didn’t want to share me, huh?” I said nothing of the dirty talk she brought out of nowhere.

I couldn't take my eyes off of her. Neither one of us reached out to touch the other, but I was close enough to grab and kiss her if I chose. Or if she chose.

The way she looked at me under those long black lashes told me I was right. She'd decided to stop running too.

It meant something, I assured myself. It had to mean something; otherwise, what were we even doing with each other?

This is her special night.

Except I knew in my bones it was the right time to talk to her about this. The only time, or else we were going to go our separate ways with no one making a move. Maybe she'd run the other times because she knew it as well.

"You look great," I murmured, bending to place a chaste kiss against her temple. The picture of propriety despite my growing desire.

"Thank you. You look pretty snazzy yourself. I don't think I've ever seen you in black and white before." She reached out to tug on my bowtie, and all of a sudden, I wasn't choking anymore.

I was flying.

Her intoxicating scent, much stronger now that she'd wafted it forward, not only hooked.

It gutted me.

I waved the media off, and much to my surprise, the snapping of cameras stopped, and the crowd began to shift down to the next artist in the room.

They were lined up with their canvases, but none of them held a candle to the energy and vibe that Jaxon gave off. I wasn't an authority on art, but I knew their work might be good, maybe technically better, but none of them had the heart her painting of him possessed.

"I have to tell you, Lollipop." I leaned forward to say this to her and only her. "I don't want to share *you*, either."

She blinked at me. “I’m sure I don’t know what you mean, Luca.”

“I want you and I to be a thing. For real,” I explained. And the moment I said it, reality clicked into place. “We agreed to keep our distance, but the distance sucks. It’s not what I want, and I’m willing to bet everything I have that it’s not what you want, either.”

“You—” she stared.

“Want you,” I clarified. “Nothing else. Nothing less.”

“You don’t want a girlfriend,” Jaxon reminded me. I watched her throat bob as she swallowed twice in rapid succession. “You told me. Not only do you not date during the season, but you don’t date at all. You only...” she floundered.

“I didn’t want a girlfriend.” She was right about that. “Until I met you.”

Goose bumps erupted on her skin.

“You changed my mind on everything and turned my world upside down,” I told her, stepping closer. “You burned me with coffee. You covered me in cabbage. Then paint. You drive me mad with those suckers of yours, and I’ve never been happier. So tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“Tell me you’re done running, and you’re ready to do this.” I sucked in a breath. “With me.”

What she said next mattered. If she agreed with me, if she felt the same sparks I did, then life was about to change. I was willing to hinge everything on her bravery, her willingness to give this a chance.

“You know, Luca.” She turned to me slowly, and I fought against staring at her cleavage. “I’ve been meaning to see about that talk you wanted to have. There are some things I need to tell you.”

All of a sudden, I wanted to puke. What if she said no? What if she decided it wasn’t bravery at all but a lack of feeling on her part?

Fuck.

I should have taken more time to really think about this rather than going off half-cocked.

Seeing her did strange things to me.

“I said everything I needed to say. What about you?” I asked, my throat tight.

She turned to face me fully. “Your plan? To be friends and to toe the line? I’ve been giving it a lot of thought.”

“I think you mean *your* plan.”

“Yours. Mine.” She reached out for my chest and pressed her palm against my heart.

Forget tight. My throat and my insides were dry and cracking. “And?”

“It’s not working for me,” she finished.

Thank fucking god. Everything inside of me released, and I grinned at her. My girl. She wanted me the same way I wanted her. She felt the sparks too. Otherwise, she would have told me flat out. “What can we do about that?” I wanted to know.

She closed the distance between us and matched my grin. “You’re going to kiss me. That’s what you’re going to do about it.”

Her wish was my command.

I pulled Jaxon into my arms, cameras flashing and trained on us yet again. Let them capture this moment. It was historic. I wanted to remember it forever.

I kissed her until I had my fill of her and tasted her on my tongue.

When she finally murmured and pressed a hand to my chest, something about making a scene in front of all these decent people, I chuckled. Kept my hold on her.

“Anything else you want to spring on me now while we’re both in a good mood?” I asked.

“I wanted to keep my distance from you for your own good,” she murmured.

“I’m not good without you.”

“What if you want the white picket fence and the kids? I don’t want kids, Luca. I’ve never been that type of woman.”

She looked ready to cry. And I knew, distantly, a lot of men would not be okay with a partner who didn’t want to start a family. For some reason...

“We’re enough together,” I clarified. “Whatever you want. We’re on the same page as long as we are both there.”

And I reached with my free hand to pull two red lollipops from the pocket of my suit jacket. “Here you go, baby.” I handed one off to her. “This is kind of stressful, after all. When are they going to announce the winner?”

“You always know,” she whispered. “Sometimes I worry that you can read my mind.”

“It’s not such a bad thing.” I held her at my side, with the rest of the room filling up with people.

The artist to her left giggled and lifted a small boy into her aging arms, the kid pointing at the portrait done in red, blue, and yellow alone.

“I’m nervous,” Jaxon admitted with a sigh.

“There’s no reason to be nervous. Everyone is here to support you, and you’re going to kill it.” Even if she didn’t win, then I was there for her.

She craned her head to look up at me. “You make it seem so easy.” She sucked in a breath. “One minute, we’re friends. Now, we’re dating. Exclusively?”

“It is easy,” I told her. “It’s me, and it’s you. And we want to be together. Otherwise, this wouldn’t work out.”

She still hadn’t grabbed the sucker from me, her attention slipping between it and me.

“Yeah. You’re right.”

Just like that.

JAXON

Well.

Well, *well*.

Luca wanted me. And I wanted him.

I'd dropped the kid bomb, knowing it would be a make-or-break moment no matter what else he decided. And my heart lightened to the point of bursting when he said he was with me. With me, wherever we wanted to go, but together.

Together. In my wildest dreams, I never would have imagined an outcome like this.

Despite the butterflies attacking my insides at knowing the contest winner would soon be announced, Luca was there to keep me steady. And he'd brought fresh suckers with him!

Case closed, and I'd never felt so free in my life. It was as though I'd finally stepped over the threshold to the place where I really belonged, and now I had the space and the safety to relax.

I took the lollipop from him and smiled.

He watched me take the wrapping off, stuffing it down in my pocket before I pooped the sweet sucker into my mouth. Sugary flavor lit my tongue, and my eyes crinkled.

"Good?" he asked.

With my free hand, I reached out, still keeping eye contact, and laced my fingers through his. "Perfect," I managed.

The cherry pop did not go with the rest of the image I'd cultivated tonight. Yet I'd never felt more like me.

Luca said nothing, and I understood him perfectly. From the slightly quirked corner of his mouth to the twinkle in his eyes and everything in between. His feelings were my own, and although it sounded crazy and a little too metaphysical for even me, it felt right. So right, I wanted to scream and shout and dance to get this energy out into the crowd.

Butterflies and lightning.

They were there, and they were accompanied by the greatest sense of peace I'd ever experienced in my life.

"I didn't see your bike outside, or Mia's sedan," Luca murmured. "Please tell me you didn't come here in that dress on two wheels?"

"I had Corrinne drive me," I answered with a smile.

A throat cleared, and I finally broke away from Luca to see Mia approaching with Joshua, her hands full of drinks. My cousin wore a dress the same color as the champagne that offset the pretty waves of her hair, and the blush of her cheeks.

"This seems like more of a bubbly occasion than anything else." She held one of the flutes out for me. "Also, Joshua has something to say. Something he's wanted to say for a long time."

Mia elbowed her husband in the ribs and must have had perfect aim because he winced, and the reaction wasn't faked.

"I...apologize." He bit out the words, and I wondered how often he had to say them to anyone besides Mia. "I'm sorry for interfering."

I guffawed loudly. "Dang. This is an historic occasion indeed."

Joshua looked uncomfortable as I took the sucker out of my mouth and re-wrapped it so I'd be able to sip my champagne easier. The first taste was just as heady as the lollipop had been.

"Anything else you want to say?" Luca pressed.

He enjoyed this as much as I did.

Joshua's embarrassed expression shifted into a sulking scowl when he turned to Luca. "I'm sorry I tried to keep you away from each other. It was selfish and uncalled for. I never should have tried to control the situation, and telling everyone to stay away from Jaxon was a mistake. I apologize."

"There," Mia said. She reached out to caress her husband's shoulder. "Was that hard?"

"Yeah, it was," he replied with a loud exhale. "I don't feel better yet."

The tender moment was interrupted by the screeching backlash of a microphone. The community director tapped on the top of the microphone, leaning close and speaking way too loudly.

"Attention!" he called out. The microphone screeched again. Much to my surprise, Lois stood by his side, her white-blue hair done in a helmet-like coif and her makeup flawless for someone her age. She caught my attention and winked. "Attention, everyone. It's time for us to announce the winners of the Tucson Art Prize. I know we're all very excited for the outcome, and this process has been especially exciting with the addition of so many new contenders this season."

I held my breath as my skin went up in flames. Luca squeezed my hand to let me know he was right there with me.

The director was a kind man, slightly balding, but he'd always been really nice to me, and it had taken a lot for me not to approach him and try to get the details out of him earlier.

He shot his gaze across the crowd. There could only be one person to snag the top spot and the prize that accompanied it.

I did not win.

Not the big one, anyway.

First place went to another local lady who had multiple projects with the community and had donated several benches to parks, benches she'd painted with images close to the heart

of the locals. She was going to do a great job on the side of the building. She looked unsurprised at her win but grateful, I thought, absolutely grateful when she walked onto the stage and shook the director and Lois's hands.

However...

"We'd also like to honor our people's choice and winner of best new artist," the director finished. He smiled directly at me. "Miss Jaxon Roark."

I jerked at the sound of my name accompanied by a round of wild applause from the rest of the room.

"Me?" The word came out in a squeak, and I sloshed champagne all down my front when Mia launched herself at me for a hug.

"You did it!" she screeched next to my ear.

"But I didn't do it." I was in a daze. People's choice? Seriously? And best new artist.

"You're my choice, anyway," Luca whispered in my other ear. My shivering continued all the way down to my toes, but the rest of the room was a blur. There was only Mia, hugging the life out of me, and my man.

My Luca.

"I've won," I repeated the word on a loop as everyone pressed closer to me to celebrate. I had no idea what I'd won, but I did it, and man, it felt good. Once the realization set in, anyway. It felt *really* good.

"Come on up on stage and give us a few words, Jaxon," Lois said when she grabbed the mic from the director.

The applause continued, and I walked up to the stage on cloud nine. Floated.

"Ah, thank you." I took the microphone from her with trembling fingers. "This is unexpected in so many ways. Thank you, everyone, who believed in me. Who gave me the strength and the courage to push through." I glanced over to Luca. "And thank you to the love of my life for being the best

model a girl could ask for. I never would have been able to do this without the support of Mr. Luca Stone.”

The applause reached staggering heights then as the attention shifted from him to me. Rather than being upset that I'd called him out or called him the love of my life, Luca straightened. The pride on his face when he looked at me almost brought me to my knees.

I'd have to catch up with everyone on the committee later because it was party time. The moment I stepped from the stage, the empty flute in my hand was automatically replaced with another full one, and as music piped through a discrete set of speakers around the empty center of the room, I went out to dance.

Too much joy to contain in my body.

It didn't even matter that no one else wanted to dance with me. I was out there on my own for a whole two minutes until the rest of the girls joined me. Luca watched from the table where he stood with the other guys looking uncomfortable. I beckoned him with the crook of my finger, knowing he was uncomfortable with the attention.

Heck, the picture of him naked was still on the stage front and center.

He deserved praise and applause. He deserved the world. We both did.

We partied late into the night, and even when I was drop-dead tired and ready to pass out, I danced. I looped my arms around Luca's neck, allowing him to cradle me close. We were the only ones left who hadn't called it quits for the night.

Er, for the early morning.

Except for the rather startling display of the team's co-owner Jeremy dancing with Corrinne, the PA for the Rattlesnakes. They weren't quite as close as Luca and me, but they were still pressed front to front.

The two of them had a love/hate thing going on since Jeremy was the less responsible brother of Joshua Harris. The

party boy extraordinaire. He annoyed and needled Corrinne like nobody else's business.

This really was a night for celebration, then.

Everyone got into the moment, the emotion, the energy.

Champagne, good food, and even better company did that sort of thing to people. It put them in a good mood where they were able to put aside their differences and simply enjoy themselves.

If we didn't leave soon, I'm sure we'd be in the middle of those two spitting and hissing. Saucer of milk for two, please.

"Are you asleep?" Luca murmured.

I said something in response and melted against him, causing him to tighten his hold on me.

"You've been barefoot for about two hours now. Let's get you home. We can play sexy Mr. Lumberjack again if you want," he offered.

"I don't have a ride back. How about you find a nice corner for me, and I'll curl up somewhere for a nap?" I teased.

"No dice, my love." He linked his fingers through mine and gave me a tug. "We're going home."

I really liked the sound of that, and if I'd been in full control of all of my faculties, I might have told him so. Especially when I knew that he meant home, as in his house, not my pool house.

I let Luca take the lead, ever the responsible one, and pack all of my stuff, including his portrait, in the back of his car. Then we were on the road with the radio pumping out soft mood music on our way to his place.

I loved the way the light dappled along the dark stretches of the desert too. So much nicer than living in the suburbs where your neighbor's house plotted out any kind of view.

Before I knew it, we were parked in the driveway. Luca walked around to my side door and helped peel me out of the seat.

“But all the stuff...” I cast a blurry look at everything in the back seat.

“It will wait for the morning. I’ll still get up at my normal time and make sure to get things in before it gets too hot,” he replied.

“My hero.”

He chuckled, helping me to the front door. Not because I’d drank too much but because the sleepier I got, the more limp noodle-ish I became.

And happy.

So damn happy I wanted to keep dancing and show the heavens above my joy. This night could not have gone any better if I’d planned it out myself, and although I hadn’t won the penultimate prize, I got something much better.

The best boyfriend in the world.

Who did not laugh at me when I stepped into his place and stared.

“Your mouth is hanging open,” he commented.

The walls...he’d painted them. Not only painted them, but he’d done them in an array of colors to mimic the desert at sunset. Just like I’d suggested. There was artwork on the walls, pieces I’d commented that I’d liked, and I knew. I knew. He’d done this for me.

“What do you think?” he asked in an undertone. “I had it done in a rush.”

“I think I’m too tired to fully appreciate the gravity of this situation.” I shook my head and walked, dirty bare feet and all, into the living room. There were throw pillows on the couch now.

No rugs yet, but I had a feeling he was going to let me know when we’d head out to the store to pick some out.

“You did this for me.” I turned on him and held my arms open.

Without waiting for me to ask him out loud, Luca stepped into them, and we hugged each other like we were lost in a stormy sea.

“I did,” he agreed. “Because I wanted you to feel at home here. I hope it’s okay. I wasn’t sure you’d like it, but I took the risk.”

“It’s more than okay.” I had to fight the urge to swoon because it was wonderful.

“I want you to feel like this is a space where you’re able to make your mark. If at any time you feel like I’ve boxed you into a corner with my decisions, let me know.” His fingers skimmed along the bare skin at the top of my spine. “Please, Jaxon.”

“You’re asking me to move in with you.”

“No, I’m telling you to move in with me and hoping you won’t be mad about it.”

I shook my head, turning to press my cheek to his chest and memorize the warm, strong beat of his heart. “It’s perfect.”

EPILOGUE

As I'd done weeks ago when I avoided Luca, I now did an excellent job of avoiding some but not all of my jealousy when it came to the hottest man I'd ever met. AKA Luca Stone.

AKA the man of my dreams and the love of my life and whatever else you wanted to call him.

I'd be lying if I said watching those puck bunnies at the games as we neared the playoffs, the ones who threw themselves at him, didn't rile me up. They sure did. They got under my skin like it was their job because it seemed to me that my very hot boyfriend had a fan club.

My girls assured me that Luca never went out with any of them, even before me, so I better chill the fuck out. Willa's words echoed by Sasha.

My girls. I loved that I had friends and family here in a way I never had before. Tennessee was in the rearview mirror, and despite the lingering ache in my heart at Gram's passing, I didn't miss the rest. I'd cleared the hurdles. Even ones I thought insurmountable at the time.

Last night at our last game that would decide whether the Snakes went to the playoffs or not, Joshua took me aside.

"Look, I really am sorry. I should not have interfered," he'd said. "Not with your love life or any of it."

"Mia put you up to the apology, huh, big guy?" I'd teased.

“Yeah, but she’s right. You’re a big girl. It wasn’t my place. I just always considered myself your protector, and I didn’t want to see you hurt.”

Poor man. He’d seemed so put out I felt sorry for him.

“You’re right to be sorry.” I’d laughed when he gawked at me. “I was sort of touched to know you were looking out for me. It’s nice having a family.”

“It is. I sometimes take for granted how lucky I was with my folks and even Jeremy.” He’d rolled his eyes dramatically. “But I want you to know we are your family, and I have your back even if I go about it the wrong way.”

I gave him a hug. “You’ve welcomed me into your home, introduced me to your friends, and not even blamed me when I broke one of your star players. You’re a good guy.”

“Feel free to tell my wife that. Oh, and don’t break Luca again. We really want a run at the Cup, and he’s essential for that.” Jeremy had stared out of the private box toward the ice. “We need him to push for the Cup.”

“Don’t worry. I have no intention of breaking him.”

I didn’t want anything to break either of us. No person, no matter who they were, ever really came out whole again after breakups. Being with Luca had me thinking about the Japanese art of Kintsugi, though, where old pottery was mended with gold and made into something different but beautiful in a different way.

I kind of felt like I was a piece of Kintsugi pottery, and Luca’s love was the gold. We only made each other stronger in the long run.

The truth was, no matter how different we appeared on the outside, Luca was perfect for me. He made *me* feel perfect. He didn’t seem to want any more from me than I willingly gave, and so far, he’d made no attempts to change me, either.

He seemed pretty content just to be with me and all my quirks.

And I was getting used to living with him. The guy was like a machine with his diet and exercise and training and whatnot. I understood he was an elite athlete, and his body was his tool, but it was kind of intense. And it was also kind of hot. I'd never been with anyone driven like that before, and I liked it.

I also liked how he didn't leave his intensity on the ice; he brought it to the sheets as well. Mr. Lumberjack had made quite a few appearances lately.

Not that I should be thinking those thoughts. I shook my head to clear it as I set up for my senior's class at the community center. The little old ladies teased me endlessly once they'd gotten a good look at my painting. Not because of the subject matter but because of what I'd left off the canvas.

Namely, the piece of Luca that made him absolutely male.

"Hey, Lollipop."

I turned toward the warm sound of his voice. I loved that he still used that nickname even though my addiction to the sweets was fading now that I was less stressed and not inclined to reach for a cigarette. "You're a nice surprise," I told him. "Look at that adorable face of yours! I want to kiss you all over, Luca. But what are you doing here?" I glanced at the clock. "You said you were picking me up this afternoon."

He leaned against the doorframe, looking crazy hot. Arms crossed over his chest, and a wicked smile on his face. "Hazel nabbed me the other day and asked if I'd come pose for the class again," he explained. "I figured, why not? More time I get to spend with you. Plus, she said it was the last class of the season."

"Wow, yeah. It sure went by fast." I couldn't believe how fast life moved now. I was busy with my painting and friends and the hockey schedule. It was a lot, and I loved it.

The ladies arrived and pushed him into the room. He pulled off his shirt and took a seat. No nudity for the seniors' set; that was just for me. I'd been commissioned to do a couple of other athlete's portraits, and I was working up to my own

show soon. Winning that prize had changed my life just as Mia predicted.

I owed my cousin a lot. I did my fair share of babysitting, but I needed to think of something extra special for my cousin soon.

The class flew by, and I tried not to be too distracted by Luca's naked torso, though judging by the way several of my class members stopped with their brushes midair, I wasn't the only one having a hard time of it.

Every one of them was re-enrolled for the next session of classes, so I wasn't too sad when they all finished up, knowing I'd see them all again made me happy. And I was pleased to see their skills were improving too.

As Luca helped me tidy up, he offered me a choice. "Okay, so you have two options. A is sex in that store room, or B is a surprise that will require a blindfold." He smirked. "I'm leaving it up to you."

"I really am hot for you right now," I teased us both because I absolutely was. It took effort to keep my hands off of him. "But option B it is."

"Okay. Turn around." He pulled a long silk scarf from his pocket that I recognized as one of mine.

I turned to glance over my shoulder at him. "Really?" I asked skeptically.

"Really, really. Spin, woman, or no surprise for you." He stood behind me and kissed my neck. "Don't worry, you'll like this surprise. Trust me."

And the thing was? I did. I really did trust him. There was no one else in the world I'd let blindfold me, walk me from a building, and load me into his truck. Not a living soul, and even though I was buzzing with anticipation, I also felt safe.

"You doing okay?" he asked, squeezing my hand a few minutes into the drive.

"Yep. But I have no idea where you're taking me. Is this some sexy role-play?"

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” I bit my lip and nodded. We’d gotten into some fun role-play lately, and he was getting almost as into it as I was these days. “Dirty girl. Sorry to disappoint you, but it’s something else.”

He killed the engine and helped me from the truck, then walked behind me, one large hand on each shoulder to guide me. “Stand here.”

He let go, and as always, I missed his touch instantly. Luca Stone was like a never-ending craving, and I’d need more than lollipops to ever break my addiction to him.

He led me forward, and I was aware that we’d moved inside. The space was cool and had an echo.

“Where are we?”

“Give me one second.” Then he came up behind me. “Three, two, one...”

The blindfold fell away, and I was in an art studio. The building looked old, like a former auto shop, maybe? It had arched windows and a cement floor.

“What is this space?” I looked around before turning to meet his eyes.

“This is your new studio, Lollipop. Fun as it is to have you painting at home, you need a proper workspace. I’m reliably informed half the Rattlesnakes want portraits, not to mention the exhibit you’re working on. You need a space to create.”

“You did this?” I was gobsmacked. I knew Luca cared for me because he showed me every day, but this...*this* was next level.

“I had my ear to the ground. One of the judges I met at the art prize suggested it. I guess the former artist moved to Mexico or something.”

I blinked back tears. No one had ever done anything like this before. My last boyfriend had trashed me and my art, literally, and here was Luca helping me time and again to find a home for it.

“I...” I was at a loss for words.

“Hey, no crying. This is a happy space.” He brushed his thumb across my cheekbone to capture a tear that had escaped. “No tears allowed.”

“But these are happy tears!” I threw myself at him with such force he backed up a few steps to catch his balance. And me. “Thank you so much for this and for everything.”

“One thing I know how to do is be part of a team, and when I’m in, I’m all in.” He brushed a kiss to my lips before spinning me in his arms to take in the space. “You can do classes here too, although the seniors do like the community center. But you know you could do free classes for teens or whatever...Zadie has an idea or two about how to promote that.”

“Everyone was in on it?”

He shrugged behind me. “That’s how we roll. In fact, they’ll all be here later to help christen the place. But first, you and I are going to christen it.”

I went to turn in his arms when I felt silk around my wrists. “Oh yeah.”

“Yep. And I have more than one scarf in my pocket, so get ready for a wild ride.”

Every *day* with Luca was a wild ride, and I couldn’t wait to get started.

THE END

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Eden Dunn is a joint pen name for two USA Today Bestselling authors who have combined their skills to write hockey romances hot enough to melt the ice. Together they are an indomitable force who love a good happy ending, a dirty sex scene, and strong coffee.

If you love enemies to lovers, forbidden love, single parents, and emotional healing, then you're covered! These hockey heroes are the stuff of fantasy because they are hot, hard, and have hearts of gold, while the heroines are strong, sassy, and smart. With take-no-prisoners characters and gripping stories, Eden's contemporary hockey series will knock your ass on the ice and claim your heart.

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