

**A GUIDE TO ~~AVOID~~
DATING HOCKEY PLAYERS**

BEING PUCKED

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BAY REBELS

An NHL star player pucked up my life, and now I have one rule: Avoid all ice hockey players.

But when I run to my hometown, desperate for a fresh start, I find that it's easier said than done. My dad is the coach of the newest team in the NHL and offers me the job of PR Director to these gorgeous players who are walking disasters.

They say that cocky hockey players are obsessed with their sticks. It turns out that three of them are also obsessed with *me*.

First, there's the charming, playboy captain. Then there's the scorching-hot twins. One brother is a fighter on the ice but has the heart of a golden retriever, when he takes off his skates. The other is intense and tattooed but sweetly protective. Yet they're all hiding secrets that could blow apart the team.

My job is to keep these three out of trouble. But will I break my one rule for them? Their careers depend on winning this season, and my new life depends on beating them at their own game.

Will falling for hockey players pick up my life again? Will my heart be broken or is this my second chance?

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A GUIDE TO AVOID DATING HOCKEY PLAYERS

Robyn's Number One Rule: Don't kiss ice hockey players.

To strengthen resolve, remember three things:

- 1. Their late-night training, canceled plans, and stinking hockey gear.*
- 2. Your stalker NHL ex-husband with perfect abs but also, perfect lies.*
- 3. D'Angelo.*

Never forget that it all began with D'Angelo...

CHAPTER ONE



Tide Cottage, Freedom

*R*obyn

“RYN, did you pack everything that you own in this single suitcase?” My younger brother, Cody, struggles to drag my heavy polka dotted suitcase out of the trunk of his SUV. “Your entire smut collection, bottles of beer, and the kitchen sink?”

Exhausted, I slip out of the backseat of the car.

The afternoon sun is bright, and I squint. I run my hand through my wavy, flame-red hair, pushing it out of my emerald eyes.

Would Cody mind if he carried me inside his cottage as well?

I feel shattered, in so many ways.

I’ve been divorced from my dick of an ex (the star NHL player, Wilder Talon), for six months but I’m only now returning to my home town of Freedom.

I hope that I can finally start to heal and mend my life.

This is my chance for a do-over, and this time, I have one rule.

Don’t kiss ice hockey players.

I take a deep breath of the tangy sea breeze, and finally, feel like I’m home.

I glance out at Ember Beach, which lies down a long, sandy path beyond

Cody's cottage.

The light sparkles on the waves, and the air shimmers. Some months, you can go out boating and see the whales. The seals play here.

Cody loves it.

My heart clenches.

Since college and my crappy marriage to Wilder, I never had anywhere that I settled in and truly loved.

I bite my lip. "This is all that I own."

Cody slams shut the trunk and stares at me in shock.

Cody is two years younger than me, although he's so athletic and sun blushed by his time spent surfing that he could still be a college student.

He's handsome with neat brunette hair, freckles across the bridge of his nose, and russet eyes. He's dressed in a pastel blue t-shirt and matching boardshorts.

His nose scrunches up. "But you had more shoes than would fit in here alone, when we were in high school."

Fair.

I hold my arms out. "Robyn McKenna, twenty-seven, and one suitcase to my name. I'm serious life goals."

Cody fixes me with a look that I know means he's not letting me off the hook. Even if he is the younger brother, he's always been fiercely protective of me.

"Later, you're going to tell me why you walked away from a marriage with that millionaire megalomaniac with nothing. Shit, Wilder thinks that he's such hot stuff on the ice. If he really was half as good as he thinks he is, then he'd be in the Hall of Fame."

I snort. "That sounds like Wilder. You'd reckon that he could walk on water, rather than ice. This one suitcase means that I've *escaped*, Code. I didn't want the dresses, shoes, and diamonds that my ex bought me. They're tainted. I followed him around for years, supporting him in his career and neglecting my own. I became like a shadow. I don't want a dime from him. I'm going to be independent, somehow. You know, hot mess and all."

Also, I'm a survivor of Wilder's abuse and cheating.

I can't examine that yet; I'm still processing it.

Wilder didn't break me, however, and I'm going to prove it.

Cody's expression softens, and he drags the suitcase toward me. "I'm trying to give you an awesome, reassuring hug, but hell, it's hard, when I'm

dragging this suitcase about. Seriously, what's in here?"

I blush.

Sex toys, along with my clothes and books, I definitely *don't* admit.

I'm single now.

They're an essential.

I'm sticking by that.

At last, Cody reaches me, throwing one strong arm around my neck. He pulls me into a hug. It's achingly familiar, and I sink into it. His hair smells of the sea. He must have gone surfing, before I called him to pick me up from the airport.

"I'm a hot mess too, sis." Cody hugs me tighter. "We can be misfits together like we were throughout high school, remember? You'll always have a home in Freedom though. You have friends and family here. We've got you, Ryn. I only wish that we'd been able to show you that you weren't alone sooner. You know that I'm the screw-up in this family. Dad always says so."

My eyes burn with tears.

My heart's beating fast, and my chest is tight.

"Thanks, Code," I whisper. "But you're not a screw-up. You're married to that hot doctor of yours, and I know that he keeps you on a tight leash."

Cody's face lights up at the mention of his husband, Doctor Michael Gaines. They only married a year ago, so I guess that they're still in the honeymoon period.

They're perfect for each other. Cody's the wild spirit, and Michael's the stern but calm influence.

Cody winks. "Only when I'm a good boy."

I pull a face. "TMI."

"Hey, it's not like I haven't had to suffer through hearing about your love life in excruciating detail."

When Cody's phone breaks into David Bowie's "Underground" from the movie *Labyrinth* — Cody's lifelong obsession with David Bowie is only rivaled by his love for *Labyrinth* — he reaches for his pocket.

He drops my suitcase, and immediately, it begins to vibrate.

A loud whirring starts up.

I freeze. My cheeks heat.

I knew that I should have paid more and bought the expensive vibrator that didn't sound like a jet engine.

Plus, one that didn't malfunction.

Cody freezes too, staring at my bag. “Your suitcase appears to be alive, Ryn.”

“Don’t worry, it’ll die soon.”

Cody is grinning, *the asshole*. “Uh-huh. So, you only went for the cheap option. Short sighted savings. Mike always researches and makes sure that our vibrators are quiet, powerful, and long-lasting. You should get some advice from him.”

The problem with brothers is that they know you too well.

“Doctor and kink expert rolled into one.”

“Just call him Doctor Kink. Wait, don’t. He’d hate that. The expression on his face would be worth it though. How soon is your suitcase going to die?”

“Probably in about two hours. Still, that means it has better lasting power than a normal dick, and it’s not attached to a man who could turn out to be a hockey star, the type who promises you the world, marries you, then crushes all your dreams, before cheating on you.”

I gasp for breath. Wow, that sentence really got away with me.

Cody blinks. “That’s weirdly specific.”

I blush. “Who’s the text from?” Time for a subtle change of subject. “Is Mike going to miss dinner?”

Michael works in ER at Freedom Heart hospital. As much as Wilder canceled plans with me every week, Cody has the same problem with Michael, only it’s because his husband is saving lives.

Cody has been able to understand my life, however, because of it.

Cody slips the phone out of his pocket and grimaces. “Sorry.”

I shrug. “It’s fine.” Then a slow smile crosses my face, when I see him blush. “That’s not all Doctor Kink said in his text, is it? Is he missing my favorite brother?”

“I’m your only brother.”

“Exactly.”

Cody nudges my shoulder, letting go of me. “Come on, get inside, and I’ll make us a coffee. You’ve got so much gossip to catch up on. You have no idea what’s been going on in Freedom and with the Bay Rebels.”

I frown. “No way. The only thing that I don’t want to hear about is hockey.”

With a grunt, Cody picks up my suitcase. “You’d better get used to wearing your iPod all the time then as an excuse not to talk to anyone. Since

Dad became coach of the newest team in the NHL, Freedom is all about the Bay Rebels, even if the fans — half lovingly and half as a kick in the balls — have nicknamed them *The Misfits*. You can't avoid hockey here."

"Watch me." I stride toward Tide Cottage's large, welcoming porch.

Cody's home is cozy but ramshackle.

It's a single-story building with gingerbread trim and ornamental brackets.

Last year, Cody painted it a cheerful sea foam green.

I rest my hand against the arched oak door with a determined glance over my shoulder. "Hurry up, someone promised me coffee, and I need caffeine, before I collapse in a crumpled pile of green t-shirt and stained jeans. Then you'll have to call Mike back to give me coffee by IV."

Cody arches his brow. "You're still dramatic as ever, huh?"

"Coffee, then chat. I want to get on with this new life of mine. A life that has nothing, zero, zilch, zip, nada to do with hockey."

Cody swallows, shifting anxiously. "Okay, you may get dramatic again after that coffee because I have a couple of funny stories to catch you up on. So, I guess that I haven't told you what my new job is then...?"

CHAPTER TWO



Tide Cottage, Freedom

“*I*s your new job the funny story?” I narrow my eyes at Cody. Cody’s hunched over the butcher block countertop in Tide Cottage’s kitchen, stirring my coffee with the same kind of intensity as a mage with a potion.

He’s avoiding looking at me.

Shifty.

What doesn’t he want to tell me? It’s making me antsy.

Cody looked like that in high school, when he borrowed my One Direction t-shirt without asking and then dropped peanut butter down the front.

I don’t know who you’d judge more harshly in that story: Cody for ruining my Harry Styles’ t-shirt or me for owning one in the first place.

Probably, it’s a tie.

I settle more comfortably into the striped, padded window seat. Glancing out of the large, arched window, I can see the rugged coastline.

The beach is remote and wild with sea stacks, which rise from the swelling waves. Above, in the sapphire sky, bald eagles soar.

It takes away my breath how free the eagles appear.

Cody’s still guilt stirring my coffee, and the spoon clinks against the side of the mug. “Do you want your coffee black like always?”

“Yep, so strong that it gives you a coffegasm.”

Cody stops stirring like I knew he would. “I must be making this stuff wrong. I’ve never had that from a drink before.”

“My coffee is the best start to the day.”

“Lucky you.”

I pull my knees up, hugging my arms around them.

My whirring suitcase lies below the window seat, and I’m doing my best to ignore it.

The kitchen is cozy with exposed beams and wide-planked wooden floors. The walls and open shelves are painted sky blue. Cody’s surfboards are stacked against the far wall.

A tangy brine smell wars with the sweet scent of baking, fresh bread.

My mouth waters.

At least I have Cody’s famous Sunday brunch to look forward to tomorrow with his home baked rolls.

I’ll truly feel like I’m home then.

Cody strolls across the kitchen and passes me a mug that must be Michael’s because it has **HOT ENOUGH TO STOP YOUR HEART AND QUALIFIED TO RESTART IT** emblazoned across it.

I take a sip of the delicious coffee and sigh in delight. “Fuck, that’s good.”

Cody throws himself down on the window seat next to me. “Just don’t tell me if it’s coffegasm good, okay?”

“You can’t bribe me with coffee. Although, it’s a close call.” I stare at Cody sternly over the lip of the mug. “What’s your new job?”

Cody runs his hand nervously through his brunette hair, making it stick up. “Funny thing, I’ve been appointed the Director of Physical Therapy at the Bay Rebels.”

I stare at him in shock. “That’s not funny.”

“I forgot the punchline. Nope, there isn’t one.”

He looks at me nervously like I’m an unexploded bomb.

My expression softens, and I squeeze his forearm. “Am I happy now that I’m surrounded on all sides by hockey? Hell, no. But you never have to feel that you need to hide anything from me. We’ve always shared everything. I’m glad that you got this job role because you deserve it. You’re dedicated and committed. You’ll be invested in the players and team. They’re lucky to have you.”

Cody looks down. “I’ve missed you, Ryn. I’d forgotten what it was like

to hang out like this.”

“Me too.” There’s a lump in my throat, and I struggle to swallow. Wilder took this away from me, and I’m lucky to be able to rebuild my life, family, and independence. I’m also fucking lucky that my family has stood by me... at least, some of them. “Dad wouldn’t have given you the post, if you hadn’t been the best candidate. He’s tough, and we both know that he gives no one handouts.”

“Especially me,” Cody replies. “He’s fair though. Should we be happy that he doesn’t believe in nepotism or handing on an inheritance? Shit, it’s made me work hard for years to achieve this job. I’ve worked my ass off.”

I take another sip of coffee. “I bet Mike’s proud.”

Cody’s expression brightens. “So proud that he bought me a **TORTURER** set of t-shirts for me to wear at work.”

I splutter out my coffee in a spray, and Cody pulls a face. “Is this another TMI moment?”

“Mike’s a grumpy dick but he’s let me practice my physiotherapy on him. He bristles like a cat every time. So...”

“He nicknamed you *torturer*.”

Cody grins. “You don’t think that it’ll freak out the pre-season players in the training camp, right?”

“I hope so,” I mutter. Then I give him a sideways glance. “Is D’Angelo...?”

“Still an asshole?” Cody arches his brow.

“That’s not where I was going with that but...accurate.”

Cody shifts around on the window seat to face me fully.

He looks awkward like he wants to tell me something but is struggling to keep it locked behind his teeth.

Then he carefully replies, “Jude D’Angelo still lives in Freedom. He was the Captain of Bay Rebels last season. He’s seriously talented and is going to get through the pre-season but only if he can stop being such a massive dick.”

I snort. “So, in other words, he’s about to ruin his career in the Bay Rebels and be sent to the minor leagues. He deserves it.”

Then why are my guts churning at the thought?

D’Angelo was once my best friend at college.

He’s the most handsome man in the NHL, smart, and funny.

Before Wilder swept me off my feet and married me (and I discovered the truth about D’Angelo’s bad behavior and lies), I hoped that D’Angelo would

be the man who I'd end up growing old with.

He broke my heart.

So, why should I care that he's fucking up his life?

"More like he won't play again with his reputation, especially since he's too close to retirement age. If he continues acting the cocky wild child so publicly, then he'll lose everything." Cody shakes his head. "I don't know why Dad's giving him a second chance after what he did to you in college but I do know that this is D'Angelo's last chance. I mean, that seems to be Dad's thing with the Bay Rebels. It's a team for players who need a shot at redemption, just like he needed, but no one ever gave him, remember?"

I place down the mug on the floor and nod.

Then I pull Cody into a hug because I know that he's being flooded with the same memories as I am.

A faint tremor is running through him.

Dad, Austin McKenna, was a pro player who won the Stanley Cup. Then he was caught in a scandal that tore apart his life and haunted Cody and me, as Austin raised us under its cloud.

Did Dad take up the job as coach of this new team to redeem himself, as well as to offer this chance to the other players as well?

"Why don't you stay here for more than a couple of days?" Cody offers. "Mike and I got the spare room ready for you. We talked about it and we really don't mind. We'd be happy for you to live here, until you're on your feet again."

I hug him closer.

"Thanks, Code. But I need to start feeling that as much as my life is a fucking shambles, it's *my* shambles. Neve has offered me a job as a server in Merchant's Inn, and the job comes with a room above the bar. I'm going to work there, until I figure something out that's more to do with my Public Relations Ph.D., hopefully. The one thing that Wilder couldn't do was stop me studying. But right now, serving pints sounds like heaven."

"Plus, Neve is the most fun person in Freedom."

"There is that. Of course, I also want to be somewhere that I can actually sleep. Have you stopped snoring yet or do you still sound like you're dreaming that you're a Harley?"

"Have you?" Cody pushes me away with a laugh, and I shove my hair out of my face. He peers at me closely. "As long as you're not avoiding this cottage because you think that it's going to be swarming, as soon as pre-

season starts next week, with hulking hockey players. I hate to break it to you, but in terms of hierarchy, I'm way below them. I'm useful but unglamorous, maybe above Seal, the mascot, but below their hockey sticks. They have a serious fetish for their sticks."

I choke on my tongue, trying hard not to imagine all the kinky ways that Wilder used his stick in bed.

The problem with Wilder is that he looks like an aristocratic Viking (and I hadn't realized that was possible but it is), is charming in the way that only secret narcissists can be, and is a freak between the sheets.

He hid the darker side of his personality for a long time.

I shake myself, struggling to push aside all thoughts of my ex and novel uses of hockey sticks. "Of course I don't think that they'll be invading your cottage after practice. It's Dad who's the coach."

"So, is that why you've been avoiding him?"

"Nope, that's more about avoiding his inevitable disappointment."

Cody's expression gentles. "Ryn, he's not disappointed in you. He's as relieved as I am that you've finally got away from that puckface."

"Puckface?"

"It's good to switch it up sometimes."

"Hmm. Let's simply say that Merchant's Inn is a town bar for locals, as far from the rink as possible. You know, it's comfortably rough and not the sort of place that those millionaire star players will go. I'll feel safe there. I've sworn off hockey for life. Wilder burned me, and it's taken a year to untangle myself legally from him. I'm not there emotionally yet. He's trying everything that he can to keep his claws in me."

Cody's gaze hardens. "He better not be giving you a hard time. I've been working out, and even if I may look like a pixie next to him, I'm feisty when someone threatens my sis."

It's true.

At high school, Cody used to take on gangs of kids who were two years older than himself to protect me.

He got his ass handed to him but still, it's the thought that counts.

He'd get his ass handed to him by Wilder as well, but I'll allow him the fantasy.

"I know you are." I grasp Cody's hand. "But I don't need anyone to fight my battles for me. It's why I have a personal rule about avoiding hockey players."

“Easier said than done in a town obsessed with the Bay Rebels and with pre-season training camp about to start with fifty-two hopefuls turning up.”

“But you don’t know about my secret weapon.”

I let go of Cody’s hand, dropping to my knees on the floor.

Cody watches me, bewildered.

I reach for the zip on my suitcase and tug on it for a humiliating amount of time, before I get it to open.

Then I throw open the suitcase.

The vibrator’s whirring is embarrassingly loud now. It also lies on the top of my clothes in a vivid neon green like an accusation.

Shit.

Why didn’t I at least bury it at the bottom of my bag?

Cody’s lips twitch like he’s trying very, very hard not to laugh. “Is that tentacle shaped? Fuck, it has suckers.”

Flushing, I scramble to cover the offending tentacle vibrator with my underwear.

Why did I have to pack my panties on top as well?

“Blame Neve for her book suggestions.” I search through the suitcase. “We have this book club, and the recommendations are more *Claimed by the Insert your Freaky Monster of the Week*, than *War and Peace*.”

“And *that’s* your secret weapon?”

“Nope.” I snatch up a thin, pretty book, which looks like a hockey strategy book in arctic blue and white with lines, arrows, and arcs on the front.

There’s also a crude puck and hockey stick.

I drew those.

I also wrote the scrawled words, which are along the top:

A GUIDE TO AVOID DATING HOCKEY PLAYERS

“Yes!” I clutch the book to my chest and dive to my feet. “This is my shield.” I toss it to Cody, and he catches it. He always had good hands. Lucky for me, since I suck at sports. “It’s a guide that explains all the reasons I should never, ever date a hockey player again, in case I slip.”

“You’re weird.”

“I know; it runs in the family.”

He laughs, flicking through the book.

Cody’s eyes widen. “You have photos in here and press clippings. There’s a whole section dedicated to D’Angelo. I mean, you’re not wrong

but...” He cocks his head as he reads out, “*To strengthen resolve, remember three things:*

1. *Their late-night training, canceled plans, and stinking hockey gear.*
2. *Your stalker NHL ex-husband with perfect abs but also, perfect lies.*
3. *D’Angelo.”*

I shift awkwardly, foot to foot.

Creating the book hadn’t seemed extreme at the time, but then, it’s cheaper than more therapy, right?

“I may have lost it a little over the divorce but then, arts and crafts are more constructive as a response to being cheated on than say, burning your ex’s favorite but hideous ties, drawing dancing dicks on his hockey stick, and sending screenshots of his most misogynistic messages to his mom.”

Cody smirks. “*Ouch. You did all those, didn’t you?*”

“I plead the fifth, but let’s just say that his mom was seriously pissed with her golden boy.”

Cody looks out of the window at the sea for a long moment like he’s struggling with himself. “Do you still love Wilder? It’s okay if you do.”

“Not even a little bit. I don’t think that I have for years.” It took a while to sort out my emotions from the hurt and devastation but then, when I realized that what I was mourning was a fake and that the marriage hadn’t been real in the first place, I knew that I didn’t love him. I’d been desperately holding onto the man and love from six years ago, when we’d first fallen in love. But I don’t think that he ever existed. “I started to fall out of love, when Wilder isolated me from my friends and family. I’m glad that I saw this side to him, before he became an even worse bully. I’m just relieved that despite everything, he couldn’t stop you from caring about me.”

Cody leaps up like he’s ready to take a swing at the imaginary Wilder. “No one could do that. If that asshole ex of yours comes into this town, however, then I’ll punch him in the dick.”

“See, drawing dicks on his stick wasn’t too bad.”

“I’ve heard that done as a hazing prank in teams but on their other stick.”

I pull a face. “Enough. Look at that book in your hand. Maybe I am ready to have some fun with a guy and start to get over Wilder. But it won’t be with a hockey player.”

Cody’s eyes glitter with amusement. “We’ll see. You’re a hockey

magnet, Ryn. How about a bet?”

I take a wary step backward, banging into the counter.

I wince, rubbing my ass. “Oh, no. I know you and your bets. They’re dangerous. Last time, I lost and ended up dancing on top of a table.”

“In only a tutu.”

I nod.

“Singing ‘Dancing Queen.’”

I nod again.

“In the middle of detention.” Cody salutes. “Just call me the King of Bets.”

I wag my finger. “Just think what Mike would say. You should have a bracelet made of that: What would Michael do? He wouldn’t approve of us at this age doing these kind of bets anymore.”

Cody winks. “Naïve, Ryn. You don’t know Mike as well as I do. But okay, how about a one dollar bet?”

Warily, I narrow my eyes. “What are we betting on?”

“You win, if you can go a single season without kissing a hockey player.”

Easy winnings.

I throw back my shoulders as I swagger toward Cody, outstretching my hand. “Done. This is like taking candy from a baby.”

“Pretty cocky, since you’ve never won a bet against me before.” Cody takes my hand, and we shake. “Just a single season. Let’s see how well your guide truly works. The moment that you break your rule, however, your dollar is mine.”

CHAPTER THREE



Merchant's Inn, Freedom

“*H*ey, Robyn Hood, get your ass over here with those beers,” Neve calls above the Emo-punk rock of Loveless’ “Happier Than Ever.”
“Coming, boss,” I reply and I’m not even being sarcastic.

Much.

Neve and I were best friends at high school. She still wears the emerald and silver friendship bracelet that I made for her. She didn’t make me one back because it wasn’t her type of thing. Yet I know how much it means to her because she doesn’t wear jewelry but she’s never taken that thing off.

I take a deep breath, before risking balancing the weighed down tray on my hand and weaving back through the crowded bar.

My nose scrunches up at the scent of smoke and stale beer.

It’s hot, and sweat trickles between my shoulder blades.

I’m dressed in a uniform of black jeans and t-shirt. My muscles ache, and my skin is sticky with spilled drinks.

It’s Saturday night and jumping in Merchant’s Inn.

The locals love this old, grungy slice of Freedom with its tacky floors, dance floor, and stained wooden walls that are covered with paintings of Neve’s favorite Emo bands like a shrine.

It’s a safe space with cheap beer, loud rock, and a couple of rooms for travelers. At the moment, Neve is allowing me to crash in one of them as part of my pay.

Except, I've already smashed three — or is it four? — glasses tonight. So, I don't know how much longer even she'll have patience with me. She doesn't need me. She's only giving me this job to help me out.

I frown at a hockey player who's standing in my way, and he startles.

How do I know he's a player?

He's over six foot with dark stubble and hair, built with muscles, but dressed in a suit that'd cost most locals a year's salary.

He may as well have skated in here, wearing his pads and jersey.

Why did these rookies, who are arriving for the training camp, have to find out about this local bar?

I was meant to be safe from them here.

I squirm around him, sliding the tray onto the chipped oak table in the middle of the leather booth in the corner.

Then I hurl myself down dramatically next to Neve.

Neve raises her eyebrow. "Did you need to go to the Arctic for the ice?"

"Shut up."

"Ballsy, telling your boss to shut up."

I give her the finger.

Neve sprawls on one side of the booth with her converse trainers resting up on the table. She's my age, and I'm so fucking proud that she stayed in a town that treated her like an outcast when we were young but ended up owning and running the best inn.

The only way to beat the haters is to succeed.

I guess an iron bar may work too.

So far, I haven't tried either, so I don't have comparative data.

Neve has chestnut eyes and spiky midnight hair. Large horn-rimmed glasses are pushed firmly on her nose. Her rich brown skin glows bronze on her cheeks. She's dressed in skinny jeans with a studded belt and Fall Out Boy black t-shirt.

One day, I want to turn into Neve with *cool don't give a shit* vibes.

Sadly, today isn't that day.

She snatches a bottle off the tray, before pointing it at me. "You suck at this job."

One of the things that I love about Neve is her bluntness.

She doesn't sugar-coat and she doesn't lie. It's refreshing after living with a man like Wilder, who smiles and flatters, while destroying you.

True family are those who can tell you that you look like shit to your

face.

Neve does that for me.

Cody leans across from the other side of the booth and picks up his order of a beer. "Take a break, Ryn."

I sag on the seat. My feet are aching.

I massage my calves, shooting him a grateful smile.

Michael sits with his arm possessively around Cody's shoulders. He always sits like that, and Cody always melts into his side.

Michael has purple shadows under his eyes and looks even more exhausted than me. It's late, however, and I bet that he's already worked a twelve hour shift at the hospital. He still comes out with Cody though because he's awesome like that.

I'm so relieved to see that Cody's marriage isn't the same as mine was.

Michael is in his late thirties. He's hot but stern with ebony skin and salt and pepper hair. He's dressed in a casual tan suit that's open at the neck.

He's just the kind of smart and steady man that Cody needs in his life.

He also has a sense of humor that's drier than a desert.

Fuck, don't think about Doctor Kink.

He looks confused, when I blush and avoid his eye.

Hurriedly, I snatch his whiskey off the tray and shove it at him. It sloshes over the sides and across his hand.

"Thanks, Ryn, my fingers were feeling thirsty." Michael shakes his hand, wiping it on a napkin.

Neve nudges me with her foot. "They're not the only thing that's thirsty."

"What...?" My brow furrows.

Then my heart sinks, as I notice Mr. Ice Hockey prowling toward me with a determinedly charming smile.

Only, I've seen that expression enough times on Wilder's face to see through it.

I scramble as far back as I can in the booth, slamming into Neve. Her beer's knocked into her lap.

"Fuck, RH," Neve hisses.

"Run, puck bunny, run." Cody laughs.

"Code," Michael warns with his patented disapproving tone.

"Time to put into place Maneuver Three. Remember what that is, Neve?" Cody's eyes glitter with amusement.

Neve sits up with a dangerous smile. "How could I forget, Code?"

“Wait,” I whisper. “Remember the rule: What would Michael do?”

Too late.

Just before Mr. Ice Hockey makes his move, Cody slips out of his side of the booth and slips in next to me.

Cody’s gaze meets Neve’s over my head, then they both slide their arms around me.

What are they plotting?

Mr. Ice Hockey freezes, hesitating.

Neve squeezes me tighter.

“Babe,” she says loudly enough to be overheard, “we all can’t wait to get you back and try out that thing we were talking about. You’re so fucking hot. And four is always better than one, especially when you’re trying out tentacles.”

I choke on my own tongue.

Then I elbow Cody in the side.

I knew that Cody would tell the others about that.

Brothers.

You love them, and sometimes, you want to shove certain things in their ass in revenge.

Cody looks like he’s trying as hard not to laugh, as Michael is.

“S-sorry. I’ll just...” Mr. Ice Hockey turns on his heel and disappears as fast as he can into the crowd.

We burst out laughing.

Cody shrugs. “You know, we’ll try that routine one day to protect my sister from some guy, and he’ll ask to join us.”

Michael huffs, taking a swig of whiskey. “Then I’ll tell that guy I’m a possessive, dominant asshole and don’t share. You three are trouble.”

Cody flutters his eyelashes. “It’s why you love me.”

Michael’s expression gentles. “I’m not denying it. Yet you appear to have forgotten your bet. Shouldn’t you be trying to get your sister to break it? Normally, you’re scarily ruthless.”

My eyes light up. I lean forward, resting my elbows on the table.

“Have you lost to Code as well?” I ask.

Michael looks flustered, ducking his head. “I may have done, on occasion. Until I became wise to the fact that he always appears to win, and the consequences are either dangerous or humiliating.”

I take a sharp breath, at the same time that my heart jumps at the image of

Doctor Kink being forced to stand on a hospital bed in front of his interns in nothing but a tutu skirt, singing “Dancing Queen.”

I hope.

Cody shoots me a devious look.

My brother scares me sometimes. I’m glad that he’s family and not my enemy.

Suddenly, my phone vibrates in my pocket, and I stiffen.

My heart speeds up. My breathing becomes ragged.

I ignore my phone.

Until it vibrates again.

I wish that I didn’t know who it was. Only, I do.

I force myself to pull out the phone and glance at the text.

THE MISTAKE (22:14): Hello, Birdie.

My adrenaline spikes. My pulse roars in my ears. I freeze but try not to react.

I renamed Wilder in my phone. It’s pretty accurate, although I was also torn between naming him that and **CAPTAIN TWO-FACE** or **THE WANDERING EYE**.

THE MISTAKE (22:15): Are you awake rn? Bc I can’t sleep without my Birdie. Do you miss me too? ILY

Feeling sick, I stuff the phone back into my pocket.

Part of the deal of me walking away with pretty much nothing to show from our marriage was no press attention on the whole mess because that would have destroyed me, as well as risked opening up a whole can of bad shit for my dad and Cody again, and neither of them deserved that.

Also, that Wilder would leave me alone.

Yet he can’t seem to stop himself texting every day.

I never reply, but the texts keep coming.

He acts like we’re still together. He always ends it with ILY: *I love you*.

I shudder.

I want to block him, but there’s this cold ball in my stomach that tells me if I do, then he’ll build himself into a narcissistic rage and do something even fucking worse.

He terrifies me.

It’s hard to admit but it’s true.

I want to rub Wilder’s touch away from my skin.

It’s lucky that tall, dark, and handsome Mr. Hockey Player was scared off

because right now, I'm desperate to feel desired by someone who doesn't call me *birdie* and lie even over text.

Neve's eyes crease at the side in concern, as she notices how quiet I've become. "Have you seen a ghost, RH? All I see out on that dance floor is a whole bunch of gorgeous but badly dressed people, dancing their asses off to forget that they can't pay their rents and hate their sucky jobs. But hey, here they can kiss and dance with who the hell they like. And there's a pretty little blonde over in that corner with the most badass smoky make-up, who has been making the most intense eye contact for the last minute with me, so I know who I'm spending the rest of the evening with, and it's not you guys. No offense."

Michael chuckles. "Some taken."

As Neve squeezes past Cody and me, I pat her on the shoulder. "Good luck."

She snorts. "With these curves, I don't need luck. Back to work."

I salute. "Yes, boss."

Cody smiles. "You're getting better at this."

I slide past him out of the booth, collecting my tray. "Liar."

"Well, you're trying and that's what counts."

"We're proud of you." Michael's voice is deep and filled with such warmth that my chest becomes tight.

My eyes prickle with tears.

I didn't know how much I needed to hear that.

Only, I know that I need to hear it from someone else. Yet I haven't been able to get myself to call Dad yet, and he hasn't called me.

I know that I hurt Dad, when I married Wilder.

Dad warned me about him because Wilder and his family already had a bad reputation within the sporting world. Wilder spun me a sob story about that, however, and I believed him.

After all the shit that the press put Wilder through, I wanted to give him a chance to prove that he was better than his family.

I still believe in redemption for people, even now.

Wilder kept me away from my family for six years, however, and Dad only had Cody and me. I tried to keep in contact as much as I could. But I don't know if Dad will understand that I didn't ignore him out of anger or that I didn't choose Wilder over him.

I need to call him, but it's hard.

I wind back to the bar, collecting more opened beers from Tom, the tiny but feisty bartender, to take to the far table.

Distracted, I turn back and slam straight into a muscled chest.

I knock the bottles over, spilling them down the man's crimson shirt.

"Shit, shit, shit." I scramble to clutch at the bottles and right them. "I'm so fucking sorry."

My heart pounds, and I struggle to slow my breathing.

The man helps me to right the beers, although more of the alcohol appears to be spilled down him than remains in the bottles.

I nudge the tray back onto the counter. Tom sighs, before starting to replace the beers.

I glance up at the man whose shirt I've wrecked, ready to apologize again.

Then the words die in my throat because fuck, he's six foot of hotness.

My heart sinks that I don't recognize him. He's not a local. Of course, that doesn't mean he's off-limits.

A lot of people come through here, and I've been away for six years.

Please, please, please don't let him be a hockey player.

My heart does a jig of delight that he's not wearing a suit.

In detective mode, I make a quick assessment.

He's not dressed like a typical NHL player.

Instead, he's wearing a motorcycle jacket over a punky red shirt and black jeans. He fits into Merchant's Inn, as if he was a local.

He's also six foot, which means that he's shorter than most players, and he's prettier too.

My hockeydar isn't pinging.

Do players have a bunnydar?

He looks a couple of years younger than me and his spun gold hair tumbles over the sharpest cheekbones and jawline that I've ever seen.

Maybe he's a model.

He's athletic with broad shoulders, and his skin is ice-white.

When he catches my gaze, I can't look away from his large, winter gray eyes, which are framed by butterfly lashes.

Hot and cold flushes through me.

Hell, I've been around Wilder and his star player friends for most of my life, and this guy still looks like a god.

One who's already making me fucking wet.

I've certainly made *him* wet.

Hurriedly, I snatch a pile of napkins off the bar top and dab at his chest. "Here."

He catches my hand between his to still me.

"Don't worry about it, love." His voice is like caramel. I flush even deeper pink. Plus, with relief, I realize that he's English and so, even less likely to be a player. If I want to have some fun tonight with him, then I can. *And isn't that a liberating thought?* "I'm happy to stink of beer, if it means that I'm being served by you. It could be a new trend."

I smile. "I've never heard that pick up line before."

I also didn't expect to hear *any* pick up line from him, especially after my clumsiness, but I'm not going to turn down my good luck.

"I've never been doused by beer and then felt up by a napkin." His sensual lips turn up at the side in a crooked smile. "Before I've even introduced myself too."

"Shit, sorry." I stop dabbing at his seriously hard chest.

My cheeks flame.

He chuckles, deep and rumbling.

It does something funny to my insides.

I throw my shoulders back, steeling myself.

I've been in a controlling relationship for five years and living by myself, while I fought to free myself for a further one.

I've felt alone for much of it.

I deserve to have some wild, no strings attached fun, damn it.

I need to prove that I can.

I need to move on.

"I'm Robyn," I offer.

"Shay." The man's eyes are winter gray, but his smile is like sunshine. It transforms his face. "I'm not stopping you from working, am I?"

"Nope, but she's stopping *me* from kissing the cutest nurse I've ever met, and that's fucking inexcusable." Neve shoulders her way across the dance floor toward me, her eyes flashing.

I'm screwed.

To my surprise, Shay stands in front of me protectively like a knight in front of the dragon, which is hilarious, because Neve is a dragon who could flame Shay's ass.

Neve puts her hands on her hips, examining the beer stain, which is down

the front of Shay's shirt. "I suppose you want to try and bill me for your dry cleaning."

Shay shakes his head. "I wouldn't dare."

I stifle my laugh, until Neve points at me. "That's the fifth accident tonight. It's a record. Let's just admit that you're not cut out for this."

Panic swells through me. My hands start shaking.

This can't be happening.

It's my first week in this job. I can't lose it.

How can I prove anything about my independent new life without it?

"I need this job," I say, as cold rushes through me. "I'm not above begging."

"In case you're wondering, neither am I." Shay runs his hand through his golden hair, and I notice that his nails are painted metallic gray, although the polish is chipped. He's jittering on the spot with nerves, as if it's *his* job on the line and not mine. "It was my fault. I stepped in front of her and surprised her. See? I'm willing to get on my knees."

Fuck, did he have to put that image into my head at a time like this?

There are so many things that I'd love to have him on his knees for.

Neve, unfortunately, doesn't look impressed.

She pushes up her glasses. "I know Ryn loves a man who'll get on his knees, but still, it's no good. That's the fifth customer today who'll go home drowned in beer."

"Neve," I try.

She grasps my hand. "Look, you have an awesome degree..."

"Ph.D.," I automatically correct. "After all the shit that the press pulled on my family, I wanted to be one step ahead. What better way?"

"Congratulations," Shay says. "I only have a bachelor's degree in astrophysics."

I stare at him. "Huh."

Shay runs his hand down his jacket. "What? Is leather not the right uniform for astrophysicists in America? I mean, this goes with my motorbike."

"Look, Mr. and Mrs. Nerd," Neve says, "I don't care how many degrees you hold between you, or if it's in rocket science or puppetry. You're clumsy as fuck, RH. This job doesn't suit you. You can stay in the room here for free, while you apply for roles that actually suit your skill set. But server isn't one of them. You're actually costing me money at this point. I love you,

Robyn Hood, but this is called tough love.”

She gives my hand a final squeeze, before turning and winding back to her blonde nurse.

I groan, collapsing against the bar.

I cover my head with my arms, battling to stop the tears that are burning my eyes from chasing down my cheeks.

I don't want to break down in front of everyone.

I know that Neve's right. She's brilliant at what she does, but I suck at it.

I need to find the right thing for me to shine at as well. I've spent so long thinking only about Wilder's needs that I've forgotten who I am and what my own needs are.

I need to start reclaiming them.

I sink even further, hunched over the bar, and my hair covers my face.

Suddenly, I feel a tentative hand patting my back.

“Are you okay?” Shay asks, gently.

Fuck, I forgot about my own hot blond.

I swallow, before forcing myself to turn my head.

I blow the hair away from my mouth. “I just got fired.”

“Yeah, I was there. I wish that I'd been able to help, love. If it makes you feel any better, I'm in this bar, without any friends, knowing nobody, in a new country, when I've never traveled outside England before. And now, I stink of beer.”

He forces a laugh out of me. I straighten, peering up at him.

We're standing close, and his scent of leather cocoons me.

When I look into his eyes, I can see that they're flecked with rich gold. They're beautiful and so warm that I feel lost in them.

“Funny, you don't sound upset about all that stuff,” I point out.

Shay's smile is bright. “Life's short, right? I'm not wasting a single heartbeat. If I can take joy in something, then I'm seizing it.”

I stare at him.

He's giving off serious golden retriever vibes. I wish that I could pat him. A golden retriever would like that, and he has such silky looking hair that it's irresistible.

Plus, I wish more than anything that I knew how to look at life like he does.

Perhaps, if I spend at least one night with a guy like him, then I'll be able to restart my life.

Free myself.

I'll be able to erase the feel of Wilder's touch on my skin and claim ownership of my body again.

I realize that I've taken too long to say anything, when Shay's shoulders slump.

"That was too much, right?" He cocks his head, and his hair tumbles over his eyes. "I've never learned how to mask myself."

"Don't." I reach for his hand. He looks at me in surprise. "If anyone wants you to pretend to be someone who you're not, then don't be with them. Take it from someone who knows."

He nods.

"But just for my peace of mind," I have to be hundred percent certain, before I take this risk, "why are you in Freedom?"

I hold my breath.

My heart hammers in my chest.

Please don't say for hockey.

I like Shay. That's so fucking rare. I don't want to lose this connection.

He hesitates.

Why the hell is he hesitating?

I drag my hand out of his, hugging my arms around myself.

Finally, Shay's expression softens. "For my brother."

I let out my breath in a whoosh of relief. "Okay."

"Okay? What were you thinking I'd say? To bury the bodies?"

Flustered, I look down. "It's a long story."

"Well, we have all night, or at least, until the bar closes, for you to tell me."

"Are you staying here as well?"

He nods. "I arrived this morning with my brother, Eden. I lived in Guildford before. But hopefully, this will be a new life for us. Sometimes that's what you need, starting again, even if it's bloody hard."

My chest is tight with recognition. I didn't expect to meet someone who could voice how I was feeling.

I swallow. "Amen to that."

What's Shay's story?

Is he running from something like me or toward it?

"Didn't Eden want to come down for a drink?" I ask.

Shay shifts from foot to foot like he can't decide how to answer. He

fidgits a lot, as if he needs to be on the move or struggles to stand still.

I have a feeling that he'll be an amazing dancer.

I hope that we get to dance. It's been a long time since I've wanted to dance with someone.

"Eden finds it hard around large groups of people," he finally replies. "Social anxiety. He's sleeping, but I don't sleep. Have you ever had insomnia, love? It's no joke. I love bars like this, however, and being a music fanatic, it's just my cup of tea. Scary as your boss is, she's a legend."

I grin. "She is."

Unexpectedly, I feel an arm wind around my shoulder.

I startle.

Michael is hugging me, awkwardly. He looks like he wishes that he could be anywhere but here.

Cody shoulders between Shay and me, even though he's smaller. He's spent his life fighting bullies, and I realize with horror that he's doing his Maneuver Three to scare off another player for me.

His hockeydar must be broken.

Shit.

Shay's expression is unreadable as he looks at Michael's arm and Cody's protective stance.

My stomach swoops.

"Come back to the booth, Ryn," Cody says. "We missed you."

Then he turns and leans up, kissing Michael on the lips, lingeringly.

"You three are together?" Shay asks.

"Indeed we are," Michael answers in the most stilted acting that I've ever heard.

"Hold up," I hiss, shrugging away from Michael. "I want to keep this one."

Shay blinks. "Why are you making me sound like a pet?"

"You mean," Cody gestures between himself and his husband, "you don't need this hotness protection barrier?"

Michael scrunches up his nose. "And why are you making *me* sound like a condom?"

"He doesn't break the rule. I don't need you, Code." I tip my chin at the booth and hope that Cody gets the message.

Shay looks even more confused. "Look, I'm okay with you guys being polyamorous. As long as it's okay with you and this fits with your

relationship, then I'm fine with this dynamic. I like Robyn and just want to spend some time with her."

Warmth unfurls through me.

Seriously, do they grow them all like this in England, or did I just get lucky?

Where did this gorgeous open-minded guy come from?

He's everything that Wilder isn't and he's everything that I need right now.

I itch to drag those plush, bow lips of his into a kiss, and do something far more wicked to his ass in those painted on jeans.

Cody's mouth falls open. "The unicorn. We've found the unicorn."

"I'm not in a poly group with them," I rush to explain. "He's my brother."

Shay's lips twitch, as he studies Cody. "Do you normally flirt with your sister? Is this a Virginian thing?"

Is it possible to want to self-combust from embarrassment?

Cody pokes Shay in the chest. "Don't hurt her, or I'll hunt you down."

Michael gives a long suffering sigh. "Come on, big, bad, wolf; we're crashing her date. Have fun and don't do anything that we wouldn't do, Ryn."

Cody winks. "Which isn't much."

I can almost see Michael's hand itching to swat my brother's ass.

Shay moves closer to me. "Can I put my arm around you, or is some other random relative going to seduce or threaten us? An uncle? Great Aunt?"

"No, we're fine."

When Shay slides his strong arm around my waist, I rest my head on his chest, and we begin to sway to the music.

My skin tingles, as he plays with my hair. I take a deep breath of his masculine leather scent.

He feels warm and solid.

Yet dangerous, beneath his sunshine.

"Over protective brother, huh?" He says.

"Just a bit."

"Don't worry, I have one too. If he wasn't so jet-lagged from our flight out here, then he'd have stayed up and checked in with me, since we're in a new country."

Shay's thigh slips between mine.

I can dance with him here, which I'm really fucking enjoying in the dark

of the grungy bar to the throbbing music, or I can follow through with what my heart, soul, and the heat between my legs is pulsing through me.

I want to fuck Shay tonight.

Fuck him, until I forget about the last six years.

Fuck him, until I remember the woman who I used to be, when I was his age and believed all the shit that he does about seizing life.

Fuck him, until I know who I am now.

Fuck him, until I can believe that I'm the most beautiful woman in the room, which is how he's looking at me now.

"I'm newly returned to town as well," I whisper, and he's the first stranger who I've been brave enough to tell. "My family and friends never left Freedom. They've moved on with their lives here and made something of themselves. They have their connected lives, stories, and anecdotes. But it doesn't contain me, or at least, not anymore. I left as soon as I could, when I was young and desperate to see the world. But that blew up in my face. So, now I'm back but I still feel more alone than I ever have."

I'm shaking.

I didn't expect to be, but then, I didn't expect to tell Shay all of that either.

He pulls me even closer into his embrace. "If I'm honest, love, my brother and I have always been alone, no matter where we've lived. But you snatch each moment and make sure that you at least feel alive in it. You chase the thrill." Then he leans down and murmurs, hot against my ear, "So, want to feel alone together between the sheets?"

I laugh, pulling away to look into his beautiful eyes; the golden specks catch the light against the gray. "Does that line ever work?"

Shay brushes his thumb down my cheek. "I don't know. I've never used it before. So, you tell me. Will it work, love?"

CHAPTER FOUR



Robyn's Bedroom, Merchant's Inn

*Y*ou're bloody beautiful," Shay murmurs.

Shay's breath is hot against my neck, as he drags me closer.

His arm has been slung around my shoulder, wrapping me in the scent of masculine leather, from the moment that we made our way up the stairs from the bar to my room.

Perhaps, he thinks that I'll make a run for it.

Weird because I have the same thought about him.

I haven't dated or brought a guy back to my room since college, and I'm holding onto the front of his jacket tightly.

With difficulty, unwilling to give up my gorgeous prize, I inch my arm out to slam the door shut behind us.

It cuts off the bar's grungy rock music, but the beat still pulses through my bedroom walls like a seductive heartbeat.

Too late, I realize that leaves us in the pitch black.

Shay pushes me against the wall with a slam, before kissing me passionately...or he tries to.

Instead, he misses and gives my forehead the kissing of its life.

We both laugh.

"How about a little light? Or am I so hideous to you that you intend to fuck me in the dark?" Shay's large hand slides between us, ghosting over my collarbone.

I shiver.

“No need to fish for compliments, Mr. America’s Next Top Model.”

Shay slouches, and I can feel his lips curve into a smile against my neck.

“I’m not tall enough to be a model.”

“Good things come in small packages.”

“Hey, no dick jokes.”

I chuckle.

Then I reach out tentatively to the whale shaped lamp, which perches on the chest of drawers next to me because I’m not putting on the main light and revealing my room in its full messy glory.

Yet I hesitate.

Somehow, being in the dark like this, with the press of Shay’s hard body against mine, it’s easier to tell him about my past.

It feels like I should.

I swallow down the wave of grief and pain, which is threatening to drown me at the memories.

To my surprise, Shay stops smiling and straightens.

He tentatively traces my face. “Are you okay? Do you want me to go?”

“No,” I yell, embarrassingly loudly, grabbing onto his sleeve like he’s a treat that I don’t want to give up. “It’s just that I got out of a bad relationship, and even though it’s been a year, I haven’t been with anyone in that time. You’re the first guy who I’ve wanted to...”

“Then you’re in charge here. You can ride me to get back in the saddle,” Shay replies with such ease that it takes away my breath. “Whatever you need from me, love. Just tell me.”

“I think that I simply need you to be yourself.”

“Oh.” The sound is driven from him: soft, surprised, and pleased. “Then my tongue wants to feel how wet you are for me.”

I moan at that irresistible image. I become even wetter than I was before, fumbling to press on the light as fast as I can.

The golden glow illuminates my small bedroom, which contains an oak chest of drawers by the door and a window that’s covered by emerald drapes, which match the covers on my sagging bed.

Most of the floorspace is piled with haphazard stacks of books and makeup.

Yet Shay doesn’t glance around at the mess. His intense gaze is only fixed on me.

He brushes a strand of hair away from my face. "There you are."

In the warm lamplight, Shay looks even more beautiful. It glows off his golden hair and sparks on the gold flecks in his large, gray eyes.

"Here I am," I reply, breathlessly.

He wraps his arms around my waist and hikes me to sit on the top of the chest of drawers. He rests his hands either side of me, and my breathing picks up.

He's stronger than he looks.

Something's knocked over behind me, rolling to settle by his left hand.

"Kinky." Shay arches his brow at me. "Shall we use this later?"

Horrified, I stare at the tentacle dildo, which Shay is now studying with interest.

Damn, that thing must be cursed.

Why didn't I hide it?

But then, it's not like I expected to bring a gorgeous English guy up here.

I blush. "That's not what it looks like."

Shay cocks his head. "Well, it looks like a monster vibrator. I don't know why you'd want to pretend. I mean, if I wasn't already so hard that I may actually break through my jeans, which would be impressive, I'd love to hear you try to come up with a list of innocent objects that this could be. Don't worry, I once played with a dildo shaped like a fox's tail. That was fun. But right now, I want to taste you. Is that okay?"

I love the way those sweet lips can just say things like that.

Sweet and filthy, what a combo.

"So okay." I deliberately nudge the dildo onto the floor.

To my shock, Shay slips one arm underneath my legs and another around my neck, before swinging me into his arms.

I cry out, looping my arms around his neck as well to cling to him.

Shay winks as he takes two strides across my tiny bedroom and throws me bouncing onto the bed.

Then he launches himself onto the bed too, laughing.

He lands next to me, as I'm still gasping for breath.

"A little warning next time." My heart's still beating like a humming bird in my chest.

I kind of like it.

I feel like I'm on a roller coaster.

"Where's the fun in that?" Shay wrinkles his nose and squirms next to

me. Then he pulls out a handful of my lacy bras, which were bunched underneath his back, and holds them up, including my favorite dancing cat one.

“My laundry,” I snap, snatching them from Shay and tossing them onto the floor.

“You have the same system as me, bed and then floor.” Shay stretches out on top of my sheets like he was always made to be there, athletic and lean.

I can’t look away from the pale sliver of skin that’s revealed, as his t-shirt rides up.

It’s probably the most erotic thing that I’ve ever seen.

“Don’t complain, if I lose you under my unsorted socks then,” I warn.

Shay stretches even more indolently like a cat; I long to stroke along the delicious curve of his neck. “My brother calls me the least organized man in England. I could lose my motorbike or not be able to find my phone in my own pocket. Eden takes the piss because I forget to eat but then, I remember to buy in his favorite flavor of chocolate ice cream and Earl Grey tea.”

“It’s easier to take care of someone else’s needs, if you care about them than your own.” My stomach is tied in knots. “At least, for me.”

Shay’s look is too knowing, as he turns on his side and reaches out to grip my chin. “How about we both look out for the other’s needs then, love?”

He pulls me in for a kiss, which is tender with understanding.

When he draws back, our gazes meet for a long moment.

“This tea drinking brother of yours won’t be worried that you’ve been kidnapped, if you don’t come back tonight, will he?” I ask.

I want Shay, desperately.

I’m shaking with desire, lying next to him like this.

But I need to check.

“Should he be worried? Is this role play?” Shay’s face brightens. He holds out his hands dramatically with the wrists pressed together like he’s waiting to be arrested...or tied up. “Go on then, get out the ropes. I’ll be a good prisoner, Madam Kidnapper.” Then he whispers with a voice like melted caramel, “I could fucking come untouched at the thought of being at your mercy...or wouldn’t you have any mercy?”

“Showoff.”

Only, that’s an idea I’m filing away for later.

Or maybe not for later.

This is my night to take risks, and Shay is offering me this.

So, I'm going to take it.

I push Shay gently in the chest, and he throws himself onto his back on the bed like I've shoved him harshly.

He's really getting into this.

Then he holds his hands above himself, lacing his fingers together.

He's played like this before.

"That depends on you." I ghost my hand over his crotch, and his breath catches. "How mouthy are you going to be?"

"My mouth is my best feature."

True.

Well, tied with his ass.

I palm the outline of his hard cock, and his breathing becomes ragged. But he doesn't break position.

I'm impressed.

"I meant it about Eden though. I don't fancy having the door broken down by an overprotective brother mid *kidnap*. It's the kind of thing that mine would do."

Has done.

"So, I'm staying the night, am I?" The surprise and hope in Shay's voice takes me off-guard.

How many women have the willpower to fuck Shay and then kick him out of bed afterward?

Not this one.

I lean over him, cupping his cheek. "If you want."

"Of course. Anyway, I messaged Eden, when we were coming up the stairs. Eden and I have this system, if the other one is staying out."

"Uh-huh."

"It's just a single emoji. That way, we can type it quickly."

I narrow my eyes. "You mean *secretly* so that your partner doesn't see. Hmm, my mercy is waning. Do I want to know? A lollipop, open hand plus peach, or a rocket ship?"

Indignant, Shay almost breaks position, before settling back with a sulky look that I want to kiss off him. "You make me sound like an emoji psychopath. I'd need to have premeditated what sex act we were going to indulge in, whereas I like to meet the desires of the woman. Their pleasure is what gets me off."

I believe him.

“What was it then?”

“Smirking face.” *Of course it was.* Shay gives me a hard look that tells me just how dangerous he still is, even if he’s pretending to be my prisoner right now. “I didn’t miss you signaling to your friend and brother across the bar as well, before you left. Neve’s signal back was interesting. Was it an impressively good *licking an ice cream* impression?”

I groan, covering my face.

Fuck Neve and her novel way of moral support through encouraging BJs.

Shay reaches over and urges my hand away from my face. “I get it. We only met tonight. We’re strangers.”

“Then let’s stop being strangers,” I say, as determination steels my expression.

Before I can second-guess myself, I run my hand through his hair like I’ve been longing to.

Shay’s breath catches, and he pushes into my hand.

He likes that.

So, experimentally, I tighten my hold.

“Okay?” I check in.

“More than,” Shay replies. “I won’t break, love.”

He stares up at me with challenge in his eyes.

I take that for the permission that it is, tugging at his hair.

He whines in the most satisfying way that goes straight to my core.

So, I do it again.

Shay’s pupils dilate. “You have me, Madam Kidnapper. So, what will you do with me? Don’t you think that it’s hot in here? Inhumane conditions.”

He glances significantly down at his clothes.

I smirk.

Well, he definitely likes to top from the bottom. But since I’ve wanted to undress him almost from the moment that I saw him, I’m not turning down that offer.

Because it *is* an offer.

“If you behave, then you can earn better ones.” I yank him to sit up by his hair, and he hisses. I shove his jacket off his shoulders. It pools like a black snake’s skin on the bed beneath us. “Why don’t you undress and cool down?”

He arches his brow. “How kind.”

When I finally let go of his hair, I adore how messed up he already looks. Also, how he doesn’t reach up to smooth down his hair but leaves it like he

loves being molded into my toy.

Yet he's confident as he unbuttons his shirt, before bundling it between his hands and hurling it to join my bras on the floor. "I do need to get out of this damp shirt."

All of this did start because I drowned him in beer. Who knew that was the best way to pick up a guy?

Shay's gaze becomes half-hooded. "Now I understand that it was all part of your wicked plot to get me up here."

I grin. "It works every time."

He stills, glancing around the small room. "Wait, I'm just your latest prisoner? Where have you stashed the others? Under the bed?"

I trace my finger over his lips. "I let them go in the morning. And aren't you meant to be pleasing me with this pretty mouth of yours?"

Shit, I could never have said that to Wilder.

Wilder was adventurous but obsessed with a toxic masculinity view of himself that meant growling, grunting, and pushing *me* to my knees.

Shay's playful. I've never actually had fun like this in bed before.

And no one has considered my needs during sex.

This is a revelation.

I wet my dry lips, as Shay reveals his muscled chest and toned abs. His skin is porcelain, unmarked. I can't help reaching out and running my finger along his pecs, feeling the muscles jump at my touch.

Shay's breath hitches.

He looks like the perfect canvas.

I ease my other hand over his shoulder, and he holds himself still like if he moves, he'll break this spell.

His skin is soft but taut over corded muscle.

I hunger to mark it to prove that tonight is real.

I tighten my hold.

"I did say that I'd get down on my knees." Shay's voice is husky. "Do you still want that?"

"So fucking much."

When I let my hands fall to my sides, he scrambles off the bed eagerly, dropping to his knees next to it.

The look that he shoots me with his large eyes melts me.

I'm surprised that Shay doesn't move to take off his jeans. I'm used to a man who made everything about his cock.

Wilder came first, every time.

I rarely come vaginally, or at least, without my clit being stimulated too.

To start with, when we were dating, Wilder would put in the effort to make sure that I came after he did, but in the last few years of our marriage, he usually didn't bother.

Once, I even drew him a diagram of a woman's erogenous zones, including clit, mouth, ass, shoulders, lower back, and nape of the neck, but he just gave me the silent treatment for the next month in response.

And didn't touch me anywhere.

Now, Shay isn't even touching himself, focused only on my pleasure.

It's intoxicating.

He looks fucking hot on his knees.

He tilts his head. "Don't you think that you should take off your pants? You're the kidnapper, but I can't get to work otherwise and I can't wait to suck on your little clit."

I've never taken a pair of pants off so fast.

I hurl the pants and underwear across the room, and they hit the wall. Then I slide to the edge of the bed, feeling the sheets cool against my bare ass.

"Here," Shay's staring with a piercing focus at my pussy, which makes me shiver, "put your legs on my shoulders."

He snatches my ankles and eases them up onto his shoulders, yanking my ass to the very edge of the bed.

His head is close to my pussy now, and it's intimate in a whole new way.

Shay's breath ghosts against my inner thigh, as he turns to feather kisses on the sensitive skin there.

My pulse speeds up.

"You promised that I could get back into the saddle by riding you." I clamp my thighs around Shay's head, and his eyes become glassy. "So, I'm going to ride your face. You won't be able to say a safe word. So, tap my thigh three times, if you need me to stop."

Shay kisses my thigh again. "See, you're a kind kidnapper. Aren't I lucky?" He glances up at me through his thick lashes, then he swipes out his tongue. "Especially as you're one who's dripping wet for me."

"Fuck..."

How can Shay look so in control, when he's the one who's kneeling?

I feel too hot. Pleasure begins to spiral through me.

Shay nudges my legs wider, licking a stripe down the center of my pussy.
I moan.

Shay flattens his tongue and dips it between my folds with more fervor.

Breathing hard, I wind my hands into his hair. “Remember to tap out, if you need to.”

He nods against my pussy, deliberately brushing his nose against my clit.
I arch off the bed.

Gasping, I drag his head even more firmly between my thighs, as his hands rest loosely on top of my knees.

Shay curls his tongue, pressing it into me.

Then I drag him where I want him to be, chasing my own pleasure. I feel him groan with desire as well.

He’s devouring me with a devotion like worshiping me is his favorite thing.

As if he has something to prove.

Ecstasy coils through me.

He keeps his hands on my knees, although they’re curling and uncurling like it’s a struggle for him not to reach down and relieve the pressure building in his own balls and throbbing in his dick.

Yet he doesn’t touch himself.

He’s making this all about what I need and he’s secure in himself enough to offer me this.

That thought is almost enough to make me come.

My skin goosebumps.

I drag Shay back by his hair to let him draw a desperate breath.

I love the way that he licks over his shiny lips like I taste of nectar and he doesn’t want to be deprived of a single drop.

His eyes look dazed.

“You look amazing between my thighs.” I stroke his cheek. “I’m almost fucking there.”

“Then I’ll try harder.” Shay dives back, licking and sucking with even greater devotion.

“Fuck, fuck, yes.” I throw back my head, clutching the sheets between whitened knuckles. “There, just...”

Shay circles my clit with his tongue, before sucking, *hard*.

And just like that, ecstasy crashes over me.

I howl, trembling.

And I do have the best orgasm of my fucking life.

Shay works me through it, until I'm trembling with oversensitivity.

Then he sits back, and I feel fuzzy and sated.

I smile as I stare at this beautiful man, who's still kneeling in front of me.

"Okay?" Shay asks.

"Yeah. What about you?"

"Perfect, love. You're gorgeous, when you're wrecked."

I hold my arms out to Shay. "Let's lie down for a moment and—"

"Hey," Shay crosses his arms, "it's time for round two."

Startled into alertness, I stare at him. "Already?"

"What kind of prisoner would I be, if I only gave you one orgasm? I can't have that reputation getting out about me. This is a whole night kidnapping, right?"

I laugh.

Well, I did want a wild night.

There's nothing holding me back now from trying new things.

I jut out my chin. "Right."

Shay's grin becomes wicked, however, as he stalks to his feet. "Except, what kind of prisoner would I also be, if I couldn't slip my bonds and turn the tables on my beautiful kidnapper?"

My eyes widen. My heart speeds up.

Okay, I like where this is going.

A lot.

Shay pretends to snap the ropes around his wrists. His eyes flash in a way that would look dangerous, if he wasn't also jittering with excited energy.

I put on my best feigned damsel impression that isn't conning either of us. "Help! I'm all vulnerable and shit to the good guy turned bad."

"Maybe it's not the best idea to shout that loudly enough for other guests to hear. Otherwise, I'll end up spending my first night in Freedom having *lost* my freedom and wearing handcuffs, as I try to explain to the police that I'm not a criminal, instead, I'm just kinky."

I muffle my laugh, before calling out loudly, "And I'm *enthusiastically consenting*."

"Better." Shay slowly unbuttons his pants, and my mouth waters. "Now, turn around and bend over the bed. Bite the sheets because I'm going to fuck you so hard that you're going to scream my name." I shiver at the gleam in his eyes, as he murmurs, "And we don't want anyone hearing us, remember?"

Unless, you want them to...? Because personally, I like the idea of the whole bar knowing who fucked you all night.”

I swallow, hurriedly bending over the bed.

I clutch onto the sheets, biting into them with a defiant chomp.

Behind me, Shay chuckles.

My skin prickles, as his fingers push up my t-shirt, bunching it at my neck, before they stroke down my spine. Then he uses his foot to nudge my legs wider.

“Push your ass up for me, love.” He draws his thumb down my cleft.

Now, I’m glad that my burning face is buried in the sheets.

I widen my legs, as he runs his hands down my ass admiringly. I hear him rummage in his pocket, followed by the rip of a condom being opened.

So, nice to know that he’s always prepared.

I doubt that he was ever a Scout though.

When Shay rests his hands on the hollow of my back, my breath catches.

“You’re beautiful, love.” Shay’s voice is low and reverential. “You’re like a flame sprung to life. I can’t wait to fuck you and make you feel as good as you deserve to.”

Something about his words strike me hard inside.

I don’t know why, but suddenly, my eyes are burning with tears.

Yet I’ve never felt so good or valued before.

I bite even harder onto the sheets. I’m glad that he can’t see my face.

I don’t want him to stop. I need this.

I feel free.

It’s like the ropes around me are being cut as well.

“Fuck me,” I mumble around the sheet gag in my mouth.

“I can do better than that.” Shay fucks into me in one long, hard thrust that pushes me onto my toes and rocks the bed. My gasp is muffled. He must be huge, but I’m so wet that I can take him. No one has ever been this deep inside me. I feel stretched, but it’s perfect. He waits a moment for me to adjust. “I can make you come, over and over, *and fucking over again.*”

Then he begins to piston into me, hard.

The pleasure is relentless.

Overwhelming.

I ride its wave, lost to it.

I scream into the sheets, as Shay promised that I would, and it’s like letting go and stepping off a cliff with no harness at the same time.

This is the best sex of my fucking life, and suddenly I know, that I never want to lose this feeling.

I don't want to lose Shay.

But what if this — what we have — is only for one night?

CHAPTER FIVE



Robyn's Bedroom, Merchant's Inn

*W*hen light filters through my windows in the morning, I yawn, sitting up.

But the space in the bed next to me is cold.

Shay is gone.

Disappointment washes over me, and I groan.

Of course, he is.

I knew it.

Shay doesn't feel real like my overactive imagination thought him up.

Last night — the whole night, until we both fell into an exhausted, sated sleep, tangled together in the early hours — feels like a beautiful dream.

Confused, I grasp at the sheets that are tucked underneath my chin. I never sleep with them neatly around myself like this. I wake up most mornings like a drunken starfish on the mattress, while the sheets are bunched below my waist or thrown off altogether.

Did Shay take the time to make sure that I was covered, before he left?

Warmth curls through me. I stroke over the sheets like I can still feel the heat of his fingers on them.

I sigh.

Back to reality, where I have no job and need to work out what I want from this new life.

Only, I feel more energized for facing that than I have for a long time.

Shay's philosophy on life, and the way that he found it in focusing on others' joy and pleasure, resonated in an unexpected way.

I think that being able to talk to a total stranger (who isn't my therapist), someone who didn't know me or anything about my situation, helped as well.

Shay was like a breath of fresh air, and hell, he's made me feel like I can breathe again.

More than that, it was one mind-blowing night and it's awoken me to what's possible with my own body.

I'll always be grateful to Shay for that, even if he has slipped out the morning after without a word.

Perhaps, it's better to keep it to one night anyway.

I bite my lip.

Back in college, D'Angelo and I set up a sports charity together for disadvantaged kids in the local high school, which encouraged university sports stars to coach the kids as volunteers.

We spent most of our free time working there because D'Angelo was a good guy for the first two years of college. The best. He always used his sporting talent to help others.

At least, that was before he turned into the world's biggest dick.

Wilder only gave to charity, I discovered after our marriage, if there was a gala that he could be seen at by the press.

Perhaps, I should look into giving something back like my original charity with D'Angelo?

At least, as soon as I have my own life a bit more sorted out.

I roll onto my side, before cringing at the sight of my bedroom in the morning. My laundry hangs off the books on the floor like seaweed and dirty wine glasses war with coffee mugs for space on my bedside table.

I groan, dragging myself to sit up.

I run my hand through my hair, which is sticking up wildly. I ache in all the right places.

I smile happily, running my thumb over the finger sized bruises, which litter my hips. It's nice to know that I didn't totally fantasize last night.

Then I catch a glimpse of my dancing cat bra, which has been pinned under a wine glass on my bedside table. One of my favorite crimson lipsticks lies open next to it, ruined.

Confused, I drag out the bra and dangle it in front of myself, before I gasp.

A phone number has been scrawled on the bra with the lipstick, as if the cats are now partnered by 6's and 0's.

The number is followed by the messily scrawled **xxx**.

Shay.

Instantly, I'm grinning so widely that my mouth hurts.

I'm still going to spank Shay's gorgeous ass for wrecking two of my favorite things, although I'm definite he'll enjoy that.

Who the hell leaves their phone number on a bra?

I glance around my room, which has nothing as sensible in it as a pen and paper.

Also, I have to respect a guy who'd ruin a bra and lipstick, rather than desecrate a book. Those are the types of *Hunger Games* choices at dawn, which most potential boyfriends would fail.

Creative.

Plus, determined.

I hug the bra to my chest, careful not to smear the lipstick.

Then I glance around myself hurriedly for my phone because if I don't make sure that Shay's number is stored somewhere safer, I'll end up scooping the bra in with the laundry and washing away my only way to contact the guy with the sunniest smile and sexiest ass.

After all, I forgot to even ask Shay his last name.

I could go room to room, asking after the *English sex god* but I don't fancy meeting this over protective, tea quaffing brother of his yet.

He sounds intense.

I glimpse my pants, which I remember ripping off and throwing to the far side of the room.

I slip off the bed and hop over the books to reach my pants. Then I crouch down, reaching into the pocket for my phone.

Unlocking the phone, I think for a moment, before adding Shay's number under **SEXY PRISONER**.

The phone vibrates, and I throw myself back onto the bed, pulling the covers under my chin, before I glance at it.

NEVE (08:03): Did you? *winking face*

I blink.

RH (08:04): Did I what?

When she sends an ice cream emoji, I laugh.

Then I reluctantly reach over the side and snatch a clean pair of panties

off the floor, working them up my legs.

RH (8:05): Can't you just say BJ?

NEVE (8:06): No. *Ice cream* Y/N

I remember the delicious taste of Shay's heavy cock on my tongue and how I held his hips down, insisting that he not move — just here on these sheets — as I took my time to explore every gorgeous inch of him.

I'd been in control, despite being the one between his thighs and working to make him come.

Again and again...

I'd loved it.

So had he.

Suddenly, I realize that I've taken far too long to reply.

It's an incredible memory, and I feel breathless.

RH (8:10): Yes. But he's gone now

NEVE (8:11): I have his room key. Do I need to...?

Then there's a chain of emojis that can only mean *get stabby on his ass*.

At least I think that the three knives, blood, and peach mean that.

I hope that they do.

Because otherwise, Neve could be planning to burst into Shay's room and follow through with a new kink that I don't know about.

She does read a lot of dark romance.

I grab a lacy bra from the floor, check it via the sniff test, then wriggle into it.

RH (8:12): No. He's a good guy

For a long moment, Neve doesn't reply, and my guts churn that she's storming to his room to do something to his peachy ass.

His ass is all mine.

NEVE (8:15): You like him. You lost the bet *kissing face*

My eyes widen. "Hey, no."

Indignant, I clutch the phone hard enough for it to creak, typing frantically fast.

RH (8:16): He's NOT a

I send her the emoji of a hockey player: Stick and puck.

It's bittersweet because Wilder would send that to me to mean that he wouldn't be home for dinner or had to cancel our plans because of training.

He sent it a lot.

I was understanding, of course. I was always supportive of his career

because all partners of players need to be.

Except, then I discovered that lots of those little symbols had been times that he'd actually been fucking other women.

I shake my head to clear it of those memories.

Shay isn't Wilder.

I haven't broken my rules.

My gaze shoots to my blue and white *Guide to Avoid Dating Hockey Players*, which is on top of the pile of books by the door.

I'm proud of myself.

It worked.

The phone vibrates again.

NEVE (8:18): Tell me more about his...

I've only just started to read the message, however, when the phone rings.

I knew that Neve would want all the filthy details. I thought that she'd at least wait, until I had a coffee in my hand.

I hurl myself back onto the middle of my bed, closing my eyes, as I drag the phone to my ear. "Look, he was the best fuck of my life, okay?"

"Was he, Robyn?" A gruff voice demands.

I sit bolt upright. My eyes fly open.

"Dad!" I squeak.

Shit, shit, shit.

The color drains from my face.

My heart speeds up, and I flail for a moment, dragging the covers up to my neck, as if Austin's actually strolled into the room.

After a moment, I force myself to relax my stiff shoulders, when I remember that he can't see me.

I call this parental stealth calling.

"So, who is he? This man?" Austin presses.

Dad is more dogged than anyone I know.

"Just some guy." I wet my dry lips. Fuck that sounds worse. "No one."

Sorry, Shay.

Dad is a lot, since the whole thing with Wilder, and I won't bring him down on Shay's head, when we haven't even had an official first date yet.

Giving me his number via lipstick on a bra isn't exactly agreeing on full relationship labels.

Shay is better kept in the shadows, until I at least know that there's definitely something concrete there between us to be managed. And when

you have a family as famous — or infamous — as mine, then it *does* need to be managed.

“As long as this *nobody* isn’t one of my players,” Austin growls.

I give an awkward laugh. “Nope, no chance, never.”

“That’s a lot of protesting for someone without a guilty conscience.” Dad almost sounds amused.

He has no idea the state of my conscience after the things that I got up to last night.

Actually, I don’t regret them at all.

So, in that case, I feel angelically wicked.

Austin’s voice hardens, “I’m not kidding. My team are a week away from the start of training camp, and you know that puts them through hell. I don’t have any control over what you do and I’d never try to act like that piece of shit ex of yours. But I’m just telling you that my players need their heads in the game to get through pre-season and gain their places on the team. Sleeping with the coach’s daughter is something that they don’t need.”

Yeah, because Austin would kick their asses right off the team.

He doesn’t add it, but I know it.

We’ve both had enough intrusive press in our lives, and a scandal that draws attention to both of us and the Bay Rebels, could be devastating.

“I get it,” I say, gently. “Don’t worry, I’ve sworn off all hockey players. Ask Code. The guy last night was a scientist.”

Austin whistles. “Smart, huh? You’ll have a lot in common then. I was so proud of you, when you got that Ph.D., Robyn.”

I glow, smiling. “Thanks, Dad.”

I look down because this is the conversation that I’ve been dodging. “Look, I’m sorry. I know that I’ve been avoiding your calls. This last year, you wanted to fly out and be with me, and I said no. I wasn’t ready to face anyone else yet. It wasn’t about you. I was a mess. I’m *still* a mess.”

“I heard you were fired last night,” Austin says, brusquely.

I grit my teeth.

Thanks, Neve.

“Good talk, Dad.” I bang my head against the headboard. “I think we really sorted through our deep issues and—”

“Emotions aren’t my type of game,” Austin replies. “You needed space. I gave it to you. The end. Freedom is your home, however, and I always want you to feel comfortable here. This is where you belong. Now, you’re out of a

job, and I've got an offer for you, which suits your degree better than serving beers."

My eyes widen.

He can't mean with the Bay Rebels, right?

Please, no.

I'm trembling but I tilt up my chin. "I don't need—"

"You do."

"I don't want—"

"Dress smart and that means in a suit," Austin orders. "Come to Rebel Arena for a meeting in one hour. Hear what I have to say. I don't give handouts to my kids, both Cody and you know that. This isn't charity. I have a role that only you can do, which could save the Bay Rebels this season. This is your second chance."

CHAPTER SIX



Rebel Arena, Freedom

*S*mooth down the front of my ivory suit's skirt. My green shirt is wrinkled, since I haven't had time to iron it. It's too hot to wear a jacket.

This is power dressing, right?

Part of me wants to stand up to my dad and turn down this mysterious job, no matter how persuasive he is. On the other hand, part of me is intrigued about taking a job that uses my PR knowledge.

I love hockey.

I was raised on it and I've spent five years living in the world of the NHL. It's only the players who I'm trying not to fall for again.

What if this job offer, however, truly is my second chance?

Despite myself, excitement tingles through me at the sight of the arena. It's a familiar anticipation for the thrill of the incredible game, which has always stolen my heart.

I lift up my chin, straightening my shoulders.

I can do this.

Except, possibly I can't.

I narrow my eyes, squinting through the morning sunshine at the journalists and paparazzi who are huddled around Rebel Arena's entrance.

So much for my relaxing walk through Freedom this morning, which I'd been enjoying, despite the light drizzle that's dampening my hair and

plastering it against my neck.

Is it still power dressing, if you look like a drowned rat?

I guess that this is my first test.

Are the press here because of me?

Have they already learned that I'm back in Freedom?

I swallow, as my heart beats uncomfortably fast in my chest.

Did Wilder tip them off? But how did they know that I'd be at the arena?

Dad wouldn't use my return as a PR stunt, right?

Actually, he would.

I clench my jaw and march toward the vultures.

"Do you know, if you keep sticking that camera in my face, then I'll see whether I can hit it just as far as I can a puck," a lazy drawl says from behind the wall of journalists.

I freeze, and my heart leaps into my throat.

I'd know that cold, commanding voice anywhere.

D'Angelo.

Plus, I know that tone.

D'Angelo's like a cat in that moment before they claw.

Shit, I have to rescue this, before his career ends in front of my eyes.

It'll wreck the Bay Rebels, if this explosion happens before the pre-season even begins.

So, the press are here for D'Angelo, rather than me.

They're really hounding him.

An unwilling sympathy coils through me, before I quash it.

If he didn't keep giving them the reaction that they want because it's the perfect clickbait, then they'd get bored and leave him alone for their next victim.

They're loving the chance to tear down the star.

I sigh.

I better go save the asshole.

Struggling on my high heels, I rush toward the pack of what I call *glorified stalkers*.

The paps part for a moment but don't stop yelling at D'Angelo, trying to get him to lose his temper, and I catch a first glimpse of the man all grown up who I haven't seen in real life since college.

My breath hitches.

Secretly, I've watched all his matches.

Wilder was D'Angelo's rival in college and would have flown into a jealous rage, if he'd known.

Yet in person, D'Angelo looks even more angelic, even if I know that he's closer to the devil.

It's unfair.

D'Angelo's six foot three with olive skin and piercing ice blue eyes that are so frosty they make me shiver. Raven curls frame his strong face, although his square jaw right now is covered with the scruff of stubble.

It makes him look even hotter, as if he's been up partying all night and hasn't been to bed.

Actually, I suspect that's true.

His long, woolen coat is the same arctic blue as his cashmere scarf and lies open over an elegant, designer navy suit and waistcoat.

He definitely doesn't have wrinkles in his shirt.

Now, *that's* how to power dress.

For a long moment, I fall under the same spell that he cast on me at college.

My skin tingles.

I crave to run to him and feel his strong arms around me.

I long to have D'Angelo look at me like he used to.

Soft.

Tender.

Loving.

But then, I remember.

He was once my friend but now, he hates me.

It was never a real friendship. He only used me for my name and connections to my dad to start his career.

And that makes him worse than Wilder.

I steel myself, and my gaze hardens.

"Melanie from the Peninsula Daily News." A woman, who's my age, pushes herself forward.

I struggle to stop myself growling.

Melanie was the Queen Bee and mean girl in my class at high school.

Typical.

She's dressed in a flannel jacket and pink jeans. Her hair is streaked with silver. When she smirks at D'Angelo, I don't know whether he can tell that it's the exact look that I'd imagine a snake gives a mouse, before it devours

it.

“I know who you are.” D’Angelo arches his brow. “What was that delightful headline with the tell-all, which you wrote about me last week? *Pucking the Playboy?*”

He sounds cool, but his eyes are blazing.

He’s making this worse.

Melanie sticks her microphone in D’Angelo’s face. “That was a fortnight ago. Last week’s was a direct quote from your friend, Wilder Talon: “D’Angelo, The Loser Captain of The Misfits”.”

Wilder, the dick.

I wince, shoving my way through the journalists, who are laughing and calling out *D’Angelo* or *loser*, *this way, this way, look over here*, all trying to get the best reaction shot to D’Angelo being called *loser* to his face.

Especially since the insult’s from Wilder, the man who everybody knows D’Angelo has an on and off the ice rivalry with.

I need to get to D’Angelo right fucking now, before he says something like...

“I may lose games,” D’Angelo gives an icy smile, thrumming with such dominance that it makes even Melanie shrink back, “but at least I haven’t lost my wife.”

At the same moment, I stumble to the front of the group, catching my foot on a tripod and falling into D’Angelo’s arms.

The photographers click their cameras in a flurry of flashes, getting their perfect photo to go viral, while the journalists get their quote for the headlines.

D’Angelo stares at me in horror, freezing.

My chest is tight. My pulse is roaring in my ears.

...At least I haven’t lost my wife...

D’Angelo smells of whiskey, and his body feels warm against mine. He’s held me in his arms so many times in the past to comfort me, and this feels familiar.

Yet anguish makes me shake.

I should have known that D’Angelo would *use* me again, this time in his war against my ex-husband.

Hockey is all that matters to D’Angelo.

I need to remember that he always puts it first; he’s obsessed.

He’ll never change.

D'Angelo's smile fades. "Robyn, I didn't know..."

The journalists around us are catching every word.

I force myself to blank my expression and shrug myself out of D'Angelo's arms. He doesn't appear to be able to school his expression in the same way, staring at me like I'm a ghost.

"We should go inside." I nudge his arm.

"I've been trying to," he replies. "But I'm a little outnumbered here."

I glance around us. We're encircled.

How has the situation with press got so out of hand?

I reach up and snatch D'Angelo by his scarf. He bristles, letting out a startled sound.

I turn and start to march through the journalists. "Excuse me."

I know that they're watching me tow the team's captain through their ranks like he's on a leash, but their shock means that they part for us, allowing us through to the doors of the rink.

Plus, when I think about it, I can spin pictures of the coach's daughter turning up and taking charge of the wild boy captain.

It may even distract from everything that D'Angelo's said or done.

I smirk, tugging just a little harder, and D'Angelo stumbles against my back.

At least we're a fair distance away from the press now.

"Robyn," D'Angelo says, quietly, "I didn't know that you were back in Freedom."

I don't reply.

He truly has no idea when to keep his mouth shut.

He prods me. "Don't ignore me, principessa."

I stiffen.

He better not think that he can still call me that, even if it does make me battle not to smile.

He leans even closer. "I need to tell you—"

"You need to learn when silence is the best answer. Two words that I may write in permanent marker on your forehead: *No comment*," I hiss over my shoulder, tightening my hold on his scarf. "Now, practice that silence. I don't want your apology."

Unexpectedly, D'Angelo yanks on his half of the scarf, wrenching it out of my hold and taking me by surprise.

I twist around, as he fusses over the scarf, straightening it like I've

contaminated it.

“Apologize? Hardly.” D’Angelo’s ice blue eyes scan across me. “But I thought that you’d want to know, before you go into the arena where all the players and staff are, that you have a lacy thong stuck to your ass.”

What the fuck?

I flush.

I reach around, fumbling behind me because I’m definitely not asking D’Angelo to help me.

He doesn’t offer.

Instead, he crosses his arms, watching me with a stony expression.

Wait, is he only fucking with me?

But then, my fingers close around a thong, which is tucked into the waistband of my skirt.

It must have got trapped there because of my haphazard laundry system. Possibly, I’m going to have to rethink it.

I groan. “They all took photographs, didn’t they? That’s going to be my welcome to Freedom front page spread: Me walking into the arena with a thong hanging out of my suit.”

“It won’t because I walked behind you carefully to block them. Nobody saw.”

I stare at him in shock.

Why would he do that to protect me?

“Although,” D’Angelo’s lips twitch, “you did show off your ass, when you threw yourself into my arms. So, I suppose that you already gave them the perfect photograph.”

I knew it. *He’s still a dick.*

I turn back to the high, steel door with all the dignity that’s possible, while I’m shoving a thong into my pocket. “You smell of whiskey.”

“I always smell of whiskey.”

“So, you’ve been drinking?” I drag open the door and rush into the narrow corridor.

D’Angelo strolls after me into the empty arena corridor. It’s painted white with low, blue lighting.

The door clangs shut loudly behind us, and for the first time, we’re fully alone together.

My heart speeds up, as I turn back to D’Angelo, taking a step closer.

I’ve forgotten how tall he is.

He's almost as tall as Wilder.

I need to tip back my head to meet his icy gaze.

"Not since," D'Angelo makes a show of checking his elegant Rolex, "two hours ago, when the cocktail bar shut."

I bet that it was On the Rocks, a decadent club and cocktail bar, which both players and holiday makers love.

The one or two secret, leaked photographs of D'Angelo that have been taken over the years of him fucking both men and women, (sometimes at the same time), dancing on tables, around poles, or in cages, around the decidedly BDSM styled club, are legendary.

I may...definitely...have them stuck in the D'Angelo section of my Guide.

To be fair, they're more like *this is the devil tempting you* than anything else.

He looks like a fallen, debauched angel.

I deliberately harden my expression to try and hide my blush at the memory. "You better not have driven here."

He glares at me. "I save you from a thong wardrobe malfunction, but you still think that I'm a dick. Why I am not surprised? Don't worry, I have a taxi app on my phone."

"This is first day of practice, right? Won't the rest of team already be here on the rink? I guess that you don't want to impress Dad, huh? You used to be so dedicated that you lived on the ice. What happened?"

"I'm not the *rest* of anything. I'm Jude fucking D'Angelo. The captain. And I'm—"

"A fucking PR disaster."

Also, as gorgeous and cocky as ever.

To my surprise, his shoulders slump.

He pushes past me, vibrating with tension. "Are you just here to insult me, principessa? Because nice as this wasn't to catch up, I was hoping that we don't do this again."

That hurts.

I hurry to catch up with him, frowning. "I told you not to call me principessa. Silence would be a good choice right now."

D'Angelo side-eyes me. "No comment."

He's learning.

"And I'm here because Dad called me in. I have a meeting with him

now,” I explain.

D’Angelo stumbles, staring at me, warily. “So do I.”

Oh, damn.

CHAPTER SEVEN



Coach's Room, Rebel Arena

“*Y*ou left D’Angelo kicking his heels in the corridor like a naughty schoolboy.” I throw myself down in the chair opposite the large, mahogany desk in the coach’s room. “His expression was priceless, when you only invited me into your room for the meeting but told him to wait outside. I didn’t think that he could project both fire and ice in the same expression, but he managed it.”

Austin chuckles. “That man needs reminding who’s in charge around here, or he’d be bossing the staff around, me included. It’s one of his problems. And Jude has many.”

I’m surprised that Dad is calling D’Angelo *Jude*.

Despite the criticism, there’s a type of gruff fondness in the way that he says his name.

Does he like D’Angelo?

I shudder.

But then, D’Angelo has been playing for the Bay Rebels for three years. Dad has seen more of him than he’s seen of me.

A deep sadness washes over me, and I duck my head. My hair hangs over my face.

A hockey team is like a family.

Will Dad even need me?

I’ve only brought him problems. He’s moved on with his life, without me

in it. I don't blame him for that.

Does he have space in his life for me right now?

Austin is leaning against the wall next to the window. The arctic blue drapes are open. Rain has started and is lashing against the glass.

Austin once had the same red hair as me but now, looks like a silver fox. He's tall with a neat beard and twinkling, emerald eyes, which means that there's still no missing that he's my dad.

He's dressed in a sharp charcoal suit with a green shirt and tie.

I can't remember seeing him in anything but a suit.

Beside Austin, flat screen monitors hang on the walls. I know that he'll use them to watch back the games with his team, analyzing their plays to improve them.

On the far wall is a white touchscreen that's scrawled with red and blue lines of strategy like the front of my Guide.

I duck my head further, clutching my hands on my lap.

"Robyn?" Austin's voice softens. "What's wrong?"

"It's a lot," I reply. "Being back here. You called him *Jude*. You never used to."

Austin sighs. "I haven't forgotten that you two fell out."

Affronted, I raise my head to glare at him. "It wasn't like that."

"How would I know? You never told me. What I do know is that Jude is on my team now, and so, I have a duty toward him. Do you want to tell me something that would change that? Because this is your chance."

I swallow.

I could tell Austin about how I learned through Wilder that my friendship with D'Angelo had been fake.

That D'Angelo used me to get contacts in the hockey world.

That he's a liar.

But that's in the past, and my hurt feelings shouldn't destroy a man's life now.

I turned to Wilder for comfort, and he turned out to be a genuine asshole, making me doubt some of the things that'd happened with D'Angelo.

Perhaps, I've been holding onto past hurts because it's easier than focusing on my own choices.

I shake my head. "It's ancient history. I'm over it."

Austin claps his hands together in satisfaction. "I knew that you'd be sensible about this. Now, tell me about your Ph.D., Robyn. Why'd you take

it?”

Why does this feel like an interview?

I take a moment to think, before I reply, “After everything that happened to you, then seeing Mom and you being hounded throughout our childhoods, I just felt... I was driven to understand how to protect people. A PR officer or director protects their client. I felt so helpless and exposed, when I was younger. Then with Wilder as well. Now, I can be someone’s shield.”

Austin strides to me, pulling me to my feet and into a hug.

I stiffen because he’s not a hugger.

I can count the number of times that he’s held me like this on one hand and most of those were after Mom died.

I tentatively wrap my arms around him, making the most of this. My eyes burn with tears.

I didn’t know how much I needed this, until his arms are around me.

How much I’ve needed my dad.

“I’m sorry, Robyn.” Dad’s voice is muffled, and I know that he’d never be able to say this, if his face wasn’t hidden. “I should have tried harder to be there for you this last year and with that bastard Wilder. But I have more to say sorry for than that. I wish that I’d said all this before to both Cody and you. I screwed-up, when I was a player. I lost my career, reputation, *everything*. But I regret most that it hurt my wife and then my family. I let myself forget the most important lesson on the ice: *Discipline*. I’ve spent the rest of my life, trying to make up for that one bad decision. I learned that I couldn’t take it back but I could find ways to atone.”

A tear chases down my cheek. “It was a smear campaign. The press scapegoated you.”

“Hey,” Austin strokes my hair, “it’s okay. I’ve never blamed the press. I deserved it. I take ownership for my own actions. When Larry talked shit on the ice about your mom, I lost it. My head shot would be illegal today and it gave the asshole concussion. I didn’t mean for that outcome, but you know I have a temper. Larry was a huge star back then, and everyone knew that I’d just beaten him in the playoffs to win the Stanley Cup. The press framed it as personal. It brought the whole sport into disrepute, making hockey itself more unpopular. It ended my career. The Bay Rebels are my final chance to prove myself. I won’t get another one. And that’s where you come in.”

Finally, Austin draws back from me.

Gently, he wipes away the tear from my cheek, before offering me a

smile.

Then he swaggers to the leather chair behind his desk, settling himself comfortably in it like he hasn't just opened up about the darkest days of his life with me for the first time.

Typical Dad.

I rub at my eyes, trying to pull myself together. "How do I come in?"

Is that alarm bells ringing?

Ding, ding.

"Well," Austin rustles a neat pile of papers, which are in front of him on the desk, "I can't let any of the players go through what happened to me. I was a reckless idiot and deserved to suffer consequences. But no one back then either offered me a second chance or worked to educate me. Bay Rebels is called The Misfits because I'm offering try outs to those players who have fucked up in some way or struggle to be accepted by other teams because of their mental health or physical needs. I know that I can make this work but I need you on my side. Will you become our PR Director?"

What?

I stare at him.

Did he seriously just offer me a senior position on his staff?

I'm only meant to be here in this meeting to reject his offer. But now, he's seriously tempting me.

Plus, after our heart to heart and his explanation of his mission behind the team, how can I reject him?

Yet I can't be the best candidate for this post.

Ding, ding.

I lean closer, gripping the edge of the desk. "I don't want to be drawn back into this world. Plus, I don't have experience at this level. I know that you don't believe in helping Cody and me with either money or jobs. You want us to make it by ourselves, independently, just like you did. I respect that. I was actually thinking about doing some charity work."

Austin arches his brow. "You're more similar to Jude than you think."

I scrunch up my nose. "I don't think so."

"He does charity work. So, you can take this offer and still volunteer with him."

So, D'Angelo's still pulling the charity trick.

My eyes narrow. "D'Angelo will only be doing charity stuff to make out that he's a good guy for his image or to get you to like him. Look at that, it's

worked.”

Austin gives me a considering look. “Jude does his charity work anonymously. No one else in the team knows. The fans and press don’t. He still thinks that *I* don’t know where he disappears to each Sunday. So, don’t tell him.”

My chest is tight. My mind is racing.

Would D’Angelo, the cocky millionaire playboy who parties at On the Rocks, truly give up his Sundays to volunteer to help others?

At college, D’Angelo used to.

Yet Wilder convinced me that D’Angelo had only been doing that for his resume.

He showed me proof. At least, I thought that it was proof at the time.

It almost fucking killed me to find that out about someone who I respected.

Plus, had been falling in love with.

Which version of D’Angelo is real?

“So, do you know where he goes?” I ask.

“It’s a gym for underprivileged teenagers. He set it up and funds most of it. He also funds three hockey college scholarships anonymously.”

That sounds like the man who’d once been my friend.

I struggle to stop myself shaking because it hurts to remember how close we’d been.

Austin leans forward, conspiratorially. “I know a lot about my players. A coach needs to. Don’t look so shocked. This team is part of this town. We care about it, and the fans care about us.”

Only, I’m not looking shocked about that.

I’m shocked because of my own stupidity.

My alarm bell is ringing repeatedly now, *ding, ding, ding.*

I jump out of my chair and point at Austin. “You’ve been distracting me. The point is that anyone else could do this job. So, why me?”

Austin rubs his hand over his beard. “My smart daughter. I could tell you that it’s because this is your break into the industry, and you should never have abandoned your own independence and career in order to follow around your asshole husband. Now it’s time to take something for yourself.”

“All true but not the real reason.”

Austin taps the intimidatingly large pile of papers in front of him. “This is a contract. Your contract of employment.”

I stare at it. “Why does it look as long as *Moby-Dick*? And spoiler, things don’t end well in that.”

Austin pushes the contract toward me in a startlingly good impression of the devil tempting me to sign away my soul. “It just has some additional clauses in it because your employment will be more unusual than normal. These include no fraternization. The reason will be obvious. As I said, I’m offering these guys second chances, but three of them are such PR nightmares that they could sink this team, before the season even begins.”

Confusion and anxiety war in me, as my gaze darts between the stack of papers and Austin’s deliberately blank expression.

What the hell does he mean?

“Then simply don’t pick them,” I suggest.

“The problem is that they have the potential to be my star players,” he replies. “Also, for all of them, this truly is their last chance, even if they don’t realize it yet. I want to give them this, and you’re uniquely placed to help them achieve it.”

“Uh-huh.” Reluctantly, I slide back into my seat. “How?”

For the first time, Austin shifts awkwardly, and his leather chair creaks. “Your basic role will be to enhance and promote the image of the players, using different social media channels. This will let the players focus on the game, rather than being dragged down by negative press. But the reason that I need someone who I can truly trust is that you’ll be living with these three players, who could sink the entire team, in a house that I’ve set up. You’ll be surrounded by security to keep you safe and press away. The players can only go out, if you okay it. You’ll be with them twenty-four seven.”

I freeze in shock.

Adrenaline shoots through me. Suddenly, my pulse is rushing in my ears.

I try to speak — twice — and can’t.

Finally, I clear my throat and manage, “You want me to babysit them.”

Austin grimaces. “I want you to manage them. Handle them. Kick their asses, if you need to. You’re trained in this. You have a protective streak a mile wide. You know what the outcome will be for these guys, if they mess up one more time.”

I grip the arms of the chair like a lifeline. “They’ll never agree to it.”

I hope.

Because I can’t say no.

Dad’s right. I do know what life after fucking up feels like. I lived it in

my family. Both Cody and I did.

Plus, I've studied for exactly this, and it could be my way into the industry.

It's an amazing career opportunity.

Yet it'll also mean that I'll have to live in a house with three hockey players, who'll probably resent my guts because I'm the coach's daughter...a coach who's put them there like it's a boot camp for bad players.

"No one's selected for the team yet. If they don't agree, then the only place that they'll be going is the minor leagues. They know that." Austin settles back in his chair.

His eyes flash with a steeliness, for which he's legendary.

I shiver.

At the same time, I admire his ruthlessness. It's what makes him a good coach. After all, he's fighting for these guys' careers.

They can hate him now, and thank him later.

I'm going to regret this.

"Okay." I drag the papers across the desk toward me. "I don't know how long it'll take me to read *Moby-Dick on Ice*, but in theory, I'm in."

Austin grins. "I knew that you would be. After all, whatever your arguments were about in the past, Jude was once your friend. I know that you two can work things out, act professional, and save his career. He'll be in charge on the ice, but off it, *you'll* be in charge."

What?

I sit bolt upright. "What the hell has this got to do with D'Angelo?"

"Didn't I say? Three guys are going to be the biggest problem this season, but only one is the pain in my ass right now. My captain. He'll be your greatest challenge."

No, no, please, no.

Austin pushes himself out of his chair and around his desk.

I watch like I'm caught in a slow motion horror movie that I can't stop, as he crosses the office.

Austin drags open the door. "Get your ass in here, Jude."

CHAPTER EIGHT



Coach's Room, Rebel Arena

D'Angelo stalks into the coach's room, attempting to look cool and in control and *not* like he's been forced to kick his heels in the corridor.

I clutch my hands on my lap. My heart is beating hard in my chest.

D'Angelo looks pissed already and he doesn't even know yet about the fact that him and I are going to be forced to live together.

My breathing picks up.

It'll be like college all over again, when we had rooms next to each other in our dorm. Except, even more intimate because we'll be sharing with two other men, and I'll be the only woman.

D'Angelo's glacial gaze meets mine, freezing me in place. "Why is *she* in my meeting?"

"Shut up, D'Angelo," Austin barks. I smirk. So, he isn't always *Jude*, when he's in trouble then. "You're a mess. Plus, you smell like you've bathed in whiskey."

A mess?

D'Angelo looks immaculate. At least, compared to *my* hot mess self.

Just for a moment, a crack appears in D'Angelo's façade, and he smooths his hand through his curls, flattening them. Then he adjusts his cufflinks ritualistically three times.

I glare at Austin. "He looks fine."

Austin harrumphs, before swaggering back around his desk. “Does he?”
D’Angelo pales. “I’m not drunk.”

“I know,” Austin replies, “or I’d have to suspend you just before pre-season, and neither of us wants that. Now, shut up and listen. This isn’t a negotiation.”

He throws himself down in the leather chair.

D’Angelo’s jaw clenches, before his gaze slides to me.

I deliberately don’t catch his gaze.

“Of course.” He glances around the office like he’s looking for a third seat. When he doesn’t find one, he stalks to lean against the wall, as if he’d been planning to do that all along.

“I’ve just had a meeting with Robyn because I’ve offered her a role in the Bay Rebels. She’s going to be the new PR Director.” Austin reaches forward to tap the contract.

The contract that I haven’t signed yet.

I open my mouth to say that but then shut it again.

This isn’t a negotiation...

I’m pretty sure that Dad is including me in that and I’m looking forward to D’Angelo’s reaction too much to interrupt this right now.

Dad’s exactly the type of coach that I imagined he’d be.

Hard-ass and ruthless.

Well, with a larger dash of dictator than I’d have guessed in the mix but then, D’Angelo is such an Alpha (Alphahole), that he probably only responds to an older guy who can make him show his belly.

D’Angelo affects to look bored. “What’s that got to do with me?”

Is he serious?

After that circus outside, the player who garners headlines like *Pucking the Playboy*, has a serious press problem

I may lose games but at least I haven’t lost my wife...

I grit my teeth.

Now, D’Angelo’s also dragged me into them.

Although, the way that I fell into his arms, giving the press the perfect photograph to go with the articles, didn’t help.

Okay, we were fifty-fifty to blame for that disaster.

The lacy thong on my ass has to take some of the blame as well.

Yet this player needs a PR Director as much as he needs his padding on the ice.

“Simple,” Austin replies. “From now on, you have the power on the ice, but off it, Robyn’s in charge.”

D’Angelo straightens, thrumming with outrage. “Over my dead body.”

“Over your dead career. Robyn will be handling you from now on. She’s going to be your direct liaison to the press, and you’ll be working together full time, before the season starts.”

“Handling my...?” D’Angelo blurts.

I struggle not to laugh, arching my brow.

“I mean, handling me?” D’Angelo takes a step toward me. He’s fiddling with his cufflinks again, three times. “This is ridiculous and a mistake. I don’t need managing or any of that therapy shit.”

“You go to therapy?”

He gives me a cold look. “You don’t know anything about me anymore.”

I flinch.

What can I say? My stomach is churning.

I agree with him. This is a terrible idea.

And not merely because I don’t think D’Angelo has ever been able to be *managed* in his life.

Also, because now that we’re together again, there’s something pulling deep inside me. It’s an electric sensation that reminds me just how much I used to feel for him.

It’s not only that he’s objectively the best looking guy who I’ve ever met or that I’m wet every time that I study his ridiculously gorgeous blue eyes.

It’s that I can’t help remembering our friendship and all the time that we spent together. How he made me laugh with impressions on our comedy movie marathons. The long nights that we spent staying up, chatting about our hopes, dreams, and all the other deep student shit about the universe.

I’ve never felt closer to anyone, apart from my brother.

Then I can’t forget D’Angelo’s kindness to the kids, as he taught them how to do fitness routines, and that agonizingly hopeful part of me, which is thinking: What if he’s still doing that with his charity work?

What if I was wrong about him?

What if Wilder was lying?

I don’t know if it’ll hurt more to find out that I’ve been right all these years about D’Angelo using me, or that I was wrong, meaning I lost my friendship with him for no reason.

Either way, being so close to him will be dangerous for my heart.

Possibly, for his too.

Especially, when his career and reputation, along with my new life, depends on us not fucking this up together.

Yet as he says, I don't know the man who he's become.

I push myself out of my chair and take a tentative step toward him. "Maybe I don't. But we can get to know each other again and make this work. I just saw how the press are out for blood with you, and you're playing into their hands with how you react. You need me."

"Hardly, principessa." D'Angelo closes the distance between us and just for a moment, I think that he's going to reach to cup my cheek like he used to. But then, his hand drops to his side like he's strictly controlling himself. "I haven't needed you, since you chose Wilder over me. Since you abandoned me. Since you ghosted me."

"That's not how I remember it."

"That sounds like a you problem."

Austin slams his hand down on his desk, and we both jump apart. "Be professional about this. D'Angelo, this is your last chance. I'm not kidding around here. I've set up a large ranch style house with security, called Captain's Hall, for you to move into together twenty-four seven. That's the only way I can be certain that you won't wreck the team with negative press coverage, before our season even kicks off."

D'Angelo stares at him. "You can't be serious."

"Deadly."

D'Angelo's gaze darts to me. "I'm not sharing a room with her."

I flush, crossing my arms.

Did he have to put the image of him spread out naked with his gorgeous tanned limbs and muscles splayed on the white sheets into my mind?

Okay, I can't blame him.

That was all me.

What does he think this is? *Ice Hockey Love Island*?

To be fair, I'd watch that.

Perhaps, I should pitch the concept.

Austin reddens. "Damn straight you're not. Did you think that you were sharing a bed with the other guys too?"

Probably.

D'Angelo's mouth tightens with anger.

Why?

“Other players are going to be in this house of pain with us as well...?” D’Angelo sounds more furious about that idea than he did about the whole idea in the first place. “Why would you trust them with Robyn?”

Surprised, I study D’Angelo.

I didn’t expect that to be his sticking point.

Austin’s expression gentles. “Because it’s the twins. They’re good guys. I know that you haven’t met them because they’re new. But trust my judgment as your coach, just like I *trust* Robyn. She’s a grownass woman. Let her make her own choices. Unless you think that she’s weak.”

He’d better not say that he does.

D’Angelo’s eyes, however, gleam with amusement. “I know that she’s not. It’s rather a low blow, coach, to try and tempt me to get my balls busted. Literally.”

I’m flooded with pride that he knows me so well.

Austin chuckles. “Then no more bullshit. Look, you can work well together, even if neither of you want to admit it. But stow that crap and focus on the job. This may be your last season, D’Angelo, and I know that you don’t want your name and this team’s legacy to be ruined. I’m fighting for the Bay Rebels to become established. If this goes wrong, then the team could be over permanently, after only four seasons. Do you want that on your head?”

D’Angelo looks aghast. “Coach, you know that I don’t.”

Austin waves his hand at D’Angelo, as if he’s rolled up to the meeting in nothing but stained joggers and fluffy bunny slippers, rather than an elegant suit. “Do I? Eyes on the prize, D’Angelo. Just get through this a day at a time. First, this week to settle into Captain’s Hall. Then two weeks of the training camp. Finally, five exhibition games of pre-season. That’s all. If you don’t create any press scandals throughout that, then you’ll have proved yourself to me.”

D’Angelo pushes a curl behind his ear. “And what does proving myself mean?”

“You’ll have earned your place on my team as captain.”

He frowns. “But I’m already captain.”

A cold ball forms in my stomach.

Is Dad truly doing this?

“For now.” Austin leans back in his chair. “But if you fail, then you won’t have earned any place on the team, including as captain.”

Shit.

D'Angelo looks like he's been slapped.

"You can't do that."

"It's done."

D'Angelo turns his icy glare on me like I've been part of the conspiracy.

I wave my hands urgently in front of myself. "Hey, I didn't have any part in trying to take away your captaincy."

"Right," D'Angelo draws out the word, sarcastically enough to make it clear just how much he doesn't believe me. "Well, I can lie low and avoid the press well enough without being babysat by a PR Director."

"You can't. Did you forget that you managed to get the last two directors to resign within a month? So, now my daughter is stepping up."

"Wait, what?" I twist to dad in shock. "They resigned?"

"Didn't I tell you that?" Austin shrugs.

He's terrible at playing innocent.

Now it makes even more sense why he wants me. He knows that with my sense of duty to family, I'm going to stick at this more than those others who walked away.

What's betting that the haughty asshole who's already glaring at me like I'm his enemy and not his ally is the reason they resigned?

"I'd give you one day without me." I tilt up my chin.

"Why don't we see?" D'Angelo replies, challengingly.

"She's in charge. This is happening. Suck it up," Austin growls. "And you're not my only pain in my ass who needs to be managed, remember? There's also my new star, one of the twins. He's just as bad in his own way."

"Star?" D'Angelo quirks his brow. "Is he really that good?"

"You'll soon see," Austin replies. But I'm still stuck on his *bad in his own way*. Who the hell are these twins, with whom I'm going to have to live? "He has more potential than anyone I've seen on the ice but he's only twenty-one and still has a lot to learn. This is his first experience of the NHL."

"I can mentor him." D'Angelo smiles, and for the first time, it's warm and genuine. "I remember what it was like being that age and freshly drafted. Wait, twins? We're not talking about...?"

"The Terrible Twins." Austin sighs, shaking his head. "So, their reputation follows them everywhere. As the only twins now in the NHL in the same team, press attention on them will be intense. They need it to be positive from the start. If it isn't, then it'll destroy what should be legendary

careers.”

“Terrible?” I whisper.

Alarm bells are ringing again.

Ding, ding.

I bite my lip, as my guts churn.

“The Prince brothers didn’t want to be separated, and I’m offering them that chance.” Austin pushes himself out of his chair and swaggers to the door, swinging it open. “They’re geniuses in their own way, different to each other, but each with their own image difficulties. One of them...he reminds me of what I was like when I was younger. He’s a star in the making but with a troubled past. He hides it well though, off the ice. On it, he’s a nightmare. I want you both to help him. This is going to be the hardest job of your life, Robyn, but it’ll save these men, the Bay Rebels, and me. So, are you ready to meet the Terrible Twins?”

CHAPTER NINE



The Rink, Rebel Arena

Who the hell are these Prince twins?

Dad doesn't often throw around terms like *genius* or *star*.

Yet it was the *troubled past* and *nightmare* on the ice, which caught my attention.

It's strange how little Dad mentioned the second twin, as if he's only the first twin's shadow.

Can't he skate? Doesn't he have his own talents?

What's his deal?

Has he only earned his shot at a place on the team because the twins won't play in separate teams?

To be fair, I understand.

Once the season is underway, if they played on separate teams, then they'd never get to see each other.

For twins who are close, that'd be tough. It's hard enough on players who are family orientated.

It takes a certain type of woman to be able to date or marry a player.

And I should know, right?

Well, once ice burned, twice shy.

If I just stick to my number one rule to never kiss another hockey player, then I'll be fine.

How hard can that be?

I struggle to follow Austin and D'Angelo alongside the rink.

Note to self: Next time, don't power dress at the arena and instead, bring my warmest coat, gloves, and sturdy boots.

And definitely, don't wear heels.

I pass the cold metal benches that line the vast ice rink. A thrill of excitement rushes through me.

I wrinkle my nose at the smell of the arena, which is as familiar as coming home: the bite of cold air mixed with sweat and rubber.

When my heel slips on the damp floor, D'Angelo catches me by the elbow to steady me.

He looks startled like he didn't expect that rusty reflex would still work.

He lets go hurriedly, and I struggle to right myself. I smooth down my shirt and take a couple of more careful steps past the bench.

But when I shiver, D'Angelo unwinds his cashmere scarf and holds it out to me.

I stare at it.

"It's neither a friendship bracelet nor a poisonous snake." He sighs, wrapping the scarf around my neck and tying it much more neatly than I ever could have done. "Don't rush to thank me all at one, principessa. I may blush."

I can't help my lips curling into smile. "Asshole."

"See, now I'm blushing."

He turns sharply away from me, before I can see whether he actually is blushing, marching after Austin.

I stroke my fingers gently over his scarf.

It doesn't smell of whiskey, but rather his fresh, masculine scent that I've always loved.

I hug my hands under my arms to keep them warm and hurry after him.

The lights are dim, apart from the spotlights that are directed onto the vast rink and its red and blue markings.

Austin waves D'Angelo and me up close to the boards. Then he points through the glass to the two players in Bay Rebels jerseys, who are on the ice, clutching sticks.

The home jerseys are dark blue with arctic blue bands on them, as well as the Bay Rebels' logo, which is a puck that's trailing arctic blue fire like it's been hit so fast that it's trailing flames.

I stare, mesmerized at the players.

They're at the other side of the rink to us, and I can't see their faces. But what I can see is that one of them is skating faster than any player I've known.

Faster than D'Angelo.

Faster even than Wilder.

Perhaps, his skates will catch fire like the puck in the logo.

I grin, as anticipation thrums through me.

I can't wait for Wilder to discover that he's been outclassed.

Okay, now I'm fully invested in making sure that these twins make the team.

D'Angelo draws in a sharp breath, resting his hand on the glass. "I see now why you want him on the team. He's got the potential to be the best."

"If he doesn't throw it all away," Austin mutters. I catch a glimpse of Austin's face before he can school it, and he looks haunted. "It's up to him what he tells you, although I've strongly advised him to be open about his past and issues. He needs you to know what he has going on, so that you can both help him. If he doesn't get a grip of his demons, however, then he won't be able to get a grip of them, when he's on the ice. I should know. Then he'll throw away a once in a generation talent."

"He won't." D'Angelo's voice is steely and determined. "Because I won't let him."

"Are you sure about taking on this responsibility? It'll mean no more parties and turning up late. Are you ready to be a leader again, taking the Prince twins under your wing?"

"My team are my brothers." D'Angelo's voice is tight. "You know that. I'll do whatever they need, even if that's to kick their asses."

Austin's gaze hardens, as he watches the twins. "They'll only be selected for the team, if I pick *both* of them at the end of pre-season."

My heart clenches.

I don't miss the warning.

Or is that a threat?

I rest my hand next to D'Angelo's on the glass and watch the twins more closely, assessing them.

They're small for hockey players but with broad shoulders. They're frighteningly physical in how they play.

It's strange seeing twins practicing together but exhilarating.

One of them is good, but the other is like a god.

I squint.

Is that golden hair glinting underneath their helmets?

Wait, it couldn't be...?

I mean, it *couldn't*, right?

My heart speeds up.

My mouth is dry. I'm trembling.

But I was so careful. I checked.

Last night was the best sex of my life...

Austin whistles. "Shay! Eden! Get your asses over here."

Shay.

He definitely called Shay.

Faint, I stumble back a step.

Confused, D'Angelo settles his hand on my lower back to steady me.

Except, he doesn't know that he's steadying me against the news that the man who I intended to call later (and whose number is right now in my phone under the name, **SEXY PRISONER**), in order to set up our first date, is just about to turn around.

He doesn't know that I broke my bet with Cody not to kiss a hockey player by the end of the season *in less than one week*.

I broke it, before training camp even started.

I suck.

Cody is never going to let me live this down.

I groan, covering my face.

"Are you okay?" Austin asks.

"Nope." Reluctantly, I raise my head, although I allow my hair to hang over my face.

It's not much of a shield but it's something.

I peer through my hair to see the twins skating toward us.

Shay looks as gorgeous as I remember.

Only, there are two of him now.

His brother, Eden, is identical to him.

Shit, which of them did I even fuck last night?

I can't tell which is which, until the moment that the player on the right breaks into a sunny smile that I'd recognize anywhere and waves at me.

Mechanically, I wave back.

D'Angelo glances between us with an arched brow. "Friend of yours or something?"

“Or something,” I manage to rasp.

Turn around and bend over the bed. Bite the sheets because I’m going to fuck you so hard that you’re going to scream my name...

My breathing becomes erratic, and I press my thighs together.

Oh shit, the non-fraternization clause.

Even Austin is looking between Shay and me now with narrowed eyes.

I force myself to smile at his twin, Eden, to try and reduce the tension like I’m just being friendly.

But he doesn’t smile in return. His face is stony.

Now that they’re close, I can see small differences.

Eden’s expression is serious, and his eyes are stormy gray. His hair is slicked back underneath his helmet, rather than tumbling forward like Shay’s is.

He’s just as gorgeous though.

I’m low-key panicking. What the hell am I going to do?

If I admit what’s happened, then I’ll be wrecking their careers. I know that Dad will throw them out of the team, and this appears to be their last chance, as much as it’s D’Angelo’s.

I could be the reason that they’re split up and I couldn’t bear that, especially when Shay’s looking so happy to see me like he’s won the fucking lottery.

Dad knows me well. I do have a protective streak in me that’s a mile wide.

Eden and Shay skate to a stop behind the glass in sync; it’s impressive.

“Coach.” Shay nods at Austin, before turning to me excitedly. “So, you found me, love. I’ve never been hunted before. I like it. Sorry about the dancing cat bra.”

Eden’s eyes light with understanding, before his gaze becomes piercing.

I shift under his steady stare.

“I spanked him for that,” Eden deadpans. His voice is low and smoky. “I like cats.”

I think it’s a joke.

Shay laughs, brightly.

I choke on my tongue.

These two should be called the Trouble Twins.

“Why the hell are you talking about my daughter’s underwear?” Austin growls.

I hate the way that Shay's smile dies, and his expression instantly shutters.

"You didn't tell me that you were a hockey player," I hiss.

"And you didn't tell me that you were the coach's daughter," he replies.

"So," D'Angelo drawls, "how do you know each other again?"

I shoot Shay a warning look. "We met last night in Merchant's Inn."

It's not a lie.

Okay, it's one by omission. But I don't count those.

"She spilled a drink over me," Shay clarifies. "It's why she was fired."

Obviously, he has the same view as me on lying by omission.

Austin looks mollified. "I heard about that."

D'Angelo crosses his arms. "And how were dancing cats involved?"

"None of your business is how," I reply, mirroring him. "It's nice to meet you, Eden."

Eden nods, silently.

D'Angelo leans against the glass. "I'm Jude."

Shay's cheeks tint with pink. "I know who you are. I've watched all your games. You're incredible. I'm honored to have the chance to train next to you, let alone play and..."

Eden nudges Shay hard in the shoulder, and Shay cuts off his excited ramble.

Yet D'Angelo looks pleased. "I just saw some of your potential on the ice. I look forward to seeing what you've really got."

I don't think that Shay notices he's doing it, but he's leaning closer now. He's resting his forehead and arm against the glass, so that if it wasn't there, he'd be touching D'Angelo.

Does D'Angelo notice the tension? He always had this type of dominant aura that works on most people.

His name means angel, but he's definitely the devil.

Sin has never looked so good as it does on him, nor been as tempting.

Shay appears under his sway already, even if he doesn't realize it, as much as I always was.

It's why D'Angelo should have become one of the best captains in the NHL. Plus, why I don't want him to lose his chance at playing his final season.

Austin pats D'Angelo on the shoulder. "Okay, then. Great to see you all getting along, since you're going to be spending the next week living alone

together in the mountains.”

I swallow.

How will I survive being trapped alone in a house with my ex best friend and first love, the man who I’ve just had the wildest night of my life with, and his over-protective twin?

CHAPTER TEN



Captain's Hall, Freedom

I stand in the foyer of Captain's Hall, staring around myself in wonder.
Is Dad rewarding or bribing us?
Possibly both.

D'Angelo, the Prince twins, and me have just been driven by a security team through the wooded mountains to this isolated, ranch style house, which is painted white with balconies and a large porch. It's set in the middle of twenty lush acres of pasture.

The security team have their own accommodation in the converted barn at the end of the winding driveway.

I glance around the vast foyer with its golden ceiling fans, and pretty, mosaic flooring. A sweeping oak staircase leads upstairs like something out of a fairy tale.

It manages to pull off being breathtaking and cozy at the same time.

I scrunch up my nose at the citrus scent like it's been cleaned within an inch of its life.

Our suitcases are already stacked by the stained glass door, which patterns the foyer with the warm afternoon sunshine.

It's our pretty prison for the next month.

"Wow." Shay sounds both awed and unsure. He wanders to stand at my shoulder, staring around himself. He's dressed in a red t-shirt and ripped black jeans. He looks as irresistible as when I met him in the inn. "This isn't

what I was expecting. I was only living in dorms a couple of months ago. What if I break something? I can't pay for it."

When D'Angelo prowls to stand at his side, I expect him to start mocking Shay.

Shay's going to need to learn to protect himself with the crucial defense of silence and the trick of *no comment*.

These guys really have a problem with that.

To my surprise, however, D'Angelo instead rests his strong hand on the scruff of Shay's neck, flattening his golden hair. "You'll be okay, cucciolo."

Shay cocks his head. "Cucciolo?"

"My parents are Italian American. They...used...to call me that. It means cub."

"Hey." But Shay looks pleased. "It's okay for you, darlin', with all your millions."

"Then I'll just have to cover the penalty for you, if you bounce like Tigger into some priceless vase. You can pay me back on the ice."

Shay grins. "You're the best."

"It's a long time since I've heard that."

D'Angelo still hasn't removed his hand; he looks flushed at Shay's praise as well.

I don't think that Shay has realized D'Angelo's reaction, or the way that he is himself leaning into his touch.

Hockey players are physical with each other. It's simply the way that they are. There's something else going on here, however, and I don't know if either of them have picked up on it yet.

I'm definite that Shay hasn't.

D'Angelo being bisexual has been known by the press since the start of his career, which I've always admired and respected because it can be tough in the sporting world.

D'Angelo and Shay's chemistry together is obvious.

Shay immediately breaks away from D'Angelo to twist to me.

"Are you okay, love? It was a long drive up here." His large, gray eyes are concerned.

I nod.

Yet my chest is tight.

Does he still think that we're dating? He doesn't know about my new contract.

I need to have a talk with him as soon as I can.

Hopefully, before he tells D'Angelo everything, since we need to all get on and live in this house together.

D'Angelo nudges Shay away from me and toward the stairs. "Why don't you go and explore the house like you didn't shut up about wanting to do the entire way here on the long, *long* drive? Go and steal the best bedroom."

Shay grins, before winking at me. "I'll steal it all right...for you, love."

I'm unable to resist smiling back.

Shay's such a fucking great guy. Why couldn't he have been the astrophysicist that I thought he was?

Why can't I have him anyway?

Fuck my Guide.

There's already a place in my heart, which is Shay shaped, and cutting him out is going to be agonizing.

I don't know that I'm going to be able to do this.

D'Angelo and I both watch Shay bound up the stairs two at a time.

Then D'Angelo turns to me, looking as elegant as ever in his suit.

His gaze is frosty. "So, you met him in Merchant's Inn, huh?"

"Yep." I scuff my foot on the floor.

One word answers are my friend.

Another PR trick.

"And you spilled your drink on him."

"Uh-huh."

"And you're gorgeous."

I blink.

Okay, I didn't think that he'd go that direction with the interrogation but I won't stop him complimenting me, since it's rare.

I shrug.

Another PR trick, being noncommittal.

"And *he's* gorgeous."

I glance at D'Angelo from underneath my eyelashes. "If you say so."

Third PR trick.

"Then you fucked."

My gaze shoots to D'Angelo's, and my mouth hangs open. "W-w-what?"

"You. Fucked," D'Angelo repeats slowly, as if each word is an icicle to spear me with. "I know you. It was as obvious as that thong stuck to your ass. So, the question is whether you're going to continue to fuck him."

I redden, before jabbing D'Angelo in the chest with my finger. "I didn't know who he was. And yes, we intended to date. He probably...damn, he probably thinks that we're dating. Right now. But I have this..."

"Non-fraternization contract." D'Angelo's voice is hard. "I'm the last one to be able to preach and I'm not going to tell you what to do. I was ambushed into this. But since this is all our careers equally on the line, then we should be open about everything from now on. I don't want my final season to be fucked up. But do you know what I want even less?"

I shake my head.

He balls his hands into fists, before opening them with an effort. "To see a new player with the level of talent that Shay has fuck up, before his career has even started."

The cold ball that started in my stomach, when I first heard about D'Angelo's charity work in Freedom, then became larger as soon as he offered to mentor the twins, is making me want to hurl.

I feel like I really don't know him now.

Perhaps, I never did.

"Why do you care?" I demand. "He's not your friend."

D'Angelo's expression clouds. "We're not all like that asshole Wilder. A team is a family. It's the only one that I've got. These twins sound like me at the start of my career. I didn't have anyone there to help me. I've done everything that I can to make sure my teammates, along with those who are being drafted, don't go through the same crap as I have. Do you get that?"

"I do," a deep, intense voice says from behind us.

"Shit, don't do that." I jump, and my heart hammers in my chest. "You just gave me a heart attack."

Eden pushes himself off the wall, where he's been leaning, ignored.

I can easily tell the difference between him and Shay now that they're out of their hockey gear.

Eden's golden hair is slicked back from his face, making his cheekbones look sharper than Shay's. His right eyebrow is pierced, making him look edgier too.

He's dressed in a gray t-shirt and black leather trousers.

I'm fascinated by the gorgeous tattoos on his arms. The ink is in stark contrast to the ice white of his skin.

Black roses wind up both of his forearms with spiky thorns like he's fighting his way through them.

They look painful but beautiful.

Eden was silent all the ride up here. He has a way of watching with a quiet intensity and a serious expression but not speaking.

Next to his loud, volatile, and sunny brother, it puts him in the shade.

But there's a power in him. I can feel it.

"I'm putting a bell on you." D'Angelo takes a shuddering breath, fiddling with his cufflinks, three times.

Eden crosses his arms. "None of us should have secrets. We need to trust each other."

He doesn't speak much. But when he does, it feels important.

"You're right." I glance between the two men. "We should gather and talk it out, make sure that we're on the same page. We only need to be here ___"

"Under house arrest," D'Angelo mutters.

"PR lockdown," I correct. "It's short term."

"I'll find the kitchen and make us drinks." Eden pushes away from the door and heads down the corridor, toward the back of the house with none of Shay's insecurity.

You'd think that he owned the place.

D'Angelo snorts. "Good idea. I've been needing a drink for hours. Actually, from the moment that coach ordered me to meet him."

"You'd already been drinking all night at that point," I say.

D'Angelo smirks. "What's your point?"

"Tea," Eden calls over his shoulder.

D'Angelo frowns. "Well, I'm going to find where the good stuff is kept. And there better be some good stuff, or I'm staging a breakout."

He prowls away in the opposite direction to Eden.

What the hell have I agreed to?

I sigh, collapsing on top of my suitcase.

The only small consolation is that this time, I didn't pack my tentacle dildo, so the suitcase doesn't start to vibrate.

Thank god for small mercies, right?

Suddenly, I hear the clatter of footsteps above me and look up to see Shay bounding down the stairs and jumping the last few steps. He throws himself to his knees in front of me like he's intending to propose marriage or do something far more fun.

He glances around himself quickly to check that we're alone.

“I found the best bedroom for you, love.” His hair falls into his eyes. “Well, for *us*. It has a huge bed with a wooden headboard that will be perfect for so many types of bondage. I’m at your mercy, Madam Kidnapper. You’ve brought me to your lair in the middle of the mountains. I shiver to think what you have planned for our second all-nighter. After all, we tried pretty much everything last time, including...”

I slam my hand across his mouth. “We need to talk.”

Confused, he nods.

Slowly, I take away my hand. “Sorry.”

“It was hot. You know that gags aren’t a limit for me.”

“I thought that you were an astrophysicist,” I blurt.

“I am...on ice,” Shay replies, proudly. “That’s what I was studying at college. I don’t like to use my hockey playing with women like some blokes do. You know, those who sleep with all the fans. I want someone who likes me for who I truly am.”

My expression gentles. “I get that.”

Wilder was the opposite. He was flashy about his hockey like it should have made women automatically worship him. He swept me off my feet with it too.

But it was a fake mask to hide his darkness.

I love that Shay didn’t do that with me. He let me see beneath his mask to the real man.

It makes me want him even more.

Shay shuffles closer. “Can I take your hand?”

“After you’ve had your tongue in my pussy, I’m impressed that you’re still asking permission.”

He laughs, entwining his fingers between mine on my knee. “I’m sorry that I ducked out, before you woke up. Eden really was pissed, when he found out about the dancing cat bra desecration. Cats are his favorite animal. But he’d have been even more pissed, if I’d ripped up any of your books to leave my number on. I’ve learned that the hard way. Books are like babies to him.”

“A man after my own heart.”

“But your dad had asked me to practice early on the rink, and I didn’t want to make a bad impression by being late.”

“D’Angelo never cares about that.”

“Yeah well, he has a place on the team for definite; he’s the captain.”

For now...

Shay lifts my hand to his lips and gently sucks my finger into his mouth, before fellating it.

My breath catches.

Then he looks at me through his butterfly lashes in a way that makes me crave to push him onto his back and christen this new house by fellating a part of him that isn't his finger.

I don't.

Because that's willpower.

He lets go of my finger with a pop. "It was seriously hard, love, to leave you in bed, when you looked so cute. Sort of like a sexy starfish, before I tidied the blankets over you."

Accurate.

I tilt my head. "You said that you were in Freedom because of your brother."

"I am." For the first time, Shay looks down. His expression becomes vulnerable and exposed. "I wouldn't even be in this pre-season with the Bay Rebels, if it wasn't for Eden. I guess that coach is right that I should be open with you about this."

"He isn't." I grip Shay's chin and turn him to meet my gaze. The pain in his eyes hurts me deep inside. "Your brother said something that resonated. He told us that we should trust each other. But that doesn't mean you owe me explanations about your past or to share things that are too traumatic. As your PR Director, I can't protect you, if you're not honest about things that are going to impact you or may come up, but anything outside that...it's your choice what you tell me and when."

There's a long silence.

Then Shay's expression becomes determined. "You need to know this both for your job but also, because if you're going to be part of our lives, then it's important. I've never allowed anyone into our lives. I've had casual relationships but never properly dated. It's hard to date a twin and especially, when I'm committed to my sport."

Shit, now I feel even worse.

Shay's hopeful expression is devastating.

"What do I need to know?" I say, wishing that I could have him like I want.

Like he wants.

“I had offers from a bunch of NHL teams. But they were only for me. I know that I have a shot at going far. I have a pact with Eden, however, that we’re going to stay together. I will only accept a contract that also offers one to my twin as well. Bay Rebels were the only team that would do that.”

This is more extreme than Dad told me.

It’s shocking.

My eyes widen. “Are you serious? Do you really understand what you’re throwing away? If you don’t both get a position after pre-season, then you’ll end up in the minor leagues.”

Shay shrugs. “Then I do. It’d kill us both, if I was sent to one side of the country, while he was on the other. We promised, when we were kids, that we’d never do that, no matter what. We wouldn’t do it for women, money, or success. No amount of ambition will make me screw over my brother. He’s overprotective of me, but I’m protective of him too.”

I grab Shay by the shoulders and pull him closer, until our foreheads are resting against each other’s.

I’m overwhelmed with respect for him.

I know how much I love Cody. I’ve missed him, but he also loved his independence, as well as his husband.

Yet something caused these twins to make a pact.

It must have been traumatic.

I’m not going to press because it’s not my business. If Shay wants to tell me, then he’ll tell me in his own time.

I’ll be there for him, when he does.

“Shay.” I let my lips curl into a smile. “Sexy Prisoner...?”

“Hmm?”

“I loved that you left your number, even if it was on my bra with my favorite lipstick. I put it into my phone and wanted to message you straight away. But I didn’t want to come across as too desperate. I’d love to share that bed with you. The problem is, however, that there’s a non-fraternization clause in my contract.”

Shay draws back from me. “What does that mean?”

“It means that we can’t fuck.”

“Can we still...?” Shay glances between our hands. “What exactly does it mean?”

“A sexual or romantic relationship,” I explain.

“For how long?” He questions, and I can see how smart he is, as he’s

clearly searching for loopholes around it. “Just for this twenty-four seven thing?”

“I think so. The contract was so long that I skimmed it.”

He tuts. “Never do that, love. I’ll read it for you later. If it’s only this twenty-four seven situation, then we can go for that date *after*. And who’s to say that this...” He squeezes my hand. “Isn’t non-romantic? There’s nothing stopping us from being friends, right?”

I like the way that this man thinks.

On the other hand, I reckon that Shay’s seriously underestimating how hard it’s going to be to keep our relationship on the friendship side of the line.

“Just so that we’re clear, we’re not going out right now. We’re really friends.”

Shay looks happy like he’s solved the problem (and as if I’m joking). “I’ve never had a forbidden romance before. How exciting! We can do friendship and get to know each other. My brother wants to become friends too, even if he won’t say as much. He spends a lot of time in his head. Self-contained, you know? But he hasn’t been able to take his eyes off you, since he saw you at the arena.”

“He probably wants to kick my ass, now that he knows I’m the coach’s daughter.”

“I don’t think so.”

“Tea,” Eden’s voice booms from the end of the corridor.

Shay jumps to his feet, pulling me with him.

I’m glad that I took my own advice and am wearing sturdy boots along with jeans and a sequin, green top.

The breath is knocked from me, as Shay drags me along behind him down the wide corridor, which is lined with paintings of black bears.

He pulls me into the room at the bottom, which is warm and sunny.

The kitchen.

Shay whistles. “Shit, this one room is bigger than Dad’s entire house.”

The ceiling is vaulted with beams. The room is dominated by a wide, oak table. A porcelain vase of mixed orange and yellow flowers, which sits in the center of the table, is the one bright spot in the middle of the sea of white.

The floor is marble, along with marble countertops.

Eden is leaning at the breakfast bar that runs along the back of the room. I’m impressed that he’s found a set of blue mugs, the kettle, and milk, in the

time that I've been chatting to Shay, as well as brewing each of us a cup of tea.

Eden raises his eyebrow, pushing two mugs toward us. "Drink."

Shay salutes him. "Yes, sir."

Together, Shay and I approach the counter.

I pick up the tea, which smells softly aromatic and fragrant.

Shay takes a swig of his tea. "Perfect. Thanks, Dee."

When I take a sip, my eyes shoot open, and I let out a moan. "This is fucking delicious."

Eden's heavy gaze settles on me. "It's Earl Grey."

"Wait, Dad even stocked your favorite tea...?"

"You know my favorite tea?"

I flush. "Maybe."

"No, I carry emergency tea on me at all times."

Is that normal for British people? Do they also carry an emergency stock of irony, chat about the weather, and a stiff upper lip?

Eden definitely has the stoic stiff upper lip thing down.

Somehow, I think the tea carrying obsession is unique to him, however.

"Found it!" D'Angelo swaggers into the kitchen, holding a bottle of whiskey above his head like the Stanley Cup in victory. When he sees us standing around, politely drinking tea, he rolls his eyes. "This is what happens, when the English invade."

"Okay." I rap my knuckles on the counter. "I'm calling to order the first meeting of the—"

"Losers." D'Angelo slams his whiskey bottle down, dramatically.

Shay winces.

I clench my jaw. "We'll start there. If you don't stop letting the press and their headlines frame how you think about yourself, then no one else will change their opinion either. It begins inside yourself with your own self-image and sense of worth. So, what shall we name our merry little band?"

"How about just *the rebels*?" Shay looks down. "I've been different all my life, often bullied for it. I don't give a fuck about that. I know that Eden and I are pushing our luck, but we have certain needs, and it makes us rebels within the industry to ask for those to be met. A rebel is someone who doesn't obey rules or accept society's standards of behavior. I don't know about you, D'Angelo, but that sounds like us."

D'Angelo's lips thin. "Only because society's rules and standards fucking

suck.”

Eden arches his brow. “And should be burned down.”

So, maybe Shay isn’t the only twin who’s going to be a problem.

“We’re being pucked.” D’Angelo unscrews his whiskey, before glancing around, looking for a glass.

When he can’t immediately find one, he raises the bottle and drinks from its neck.

I was wrong. D’Angelo is definitely the biggest problem.

Except...

“Explain to me why you’re called the Terrible Twins.” I narrow my eyes.

“There was this guy,” Shay shifts closer to Eden, who in turn, twists his shoulder toward him in an automatic move, until they’re side by side, “called Ivan the Terrible...”

D’Angelo chuckles. “Good luck, principessa.”

“You’re no better, D’Angelo.” I tighten my hands around my tea. “You’re self-destructive and wild with the worst reputation in the NHL as a cocky playboy. This experiment with us here in this house is a huge risk; the stakes couldn’t be higher. The Bay Rebels are already the underdogs. Dad is taking on players who have been rejected or need support with problems because he cares enough to give them a second chance, when no one else will. So, you can’t let him down.”

“We won’t.” Eden gives me a piercing look. “But you won’t hurt Shay either. I’ve never seen him like this. He didn’t want to leave his phone to go on the ice, in case you called. He always wants to be on the ice.”

That’s the most that I’ve heard Eden speak.

Unfortunately, what he’s said is enough to make both Shay and me blush.

“I’m going to punch you in the dick.” Shay shoves his brother, but it doesn’t even move him an inch.

He’s like a gorgeous but intimidating gargoyle.

“I’m not going to hurt him,” I promise. “Shay and I have talked about this. How about we spend this week getting to know each other, while I work on finding out what’s gone wrong with your image and spinning to improve it? Sound good?”

“Do you really want to find out who I am now?” D’Angelo snatches up his whiskey, stalking to the door. I freeze, and my chest tightens. Should I go after him? “I thought that you knew me once. But I was wrong. You trusted a man who hated me, believing the same lies that the press are now peddling

about me. You're talking about taking risks...? You've no idea what it means to me that I'm risking trusting you again, after you destroyed me once before. I swear, if you do it a second time, then I won't forgive you again. Instead, I'll make sure that you're destroyed, right alongside me."

CHAPTER ELEVEN



Captain's Hall, Freedom

“*I* f you leave the lid off the strawberry jam one more time, I’m going to become your worst nightmare.” D’Angelo jabs his finger at Shay, before aggressively screwing the lid back onto the jam.

Then he pushes it to line up next to the other jars, separating them into sets of three and fussing over them with a focused concentration.

D’Angelo’s dressed informally in a light blue shirt and trousers without a tie or jacket.

I love seeing him like this.

The shirt is open at the neck, and I can glimpse a strip of his tanned skin. His shirt is rolled back to reveal his strong forearms.

He isn’t even wearing a tie.

It’s a cold, breezy day, and I’m shivering, wrapped up in a thick, woolen ivory dress with green tights.

Shay’s leaning against the side next to D’Angelo, casually drinking orange juice like he’s not being scolded.

He’s wearing a scarlet sweater over black jeans, and his feet are bare. They must be freezing.

Eden glances over from behind the kitchen counter, as he finishes fixing a BLT. He’s been hitting the gym all morning and is still dressed in his joggers and black sportswear.

I hide behind my hair, sinking lower on the bench at the oak table in the

kitchen.

The late afternoon sun streams through the wide, bay window behind the table, which looks out over the forested mountains.

I wrinkle my nose at the strong, sweet scent of the fresh flowers that D'Angelo has ordered to be delivered and arranged in vases throughout the house.

He's chosen cheerful, orange roses. They're the bright spot in the room (if you don't count Shay).

It pulled at something deep inside me that D'Angelo remembered that orange roses are my favorite flower.

It's been four days, since I moved into Captain's Hall with D'Angelo and the Prince twins.

Four days of learning how to negotiate this new found family of mine and start to realize that all of us are broken in our own ways.

Four days of D'Angelo's passive aggressive texts or notes at all times of the day and the night, leading to a note war with Shay, Eden's obsession with the home gym, and Shay's constant need for attention, even negative.

My favorite note war was D'Angelo's text: **Want to not die of food poisoning? Remember to date our food.**

Shay's response in note form, stuck to each piece of food in the fridge:

Hey, gorgeous, will you date me or do you still only see me as a friend?

I thought D'Angelo was going to break the fridge, when he discovered those notes and slammed it shut.

So, we're all messes together. I'm hoping that together, we can heal.

We're struggling, only these men won't admit it.

Why are they guarded?

How can I protect them in the press, when their walls are up so high?

They're even higher than mine are.

Is it only that they're too competitive? Do they see it as looking weak, even if I'll never see it that way?

After all, yesterday I caught them playing poker with such intensity that I half expected the stakes were execution for the losers.

Eden won.

I've already made contact with friendly journalists who I know, fielded press calls, and set up proper social media management for them.

My first campaign is to transform D'Angelo's image from being the devil

of the NHL to being the angel.

He has the face for it.

The twins should be easier, as long as I can convince Shay to behave on the ice. I wince my way through footage of his explosive outbursts like he was an enforcer, each time in protection of his brother.

I can play them off as a brand: The Prince Twins.

Together, two handsome English twins are marketing gold.

As soon as that brand takes off, the English hockey royals, they should earn instant sponsorship deals.

I've learned that they're adopted and come from a low income home.

I want to do this for them.

Yet the key to all of this is that they don't self-destruct, and seriously, I know how hard that can be. Yet using my skills like this has been a revelation.

I fucking love it.

I haven't felt this energized since college. I'm loving the challenge.

It's good for me.

It's also better than having nothing to focus on but my own problems like it's been for the last year.

Dad was right that I needed to take this role for myself, as well as for the team's sake.

The only problem is the guys themselves.

Training camp doesn't start for another couple of days yet.

I'm running out of ideas about how to keep these thrill seekers amused on this estate.

Either we're staying up all night like we've known each other our entire lives, or they're bickering...actually, like they've known each other their whole lives.

I can see the energy and tension vibrating through them.

Eden's getting it out through intense sessions in the fully kitted out gym at the back of the ranch.

Shay's taking long runs and playing football with his twin in the gardens.

D'Angelo appears to spend his time prowling around the house, however, and becoming more wound up.

Shay never takes his gaze off D'Angelo, deliberately edging even closer into his space, as he holds his orange juice to the side. "But I wasn't finished with that jam."

Shay sucks his fingers into his mouth, licking them in a way that's definitely obscene.

He glances over D'Angelo's shoulder at me and winks.

Tease.

D'Angelo draws in a sharp, outraged breath. "You were using your fingers...?"

He crowds Shay back toward the fridge.

Well, I guess that a fight isn't ideal, but it'll break the tension.

Shay looks like he's trying hard not to laugh as he glances down his body. "Any other body part that you want to suggest...?"

D'Angelo's eyes flash. "Think very carefully what you say from this point on, bad boy. You're already in deep shit with me. Why does it take you five minutes to mess up this kitchen but days to clean it?"

"It's a gift."

I smother my chuckle on my palm.

D'Angelo shoots me an icy glare.

"How do you think your garbage, which you leave in your wake, is magically cleared away?"

"The garbage elf?" Shay smiles, winningly.

"Usually, that's me," Eden supplies, not looking up from the sandwich.

"Well, it's not going to be me." D'Angelo moves closer, until his face is almost touching Shay's. My eyes widen. "Today, I've cleared away a pizza box of yours, three glasses, and your worst offense..." He lowers his voice to a deep rumble that shit, makes my head snap up because it's as dominant as a whip crack, "...muddy footprints all over the floor that I had to scrub."

"On your hands and knees...?" Shay pretends to sound innocent, taking a swig of juice.

"For fuck's sake, D'Angelo." I wave between the two men, unable to bear the crackling tension in the air a moment longer. "Just shove him against the fridge and have hate sex already."

Shay sprays out his orange juice in shock...right into D'Angelo's face.

D'Angelo splutters, wiping his hand over his face in disgust.

"Sorry, darlin'." Shay's cheeks are tinted pink, as he places down his glass and tosses a dishtowel at D'Angelo.

D'Angelo catches the dishtowel and wipes it over his face. "You're lucky that it didn't go on my shirt or—"

"You'd destroy me, kick my ass, and make my life a living hell, right?"

D'Angelo freezes. "You're not scared of me at all, are you?"

"Nope. Was I meant to be, oh scary captain?"

D'Angelo looks over at me like I can help him with the whirlwind that is Shay.

No chance.

I shrug. "Accept it. Amazing as it may be, you've tried all your ice powers, but this Care Bear still loves you."

To my surprise, Shay and D'Angelo laugh at the same time and then look at each other.

Eden ignores them both and carries the plate over to the table.

He slips the BLT sandwich in front of me. "Eat."

"Thanks."

Eden swings his legs over the bench and sits next to me, scanning the garden outside.

As soon as we arrived, Eden took charge of caring for me in subtle ways like making my food and drink.

I asked Shay if his brother did that for everyone.

Shay side eyed me, before replying, *only me.*

Now, every time that Eden silently carries my files for me, helps me research for press releases, or makes my meals, I know that this is special to him.

I don't understand it yet, or him, but I want to.

I like him.

He cares for Shay too.

Eden makes me feel safe, just by being close.

I take a satisfyingly large bite of the BLT because Eden makes the best sandwiches, and the fresh, intense flavors hit.

I can't hold back the moan as I chew.

"Fuck, this is good," I mumble around my mouthful.

Eden doesn't smile but he straightens at the praise.

"Take another bite." Shay breaks away from D'Angelo to perch on the table opposite me, swinging his legs. "I want to hear you make that sound again, love. Who knew how sexy a sandwich could be? Although, I do love some food play. You'd look amazing in nothing but whipped cream, a single cherry, and—"

"Does that sound like something a friend would say?" D'Angelo's voice is frosty, as he stalks to the table.

Shay pales, and his shoulders slump. “Sorry. Have I fucked things up? I do that but I didn’t mean...”

“Hey,” I reach to grasp Shay’s hand, “it’s just banter. You know that I’m okay with it. It’s only us here, and we’ve all been open about things. It’s in public that we have to keep things hidden. And you...” I round on D’Angelo, who’s standing stiff and uncomfortable. “You don’t need to fight my battles or speak for me. Shay and I may not be able to be in a relationship, but he can be himself around me. Do you understand?”

“I do.” D’Angelo looks away. “But I’ve been living on my own for six years and suddenly being here is hard.”

My expression gentles. I know that was difficult for him to admit.

“I get that,” I reply. “But give us some grace for...”

“Dirty glasses and muddy footprints,” Eden supplies.

“Tell me.” Shay tilts his head, and his hair falls over his eyes. “Just say, in that commanding voice of yours: *Cucciolo, get your ass over here and clean up this mud.* I will. I just don’t notice these things, really. I don’t do it on purpose.”

D’Angelo nods. “I can do that, *cucciolo.*”

I have a feeling that despite his protests, Shay likes being called that.

D’Angelo looks about fifty percent less bristly than he did before the jam incident, which is something.

“Look at us, sorting out this domestic shit like grownups,” I tease, letting go of Shay’s hand and taking another bite of my sandwich. “Give us another day, and we’ll have written out a cleaning rota.”

“Don’t you dare.” Eden quirks his brow.

I almost bark out an immediate *yes, sir* in response to his gentle dominance.

It’s intoxicating.

Instinctively, I shift closer to him on the bench.

Eden’s stormy gray eyes are piercing, as he studies D’Angelo. “What’s your problem today?”

D’Angelo looks at Eden in shock like he didn’t expect him to be the one to kick his ass.

Suddenly, D’Angelo deflates, sliding onto the bench next to Eden. “I’m bored.”

Eden arches his brow. “All this because you’re *bored.*”

Seriously?

This is the problem with trying to live with a household of pro athletes in the middle of the mountains, when they're on a social media ban, before the pre-season starts.

They're driven, committed overachievers.

How the hell do I keep them out of trouble?

"Then go outside and play," Shay singsongs.

D'Angelo narrows his eyes at him. "Hilarious."

"You know why we're laying low," I explain. "We need the world to forget about your bad press. Sorry to put it bluntly, but it's true. What would you normally be doing right now?"

"Drinking," D'Angelo lists off on his fingers, "dancing, partying, and..."

"Fucking," Shay adds longingly, looking at me.

I know how he feels.

It's been a long four days being surrounded by three gorgeous guys, no sex toys, and being too anxious, since my bedroom is next to theirs, to relieve the pressure by flicking the bean.

I'm frustrated, but you don't see me shoving Shay against fridges or growling at people.

Well, only in my fantasies.

I take a deep breath. I have to be the professional here.

"What else?" I demand.

"Hockey," all three men reply at the same time.

Then they look at each other and burst into laughter, even Eden.

It's the first time that I've heard Eden laugh.

It's a deep, cautious sound like he's unsure quite how to laugh and has surprised even himself.

My own lips tug into a smile, and I know that it's now my mission to make Eden laugh like that again.

I'd love to hear him laugh every day, even though he'll never laugh as much as his twin.

Shay appears to be able to find joy in everything, even D'Angelo acting like a snarling wolf.

"So, we have that in common." D'Angelo crosses his arms. "In fact, all four of us have a lot in common. We're smart, hardworking, and driven. We're protective of each other too; I haven't missed that. I may...just may... have been acting like a hardass. Shay, I know that deep, exceptionally deep down, you're a good boy. But I struggle with..."

He looks away, before adjusting his cufflinks in a gesture that I've begun to understand now.

"D'Angelo," I lean closer to him, "remember I said that we only need to share what we're ready to. We're getting used to your difficult self. It's charming, and you know it. It always was. Only tell us, if you want to."

"I have OCD, which is obsessive-compulsive disorder," he gets out in a rush. I hate the way that he ducks his head, making his curls cover his face. It's so unlike him. "It's not like they show it in the films: some kind of funny quirk. It's hell. I have these intrusive thoughts and impulses and I feel compelled to act out rituals."

My stomach is churning. My palms feel clammy.

Shit, how did I miss this? I thought that I knew my old friend.

He's been dealing with this alone. Have I made it worse?

"Like doing things in threes," I say, remembering the way that he always adjusts his cufflinks or lines items up in threes.

D'Angelo's head whips up, and my guts churn at the look of shame in his eyes. "You noticed...?"

When Eden catches my gaze, there's a heavy understanding there.

I think carefully, before I reply. "I'm not judging, I swear."

"None of us are," Eden adds.

"I was getting therapy to help with it. But now I can't attend it. Controlling things is how I deal with my anxiety." D'Angelo's voice is brittle. Now, I'm certain that he's telling me the truth that Wilder lied to me about our past because he's making himself fully vulnerable here. Why would he do that, taking such a risk, if he's the villain that he's been painted? His gaze slides to me. "But dealing with seeing you again, principessa, then being thrown into all these changes stuck inside this new house, has made it worse than before."

Shay leaps off the table and strolls in front of D'Angelo. "Can I put my hand on your shoulder?"

D'Angelo huffs. "You can still hug me, hang off me, and fall asleep drooling on my shoulder like you always do. It doesn't change who I am."

Shay places his hand on D'Angelo's shoulder. "Whatever you need, we'll give it to you. For now at least, until we fuck it up, we're teammates. *Brothers*. Just tell us what to do, darlin'. I'll turn into the garbage elf and even convince Eden to stick to a rota."

D'Angelo couldn't look more surprised, if Shay had punched him in the

dick.

Perhaps, he'll lower some of his walls now.

Shay is a good guy and he only needs to prove it. He's been proving it to me personally in the way that he's become the glue of the group with his jokes, kindness, and energy.

I'm filled with conflicted emotions, however, because it's becoming harder and harder to deny to myself that I want both of these men.

And Eden intrigues me as well.

He's magnetic.

Eden's press problem is that he's truly in the shadow of his twin.

Shay is the ice god. His brother is simply the solid player who's unlikely to have had a shot at the NHL without his brother's unique pact.

The press are sniffing around *that* already.

The angle is that Eden's a weak player who has no right to be on the team.

On the first day, I was concerned that I'd have a problem with a jealousy fueled brother, who'd wreck his brother's shot at stardom. There aren't many people with the strength in their souls to know that they're standing in the shadow of their sibling's greatness and yet dedicate themselves to supporting them shine.

I've been watching Eden closely this last week, however, and that appears to be just what he's doing.

Helping Shay shine.

Eden's proud.

The calming presence.

The anchor that Shay needs.

How can I not admire that in a man?

I turn back to D'Angelo, thoughtfully.

"Does keeping busy help you?" I ask.

I want to support D'Angelo and I need to understand to do that. I have a feeling that D'Angelo being bored is a bad idea for many reasons.

He nods. "If I have too long without my mind being occupied, then I become caught up with thoughts that I don't want to talk about."

"Help us out here. If you were stuck inside a house without being able to do hockey for a couple of days, and you could do anything, what would you choose?"

I take another bite of my BLT, savoring the crispness of the lettuce, while

D'Angelo hums in consideration.

For a moment, his grin becomes wicked. "Well, if I was in *my* mansion with gorgeous twins and a beautiful woman, it would probably involve rope, butt plugs, and spanking..."

I almost spray the BLT out in a Shay O.J. moment.

It would serve D'Angelo right.

Shay's face has lit up like he's corrupted his mentor. I don't think that he fully realizes the dominant inside D'Angelo and may come to wish he'd never poked that particular bear.

"All I can offer is a movie night with popcorn," Eden says, wryly.

"I'll settle for that."

D'Angelo arches his eyebrow at me. "What? You two brats can say outrageous things, but I can't?"

"He didn't call *me* a brat." Eden squares his shoulders. "Good choice."

"But he did call *us* brats." Shay gestures between himself and me, in a way that makes me feel something inside that I can't explain yet but feels right in all sorts of ways. "Now that's outrageous."

"Are your feelings hurt?" D'Angelo says with fake concern.

Shay nods with equally fake puppy dog eyes.

"Do you think that you deserve to be the one to choose the movie then?"

Shay nods again.

D'Angelo leans toward him, before he murmurs, "Oh, cucciolo, *tough*." He nudges me with his foot, once, twice, thrice. "Robyn has to put up with all of us. So, nobody deserves to choose more than this saint. Plus, what you don't know is that on what used to be legendary comedy movie nights together, she always chose the movie, while I brought the drinks and snacks. Remember, principessa?"

I don't miss the hopefulness under his casual tone.

If I were to say *no* right now, I would make him bleed.

Once, I'd have relished the chance.

I'd have enjoyed being the one with the power for once.

Now, I love that he's melting his frozen heart.

I know what he's doing.

He's offering these small ways for me to hurt him, testing to see if I will.

After Wilder, I have tests myself. I have an entire book, which is filled with stalker style photos and press clippings, to remind me that D'Angelo will always put his hockey before me.

To harden my heart and keep me away from him.

But fuck, the more that I grow to know this older, mature version of D'Angelo, the harder that's becoming.

Especially, when it's combined with D'Angelo around the twins.

"Of course." I try to match his tone but don't quite pull it off. "*The Big Lebowski* night was your favorite. There was a drinking game with it that we always did in secret. We had to take a drink of beer anytime an actor said *dude* and a shot of vodka anytime they said *man*."

"You must have been on the fucking floor," Shay mutters. "Respect."

D'Angelo's expression is bright with happiness at the memory like the shadows have been chased away.

He looks years younger.

"Your favorite was that *Labyrinth* film with David Bowie, which your brother told us about." D'Angelo shakes his head but he's laughing. "Drink once every time someone says *goblin*, twice every time David Bowie appears, and drink three times everything is not what it seems."

I blow out a breath. "We were so wasted."

"Those nights with you," D'Angelo says with a quiet intensity that takes me by surprise, "were the best of my life."

I catch his gaze, and the rawness of the truth in his blue eyes, makes my heart pound.

What do I say?

Into the sudden, awkward silence, D'Angelo's phone rings.

Saved by the bell.

D'Angelo's cheek twitches. He shoves himself up, turning his back to the table.

Both Eden and Shay are silent, watching me carefully.

I avoid their gazes.

My cheeks are burning. My hands clutch the edge of the table.

I hear D'Angelo pull his phone out of his pocket and answer it.

"What?" He pales, stiffening. Something's wrong, *really wrong*. It's how I react, when I read a text from my asshole ex. *Exactly* like that. "Why are you calling me, Talon?"

I push myself out of my seat.

My heart is hammering in my chest. Adrenaline surges through me.

Accidentally, I knock my plate off the table, and it shatters on the floor, startlingly loud.

I hardly notice.

All my attention is focused on the tense line of D'Angelo's back and the iPhone in his hand that's pressed to his ear, which suddenly feels so dangerous.

I'm shaking.

Why is Wilder talking to D'Angelo? What's he going to say about me?

Are they friends? Allies?

Has all of this been a trick?

Now, I'm trapped out here with D'Angelo.

Help, help, help.

Suddenly, I notice that Eden has stood and looped his strong arm around my shoulder, and that I'm whispering the words without realizing.

Shay is standing in front of me protectively as well.

"Stop harassing me." D'Angelo's voice is low and furious. For a moment, I wonder if he's so focused on the conversation with Wilder that he's forgotten I'm in the room. But then, the thought jolts through me that he knew there was a chance this could have been Wilder. He moved away from the table, turning his back, so that I couldn't see his expression in his own bid to protect me. "Haven't you already taken enough from me? Fuck you and fuck your narcissistic rage. If you have anything else to say, say it on the ice. Are you kidding me? I'm not passing on a message to your *ex-wife*. If she wants to talk to you, then she'll make the choice to do that. I don't care what photograph you saw. You don't own her. If you try to damage Robyn's reputation or hurt her — in any way — then I'll make sure that your golden boy crown is so tarnished that you won't even be able to play in the minor leagues. Do you understand?"

CHAPTER TWELVE



Captain's Hall, Freedom

I stand in the open doorway to D'Angelo's bedroom, watching him with concern.

It's been hours, since D'Angelo took the call from Wilder and then stalked out of the kitchen without saying a word.

Shay wanted to immediately rush after him, but I knew that he'd probably need some space.

I always do, after reading one of Wilder's texts.

Who knew that being called *birdie* could make you want to change your name?

It's as bad as being bought gifts covered in robins at Christmas by people who always think that they're being original.

When I passed D'Angelo's room, however, carrying a bundle of files, I stumbled to a stop.

D'Angelo's room is large and overlooks the pasture at the back of the ranch. His drapes are open, and pale moonlight streams over his antique silver bed, which is lavish and elegant with glimmering bedding. The floors are thickly carpeted and white like the walls. The entire far wall is a mirrored walk-in closet.

I can tell why D'Angelo chose this room.

He's bent over his bed with all his focus on three shirts, which are laid out with meticulous neatness. He's folding and refolding them with fluid,

crisp motions.

It's impressive.

I'm more a roll up clothes and stuff them in the closet type of woman.

Yet every time that the shirts are folded perfectly, D'Angelo shakes them out with a frustrated huff and begins again.

How long has he been doing this? Minutes? *Hours*?

There's a crease between his brow like he's in pain.

I drop the files and knock on his open door, but he doesn't react.

"Hey, D'Aneglo," I say, "can I come in?"

He doesn't even look up.

Cautiously, I edge into the room.

D'Angelo's hands move fast over the shirt with an anxious energy.

Is this because of Wilder's call?

I'm going to kick that bastard's ass.

What's distressing D'Angelo this much?

I'm close to the bed but I don't reach to touch him.

Instead, I say, gently, "How about you leave that now? Shay's made literally tons of popcorn, and Eden's set up the drinking game for *Labyrinth* downstairs. I'm desperate to see Bowie in those tight pants. How do you feel about getting wasted together?"

Because it's looking pretty appealing to me.

"Don't." D'Angelo's still folding the shirts, as if he's in a trance.

"What...?"

"Don't distract me."

"Those shirts look well folded to me."

"I've lost count now." He sounds panicked. "And if I d-d-don't do it just r-right..."

"What will happen?" I ask, struggling to understand.

Is this his OCD?

D'Angelo grits his teeth. Even though he's trying to hide it, I'm certain that he's struggling with back pain.

He must have been bent over like this for a long time.

I crave to massage him because his muscles must be cramping.

Suddenly, D'Angelo slips up, turning a sleeve the wrong way as he folds.

He notices at the same moment as I do.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck." He becomes ashen. "They're going to come for me tonight now. The men. They're going to break in and take me and—"

“Take a breath.” I force myself to remain calm, even though I can see how fast D’Angelo’s chest is rising and falling, and I’m beginning to panic myself. Who the fuck are these men? Just fears, anxiety, or real people? “Slowly, in and out. Now, what do you mean?”

“It’s not rational. I know that it’s not...” With a roar, D’Angelo sweeps the shirts off the bed and collapses onto it on his back.

Distressed, I stare down at him.

I’ve never seen him like this.

I don’t know what to do.

“It’s these thoughts, the OCD, that if I don’t fold the shirts just right, the same number of times, then the men will come for me.” D’Angelo looks away from me, embarrassed. “You can laugh at me. I’ve dealt with having to hide this from almost everybody for years. Don’t hold back on my account.”

I sit down on the side of the bed next to him. “Does it help to think that even if men *did* come tonight to try to get you that they couldn’t?”

In surprise, D’Angelo’s gaze snaps to mine. “You’re not telling me that I’m crazy or that there are no men.”

“I’d never call anyone crazy. The point is that we’re in a secret location in the middle of the mountains. Plus, we’re surrounded by state of the art security with an entire security team at the bottom of the driveway. Also, you have three other people on the same corridor with you, who’d fight to protect you.”

“You would?”

I hate that he sounds uncertain about that.

I also hate that part of me feels that these *men* may be based off a traumatic memory of his.

“I’d get my klutzy ass kicked, but of course.” I shuffle closer to D’Angelo on the bed, before lying next to him on my back. “So, worst case scenario, we fight like knockoff Rambos, but you’re not being taken anywhere. No one steals my friends from me. Okay? Plus, if you want me to, I’m calling Dad tomorrow and getting him to make sure that your therapy is slotted back into your pre-season schedule.”

He gives a short nod. “Is that what we are? Friends?”

“Isn’t that what we always were?” I know that it’s the truth now.

I wish that I always had.

“I thought so. But I was beginning to wonder if you knew that.”

My cheeks flame. “Can I massage your shoulders?”

He arches his brow. "Now you sound like Shay."

"Never reject a massage from him. He turns me into a puddle of goo at least twice a day. I can't promise that because I suck at massages but I'll do my best."

D'Angelo nods like he's doing me a favor, before rolling onto his front.

I push myself up to straddle his ass, blushing.

He has a seriously amazing ass.

I work my fingers into his shoulders, feeling the knots in his stiff muscles.

"Ouch." He winces. "I've changed my mind."

"Suck it up." I move lower, where I can feel that he's done the most damage.

D'Angelo's breathing is tight with pain. "Did you ever think of training as a *domme*?"

"Already have," I tease. "Now, be a good boy or do I have to spank you?"

We both freeze the moment that the teasing words have spilled out of my mouth.

"The thing is, principessa," D'Angelo's voice is back to icy again, as if just a moment ago, he wasn't vulnerable and open with me, "I actually *have* trained as a *dom*. So, which of us do you think is most likely to get spanked, if they consent?"

"Not me." I'm struggling to continue the massage, when inside, a desperate flood of emotions and desire is sweeping through me and making my skin spark, everywhere that I'm touching him. Why did I think that straddling him was a good idea again? "Because I actually *am* a good girl."

To my shock, D'Angelo rises up, rolling me off him and to the side. Then he leans over me, studying my face.

Breathing hard, I lie like caged prey, as his curls fall over my cheeks.

"You don't need to do this," he says, quietly.

"Do what?" I ask, confused.

"Continue to pretend to care. Tease and give me massages. I've already agreed to go along with the whole press thing. I know that you really hate me."

For a moment, I forget how to breathe.

Is that what he thinks?

Still thinks?

"I don't..." I splutter.

"During our first meeting, you refused my apology, accused me of a DUI,

then called me a *PR fucking disaster*.”

Shit.

I wish that I could go back in time and slap my old self.

“In my defense, you were being a dick.”

Or my self right now.

D’Angelo’s mouth tightens. “Just feel the love.”

“Look, I was taken off guard myself. I’d only been in Freedom a week and being here stirred up a lot of memories. I’d been fired the night before, then Dad rang, telling me to get down to the arena. You know how persistent he is, and he ambushed me that morning, just the same as he did you. Needing to rescue you from the middle of a press savaging was a lot to deal with, especially after the way things were left between us. You know, after what you did.”

D’Angelo’s brow furrows. “What *I* did? You’re the one who out of the blue rejected me and stopped being my best friend. You’re the one who chose the asshole, who was my rival and bully, instead. You’re the one who...”

I’m shaking. “Go on. Don’t stop there.”

D’Angelo’s breathing is too fast. “*Married him.*”

I can’t look away from D’Angelo’s fierce stare.

My stomach is churning with dread.

Everything that I’ve been piecing together, since I returned to my home town, is beginning to come together, and I hate the shape that it’s making.

“That’s not...” Tears quiver in my eyes.

D’Angelo looks crushed for a moment, but then, his expression hardens. “I loved you but I was scared of losing you. So, I didn’t tell you the truth of my feelings. For that, I’ve never stopped hating myself.”

A tear chases down my cheek. “I knew that Wilder was your rival but not —”

“He comes from an elite family who owns half the fucking state. I was on a scholarship. He hated that I was better on the ice than him and he made it known with extreme hazing. But it wasn’t hazing; it was fucking torture.”

I reach up and cup his cheek. “Why didn’t you tell me?”

“Yeah, that’s not how it goes. Why would I give you even more reasons to choose him over me?”

I pale. “Don’t you get it? I’d have kicked him in the balls for touching you, if I’d known. I’d never have dated him.”

D’Angelo gives a small, pleased smile. “Then younger me is a dumbass.

But I wasn't in a good place back then. The coach was working my ass off to earn my scholarship. I couldn't risk missing a single practice. I know that I pissed you off with all the dinners and movies that I missed because I had extra practice or essays to finish because my grades needed to be perfect too."

I shift, uncomfortable.

Shit, I blamed him for that.

Wilder never blew me off for work, while D'Angelo was unreliable.

He always put his hockey first.

Yet I understand his single-minded focus now.

Wilder had his family's power and money to fall back on, if he messed up. But D'Angelo had nothing.

He hadn't been able to risk his scholarship.

With maturity and the time that I've spent supporting my ex-husband in the sporting world, I can see that. He couldn't pass up his only opportunity.

I get why he's supportive of Shay and Eden now.

The picture that Wilder's painted of D'Angelo over these years has all been fucking lies, which must mean that *everything* was a lie.

I can't help it, I sob.

Instantly, D'Angelo turns us on our sides, wrapping his arms around me.

He cards his fingers through my hair, soothingly.

He murmurs, "Hush, cara mia."

Cara mia: My beloved.

I don't feel like I deserve such sweetness from him.

"You don't know," I manage between my tears, "why I ghosted you."

"Oh, so you're admitting that? I thought that you were going to say that a clownfish ate your phone with my number on it or something."

I choke out a laugh through my tears. "A fucking clownfish?"

"You did force me to watch your favorite childhood film, *Finding Nemo*, at least ten times, you know."

"Only seven, and you remember that?"

"I remember everything about you, Robyn."

Somehow, his use of my actual name feels more intimate, than his usual crooned pet names.

Everything.

"Wilder lied about you." Each word is like spitting out glass, but I force myself to say it because D'Angelo deserves to know this, and I need to finally be certain about what actually happened that tore us apart back then.

It's wrecked both our lives, and we need the truth. "But I was in love with him and I trusted the wrong man."

There's a long silence. D'Angelo doesn't pull away.

"I don't blame you for that." D'Angelo's voice is steady. "To be clear, I know that Wilder's a charming narcissist. Most people adore him. In college, they didn't see the darker side like I did. Once I noticed that you two were getting close, however, I did try to warn you, even though I knew that Wilder would fuck me up for it."

I remember D'Angelo telling me to be careful because Wilder could be violent, sadistic, and *a liar*.

It was the last straw for our friendship.

The picture that he drew sounded laughably unlike Wilder.

I thought that D'Angelo was simply acting jealous and possessive.

Wilder had warned me that D'Angelo would try something like that to isolate me and try to break us up.

He'd told me that I was D'Angelo's ticket into the NHL, so of course he was going to say anything to stop me from dating someone else.

I had no idea at that time how manipulative Wilder was.

Yet he'd been playing both D'Angelo and me.

I wet my dry lips. "He told me that you were only using me because of my dad. I didn't believe him at first."

D'Angelo stiffens. "I never used you. Do you want the truth, even if it hurts? I'll show you the evidence later. I kept the messages, notes, and took photos of my injuries, *everything*. I couldn't use it at the time but I wanted it documented."

Now, isn't that a hard question to answer?

I glance up at him through my matted lashes. "Nothing can hurt more than what that asshole has put me through for years."

"My brave, principessa." D'Angelo tightens his hand in my hair like he's frightened that I'll vanish on him again. "When Wilder was hazing me, he was looking for ways to hurt me. He wrecked as many chances in my career as he could. He still does. Then he noticed who my best friend was; he worked out who I loved the most. He also knew who your Dad was. He told me that I didn't deserve to win a trophy like you. He tried to get me to sleep with some women after a match, and when I wouldn't, I guess he knew how serious I was about you. That's when he put his mind to taking the one person who I cared about more than anything from me."

“What the fuck?” I shove away from D’Angelo, pushing myself up. “I was just a pawn in a game between you two?”

D’Angelo looks startled, sitting up as well. “Not to me, but yeah, to Wilder.”

“I’m going to rip off his balls.”

“From what I heard, you already did that with the divorce settlement.”

I wish that was true. But his lawyer was savage.

I guess that it suits Wilder to lie about me too.

“Now,” D’Angelo edges closer to me on the bed, grabbing hold of my hand, “I’ve told you the worst that Wilder did to me. Why don’t you tell me how he tricked you into abandoning me?”

Hell, this is hard.

I squeeze his hand. “Remember the charity that we set up together...?”

D’Angelo smiles. “Of course.”

“Wilder told me that you were using me for my connections, so that we could get donations. Then that the whole charity thing was only for your resume. He said that you were never my real friend and that you laughed about it — *me* — behind my back in the locker rooms.”

D’Angelo bares his teeth. “And you told him *to go fuck himself* because I’d never do that, right?” Then realization dawns in his eyes, and he slumps against me. “You asked me, didn’t you? That night, when you asked if I was putting the charity on my resume, and I told you that *of course* I was. I was rushing to get to the rink in time, and you tried to remind me that it was your birthday drinks. I was distracted because of the big game coming up, however, and you said—”

“So, it really is only about hockey to you, isn’t it?” I reply, sick with guilt.

“Fuck,” D’Angelo snarls. Then he grips my cheeks and forces me to meet his gaze. “I didn’t understand what you were really asking me. Wilder messed with both our minds. Anyone on a scholarship would put volunteering work on their resumes and applications. Plus, I couldn’t miss practice, you see that now? But it doesn’t mean that you weren’t my real — only — friend. It fucking killed me, when you suddenly drew away from me and married that asshole.”

“Did you hate me for that?” My voice is small.

“I wanted to.” D’Angelo’s lips are so close to mine that his hot breath heats my mouth. “But, cara mia, I could never hate you. I fucking love you more than life itself. More than fucking hockey.”

My eyes widen, and my heart is hammering in my chest.
His thumbs are stroking my cheeks, and I don't ever want them to stop.
How could I have got everything so wrong? I mean, a whole section in my Guide with stick drawings, bullet point notes, and even unsent letters (therapeutic) wrong?

"You don't love anything more than hockey," I breathe.

"We still appear to have a little miscommunication here," D'Angelo says, low and commanding. "If I'd had to choose between hockey and you, I'd always have chosen you. Now, I've waited years for this. May I kiss you?"

"Please..." I wrap my arms around D'Angelo's neck.

I'm shivering, desperate for his touch.

Desperate for this.

Our first kiss.

I've waited just as long.

This was stolen from us.

I'll take ownership for my own part in it but I was naïve and used to an honest and loving family around me.

I'd been nothing but prey to Wilder and his dick friends on the rest of the team, who echoed back everything that my husband told me about D'Angelo.

But now, I need to reclaim this connection.

I need D'Angelo.

Everything started with him.

D'Angelo's looking at me like the world starts and ends with me as well but also like he can't believe that I'm real.

He presses his lips lightly to mine, as if he expects me to pull away, but I don't.

"We shouldn't be doing this," D'Angelo whispers, kissing me on each word. "This is definitely fraternization."

"I've spent years being convinced that I should hate you, when I should have been loving you. Damn straight we're fraternizing." I bite on his lower lip, and he sucks in a breath.

Then he's kissing me, passionately.

At last, he draws back; his pupils are dilated. "Fuck, I love fraternizing."

Then he tugs on my hair, dragging me even closer, and it sends delicious sparks through me.

We collapse together, tangled on the bed.

He wraps his legs around mine, and I can't stop myself humping against

him.

I feel like I'm unraveling, undone.

He slips his hand up my thigh, edging my dress up. The feeling of his fingers stroking my tights is making me wet.

So close...

Just a little higher...

I whimper, and my eyelids flutter. I'm losing the ability to coherently think.

I claw my fingers into D'Angelo's shoulders.

His breath hitches.

Then he rubs backwards and forwards with his thumb, massaging my clit through my panties.

I moan.

We're both panting, kissing each other on every patch of skin that we can find: corner of lips, bridge of nose, necks, and down to collar bones.

This is everything.

He's everything.

"Jude," I moan.

Pleasure is slamming through me.

His hips are grinding against mine.

And I'm about to...

"W-wait." My mind is hazy. I push D'Angelo back, even though what I really want to do is to keep kissing the cruel curve of his sensual lips and never stop. His thumb is still maddeningly circling my clit. "We can't do anything, until we have a conversation about this with Shay. Everything needs to be in the open; no more secrets or misunderstandings. We're not the only two involved in this, and I don't think that I want us to be. What about Shay?"

"Yeah, what about me?" Shay's voice says from the open doorway.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Captain's Hall, Freedom

“**S**hay,” I blurt, scrambling in a wild whirlwind of limbs off D’Angelo. Accidentally, I knee D’Angelo in the balls, and he doubles over with a groan.

Shay’s lips twitch.

“Careful, my family jewels are valuable,” D’Angelo says through gritted teeth.

“Sorry,” I whisper back, straightening my dress.

My heart is hammering. My fingers are trembling. I feel like I’m being edged and push my thighs together, as my pussy throbs.

I’m looking between both men.

I don’t know what to say.

I want both of them.

I care for both of them.

I think that they feel the same for each other as well.

But how do I explain that?

Shay leans in the doorway; there’s the whisper of hurt under his expression, but an interest that he can’t hide as well. “They are valuable. I heard that Jude’s such a player that he’s insured his balls for almost as much as that big head of his.”

Now I know that Shay is pissed to be making ball jokes to D’Angelo.

He obviously likes to live dangerously.

D'Angelo's eyes widen, before they narrow.

He appears to pull himself together, once more taking command of the situation.

He pushes himself off the bed.

D'Angelo's hair is mussed, which is unusual for him. I find that I love the messed up look on him.

I also love how hard he is in his pants.

He stalks toward Shay, who flattens himself against the door frame, as D'Angelo cages him.

My hands flutter nervously.

Are they going to fight or fuck?

I think that it's fifty-fifty at this point.

D'Angelo towers over Shay. "It's rude to interrupt a guy, when he's finally been reunited with his first love."

Huh, *reunited*.

Is that the posh term for dry humping?

Warmth coils through me, heating my cheeks. I smile, hugging my knees to my chest.

Only D'Angelo could say something so romantic but make it sound coldly menacing.

I hold my breath.

I never wanted to hurt Shay.

I'd do anything not to hurt him.

Shay doesn't look away from D'Angelo. "And it's rude to kiss a guy's girlfriend."

Except, Shay doesn't sound devastated. He sounds hopeful.

What's going on?

It's like they're having a whole conversation with their silent, intent gazes and settling something between themselves.

"Hey," I call over, "*girlfriend?* Shay, we had one admittedly mind-blowing night together but we haven't even had a date yet. We decided to remain friends for the moment, remember?"

Shay deflates, and his shoulders slump.

Finally, his gaze slides from D'Angelo's to the floor like he's lost some war.

I realize that I hate seeing Shay look defeated like this. No matter what's thrown at him, he's usually cheerful.

This is all wrong.

I was never choosing D'Angelo by himself, and if I've been reading D'Angelo right, then I don't think he wants that either.

I know that I have been, when immediately D'Angelo grips Shay's chin and tips up his head.

He must hate that sad look on Shay, as much as I do.

"My teammates don't give up," D'Angelo chides. "What's happened to your fight?"

Shay blinks, confused.

Then his expression brightens, and it's like the sun has come out in the night.

When Shay bites his lip, I'm desperate to sooth the marks with my tongue. "So, we're not holding to the non-fraternization thing then...?"

"It looks that way." D'Angelo caresses his thumb just once over Shay's chin, before dropping his hold.

Shay turns to me. "Does that mean I can take you on a proper date, love?"

This is all happening so fast. I haven't figured any of this out.

But it feels right, in the same way that being apart from these men has felt wrong.

"D'Angelo," I say, carefully, "we're going to need to talk about this, but it's important to me that you're fine with this too. We'll need to be careful and make sure that we keep it secret because it could damage us, if it's found out."

"We shouldn't have to hide who we are." D'Angelo's voice is tight. "But if it's a choice between being with the people who we love and following rules on a fucking sheet of paper that someone else has forced on us..."

"Then we take the risk on love," Shay states.

We all look at each other.

This feels big.

My heart speeds up.

Has anyone taken a risk on me before?

They're putting me in front of their hockey.

They think that I'm worth that.

But then, I'm risking my new life for them because I know that they're worth it.

Yet I have to make sure that they know what I want.

I tighten my arms around myself. "My marriage tied me down. My

husband made me feel owned. I can't do that again. But that doesn't mean I can't fall in love again. I just have different needs and I'm definite that I won't be able to choose between you. I refuse to come between teammates and friends."

Shay shrugs like it's the simplest thing in the world. "Then share us. We can have a polyamorous relationship."

My eyes widen. "Would you be okay with that? But you're so competitive..."

Shay's eyes crinkle with amusement. "Competitive over sport, love. I'm not a possessive bastard. I only care about... I really like you. I want you to give me a chance."

"What do you want D'Angelo?" My chest is tight. I'm desperate not to pick between these two men. They meet different needs for me, and it'd kill me to lose one of them. I'll only try this, however, if we're all totally comfortable. "I need to know that you're—"

"On board with a poly relationship," D'Angelo twists to me, "as long as that's what the woman I love needs." He turns back to pin Shay with his stare. "I'm a big enough man with million dollar insured balls, as rumor would have it, to see that you meet some of her needs in a way that I can't, which makes me happy. But be warned, I'll be watching. And *your* balls will be busted, if you ever make her cry."

Shay shudders in mock horror. "What if it's the good type of crying? You know, darlin', the wrecked with pleasure, until she screams, cries, and..."

"Shay," I laugh.

"What?" He chuckles. "You know that you like that, remember?"

Fuck.

Now, D'Angelo's calculated look is darting between the two of us.

I wonder if Shay realizes how close he's leaning to D'Angelo or the way that he's smiling at him. It makes me want to slide my hand between my thighs and finish what D'Angelo started.

I can tell by D'Angelo's softer, thoughtful expression that *he* realizes.

Yet I trust that he'll be patient and let Shay work through things for himself in his own time.

It's Shay's self-discovery that he desires D'Angelo, as much as I do.

I think that all three of us can feel it crackling in the air between us.

This arrangement could work for us in ways that we're only just beginning to feel out. And for the first time in a long time, I'm truly excited.

Until, my shoulders slump.

Because there aren't only three of us living in this house or even only two men in my heart.

"What about Eden?" I ask, quietly.

Eden, the shadow twin, who's so often overlooked, even though he's the caretaker. He's been quietly looking after all of us.

Shay gives an easy smile. "He'll be happy for me. He knows how obsessed I've been, ever since I met you."

D'Angelo crosses his arms. "Would he accept this type of relationship?"

Shay's expression darkens, as if with imagined pain. "He'll be relieved that someone, two people, care about me. It's like a type of family, right?"

D'Angelo briefly rests his hand on Shay's shoulder. "A family."

Shay darts a glance to me. "Eden will probably punch me in the dick for this, but I can't not tell you."

My brow furrows. "Not tell me what?"

"Do you like my brother? If you could date him too, would you?"

My mouth hangs open.

Now, I've lost the bet with Cody — twice. And every moment that passes, I'm breaking the rules and guidelines of my Guide to date more and more hockey players.

I'm a player magnet.

"Total honesty...? If I could date him and get to know him more, then yeah, I would."

I close my eyes, wringing my hands on my lap.

Is Shay going to explode?

Have I screwed everything up?

I hear quick footsteps coming toward me, then the bed bounces.

My eyes snap open, and I find myself staring into Shay's golden flecked gray eyes.

I let out a whoosh of air, as he hugs me, hard.

Unless it's a hug attack, I'm safe.

"I knew that I could trust you." Shay's glowing with a relieved joy. "My brother has never told me that he likes anyone before. He's introverted. I bet that he'd never have told you himself. But he's been asking me to find out a way that we could *both* be with you. I told him that it was impossible because...he's already been hurt enough for a hundred lifetimes. But we could really try this, and I know that you won't hurt him, love."

“I won’t,” I promise.

Who’s hurt Eden?

Shay doesn’t say it, but since the twins are so protective of each other, I’m certain that Shay has been hurt as well.

D’Angelo smooths down his curls. “How about this, we each get one date, in secret. If they work out, then we negotiate a clear and specific polyamorous relationship that meets everybody’s needs.”

Shay nods.

I run my hand along Shay’s strong shoulder; he’s still clinging onto me like a limpet. “Typical Ryn, I’m meant to be avoiding hockey boyfriends, and I’ve ended up with three secret ones.”

“You were always an overachiever,” D’Angelo drawls.

He marches to the bed and grabs Shay by the scruff of the neck.

“Hey,” Shay protests, “watch it, darlin’. I’m valuable too.”

“You both are.” D’Angelo leans down to whisper in Shay’s ear, “You mean more than my own life to me. So, go together on the first date tomorrow night. Work out the way that we’ll fit together. And don’t you dare disappoint my principessa — make her cry with pleasure.”

My breath hitches.

I think giving up the first date to Shay is the most generous thing that D’Angelo’s ever offered.

I’m falling harder every moment.

Plus, the way that Shay’s eyes sparkle with joy, as he’s caught between us, I know that I’m falling for him too.

“I’m going to show you how I get my thrills, love. Then I’ll make you cry in the best way.” Shay’s smile is dangerous. “Have you ever ridden a Harley before?”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



Wild Mountain, Freedom

*I*scream, but the wind steals my voice, as the motorcycle roars up the empty road that winds through the estate and onto Wild Mountain.

It's so loud.

I can't believe that the one thing Shay asked for in his deal with Dad, aside from playing on the ice with Eden, was access to this Harley.

I tighten my hold around Shay's waist, and he pushes his ass against me.

It's Thursday evening, and my first date with Shay.

I've been on edge all day, waiting for this.

Shay has been worse.

When I walked out and saw him leaning against his red and black beast of a motorcycle in front of Captain's Hall, however, everything felt so right that my nerves left me.

Shay was dressed in biker gear: dark waxed jeans, battered black boots, and the leather jacket that I recognized from the night I met him in Merchant's Inn.

His nails were painted metallic gray and not chipped this time.

Shay's face lit up, when he saw me. "You look fantastic, love."

I glanced down at myself. "This isn't my usual date outfit."

At Shay's insistence, I'd worn jeans, boots, and a new tan motorcycle leather jacket that I'd ordered online and had been speed delivered.

"You look fucking edible in that jacket." Shay bit his lip. "Huh, I didn't

know that I had a kink for leather. But I do, if it's you wearing it."

"Well, I definitely have a kink for it." I sauntered to where Shay was standing. My heart sped up, as I caressed down the buttery softness of his jacket, taking a delicious sniff of its scent. "Anybody would have, if they saw you looking like this."

Deliberately, he drew his hand — which was gloved in black leather — down my cheek, flooding me with the scent, then tingling across my lips.

"You've just given me so many ideas for later, love." He leaned down and placed a tender kiss on my lips, before pulling back and snatching up a second pair of gloves, which were lying on top of the helmets on the saddle.

Slowly and teasingly, he drew the gloves onto each of my hands, one finger at a time.

I could hardly breathe, spellbound.

The moment bound us together, ceremonial.

When he was done, he picked up a helmet and passed it to me. "Have you ridden before, love?"

"Yeah, but not a motorcycle."

Shay's gaze became sultry. "Oh, I know that, love. You've already ridden both my face and my dick, remember? I was your prisoner and I still am. My poor heart doesn't stand a chance. I wonder what you'll ride tonight..."

Now, he's finally slowing the motorcycle, and I can open my eyes.

My breathing is still ragged, and my pulse is frantic.

The drive has been a thrill all right — like flying or possibly, more like jumping out of a plane.

Is that what it feels like for the guys, when they skate? Is this why Shay loves it so much on the ice?

It means a lot that he's sharing this experience with me.

It's like freedom.

Only, as trust exercises go, it's pretty extreme for a first date.

I guess that it shows how much I do trust him.

Although, hurtling through the evening dark, holding onto someone for dear life around winding roads and screaming...

It's not exactly a candlelit dinner and roses.

Actually, it suits Shay.

Shay begins to slow the Harley, pulling off to a cliff point.

I smile against the deliciously soft leather that encases the hard muscles of Shay's back, allowing my hand to wander down from his waist to his

crotch.

I rub my palm against his dick through his jeans, before gripping him there.

Does it matter where I hang on? Waist or dick?

Shay stiffens and skids the Harley to an abrupt stop, steadying it.

I smirk.

Wow, it's like having reins.

I pull off my helmet, stretching my tense muscles.

I'm surprised by the jerky way in which Shay yanks off his helmet and throws it down.

Then he twists to me. "Tease."

He drags me into a kiss, slow and drugging.

Then energized, he pulls back, climbing off the motorcycle and then helping me off it.

He grabs my hand. "Come on."

Shay's excitement is infectious, as he leads me away from the motorcycle, across the grass, and closer to the rugged cliff edge.

It's remote here. The view is breathtaking.

I can see a spine of mountains in the distance on one side, and in front of us, the Atlantic ocean like a black mirror, extending to the horizon.

It's a clear night, and both the moon and the stars are reflected in the water.

I feel calm, closer to nature than I have in a long time.

When I glance at Shay's face, I don't think that I've seen him stand so still, ever.

He's staring up at the night sky. "Isn't it beautiful?"

My eyes widen. "Did you bring me out here to stargaze?"

"I know that Eden and Jude can probably do romance better than me, love, but I am an astrophysicist."

I huff a laugh, tightening my hand in his. "This is perfect."

And it is.

"I want to find out about you." Shay's voice is soft. "And tell you about myself. Who are the people who are important to you? What's your all-time favorite band? Where in the world do you want to travel? *Everything*. Plus, I don't want you to think that *I'm an astrophysicist* was just a pickup line, you know, like *I'm a rocket scientist*."

"Go on then." I snuggle closer to him against the cold. "Tell me about the

stars.”

“You’re lucky because stargazing is incredible here in Virginia, since there’s so little light pollution. You should try stargazing in London; it’s a bloody nightmare. Just to be clear, I’m not an astronomer because my focus is the physics of space, but yeah, this is where Eden would tell me to shut up because my geekery is ruining the mood.” He drops my hand and wraps his arm around my shoulder. He’s warm, and I feel cocooned with him in this moment. His voice is rich and reverent. “Do you see those stars up there, which are shaped like a winged horse?”

When he traces them with his finger, I nod.

“The constellation is called Pegasus. According to myth, he had magical powers and dug out a spring to drink from with his hooves. If you drank from it, you could write poetry. I should tell Eden; he’d like that. Can you see that really bright star? It’s a supergiant star called Epsilon Pegasi and marks Pegasus’ muzzle.”

Shay’s uncertainty and constant fidgeting has faded away. It’s fucking hot to see him in expert mode.

Maybe I have a competency kink as well.

I’m learning lots about myself, as well as Shay tonight.

I point at another section of the sky. “What’s that?”

Shay smirks. “Well, what a surprise, you’re drawn to the constellation known as Hercules, *The Kneeling One*.”

I pretend, with no success, to be outraged.

Shay only laughs, falling to sit on the grass and dragging me onto his lap.

I wrap my arms around his neck, resting my head on his chest. We sit in silence for a moment, as an infinity of stars above and the ancient ocean beneath, watch over us.

The moment stretches, and I feel languid, safe on Shay’s lap.

Being with him is both thrilling and deep on an emotional level. It was from our very first night.

I’ve never felt this with anyone else.

I admire D’Angelo for understanding me well enough to see that and for not forcing me to choose between these men.

It’d kill me.

“My family and friends are the people who are most important to me,” I say. “Dad, Cody and his husband, and Neve. I’d do anything for them. They’ve always had my back. Favorite band next?”

Shay looks down at me, fondly. “This could be the deal breaker.”

I quirk my brow. “Wow, a music snob. So, if I were to say Justin Bieber...?”

“He’s not a band.”

This is fun.

I tap my chin, pretending to think hard. “One Direction, in their glory days.”

Dramatically, Shay pulls his arms away from around my neck. “Sorry, love, but that’s a hard limit for me. This is going to be our break up.”

“Hey...”

“Joking.” Shay snatches hold of me quickly, before I can struggle off his lap.

Then we’re both laughing, as he pulls me down to lie next to him on the grass, kissing down my neck. “I don’t care who you like. Be the biggest Belieber in belieber land. Wait, is that a thing? Because it feels like it should be. Or wear a Harry Styles t-shirt because I admit to being jealous of his hair. I may insist on listening to my own bands, Arctic Monkeys and The Strokes, as often and loudly as I can, but you do you.”

I wriggle to get closer to him on the cold grass, glad for the protection of my jacket. “So, who’s important to you?”

If our faces weren’t so close, I may not have noticed the way that Shay’s smile becomes stiff and unnatural. “Eden and my adoptive parents.”

It’s the first time that he’s mentioned his parents to me aren’t his biological ones.

I can see the thoughts whirring in his mind. He looks like he’s struggling to come to a decision.

And it’s a difficult one.

Finally, he pulls away from me.

He rolls onto his back, pillowing his head on his arms.

Then he stares up at the blackness of the sky.

Concerned, I roll onto my side, studying the handsome outline of his face and how tightly his jaw is clenched.

I don’t reach out for him.

What’s wrong?

Finally, he says, still not looking at me, “Your Dad, he’s tough, right?”

Confused, I reply, “He can be. I know that he is on the rookies, but he’s only like that because he wants to get the best out of them. He’s invested in

people. He said that you have the potential to become his star player.”

Shay turns his gaze to mine in shock. “He said that.”

“Don’t look so surprised. I saw you skate, remember? I can see it too. You’re incredible, Shay.”

He looks flustered. “How can you just say things like that?”

“Because it’s true.” I gently reach out to brush a stray strand of golden hair back from his forehead. “Why are you asking about Dad?”

“I just needed to know that he wasn’t tough on *you*.”

Oh, shit.

“He’s great,” I rush to reassure Shay. “I respect him so fucking much. Yeah, he’s never handed us anything on a silver spoon, and he was harder on Cody than me. Mom died, when we were teenagers, however, and that was a struggle for us all to cope with, especially when we had the press giving us shit. We simply wanted to be left alone to grieve.”

“I can’t imagine how hard that was. I’ll always be here, if you need me.”

I reach my hand around Shay’s waist and settle closer to him. “Thank you.”

Then it hits me.

Adoptive parents.

Why he’s asking me these questions?

Have his parents died as well? But why was he so worried that my dad may have hurt me?

My stomach feels like it’s filled with ice.

“What are your parents like?” I ask, carefully.

Shay smiles. “They’re good people. They don’t have much but they both work two jobs to make sure that we...” Then his smile fades. “Or do you mean my *biological* parents because they’re not my mum and dad. They never called themselves that. We called them the Man and the Woman.”

I’m frozen.

I feel like I can’t swallow.

There’s been small things that I’ve noticed about both the twins, including how close they are and how impossibly protective of each other, which made me wonder about their pasts.

Eden cares for Shay almost like he raised him.

Now, I wonder if he actually did.

“If I tell you this,” Shay whispers, and I have to lean closer to him, “it’s a secret that Eden and I swore never to tell anyone. Eden gave me permission

to share this with you tonight, if I was ready to. He said that he felt you needed to know, before you chose us. You may not want us, after you know.”

My chest feels tight. “I promise, I won’t judge you for your past.”

Shay’s eyes are gleaming, as if with tears that he’s not allowing to fall. “I hope that you won’t but I’m not like the other guys at practice from these posh families with their Ivy League backgrounds. I’m trash, and when you really find out—”

I stop his words with a kiss. “I don’t care about any of that. I was married to one of those elite assholes, remember? *I* divorced *him*. Don’t you dare insult the man who I respect and love again as *trash*, or I’ll have to spank you, okay?”

“Promise?” Shay tries to smirk, but it’s crooked. He takes a deep breath, steadying himself. “Man and Woman were addicts. That’s the only thing I know for sure. I don’t know how Eden and I survived our first few years. They dumped us wherever, and we scavenged. I remember the cold and the clawing hunger. It’s one of the reasons that I’m so excited by food now.”

My eyes burn with tears at the thought of these beautiful twins as tiny kids, cold and hungry. “Why did no one help you? Why weren’t you taken into the system?”

“Man and Woman moved us around a lot. They couldn’t afford rent, so we slept in the back of a car or in squats. Then they worked out a plan to sell us for drugs.”

“W-what?” I stiffen with outrage, as my blood runs cold.

Shay says it so simply like it’s not the cruelest thing that I’ve ever heard.

As if he’s not sharing his worst trauma and laying it out like his own beating heart at my feet in worship.

I know what this means to both the twins now.

This is their secret, but they want to share it with me because this relationship means so much to them.

I can’t screw this up.

“We were just possessions to them. Pretty, little ones. So, they could just sell us.” Shay is studying me now like he’s expecting me to pull away. Instead, I burrow even closer to him, tightening my arm around him, as if I can give him strength to help him get through telling me this. He lets out a relieved breath. “When we were four years old, Man took us to this couple. I don’t remember much because I was crying so hard. They did this exchange, then he left us there.”

“Why would this new couple want you?”

Shay’s expression shutters, and he pales. “Please don’t ask. Never say that to Eden.”

“I’m sorry. I don’t know what the right thing is to say, but thanks for sharing this with me. I hope you know that you never have to answer or share anything that you don’t want to.” Bile rises in my throat. “Are they who you call Mom and Dad?”

Shay snorts. “Fuck, no. We ran, two weeks later. Eden was bloody brilliant. He didn’t speak then and never had. He was twelve before he said a word but he was still smarter than me. He was the one who planned our escape. I don’t think that I’d be alive without him. I owe him everything.”

“I think you’re both brilliant.”

Shay studies me in surprise. “This isn’t going how I expected it would. Eden and I have both been terrified about you finding out. About telling you. I thought that you’d reject us. This is a lot for anyone. And I definitely didn’t reckon that you’d praise us.”

“Why?” I tilt my head. “You weren’t to blame for what happened. You were two four year olds who deserved to be loved and protected by your parents. When you weren’t, you showed bravery and resourcefulness.”

Tears tumble silently down Shay’s cheeks, and he ignores them. “Not that incredible. It was a freezing night, but we didn’t even have coats, and it was the middle of winter. We had no bloody clue where we were going. We were lucky that a neighbor was coming back from a late shift and found us. He took us home to his wife and called the authorities. That’s who I call Mom and Dad.”

Finally, he smiles.

Relieved, I smile as well. “And they — shit — tell me that they’re kind?”

Shay turns on his side now to face me, and our noses touch. “They’re the best people who I’ve ever met. They battled with the system to make sure that they could adopt us, two near feral kids. They loved us like we were their own. I didn’t know that people could be kind like that. We didn’t have names, until them. They had to work two jobs each but they made sure that we were enrolled in school and therapy. They even found a way for Eden to communicate, despite the fact that he couldn’t talk or write.”

I tangle our hands together. “How?”

Shay’s shoulders relax, as the tension bleeds out of him. “The ice. There was this rink near the house. We’d never seen anything like it before. In fact,

never done any sports. We were scared, but Dad was patient. Eden and I were anxious to start with, but then, it was like a switch being flipped. I felt like I was flying free for the first time in my life. But for Eden...? It was like he'd finally found his voice."

My throat is tight with tears. "That's beautiful."

I pull Shay into a tight hug. I never want to let go.

The vision of the two of them, finally free from the asshole who'd sold them, finding their freedom in different ways on the ice, floors me.

I understand their pact not to be parted now.

I understand their fear about this pre-season and the risk that they'll be separated for the first time in their life.

I understand that to them, the danger is real.

Yet is it healthy for them to be holding onto each other this tightly?

If they always play together on the ice, will it become another invisible way for Shay to be shackled?

Eden can talk now. His words have been freed.

What does the ice mean to him, as an adult?

I don't say any of that because it's something for the twins to work out. Yet as their PR Director, I'll need to think about it too.

As his lover, however, the most important thing is to listen to and support Shay.

And Eden too.

"What did playing hockey do for you?" I ask.

Shay plays with my hair. "I was good at it. Really good. And that felt amazing. Also, let's just say that I had a lot of aggression and pent up feelings. Dad said that I could get those out on the ice in a more *productive way*."

"Hmm, may I politely suggest it's not so productive anymore."

Shay shrugs. "Your dad said the same thing. I'm going to listen to him because playing for Bay Rebels means the world to me. I need to make Mom and Dad proud. They sacrificed a lot to pay for our time on that rink and then to help me through college, even with my scholarship. They literally saved our lives. Hockey is more than a sport to us, see?"

Finally, I do.

My expression becomes steely. "I'm going to work my ass off to make sure that you, the Prince Twins, are seen as the hottest new thing for sponsors and the most exciting new players in the NHL. You concentrate on working

hard at the upcoming training camp because it's going to be intense, and I'll focus on making you stars for the fans."

Shay's eyes light with amusement. "Are you telling me that you're going to make me a star?"

I laugh, and the weight on my chest lifts.

Shay is okay. He's here with me now. He's safe in my arms.

And I'm going to make sure that he continues to be.

"Exactly." I run my fingers through his hair. "The golden prince of the ice."

"I like the sound of that." Shay slips his thigh between mine, grinding against me. "But I'm more of a bad boy, love."

"How about the golden boy in public, and the bad boy in private?" I murmur. "Although, I know that you can be a good boy too, can't you?"

He gives a full body shiver.

"Look, I promised Jude that I was going to wreck you on this date." Shay's gaze searches out mine, and I know that he's checking in, as if anything about his past could change how I feel about him; I'm going to prove just how much it hasn't. "And I never break a promise."

"Then you'd better get on with it," I challenge, "because I'm not crying with pleasure yet."

Shay's eyes light up with wicked delight. "Dangerous, love."

He untangles himself from me, leaping to his feet. Then he reaches down and grabs me by the wrist, dragging me up as well.

I let out a surprised *eep*, as he drags me behind him.

Inwardly, I'm grinning, however, because being manhandled like this is perfect.

Shay pushes me toward the Harley, and I catch myself. When he bends me over it, I steady myself with my hands resting on the saddle.

He slips his hands around me underneath my jacket to the waistband of my jeans, taking his time now.

I bite my lip, as my breathing speeds up in anticipation.

Shay undoes the buttons of my jeans one at a time, before stroking between my legs over my clothed pussy.

I tingle at his touch. My core throbs. He slaps at my inner thighs, and I widen my stance.

Then he edges his gloved hand down my opened jeans and into my panties, sliding one finger delicately over my clit.

I hiss out a breath.

The leather feels incredible on my clit.

Intense.

I lift my head and peer through my hair down the road and through the trees.

“Shay,” I warn, “someone could see us.”

“Who?” He replies. “We’re high up on our estate. Of course, Eden or Jude could come up here. I have a feeling that Jude is a voyeur. Plus, one of the security team could be watching. It’s their job, after all. They could see you bent over my motorbike, spreading your legs for me right now. How do you feel being seen with my finger working your sweet clit?”

I know that he’s checking in with me.

How do I feel?

The idea that someone could see me like this, but only for Shay, is hotter than anything that I’ve done before.

I’m almost ready to come from his circling of my clit and being exposed like this alone.

Exhibitionism must be my thing too.

“Don’t stop,” I urge, shuddering. “It’s intense, but I love it.”

He works me faster and faster, leaning over me. “Come, if you want to. I’m going to make you come as many times as I can. You’ll be weeping from pleasure, love, by the time that I’m done with this...” He taps hard on my clit, and I gasp. “...little...” He taps again harder, and the glove is like being spanked by a tiny, leather paddle, after he’s already stimulated me to wetness with his stroking. “...clit.”

When he taps me for a third time, I come hard and fast.

He rests his hand on the back of my neck, keeping me bent over the motorcycle. “Don’t move.”

My knees almost buckle, but I catch myself in time.

Shit.

I’m breathing hard, struggling for breath.

“Shay,” I whisper.

“I’m here.” He works at my jeans, dragging them down my legs. “Are you okay?”

I nod, shakily. “That felt so fucking amazing.”

“When you can’t speak or even whimper, then I’ll know that it feels better.”

When he pushes my panties down to my ankles as well, I shiver.

I'm standing out in the open, half naked, while he's still dressed. The wind whips around me, and my skin goosebumps.

Then he leans down and hikes my left leg up and onto the top of the saddle, exposing me even more.

I blush.

Shay drops to his knees, behind me, and I feel his hot breath against my pussy; he must be studying me, intimately. "Gorgeous."

"Fuck." I'm shaking.

He steadies me.

My hands white knuckle the saddle. "Lucky me, I have my own *kneeling one* come down from the sky."

Shay draws in a breath. "You were listening to me."

Did he think that I wasn't?

That I don't care about his interests?

"Or should I call you Hercules?" I add.

I smile, loving the way that Shay's breath hitches with joy for a second time.

"I'll be your hero, any way that you need me to be, love."

"You can just be my star."

He rewards me by brushing his fingers, feather-light, along my inner thighs.

I relax against the saddle, melting into his touch.

My Hercules. Hero. Star.

Sex god.

He stops each time, however, not quite touching where I'm desperate for him to with his gloved hands that increase the sensation a hundredfold.

I can also feel his hot breath against my pussy, and it's driving me wild.

When I wriggle my hips to encourage him, I feel his huffed laugh, as his nose presses against my clit.

I whimper.

"There," he says, "I told you that you'd whimper."

Instantly, he stops teasing and licks a stripe down my exposed pussy. I almost jump over the Harley. He reaches to grip my hips and hold me in place, as he takes his time circling my clit with his tongue, before flattening it and pushing it into my pussy in shallow thrusts.

I moan, panting.

I'm overstimulated and overwhelmed.

Pleasure spirals through me.

He's fucking me with his tongue, worshiping me. He's totally focused on my needs.

I look up, down the empty road and forests swathed in shadows beyond.

I have a man on his knees, pleasuring me like I'm his Queen, while around me, my land stretches, from the ancient ocean to the watching stars in the night sky.

And I don't feel trapped or owned.

I feel liberated.

When Shay slips one of his long fingers into my pussy next to his tongue, working me in tandem, then crooks it, that's it.

I come with a scream that I bet D'Angelo and Eden can hear all the way back in the ranch.

My back arches, as I push back into Shay's face. Yet he doesn't pull away, instead, only tonguing me harder to work me through the intense orgasm.

I collapse over the Harley, as my knees give out.

My hair is damp with sweat, hanging over my face. My eyes close.

I feel floaty.

Fuck, that was good.

At last, Shay pulls back but gives my pussy one last lick like a satisfied cat unwillingly giving up his treat.

Then he stands and leans over me, stroking my hair and kissing the nape of my neck. "You were perfect, love. But I want to make you come a third time. I haven't made you cry yet and I'm going to get you there. If you want that?"

I bite my lip and glance over my shoulder at him.

It takes me a moment to work out how to talk. "I've never been fucked over a motorcycle before. So, fuck me."

"Anything for you."

Our gazes meet for a long moment.

He means that.

Anything.

It's dangerous.

Powerful.

He's falling for me.

And I'm falling for him.

He pulls back, pushing lightly on my neck and shoulders to make me face forward again, bending me fully over the Harley.

He strokes down my spine and around onto the naked skin of my hip. It feels like he's leaving sparks in his wake.

I'm already overstimulated. I know that it won't take me much to come again.

I hear the rustle of his clothing, then the rip of a condom being opened.

It's the only warning that I have, before the head of his hard dick is nudging at my exposed pussy.

He doesn't tease.

Instead, he holds tightly onto my hips and pushes in with one, long, hard thrust.

I'm already so wet that he slides in easily, and we both gasp at the same time.

He's hard and must have been holding himself back from coming, while he's been pleasuring me.

He's not going to last long now either.

Neither of us need to.

We can both chase our pleasure.

Surrounded by the wild breeze and shadows, I'm safe under his touch.

He holds me still as he pistons into me, deeply.

At the same time, he edges his right hand between my thighs to work my clit, giving me the extra edge of stimulation that I need.

"Shay!" I moan as I come.

Behind me, he stiffens as well, and his hips stutter.

He collapses against my back as he comes. His warm body blankets me.

I smile, as Shay kisses my shoulders, murmuring praise.

My cheeks are wet with tears, but they're not of pleasure.

They're tears of joy that sex can feel like this.

That this man can be mine.

That I'm free to make this choice.

Yet also that now knowing their past, Shay and his brother are taking a huge risk with our relationship, and it makes it even more dangerous to our lives, careers, and hearts.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



Captain Forest, Freedom

“Was my brother careful?” Eden asks.

I stumble over my own feet and only just catch myself on the nearest oak in the clearing in time to stop myself falling over.

It’s hot as hell today.

The midday sun is spearing through the branches of Captain Forest’s pines and oaks. I wrinkle my nose at the sweet scent. It rained last night, and the floor is muddy and covered in puddles.

I’m dressed in jeans and a green t-shirt with boots. My hair is pulled back with a glittery clip against the sticky heat.

I flush.

Eden hasn’t said a word since the start of our date.

He chose to show me his favorite hike out into the quiet of the woods.

He’s been walking here alone every day but offered to take me with him for our date.

This is a trail, which is still part of the estate.

Yet I’ve noticed his shoulders relax, every step that we’ve taken into the forest, which is silent apart from the chatter of birdsong.

I knew that the twins were close. But does Eden even check in about whether Shay practices safe sex?

Wow.

“We were responsible,” I splutter. “If you’d like to see my tests, then you

can. D'Angelo and Shay have already shown me theirs. But we used, you know...?"

When Eden stops and turns to look at me, his expression is unreadable.

His golden hair is slicked back from his face. He's dressed in a gray t-shirt and black leather trousers.

He looks more stoic than normal.

Also, perfect despite the heat, as if ready for a model shoot, while I look like a hot mess.

How does he manage that?

Has Shay told Eden everything about our date? *That he told me about their pasts?*

Eden feels mysterious and hard to read.

Yet I'm desperate to understand him.

Eden raises his pierced eyebrow. "No."

He's going to make me say it.

"A condom."

Silence.

Then to my shock, Eden laughs.

Even though, I'm pretty sure that it's because I've just made an ass of myself, I smile.

It's the first time that I've made him laugh.

It appears to have surprised him as well.

"I meant, when he drove you on his Harley," Eden explains, trying to work his face to look serious again. "He tends to drive too fast. He swore that he wouldn't. We're going to protect you."

Whoops.

"Oh," I say, weakly. "That's what you meant. Of course. Yeah, he was... careful."

"Your date went well then."

My smile brightens. "So fucking well. Didn't he tell you?"

"He thinks that he has. He sent me lots of emojis."

Typical.

I cross my arms. "Uh-huh. Which ones?"

"Too many. I don't know what they mean. I don't want to hurt Shay by telling him that I never do."

"I really like your brother." I look down. "I'm falling for him. He's hard not to fall for. He's like a ball of sunshine. Smart, kind, and fun. I miss him,

when he's not in the room."

Eden's gaze is piercing. "He's falling for you too."

Warmth coils through me. "I'm serious about wanting this to work."

"Are you serious about wanting *me* as well? You don't need to pretend. If you only want Shay, then I'll be happy for you both. I'd never wreck anything for my brother, if that's what worries you."

I stare at him in shock. "Eden..."

I rush across the clearing, desperate to reassure him, but I catch my foot on the thick undergrowth.

My stomach swoops, as I lose my balance and fall forward.

"Fuck," I yelp.

Eden dives toward me but he's too far away to stop me facepalming into a deep, muddy puddle in the center of the glade.

I groan, pushing myself to sit up.

My hair's lost its clip and now hangs in wet rat's tails, dribbling water down my neck. Mud streaks my cheeks.

My jeans are splashed with water but aren't ruined. My t-shirt, however, is soaked.

I shiver.

Yep, the perfect date.

Let's hope that Eden's type is *mud monster*.

Although, maybe he's into mud wrestlers.

Without hesitating, Eden kneels in the sludge next to me, staining his pants.

He reaches out to wipe the mud from my cheeks with his thumbs. Then he pushes my wet hair back from my face.

Eden's beautiful gray eyes are clouded with concern. "Are you hurt?"

I shake my head. "My ego is bruised though."

He scans down my body, as if assessing for injuries. I can see the tension vibrating through him.

"Shay will kill me, if I let you get hurt." His brow furrows.

"Hey, you didn't *let* anything happen," I insist. "I'm this clumsy all on my own. It's a talent that I've had since birth."

"You're shivering." Eden draws back from me, and to my shock, pulls his t-shirt off in one, swift move.

I stare at the revealed expanse of his chest, mesmerized.

Eden's body is as stunning as Shay's: ice-white skin and sculptured

muscles.

Yet even though they're identical twins, their bodies are different, just like their personalities are.

The gorgeous tattoos of black roses and thorns, which wind up his arms, look starker now. He has silver piercings through his nipples, which glint in the light.

I itch to discover how sensitive the piercings make his nipples.

He holds out his t-shirt to me. "It's dry."

Suddenly, I realize that he means I can change into his clothes, and it's such a caring and intimate gesture that my heart melts.

"Thanks." My hand closes over his, for a moment, before I take the top.

Like a gentleman, Eden stands and turns his back to me.

Then I gasp.

Eden's back is tattooed with the most stunning and intricate tattoo that I've ever seen.

It's a phoenix with a dramatic tail and wings, which rises from the hollow of his back to his shoulders.

He stiffens but he doesn't say anything.

Hurriedly, I stand up, stepping away from the puddle with a slurping sound, as my boots cling to the mud.

I grimace, before yanking my wet top over my head. I use the edge of it to wipe off my face, then tuck it into the back of my jeans.

Finally, I hug Eden's t-shirt to my face for a moment.

It's warm from his body heat and smells fresh, clean, and as aromatically fragrant as the tea that he adores.

I can't help loving that I'm going to be wearing Eden's clothes, as I slip it over my head. It's so large on me that it hangs loosely to my knees.

I also love that Eden is now bare chested. He's not only hot, but it means that I can see his incredible tattoos properly.

"You can turn around," I offer.

He does, stiffly.

When he sees me standing in his t-shirt like I'm playing dress up, however, he relaxes.

"You look good in that." He studies me. "I'll give you my jersey on game nights."

"I mean, that's the romantic thing, right? Even if your jersey will stink after a game, trust me."

“It’s what happens in romance novels.”

“Well, then it must be true.”

Eden’s lips twitch. “I love reading.”

My eyes light up. “So do I.”

“I guessed from the library in your room.”

“I guessed that you did from the books that kept going missing from my library.”

Eden looks caught out, before shrugging. “It wouldn’t have been Shay. He counts reading as listing the tracks on his favorite album.”

“And it wouldn’t have been D’Angelo, as he counts reading as scanning the label on his new whiskey bottle.” I glance around the glade and notice a large, knotted log at the back. “Come on.”

I lead the way, feeling Eden’s silent presence behind me.

I’m becoming used to his direct way of speaking and how comfortable he is in silence.

Eden’s calmness is good for me, as much as Shay’s energy fulfills a need within me as well.

They balance me out.

I settle on the log, and Eden sits next to me, close enough that our thighs are touching.

Wearing his t-shirt makes me hyperaware of him. I’m wrapped in his scent, and my skin is touching material that’d been pressed to his, only minutes ago.

“Before I took that dramatic puddle swim, which was definitely an intentional attempt to cool off,” I say and can tell that Eden doesn’t believe me (rude but expected), “I was trying to tell you something. I’m not pretending about wanting to be on this date, just as I haven’t been pretending this last week about wanting to be your friend. I’m more worried about coming between Shay and you, but if we can negotiate a way that it won’t happen, then I’m keen to get to know you, and not as someone who’s less important. Everybody will be equals in this relationship.”

He cocks his head like he’s thinking hard. “Equals?”

“Right.”

“But you’ve known Jude since college.”

“I didn’t say that we’d all be the same or that our feelings would be identical. We’ll meet each other’s different needs but we’ll be equals within the relationship, or it won’t work. I wouldn’t want it like that either. I spent

too long in a marriage, where I was the trophy wife — the shadow to my star husband.”

Eden reaches to rest his strong hand on my neck, caressing me. “Do you want me to bust Wilder’s balls?”

My eyes widen.

Is he serious? I can’t tell when he’s joking.

His expression doesn’t change.

I think that he’s serious.

Then I remember the message on my phone this morning:

THE MISTAKE (6:23): Hello, birdie. I’m lying here in bed rn thinking of you. Are you thinking of me? ILY

My expression hardens. “Let’s cross that bridge, if you meet him.”

Eden hums his agreement, deep and rumbling.

The sun streams across his tattoos, and I study them. “Do these have a story?”

He nods.

When he pulls back from me, I miss the sensual brush of his fingers massaging my neck.

Eden’s expression blanks. “Shay told you...about us?”

I know what he means. I can tell by his wariness.

It’s the same edge that his brother had like I was going to reject him.

“He explained about your past,” I say. “He said that you’d given him permission. I’ll always be here, if you need to talk, but you also don’t have to tell me anything. What you went through — I can’t imagine how tough it was and still is. I won’t pressure you to share.”

He nods again, relieved.

But then, he looks thoughtful, before holding his arm out to me. “I can tell you about my ink.”

“I’d love that.”

Eden traces his finger along the rose. “I can talk to you more than I’ve been able to talk to any woman.” My throat is tight. I don’t think anyone has given me such a precious compliment. I shuffle closer to him, taking his hand. “At college, I found it overwhelming. I expressed myself in ink.”

I study the painful looking thorns and the black petals. “So, are these like a way of talking about your life?”

“They’re things that I can’t talk about. Tattooing my skin was a way of taking back control over my life and my body. Proving that it’s mine and no

one else's."

When I remember how he was literally sold, it makes sense.

These tattoos are beautiful in a whole other way now.

"What do the roses mean?" I ask.

"Black roses symbolize that you've endured pain but you've still bloomed."

I reach up, cupping Eden's cheek. "You have. You're fucking beautiful. You care for all of us in the house. We'd forget to eat half of the time, if you weren't slipping sandwiches or snacks in front of us. You bring tea in to me every morning and quietly make sure that your brother isn't bouncing off the walls. You even out dom D'Angelo, when he needs settling. The only reason that us living together has run as smoothly as it has, as if we've known each other for years, is because of your firm but gentle presence. If D'Angelo is the mind, your brother is the soul, then you're the heart of our relationship, Eden."

And already, in my heart.

I don't tell him that, however, because I can sense that it would be too much.

Even at this declaration, he hisses in a shocked breath, then he tightens his hand in mine.

We sit in silence, but it's a comfortable one.

I'm relaxed and calm.

I allow myself to feel the sun and smell the fresh forest air.

I get why Eden likes this.

Suddenly, a tiny red squirrel with tufted ears and a pointed face scurries down the log and jumps onto Eden's leg.

Does it even know that he's a human? He's as still as a statue.

"A squirrel!" I explode, pointing.

I can't help it. The sight of the squirrel curling its bushy tail around Eden's strong thigh is adorable.

Eden doesn't say anything. He appears to be concentrating on not moving.

"Perhaps, it's looking for nuts." I smirk.

Eden's gaze flicks to me. "She reminds me of you."

"Hey."

"Cute."

I flush, smiling.

Undisturbed, the squirrel bounds off Eden's leg, across the glade, then up the trunk of the closest oak.

We both watch it, comfortable in the moment.

"You're like a male Snow White." I nudge Eden. "You've attracted me too, and I'm a Robyn."

"Animals and birds are easy to be around." He runs his hand through his slicked back hair, pressing it down. "I've never dated before. How am I doing?"

My lips curve into a smile. "Better than me. I fell into a puddle."

"I'm glad that the bar isn't set too high," he replies, dryly.

Then he gives me an assessing look, before he turns to present his back to me like an offering.

Studying the phoenix up close, I can see just how intricate it is and how many agonizing sessions it must have taken at the tattoo parlor to finish it.

It must be important to him.

"This is incredible," I breathe. "It looks so lifelike. Well, if phoenixes were real, which would be badass."

"I became a bookworm as a teenager but as a defense," Eden replies. "An escape. A shield. If I have a book in front of me, I don't have to talk to anyone. And I loved books on myths and legends. The phoenix became an obsession. It's destroyed, burned to ashes. But it still rises, reborn, fiercer and more powerful."

My hand hovers above the red, golden, and black lines on his back.

It feels like he's showing me the most personal thing about him.

I'll always value this.

"At college," Eden continues after a moment, although his voice is less steady, "I wanted to feel like a phoenix. So, the ink helps me to remember that. I don't want to forget what I've been through because it's what I've become."

He turns back to me abruptly, wrapping his arms around me.

In turn, I reach up, sliding my hand up the back of his neck and holding him firmly against me. "Eden..."

"I want you," he whispers. "I want this, so fucking much."

I admire the strength in his eyes. I respect his bravery for voicing what he needs.

And hell, I want him too.

When our lips clash together in the quiet of the glade, under hot, dappled

sunshine, he tastes as sweet as he smells.

His kiss isn't sensual or experienced. It's slow but passionate like he wants to memorize every moment of this.

Eden's tongue tangles with mine, before he draws back, licking across the seam of my lips, then exploring down my neck with his tongue, lips, and teeth.

I pant, and my skin tingles.

I encourage him up to my mouth again, and this time, his kiss is more confident.

I can sense his desperation and need, but also, a sweet uncertainty.

Is this his first kiss?

I moan at the thought.

What if I'm all his firsts?

I kiss him more deeply, and he responds by pulling me onto his lap, never breaking the kiss.

I know now that all three of these men are in my heart, and this is also taking risks with *their* hearts.

After all, if they don't pass the training camp and get selected, or I screw up their press image and there's a scandal, then I'll lose them.

And it'll tear us apart.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



Merchant's Inn, Freedom

“Come on, hand it over, Ryn.” Cody leans forward over the chipped oak table in the middle of the corner booth.

When he holds his hand out to me, palm up, and waggles it, I pretend not to know what he means.

“Hand what over?” I settle back into the leather seat, crossing my arms.

It’s another jumping Saturday night in Merchant’s Inn.

I’ve escaped from the intensity of my mountain retreat with my PR disaster guys, having locked away their phones, laptops, and all access to social media in the hope that they can’t do too much damage in the couple of hours that I have this break.

I mean, they can’t.

Right?

I’ve left strict instructions with the Head of Security, Mr. Hust, who’s acting in my stead, while I’m away.

If those instructions are more about calling me, if Shay drives his Harley recklessly, Eden goes for a nighttime stroll into dangerous mountain trails, or D’Angelo makes an escape bid of his own to party, then sue me.

Handling celebrity athletes is harder than it looks.

It’s like herding cats.

Fun, cute, but exhausting.

Cody fixes me with a look that I know means he’s not letting me off the

hook. He's wearing a pastel blue t-shirt with **DOCTOR'S HUSBAND** with a heart in sequins on the front and boardshorts.

It's hot inside the inn, and I'm dressed in only a light, cotton green dress and sandals.

Sweat still dampens my hair, and my nose scrunches at the scent of smoke and stale beer.

Yet it feels amazing to be back in the grungy inn with its tacky floor and stained wooden walls covered in Emo band paintings, while the locals are going wild on the dance floor to the Loveless' dramatic music.

Right now, as Cody is fixing me with a stern stare, I wish that I could join them.

Actually, that's a great idea.

"Wait, I love this one. "Middle of the Night" is my favorite." I leap up in a way that'd make Shay proud, snatching Cody's hand to drag him up as well. "Come on, let's dance."

Cody yanks me to sit down again. "Not so fast, Ryn. I invented that distraction technique. It works on Mike every time, especially if I want him to forget our discussion about how much I've been spending or how I've forgotten to tell him about the fact that I'm surfing the whole weekend. It won't work on me. I know you too well."

I pout. "I hate bro knowledge."

"Well, you have sis knowledge."

My eyes light up, as I pull my hand out of his. "True, so how do you know that you won our bet? I haven't told you anything yet."

Cody runs his hand through his neat hair. "Don't you remember the guy who Mike and I tried to cock block?"

"How could I forget?"

My brow furrows.

I told Cody that Shay wasn't a hockey player. I'd been hoping to keep our relationship quiet from Cody just a little longer.

I should have known that it wasn't possible with my brother.

Mostly, I'm not unhappy about that. I never want to keep secrets from my brother.

He's too important to me.

Cody wrinkles his nose. "Neve told me in way more detail than I wanted to know how much fun you guys enjoyed that night because the walls are thin here."

I redden, covering my face with my hands. “Fuck.”

“Sounds like you did.”

I give him the finger.

“Let me remind you, Miss Hockey Magnet, you only win the bet, if you can go an entire season without kissing a hockey player. So, how well did your special Guide protect you against that guy’s lips?”

It didn’t.

And it didn’t protect me from his hands, dick, or any inch of his delicious body all...through...the...night.

I have a feeling that the thought crosses my face because Cody scrunches up his nose. “My record of winning every one of our bets remains intact. Your dollar is mine. Pay up.”

“But how do you know that he’s a player?”

Cody sighs. “You suck, Ryn. I expect Dad to forget me, but not you. I worked my ass off to be appointed the Director of Physical Therapy at the Bay Rebels.”

Shit.

“I’m sorry,” I rush to say. “The last month has been crazy. I fly across the country to start an entirely new life, take a job here, then get fired. Out of the blue, Dad offers me this huge role in the Bay Rebels with his players who have the most serious problems. They’re the ones who could make the entire team crash and burn, if I don’t help them. Still, that’s no excuse for—”

“It is,” Cody says, gently. “I understand and I wasn’t meant to start the role until Monday but I wanted to get to know the guys, before training camp begins. Hell, it’s more like torture camp with the drills that they’re going to be put through. So, I thought that I’d introduce myself to the guys at practice.”

“So, you met Shay.”

“Plus, his twin. But yeah.” He cocks his head. “Does Dad know?”

I stiffen, shaking my head.

Cody studies me for a long moment. “I liked the guy. He has potential. I don’t want him to start on Monday being in trouble. You guys didn’t do anything wrong, but we both know how overprotective Dad is. He’d kick Shay’s ass and probably kick it straight off the team. I’ll do whatever you want, Ryn.”

My heart speeds up. I feel sick.

“Please, don’t tell him. I’m working things out, and eventually I will need

to, but not yet.”

“That’s all you need to say. Just be careful.”

I smile at him, warmly. “I will. Thanks, Code.”

He’s an awesome brother. He’s always had my back.

At high school, I was teased for my flame red hair and curves. Even though he was a year younger than me, Cody stood up to the boys for me.

At its worst, he got into fights.

I tried to stop him, but he’s always been fierce, when it comes to family.

In the summer, after the death of our mom, grief fueled Cody’s rage. We were already dealing with loss, Dad withdrawing into himself, and the press hounding us.

Dad caught us one time, as I helped Cody to limp into the house. Cody’s eye was swollen and his lip busted.

Neither Cody nor I could stop Dad storming to the school and demanding to know what they were doing about *his boy being bullied*.

We also couldn’t stop the fact that Cody’s fighting was revealed either.

Cody was fucked.

I think Dad saw him as a screw-up from then on.

In the middle of the press pressure, Dad needed to deal with Cody’s suspension. At home, Cody was put on permanent chore punishment.

He was never taken off it.

Yet Cody was only standing up for me. I’ve never forgotten that.

At the same time, it taught me that direct aggression to bullies gives them what they want, a reaction.

It fucked up Cody’s life for years.

He spent a long time earning back his reputation in Dad’s eyes.

I understand now that Dad was terrified that his son was turning into him with the same anger problems. He was protecting Cody in his own way.

He was also trying to cope with losing the woman who he loved.

Back then, I didn’t understand but now, I can see that the same thing has happened to Shay.

I feel the same need to stop Shay self-destructing.

It’s helped me to connect better with Cody, but also, to let go of my resentment toward Dad.

“How did your first week in the job go?” I ask.

Cody smiles. “It felt great, going in and feeling that I’d earned my place there. The rest of the staff are awesome. There are a couple of people on the

management side who may be a problem, but I'm excited. I came back on the first day and found that Mike had cooked dinner for me. I've done it for him so many times after his shifts. It meant a lot."

"Mike's brilliant." I smile. Michael's exactly what my brother needs. "Is he still worked to exhaustion at the hospital?"

Cody taps his fingers in frustration on the table. "Yeah, but he doesn't see it like that. He's all about duty. I've never met anyone as decent as him. I love him for it, but just sometimes, he needs someone like me to force him to look after himself. Otherwise, he'd collapse, you know?"

"Take him on a spa day."

Cody chuckles. "Can you imagine Mike on a spa day? He'd pull that dry face of his, then turn on his heel and march out the moment that they tried to strip him for a massage."

My smile is wicked. "Book him in for a bull sperm hair treatment, followed by a nightingale bird dropping facial."

"Hell, no." Cody shifts to point at his ass. "I value this too much. And don't think that your talk of bull sperm has distracted me from the fact that you lost the bet. *Pay up.*"

Damn.

My brother never forgets a bet.

I turn to my bag, which lies on the booth's seat next to me. Then I click open my emerald, silk purse and slide out a single dollar.

I wave it like it's a hundred dollar bill temptingly in front of Cody, and he rolls his eyes.

I slam it down on the table. "There, you win."

Cody grins, snatching up the note and hugging it to his chest. "I'm rich!"

"Robyn Hood lost the bet, didn't she?" Neve calls, winding through the crowds with a tray balanced expertly on her hand.

My heart quickens.

Of course, why did I think that I could keep anything from my best friend?

She's Freedom's gossip queen. And Merchant's Inn is her castle.

Neve slides the tray with its three bottles of beer onto the table and then sprawls in the seat next to me. She kicks her feet in converse trainers to rest up on the table.

She's dressed in even skinnier jeans than normal and a My Chemical Romance black t-shirt.

She pushes her horn-rimmed glasses more firmly onto her nose. “You suck at avoiding players.”

“That’s fair.”

“You suck at losing bets.”

“Also fair.”

“Did you at least use the tentacle dildo, RH? It sounded like you did. Lots of times. It was a wild soundtrack to the equally wild time that I was having with a certain hot, blond nurse.”

My cheeks heat. “No, no, absolutely not. There was no...tentacle fucking.”

She cocks her head. “Don’t you think that she’s protesting too much?”

Cody nods. “Yep.”

Neve shoves a beer toward me and snatches one up for herself.

I take a long, refreshing drink. “I love how cold you keep these. I needed that, when it’s so fucking hot.”

“The air conditioning is broken.” She shrugs. “Suck it up. It makes for a more authentic experience.”

“Authentic sweat?” Cody laughs, taking the final bottle and rolling it over his forehead with a moan. “Just bring the ice bucket next time.”

“I’ll happily pour it over your head.” Neve smirks. “It’s already been a good night. No broken glasses.”

I pretend to hold my sides. “Stop it. I’m going to die with laughter.”

“Not before you pay the forfeit.”

I stare at her.

She wouldn’t.

But she is.

I lean toward Neve, gripping onto the emerald and silver friendship bracelet, which I made for her, when we were young. “In the name of our friendship, don’t incite my mean brother to—”

“It’s only a shame that we don’t have a tutu.” Neve pulls back from me, hiding her grin behind her bottle.

Cody’s expression brightens. “Onto the table, Ryn. I can’t wait to hear “Dancing Queen” again. How about this time in a dub step style?”

How the hell do I manage that?

“This wasn’t part of the bet,” I hiss.

This is why you don’t make bets with my brother.

I knew it.

What was I thinking?

He straightens. "I'm the King of Bets. You paid me the dollar but not the forfeit."

I flush with embarrassment.

This is worse than standing on a table in detention. This is in the middle of the local inn in Freedom, where the coolest people gather on the busiest night of the week.

Yet Michael did it on a hospital bed in front of his interns in a tutu.

I can do this. I can live a little.

Before my marriage to Wilder, I used to do things like this all the time.

I can be unafraid again.

This is for fun.

Cody's watching me now with concern. "We're only joking around, Ryn. You don't have to, if you don't want to."

"I do." I tilt up my chin. "And it's going to be the best dub step...possibly *only* dub step...version of ABBA that you've ever heard."

I like to be ambitious.

Neve looks impressed. "Do you want me to turn down the music? I can grab the karaoke."

"Fuck, no," I yelp.

I'm all for pushing myself back to my old confidence. But I can't cope with that level of humiliation.

Cody stands and helps me to clamber onto the top of the table, making sure that it's steady.

I sway for a moment, but he keeps holding onto my hand.

I know that he's also not letting go longer than he needs to physically, so that he can support me mentally and stand at my side, as I sing.

Neve slumps in her seat, crossing her feet on the table, readying herself as the audience.

Cody whoops in encouragement.

Caught in the excitement, I open my mouth and...

My phone vibrates violently in the pocket of my dress. It startles me enough to make me almost topple off the table.

Cody cusses and catches me.

"Sorry," I squeak. "I need to take this. Work."

More like Shay tumbling off his Harley, Eden getting lost in the woods, or D'Angelo in a drunken stupor, probably doing something unforgivable like

breaking my paperbacks' spines.

See, this is what happens when I leave my charges for a single evening.

I pale, snatching out my phone.

"Saved by the bell," Neve mutters.

Cody laughs.

I don't even pause in my alarm, holding my phone to my ear tightly.

"Are the guys okay?" I yell over the loud music. "What's happened, Mr. Hust?"

"Guess again, birdie," a smooth but dangerous voice says that makes me freeze in fear. "I'm disappointed. I thought that you answered because you'd finally stopped being so hysterical and were acting like a rational person for once. Never mind. This is nice. Where are you? Why's there music? Don't you think that we've been apart long enough? I miss you. Shall I visit?" His voice becomes darker. I shudder. "I hope that one of those guys who you're worried about isn't that asshole D'Angelo or—"

I hurl my phone to the floor, and it smashes.

My breathing is ragged. I'm shaking.

My knees buckle, and Cody helps me to sit on the table.

Neve's standing now, I didn't even notice, and her arms are around me too. I'm surrounded by both my brother and my best friend but I still don't feel safe.

"Wilder," I whisper, feeling his touch on my skin, even as his voice echoes in my head again. "He's going to break our deal. He plans to find a way to see me again. He's coming here."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Garden of Eden Restaurant, Freedom

I push away my empty plate because I wasn't going to leave a single forkful of the best lasagna that I've ever eaten. "I still can't believe that you bought out an entire restaurant on Sunday lunchtime, so that we could have our date."

D'Angelo looks at me over the lip of his crystal wine glass. "Why not, principessa? I've waited six years for this date. Plus, I personally know the owner here, and they're discrete. There won't be any press to see us. Even if they do snap us, we can play it off as a marketing meeting."

"A marketing meeting in black tie with wine....?"

"They're the best type."

I stare at him over the tiny table in the quiet booth at the back of the empty, luxurious Italian restaurant.

D'Angelo's sprawled on the crimson leather, wearing a black tuxedo, which makes his curls appear even silkier and his eyes a brighter blue.

He looks fucking gorgeous.

He offered to buy me a dress for our date. I appreciated that he didn't simply order me something.

I left behind all the evening dresses that Wilder chose for me over the years, or that I only bought so that I fitted in as I hung off his arm at official events.

I didn't want any reminders of those times.

Plus, I'm broke.

My first pay check hasn't come through yet.

I'd been able to read D'Angelo well enough, however, to know that underneath his cool demeanor, he truly wanted to buy me this gift.

So, I picked out a gorgeous, off the shoulder, floor length emerald dress with a slit up the thigh.

It feels amazing on my skin.

On the other hand, I'd been hoping to get away without shaving my thighs, but this dress meant I took the painful decision to wax all the way up to the top of my legs.

What a mistake.

Shay crashed into the bathroom with Eden at his shoulder, looking panicked, when he heard my gasps of pain.

They found me bent over the bath, half naked, and smothered in wax.

I suck at waxing.

I don't know which of us was more startled.

Yet it was worth it because D'Angelo's eyes lit up, when I walked down the stairs wearing this dress.

Lana Del Rey's sensual, breathy "Burning Desire" plays quietly in the background, and I'm half convinced that she's somehow translating the feeling between my thighs into lyrics.

Wouldn't that be a talent?

D'Angelo takes a drink of his wine, and I can't look away from the curve of his throat, as he swallows.

I cross my legs, pushing my thighs together.

D'Angelo sets down his glass, adjusting its placement three times.

Then his shoulders relax. "I hope that this romantic gesture of mine isn't boring you. How can I compete, after all, with being railed over a Harley or mud wrestling in puddles?"

I should have known that it'd be D'Angelo who was into mud wrestling.

I flush, hurriedly looking around myself to check that no waiters are close by to overhear us.

The restaurant's walls and roof are draped in velvet crimson and golds. A chandelier that looks like a tree, dripping crystal leaves, hangs above us.

On the far wall is a cocktail bar.

The wall is bright with bottles of spirits, gleaming with a golden counter and stools.

The restaurant is empty, however, apart from the waiters, who are bustling around at a distance, occasionally checking on us or adding more wine to our table.

I've never felt more like a real principessa.

One who is being teased by my wicked prince.

"They told you about that...?" I hiss.

"Of course," D'Angelo replies. "We're guys; we're going to chat about the woman who we're all dating. I wanted to know if they were okay and be certain that you were. I wasn't kidding about being a dom or needing to be in control. With that comes the fact that I'm going to check in and communicate. Unlike Eden, I do talk about things. It's the only way that a relationship like this will work. Is that a problem?"

Is it?

I consider for a moment. "Not as long as we still have things that are private, if we want them to be. It's our joint relationship, however, and I get that we're going to need to be open about it."

Suddenly, I'm sickeningly aware of the phone in my bag next to me.

My phone that contains the relentless texts from Wilder.

My phone that Wilder called me on last night.

The asshole.

I glance at D'Angelo, who's pushed away his empty plate. He's tapping its rim three times, and I know that I should tell him about Wilder.

I should.

But I won't.

Wilder tried to destroy D'Angelo at college.

He stole me from him once already.

Now, he's trying to wreck both of us again.

I won't let him because I know that if I even tell D'Angelo about the texts and call, then it'll throw him back onto that cold, self-destructive path, which he'd been on before.

Training camp starts tomorrow.

This is D'Angelo's last chance in the hockey world. If he fucks this up, then he'll be out for good.

Inside, I'm trembling with the fear that Wilder means it about finding me. But I have the security team. I need to trust them.

I can't live my life afraid.

Plus, I won't let Wilder with a single call, destroy D'Angelo's chances.

D'Angelo snaps his fingers in front of my eyes. "Hey, daydreamer. Where did you go? What a compliment. I put my date to sleep."

"Sorry," I say, sheepishly. "I was just thinking."

"About how handsome I am?"

I laugh, and at D'Angelo's affronted look, laugh harder.

I can't tell him the truth, so instead, I tell him something that I've been wanting to say since we arrived. "This restaurant's new. I love it. The food's amazing. But the name's the best thing about it."

"The Garden of Eden." D'Angelo smirks. "I chose it for Eden's sake. He was busy baking blueberry muffins this morning, and I told him that I chose this place because of his name. I said that I was taking you to the Garden of Eden and then, hopefully, taking you *in* the Garden of Eden. It made him smile and hell, that's like winning the Stanley Cup."

"It really is."

I bite my lip, trying for seductive; I'm not sure that I pull it off. "So, are you the devil, and I'm Eve?"

D'Angelo leans across the table and brushes a stray strand of hair behind my ear. "Do I still need to seduce you then? Corrupt you?"

I shiver.

Fuck, his voice does something to me.

Something very, *very* good.

"I should call you *my devil*." I slip my stockinged foot out of its shoe, tracing it up his ankle, higher and higher to rest it between his thighs.

I rub my foot backwards and forwards because I want to make him unravel in the way that he's deliberately affecting me.

D'Angelo stiffens. I can feel that his dick is hardening in his pants.

The table has a thick cloth on it that drapes to the ground, hiding our naughty game.

D'Angelo doesn't move, keeping on his cool mask.

Impressive.

"Lucifer was a fallen angel." D'Angelo doesn't look away from me.

I rest my foot casually over his crotch as I play with one of his curls.

"Since this is a marketing meeting," I press harder against his balls and am rewarded with a hiss through his gritted teeth, "transforming your image from the bad boy devil of the Bay Rebels to the angel is a good one. Next week, I'll make some calls and set up a couple of interviews. After all, your name literally means *angel*, right?"

“I think my parents should have asked for a refund.”

“I’m going to make sure that you’re good.”

“Oh, principessa, you’re fucked.” He gives a wicked grin. “Because we both know that I’m bad.”

D’Angelo grips my wrist, yanking me closer to him over the table, and my foot slips away from his crotch.

I gasp.

I’m breathing hard.

“Are you still not calling me *Jude*?” His lips are close to mine. “You had no problem moaning it, when I was stroking your pretty clit. Do you know how much I loved hearing my name on your lips, while we were dry humping, and I was imagining how much I wanted to bury my tongue in your pussy?”

Wildly, I look around, checking that no waiters are close to the table. “Now I’m definitely going to call you *my devil*.”

He lets go of my wrist with a caress to my sensitive skin there, which makes me shiver.

Then he steals a kiss that also steals my breath.

When D’Angelo draws back, however, his expression is troubled. “Do you truly think that you can change my image that easily?”

I nod. “Because most of the press about you is bullshit. I’ve been looking through it. I think Wilder has been stirring up most of the rivalry and smearing you, as well as getting other players and people within the hockey world to circulate fake stories. I mean, you’re no angel...”

D’Angelo laughs. “You noticed.”

“I guess your partying isn’t a surprise, considering everything that’s happened.”

He arches his brow. “If you’ve been looking into the bad press about me, then you’ll know that a lot of it focuses on how many people I supposedly fuck or am fucked by because I’m bisexual. And *that’s* the bullshit. I sleep with less people than any other single player on the team. Last season, the defensemen on average slept with two female fans each after every game. The press didn’t give a fuck about that.”

I stiffen with outrage. “That’s wrong and unfair. I’m sorry that you’ve been treated like that. We’ll handle it.”

To my surprise, D’Angelo’s gaze becomes frosty. “Handle? Like *hide who I am*, as if my sexuality is a problem to be fixed? Because I’m not

pretending that I'm not bisexual. I fought a hard battle to be my authentic self."

Shocked, I stare at him. "I didn't mean that."

He draws back, fiddling with his cufflinks compulsively. "Every time I entered the college locker rooms, it was like stepping into fucking hell for me. I had to grit my teeth and pretend not to hear supposed *jokes* that were really slurs, just like I had to ignore the insults on the rink. As soon as I turned pro, I came out as bisexual to everyone. The wonderful thing is that my teammates had my back. Here in Bay Rebels, they accept and support me, and your dad would kick the ass of any guy who threw a slur."

D'Angelo's flushed and breathing hard now.

There's a cold ball in my stomach. I'm desperate to reach for him but I don't.

Instead, I steady my own breathing. "I didn't mean handle *you*. I meant the opposite: handle the fucking press who go after you for your sexuality. I've got you, D'Angelo."

"You don't want to keep me quiet and hidden away...?"

My heart aches. "I only want what you're comfortable with, but if we do this right, then it could change attitudes for other players in the NHL and the next generation. Then no one will grow up feeling like their locker room is hell. We need to show the press the *authentic* you, then even those prejudiced dicks will only be able to post the good stuff. I have journalists who I trust, and as long as you tone down the cocky asshole side of your personality and reduce the scandals, they can get to show off the side of you that I see."

D'Angelo's expression thaws. "And that is?"

"Going fishing for compliments, are we?"

"Possibly."

"A smart, talented, powerful but grumpy man, who's deeply committed to his team."

D'Angelo looks away, as if the praise is more painful than blows. "Huh, really."

"Look, I've known how toxic this industry can be, all my life. Anything that you need me to do to help with this, you've got it. But is there a chance that you deliberately pull stunts to keep that side of yourself safe? Hidden? Because it's safer to be hated for being an asshole than for something that really hurts you?"

"Don't," D'Angelo growls.

“Am I wrong?”

He takes a slow breath. “Who says that I’m grumpy?”

My shoulders relax. “To be fair, you were already pretty wild at college, before there was any bad press about you.”

D’Angelo adjusts his bow tie, nonchalantly. “That doesn’t sound like me.”

I snort. “What about the time that you turned up at the Halloween party, naked apart from a pair of horns on your head?”

“I was a horny devil.”

I loved that costume. D’Angelo looked spectacular.

I think that I fell in love with his ass that night, probably along with most of the rest of the dorm.

“Then there was the rumor about you dancing in nothing but a leather harness in a kink club because you lost a bet.”

“Now, that *does* sound like me.”

My chest is tight. “I’m not asking you to change, is my point. I love you exactly as you are. This is just about controlling press perception for this single season.”

“You love me?” All of a sudden, D’Angelo’s voice is soft and hopeful.

Hell, haven’t I said it out loud to him yet?

I lean forward and clasp his hands, holding them together in the center of the table. “I love you, Jude.”

D’Angelo’s breath hitches. “Say that again.”

I squeeze his hands; I can feel the tremor through them. “I fucking love you, Jude.”

D’Angelo’s expression gentles. “You know that you own me with those words, *cara mia*. I would do anything for you. *Be anything.*”

“I want Shay, Eden, and you, just as you are.”

D’Angelo looks down. “What would you say, if I said that I wanted Shay as well?”

Fucking finally.

D’Angelo’s studying me intently. He’s nervous.

I don’t let him pull away from me, even though I can feel that he’s ready to at a word. “I’d say that it’s the best thing for all of us. Shay clearly has a crush on you and he seems to suit a need that you have as well.”

D’Angelo’s eyes widen. “You’re incredible.”

“The point of this relationship is that we can all love each other. Shay

needs as much love as he can get.”

“Plus, a firm guiding hand,” D’Angelo adds, sternly. “I can be that for him. But only when he’s ready. I’d never pressure him. I want to be careful. He needs to come to the realization about what he wants himself, and I’ll be there for him when he does. I didn’t have that. I’d do anything to make this easier for him, than...”

He cuts himself off shakily, yanking his hand away from me and withdrawing to his side of the booth.

Confused, I study him.

He’s ashen.

Suddenly, realization dawns on me; cold dread churns in my guts. “Is this about those men who you spoke about in your bedroom? The ones who you thought were going to break in and take you?”

For a moment, D’Angelo’s eyes become glassy, and he looks like he may hurl.

He steadies himself on the edge of the table with white knuckles.

Panicked, I edge around the booth, until I’m sitting side by side with him.

“Shit, what can I do?” I rest my hand over his.

He shoots me a glance. “You’ve already done more for me than I thought anyone would. You love and accept me. You have no idea what that means, principessa. The only other person in the world who’s ever done that is my sister, Maria.”

“You don’t have to tell me,” I say. “But I’m here, if you’re ready to.”

I feel deep in my soul that he needs to share who these men are. The ones who’ve traumatized him shockingly.

He’s hidden it like so much else.

I want to bring all that’s positive about him to light in public, but in private, he has a chance to do the same with the things that have been hurting him.

Sometimes, pain is better buried.

But sometimes, it will find a way to burrow up into your life and fuck with you anyway, unless you face it.

“I *need* Shay to be happy and safe, while he’s figuring out stuff, including if he realizes that he’s bisexual,” D’Angelo says. “Because I wasn’t. When I was seventeen, I fell for a guy on my football team. Looking back, I think that he knew we were more than friends long before I did. My parents and older brother, Bruno, were religious and strict, and I knew that they wouldn’t

accept me being with a guy. They were away for the day though, so I thought that I'd be okay to invite my crush over and study."

My muscles are tight with tension.

I hate that I know where this is going.

"Study meaning...?"

"My first kiss. I was so innocent back then. I didn't know that Bruno had come back, until he was hauling my friend off me and yelling all this stuff at us. My friend ran and just left me alone to face my brother's rage." D'Angelo's hands are shaking. "I don't blame my friend for abandoning me, to be clear. He was only a kid. At the time, however, it was devastating."

Already, I understand more about D'Angelo and why he didn't rush to ask me out in college.

"What did your brother do?" I ask.

D'Angelo looks haunted. "He beat me, until I passed out. When I came around, it was night, and I was in bed. I was surrounded by three strange men. They were yelling at me, before they dragged me out of bed and tied my hands behind my back with plastic handcuffs. I thought that I was being fucking kidnapped. I was terrified and screaming. But I was black and blue from the beating and couldn't struggle much against three men who were twice my size."

My eyes are wide. "Fuck."

This is worse than anything that I'd imagined.

"I screamed, *Mom, Dad!* No one came to help me. When these strangers hauled me downstairs to the front door, my parents and brother were just standing there, wearing these cold expressions that I'd never seen before. I was so naïve; I still thought that they were going to save me. Instead, they watched, as I was thrown into the back of a van. I only learned, as I lay in a sobbing mess, that I was being sent to a private boarding college for troubled teens. I no longer had any rights."

My heart's beating too fast. My eyes burn with tears.

How can anyone do that to a kid?

"What the fuck?" I'm shaking as much as D'Angelo is now. "That can't be legal...?"

D'Angelo's expression is bleak. "It is. Didn't you know that a kid may as well be their parent's property? From then on, I lived under a regime of fear. What had I even done wrong? Everyone who went through that place — we're survivors. We were kidnapped and terrorized, yet it was our own

families footing the bill. I guess that I'm a rebel now because I had so many rules then. Do you know, it was forbidden to even be attracted to anyone? To talk too much? *To smile.*" He becomes even more ashen. "Fuck, Shay would have...I can't think of my cucciolo in that place. His sunny joy crushed. *I can't—*"

"Hey," I tighten my hold on D'Angelo's hand, "you're here, in the Garden of Eden with me. Can you feel my hand? Smell the delicious sweet wine and garlic herbs? You're with me. You're safe, and so is Shay. We'll make sure that he always is, I promise. And I can't bear to think of *you* being there."

"It doesn't matter."

"It does. It really, truly does," I whisper, as my heart shatters.

It's going to take some time to process this.

Yet the coldness and Alphahole persona that D'Angelo wears around himself like a shield is beginning to make so much more sense.

He glances away. His eyelashes are matted wet.

D'Angelo doesn't acknowledge the tears by wiping at his eyes. "I survived."

"You deserve so much more than that."

"Shit just happens. I've barely been able to talk to my therapist about this. You've no idea how many of those late nights that we sat up talking at college, I was desperate to tell you about this but couldn't. I wasn't ready. I spent seven months alone in that boarding college. I wasn't allowed to phone or write to anyone. They were extra tough on me because of what...a kiss? But the one thing that college was big on was sports, and there was a hockey rink nearby, which they used. Being good at hockey saved me. But then, so did my sister, Maria."

Relief floods me.

D'Angelo had someone in his corner.

If I ever see his sister, I'm going to hug her so hard, one of us may break a rib.

"Is she your big sister?" I turn his hand over, so that I can entwine his fingers with mine.

Finally, D'Angelo's expression brightens like even the mention of his sister makes him happy. "I was the baby of the family. She's three years older than me. It meant that she was legally an adult and could fight to get me out of that place. In the end, even Bruno felt guilty about his part in the whole

thing and backed her. She took me out of that hell hole. My parents disowned me, however, throwing me out of the house. They said that if I wanted to be independent, then I need not expect any support from them. I crashed on Maria's couch to start with but that's why I needed the scholarship to go to college."

I'm vibrating with rage and tension that D'Angelo's parents did that to him.

Also, that Wilder tried to fuck with D'Angelo's scholarship.

Without it, D'Angelo had nothing. He only had Maria's support, but no other family backing, money, or home.

Wilder had everything but he tried to wreck someone who was working his ass off to provide for himself.

Guilt slams through me. "Fuck, if I'd known..."

"But you didn't." D'Angelo turns to me, gently cupping my cheek. "Because I wasn't ready to tell anyone. You're the first person who I've trusted enough to be open about it. Do you still love me, knowing all this?"

Our intense gazes meet.

I say each word as distinctly as I can, "Listen here, Jude, I love you. I accept you. And I respect the fuck out of you for everything that you've survived."

D'Angelo lets out a desperate breath, before he dips his head toward me and captures my lips with his.

There's nothing gentle about the kiss. It's hungry and dominating, as if he has to claim every inch of me.

I'm as desperate to answer back as fiercely.

I slide my hand into D'Angelo's curls, pulling him even closer. I nibble at his lower lip, and he retaliates by biting mine.

I groan, and he licks over the bite, soothing it.

He slips his hands under my ass, sliding over the silky material and teasing at the gap where it meets my bare skin.

My pupils dilate.

Then he hauls me to sit on his lap, and instinctively, my arms loop around his neck.

"Now you're where you should be, cara mia." D'Angelo kisses me again, passionately.

Unexpectedly, there's a polite cough to the side of the booth.

Startled, I break off the kiss.

My cheeks redden, as I look up at the tall, Italian waiter who's standing next to our booth. He's dressed in a fancy, traditional black and white uniform. He has thinning hair, and his hands are clasped smartly behind his back.

The waiter looks like he's trying hard not to smirk but is gazing steadily over our heads.

D'Angelo doesn't look fazed but casually rests his hand on my hip, circling where the dress has fallen away to reveal my stockings.

I shiver, and my skin tingles.

"May I clear away the plates and bring out the desserts now, sir?" The waiter asks.

D'Angelo studies me for a moment, before he shakes his head. "Give us half...make that a full hour...would you?"

Now, the waiter's professional mask does slip, as his gaze shoots with a smirk to the way that I'm sitting on D'Angelo's lap.

Hurriedly, he fixes it again, inclining his head. "Of course, sir. You won't be — disturbed — with dessert, for another hour."

He must be angling for a good tip.

My breathing picks up.

What's D'Angelo planning to do for an hour?

I bet that he can do a lot.

"Why are we waiting?" I demand. "I'm hungry."

D'Angelo tightens his arm around me, and his grin becomes wicked. "Because I'm going to seduce you in the Garden of Evil, and you're the only dessert that I intend to devour. So, have a guess what I'm going to do now?"

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Garden of Eden Restaurant, Freedom

“*T*he female restroom, seriously?” I scrunch up my nose, even though the pretty room is scented with lavender. “Is this your big seduction move, D’Angelo, because so far, I’m not feeling tempted to eat your apple.”

D’Angelo laughs.

I glance around at the restaurant restroom, as D’Angelo guides me into the empty room with his hand on the hollow of my back.

The press of his strong hand makes my back warm.

The restroom is luxurious, looking more like a hotel lobby with velvet, crimson walls and stalls along the back wall with golden partitions.

D’Angelo steers me toward the marble sinks, which have gleaming gold taps, at the side of the restroom. “Although you enjoy a small amount of exhibitionism, according to our contract, you’ll want privacy for what comes next, principessa.”

I blush.

The guys and I have spent the last few days talking through our needs, kinks, and limits, negotiating a contract. D’Angelo was meticulous about it for all four of us.

I’ve never spoken about my desires in such an open way before.

Eden found it too difficult, and I was impressed with how fast D’Angelo realized that.

Instead, D'Angelo simply slipped the paperwork over to Eden and casually suggested that he fill it out in his room by himself, then return it to him the next day, annotating it with any questions that he wanted a response about by text.

Shay's heavy gaze slipped to D'Angelo with the same admiration as I felt.

Has anyone looked out for Eden in that way, apart from his twin?

My heart clenches at how much our household already feels like a family.

D'Angelo may find it hard to accept but he's a large part of that.

D'Angelo pushes me in front of the sink.

I bite my lip, when I look at my reflection in the huge crystal encrusted mirror, which surrounds the marble sinks.

Wow, I already look wrecked.

How long have I looked like this?

No wonder the waiter was smirking.

I look like I've already been fucked — hard.

My cheeks are flushed, my chest is heaving, and I'm gripping onto the edge of the sink with white knuckles.

When my gaze meets D'Angelo's in the mirror over my shoulder, my breath hitches.

He's so fucking gorgeous.

Plus, he looks cool and immaculate like he's in a business meeting.

How does he manage that?

It's not fair.

The only signs that he's affected by pressing his body against mine and caging me with his arms, are the way that his blue pupils are dilated and the hardness that I can feel against my ass.

Encouraged, I grind my ass against him, teasingly.

Now, it's his turn for his breath to hitch.

"Don't we have some fraternizing to be getting on with?" I say.

"Brat," he chuckles.

"That's Shay."

"Is it?" D'Angelo quirks his brow. "I have a feeling that he could be *our* good boy."

"Fuck, yeah." I become even wetter at *that* image.

D'Angelo lowers his lips to my ear, and I shiver at the sensation. "But for now, are you going to be *my* good girl?"

I know that he's both asking for my consent and checking in that this is how I want to play it tonight.

And I do.

I twist and capture his lips with mine.

He lets out a surprised sound, which I love, moving his hands instantly to my hips and squeezing.

"Hey, I can be such a good girl." I wriggle my ass against him, feeling how hard he is in his pants, and he groans again.

"We'll see." D'Angelo's expression becomes commanding, and hell, it's hot. Yet he only pushes my hair back from my face and grips my chin to make me focus on him. "Remind me what your safe words are."

"You know what they are."

"And I'll get you to repeat them every time to be sure. Hmm, we may have to work on your obedience."

Fair.

"Traffic light system. Green for everything is good, so keep going. Yellow to mean that it's too intense, slow down, or I need a break. Red for I'm at my limit, which will stop everything immediately."

D'Angelo smiles, "Perfect, cara mia. There'll never be a consequence for using a safe word. I'll be proud, if you do. You and I have had a complicated relationship. We've crashed and burned at communication. Communication and trust are at the heart of what we're building together, however, so I'm going to try my hardest to be worthy of that, I promise."

My throat is dry, and I can't swallow. "Me too."

D'Angelo's expression softens. "How are you now?"

"Green."

I don't look away from his intent gaze; I feel trapped in this moment with him.

I can feel how important this is to him.

D'Angelo is being thoughtful and careful like I'm more precious than anything he's ever possessed and he's desperate not to break me.

At the same time that he's looking at me like breaking me is exactly what he has planned.

My hands tighten on the side of the sink.

"I've waited so long to be with you." D'Angelo's eyes are frosty, but his words are warm. "I'm going to do this right. I need to trust that you'll say your safe word, and you need to trust that I'll always listen to you, if you do."

“I do.”

“Good. Then remember that I’ll respect hard and soft limits and all boundaries. The contract document itself can be changed, however, as we explore things. I can’t wait, cara mia. It doesn’t matter who’s dominant when we fuck...” He kisses me, gently biting on my lower lip, before releasing it. My eyelashes flutter. “...we’re all equal and consenting in our relationship.”

My brow furrows. “No one has talked about trust, boundaries, or consent like this before to me. Wilder never bothered to find out what made me happy in the bedroom. He was adventurous, but still, in six years, I came a grand total of three times on his dick.”

D’Angelo’s eyes flash with fury. “He didn’t deserve you. You’re a fucking queen, Robyn. I always negotiate a contract with everyone who I play with, only we’re not playing. This relationship feels like a marriage.”

For the first time, he avoids my gaze like I’m going to laugh.

Only, I don’t.

I know now that he’s loved me for nine years, since the start of college.

I know that his past kept him from telling me and becoming more than my best friend.

And I know that this is our second chance.

It does feel like a marriage.

Why would we need a piece of paper to confirm that? I had one of those with Wilder, until we divorced.

It led to the worst five years of my life.

“Hey,” I rub my nose against D’Angelo’s, and surprised, his gaze rises to meet mine again, “it does.”

D’Angelo’s eyes widen with wonder, before he’s kissing me, hard. I melt against him, letting him take everything that he needs.

Letting him say in the kiss what he’s still not ready to say in words.

Except, then he does.

“I fucking love you, cara mia.” He kisses me, over and over. Across my lips, cheeks, jaw, and nose. “I claim you, want to own, wreck, and make you mine forever.”

I’m breathing fast.

Inside, I’m giddy.

Yes, yes, yes.

“Then why don’t you?” I reply. “You already have my permission in triplicate.”

And he does because he's so anal that he made us print out every document three times.

Shay moaned about it for an entire day, until Eden bribed him with chocolate chip cookies.

Instantly, D'Angelo's eyes narrow.

Uh-oh, strict dom alert.

D'Angelo pulls back, crossing his arms. "Don't mock the contract, or I'll enforce page four, clause two."

"You memorized the whole thing...?"

"Shall I remind you? Keep your hands on the sink and face the mirror."

I nod, hurriedly.

D'Angelo closes in on me like a wolf on its prey, and I watch him behind me in the mirror.

My heart races. My pulse is loud in my ears.

Yet I'm also wet and throbbing between my thighs because I fucking love it, when he lets out this side of himself.

D'Angelo draws his finger down my back, then lower, until it's resting on my ass. He flattens out his hand in warning.

My cheeks redden. "Oh, *that* clause two. Discipline."

"Spanking."

He's smirking. The asshole is actually smirking.

"I'll be respectful."

"Then say it."

I swallow, and my cheeks become even redder.

Still, this is better than my *other* cheeks becoming red.

Maybe.

Because we both know that I actually want to try lying over D'Angelo's lap, although for fun and definitely not for discipline.

"Spanking," I whisper because I really hope that no waiters are listening outside the door.

D'Angelo coolly pats my ass. "Good girl."

The sudden and unexpected warmth that curls through me at his praise makes it all worthwhile.

"Okay?" He checks in.

I smile, beginning to feel floaty. "Green."

D'Angelo's smile becomes sharper. "Excellent because I'm only getting started."

He runs his hands down my ass to my thighs over the shimmering material of my dress. I shiver at the sensation, as he edges my dress up by slow degrees.

He's so much taller and larger than me that I can't look away from the image of him behind me in the mirror, as he hikes up the emerald silk.

"Bend over." He pushes on my back, and I bend lower over the sink.

I stretch out my arms, gripping onto the back of the marble.

This position feels exposed and like nothing that I've ever done before.

It's thrilling.

Now, he's able to push my dress entirely onto my back, revealing my stockings and panties.

I'm taking quick, panted breaths, trying to calm myself. I stare down at the marble, unable to see what D'Angelo's doing.

It heightens the sensations and anticipation.

I'm desperate for his touch.

Please, please, please.

I need him.

His clever fingers, tongue, and cock.

Everything.

I push my ass out even more, hollowing my back and hoping to encourage D'Angelo.

He gives a dark chuckle.

"Isn't this greedy?" He traces one finger lightly — too fucking lightly — down the clothed crack of my ass and then, over my pussy.

I whine, when he pulls away his finger.

Then he leans over me, pressing his body against mine. "Don't move."

I feel too hot and too cold at the same time. I'm trembling.

I struggle not to rub against him, but after a moment, I force myself to stillness.

"So good for me." He presses a kiss between my shoulder blades, and along with his praise, it makes my nerves sing. I feel like I could hold still forever, for another kiss like that. "Tell me why you can't normally come."

D'Angelo's words pull me out of my happy place.

Yet he told me that we need to communicate and trust each other. I told Shay about this, so I can tell D'Angelo. I'm sure that he'll understand.

"I almost never can from just vaginal penetration," I explain.

Silence.

How will he react?

Anxiety shoots through me, and I tremble even more.

Will he think that I'm broken?

I hunch my shoulders, until I feel another kiss between them.

Then I relax again.

"Most women can't." D'Angelo sounds perplexed. "If you're telling me that your dick of an ex didn't bother pleasuring your sweet clit as well, then I'm sorry. He's a loser, and he lost out too. There's nothing as incredible as seeing a woman shake, scream, and come apart with pleasure. There are plenty of other ways, if you want to avoid—"

"I don't," I say quickly because I seriously want him to fuck me. "I just didn't want to disappoint you, if I don't come that way."

Suddenly, D'Angelo's expression darkens, and he winds my hair around his right hand, before yanking back my head to force me to look in the mirror and meet his blazing gaze.

My heart is hammering in my chest.

"Don't *ever* tell me that you'll disappoint me again," he growls. "And don't doubt that I have the talent to make you come in more ways than you can imagine. I've never left someone unsatisfied and I never will. What if I touch here?"

His left hand slides to my breasts, cupping and circling them, before teasing at each of their nipples in turn.

Hell, that feels amazing.

He becomes bolder, flicking and tugging at my nipples through my dress. "How does that feel?"

"Incredible."

"What about if I do this?" He slides his hand up over my collarbone and around to my neck.

D'Angelo's touch is electric like he's finding out each of my secret erogenous zones in turn and then memorizing every twitch and moan, before returning to it, more confident and teasing.

He's good at this.

"More," I whisper.

Unable to stop myself, I'm humping my hips against the hard side of the counter. He's edging me just with this touch alone.

"Like this?" He pulls my hair to the side, then he's kissing down the nape of my neck reverentially, even as he pins me in place.

I don't know if he's punishing or rewarding me, but this is driving me mad in the most pleasurable way that I've ever experienced.

Then he leans so close to me that I can feel his hot breath on my neck and he kisses my favorite place in the whole world, the deliciously sensitive skin behind my ear.

"Here?" D'Angelo whispers. "What if I held you down and just kissed you here all night, cara mia?"

His soft lips kiss me again, and again, and...

I come, long and sensual, and so fucking unexpected that I scream.

D'Angelo keeps kissing me, tightening his hold in my hair, through the pulsing ecstasy.

Then as I shake afterward.

He places a final kiss, before pulling back.

"Fuck," I murmur, as a tear slips down my cheek. "That was mind-blowing."

"You are," D'Angelo replies. "Do you see now just how incredible you are?"

Emotions flood me.

I feel like falling apart, only at the same time, I'm being built up again.

I'm building myself up.

D'Angelo has shown me — in the same way that my revelatory night with Shay did — that my body is my own.

It's not broken or disappointing.

Wilder is.

I have a lifetime now to enjoy and explore what brings me pleasure.

I let out a sob that is both cathartic and joyful.

Concerned, D'Angelo asks, "Do you need to safe word?"

"No," I reply. "I just realized how happy I am. Finally, how much freer. Fuck me, Jude. I want to feel you inside me. I need your dick to stretch me and make me ache."

And I do.

More than anything.

I close my eyes, slumped over the sink, as tremors shake me. I feel like taffy.

It's a warm, good feeling though.

Behind me, I hear the rip of a condom.

I force myself to open my eyes. I want to see this.

Need to.

Behind me, D'Angelo has freed his cock from his trousers, but otherwise, still looks as immaculate as before.

His cock is huge.

It's gorgeous, curved, and massive.

It's also so hard that it looks painful.

He held off coming and his own pleasure to give me mine first.

I'm mesmerized by the way that D'Angelo is gripping it around the base like he's forcing himself not to come and to calm down, so that he can give me the best first experience.

I know now that D'Angelo is a good man.

A good lover.

A good dom.

Yet the expression in his eyes is coldly dangerous.

Finally, he moves closer to me, and I don't even protest, when he grips the sides of my lace panties and rips them.

He can buy me another pair.

Then his dick is nudging at my pussy, swiping along the wetness. That touch alone makes me moan.

D'Angelo settles one hand on my hip, as if he's steadying me. His other hand tangles in my hair, tightly. I enjoy the tugging sensation.

My eyes slip shut again.

He pushes into me, long, and deep, and perfect.

I've never felt so stretched or so filled.

I whimper, and D'Angelo traces reassuring circles on my hip but he doesn't draw back. Instead, he pushes harder and persistent, until he's so deeply in me that I'm shocked at how stimulating it feels.

He stands without moving, and the intimacy of how we're connected strikes me, white-hot.

Unexpectedly, he starts to move his hips, fast, hard, and unrelenting.

He yanks back my head, and in surprise, my eyes snap open.

I'm staring at myself in the mirror.

My mouth is open in an 'O', and my lipstick is smeared. My eyelashes are matted wet. My whole body is being used like a ragdoll.

"Watch yourself in the mirror." D'Angelo's voice is darkly dominant. Our gazes meet. When they do, I see how elegant and powerful he looks, bending me over and taking me like this, while I'm totally, utterly wrecked

and owned. Yet I can see behind his mask as well; he's just as owned by me, as I am by him. "Look how beautiful you are, taking my cock like a good girl."

I didn't expect that: For him to look at me, a hot mess, and call me *beautiful*.

To praise me.

And that does it, I drop.

I'm floating now, warm and safe in his hold and on his cock.

I could live here forever.

When I whine, D'Angelo notices immediately what I need. He tightens his hold on my hair and speeds up his thrusts.

Yet D'Angelo's voice becomes a gentler purr, "Keep watching yourself in the mirror. Don't look away. You're mine, cara mia, and I'm yours. I'm never...ever...letting go of you again."

He thrusts into me even faster and never drops his piercing gaze from mine for a moment.

"Jude, Jude, Jude," I whisper his name under my breath like he's truly an angel and I'm calling to him. Only, I don't need to because he's already here. He's already answered my prayer. "*Please...*"

And that's what does it: His first name on my lips and my begging.

D'Angelo's long, black eyelashes flutter shut, and he stiffens. His hips stutter, before he thrusts more erratically into me.

"Robyn." D'Angelo comes with *my* first name on *his* lips.

I don't stop watching his beautiful, expressive face in the mirror.

When I feel the joy that surges through me at his pleasure, I understand why he enjoys making me feel like that so much.

I also know that I want to make all my guys feel like it over and over again.

Except, I never want to let go of D'Angelo again either.

After these three dates and our in depth conversations and negotiations, I know for definite that this polyamorous relationship is what I both want and desperately need.

Yet it breaks the rules of our Bay Rebels contracts.

We could lose our careers.

By choosing our hearts, we could bring our worlds tumbling down around our heads.

CHAPTER NINETEEN



Rebel Arena, Freedom

*I*t's the first morning of training camp.
If my nerves make this hell for me, the punishing drills definitely make it hell for the players.

I lean against the glass in Rebel Arena, rubbing my hands to keep them warm in their fluffy gloves.

I remembered to dress warmly this time in a long woolen fuchsia dress, tights, and sturdy boots.

I'm done with risking slipping on heels at the rink, especially if it's in front of over fifty players.

I scrunch my brow with concentration, watching as Eden sprints across the ice in a blur of sprayed ice and broad shouldered determination.

He's exhausted, however, hunching over and taking desperate gasps of air as soon as he hits the blue line at the end of the sprint.

How is he doing? Is he okay?

I can tell that he's flagging.

Shay casts him nervous glances.

Training camp is intense.

But then, it's Shay's turn again.

My lips curl into a smile that I can't smother.

Shay makes it look effortless. He has for the last hour.

He skates faster than any of the other players, even D'Angelo, with a flair, energy, and physicality that makes my heart race, and my mouth

become dry.

He looks like he was born to be on the ice.

D'Angelo leans against the far boards, watching the lines of men as they take their turns. He's pretending that he's confident and in control, reassuring the rookies.

He's a good captain.

When he catches my eye, he touches his fingers to his head in a mocking salute.

I wave.

Some of the guys laugh, until the assistant coach yells at them to concentrate. Then the AC turns his glare on D'Angelo, who immediately straightens, apologizing.

Whoops.

This is the on ice part of their three hour session, but my guys have already been put through a lot today.

Eden asked me last night, while we were getting ready for bed, whether I'd be coming to the arena with them for the first training session.

From Eden, saying that out loud, he may as well have engraved me an invitation.

Plus, it gives me a chance to talk to Dad.

Austin stands next to me with his arms crossed, intently watching the players being put through their paces on the ice.

Watching some of their performances, he tuts or huffs in frustration.

But now, watching Shay, he nods in approval.

I know that gleam in his eye. He's impressed.

So, Shay has just achieved the near impossible.

While Austin's in a good mood, I decide to test the waters.

"So, how are they doing then?" I ask.

Austin's gaze darts to mine. He's dressed smartly as always in a sharp charcoal suit with an emerald shirt and tie.

"They're not all totally shit," he replies, gruffly.

"Wow, high praise from you."

"It is." Austin's eyes twinkle. "Don't worry, with the help of the AC, strength and conditioning coach, and the mental skills coach, I'll get their asses kicked into shape by the end of these two weeks. Most won't survive, but those who do, will make the team."

Typical Dad.

Anxiety spikes through me. “You’re kidding, right?”

“I never kid about training camp.” Austin quirks his brow. “You know the drill on this. Are you just worried because of the pressure it’s going to put on your three PR disasters?”

I twist to face him, trying to hide my concern under a fake smile.

Hiding my love for the guys is harder than I thought it’d be.

I hate not telling Dad about my new relationships, but he never wanted to see me with any hockey player, and after my experience with Wilder, he’s even more set against it than I thought I was, when I wrote my Guide.

He only thinks that he’s protecting me.

I understand why a non-fraternization clause makes sense.

I talked this through last night with the guys. I suggested that I resign my new job as PR Director, so that I could be with them openly.

D’Angelo begged me not to.

He didn’t want to feel responsible for my choosing them over my independence and career.

Plus, if I did that, then we’d have no control over who took over the role and what happened with the press.

I can’t leave my three players unprotected. This way, I can be certain that they’re safe. I can be their shield in the way that the person who loves them should be.

None of them have experienced that from a family or lover before.

I want to show them it’s possible.

Yet we don’t want to hide our relationship long term either.

So, we decided together that we’ll tell Dad after training camp.

D’Angelo, Shay, and Eden just have to survive these two weeks first.

“Yeah, that’s it,” I reply.

Austin gives me a long look. “Jude’s not riding you too hard, right?”

I flush, almost choking on my tongue. “R-r-riding me? Nope, none of that...and Shay, definitely, no...riding.”

“Good.” Austin turns back to the rink, studying D’Angelo, as he takes his turn sprinting. “He’s trying at least. But is he making things hard for you?”

He was in the restaurant restroom.

I shake my head, unable to speak.

Austin huffs. “Well, they had psychological testing this morning. Jude’s is always interesting, and I have a feeling that the Prince twins’ will be as well. They’re almost ready for their endurance laps, then we can go to my

room, while they have an ice water bath and massage.”

I scan over the other men on the ice, who are the competition for the places on the team. “What are the guys like this season?”

“Assholes. But that’s only because they’re all the rebels and outcasts, to whom I’m trying to give second chances. Hell, they’re pro athletes. Of course they’re competitive. It wouldn’t be normal, if they didn’t fight in the locker room, when it’s such a high stakes environment.”

I stare at him. “You’re piling on the pressure on purpose.”

“Hell, yeah. Anyone who cracks is off my team.” Austin’s expression is hard. “They don’t think that they’re being watched all the time but they are. I don’t want to see them, when they’re wearing their professional masks, but their bad sides. I know how to play the game. They can’t trick me. Talking of that, you’ve been doing a good job with the players who you’re handling.”

I glow from his praise. “They’re doing their part too. Seriously, I thought that it was going to be a nightmare living with them but it hasn’t been. I mean, the worst thing has been Eden showing me thousands of cat videos, Shay insisting on us watching *Shaun of the Dead* twice, or D’Angelo...well, being himself. But they’ve obeyed me on everything to do with my role and the Bay Rebels.”

Austin raises his eyebrow in disbelief. “Really?”

“Really. They care so fucking much about making the team together. Plus, D’Angelo has impressed me. He’s taken the twins under his wing like a mentor. They’re fighting for this, Dad.”

Austin hums in thought.

My guts churn with anxiety. I need him to believe me.

It matters to me on so many levels that he respects these men and sees the other side to them that I do.

“There haven’t been any scandals or negative press in the last week,” Austin finally agrees, and I let out my breath in relief. “But it’s only been a week. Let’s see what happens over the next two weeks. To be honest, I’m most worried about the Prince twins.”

Concerned, I turn to look at the rink again, resting my gloved hand on the cold glass.

Shay and Eden are standing shoulder by shoulder at the far side of the rink, watching the other players.

Just for a moment, Shay turns his head to whisper something to Eden.

Eden looks serious and earnest. But he listens intently to his brother,

before reaching to pat his shoulder.

Shay relaxes, smiling. His smile lights up his face.

All of a sudden, I realize that I'll do anything to keep these two brothers together.

To keep Shay smiling that brightly.

"Why?" My lips pinch.

"They're the only twins in the NHL," Austin replies. "That means the narrative will be either that they're both equally exceptional. Stars. Or that one is the star and the other is the shadow — *shit*. Which do you think it is?"

Rage rushes through me.

My hand curls into a fist. "That's not fair."

"When is the press fair? Eden's too young for this. He's not ready to face the type of asshole scrutiny that he's going to face. And he's not good enough, when compared to his brother."

My eyes prick with tears. "Dad, don't do this."

"I haven't said that I'm going to do anything yet."

I don't care what it looks like. This is too important.

I turn to Austin, snatching him by his sleeve and tugging him away from the rink. He's so surprised that he lets me, following me over to the metal bench.

I drag him to sit down next to me.

"Robyn, you're a grownass woman." Austin shakes his sleeve out of my hold. "Act like one."

"I'm sorry, Dad, I just..." I struggle to stop my voice from wavering and to sound professional, but it's fucking hard. "I've got to know Shay and Eden this week. Just like on the ice, they're equally as protective of each other off it. They're each other's support system. Shay won't be able to perform at the level that you're witnessing now, if he doesn't have Eden to watch his back."

"You're wrong." Austin's voice is low, as he shakes his head. "You're meant to be managing them and their image — not getting emotionally attached. Shay's star is dimmed by constantly trying to protect Eden. Look, I've seen guys like them before, brothers or best friends who've come up from college. It may be more extreme because they're twins, but at heart, it's the same thing. I want team players but I don't want this. They're co-dependent, and it's dangerous on the ice."

My breathing is ragged, and I wrap my arms around myself. "Don't separate them. *Please, don't*. Can't you give Eden a chance? He's been

working his ass off in the gym in preparation. He wants this, desperately. He'll do anything that the team needs. Just ask him, and he'll do it. Plus, if you think that Shay will still perform for you, when you force his brother halfway across the country from him, then you really don't know him. Because it'll kill them both. That's not me being emotionally attached. It's me telling the simple truth."

I hold my breath.

Believe me.

Austin gives me a long look, and I feel like he's assessing my soul.

In this moment, I know that I'll do anything to fight for their chance. I can tell that they're fighting for it on the ice.

"They have one chance." Austin holds up his finger in warning, as I start to smile. "I'm talking about all three of the trouble makers on my shit list. I'll be fair and hold off judgment on Shay, Eden, and D'Angelo, until the end of training camp. As long as there are no scandals or negative press, then they have these two weeks to impress me. If they don't, then they're out."

CHAPTER TWENTY



Gym, Captain's Hall

*S*frown, wandering down the corridor toward the basement gym. It's midnight, and I'm yawning with exhaustion. I can't fall into Shay's arms (or onto D'Angelo's dick), however, because Eden is missing.

Eden's been missing every evening for the last three nights in a row.

Normally, it's Shay who struggles to sleep. Yet Eden has started being the one to act like he has insomnia.

Since the brutal intensity of training camp has started, Eden should be taking it easy and getting more sleep.

Except, all the guys are reacting differently to the pressure.

D'Angelo is playing piano moodily, while being more of a controlling asshole than normal.

Shay, on the other hand, has become an even bouncier ball of energy, having broken at the last count, two glasses, a vase, and the lounge's window.

D'Angelo has put him on warning for a spanking if he breaks anything else.

He's so getting spanked.

My bet? Shay will only last until tomorrow evening.

Now, I hesitate at the closed door to the gym.

I can hear the dominant drumming, powerful bass, and aggressive, driving lyrics of the Arctic Monkey's rock song "From Ritz to Rubble"

bleeding through the door, along with a rhythmic running.

Self-consciously, I glance down at my bare legs and feet.

I'm only wearing a long, black t-shirt, which hangs to my knees. The t-shirt is embroidered on the front with a cat, which is peering out of a cup and saucer, above the striped gray words:

KIT- TEA.

It's the t-shirt that Eden normally sleeps in.

I laughed, when I first saw it, telling Eden that it suited him.

I loved the way that the cute kitten was stretched across Eden's muscled chest.

Cute but hot.

Like Eden.

Earlier, Shay dragged me into his room and stuffed the t-shirt at me. "Put this on, love."

"What?" I flushed. "I'm not into *that* kind of role play."

Shay gaped at me. "Even I'm not that kinky. I meant put it on because my brother won't tell you but he fucking loved seeing you wearing his clothes. Add cats too, and he's doomed. You need to tempt him to bed."

"No arguments here." I slipped out of my dress. "But why now?"

Shay's expression clouded. "Because he's driving himself too hard. He's barely sleeping. If he keeps going like this, then he won't last the week."

My lips thinned, remembering what Dad told me on Monday, as we watched the twins together on the ice.

Has Dad been piling on the pressure?

"How's Eden doing?" I asked.

Shay's perspective would be interesting. Normally, he was upbeat about everything.

He's even spun the whole training camp as the best thing that he's ever experienced. You'd think that being put through the biggest test and pressure of his life was a trip to a theme park.

Perhaps for a thrill seeker like him, it is.

He's been excited about *pushing himself*, meeting so many other *exceptional athletes*, and the chance to *learn from the best*.

It's not hard to work out why the coaches love him.

Or D'Angelo.

Shay crossed his arms, defensively. "Eden's doing his best. It's all I ever expect from him. So, stop him from killing himself. Please, love?"

I shift from foot to foot, pulling at the hem of the **KIT-TEA** t-shirt and hope that Shay was right about this approach.

Would ordering a pair of plush kitten ears be a step too far?

I bite my lip.

Yeah, too far.

I cautiously open the door, peering into the home gym.

Being raised by Dad and then, living with Wilder, I know my way around a gym.

Well, in theory.

In reality, I get all the cardio I need from sex and my weightlifting from carrying books.

They're both good workouts.

To be fair to him, Dad never made me feel bad that I didn't follow in his footsteps by becoming a jock. In some ways, I think that it was a relief to him that I was smart and wouldn't need to navigate the same world, which had destroyed our family.

He found it more difficult to understand and connect with Cody.

He thought that Cody was too dangerously similar to him in some ways but without the talent in others.

He's so fucking wrong, if only he'd open his eyes.

Cody's surfing and baking is legendary. He's as smart as I am.

Plus, he's an incredible brother and husband.

Now that I'm back in Freedom, I'll find a way to open Dad's eyes.

The gym is large, windowless, and painted red like a miniature hell. It's hot as well, and I'm glad that I'm not wearing much.

Perhaps, Shay was right that I didn't need panties?

I don't think that he was worried I'd overheat.

On one side of the gym are gleaming new weight training tools: kettlebells, dumbbells, and barbells. They're neatly stacked next to a squat rack and low, black bench. On the other side, accessories like medicine balls, an exercise mat, and a foam roller lie ready for use.

Dad has kept his word about kitting out Captain's Hall to properly support the guys.

On the back wall stands the biggest equipment for cardio: a rowing machine, spin bike, and treadmill.

The gym is also filled with cheeky English rock music and a gorgeous, tattooed Englishman.

Eden is running on the treadmill with the same speed and urgency, as if he's being chased by a wolf.

My eyes widen.

Shit, this isn't good.

Eden's stripped to only his gray joggers, and sweat drips down between his strong shoulder blades, over his phoenix tattoo like it's weeping.

His muscles bunch and flex, as he runs.

He looks like he's been at this for hours.

He's relentless, powerful. But his golden hair is plastered to his neck, and I can hear his panted breaths.

My heart clenches.

Shit, Eden *is* pushing himself.

He looks moments away from collapsing.

Eden's legs are shaking.

Startled, I take a step forward. "Eden!"

His head whips around in alarm. "Robyn...?"

He loses his balance and stumbles.

Immediately, Eden flies off the end of the treadmill, catching his head on the end with a groan and crashing to the floor with a bang that makes me flinch.

Fuck.

I rush across the room, diving to turn off the treadmill, before crouching to check on Eden.

Eden's cheeks are red, and he looks dazed. His muscles are quivering involuntarily. His joggers have slipped all the way down to reveal the delicious 'V' of his hips, trailing to his pelvis.

He's drenched with sweat, struggling to catch his breath.

I glance around for his Gatorade bottle, before snatching it up and holding it to his lips. "Here."

Eden looks at me for a moment, before drinking deeply.

I can tell by how rapidly his chest is rising and falling that it's hard for him to steady his erratic breathing.

I scan Eden's head, noticing the swelling and purple bruising, which is appearing.

Luckily, there's no gash.

Dad will notice tomorrow though.

How will he explain that?

Note to self: Never startle someone on a treadmill.

Eden stops drinking, wiping his mouth. “Why are you here?”

“Do you know that it’s gone midnight?” I reply. “Also, sorry.”

He bats away my apology with a wave of his hand, before shaking his head. “I need to finish my run.”

I try to look commanding by channeling my inner D’Angelo. “Your run is done. How will you complete the drills tomorrow, if you can’t even walk?”

I run my hand down his arms, beginning to massage them. He blinks, as if only just realizing how wrecked he actually is.

“You have a point,” he concedes.

“Fancy that.”

He turns his head to study me. I carefully set down the Gatorade.

Eden’s expression is as serious as ever, and I wish that I could read the look in his beautiful gray eyes.

Then he wraps his strong hand around the back of my neck, before pulling me down closer to him by the front of my t-shirt to sniff it, as if checking on something. “You’re wearing my top.”

I blush. “Yep.”

“It was my brother’s idea.”

I smile. “I have a feeling that he thought it’d turn me into a catnip toy to tempt you out of the gym, before you...”

“Injured myself...?” He raises his hand to touch at the darkening bruise.

I wince. “Yeah, our plan may have backfired. Perhaps, you can tell the AC that you got the bruise from Shay tripping and breaking something over you by accident. Literally everybody would believe that.”

Eden shrugs like he doesn’t even feel the pain, pushing himself to sit up. “It’s nothing. I just won’t say anything. That t-shirt looks good on you.”

“Wearing your clothes is becoming a habit.” I stroke over the picture of the kitten. “You really do like cats.”

Eden pushes his hair back from his face. “Our adoptive parents bought me one, when I didn’t talk. Shay named him Silky because of his fur. I loved his fur. He slept on my bed every night. He made me feel safe. And he didn’t need me to talk to...”

He cuts off.

My expression softens.

Eden doesn’t say as much as his brother, and often, it’s what he doesn’t say (or is hidden underneath his words), which speaks the loudest.

I'm beginning to understand him more now. It simply takes patience, and he's worth having an infinite amount of that.

All good relationships are.

"How about coming to bed now?" I say, gently.

Eden's gaze hardens, before he shakes his head.

Okay, time to take a different approach.

If he won't slow down because he cares about his own health, then I know that he cares about his brother's.

"Shay's worried," I say, no longer playing fair. "He's up there, still awake. Do you want him to struggle tomorrow as well?"

Eden's eyes widen. "He needs to sleep."

"So do you." I kneel up, cupping Eden's cheeks. "What's this about?"

Eden studies me, intently. "You shouldn't be worrying."

"Tough."

"I know the look in coach's eye. He doesn't think that I'm good enough," Eden replies. My stomach swoops, and I battle to school my expression because fuck, he's right. Sometimes, I forget how perceptive Eden is. How difficult must it be to notice this stuff but not be able to talk about it? "I'm failing, but my brother is the best man on the ice. I don't want to hold him back. I always do."

What the hell do I say to that?

Tenderly, I lean forward, kissing Eden.

He's still shaking from the overexertion, but he opens his lips sweetly.

For a moment, all our worries disappear, as we lose ourselves in the sensation of our touch, taste, and dance of our tongues.

I moan, and he tightens his hand on my neck.

When I draw back, our faces are so close that I can see the gold flecks in his eyes.

Eden may look like his brother, but he's nothing like Shay.

When I'm with him, I wonder how anyone could ever get the two confused.

Eden has such a mesmerizing intensity. I feel like I could fall into his eyes and happily live out the rest of my life there.

"I know about feeling like you're never going to be as good as the people around you," I whisper. Somehow, at this midnight hour, being held close by Eden, it's easier to talk about this. "For years, I tried to live up to my husband's standards and expectations. He was the big star. I was just his

partner. But trying to be what he wanted was pointless, in the end. When it comes to brothers, Cody was *my* shadow. He spent his life, trying to prove that he could be as good as me, so that he deserved to be noticed. But he never should have been seen like that. He's always burned bright in his own way. And so do you. You're enough — worthy — just as you are."

Eden swallows, resting his forehead against mine. "I'm not good enough."

"Just because you're not Shay, doesn't mean—"

"I can't ruin his opportunity."

"And you can't push yourself to breaking point."

Eden lets out a shaky breath. "I work hard. That's how I survive. And the ice is my voice."

My eyes burn because from what Shay has told me, Eden's spent his life battling to survive.

I won't let Dad take away his voice.

I wrap my arms around his neck. "Look, you're not alone now. You have all of us, not only your brother. D'Angelo and me are your family as well. That's how this works. So, if that means dressing in cat t-shirts, D'Angelo giving you more intense mentoring, or pulling you back from self-destructing, then we'll do that. I'll work on Dad, and you just get enough sleep and focus on training camp, right? For me?"

I hold my breath.

Say yes.

Eden gives me a searching look. "For you?"

I give a small smile. "Can you try?"

"For you." Eden's eyes gleam with determination like stopping his punishing, self-inflicted workaholic routine is the tough thing...like he's sacrificing something difficult for me. "Only..."

He looks away, untangling himself from me and resting his back against the wall.

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

"I see how you are with Jude and my brother." His gaze meets mine and it's knowing. "I see how they are with each other, too. The three of you fit."

I scrunch up my nose. "Thank you...?"

Eden traces his nail, scratching down the black rose tattoos on his left arm and leaving vivid, red lines over the outlines of the thorns.

I don't think he knows that he's doing it.

“But I don’t.” Eden’s voice is deep and quiet. “Do you only want me because I’m Shay’s twin?”

I stare at him in horror.

How can he still think that?

I scramble inelegantly to straddle his lap. I snatch his hand to stop him from scratching his arm, holding it between mine.

“Just because one person is extraordinary, doesn’t mean that the people around them are less special.” I will him to understand me — to believe me. “It doesn’t mean that I’m going to love or want Shay more, simply because he’s more talented at hockey. You have loads of things that you’re better at than him.”

Eden cocks his head. “He’s smarter than I am. He’s a fucking astrophysicist.”

Unwillingly, I laugh. “Only you could say it in that gorgeous, rumbling voice of yours and make it sound cool by adding *fucking*.”

He *almost* smiles.

I squeeze Eden’s hands. “It’s not a contest. You’re twins but you’re not the same person. But still, what do I win, if I can name three things that you’re more talented at than Shay?”

“You can’t.”

“But if I can...?”

“You’re not wearing any panties.”

I gape at him. “Is that your first talent? Telling if people are going commando? Because if not, wow, that was some non sequitur.”

Eden draws his thumb up my bare thigh in a way that makes me shiver, edging it along the hem of my t-shirt.

He strokes toward my inner thigh but stops just before he can prove his theory, never taking his gaze from my face. “Your bare ass is resting on my knee. I can feel the warmth of your skin.”

My cheeks heat. “Ah, well done, Sherlock.”

“Elementary, my dear Robyn. I should prove my theory.” Eden’s breathing picks up. “What do you think?”

I know that he’s asking for permission.

Has Eden ever had anyone be playful with him? Had anyone who made *him* the center of their world?

Well, he’s going to have to get used to it.

I deliberately splay my thighs wider, as I whisper, “I think that you

should check, but *that* should be the reward, if I win our bet.”

Eden curls his hand possessively around my inner thigh. “Go on then. I dare you.”

I can tell that he’s challenging me.

He doesn’t believe that I can win.

Yet I know I can.

I have the right incentive for both of us.

Caught in this moment with our bodies pressed together in the heat and the cocoon of rock music, it’s electric.

I make sure to never break Eden’s gaze. “You’re the most talented one in this entire house at taking care of people. You’ve been doing that from the moment I met you. That’s one.”

Eden’s breath hitches, but he doesn’t deny it.

“Two,” I continue, steadily, “is your talent for reading and talking about books. I’ve loved our evenings buddy reading, discussing our worst book hangovers, and that time we played *would you rather*.”

“Would you rather only be allowed to read the first page of a book or the last page forever?”

“That was a cruel one. Now, the third. And this one’s easy.” I kiss Eden, slow and deep. “I could list your cooking, work ethic, or knowledge of nature. But I’m going to choose the way that you listen. You have a calm, steady nature that balances all of us in the house. You understand what we need, before we do. That’s a serious talent. Eden, can’t you see how incredible you are?”

“Fuck.” Eden wraps his arm around my middle and launches himself up.

I gasp in shock at his strength, as tired as he is, he sweeps me up in his arms and twists me around.

He pins me against the wall.

Eden’s pupils are dilated. His muscles bulge, as he slips one hand around my throat, and the other quests between my thighs.

Hell, this is hot.

When Eden pushes my t-shirt up, teasing across my clit, I moan.

“Your reward,” Eden murmurs.

Then his mouth is on mine, hot and eager.

At the same time, he presses his thigh between mine, spreading them wide and pressing me even harder against the wall.

I can feel how hard he is in his pants.

Eden's thick fingers slip along my pussy, moving in time with his tongue, and I find myself grinding against them.

I'm so fucking wet.

He takes his time exploring, before he becomes more confident. After that, he's relentless, watching me for my reactions. Every time that he makes me twitch or gasp, he repeats the movement.

He tightens his hand at my throat.

I whine, and he pulls back for a moment from his kiss.

When our gazes meet, I realize just how much he can say through his eyes.

We communicate more in glances than through our conversations.

Like now, it only takes me to glance down between us with a smile, and instantly, he's kissing me again.

This time, he's even more passionate than before.

I can feel with every swipe of his tongue and stroke of his fingers on my clit, driving me toward a shuddering peak, that he's proving to us both that he *fits*.

He has a place now in our relationship.

He can see that he deserves a place in this new world, which he's been thrown into.

He can be loved.

"Eden," I gasp.

He pulls back like he needs...desperately...to watch, as he makes me come apart.

Is this the first time that he's done this with anyone?

His hold on my throat gentles, and he caresses me with such tenderness that it almost breaks me. At the same time, he flicks across my clit even more relentlessly.

I wrap my arms around Eden's waist, loving that now I can stroke over the phoenix on his back.

Then I scream, as finally, I do come apart with an intensity that shakes me.

"Eden, Eden, Eden..." I collapse into his arms, never wanting to let go.

Yet I'm shaking because I know that I may be cruelly forced to.

Eden's in this gym in the middle of the night because of fears that are grounded in reality.

I secretly know that he's on Dad's shit list and will need to pull off

something spectacular to impress him.

It makes the intensity of this moment and connection even stronger.

What if Eden fails training camp? What if he's not selected for the team?

What if the twins are separated?

Will they truly be able to survive?

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



Robyn's Bedroom, Captain's Hall

“*F*uck, fuck, fuck,” I moan.

I stretch out naked on top of my covers on the huge bed with a wooden headboard, which as Shay pointed out, would be perfect for so many types of bondage.

I can't wait to have Shay at my mercy or to be at D'Angelo's.

I moan again at that image, holding the tiny, purple bullet vibrator even harder against my clit.

Should I push it up a setting?

Why not? I'm spoiling myself.

I'm also trying to forget the anxiety provoking hours that I've spent this morning with the security team, showing them every message that Wilder has sent me, knowing that they're going to make risk assessments, then most likely, report back to both Dad and the management team of Bay Rebels.

I can protect D'Angelo and the twins from my ex's poisonous influence but I also have to protect us all from his threat.

Wilder's sent a different, threatening message every morning, until worn down, I blocked him.

It was satisfying for about ten seconds, until I remembered just how he reacts to gestures like that, which is why I decided to come clean to the security team.

So, fuck him.

I deserve to lose myself in some happy time to help myself relax and forget.

I press the button on the side of the bullet, and the pulsating vibrations speed up.

I gasp.

Light streams into the bedroom through the floor length window, which leads out to the balcony. Above me, the large ceiling fan spins slowly, cooling my sweating skin.

The walls are painted a soft blue like a summer's day; they remind me of Shay. Heavy antique chairs, couches, a wardrobe and chest of drawers are dotted around the room.

My books undulate in satisfying waves between them on the floor, along with abandoned chocolate wrappers and empty wine glasses.

This is the first day in two weeks that I have the house to myself.

Eden said sorry to all of us this morning over a spread of apology blueberry muffins, syrup pancakes, and tea. He was trying to make up for both worrying us and keeping us up last night.

I hate that he felt the need to apologize, however, when I know how important training camp is to him.

Also, how genuine his fear is that he's going to fail it.

But still, it's thoughtful.

D'Angelo accepted the tea graciously, while offering him an extra one on one mentoring session.

This was also more thoughtful than I knew D'Angelo could be. But then, I've been reevaluating my best friend over the last couple of weeks.

He's been loyally supportive to the twins — patient.

I never thought *patient* would be a word that I'd use about D'Angelo.

Shay simply knocked Eden with his shoulder, which must be brother speak for *you're an idiot, but I forgive you* because Eden smiled.

As long as Eden slows down and doesn't crack under the pressure, then I'll be happy.

As soon as the guys left for their session at the rink, I shot a text off to Dad, pretending to update him on my social media campaigns, while subtly dropping in about Eden being a gym bunny.

I included a couple of model shoot worthy shots of Eden on the treadmill, weight training, (and my personal favorite), in a muscle flexing pull-up on a bar above the gym door.

On sponsorship alone, it should make Eden worth keeping in the team. Unfortunately, I'm not sure that Austin got the point, since he replied with the simple text:

DAD (9:16): ??? Did you send these to me by mistake? Tell him his core isn't tight enough in the pull-up.

I sighed.

Is it part of Dad DNA that they have to give advice, or do dads all get taught that at some kind of Daddy School?

Okay, Daddy School has a totally different vibe than I meant. It sounds like the type of place that D'Angelo may be teaching.

It's Friday, the last day of the first week of training camp.

I can't believe that we're halfway through already, and my three beautiful PR nightmares have held themselves back from fights with other players, wild partying, or scuffles with press.

I must be a good influence or else, stranding them in the middle of the mountains in an isolated house is the key.

You know, one or the other.

Meanwhile, I've been building my list of press contacts, while sowing the seeds about both the twins becoming the new ice royalty and D'Angelo being the secret angel, who's been holding together the team.

The incredible thing? *It's working.*

I didn't realize how rewarding this job could be.

Also, mentally and physically exhausting.

It was Eden who suggested that I stay back and take the morning off from visiting the arena to make up for what happened last night.

I trust the guys now enough to have taken him up on the suggestion. Plus, it meant that I could take my concerns about Wilder to the security team in private.

Of course, it's also meant that I can relax now and tease my pussy with this way too noisy for such a tiny sex toy, while fantasizing about my three favorite guys.

This is only self-care, right?

I may not have brought any of my more...tentacle...orientated toys with me but as soon as I realized what a mistake it'd be to be stuck here without anything fun, I ordered some discrete toys.

Only, this isn't as discrete as I'd hoped.

Could it possibly buzz any louder?

It sounds like I'm pleasuring myself with a hive of bees.

Ouch.

I wince at the thought. Then, I bite my lip in pleasure, arching my hips.

If I ever try using this vibrator, when the guys are here, I'll definitely stick a towel under the door to muffle the sound, throw the violet quilt over myself, and turn on my music.

Or maybe, I won't because I don't give a fuck.

Shay would probably find it sexy as hell to know that I'm in here taking care of myself.

My eyelashes flutter closed at the thought.

I imagine that he's on the other side of the wall right now in his bedroom, listening.

Fantasy Shay's eyes are bright. He licks his lips as he realizes what I'm up to.

He rests his hand on the wall that divides our rooms.

I moan.

In turn, Fantasy Shay takes his cock out of his pants. He wraps his hand around his cock, which is hard at the sound of my muffled moan.

He lies on his back, splaying his legs wider.

I turn the vibrator up a setting and hiss out a breath.

I hump my hips against the toy, writhing on the sheets.

Faster and faster, Fantasy Shay strokes himself. "Love..."

Oh, yeah.

This fantasy is perfect.

It would be even more perfect, if the real Shay was here to touch me.

I can almost hear him knocking against the wall, as he comes, spilling into his palm.

"Shay," I breathe, closing my eyes, lost in my own pleasure.

"Fuck, that's hot, love," Shay's smooth voice says.

Wait, *really* says.

I open my eyes and scream.

In shock, I hurl the purple bullet across the room, and it bounces against Shay's naked chest.

Shay's eyes widen in surprise.

Then he laughs, brightly. "Good aim. I've never been attacked with a vibrator before."

I clutch the quilt to my chest and stare in shock at Shay, who's standing

in the doorway.

He's only wearing a tight pair of arctic blue swim trunks. Water droplets cling to the muscles of his defined chest and abs.

At his shoulder, stands Eden, who's studying me with an unreadable expression, and D'Angelo.

D'Angelo's leaning against the door frame, looking far too amused.

They're both wearing matching swim trunks, and have equally damp hair, which is slicked back from their faces.

"Don't stop on our account." D'Angelo smirks. "I did knock, but you must have been busy and lost somewhere far more fun with Shay. Was I there too?"

"Nope," I say just to enjoy wiping the smirk off his face.

So, the knocking hadn't been Fantasy Shay, after all.

D'Angelo's expression darkens.

He's much taller than Shay, towering over him. He slides his hand to the back of Shay's neck, grabbing him and holding him tight.

I stiffen, worried that Shay will protest.

We all want to be in this relationship together. We've negotiated our limits, and I trust that D'Angelo won't push them.

On the other hand, it's agonizing because D'Angelo and I can feel how Shay fits between us both, but Shay hasn't quite felt it out for himself yet.

I hope that he gets there.

D'Angelo and Shay are both broken in their own ways, and together, they can help each other heal. They understand what the other needs in a way that I can't because they've lived it.

I want them to have each other.

I hold my breath, but Shay doesn't protest.

Instead, he leans back into D'Angelo's hold; it's instinctive.

Eden watches them together but doesn't say anything.

I attempt to slow my wildly beating heart, even though my face feels like it's on fire.

I'm still so close to the edge of coming that it's torture.

Could I sneak my hand down underneath the quilt to just tip myself over the edge without them noticing?

D'Angelo would definitely notice.

The gorgeous asshole.

"What are you doing here...in trunks...and wet?" I demand. "And that's

not a complaint.”

It really isn't.

Three hot hockey players who look like they've just hopped out of the pool is more or less the perfect start to any fantasy. Especially, since D'Angelo is looking broody with his golden skin in contrast to the translucent beauty of the twins, who he's standing possessively over.

D'Angelo's a combination of the big, bad wolf who looks like he's about to devour all of us, at the same time as protect us from the hunter.

I shiver.

D'Angelo arches his brow. “Camp ended, and I decided to bring these two troublemakers back with me to cool down in the pool here, rather than at the arena.” He shakes Shay, who melts against D'Angelo like he's kissing down his neck, rather than squeezing him just on the side of being too harsh. “Then we all missed you and decided to come and invite you to join us. We didn't know that...”

“You were *coming* all by yourself.” Shay rolls the vibrator that bounced beside his foot back and forth with his bare toes in a suggestive way. “So, you were imagining me were you, love? Was I being good or bad? Wait, I know. I bet that you had me tied to the bed, didn't you, Madam Kidnapper?”

I push myself up onto my elbows. “Don't tempt me.”

“I can go and get my actual ties to use,” D'Angelo suggests, “if you want to try the real thing, rather than the fantasy.”

Eden exchanges a glance with D'Angelo, before they give a conspiratorial nod like they're working together as a team on the ice.

Wow, they're going to be dangerous together.

Shay catches my gaze, and we both look startled.

I can see how it's going to be.

Shay and I had better watch out.

Eden and D'Angelo are going to team up against us.

And I love it.

Hot and cold flush through me, and my pulse is already rushing in my ears.

I throw the quilt off me because if they want to plot, then so do I.

What better way can I show them that I want this?

Shay's breath catches, before he whistles.

The other guys' attempt to look unaffected is embarrassingly unconvincing.

I stretch my hands above my head, trying hard not to be self-conscious, as I let my legs slip open in invitation.

It's easy to be bold like this, when all three men are looking at me like I'm a goddess.

Like they crave to worship me.

"There's no need to ruin perfectly good ties," D'Angelo growls, "because you're going to be obedient, aren't you, *cucciolo*? You'll do precisely what I say to pleasure our girlfriend."

D'Angelo is definitely testing how far he can go now.

Shay replies in a sultry voice, "I'll pleasure her, darlin', but who says that I'm obedient?"

Brat.

Then Shay yelps, as D'Angelo swipes Shay's damp ass.

I glance at Eden, but he doesn't react to D'Angelo spanking Shay like I expected him to.

Instead, he leaves his brother to D'Angelo's unlikely mercy with a certain satisfaction, prowling into the bedroom.

Eden settles on the bed close to the headboard, before leaning down and kissing me like a claiming.

I groan, as he sinks his fingers into the skin of my upper arms, pressing me more firmly onto the mattress. Then he pulls back from the kiss but keeps me pinned down.

"Call me, sir." D'Angelo steers Shay after Eden.

Will Shay accept that?

"Yes, sir." Shay's pupils are blown wide.

Does calling D'Angelo *sir* mean anything or is Shay playing a role?

D'Angelo's shoulders relax, and he smiles at me, when he catches the way that I'm studying him with Shay.

He loosens his hold on Shay's neck, caressing over the base of his neck with his thumb.

"You're going to be a good boy for us." D'Angelo shoves Shay onto the bed between my thighs.

Shay shivers on the *good boy*, and his heated gaze rises to meet mine.

Shay kisses each of my ankles in turn, reverentially.

"I can be so bloody good for you, love." He strokes his hands up my thighs, and I arch into his caress.

"You are good," I reply.

Shay shoots a smug look over his shoulder at D'Angelo, who rolls his eyes.

I laugh.

This is happening. My first group scene with my guys, and already, it's nothing like I could have imagined.

It's messy, fun, and as unique as my guys each are.

As I am.

"Remind me of the traffic light system," D'Angelo orders.

"Red, yellow, and green," Shay and I say at the same time, before grinning at each other.

"Are you both green?" Eden asks.

Shay and I nod.

Eden plays with my hair, sliding his hands lower to my shoulders, massaging.

At the same time, D'Angelo stands commandingly behind Shay and grips him by the hair, pulling his neck back sharply enough that his back rests against D'Angelo's chest.

Shay winces at the tug on his damp hair but doesn't pull away.

D'Angelo's silky curls brush against Shay's cheek, as he whispers, "You're going to put your bratty tongue to good use on our principessa's pretty pussy. Suck her clit and make her scream. You have one minute."

One minute...?

My eyes widen, and my breathing becomes ragged.

"If I don't manage it...?" Shay's chest is rising and falling as raggedly as mine is.

I can tell how hard D'Angelo is struggling to hold onto his self-discipline. At the same time, the chemistry between them is electric.

When it's directed at me, I feel blasted by ice and fire.

It's like being caught between the gods of winter and summer at the same time.

Just as I'm overwhelmed, Eden leans over me and kisses down my neck. His gentle touch, along with the way that his fingers massage my shoulders, steadies me, and I manage to rein back my emotions.

Eden is the balance, which I need to survive the intensity of these other men.

He slides his strong hand down my body, cupping my breast and then teasing my nipple.

I moan, twisting to capture his lips again.

“Eden,” I murmur against his lips. “Fuck, Eden...”

He kisses me more deeply, focused on nothing but me.

“If you don’t make her come in time,” I hear D’Angelo warn, “then I will tie you to this bed and order our principessa to spend the rest of the day, edging you over...and over...*and over again.*”

Shay groans. “You’re cruel but also, that sounds like fun. Can you imagine how intensely I’d come at the end of it?”

“Oh, cucciolo, did I say that you’d get to come? What an innocent. I’d have her ruin your orgasm in the wickedest way.”

I draw in a sharp breath at that image.

Can I really come in only a minute?

Poor Shay, if I don’t...or lucky Shay, I’m not sure.

I hump my hips but I have nothing to rub myself against, since I’m pinned on my back.

Eden speeds up his teasing of my nipple. He’s aiding his twin.

I’m almost there...

“Help me?” Shay asks but with a hesitancy that means he doesn’t expect to be helped.

And that breaks my heart.

There’s an uncomfortable silence.

I strain to study D’Angelo.

D’Angelo’s jaw is clenched like he wishes he could bust the balls of everyone who’s ever made Shay sound like that, as if he has no right to ask for help and definitely, never to expect it.

I feel exactly the same.

D’Angelo gentles his hold on Shay’s hair. “All any of you need to do is ask, and you have my help. I don’t have a family, apart from you. You’re everything to me now. I’d fucking die for you. Do you understand that?”

His suddenly earnest gaze slides across each of us in turn.

Eden gives a curt nod.

Shay’s expression, however, is more brittle and fragile like he can’t truly believe that yet.

I smile. “You’re my everything too.”

Shay looks overwhelmed. “Well, then I can definitely be a good boy for you.”

I bite my lip hard not to laugh.

We'll see about that.

D'Angelo shoves Shay, tipping him forward, until his face is pressed against my pussy. "Let's test that, shall we?"

I hiss at the sudden, delicious sensation.

D'Angelo's smile is wicked. "I've seen in the pool how long you can hold your breath. You have one minute."

Then he presses Shay's face even more forcefully against my pussy, using him as I had my vibrator.

Shay curls out his tongue, and I feel how eagerly he licks and sucks, as D'Angelo uses him like a gorgeous shaped sex toy.

I can't look away.

Shay's golden hair between my thighs. His teeth lightly grazing my sensitive clit. Then the glimpse of his thick black lashes and twinkling, gray eyes as he glances up at me.

It almost undoes me.

I'm being driven to the heights of pleasure...*faster and faster...*

"Fuck, yeah, there," I gasp. "Yes..."

"Thirty seconds." D'Angelo meets my gaze over Shay's head, and we share a smile, warm and intimate.

I never dreamed that I could have this.

It's incredible.

Mind-blowing.

Then Eden kisses me, and I feel connected to all three of the men in this bed at once.

"Twenty seconds." D'Angelo pushes Shay even more insistently against me.

I'm desperate to writhe but I'm held in place.

Eden deepens the kiss like he can help his twin and urge me over the edge by the dedication of his lips and tongue, working mine.

Desire is coiling through me, higher and higher.

I'm panting.

"Ten, nine, eight..." D'Angelo's voice is cruelly cool, as fire throbs between my thighs, and Shay desperately sucks on my clit. "Seven, six..."

I'm not going to come.

There isn't time.

Shay's going to lose.

Then it hits me, unexpected and forceful.

A wave of pleasure crashes over me, which makes me scream against Eden's mouth and buck up against his twin's.

I come, loud and long and earth shatteringly perfect.

I'm held between the three men who've just made me come in less than a minute, and I know that they're better than any fantasy I could conjure.

Yet at the same time, I want to explore every fantasy with them because for the first time, I know that we can trust each other with our darkest, wildest desires.

"Good boy," D'Angelo praises, stroking Shay's hair, as his gaze meets mine. Then warmth curls through me in a way that confuses and excites me, as he adds, "Good girl."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



Lounge, Captain's Hall

I sprawl on the crushed velvet couch with my head resting on Eden's shoulder.

I'm warm, comfortable, and relaxed.

In fact, I may never move from my home cuddled in Eden's arms. He'll just have to give up his hockey and become my permanent teddy bear.

Sounds fair, right?

I'm wearing only Eden's **KIT-TEA** black t-shirt. Since last week, it's been accepted that it's mine, and Eden has been casually leaving his other favorite cat t-shirts on the end of my bed without a word (**CATITUDE IS EVERYTHING** and **MURDER PAWS**).

The smile that he gives, when he sees me wearing them for bed makes me glow in a way that I never knew could be possible.

It's why I ordered him a mug that arrived over the weekend.

When he opened the package on Saturday, while we were chilling in front of last season's recorded hockey games, and realized that I'd bought a gift for him (and only him), I startled a smile from him.

The smile was so genuine that I couldn't stop myself kissing him.

He proudly placed the mug with a black kitten and the words **SORRY, I WAS THINKING ABOUT CATS** on the counter and hasn't stopped using it since.

The pale moon shines through the windows over the grand lounge in

Captain's Hall. Outside in the surrounding gardens, I can make out the rolling lawns and shadowed trees.

A crackling fire spits in the marble fireplace, which is on the far side of the room. A gilt mirror gleams above it, which reflects back the heavy, purple and black furniture and in-built bookcases.

I wrinkle my nose at the smoky, sweet scent, and my eyes sting.

In the furthest corner of the room stands a Steinway grand piano. It's gleaming and black.

It's the one request that D'Angelo made. He insisted that the piano be delivered and installed immediately.

Originally, I thought that he was either acting like a typically spoiled player or that he was being difficult in order to get revenge for this house arrest.

As training camp continued into the second week, doubling in its intensity, and D'Angelo struggled to talk about the pressure and his worries, but rather has played every evening, pouring his soul out through the music, I understand now that he needs the music.

To him, it's how he copes...speaks...breathes.

When did he learn to play like a prodigy?

It's beautiful, and D'Angelo looks even more beautiful playing it.

I rest my ear against Eden's chest, listening to the *thud — thud — thud* — of his heart, which beats a rhythm to the music.

Eden and I listen in contented silence.

I study D'Angelo.

Unusually for him, he's stripped to only his suit pants and his blue shirt that matches his eyes. It's open at the neck, and he's relaxed enough to not even be wearing a tie.

He's rolled back his sleeves to reveal strong forearms. His elegant fingers dance over the keys.

His curls hang over his face, and he's lost in the music.

Shay's sitting next to D'Angelo on the piano stool.

Shay's wearing only a scarlet t-shirt and black jeans and he looks as lost in the music as D'Angelo is.

Shay is a music fanatic, who listens or talks about music, whenever he can. He's never learned an instrument, however, and he's spoken several times to me about how he wished he'd grown up wealthy enough to learn one.

He's spellbound by D'Angelo's talent.

In evenings, I often find them like this: D'Angelo playing, and Shay sitting like this, so close that their thighs are touching.

Shay looks at D'Angelo with such awe that it makes me smile.

There's deep adoration in the look.

He's falling in love.

Then it makes me smile, when another thought hits me.

Does D'Angelo play every evening only for himself? Or because he knows how much Shay loves to hear him play? Or also because he knows how much we *all* love this quiet hour before bed and his private concerts for us?

I know now that's the sort of thing D'Angelo would do, while making it look like he's being a selfish bastard.

I almost laugh.

Typical D'Angelo.

Typical hockey player.

It's lucky that I'm learning how to read them, even Eden's silences.

I glance up at him.

"How did training go today?" I whisper. "Was it tough?"

"It's always tough," Eden replies. "Shay was fastest in sprints."

I reach to massage Eden's arm, and he grunts in satisfaction. "Dad won't tell you himself but he's impressed. He admires grit and he told me that you've shown incredible dedication and hard work. He says that you have some of the highest levels of endurance."

Eden goes unnaturally still. "Really?"

I nod. "I know that it's hard, but there's only a couple more days of this hell to survive. I know that you can do it."

"Hmm." Eden doesn't agree but he doesn't deny it.

I'll take that as a win.

This exhausting week has been driving all the guys to the edge of their limits and past them.

I've spent the time, making sure that their reputations are as stable in the press as possible, while advocating for them with the coaches.

Subtly.

Or not so subtly with Dad.

Eden has continued to make sure that everyone has been eating and drinking properly, following the nutritionist's diet plan, and don't get

dehydrated throughout the grueling practices.

I settle back on Eden's chest, watching as Shay melts even closer against D'Angelo's side.

When D'Angelo starts to play John Legend's "All of Me", my breath catches.

This is the first time that I wouldn't resent Neve for suggesting her regular humiliation of karaoke.

The draw to my two men is powerful.

Eden must sense it.

"Go join them," Eden's voice is deep and rumbling.

I bite my lip.

I want to but...

These quiet moments on the piano belong to Shay and D'Angelo.

I don't want to intrude or break their moment together.

Yet Eden is giving me a knowing look.

"Trust me." Eden pushes my hair back from my face. "I know my brother, and he needs you to help him with this."

Needs me...?

Confused, I blink at Eden. "How...?"

"You can sing."

What...?

I shake my head. "Nope."

Eden's brow furrows. "Is that a mermaid who I hear in the shower each morning then?"

"Shit, you can hear me?"

"Shay and I both do. The shower shares a wall with our room."

The twins decided to take a room, which had bunk beds in it like being at a real camp.

Shay chose it, laughing.

He said that they'd had bunk beds all the way until college because their adoptive parents were in social housing, and the house only had two bedrooms.

Eden looked relieved, as if he'd been dreading being separated from his brother.

I wondered if Dad had realized that, which was why he'd had the beds put in.

Dad can be a tough asshole to his rookies. Yet he's also the best coach in

the NHL for any player who needs support.

I peer at Eden from underneath my eyelashes. “So, you’ve heard my version of Justin Timberlake’s “SexyBack”...?”

Please say no.

I cringe.

“Shay has this whole dance routine worked out to it now.” How can Eden sound so serious? “He does it each morning, lip syncing to you, while we get dressed.”

I twist in Eden’s arms to stare at him. “Oh, fuck you.”

Then we both laugh.

I’m so getting Shay to perform that dance for me.

Naked.

Eden cups my cheek. His gaze is searching.

He gently pushes me off his lap and shoves me toward Shay and D’Angelo. “Join them. They need you.”

What does he mean?

I turn to look at Eden questioningly, but he shoos me with a quirk of his eyebrow.

I get it.

Be brave.

I turn and stroll past the flickering flames of the fireplace, as its light dances across my bare legs and its heat warms my cheeks, toward the piano.

Eden never looks away from me.

I hang back, not expecting Shay to notice me, when he’s already caught under D’Angelo’s sway. But immediately, Shay’s large eyes lift to meet mine.

Shay’s face brightens like he was waiting for me to join them all along.

Awkward, I lean against D’Angelo’s back, who doesn’t appear to know that I’m here because he’s sunk too deeply in his music.

I let out a yelp, however, as D’Angelo breaks off his song to turn and wrap his arm around my middle. Without saying a word, he lifts me onto his lap between his strong legs like I’ve always belonged there.

Like it’s my rightful place between these two men and always has been.

Without missing a note, D’Angelo starts straight back into John Legend’s “All of Me.”

Shay’s eyes are as bright as the sun, as he smiles at the two of us.

Emboldened, I start to sing along.

It's more of a mumble, but my chest is tight with nerves, and it feels like I'm serenading them in the center of the arena on the night of the Stanley Cup finals with a live audience of thousands listening.

Behind me, D'Angelo's breath quickens, and he rests his chin on my head; I can feel his silky curls.

When Shay begins to sing as well, as shy but determined as I am, in a rich and delicious voice (I'm certain that he has no idea how good it is), I twist to him in shock.

Shay's cheeks are flushed. He's struggling not to duck his head but he's doing this duet with me.

He's supporting me.

Joy floods through me.

I begin to sing more strongly, just as D'Angelo picks up the pace.

Together, the three of us are caught in the moment, the emotion, the desperate, aching unspoken need beneath the rousing notes and aching words.

All of a sudden, Shay stops singing. "I want to kiss you...*both of you.*"

D'Angelo breaks off playing, and his hands hang midair like he doesn't know quite what to do with them.

I stop singing too, and my last sung words of love and desire drift in the silence between us.

Shay's eyes are wide, hopeful, and terrified.

My breath is taken by his bravery.

Finally.

I hoped that Shay would be able to communicate this, and at last, we're there.

Shay's hands are shaking, and he's clutched them in his lap.

He casts one quick look at Eden, who nods at him.

"Is that okay?" Shay's darting glances between D'Angelo and me. "Please, tell me that I haven't read things wrongly. Tell me that you want me to... I've never...this is new to me."

I smile. "I always want you to kiss me, Shay. And as much as I don't want to inflate his ego, anyone would want to kiss D'Angelo. I mean, just look at those cheekbones."

Shay laughs like I hoped he would, making the tension relax out of his shoulders.

D'Angelo mock growls, nipping lightly at my earlobe in retaliation.

Then he holds out his hand to Shay. "Come here, cucciolo."

Shay snatches D'Angelo's hand like a lifeline, before being dragged half onto D'Angelo's lap next to me.

I squirm around to watch, as D'Angelo pulls Shay into a kiss, which is gentle and tender.

I'd expected D'Angelo to be rough.

Except then, I remember.

This is Shay's first kiss with a man.

I know how D'Angelo's first kiss ended.

Humiliation. Pain. Trauma.

D'Angelo is desperate to make this the best possible experience for Shay, rather than the nightmare that he lived through.

And so am I.

Neither of us are going to abandon or betray Shay.

D'Angelo never lets go of Shay's hand, instead, entangling their fingers.

When D'Angelo finally pulls back, Shay's eyes are glassy and dazed.

Then Shay turns to me, capturing my lips.

He tastes of D'Angelo.

The thought makes me moan and deepen the kiss.

I get to have both of these men. I can love them both.

Reaching up, I stroke my hand down Shay's neck.

I never want this kiss to end.

D'Angelo rests his hand on my lower back, and I shiver. "We're talking about all of this. I hope you understand that." He snatches me by the hair, pulling me away from Shay. Both Shay and me look at D'Angelo, whose eyes are dark, as he glances between our lips, hungrily. "But first, I've thought about having the two of you together like this for so long. I want you both. So, can we just fucking kiss?"

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



Jude's Bedroom, Captain's Hall

*J*laugh, squirming over D'Angelo's shoulder.

I stare down at his gorgeous ass, as he carries me up the stairs and down the corridor toward his room. He holds me securely by my legs.

I hadn't expected D'Angelo to literally carry me caveman style to his room to continue our kissing, after Shay's revelation, but I should have known that he'd have been feeling both possessive and dominant.

He hasn't let go of Shay's hand.

I struggle to glance up at where D'Angelo is dragging Shay after us by the hand.

Shay isn't fighting him.

D'Angelo kicks open the door to his room with a bang.

When he prowls inside, I can only see the thick white carpet swaying beneath me.

My t-shirt has fallen down, bunching around my shoulders and leaving me naked and exposed.

For a moment, Shay reaches out and lays his hand on the hollow of my back. I shiver, as he strokes down my spine, before reaching down and palming my swinging breasts.

My breathing speeds up.

I can join in this exploration, right? I reach down and pat D'Angelo's ass.

Shay laughs. "Watch out, Jude, looks like you're in for a spanking."

“Quieten down.” D’Angelo reaches to lightly spank *my* bare ass in warning in a way that makes my skin tingle deliciously, before caressing my ass. It’s soothing. His rubbing is making me so wet that my cheeks flush. “You don’t want me to drop you...just...like...this.”

I let out a shocked gasp, as D’Angelo hurls me onto the center of his antique, silver bed.

It’s exhilaratingly like flying...like being caught between danger and safety, as it always is with D’Angelo.

He’s wicked but he’s mine.

I sprawl on the glimmering covers of his grand bed, which stands in the center of his bedroom.

The drapes are open, and pale moonlight streams over his lavish white room.

D’Angelo is reflected back in the mirrored walk-in closet, which covers the entire far wall.

“Such ungentlemanly behavior, darlin’,” Shay mock gasps.

D’Angelo pulls Shay with a hard tug toward the bed and then shoves him down next to me as well.

Shay lands bouncing on his back, laughing.

Shay turns his head to look at me, and our noses are almost touching. “Hello, love.”

“Hi.” I kiss him, and it’s like a confirmation that we’re both where we should be.

That we’re home.

At the rustle of fabric, reluctantly I pull back from Shay’s plush lips. He’s studying me, as if even now, he’s checking in that I truly am okay with this.

I smile, before grabbing Shay’s hand. I squeeze it, drawing his fingers to my pussy.

Shay’s eyes widen, when he feels how wet I am. Then a look of understanding crosses his expression, and he smiles as well.

“Come on,” he whispers. “Jude’s putting on a show for us. We’d better not miss it.”

I chuckle, before we settle even closer together on the bed with our shoulders touching and turn to watch D’Angelo.

D’Angelo can’t hide the fond expression, which he’s been watching us with, quickly enough.

But he tries.

“Asshole,” Shay’s lips quirk, “throwing us around like that.”

Only we both loved it. And D’Angelo knows it.

D’Angelo continues to undo the buttons on his shirt with quick, efficient motions that are fucking hot. “I don’t respond to *asshole*.”

“You just did.”

I try to smother my laugh behind my palm.

Brat.

It’s lucky that D’Angelo is a brat tamer. I don’t think that Shay realizes that yet.

D’Angelo looks thoughtful as he finishes the buttons on his shirt and wrenches it off.

Shay’s eyes are wide with the same awe as he watches D’Angelo playing the piano, when D’Angelo’s chest is revealed.

I don’t blame him.

When D’Angelo stands over us like this, he looks like a fallen angel who’s about to corrupt Adam and Eve.

“If we’re doing this, then in bed, you need to accept that I’m in charge.” D’Angelo folds his shirt neatly, before shaking it out in frustration.

He tries again and then, a third time.

My chest is tight, as I see him struggling.

“Yes, sir,” I hurriedly answer to help him.

D’Angelo lets out a sharp breath, hurling the shirt across the room. His attention snaps back to me and then Shay.

“What do you say?”

“Please, yes.” Shay’s pupils are dilated. “Sir.”

D’Angelo stalks toward the bed. I can’t look away from his piercing eyes.

When he places his knee on the bed between Shay and me, my adrenaline spikes.

My skin prickles, and I tighten my fingers around Shay’s.

D’Angelo lightly presses his hand around Shay’s throat, pinning him to the mattress. “You’re *our* pet. In this bed, you belong to both of us. Okay?”

Fuck, yeah.

I turn my head, hoping that Shay wants that too.

I’ve dreamed of topping Shay alongside D’Angelo.

Shay’s eyelashes flutter, and he pushes up like he wishes D’Angelo would tighten his hold around his neck. At the same time, he curls his fingers out of my hold and against my clit like that’s his answer.

“I wanted Robyn from the moment that I saw her in that pub.” Shay’s expression is unexpectedly serious. This must be important to him. His brow furrows. “I didn’t think that I’d want a guy like this, until I met you, Jude. But I just couldn’t stop thinking about you. Needing you.” His cheeks redden. “I even watched porn, trying to figure out, you know, was I into cocks?”

D’Angelo quirks his brow. “And are you?”

“Only if they’re attached to dark haired, blue eyed dominant guys who kind of look like you.”

D’Angelo’s hand flexes around Shay’s throat. “Good because my cock is the only one that you’re allowed to touch, choke on, or feel coming deep inside you, understood?”

“Keep saying stuff like that, darlin’,” Shay’s expression is painfully vulnerable, “and I’m going to think that this is more than a hookup for you and that you may even want to keep me.”

For a moment, D’Angelo looks as devastated, as I feel.

Then he lowers his mouth, until his lips are grazing Shay’s on each word. “Do I need to tattoo **J** and **R** on your cock, pet, before you realize that we *are* keeping you?”

Tears glimmer in Shay’s eyes. “That sounds painful.”

“It does, so how about you believe me, before I take drastic measures?”

Shay tries to laugh, but a tear chases down his cheek. “I’ve never had this. I didn’t think that people like you...” He glances sideways at me. “...would want me for more than a bit of fun, you know? Especially not both of you.”

My heart aches. “I love both of you. It’s fucking beautiful that you can love each other too. A gift. You’ve talked about this with Eden, right?”

Shay nods. “I’ve never been more nervous and scared in my life. I shouldn’t have been, however, because Eden already knew. He always knows me better than I know myself. He only cares that I’m happy and safe. He just said that you’d better like me back and not hurt me, or he’d cut off your balls.”

D’Angelo’s smiling with relief like he hasn’t just been threatened with castration, then I realize that it’s because Shay’s family have accepted him.

Shay isn’t going to lose his brother like D’Angelo did.

He won’t be hurt in the same way.

“Then my balls are safe.” D’Angelo leans down, capturing Shay’s lips in a deep kiss. Shay moans. Then he flexes his hand at his neck on each word. “Because I like my good boy very...fucking...much.”

Shay shivers on the *good boy*.

D'Angelo turns to me and winks. "Don't you think that our pet is wearing too many clothes?"

I untangle my fingers from Shay's, biting my lip at the delicious way that his knuckles graze against my pussy, and push myself up to kneel next to him.

D'Angelo finally lets go of Shay's neck and stands up.

Shay smiles, lazy and relaxed now. He stretches out with his hands above his head like he's expecting a treat.

He's not wrong.

"Don't move," D'Angelo commands sternly. "Lie there and let us take care of you. I'm going to make you as addicted to me, as I am to you."

Shay's breath catches.

I don't think that he fully believed that D'Angelo was more than tolerating his interest until then.

By the end of tonight, I know that he'll learn the truth.

D'Angelo slips his hands to the buttons at the front of Shay's jeans, and Shay's breathing picks up.

D'Angelo catches my eye, and I nod. "On it."

I trace my hands slowly down Shay's heaving sides to the hem of his t-shirt.

Shay appears overwhelmed, unsure whether to focus on the teasing way that I'm playing with his t-shirt, or the way that D'Angelo is slowly undoing his jeans.

"Use the traffic light system," D'Angelo says. "But I want you to use *yellow* slightly differently. This is your first time with me like this. It's new to you, and you don't know where your limits are, so neither do I. I don't want any of us to push them. So, if you begin to feel that things are too much, in any way, say *yellow*, and we'll take a pause and figure it out, okay?"

Shay nods. "Okay, but can I tell you that what you're doing right now is torture?"

D'Angelo palms Shay's crotch, and Shay hisses. "The best kind."

I drag the t-shirt over Shay's head, at the same time that D'Angelo pulls off his jeans.

Fuck, Shay's gorgeous.

Stretched out and naked like this, the trust that he's showing us is immense. He's struggling to be good and hold still, which for Shay, isn't

easy.

D'Angelo's gaze rakes over him. "You deserve a reward for obeying us so well."

He reaches forward, and his large hand closes around Shay's dick. Then he just rests it there, watching Shay closely for cues.

I know that D'Angelo's waiting to see if Shay says *yellow*, but he doesn't.

Shay stares down at D'Angelo's hand around his dick, and his cheeks flush.

Then, he whines, as D'Angelo slowly strokes him to hardness.

Shay's trembling, taking shaky breaths.

I kiss him, and he kisses back, desperately.

I glance over my shoulder at D'Angelo, who looks elegant and cool, as he takes Shay apart.

Suddenly, a mischievous part of me wants to take D'Angelo apart as well.

I crawl to the end of the bed and kneel up, reaching to undo his belt.

D'Angelo arches his brow. "What are you doing, principessa?"

"I want to taste you." I slip open D'Angelo's pants and pull out his cock, which is already at half-mast.

D'Angelo nods his permission.

Shay moans.

When I look back at Shay, he's watching me with hooded eyes.

At last, D'Angelo loses his composure, shuddering. "Fuck, you look beautiful kneeling in front of me. Whose mouth is this?"

I lick my lips. "Yours, sir."

He pumps Shay's cock. "And whose cock is this?"

"Yours, sir," Shay gasps.

"You love this cock, don't you, cara mia?" D'Angelo meets my gaze.

I nod, as frustration builds through me.

I'm desperate now for the weight of his cock on my tongue and the feel of it stretching my lips.

"Beg for it," D'Angelo orders.

I grit my teeth. "Please."

"You can do better than that."

"Please may I suck your cock?" I try again. "I want to make you feel as good, as you're making Shay feel."

D'Angelo's expression softens. "Of course, and you always make me feel good, cara mia."

I reward him by licking up the velvety softness of his shaft, before kissing the head of his dick.

He moans, as I continue with teasing soft kitten licks.

I can torture as well.

D'Angelo's gaze slides to Shay, whose dick has fully hardened at the sight of me licking D'Angelo's dick.

Mostly, Shay looks eager, however, at the sight.

He wants to join me.

D'Angelo lifts his hand away from Shay, before his eyes become cold and commanding. "Pet, up and on your knees. I want to see your pretty mouth around my cock as well."

I glance at Shay, smiling encouragingly.

Shay pushes himself up onto his knees and shuffles next to me. His dick twitches in interest.

I cup Shay's cheeks and draw him into a kiss, sliding my hands down his neck to his shoulders, gently stroking.

I love this slow exploration of each other's bodies.

D'Angelo must have become impatient, however, because I hear a growl above us.

Shay and I both yelp together, when D'Angelo winds a hand through both of our hair and yanks us apart, before holding us against his cock.

"Go on then, open your sweet mouths and get to work," D'Angelo orders.

Shay's gaze meets mine.

Together, we both start to lick.

At first, Shay is hesitant. But when our tongues meet, he gains in confidence. He smiles at me, and fuck, being like this, pleasuring the same man together, is making me wet.

I'm impressed at how steadily D'Angelo is standing. I'd have expected his knees to have buckled by now, but his back is still ramrod straight.

That's a talent.

Do they give medals for withstanding BJ torment?

I love feeling both D'Angelo's dick and also Shay's soft lips.

When I kiss Shay around D'Angelo's dick, I reach to fondle D'Angelo's balls as well.

I'm taking it slow for Shay.

I know that he's received a lot of blow jobs, but this is his first time giving one.

He loves it, in the way that he's now experimenting with taking as much as he can of D'Angelo's cock into his mouth as he can is anything to go by.

When Shay chokes, D'Angelo drags him back by his hair, and Shay takes a deep breath.

"Good boy," D'Angelo says, gently. "I'm so proud of you."

Shay looks surprised and then glows like he'd been expecting D'Angelo to be disappointed and scold, then punish him.

I turn my head and press a kiss to D'Angelo's thigh.

This is why I trust him.

I knew that he wouldn't treat Shay like that.

D'Angelo glances down at me, then his cheeks pink, and he gives a small, pleased smile.

He turns crisply to Shay. "Take a pillow and place it in the middle of the bed. We need to bring pleasure to our principessa, and we're both ready now."

He glances down significantly at his painfully hard dick and then at Shay's.

Eagerly, Shay bounces further down the bed, snatching a large pillow and dropping it in the middle of the bed, before kneeling next to it for further instructions.

Confused, I look up at D'Angelo. "What are you planning?"

D'Angelo reaches down and tips up my chin. "I'm going to lay you over that pillow, which will raise your hips. Then I'm going to fuck you, until you're screaming from pleasure. At the same time, our pet is going to fuck your mouth, and he's only going to come after you do."

I draw in a sharp breath at the image.

I've never been used in that way before, but it's perfect.

Somehow, D'Angelo always seems to be able to sense what people desire most or possibly, what they need.

"Yes, please," I whisper.

"What if I can't hold on?" Shay asks. "You're so fucking sexy, love. After a hand job, plus sucking on my first cock, I'm so fucking close already."

"You'd better not come before our principessa," D'Angelo's voice becomes frosty with dominance, and I shiver. "If you do, then you'll be punished. Do you want to end the night sleeping on your stomach because your ass matches your favorite red t-shirt, pet?"

Shay lets out a shuddering breath. “You’re a beast, darlin’.”
“And you’re a beauty but you’re still not breaking the rule.”

Hardass.

D’Angelo climbs onto the bed, scooping me up and pushing me forward over the pillow.

I yelp, and my stomach lurches.

My pulse roars in my ears.

The pillow underneath me pushes up my hips, and my ass sticks in the air.

Sweat drips down the back of my neck.

I flush, as D’Angelo kneels behind me.

My skin prickles, when he smooths his hands over my ass. It feels incredible, as he kneads it.

Then I open my mouth in shock, as he pulls my buttocks apart and runs his finger down the cleft. I moan, when his tongue follows his finger. It’s wet and warm and feels fucking amazing.

Mind-blowing.

I wriggle, encouraging him.

Instead, he draws back. I hear the rip of a condom packet.

“Tap three times as your safe word,” D’Angelo says. “Your mouth is going to be busy, and I’m going to be busy showing you that there are positions, which can bring you enough pleasure to come.”

My brow furrows.

What does he mean?

Why should this position feel better for this type of sex? He’s going to be disappointed.

I guess that I could fake it.

He’s been patient and put so much effort into tonight that I don’t want to make him feel bad.

Then Shay’s hands are on my face, as he presses on my cheeks, encouraging me to open my mouth.

I open my mouth wide.

To my surprise, Shay paints my lips with his precum like he’s marking me, before pressing his cock inside.

He doesn’t move, however, holding himself still with extreme effort.

He’s battling not to come too soon.

Poor Shay.

There's no way that I'm going to come, before he does.

Does D'Angelo *want* to spank Shay?

Has he set this up in order to have an excuse to? It doesn't feel like the type of thing that he'd do.

Unexpectedly, I feel D'Angelo's fingers underneath me at my clit, and gasp, which vibrates through Shay's cock.

"Give a guy a chance, love." Shay buries his hand in my hair.

Shocked, I realize that in this position lying over the pillow, D'Angelo can work one hand underneath me to pleasure my clit, while also fucking me.

He's a genius.

Now I understand what he means about this position being one that will bring me enough pleasure.

Perhaps, I will come before Shay.

It's going to be close.

I pant, as D'Angelo circles my clit.

Then I feel his hard cock teasing my pussy.

He strokes his free hand up and down my spine. "You're fucking gorgeous, cara mia. God, I love this sweet pussy so much."

Then he slams into me with one long thrust.

It pushes me onto Shay's cock like D'Angelo is using both of us as toys.

Shay's cock stretches my mouth, almost knocking against the back of my throat. The sensation of being fucked in pussy and mouth at the same time is overwhelming and mind-blowing.

I'm oversensitive.

Spiraling.

In heaven.

"Don't move." D'Angelo growls at Shay. "Take what we're giving you and don't you dare come."

Shay's eyes flutter closed, and he clenches his jaw. His hands tighten in my hair like he needs to feel anchored.

He's already desperate.

D'Angelo pulls out and thrusts back into me with a relentless rhythm. At the same time, he works over my clit, until I'm wild and unmoored.

Pleasure rushes through me.

D'Angelo leans over my back, and his mouth clashes with Shay's.

Above me, they kiss, as below, they drive me to ecstasy.

"You're both so perfect," D'Angelo whispers between kisses. "So.

Fucking. Perfect.”

He drives into me even harder.

Tears chase down my cheeks.

“Come.” D’Angelo’s order is an undeniable commandment. “Come now.”

And I do with a scream, as my back arches, and my body shakes from the rolling pleasure that feels like dying.

Then like a domino effect, Shay comes too, harder than I’ve ever known any man come.

His hand tightens in my hair.

“Robyn,” Shay whispers, as I swallow his cum like I’m swallowing part of his soul. “*Jude...*”

When D’Angelo comes, he grips my hips and roars, driving me hard against the bed.

I’ve never felt so owned or so loved.

As my exhausted eyes slip shut, I know two things: I’m keeping these men forever and I’m terrified that if anything breaks us apart, it’ll also break us.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



Jude's Bedroom, Captain's Hall

“*M*orning, love.” Shay’s mellow voice is the first thing that greets me, as my eyes flutter open.

I don’t think that I’ve ever woken with such a sense of joy and peace.

I’m lying in the center of Jude’s bed with sticky skin and tangled hair. I’m in my typical wild starfish position but am caught in the middle of two naked men with my limbs splayed over them.

I want to wake up like this every morning for the rest of my life.

The only thing that could make it better would be if Eden was here too.

I’ve never felt this safe.

Soft light plays across Shay’s golden hair. He’s pushed himself up on one elbow and is watching me with gentle adoration.

Wow, if he can look at me like that, when my mascara is smudged around my eyes like a panda and I’m doing my starfish impression, then it must be love.

“Morning,” I rasp.

My throat is sore after last night’s enthusiastic BJ. I need the warm tea with honey that Cody swears by, after a vigorous throat fucking. Sometimes, it’s hard to look at Michael, knowing as much as I do now about Doctor Kink.

Shay leans down and kisses me, and I sigh happily into his mouth. “I’ll

get Eden to make you something for your sore throat, when we have breakfast. Actually, for both our throats.”

I should have known that he’d notice.

I love and hate being seen so much at the same time.

What’s the bet that they’ll start running me warm baths and asking me if I need tampons ordered for my periods next?

I bite my lip not to laugh at the image of D’Angelo struggling to work out the right brand tampon in the middle of a busy shop.

D’Angelo rests his arm around my middle, pulling me against his naked chest. Then he grips my chin and turns me into his kiss, claiming me.

“Any other aches and pains that I should know about?” D’Angelo pulls back, scanning me.

Wait, is he already going there with the period thing?

I hurriedly shake my head.

I only ache in the most delicious ways.

D’Angelo notes the fingertip bruises on my hips and can’t hide his look of satisfaction quickly enough.

He may be okay with a poly relationship but he’s still a possessive asshole.

When Shay entangles his hand with mine, I smile.

I’ve never felt as cherished — or as understood — as I do between these two men.

We’re allowing our masks down, and for all of us, that’s not easy.

D’Angelo sits up against the headboard, raking his hand through his curls to smooth them down. Then he reaches for a bottle of water and holds it to my mouth.

I take grateful sips, as it soothes my throat.

“How are you feeling?” D’Angelo arches his brow at Shay.

Shay plays with my fingers, fidgeting. “Good, fuck, more than good. *Brilliant*. Last night was like this puzzle piece that I didn’t even know was missing, and it slotting into place was a revelation. My brain has worked out who I really am. But when I saw you sucking Jude’s cock, love, I was so turned on. My dick became harder than it’s ever been, and so my body caught up on it too. Suddenly, I was desperate to try it.”

“Did you enjoy it?” D’Angelo asks.

“Fuck, yeah.” Shay’s smile is crooked. “We’re going to need to change our contracts because there’s a lot that I’m going to want to try now. I mean,

when I think back, I've always thought some men were objectively pretty. But I reckoned every guy noticed that."

D'Angelo hums his agreement. "Seriously, watch *The Talented Mr. Ripley* and tell me that Jude Law isn't like a sinful angel."

Shay's eyes light with relief that he's understood. "Exactly! In college, I thought that all guys secretly wanked to fantasies about Loki." Shay glances between us. "I never had anyone who I could talk to about these things. I feel free. It's like I can finally be myself."

My heart swells.

"You mean, talk about things like which couples you'd fuck, apart from us." D'Angelo's lips quirk.

Shay sits up; his eyes shine with excitement. "I like this game. The first one is easy: Jack and Rose from *Titanic*. I remember wanting to be in that car between them. And it's *my* hand on the car window."

"Westley and Buttercup in *The Princess Bride*." D'Angelo reaches across me to run his hand through Shay's hair. "You remind me of Westley."

Shay bursts out laughing. "At least you didn't say Buttercup."

"Hey, I'm the princess," I protest.

The two men exchange a glance.

"Of course you are, principessa." Angelo pins me down so that Shay can kiss down my throat in a coordinated attack.

I wriggle and laugh.

"Princess, my apologies." Shay nips and kisses my sensitive skin. The look he casts me is playful but sinful. "Forgive your poor subject."

I pretend to think about it. "You're forgiven, but only if you give me two more kisses in tribute."

"Of course, princess." Shay bends lower and places a kiss across first one of my nipples and then the next.

I shiver, and my skin goosebumps.

Tease.

Shay looks up at me through his thick lashes. "What, love? You didn't say where you wanted the kisses."

Fair.

For a moment, his expression clouds. He resettles himself on the bed next to me, throwing his arm around my waist.

Shay's hand settles next to D'Angelo. Then like it's instinctive — natural — their fingers entangle on top of my stomach.

“What else will this change?” Shay avoids my gaze. “I know that I’m on thin ice with the Bay Rebels as it is. I’m not meant to be creating scandals. What will this mean, when it comes to the press? I’m sorry, if—”

“Don’t apologize,” D’Angelo’s voice is tight and hard, “*ever* for your sexuality.”

Shay’s gaze snaps up to D’Angelo’s. “I love you both. Have I said that yet?”

D’Angelo’s expression gentles, at the same time as his hand tightens around Shay’s. “Have I? Because I’m falling for you, Shay. And I’ve loved Robyn for years. I’ll do anything to protect you both. Anything that you need from me, then you have it. We both support you. You’re not alone.”

Shay’s lip quivers for a moment like this is too much for him to accept, but then, he gives a quick nod. “Your gender doesn’t matter to me. You’re the two people who I care about, the only ones who I love. You’re my family, along with my twin. I’ve never allowed anyone close to me before. It’s only ever been Eden and me against the world. But now, I need you all and I’m fucking terrified what will happen, if I lose you because the press—”

“The press can kiss my ass,” I explode.

Did I say that out loud?

But it’s heartfelt.

“So eloquent.” D’Angelo snorts. “I thought that it was *my* job to antagonize the press. You’re the one who scolds me for not following the *no comment* rule, remember?”

“Who said anything about not following it?” I narrow my eyes. “Shay has the power here. People don’t *come out* as straight, do they? So, Shay doesn’t need to say anything now. He doesn’t owe his sexuality to anyone. They don’t own it, and no one should pressure him into revealing it. His sexuality or gender identity is private and belongs to him.” When Shay raises his surprised gaze to meet mine, I will him to believe me. “Whether you reveal this like D’Angelo does or not is entirely up to you. I’m not going to let anyone bully you into that decision, before you’re ready.”

Shay slumps with relief. “You know, love, I’m so bloody lucky. You’re an incredible woman to have on your side. ”

“And a dangerous one to have as your enemy,” D’Angelo adds.

“Remember that,” I say, mock sternly.

D’Angelo finally lets go of Shay’s hand and sits up, straight backed. “It’s early, but I need to take a shower and—”

“Dress in one of your many suits again...?” Shay bounces onto his knees in excitement, before scrambling across me to knock D’Angelo flat onto his back. D’Angelo stares up at him in shock. Shay straddles him, massaging his shoulders. “I’m determined to get you to relax, darlin’.”

“Knocking me onto my back and pinning me down,” D’Angelo growls, “is not the best start.”

Shay falters. “Whoops.”

I smirk.

Shay may not have avoided a spanking, after all.

“Come on,” Shay urges, working his thumbs deeper into D’Angelo’s knotted muscles, “I’m going to finally get you wearing something that doesn’t need a collar and cufflinks.”

“Take my cufflinks, take my soul,” D’Angelo snarls.

Shay ignores him; he’s brave. “I know! My leather trousers. Bloody hell, your ass would look bitable in them.”

I slam my hand over my mouth to hide my laugh.

D’Angelo’s eyes darken. He rises up, looping his arms around Shay. Taken by surprise, Shay doesn’t struggle, as their positions are reversed, and he’s rolled onto his stomach.

D’Angelo cages him.

“Your ass is the bitable one.” D’Angelo pulls back, sliding his hand over Shay’s gorgeous right buttock.

“Oh, fuck,” Shay breathes.

He isn’t going to...?

D’Angelo lowers his mouth to Shay’s pale, soft skin. He opens his mouth and his sharp teeth glint, before he sinks them in.

Shay hollers but doesn’t pull away. Instead, his breathing picks up, and he shivers.

D’Angelo pulls back, leaving behind the imprint of his teeth, which he licks over. “Now you’re marked as mine.”

Shay drops his head, and his hands clutch desperately at the pillow. “Bastard.”

Except, he sounds breathy and turned on.

“You don’t like it...?” D’Angelo traces over the imprint with a smug look.

“I didn’t say that.” Shay glances over his shoulder at D’Angelo. “But I’m still desperate to see you in leather trousers.”

“Lucky for me, since I love to see you desperate.” D’Angelo swings his legs off Shay and pushes himself to the edge of the bed, stretching. “We’d better get up. We don’t have that long, before we need to get to the rink, and Eden probably thinks that I’ve killed both of you, especially after that scream.”

“It was more like a manly howl,” Shay says, affronted. “I can smell coffee anyway. My brother is most likely downstairs, preparing breakfast for all of us. I bet that he’s happy for us. He’s the best bro like that.”

I wrinkle my nose, taking a deep breath.

I can smell the rich scent of coffee now, wafting from downstairs.

I smile at the thought of Eden making breakfast.

He truly is not only the best brother to Shay but also the best lover to me.

He wants us to be happy.

Then he makes sure that we get coffee and pancakes as well.

Now that makes him perfect.

Except, I know that I’ve fallen for these three men.

Plus, D’Angelo and Shay are falling for each other as well. This is a complicated and deep love between us.

It’s not easy or simple but it’s worth it.

So, I don’t feel right keeping this from my family now. At least, I need to talk it through with my men because this is more than dating or even starting a relationship.

It’s a genuine commitment.

I thought that I’d have an issue with that, but instead of making me feel trapped like Wilder did, it makes me feel free to be myself.

I push myself up, nervously bottom shuffling to the edge of the bed. “We need to tell my dad about us.”

Silence.

Okay, mood killer.

I glance over my shoulder at the guys.

D’Angelo has become ashen and is frozen still.

Shay is glancing between us, anxiously. “Are you sure that’s a good idea, love?”

“I don’t want to keep secrets,” I explain. “We know that this relationship is what we all want now. We’re serious about it. I’m not talking about going public, only telling Dad. It’ll mean admitting that we broke the non-fraternization clause, but he’ll find out about that sooner or later. Look,

secrets have wrecked our lives and you...you're not my dirty little secret or a private fantasy. You're the men who I love."

Shay's studying me intensely. "Say that again."

"I fucking love you." I glance at D'Angelo worried by how quiet and pale he is. He's tapping his knee in repeated patterns of three. Will it be too traumatic for him to face anyone's parents? My expression softens at the thought that this may be the first time he's been in opposition to someone's parents, and after what happened to him with his own mom and dad, I don't blame him for how scared he is. Although, he's trying to hide it. "We won't tell him, however, if we don't all agree. This has to be a joint decision."

Shay nudges D'Angelo. "I'm for living dangerously, if it's what my beautiful Robyn wants. Why are you freaking out?"

"I'm not *freaking out*." D'Angelo clenches his jaw, making a poor attempt to hide just how badly he *is* freaking out. "But this is a risk. We could lose our careers."

"Then I don't want to pressure you, before the end of training camp. I get that you need to concentrate and I don't want to distract you." I cock my head. "How about on Friday night, after it ends? I believe that you're going to kick this camp's ass. Then I'll get Dad to invite us over to his house for a celebratory meal, you know, as a reward for how well you've done."

Shay grins. "Look at that. I'm not the only optimist in the house."

"Dad's a good guy under the gruff exterior." I seriously hope that I'm right. Truthfully? I don't know how he's going to react. "He loves big family meals, and I can suggest that he invites Cody and Mike too. I want you to get to know my family because you're part of it. Plus, if it does explode in our faces, isn't it better that it happens now, while we have a chance to work out a solution, than when season's started? This is complicated, but we need to get it right. I don't want to break the work rules, now that we've sorted out how much this means to us."

D'Angelo finally raises his troubled gaze to meet mine. "Fine, as long as Eden agrees. If we survive tomorrow at training camp, then it's your job to get us invited to a celebratory meal at coach's house. It could end up being the last meal for condemned men, however, when your dad discovers that we're all dating his darling daughter."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



Rebel House, Freedom

*M*y hands are sweating, and I'm shaking.

I stare up at Rebel House, which is Dad's house on the lake. It's the most iconic property in Freedom, but for me, it's my childhood home.

I blink back tears at the flood of memories, which wash over me.

I press my hand against the oak door, thinking of all the times that I hesitated on this porch, late home after detention with Cody after one of his many fights. Then the fear, which would tremble through me that Dad would be waiting for us, but worse was the fear that he wouldn't be.

The churning dread that he wouldn't even notice we were late because he'd be too sunk in grief about Mom's death to care what we did.

The old-fashioned house is huge, sprawling alongside the lake, as the shadowed mountains loom behind it.

I scrunch up my nose at the smoky scent, which wafts on the breeze. It stings my eyes.

The evening is chilly, and I shiver.

Shay slips off his leather jacket and drapes it over my shoulders.

I burrow into the jacket's warmth, loving being wrapped in his scent, and it grounds me back into the present.

I can do this.

I'm loved. I have a new family. And I'm not alone.

It's just a celebratory barbecue.

It's a casual meal, you know, the type of *casual*, where I need to confess to Dad that even though I told him I was never going to even like a hockey player again — and definitely not one of his players — I'm now dating *three* of them.

In fact, that I'm in love with his three most difficult players, who I'm meant to be reforming.

Now, *I've* become one of his PR nightmares as well.

Whoops.

It doesn't matter how sensible this ivory blouse, skirt, and heels looks (carefully chosen for the optics), I may never be considered the sensible one between Cody and me ever again.

Actually, that's possibly the silver lining.

I glance around at D'Angelo, and my stomach lurches.

He looks even paler than me, and his jaw is clenched.

He appears a moment from hurling, battling to hold it together. To my surprise, it's Eden who is supporting him.

Eden has his arm around D'Angelo's shoulder and is whispering to him in hushed tones.

They're both dressed in matching navy suits with elegant arctic blue waistcoats. D'Angelo bought the same outfit for Shay to wear as well, insisting that this was an important *meeting the parents* evening and that they needed to dress up.

Yet Shay only laughed and said that my dad needed to accept him for who he was, which apparently meant someone who dressed in black leather trousers, silk red shirts, and gorgeous leather jackets.

Eden's a revelation in a suit though.

He looks powerful, dominant, and so fucking gorgeous that I wanted to rip the suit off him, as soon as I saw him walk in next to D'Angelo.

In fact, it made me realize that Eden, despite his social anxiety and silences, is more similar to D'Angelo, than he is to his own twin.

Hurriedly, I turn back to D'Angelo. "Hey, we're going to get through this. Dad likes you, I swear. He even calls you *Jude*. I know that family meals can be hell (and I warn you that you'll probably have to listen to a bunch of boring shit about boating), but Cody will be here, and I promise, we'll face this together."

Eden tightens his arm around D'Angelo's shoulder. "I'm not going

anywhere.”

Is this too triggering for D’Angelo?

He adjusts his cufflinks ritualistically three times.

But then, he straightens his shoulders with an effort, and I’m so fucking proud of him. “Boating? How will I ever survive that?”

I force myself to smile. “Distract him by talking about hockey.”

“I never thought that I’d say this but that’s one thing I don’t want to talk about, after two weeks of his torture camp.” Shay slips his arm around my waist, sniffing my neck. “Fuck, love, I adore how you smell in my jacket. Plus, you look great in leather.”

I shudder. “A mistake admitting that. I may steal your jacket now.”

Shay nuzzles at my neck. “Anything you want, love.”

Finally, I relax because I know he means that.

Whatever happens this evening, these men are worth it.

“Let’s get this over with.” D’Angelo breaks away from Eden and marches to the door like he’s about to start a military campaign.

He raps sharply on the door.

I pull away from Shay, trying to compose my features into as professional a mask as I can.

Eden and Shay move together, until their shoulders are touching in reassurance.

After a long moment, the door swings open sharply.

Austin stands with his arm blocking the doorway.

His silver hair and beard are neat, and he’s dressed in black pants and a charcoal sweater with the sleeves pushed back.

This is his laid back weekend outfit that reminds me of growing up here so forcefully that my heart hurts. But he doesn’t look relaxed.

“Hey, coach,” Shay says with a bright smile.

Austin doesn’t reply.

I wince.

Shay’s smile fades. Eden steps in front of Shay, defensively.

Austin’s glowering. He looks like an ancient wolf, who’s protecting his territory from a new pack.

Shit, does he already know our secret?

Has he worked it out?

Did Wilder tell him?

Fuck.

When his gaze meets D'Angelo's and holds it, D'Angelo becomes even more ashen.

Immediately, I shoulder to stand next to him. "Evening, Dad. Something smells good."

"You're late," Austin barks. "This is a special meal to celebrate the fact that I'm not kicking any of your asses out of my team. But you couldn't even be bothered to turn up on time. What am I meant to make of that?"

Oh, so that's the problem.

Tardiness is one of Dad's pet peeves and always has been.

Austin narrows his eyes at D'Angelo. "You're the one who doesn't show up for practice on time. The Prince twins are always early. So, you're still not able to commit, huh?"

D'Angelo's breathing too fast. He's clutching his cufflinks like he's about to rip them off.

We are late because of D'Angelo.

The stress meant that he was caught — spiraling — in his folding and unfolding loop, and it took me an hour to help him break free from it.

I'm not having him forced to admit that, however, like it's a flaw or he should be scolded for it.

No fucking way.

"Sorry, it was my fault," I blurt. D'Angelo looks at me, surprised. Shit, think brain. Why could I have made us late? "We were driving here, when I realized that I was...wearing two different shoes...that didn't match...and we had to go back so that I could change."

Austin stares at me. "You can't match shoes now."

Shay is trying hard not to laugh.

Jerk.

"In my defense," I say, "it's been a long week."

"And you're wearing someone else's coat as well." Austin scrutinizes me.

I hug Shay's jacket closer around me. "I was getting cold."

Austin huffs. "So's the meal. Come on, it's a barbecue. Follow me; it's around back."

When he turns on his heel, D'Angelo shoots me a grateful smile.

"Two different shoes...?" Shay mouths.

I ignore Shay, following D'Angelo inside into the house.

Rebel House is grand with brick walls, skylights that reveal the moon and stars in the velvet of the black sky above, and leather couches.

All along the back are glass windows, which look through to the vista over the lake.

Austin leads us smartly through to the sliding doors that open to the decking at the back of the house.

I take a deep breath of the meaty, smoky scent, which wraps around me.

“It’s beautiful here,” Shay murmurs. “Everything’s so epically big compared to where I come from. Sometimes, I have to pinch myself to believe that I’m actually here in America. It’s like a dream.”

He stares out over the lake, which is framed by jagged mountains. In the distance, lies a boathouse and a private boat launch. A long pier disappears into the center of the lake like a pointing finger.

Suddenly, Shay yips and rubs his ass.

“You’re not dreaming,” Eden says, simply.

“Cheers, got it.” Shay winks at me. “This is real.”

Austin leads us down to the water’s edge, which is lit with golden lanterns. A large, rough oak table is set around the low embers of the firepit.

The table is laid with a feast of barbecued pork, chicken, and beef shoulder. My mouth waters at the tangy smell of the barbecue sauces. There’s bowls of salad and buttered potatoes.

Cody and Michael have already heaped their plates and are drinking beers. Michael’s arm is slung possessively around Cody’s shoulder.

When he sees me, Cody leaps up. “Ryn! I knew that you wouldn’t let me down.”

He clammers over the bench and hurls himself into my arms.

“Hey, Code.” I glance over his shoulder. “How are you doing, Mike?”

Mike is dressed in a casual tan suit that’s open at the neck.

He gestures at his plate. “I’ve finished my shifts for the week and I have barbecued chicken. So, I’m good.”

Austin skirts around the table and sprawls at its head.

Shay happily throws himself down on the opposite side of the table to Michael, who passes him a bottle of beer. Shay opens it, and they clink bottles like they’ve been friends for years.

It’s Shay’s super talent to be accepted so easily. What’s not to like about him?

Cody turns to D’Angelo, looking him up and down.

“You made my sister cry.” Cody’s expression is hard. “I swore that I’d punch you in the dick.”

On the other hand, D'Angelo appears to have the opposite effect on people to Shay.

What should I do?

I snatch at Cody's arm. "That's in the past. It doesn't matter."

Cody tilts up his chin, squaring up to D'Angelo, despite the fact that D'Angelo is a head taller than him and his muscles are twice as large.

Michael looks poised to leap from his seat to back up his husband, but I love the fact that he lets Cody fight his own battles too.

Michael trusts him like that.

I need to trust D'Angelo.

But it's hard.

D'Angelo's gaze slides between us. "Your sister made *me* cry."

All the air whooshes out of my lungs. At the same time, Cody deflates.

"I'm missing something here, aren't I?" Cody says.

D'Angelo gives a tight nod.

"Okay." Cody runs his hand through his neat hair. "I'll give you a chance. But no more asshole behavior."

"Oh, I can't promise that," D'Angelo drawls.

He pushes past Cody to sit on the side of the table as far away from Austin as possible. He's still bone-white.

When I glance around, I notice that Eden is hanging back in the shadows. His expression is shuttered, but I can see that his hands are shaking.

When he's in Captain's Hall with only us, alone with me in the forest, or on the ice, it's hard to remember that he avoids social situations because of his anxiety.

He hasn't even mentioned that he'd find tonight hard. Instead, he's spent it supporting D'Angelo.

Eden is going to have to start putting his needs first sometimes. Perhaps, I'm going to have to be the one to look out for him because he won't.

I turn to him, subtly shielding him from the others.

I reach to brush my hand against his. "Are you okay?"

Eden doesn't answer for a moment.

"I don't know everyone here," Eden replies. "I don't know what to say."

This evening is already stressful.

It hurts me deep inside that I didn't remember that Eden would also be meeting my brother and his husband privately for the first time, as well as my dad in a social setting.

It's a lot.

"Will it help if I introduce you?" I say. "I know what will get them talking too, so you don't need to."

Eden nods, and his shoulders slump with relief.

I turn and he follows me toward the table like my shadow.

Shay glances up. "Here they are. It's brilliant for us all to be together like this. Now we can start the celebration. We deserve it, right? We've worked bloody hard and made it through training camp."

"Barely." Austin pours cold water on what I know Shay was trying to turn into a toast. "You've got through training camp, but now there are going to be five exhibition games. You need to impress me in those in order to be selected for the team. Only the best players will become official members of the Bay Rebels and play this season."

All three of the guys deflate.

What kind of celebratory meal is this?

The last two weeks have been hell for them. They deserve to take a moment and appreciate what they've achieved.

Frustration builds in me. "They deserve to be proud of how hard they've worked. Plus, they will impress you in these final games. Haven't they so far? You put me in charge of their PR, so that I could turn it around and I have. If you care about second chances, then they're it."

Cody claps. "Go, sis."

Austin gives me a long look, before taking a bite of his overflowing barbecue sandwich. "We'll see."

I pull Eden to sit next to me on the bench, while Shay is on the other side.

Austin slowly munches his mouthful.

"Eden, this is Cody, my brother and the Director of Physical Therapy at Bay Rebels, and his husband, Mike, who works at the hospital here in Freedom."

Eden hesitates like it's hard for him to form words, but finally, he manages, "Hi."

Cody's expression softens. "I remember you from the introduction in the first week, although that was to all the guys at once. Don't be overwhelmed by Dad's grumpy bear act, he won't bite. Well, sometimes he does. But we don't. I mean, maybe we bite each other, but that's only—"

Michael slams his palm over Cody's mouth, chuckling. "As an outsider who joined the family, I know that these guys can be intense. But here, take a

plate. The barbecue is amazing.”

Eden takes the offered plate and busies himself by piling it with salad and tomatoes.

I shoot Michael a grateful look.

“So, you go boating, coach?” D’Angelo asks.

Traitor.

For the first time, Austin’s glower fades, and he puffs out his chest. “Every Sunday that I can. We have our own boathouse and launch here, and the lakes are vast. There’s nothing like being out on the water at dawn. The sun as it glimmers on water. Feeling nature, giant and primal, and so much larger than man’s own problems.”

“Please pass me a plate,” I ask Cody.

I’ve heard this at least a thousand...million...times.

Opposite me, Cody appears to be suffering just the same.

“You can spot incredible wildlife,” Austin smiles. “When you’re stressed, it makes your real life concerns disappear.”

Like Dad would make us kids disappear, when he’d vanish on his boating trips.

“May I have the salad?” I say, loudly.

Cody passes it to me violently.

I know that the others are watching us, confused.

Eden rests his hand on my knee, so that no one can see what he’s doing. Shay lays his hand on my other knee, underneath the table.

I can see the way that Michael’s expression has become stony and he’s slipped his arm around Cody’s shoulder again in a clear gesture of solidarity.

D’Angelo is glancing between Austin and me in concern.

“Then sometimes, I’d take Robyn with me.” Austin smiles at me, and I swallow hard, unable to smile back. “But not Cody because he hated that kind of thing, remember?”

Cody didn’t hate boating.

He just wasn’t asked along because he was grounded.

And that’s it.

I can’t take this conversation any longer.

I can’t be stuck in the past, when I know that I’m here to fight for my future.

I won’t let Austin reinvent what happened, including gaslighting my brother.

Austin stares out at the lake. "Cody would never—"

"I'm in a relationship," I blurt.

Austin's gaze snaps back to me in shock. "If your next words are *with Wilder*, then we have a problem."

At least he went to the worst case scenario. I can work with that. In comparison to my being back with my ex, my situation isn't so bad.

Right?

D'Angelo's looking at me like a deer caught in the headlights. It's so unlike his usual expression that it would be adorable, if I wasn't concerned for him.

The sooner that I force my babbling mouth to get this out in some kind of coherent way the better.

Well, there's the problem.

"Nope, not with Wilder." I wrinkle up my nose. "This is me giving you permission to drive me to the closest therapist, if I ever tell you that."

Austin puffs out a breath of relief. "I'm sorry, Robyn. These weeks have been hard on me as well. There's been a lot of pressure, and I've been working hard on this team. We only have this season to prove ourselves to everyone, from the management team to the sponsors and the fans. They're letting me run Bay Rebels my way for now, but if I can't prove that it works, then they'll go back to more traditional methods. And that means most of the current team and staff will be kicked out."

My blood chills.

"Fuck that." D'Angelo clenches his hands. "I swear that I can get this team through to the playoffs."

"Can you, Jude?" Austin cocks his head. "Do you have any idea how much we're the underdogs? We'd need a miracle. On the other hand, I have to admit that your teamwork in the locker room is second to none. You've taken these two under your wing." He gestures with his beer at the twins. "Their improvement on the ice has been meteoric. Everyone's been blown away, especially with Eden's transformation."

Eden blushes. There's a whisper of a smile around his lips.

"But you were telling me about your new relationship." Austin leans over the table. Cody shoots me a reassuring smile. "Don't you think that it's a bit soon?"

"It's been over a year since Wilder cheated and I left him." My stomach is churning with anxiety. I grip the side of the table so hard that my knuckles

are white. “I’ve been divorced for months, and to be honest, my marriage was over a year ago. That’s not too soon.”

“It’s your decision.” Austin’s expression gentles. “Why are you looking like you’re about to be sick? I hope you know that I’ll always support you. It hurt that you shut me out before. Didn’t you trust me? I was desperate to be there for you, when you were married to that asshole. I was even more desperate to be there, when you left his cheating ass.”

“I know,” I reply.

But Dad doesn’t know who I’m dating.

I bite my lip. This is hard.

Austin’s looking at me with such an understanding expression that I don’t want to shatter it.

“Her relationship is with me,” D’Angelo says in a low voice.

My gaze shoots to him.

D’Angelo’s arms are crossed, but I think that it’s to hide that his hands are shaking. His expression is shuttered.

He’s spoken up to stop me from having to, no matter how traumatic this is for him.

He looks like he’s expecting to be punched in the face.

He’s fucking courageous, and I love him so fucking much.

There’s a deep silence around the table.

Cody is frozen. “Shit, Ryn.”

Cody’s gaze shoots to Shay with deep sympathy, and suddenly, I realize that he thinks I had a wild night with Shay and then dumped him for D’Angelo, my first love.

The guy who as far as my family know, broke my heart and then abandoned me.

They don’t know the truth about Wilder’s bullying and manipulations, which tore D’Angelo and me apart.

“Woah, time out.” I stand up, knocking over my beer, which puddles at my feet. I wave my hands frantically like somehow that will help. “I forgot how complicated this is.”

Austin is glaring at D’Angelo fiercely enough that I’m amazed he hasn’t been set on fire. “It doesn’t sound complicated. In fact, it seems simple. This piece of shit has broken the non-fraternization rule with my own daughter.”

“We didn’t cheat on Shay,” I say hurriedly because I don’t like Michael’s disappointed expression.

Shay stands up, prowling around the table to stand by D'Angelo's shoulder. "I'm going out with your wonderful daughter too, coach." Then his gray eyes become steely, as he rests his hand on D'Angelo's shoulder. "And this guy here...? He isn't a *piece of shit*. He's been the best mentor that we could have hoped for. He's also the best boyfriend in the world for your daughter. He loves her, and perhaps, you should listen to what Robyn wants, before trying to steal her happiness. It's what we do."

Eden links his hand with mine, before meeting my gaze and lifting our hands to rest on top of the table.

He doesn't need to say anything to actually make the point clear.

We're in a relationship too.

Cody and Michael look between us and our clasped hands in shock, before Cody's face brightens in delight.

"How many dollars do you owe me now, Ryn? You're the ultimate player magnet." Cody grins. "Shit, I'm happy for you."

Slowly, Austin stands.

Nervously, I meet his gaze. "Dad, please—"

"I trusted you," Austin says, gruffly. "I would never have put you in that house, if I thought that they would have taken advantage of you. I raised you better than that."

My breath catches, and my eyes burn with tears.

Did he really just say that to me?

Eden tightens his hand around mine.

Cody's eyes widen with shock. "Dad, that's not fair."

D'Angelo launches himself up, slamming his hands on the table. "Don't talk to her like that. She's done nothing wrong, and we didn't take advantage of her."

"Sit back down," Austin barks.

"We're not at the rink now." D'Angelo's eyes flash. "This is about protecting the people who I love, and nobody can intimidate me out of doing that." He glances at Shay who's standing next to him and looking just as protective of me. "Your daughter was the one who insisted that we come and tell you about our relationship because *she* trusted *you*. I don't have parents in my life anymore. You're lucky to still have a daughter who respects you, as much as she does. Don't throw that away."

Austin gives him a long, steady look. "Big speech for a man who's trying to get me to allow him to date my daughter."

“Hey, I don’t need your permission.” My eyes narrow. “No man controls what I do, never again. I’m only telling you because I didn’t want to keep secrets from you guys. But you’re acting controlling, just like my ex did.”

Austin looks startled. “Robyn, I never meant to... I’m being protective. Don’t you understand the position that you’ve put me in?”

Michael tilts his head. “These twins, they’re not even on the team yet, if I understand how this whole hockey thing works, right?”

Cody nods. “Yeah, since they’re not selected yet, they don’t have the same contract as Jude does.”

Austin points at D’Angelo. “These are the types of complications that I want to avoid by stopping my staff from sleeping with players. I know what you’re like. You’d probably have slept with half of them, if—”

“Would I?” D’Angelo’s voice is ice cold. “Is that how you see me? Why me, specifically?”

I glare at Dad.

He’d better not say it.

Austin looks down, red faced. “You’re a playboy. Since you’ve been handled by Robyn, this is the first time that you haven’t looked and smelled like you’ve rolled out of a cocktail bar.”

“So, she’s a good influence.” Cody looks between us. “Isn’t that what you wanted her to be, Dad?”

“It didn’t work with you, did it?” Austin snaps back.

I wince.

In the awkward silence, Michael draws himself up.

His expression becomes stern and dangerous.

He controls himself, however, as he pointedly turns to Cody. “Do you want to leave?”

Cody looks down, and I hate the way that he anxiously wrings his hands in his lap. “I don’t know.”

“Then I’ll make the decision for you.” Michael kisses Cody tenderly on the forehead.

He gently draws my brother to his feet, keeping his arm wrapped protectively around him.

Michael’s eyes are dark, as he glances at Dad. “I’m taking my husband home now, where he’s loved for who he is, unconditionally. Perhaps, you could try working on that for both your son and daughter.”

My heart aches.

“Bye, Code,” I say, softly.

Cody waves with a pained smile, as he walks away with Michael.

“I didn’t mean that,” Austin says, looking away.

“But you still said it,” I reply. “You always seem to. Call my brother up and tell him that you didn’t mean it tomorrow.”

Austin shrugs. “Right now, I’m trying to work out how you could break the non-fraternization clause because you knew that Jude and you had one.”

“We fell in love,” I reply. “In fact, we realized that we were in love six years ago. This is our second chance, Dad, and we need to give this a go.”

“And these two...?”

Austin raises his eyebrow, gesturing at the twins.

D’Angelo straightens, resting his hand on Shay’s arm, possessively.

“They’re mine too,” I say, firmly.

“Even if it wrecks both your career and life?” Austin demands.

“It’s my fault,” D’Angelo insists. “Suspend me or kick me into the minor leagues. If I’m not in the Bay Rebels, then we won’t have broken any rules.”

My eyes widen, and my heart hammers in my chest.

What the hell is he saying? We didn’t agree to this.

D’Angelo’s words are so smooth, as if this is something that he’s *rehearsed*.

He knew that he was going to say this, before we arrived.

Shit, that’s why he was so pale.

He knew.

He knew that he was about to give up the career that’s meant everything to him.

He was giving it up for me and our love.

Austin snorts. “You’d really be the one to leave...?”

Shay shakes D’Angelo’s arm. “Can we talk about this?”

D’Angelo ignores him. “I’d leave the team in a heartbeat. My connection to Robyn is strong enough to survive a long distance relationship. God, our love has survived being apart for six years, so it can survive this.”

No, no, no.

I want to scream, but my mouth is too dry.

Eden is watching D’Angelo with a new admiration.

“I’ll resign,” I gasp. “I should be the one to resign.”

“No.” Eden shares a look with this brother. “You shouldn’t.”

“We won’t let you, love,” Shay adds. “This is your home town and your

family. We're not taking that away from you."

"And I won't take your careers from you." I clutch at my chest.

Everything feels like it's spinning out of control. I'm trying to find the right words to save this situation or to get Dad to listen to me, but maybe, there aren't any.

"You're not taking anything away," D'Angelo replies. "The twins can be with you because they're not signed yet. I'm certain that we can convince your dad to write a different type of contract for them. Me...? You're not taking anything away because you've already given me more than I ever thought that I would have. Needing to change teams and move halfway across the country for a couple of years is nothing. We'll work it out."

Austin shakes his head in disbelief. "Jude D'Angelo, the playboy player, would really put someone else before himself and his hockey. I've heard everything now."

I don't blame him for doubting D'Angelo.

After all, D'Angelo is up there in my three things to help me strengthen my resolve against ever kissing a player again, along with stinking hockey gear (and there's no smell quite like it in the back of a car), and my stalker ex-husband with the perfect abs but also, perfect lies.

D'Angelo's piercing gaze meets mine. "Robyn is worth it. She deserves to have this shot at building her independent career. I've been watching her, as she manages our press and social media seamlessly. She's smart and savvy. She's good at her job, and I'm not going to be responsible for wrecking that."

I glow with pride, ducking my head.

"The Bay Rebels are lucky to have her," Shay says, pointedly.

Austin nods. "You're right. We are."

"We are too," Eden says, quietly.

Austin crosses his arms, sprawling in his seat. "I never thought that you'd be the type who was okay with sharing, Jude."

"I'm not greedy on the ice. I'm a team player. I'm the same off it. I can give the people who I love what they need as well." D'Angelo tightens his hand around Shay's arm. "What they all need."

Austin's gaze snaps to me. "And what you need is these three men?"

I tilt up my chin. "Yeah, Dad, it is. After what I've been through..." And I know that he hears more than the last six years but before that to mourning Mom's death and so many years of being hounded by the press because of his

own hockey career. He flinches. “Don’t I deserve this happiness now?”

Austin turns and stares out over the lake.

In the silence, I can hear the drone and hum of nighttime insects. The closest lantern flickers, on and off. The sky is cloudless; the stars are bright and sharp.

I hold my breath.

Please...

Finally, Austin lets out a breath, and his shoulders slump. “I don’t understand your choice. I think that you’re making a dangerous decision, especially since last I knew, you couldn’t stand to be in the same room as Jude. It was me trying to persuade you that he had a good side, for example, with his charity work, even if he was good at hiding it.”

When D’Angelo arches his brow at me, I deliberately ignore him.

“We got to know each other,” I explain. “I found out that you were right.”

“Well, I’m never going to grow tired of hearing *that*. Look, of course I want you to be happy. How can I doubt that this relationship is serious, when you’re all ready to sacrifice your careers and passions for each other? Shit, what hockey player gives up a spot on the team for a woman? No offense.”

I narrow my eyes at him. “A lot taken, Dad. Wouldn’t you have for Mom?”

“Not when I first met her,” he admits, frankly. “But of course, after we were married.”

“I feel like I’m married,” D’Angelo blurts and then blushes. My cheeks heat as well. “It’s been nine years of pining and unrequited love for me. Now Robyn loves me back, it just feels the same commitment as a marriage. I know that we can’t have that in the traditional way because our relationship is polyamorous, and Robyn has only just got out of a bad divorce, but it’s how it feels in my heart.”

Shay’s glancing between us with wide, excited eyes. “Can I be the best man...in your heart?”

“Shut up,” D’Angelo mutters.

Eden hauls me even closer, until I’m almost sitting in his lap.

“That does it.” Austin launches himself to his feet. Startled, I stare up at him. “You’re an emotional blackmailer and top of my shit list. How the hell can I send you into the minor leagues, when you’re more or less my son in law?”

“Yes!” Shay bounces on the spot like he can’t contain himself. “This calls

for more beers and maybe, a toast.”

Joy surges through me.

We’re going to be okay. D’Angelo won’t be sent away.

D’Angelo’s eyes light up. “Does that mean I get to call you Dad?”

I laugh, before I can stop myself.

“Don’t even try it, D’Angelo,” Austin growls, “or I’ll have you skating laps, until you puke.”

D’Angelo smirks. “Understood, coach.”

Eden glances between us more cautiously. “Will the contracts be rewritten then?”

Austin nods. “I’ll have to make it fair to all the staff and players and have it adjusted in every contract. It needs to be equitable. You’re going to owe me big for this. I don’t know, send me a daily muffin basket or win the Stanley Cup for me. Something like that. But this still doesn’t mean that you two...” He points at Shay and then even more lingeringly at Eden. “...have been selected for the team. There are five games over the next Wednesdays and Saturdays. If you want to stay with my daughter and Jude, as well as the Bay Rebels, then make sure that you impress me. Now, grab your beers. I’m going to make a toast to celebrate the end to training camp and to my daughter’s new husbands playing the most important games of their lives.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



Rebel Arena, Freedom

*I*t's Saturday night, and the first match between the Bay Rebels and the Washington Capitals.

Rebel arena is packed.

The lights are dim, apart from the spotlights that are directed onto the vast rink. The red and blue markings on the ice stand out in pretty lines.

The air is thick with excitement, buzzing with chatter and laughter. The local fans have brought their whole families, and it's amazing to see the goodwill toward the team.

Dad's already doing a great PR job.

Or is it D'Angelo, as the Captain?

Freedom is a town with two sides: the wealthy, including the tourists, and those who are working hard and struggling financially.

Having an NHL team to support is a source of pride. It brings joy to the entire town, uniting them.

The fans love the Bay Rebels.

The team feels like the heart of this community, no matter how the national news paint them as *losers*.

Freedom appear to have accepted them as *their misfits*, and that's what matters.

I pace beside the breakers, staring out at the players on the ice.

The score's too close: **1 — 1**.

Is it enough to impress Dad?

I'm sick with nerves.

I'm dressed in sturdy boots along with jeans and a sequin, emerald top. I've slipped a long, woolen coat over it.

Eden gave me his gray scarf and gloves, before we set off for the game. He lovingly wound the scarf around my neck, caressing my skin.

I love that they smell fragrantly aromatic.

My head is all over the place with stress, however, after the disastrous meal last night, and I've had some bad family meals before. I should be used to them by now. My mother-in-law would ask every single time why I wasn't pregnant yet, criticize my cooking, and talk about nothing but Wilder adoringly.

Even her license plate was his jersey number.

Freaky.

Those meals always sucked.

Yet I can't stand remembering Cody's face, as Michael led him away from the house last night.

I called Cody this morning, after waking up in D'Angelo's bed between all three of my men for the first time because none of them wanted to leave me.

"What's up, Ryn?" Cody's voice was sleepy but also, quieter than I liked to hear it.

"I wanted to check that you were okay after the dumpster fire of a meal last night," I said, fiddling with my hands. "It should have been a celebration. I was the one who dropped the bomb on everyone."

"It's not your fault; Dad's the only one who did anything wrong," Cody insisted. "I'm seriously happy for you. I should have known that you needed more than one dick."

I grinned. "Shut up, jerk."

"What? We always joked about you finding the perfect poly guys, and you did it. Kudos. My doctor is far too possessive to cope with that arrangement."

"I know. But I'm glad that Michael was there for you last night. It was sweet."

Cody's voice softened, "He's protective and he doesn't like how Dad talks to me. He's my husband and loves me. Mike and I have spoken about this in private a lot. I'm not a kid now, and if Dad slips back into treating me

like *that*, then we just won't hang around."

My heart ached. "Good because you're amazing, Code. You always were and you fucking are now."

"Dad can't see that."

"Then it's his loss." I clutched the phone tightly.

"Do you remember that time straight after Mom, you know? I was crying, then he told me to stop acting like a kid."

How could I forget Dad saying that to my younger brother, who *was* still a kid?

How could I forget the way that I'd needed to hold Cody sobbing in my arms because my Dad was hiding in his study too lost in his own devastation at his wife's death to recognize his kids' pain?

"You're not a kid now," I replied, firmly. "And you have a husband in your corner, who seriously impressed me last night with how badass he was, standing up for you like that. Plus, you have me and my guys too."

"Will they stand up for you, these guys?"

A smile spread across my lips. "Yeah, they already have."

Now, I walk forward, pressing my hand against the glass, intently watching the game.

Behind me, the fans and press take a flurry of photographs, but I ignore them.

D'Angelo is leading the team strongly. You can tell it, both off and on the ice.

He's a born, dominant leader.

The other players are looking to him, and he's working with well thought out plays, with Shay on the right wing, while Eden protects the left as a defenseman.

The twins are devastating together.

They can read each other's body language. They don't even need to call out to know what the other one is going to do, and it makes their moves dangerous.

They know each other so well on the ice that it's as effective as having telepathy.

My heart quickens. "Yes, come on."

This is what Dad needs to see.

The twins are powerful together in a way that they can never be apart.

Yet Eden is without doubt the weaker player. I've been watching him

closely and even I can't miss it.

It's why I'm flooded with such nerves.

Will Dad truly only select one of my twins?

It'd wreck Eden to be rejected.

Yet Eden only looks weak in comparison to his twin because Shay outshines everyone else on both teams.

Shay's the star player, and the crowd are screaming his name.

It's exhilarating to watch Shay.

He makes it look effortless.

In his hockey uniform and clutching his stick, he skates faster than I thought it was possible.

He's short and broad shouldered, standing out from the other players. But he's also breathtakingly volatile, brilliant, and unpredictable.

He's more exciting to watch than any player in the NHL.

I love the way that he plays hockey.

I've been raised around hockey all my life, but it's almost like Shay's reinvented it.

My heart is thundering in my chest.

I feel fucking honored to watch Shay.

Does Dad understand just what he has here?

Would he really lose the best chance that he has to make the playoffs for the first time in the Bay Rebel's history because he doesn't want Eden?

Shay and D'Angelo play as well together as they fuck.

Yet they'll only continue such incredible chemistry, if Dad selects Eden as well. Because Shay isn't bluffing about sticking by his brother's side.

I respect that.

If I need to have a long distance relationship with my guys, then I will. But having just found them, I'm desperate to keep us together.

All of a sudden, a rival team's player slams Eden into the boards with a bang, and the glass shakes.

I wince.

That's the third time that Eden has been targeted, when he didn't even have the puck.

Instantly, Shay glances around, stumbling.

Shay has the puck and has been skating with focused determination toward the goal.

Then my eyes widen.

The Washington Capitals are attacking Eden, whenever Shay looks like he's about to take a shot on goal.

It distracts him every time.

It's a deliberate strategy, using Shay's protectiveness over his twin as a weakness.

Shit, twins have both strengths and weaknesses on the ice, if other teams are prepared to play dirty.

My lips pinch.

The rival team are the ones using dirty tricks, but at the same time, this is why Shay has a bad reputation. It's precisely why I've been trying to change the press image of the twins.

Shay's anger management problems, whenever Eden takes a big hit, is one of the reasons that other teams wouldn't touch him.

I glance hurriedly between them.

Fuck, is Shay going to be able to hold it together?

Come on, Shay.

I understand why Dad sees himself in Shay. How do I stop him from going down the same self-destructive path?

D'Angelo's expression becomes determined, and he skates hard to back up Shay, trying to refocus him on the goal. But Shay's twisted to look at Eden now, who's bent over, trying to regain his breath.

Is Eden okay?

Worry slams through me.

As if scenting blood, the rival defensemen exchange glances. Then two descend on Eden at the same time.

I can see it happening but can't do anything to stop it.

"No!" I scream, shaking.

The players violently shoulder check Eden in the chest, just as he struggles to stand upright, and it knocks him sprawling to the ice.

My heart is in my mouth.

The transformation in Shay is a shock.

Shay's expression becomes cold like the sun has died. He bares his teeth, snarling.

He looks feral.

He instantly skates back toward Eden, hurling down his stick and dropping his gloves.

He's going to fight.

D'Angelo looks conflicted.

Then Shay skates aggressively straight toward the two defensemen, shoving one and grabbing the other by the collar.

The referee harshly blows his whistle to stop play.

Shay's expression must have freaked out the defenseman — this is what Dad's warned me about — because he tries to wrench free and skate away.

Shay's holding on too tightly, however, and he can't escape. Then Shay swings and punches him in the face.

The asshole fucking deserves it for ambushing Eden, two on one.

Eden is struggling to push himself back onto his knees. He's holding his side.

How badly is he injured?

The defenseman isn't even trying to fight back.

Why?

All of a sudden, my iPhone vibrates. When I pull it out of my pocket, I cuss, as it's lit up with missed calls, texts, and notifications.

"Fuck," I whisper, "this is deliberate. They weren't aiming for Eden at all."

When I glance at the rink again, my gaze meets D'Angelo's.

I understand now, why he's looking at me like he trusts that I'm the one who can handle this.

Like I'm the one who needs to.

This is a PR disaster.

The Washington Capitals were targeting Eden but only because their research told them that the tactic would expose and break the star player, *his twin*.

Eden is hurt, but Shay failed the test.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



Robyn's Bedroom, Captain's Hall

“Does it hurt here still?” I ask.

I prod at the swelling and bruising around Eden's left shoulder, which is so deep purple that it's turning black.

Eden winces. “Only when you touch it. Possibly, don't.”

“Sorry. Can I do this instead?” I kiss his shoulder, before kissing further down over each one of his multi-colored bruises.

The bruises litter his chest and wrap even more deeply around his ribs.

I've already stripped Eden naked.

He's standing, attempting to look long-suffering and stoic in the center of my bedroom in front of the antique chest of drawers like he has for the last four nights since his injuries that he received during the game on Saturday, but really, I know that he loves the attention.

I need to make sure that he's healing.

I've been fussing over and spoiling him in these days of enforced rest, no matter how hard that's been for him.

I don't think that he's had anyone tend to him like this before.

I've been choosing my top reads of the last year and leaving them by the couch for him each day, and even D'Angelo has taken over the cooking in the house, spending his evenings catching him up on hockey news.

Eden missed the second match, which was tonight.

The Bay Rebels won, **3 — 1**.

I'm happy that the Bay Rebels won, but on the other hand, it doesn't look good that they managed it without Eden being selected.

Rain lashes against the floor length windows of my bedroom. Above us, the large ceiling fan spins, cooling the room.

I stroll around Eden, narrowing my eyes at each of the scrapes and bruises. "Do you think that you'll be fit to play on Saturday?"

He rolls his shoulder, gritting his teeth. "I have to be."

Concern floods me. "Cody thought by the way that you were checked and hit the boards, it could be a shoulder separation injury."

Eden shakes his head. "I was lucky. The team doctor checked it and said that it wasn't anything that serious."

I huff. "You're a walking bruise. Weird definition of lucky."

"I'll survive."

"I know that you will," I say, softly.

Because that's what these twins know best: *survival*.

Injuries like this are nothing to them.

Yet it's Shay's reaction to Eden getting hurt that worries me the most. He's been on edge all week, and even though he scored all three of the goals in today's game and was on fucking fire, he didn't feel like the happy ball of sunshine that I've come to know.

He seemed pursued by demons.

D'Angelo whispered to me earlier that he had a plan to help both twins confront the issue.

It made my teeth ache with nerves.

Yet all D'Angelo needed to do was grip my chin, catching my gaze, and ask *do you trust me?*

And I do.

I trust him with my own heart and I trust him with his own teammates.

They've always been his family. I know that now.

He's the best captain because he puts their needs first. Now that we're in a relationship together, he'll fix our dynamic on and off the ice.

He won't let Shay self-destruct.

I stroll back to the front of Eden, trailing my hand down his abs.

He shivers.

"Let me just finish this inspection," I say.

"Are we playing doctors?"

"I leave that to Code and Mike. Can't I enjoy...?"

“Objectifying me?” Eden’s eyes are dancing now, which I’ve begun to understand is his equivalent of laughing.

He has a seriously dry sense of humor.

“When you’re as beautiful as a Grecian statue with these muscles,” I pause, “then I’m of course only contemplating what type of book boyfriend you’d be.”

“Hmm.” He slips his hand behind my neck and draws me into a kiss.

I’m careful not to rest my hands on his shoulders but allow him to control the kiss, enjoying the way that he deepens it and takes the lead.

He’s growing bolder every day.

My eyes flutter closed.

“Why does he get to be kissed, while I’m leashed?” Shay complains.

My eyes snap open at Shay’s voice.

Leashed...?

“Perhaps, you aren’t the only one with control issues,” D’Angelo says. “Your brother wasn’t meant to start before we arrived. I can’t blame him, however, when she looks so adorable in that little, silk dress.”

I hear Shay gasp and a stumbling sound like he’s been yanked and is trying to find his footing.

When Eden lets go of me, I twist around in shock.

Then my eyes widen, and I let out a breathy laugh.

D’Angelo is dressed in his sharp, navy suit and waistcoat. He looks cool and elegant as always. He’s holding one end of a tie, however, which is the one that he wears on game nights because it’s covered with the official Bay Rebels’ logo, and the other end is loosely looped around Shay’s neck in a makeshift leash.

Shay is also gloriously naked.

Shay pouts. “Mean, love.”

My gaze darts between the two men. “I’m definitely not complaining because this is a serious kink of mine, but aren’t you guys exhausted? It was a tough game tonight, and I was expecting us to celebrate in a less...”

“Tying me up kind of way?” Shay offers. “Yeah, I wasn’t expecting tonight to end with bondage either. I’m up for it, but it seems that this isn’t about fun. At least, not mine.”

D’Angelo yanks on the tie, and Shay takes another stumbling step forward. “This is fun *and* discipline. You’re not coming, cucciolo. You don’t need that. You need discipline that takes you apart and then puts you back

together. You need to realize that none of us will continue to let you act like that out on the ice, either on Saturday or tonight.”

Shay glances around at us.

D’Angelo is right. Yet he’s still asking for consent and permission.

When Shay looks at Eden, as if expecting him to speak up for him, instead Eden gives his twin a hard look.

Eden crosses his arms.

Shay looks shattered for a moment, before a flash of understanding appears to cross his face, and he nods. “I get it. I deserve it.”

“It’s not about that.” I rush to Shay, running my hands down his arms. “What you deserve is a long and successful career. You deserve not to sabotage it. And Eden deserves not to be covered in bruises because every rival player knows that targeting him is the perfect way to get you to lose control and end up in the sin bin.”

Shay’s shoulders slump, and he looks devastated. “I’m sorry. I’m an idiot.”

“Hey,” I tip up his chin, “fuck that. You’re brilliant. But we’re going to help you. If you want therapy, then I’ll ask Dad for you. Plus, there’s a psychologist on staff. For now, however, can you trust that we love you and we’re all here to help you?”

“Of course, love.” Then he smiles cheekily at D’Angelo, running his hand along the tie at his neck. “I’ve been a bad boy. Bind and use me, darlin.”

D’Angelo’s eyes flash. “Remember that you asked for this, brat.”

With one powerful yank, he drags Shay onto the bed, throwing him onto his back. Then he climbs onto him, straddling him. He pins him down with his knee on his chest. He holds him in place by the leash.

Shay’s eyes are blown wide, and his chest is rising and falling rapidly.

“Pull his arms to the bedposts please,” D’Angelo throws over his shoulder. “We’ll use the traffic light system to keep it simple. We can all use the safe words at any time, and they’ll be respected. Understood?”

Eden and I nod, then also crawl onto the bed, either side of Shay’s head. I gently pull Shay’s arm up, but his brother is less careful.

Shay is splayed out; his muscles are taut.

My breathing picks up as well.

“Oh, shit,” Shay breathes.

D’Angelo drags out two more ties from his pocket and deftly binds Shay’s wrists to the headboard high above him. He slips his finger between

his sensitive skin and the silk material to make sure that it's not too tight and won't bruise Shay.

Then he sits back, straddling Shay with a look of deep satisfaction.

Seeing D'Angelo on top of Shay, who's bound with his hands in such a way that his muscles strain and bulge, is so hot that I'm instantly wet.

Now I know that bondage is definitely my thing.

What would it feel like to be in Shay's position?

Powerless?

Helpless?

With D'Angelo looking down at me with such natural dominance.

I shiver.

Yes, please.

I reach into my bedside, fumbling in the drawer for a moment, before dropping a bottle of lube onto the sheets.

It's always good to be prepared.

"Listen to me carefully," D'Angelo's voice is low and dangerous; it makes my hair stand up on my neck, and Shay bites his lip, "if you can't control yourself on the ice, then we'll take away your control when we're home. This is the consequence. I know that you can do better." Shay tries to look away, but D'Angelo grips his chin and pulls him back to meet his eye. "Trust us like you are now. Trust your brother. Does he look weak?"

D'Angelo lets go of Shay's chin to pull on the leash and turn his head to make him face Eden, who's kneeling up next to him.

Eden doesn't look weak.

In fact, despite the bruises, with his hair slicked back and mask-like expression, he looks intimidatingly powerful.

Shay, on the other hand, is leashed and tied down beneath him. His face is dancing with a distress and guilt that he can't hide now.

Shay may be the one with the talent, but his brother is stronger than him emotionally.

I'm shaking, taking deep breaths myself.

I'm desperate simply to wrap my arms around Shay and kiss away the torment on his lips.

But I trust D'Angelo, and he cares deeply for Shay too.

If he feels that this is something that Shay must face, then I'm sure that he's right.

It still sucks.

“Do I look weak?” Eden repeats, narrowing his eyes.

Shay shakes his head.

It feels unnatural for Shay to be the quiet one.

“So, do you need to fight his battles?” D’Angelo presses.

Shay shakes his head again.

For a second time, Shay attempts to look away, but D’Angelo winds his hand more tightly around the leash and won’t allow him to. “You’re going to face this. Here — now — you’re a toy, the powerless one. And if I let you hide from this again, then you’ll continue fucking up your life.”

Tears glimmer in Shay’s eyes, and he pulls on the bindings at his arms but can’t escape.

I soothe down his arms.

D’Angelo taps on Shay’s nose. “No need for that, cucciolo. You’re safe in our hands, aren’t you?”

Shay pauses, taking a deep, steadying breath. The panic in his eyes recedes, before he nods.

I wish that he’d speak.

I need to feel the warmth and playfulness in his beautiful voice to know that he’s okay. But maybe, this is too serious.

For once, he’s not hiding behind banter.

D’Angelo glances at me, softening for a moment. “You’re safe with both of us.”

I understand.

I reach up, clasping my hand around Shay’s bound one.

The change in Shay is immediate.

He lets out a breath, and his entire body relaxes. The tension bleeds from him at my touch.

He squeezes my hand.

Finally, D’Angelo smiles, pushing a strand of hair out of Shay’s eyes. “That’s it. Let us take care of you and do the same on the ice. Trust your teammates. We’re bros, remember? All of us, the same as Eden. But if you can’t keep your cool and our rivals know that they can rattle you like they did on Saturday, then you’re putting Eden in danger and wrecking your own career. Coach will never select a volatile player, even if you score every goal.”

“I’m sorry,” Shay whispers.

“You don’t need to apologize. You need to change the behavior. You have to stop acting like your brother’s personal enforcer because that makes

him a target.” D’Angelo turns to Eden. “May I touch your shoulder?”

Eden nods.

D’Angelo drops the leash to sweep his fingers over Eden’s bruised shoulder, and Eden can’t hold back the wince.

“How does it feel?” D’Angelo asks, relentlessly.

“Hurts,” Eden says, simply.

Shay’s eyes glisten with tears. “I get it. Please, *I fucking get it*. I screwed up. I’m bad. I deserve it. Just hit me. Beat me.”

I freeze, letting out a shocked breath.

My skin is instantly too hot, and I want to hurl.

My gaze shoots to D’Angelo, whose expression has shuttered. Yet he looks ashen and as close to hurling as I am.

“Yellow,” D’Angelo grits out.

Shocked, I stare at him.

Then D’Angelo is wrapping his arms around Shay and holding onto him like he’ll never let go.

Also, like Shay’s the one who called the safe word.

Shay is blinking over his shoulder in confusion at me.

Unsure, I rest my hand on D’Angelo’s shoulder.

“Would you like me to get you some water?” Eden asks, cautiously.

D’Angelo takes a careful breath, before he pushes himself up. “I’m fine.”

“You don’t look fine,” I point out.

D’Angelo is compulsively stroking Shay’s cheeks with an aching gentleness.

“If I ever made you think that I would...*hit you*...” D’Angelo clenches his jaw. “Then I am more sorry than you’ll ever know. It’s my fault. I may put you over my lap, but you ticked in the contract that you’d enjoy that. I’d never hit or beat any of you. This isn’t about punishment. But I should have...it’s my responsibility to...”

“Hey,” Shay smiles, and I’m relieved that it’s one of the genuine ones that I haven’t seen since Saturday night, “you called *yellow*, and this is a pause, right? Can I take some of the blame, or do you get to be greedy over it because you’re the captain?”

“He gets to be greedy because he’s Jude fucking D’Angelo,” I tease.

I manage to get a small smile out of D’Angelo, and that’s a relief.

“Why didn’t you safe word?” D’Angelo asks, kissing Shay’s cheek absentmindedly, but I think it’s more to comfort himself. “If you thought that

I was going to do that to you?”

“Because I deserve it.” Shay glances out of the side of his eye at his brother.

Eden becomes pale. “You protect me, but I also protect you. I know the difference between the type of pleasurable torment that you enjoy in a relationship and someone hurting you. I’ll rip off Jude’s dick, if he ever raises his hand against you.”

Shay finally melts against the mattress, as much as he can against the ties, which hold his arms above his head. He looks happy and ready for that *pleasurable* torment.

Eden rarely talks that much.

D’Angelo should take that threat seriously.

“See?” D’Angelo glances at me. “Are we ready to get back to it? I think considering the wild imagination you have about what I’m going to do to you, it’d be a good idea if I actually told you. What do you think?”

I love the way that he’s checking in with Shay.

This time, there’s excitement dancing in Shay’s eyes, as he replies, “So, what are you going to do with your toy next, darlin’? I’m at your mercy.”

D’Angelo’s expression becomes wicked, as he leans over, slipping his arm around my waist. “We’re going to pleasure our principessa, until she screams. Since you’re our bound toy on the bed, we’ll be using your cock. And every time that you lose your temper on the ice, I’m going to tie you up like this to remind you that we all have you. You’re not alone.”

“Oh.” Shay lets out a shocked breath.

His gaze becomes soft and aching with love.

He thought that he’d be hit or beaten.

Instead, D’Angelo is going to show him that when he loses his control, we’ll take it to remind him that he’s not fighting this struggle alone.

I turn to D’Angelo and kiss him hard.

This is why I fucking love the man.

Then I wriggle free of D’Angelo and kiss Shay’s plush lips, while D’Angelo leans down to tug roughly on his hair.

“You’re safe,” I whisper. “Your brother is safe. Jude and I will look out for you. You don’t need to keep fighting because we have you forever, I swear. Just let go and let yourself be loved and cared for. *And believe that you’re safe.*”

When a tear chases down Shay’s cheek, I kiss it away.

He nods.

D'Angelo's lips quirk. "And now, we have our principessa to make moan and scream." After a final sweep of his thumb across Shay's jaw, D'Angelo swings his legs off him. "Don't talk."

My breathing speeds up with excitement, as D'Angelo kneels closer to me on the bed. His stubble rasps against my cheek, before he grips onto my shoulders and kisses down my neck.

"Cara mia," he breathes, "may I undress you?"

I lick my dry lips. "Hell, yeah."

D'Angelo slips his large hands down my sides, before grasping the bottom of my dress. He slides the silky material up by tantalizing degrees. I put my arms up, allowing him to pull it over my head.

It's a serious turn on to see the way that all three of the hot men in the bed — who could date any model or actor they wanted, and in D'Angelo's case probably has a lot of their numbers programmed into his phone — are looking at me like I'm the most gorgeous person they've ever seen.

I blush.

D'Angelo snaps open my bra like a connoisseur.

I arch my brow at him, and he smirks, as he pushes the lace away like it offends him. Then he bends forward and grabs the side of my panties with his teeth.

"Show off," Eden says.

"Sex god," Shay corrects. "You need to show me how to do that."

D'Angelo doesn't answer because his mouth is still stuffed with my panties.

I help him by kneeling up, and he drags the lace down with his teeth.

It does something to me to look down and see his raven curls between my thighs, as he serves me by pulling down my panties in a move that should be submissive but is probably the most dominant thing that he's ever done.

When he glances up at me through his long lashes, I instinctively reach out, stroking his curls back from his face. When he smiles, my panties fall from between his gleaming white teeth.

I chuckle, pushing them the rest of the way off.

D'Angelo licks a stripe up my pussy, and I gasp in surprise. Then he sits on his haunches and kisses up my stomach.

"You're exactly as I need you to be now," he murmurs. "Doesn't she look beautiful like this?"

“Yes,” Eden and Shay reply at the same time.

Eden slams his hand over Shay’s mouth, giving him a stern look. “You were given an order, brother. Be good.”

Shay looks startled like he expected Eden to be the soft one.

I think he’s made a mistake.

Shay nods, hurriedly.

Eden lifts his hand.

Shay gives him hurt look with puppy dog eyes.

Huh, I bet that those were devastating, when he was young.

Instead of working, however, Eden ignores him.

Eden looks at me. “Make him suffer.”

Shay gives a shocked gasp.

I can’t help laughing at the sheer outrage on his face.

“Traitor,” Shay mouths at his brother.

D’Angelo’s gaze hardens. “I’ll just pretend that I didn’t hear you talking. You’re already in trouble, pet. So, make up for it by letting yourself be used.”

D’Angelo picks up the bottle of lube and squeezes some into his hand, rubbing it to warm it, before leaning over Shay. Then he hovers his hand over Shay’s cock.

I know that he’s giving Shay a chance to safe word.

Shay smiles and nods, however, and his dick twitches its own encouragement.

D’Angelo closes his hand around Shay’s dick, and it glides with the lube up and down in easy strokes.

Shay lets out a shuddering breath, trying to hump his hips. But D’Angelo pins him down with his other hand as he works him, controlling the pace.

He steadily works Shay to hardness but then stops.

Shay’s sweating, and his hair is now damp on his forehead. He stares at D’Angelo in horror, as D’Angelo pulls his hand away and instead, settles against the headboard.

Shay bites his lip hard like he’s stopping himself from breaking the rule about speaking.

“You’re our toy, remember?” D’Angelo buries his hand in Shay’s hair, tugging. “I was only getting you hard so that our principessa could ride you and get her pleasure. Don’t even think about coming.”

Shay whines like even if he had permission to speak, he’d be too wrecked to be able to.

I climb over Shay, settling my hands on his muscled chest. I can feel his pecs jumping underneath my palms. He's slicked with sweat.

"I love you, Shay," I whisper.

Then I bend down to kiss him, and he kisses back, passionately and desperately.

Underneath me, his dick is painfully hard.

As I kiss Shay, I rock backward and forward, and he moans into the kiss.

I draw back. "You can talk."

"Please," Shay instantly groans. "I can't bear it. I feel...it's too much...I need you."

"Stay still." I kiss him again.

His arms strain against the ties. His muscles are taut.

"You're trying so hard for me," I reward him. "You look incredible like this. I knew that you could do it."

"In this position," D'Angelo says, "you'll have control, cara mia, over the speed, but I still have the control. Rock and show him what his cock is missing. Make him work for it."

Tremors are running through Shay; he's only just holding it together.

Sitting on him, however, I can feel those tremors like vibrations running through me.

It's fucking incredible.

Eden crawls behind me on the bed. He loops his arm around my waist, steadying me.

"Make him grovel," Eden whispers into my ear.

Startled by Eden's unexpected dirty talk, my pussy throbs, and I grind down on Shay's cock, using it like a sex toy and allowing myself to be rocked back and forth against it, dry humping in a way that must be a torment for Shay.

Now I know that Eden isn't going to help his brother.

He understands what Shay craves, and right now, it's to be at our mercy, but at the same time, to be kept safe.

We can all do that for him.

Shay groans, and his back arches.

Tears chase down his cheeks, and his expression is of tortured pleasure.

"Please, please, *please*."

That's groveling, right?

I can't hold back any longer.

I rise up to thrust myself down, only for D'Angelo to lunge forward and stop me.

I'm confused, when he wraps his hand around Shay's cock, giving it a hard stroke that makes Shay wail. Then he grips it firmly at the base.

D'Angelo smirks. "Can't have you coming, pet." Then he shifts his hand, so that his fingers lie at the side and his knuckles at the front. "Something for you to ride against, cara mia."

Our gazes meet.

Hell, even in the midst of this intense scene, D'Angelo is still thinking of positions that will bring me the maximum pleasure and ensure that I can come.

"Have I told you how perfect you are yet today?" I gasp.

"Not yet." D'Angelo runs his free hand down Shay's chest, before taking a firm hold on the leash. I know that it's to make Shay feel anchored as well. "You can always scream *Jude is the perfect lover*, when you come."

I huff a laugh. "Dream on."

But he is.

I smooth my hands down Shay's chest. "You're such a gorgeous man."

When Eden kisses up the back of my neck, just where I love it, I remember about the guys talking to each other.

If it means about what I love in bed, then it's a good thing.

When Eden kisses behind my ear, Shay's beautiful eyes meet mine.

D'Angelo whispers, "Ride our little toy."

Shay and I don't look away from each other, and we both draw in a ragged breath at the same time.

Then I plunge down on Shay's cock, which is already wet with lube.

It fills me in the most delicious way, stretching me but like it was made for me.

Shay shudders and clenches his hands, as if even with D'Angelo's help, he's battling not to come already.

When I push all the way down, D'Angelo's knuckles provide something for me to rub my clit against. Delighted at the added stimulation, I grind against his hand, moaning in pleasure. Then aided by Eden's arm around me, I rise up again, before starting to ride both Shay's cock and D'Angelo's hand at the same time.

I love having the control of angle and speed like this.

I love that all three are focused on my pleasure, rather than chasing their

own.

I love that this is about helping Shay, but it's also about the three of them showing me their love.

I rub faster and faster against D'Angelo's hand, sparking pleasure through me.

Shay never looks away from me for a moment.

He's staring at me like I'm a goddess.

"Do you understand now?" Eden plucks at my nipple, and I keen. "Do you understand that we love you?"

And those words — husky and heartfelt — murmured into my ear like a confession, are what tip me over the edge.

I scream as I come.

I may not be able to speak, as my brain whites out. But I'm thinking it: these three men are perfect for me, and no matter their inner demons, I'll battle to the end for them.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



Rebel Arena, Freedom

*N*ervously, I pace the side of the rink, trying to ignore the roar of the crowd, chatter of the commentator, and the bite of cold air mixed with sweat and rubber.

I pull my long, woolen coat around my emerald dress, glad for the warmth of my gloves and scarf.

I watch Eden intently, as he works hard to shut down an attack by the Carolina Hurricanes, stopping them from scoring.

“Yes!” I clap.

The Carolina Hurricanes have been relentless and aggressive in their play. I was worried about Eden playing tonight.

Yet Eden explained it simply to me. “If I miss another game, and my brother shows that he can win without me on the ice again, why would your Dad need me?”

I couldn’t answer.

Now, I glance to my right, watching Dad who’s standing by the benches to get the best vantage point and view. He’s dressed in a smart black suit with the team’s official tie.

I flush when I look at that tie, remembering just how my guys and I used *their* ties for purposes, which definitely aren’t in the official handbook.

They should be.

Ever since our scene together on Wednesday night, Shay has returned

back to his usual bundle of energy and optimism.

He's been more clingy than normal to D'Angelo, as if needing reassurance or longer aftercare, trailing after him around the house or plastering himself to his side, as he ate dinner or played the piano.

In the times that he hasn't been D'Angelo's limpet, he's been showering me with attention and love like he no longer needs to hold back his feelings, now that he's handed over such a level of trust.

On Thursday morning, he insisted on cooking breakfast for us and made heart shaped pancakes with extra chocolate chips for me.

On Thursday evening, he drove me around the estate on his Harley, then kissed me under the moonlight.

On Friday, he presented me with a playlist of songs that he'd put together just for me.

And it didn't suck.

Even Neve couldn't take the piss out of his songs.

I've been listening to his playlist all day on loop, and it's made me feel closer to him in an intimate way.

There's something special about music and what it means to someone that doesn't exist in anything else.

Well, possibly their favorite books or Netflix binges.

When you connect over those, you know that you've found your soul mate.

Now, Dad is animated as he watches the game, gruffly shouting and waving his arms.

But my shoulders are tense, and my stomach swirls with nerves, because I haven't missed how focused he's been on Eden's performance.

Luckily, Eden is more dedicated in this game than I've seen before, even though I can tell by his grimace, as he's body checked that his shoulder is still hurting him.

But is it enough to be selected?

Is it enough not to tear our new family apart?

D'Angelo and Shay exchange a glance, before skating toward Eden, attempting to take advantage of his move and turn the tables.

They're going to steal back the puck.

"I can see why you always accidentally fuck players." Neve rests her hand on my shoulder. "Hockey players look all kinds of hot in those pads and helmets, waving around sticks like huge dicks. It's as if they're having these

big dick battles. You know, cock battles on ice.”

I twist to Neve, hushing her desperately.

I knew that it was a mistake to invite Neve to the game tonight. But she’d called and kicked my ass for not seeing her recently.

No one escaped an ass kicking from Neve.

She could scold the President and end up being granted the power to issue executive orders.

Her first would probably be that everybody needed to own one Emo t-shirt like the one that she’s currently wearing beneath her open military style floor-length coat:

SPOILER ALERT: I DON’T CARE.

My cheeks flush.

Although, she’s not wrong about players and their sticks.

Wilder used to do filthy things with his stick. Sometimes, I was certain that he loved it more than me.

Neve crosses her arms. “Of course, female hockey players are even hotter. They’re like Amazonian warriors, waving the sticks, as if to say either *look, we have the guys’ dicks in our hands* or *we have fake cocks ready to peg a lucky woman.*”

Her gaze becomes dreamy.

I glance around myself wildly. “The press are here. Can we not talk about cocks or fake cocks? Tell me how Merchant Inn’s been this week. And that’s not a plea for another job there because seriously, I know that I was probably the worst server you ever had.”

“You were,” Neve replies, seriously. Huh, she didn’t need to agree so quickly. “It’s hard work, but the inn’s margins are great. I’m thinking of bringing in a regular karaoke night. You’d better show up.”

I’m not agreeing to that.

“It depends on my new job,” I hedge.

“Bullshit. It’s also bullshit that you need to hide...” Neve directs a glare at me that makes me wither. “...I mean *lie* about your relationships, even to your best friend.”

She holds up her wrist, tracing over the emerald and silver friendship bracelet that I made her in high school.

I look at Neve sheepishly. “I’m sorry. It was new and confusing. Nothing had been settled then between us.”

She gives me the finger. “Yeah, yeah. You suck, RH.” She pushes her

horn-rimmed glasses more firmly onto her nose. “So, is it settled now?”

I nod.

She leans forward and whispers, “A secret, forbidden romance with a bad boy and players with emotional damage. You’re an idiot. Because as good as the wild sex sounded, is it worth the danger?”

I understand what it looks like to her. She’s protective.

It’s why she’s my best friend.

“They’re worth it,” I reply. “This relationship is.”

She studies me for a long time. “Your choice. I just don’t want to see you getting hurt...again.” I duck my head. Then she snorts. “Robyn Hood, you robbed the hearts of the rich and then kept them for your poor self.”

I nudge her with my shoulder. “Shut up.”

“How can I? You’re the one who made that Guide about never being with a player again.”

My shoulders slump, and I look sheepish. “I was in a bad place. Can I plead temporary insanity, since clearly I’ve incriminated myself? I wrote that after a year of legal wrangling, during my messy divorce with Wilder. Anyone would swear off hockey players after going through that.”

“Has that asshole called you again? Because if he’s still threatening you, then Code and I have an entire ten point plan worked out about how to take revenge.”

I put my hands on my hips. “Have you? Does Mike know about this plan?”

Neve blinks but doesn’t look away. “Of course not. Code isn’t stupid.”

Despite myself, I laugh.

Neve and my brother are always dangerous when they get together.

“He hasn’t called,” I only *slightly* lie.

Lying by omission isn’t that bad, right?

Neve flicks my arm, and I yelp. “And the rest?”

“He’s been texting,” I admit. “I’ve told the security team. They’ve been assessing the risk and beefed up security.”

“Do *they* know?” Neve glances out at the guys on the rink.

I shake my head. “D’Angelo fucking hates Wilder. They’re not only rivals. Wilder bullied D’Angelo and lied about him.” This is so hard to admit because then it makes it real. “He lied about him to me. You know all those things that I told you in our late night conversations? The things that probably made you hate D’Angelo too?”

Neve snorts. “How can I forget? You went from talking non-stop about this new college friend of yours to doubting him, then criticizing him, to refusing to even hear his name. I’ve never known you to do that before. You’ve always been loyal to your friends, even when they fuck up. I mean, I’ve fucked up a ton of times. It made me think that D’Angelo must have been a real dick to deserve it.”

“He wasn’t,” my voice is small, “but Wilder was. D’Angelo has shown me the evidence. It’s undeniable, but because Wilder had the power and money, D’Angelo couldn’t do anything about it at the time. Everyone thinks that Wilder is this perfect, golden boy of hockey, but we both know that Wilder’s a liar, bully, and a cheat. Yet D’Angelo’s reputation and career is wrecked...and so is mine.”

“No, it’s not.” Neve’s gaze is steely, as she grasps my hand. “Fuck Wilder and his mind games. You’re Robyn McKenna, PR Director. You’re a powerful, successful woman. You’re loved and supported by powerful men. And D’Angelo is captain of his own ice hockey team. Look at him.”

Neve snatches me by the shoulders and turns me to look at the rink.

D’Angelo is dominating the play. He has the puck as he skates down the center of the rink. He glances to his right, before with precision and timing, passing the puck to Shay.

Shay powers forward toward the goal.

Is he going to score?

My breathing picks up, and my hands clench.

D’Angelo and Shay work in perfect harmony together. It’s beautiful: The veteran captain and the rising star.

“He wasn’t destroyed by Wilder, no matter what that dick thinks.” Neve squeezes my shoulder. Watching D’Angelo on the ice, it hits me how right she is. “Don’t ever let him think that. We all have people who want to tear us down or hate on us. The Bay Rebels are the underdogs of the NHL, but look, they’ve held their own against three top teams now. I think that you’re going to be surprised. And so’s your asshole ex.”

Joy surges through me.

I lean forward, resting my hand on the glass.

“Come on, Shay,” I whisper.

He’s skating fast toward the goal.

Nobody’s going to be able to stop him making this shot.

Suddenly, a rival defenseman launches himself at Eden, aiming for his

bad shoulder.

Eden bites back a yell as he's slammed into the board.

"Asshole." My gaze darts to Shay.

He's stumbled at his brother's cry.

My breathing speeds up. Is he going to abandon the goal and go back to fight to protect his brother like he did in the other game?

Has he listened to anything that he spoke about on Saturday night?

Please, let him have learned and stopped his self-destructiveness.

D'Angelo skates closer to Shay, circling him to keep the other players away, at the same time as attempting to redirect Shay's attention away from Eden.

The crowd has quieted, confused.

"What's happening?" Neve asks.

"Shay is making a big decision." I glance back at Eden. Two of the defensemen have surrounded him now, ready to fight. "It's not an easy one."

Then to my delight, Shay shakes himself and begins to skate toward the goal with renewed determination.

He ignores the distraction technique behind him.

I breathe out in relief.

Good fucking boy.

To my shock, however, the rival players don't leave Eden alone.

Instead, they ramp up the pressure to try and get a reaction.

They must have discussed this before the game.

It's a strategy.

D'Angelo truly understood the way teams work, when he warned that if Shay continued to be known for his aggressive protectiveness toward his twin, it wouldn't help Eden.

Instead, it'd hurt him.

Eden is shoved with all the pressure on his bad shoulder, then again hard enough in the ribs to make him double over in pain.

He straightens and shoves back with just as much force but he's outnumbered, and the players must have watched replays of last Saturday's game to know which parts of him are vulnerable to attack.

Shay falters for a moment but he doesn't turn around.

"Fuck." I shoot a look at Dad, but he's so focused on Shay that he doesn't even appear to notice that Eden is being savaged like a weakened wolf in a wolf pack.

Shay raises his stick, aiming at the goal.

Only one minute left to play.

If he scores, the Bay Rebels may have won.

Shay shoots...

Neve jumps up and down with excitement.

Eden is standing, facing the boards to steady himself.

Then a rival defenseman skates into him, fast and hard.

The attack is deliberate.

“No!” I scream.

Except, my yell is drowned out by the howls of celebration and joy.

Because Shay, the star player, has scored.

The Bay Rebels have won.

Shay’s avoided going to help his twin like the rest of us trained him not to.

Except, in revenge, Eden’s been hit hard, while in a vulnerable position.

He’s not expecting it.

I watch in horror, my stomach churning, as Eden’s head whips back and forth, and he crashes into the boards.

Then he collapses to the ice.

In his celebration, Shay raises his stick.

D’Angelo skates to Shay, grinning. He pats him on the back. Then they skate around the rink.

Shay searches out his twin to join the celebration over the goal that’s won the game, and which Eden helped to set up.

Suddenly, Shay’s expression crumples just like mine had.

Eden is lying on the ice. He isn’t moving.

Now, Shay, D’Angelo, and even Dad are screaming for the team doctor...*for anyone.*

There’s frantic movement on the ice, and the crowd becomes eerily silent.

Yet Eden is still not moving.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



Freedom Heart Hospital, Freedom

“*W*hy hasn’t Eden woken up yet?” My hands clench around the mug of cold coffee, which I’ve been clutching onto like a lifeline for an hour. “It’s been...”

Too long.

It must be the early hours of the morning by now. It feels like an eternity of waiting to be told that Eden has woken up.

That he’s recovered after his brutal beating on the ice.

Except, Michael hasn’t come in to tell us that yet.

Eden isn’t okay.

My heart aches. My eyes smart with tears.

I feel strangely numb like this isn’t real.

It can’t be, right?

I know now how much I love Eden because the idea that he may not... wake up...and be with me again is too much.

I need him.

I fucking love him.

I stare down at my knees, as I hunch on the pea green chair in the small waiting room. All the chairs and couches are the same green like the walls, which appear to be painted this color in an attempt to create a calming environment for every relative who ends up stuck in here, waiting for news of surgeries or outcomes after accidents.

D'Angelo is sitting next to me. His expression is grim.

He's dressed in trousers and a navy suit without a tie that looks rumpled because he hastily pulled it on after the accident, so that he could drive Shay and me after the ambulance to Freedom Heart hospital as quickly as possible.

I hated how the press pursued us, trying to get a photograph of us in our distress.

Dad was forced to stay behind at the arena and deal with the aftermath, along with the rest of the management. As PR Director, it should have been my role to as well, but there was no way that I was going to be anywhere but at Eden's bedside.

My stomach curdles, as the vision of Eden being slammed into the boards from behind, then collapsing to the ice and lying there, unmoving, flashes through my mind.

It's been looping through my brain on repeat all night, and I can't stop it.

I can't fucking stop it.

D'Angelo rests his arm around my shoulder, and its weight is the only thing that's stopping me from falling apart.

Shay hasn't sat down once.

He's pacing from one side of the waiting room to the other with his head ducked, avoiding looking at us. His hair hangs over his eyes. He's pale.

He didn't even take the time to pull on anything more than a red t-shirt and jeans, and in the chill of the night, he's wrapped his arms around himself and is shivering.

I tried to drag him into a hug earlier, but he shied away like he didn't believe that he deserved one.

Being separated from his twin like this is breaking him apart.

I sigh, placing down the cold coffee.

I scrunch up my nose at the scent of disinfectant in the waiting room.

"He will wake up," D'Angelo says with staggering confidence.

"I can't lose him," Shay says so quietly that I strain to hear him. "What if he doesn't wake up or...?"

"He will," D'Angelo repeats.

"But what if...?" Shay stops pacing.

"Don't worry about the what ifs," I reply. "We'll deal with what actually happens together. Michael's with Eden right now and he's an amazing doctor. I trust him."

"Eden just took a bad hit," D'Angelo adds. "It happens. Nobody should

ever check anyone else from behind. It's a fucking dangerous move, and the player who did it will be in a world of shit. Eden took serious whiplash, and probably a number of other injuries, when he hit the boards and the ice. You can't prepare for the blow, when you don't see it coming."

Shay nods, but his eyes are filled with tears. "It's my bloody fault."

Instantly, D'Angelo and I are both out of our seats and embracing Shay like our lives fucking depend on it.

For the first time, Shay starts to sob.

He clutches onto D'Angelo's shirt, hiding his face against his chest.

"I d-didn't p-protect him," Shay mumbles through his tears. "I'm a bastard. F-fucking b-bastard. I knew that they were hurting him but I went for the goal, instead. I cared more about showing off and fucking scoring. *Winning*. I made a p-promise that I'd never do that."

"You did the right thing," D'Angelo says firmly. "You're not to blame for the assholes who targeted him. By not allowing yourself to be riled up, you were protecting Eden in the future."

"That doesn't bloody help him now, does it?" Shay breaks away from our embrace. My heart aches, as Shay wipes the back of his hand furiously across his face to try and hide his tears. "He's lying in a hospital bed because I'm a shit brother. If Dee recovers, he's going to...hate me."

"He won't." I grip Shay's chin, forcing him to meet my eye. I can't allow him to believe that. "Eden was on board with the whole scene on Saturday night, you know, teaching you to control yourself on the ice and not see him as in need of protection. We're all fucking worried. I love your brother, Shay. I'm breaking here too. But he's never going to hate you."

Shay's expression crumples, and he wraps his arms desperately around my neck. "Thanks, love."

I hug him back just as hard.

"Were you able to get through to your parents?" D'Angelo asks, leaning against the wall.

He's wearing a faint smile, as he watches Shay and me hugging, for the first time since this nightmare evening began.

Shay nods but doesn't lift his head from my shoulder. "I had to go out into the car park to make the call, and obviously, with timezones, it's early morning in England. They want to fly out but can't, you know?"

"I'll pay for the flight," D'Angelo says, immediately. "Just give me their details, and I'll sort it."

Shay lifts his head to stare at him in amazement. “They can’t afford to pay you back, and neither can I.”

“Am I asking you to? You’re mine now, Shay, and I care for family.”

Sometimes, D’Angelo isn’t a grumpy dick.

Sometimes, he shows the side that made me fall in love with him.

Shay’s eyes glimmer with tears, but this time, they’re happy ones. “Cheers, darlin’. Can I keep that offer in my back pocket? For now, they can’t get time off work. They both work two jobs, and they’re not the type of ones with understanding bosses who’ll let them take sudden holiday. My brother and I always hoped...” He chews on his lip. “We hoped that if we were selected and were able to play in a good team in the NHL, we could send money back to the people who saved us and sacrificed every penny they earned, so that we could learn to skate. Then they wouldn’t have to work all these hours in shit jobs. This was meant to be an escape for us and for them too. But what if...?”

What if that choice killed Eden?

My stomach is tied in knots.

“No more *what ifs*.” D’Angelo’s jaw clenches. “The offer stands to fly your parents out, whenever you want. But you *will* make a team in the NHL. You *will* be able to send back money to your family and change their lives. And I’m so proud of you that you want to spend your money in that way. And you *will* both be okay.”

Shay blushes. “I may want to buy my own motorbike too.”

“That’s okay. I’m planning on buying a classic car.”

Why am I not surprised?

Suddenly, Shay stiffens, and when I twist around to see what he’s looking at, I understand why he’s become so tense.

Michael has just walked smartly into the waiting room.

I grasp Shay’s hand in support, as we rush toward Michael.

D’Angelo marches to join us, until we’re circling Michael.

Desperately, I try to read Michael’s expression for answers, but he’s wearing a doctor’s typical neutral mask.

It’s strange seeing him here in his doctor’s royal blue scrubs and white coat.

He’s wearing a name tag: **DOCTOR MICHAEL GAINES**

He’s been nothing but professional, however, and I wasn’t lying to Shay.

Michael has the top reputation in the hospital.

I know that he'll have been doing everything that he can for Eden.

"How is he?" Shay asks so quickly that his words are almost blurred together. He's rocking backward and forward on his heels. "Has he woken up yet? What's wrong with him?"

"Shay," Michael replies, "you're his brother and next of kin. So, you're family. But I need to be certain that Eden is okay with me sharing medical information in front of Robyn and Jude."

Michael shoots me an apologetic glance.

Shay tilts up his chin. "They're family too."

"Not legally."

It hurts because it's true.

As much as it feels that we're married in our hearts, there's no way for us to make this type of relationship official for situations like this.

Shay looks like he's winding himself up to become even more upset.

D'Angelo lays his hand on Shay's arm. "Michael has rules to follow. Why don't you go with him, and he can fill you in with the situation?"

Shay shudders. "I don't want to leave you."

D'Angelo looks like he's struggling too, tapping his thigh three times.

Michael glances between us. "How about if Eden makes the decision, whether I talk in front of all of you?"

Excitement rushes through me, and I grasp harder onto Shay's hand.

"He's woken up...?" I gasp.

Michael allows himself a smile. "About a quarter of an hour ago. I've been running some tests, and he'll certainly need more. But he's awake, and as long as the visit is short and you don't ask him a lot of questions, it's fine."

"He has concussion, right?" D'Angelo cocks his head. "I've had a bad one before."

Shay grimaces. "So has Eden. A lot of times."

The way that he says *a lot* is almost throw away, as if it's nothing.

"Have you?" I ask.

Shay hesitates. "Once or twice, playing hockey. But nothing like Eden. Don't worry, this is good news. He'll be vomiting and most likely will complain of ringing in his ears. He'll have poor coordination and balance for a while. But he always shakes them off within a week or so."

Except, this time something flashes across Michael's face — an anguished, sad expression — which he hides, but not before I've seen it.

Michael doesn't think that Eden will just be able to shake this off, does

he?

I swallow, and my mouth feels too dry to speak.

I force myself not to cry.

I smile instead, because both Shay and Eden will need me to be strong.

When D'Angelo catches my gaze, he's giving the same fake, reassuring smile as me, but I can see that he knows what Shay has said is bullshit.

I just don't know in what way yet.

Suddenly desperate to get in and see Eden for myself to erase the image of him unmoving on the ice, as the medical team rushed across to him, I say, "Can we see him now?"

Michael nods. "Follow me."

Shay's hand tightens around mine.

We're in public. We shouldn't be touching like this.

But I'm not pulling away from him, when he needs me.

D'Angelo walks as close to our shoulders as he dares, while we follow Michael down the bleak corridor to the end, which is bustling with nurses, and turn into a second corridor. We pass an empty gurney.

Then Michael bustles into a private room, and I follow him. My heart is hammering in my chest at what I'll see.

The room is small but bright, daffodil yellow. The office style blinds are closed against the night.

It's much quieter here, apart from the beep of the monitors, which surround the hospital bed in the middle of the room. The bed is surrounded by a bright green curtain, which has been pulled back.

"Dee!" Shay rushes forward, perching on one side of the bed and leaning his face close to his brother's, as if he thought that he'd never get to see it again. I bet that he didn't. There was a small, terrified part of me that felt the same. He looks like he's struggling to keep it together. "Don't scare me like that again."

"I'll try," Eden replies; his voice is slurred.

I'm not definite that he fully understands what's going on around him yet.

D'Angelo taps Shay on the shoulder. "Back off and give him some space."

"Okay." Shay smiles, sheepishly. "I'm just so bloody happy that you're awake, bro."

Eden is lying in the bed in a green hospital gown. His hair is no longer slicked back but is falling forward. It makes him look startlingly like his twin.

He's worryingly pale though, and his eyes are glassy.

My breath catches, when I see that his left arm is in a sling.

Eden glances around at us. "You're all here."

"Of course." I walk around to the other side of the hospital bed and balance on it with difficulty. Why do they have to make them so tall because now would not be the perfect time for me to over balance and tip into Eden's crotch? "What else would we rather be doing than checking how our favorite guy is doing?"

"Hey," D'Angelo protests but with a smile.

"Until you can chat about omegaverse romance books and your love of cats in the same breath," I reply, "Eden wins the *favorite guy* badge."

Michael coughs, politely. "I need to ask Eden a question and for him not to be tired out, before he answers it."

Chastened, I pull the thin blanket over Eden to make sure that he's warm enough.

He struggles to focus on me, but I can tell that it's an effort. "You're here."

He sounds like he doesn't believe that I'm real, as if I'm a dream.

"Yes," my voice wavers, as I smooth over the blanket. "I always will be."

"Eden, do I have your consent to share your patient information with the people in this room? You don't need to say yes. I can ask them to wait outside."

"No!" Agitated, Eden tries to sit up, reaching for my hand and snatching onto it as hard as he can, even though his grip is still weak. "Shay, stop Doctor Gaines."

"He wants us here." The look that Shay shoots Michael is dangerous. Wow. "He gets everything that he wants, got it? No one's going anywhere."

Michael looks startled, as if he's made a wrong assessment and is now rethinking his view of the twins.

Only, he doesn't know about their past or how protective they are of each other.

Michael hums to himself for a moment, before nodding. "I wouldn't let anyone force me away from Cody's side in hospital, even if we were in a country that didn't recognize our marriage. So, let's focus on your medical assessment. You have multiple injuries, Eden. Most is soft tissue damage, with the deepest bruising being around your abdomen. You also have two cracked ribs. Your shoulder is in a sling because you have an

acromioclavicular joint injury.”

Shay hisses out a breath.

We all know what means: Eden won't be playing hockey for weeks.

What will this mean for his place on the team? Is he screwed?

Has he lost his final chance to be in the Bay Rebels?

“A shoulder separation,” Eden grunts.

Michael nods. “That's right. You'll need a range of imaging tests for us to determine the best treatment plan. My feeling is that it's only minor. We'll keep it iced and put in place a physiotherapy program. Cody can help.”

Eden's silent, and Shay seems in shock.

When neither reply, D'Angelo takes over.

“Thank you,” D'Angelo says. “Will he need surgery?”

“Unlikely, if we get these first steps right. Don't worry, I'm on it. You're going to get the best treatment. Let's wait, however, until we get the results from the scans to say for sure where we are.”

I look down, furrowing my brow.

I don't want to ask the next question.

I know that the others don't either.

But I didn't misinterpret that quickly hidden expression on Michael's face.

I can't hide from this.

“And what's the reason that he was unconscious for so long?” I demand.

My pulse is roaring in my ears. I feel like hurling.

Shay looks as pale as Eden now.

Michael appears uncomfortable. “He suffered a severe concussion. The way that you were struck from the back, Eden, with no way for your body to prepare for it is what caused significant damage. Then you struck your head on the ice, when you fell as well. I know that you can't remember any of this but that's common with a concussion like yours. Don't force it. Yet the true issue is something else. While you were unconscious, at your coach's insistence, we did the full array of tests and scans, and we found something rather worrying.”

Fear spikes. The breath rushes out of me.

Shay edges even closer to his twin, struggling to fit next to him on the bed: two identical, beautiful men, who look young and terrified.

D'Angelo straightens. “Whatever it is, I'll pay for the best doctors and treatment. I won't let him—”

Michael raises his hand. "It's not as simple as money. I wish that it was. It truly is a severe concussion. We will be keeping you in for observation for the next few days. After that, you should be able to gradually increase both your mental and physical activity. We'll help you work out a careful plan. But that's not the issue."

"I don't understand." Eden sounds lost. "Did you call Mum and Dad?"

Shay hugs his brother close. "Yeah, Dee. You can talk to them yourself later."

Michael's expression hardens. "That may be part of the issue. You see, the images showed that you have sustained multiple head injuries...a frightening number...at a young age." Michael's gaze slides to D'Angelo's shocked face. "Do I still have permission to continue sharing this?"

Eden looks away but nods.

Shit, this must be what Shay begged me not to ask about, when they were taken in by the couple who bought them as kids, or at least, part of it.

"He did." Shay tilts up his chin defiantly, although he's shaking.

Michael looks taken aback by the matter of fact way that Shay says it.

D'Angelo has simply become ashen, staring at the twins like he wishes that he could bundle them in soft blankets and love and protect them from a past that has already happened.

"Did you also sustain the same head injuries, Shay?" Michael asks, carefully.

"It wasn't our adoptive parents. They never raised their hand to us," Shay bursts out. "And no, I didn't."

Michael looks at him, regretfully. "I know that I have no right to ask that. I didn't mean to violate your privacy. But I need to know for medical reasons." He stuffs his hands in his pockets, and I've never seen Michael look so uncomfortable before. Normally, he's effortlessly in control. It makes me even more nervous. "With the number of head injuries that your brother has already sustained, how serious they were, and by the looks of it, how untreated, Eden has been an exceptionally lucky young man this time."

"Lucky?" I stare at Michael in shock. "How the hell is it lucky to end up in a hospital bed?"

"Because he woke up," Michael states, steadily. Yet every word slices through my guys and me like a blade. "Because he appears to have no lasting damage. Because he didn't die."

Shay lets out a wounded sound, as he buries his face in his twin's neck.

Eden's expression is unreadable, but his hand in mine is shaking.

"Are you always such a dick, doctor?" D'Angelo's eyes flash, as he strides forward to stroke Eden's hair back from his face and rearrange it behind his ear as he likes.

"Only when I care about my patients enough to truly want them to listen to me." Michael steps forward, and for the first time, he lets his mask drop. He looks earnest and troubled. "You're important to Robyn, and she's my sister-in-law. Cody would kick me out to sleep on the couch for the rest of our married life, if I let anything happen to you. So, you need to listen to me. As both your doctor and I hope, your friend, I need to say this. You can't risk playing impact sports, Eden. You're playing Russian roulette with your life. Another bad hit, and you could die. You must stop playing hockey, or next time, you won't survive."

CHAPTER THIRTY



Freedom Heart Hospital, Freedom

Exhausted, I slouch in the visitor's padded armchair, which D'Angelo insisted on being brought into Eden's hospital room for me.

Mainly because I refused to leave and have been sleeping here, but then, so has Shay.

There are certain weeks of my life, which have truly sucked.

The one when I discovered Wilder was cheating.

The one when I was told by Wilder at college that D'Angelo had never actually been my friend.

The one when Mom died.

Now, I can add this week: The one where the man who I love has had his dreams crushed.

And his voice stolen from him.

It's evening, and Eden's finally sleeping. The pain medications are making him woozy and pale.

But he never complains.

In fact, Eden hasn't spoken again since the first night in hospital, when Michael warned that if Eden continued to play hockey, then he could die the next time that he hit his head.

It meant that his career was over.

He was fucking devastated.

He didn't need to say one word for me to know that.

Leaning forward, I run my fingers lightly down Eden's cheek.

I'm careful not to wake him because he's struggled to sleep, even if the concussion has made him fatigued. I think that it's mainly the pain of his ribs, despite the impact of the pain meds.

His mom and dad have been calling every day, but Shay has been taking the call.

They sound nice.

They also sound like they're putting on a cheerful, hopeful charade for the twins' sake.

You can tell that it's killing them not to be here with their sons.

My dad on the other hand...?

He's visited once, appearing gruff and uncomfortable. He told both twins that all discussions on their long term place on the team could wait, until Eden was out of hospital, but not to worry because his hospital bills were covered by Bay Rebels' insurance.

Dad gave me a pointed look, however, and I knew how to read it.

Eden is off the team, whether he wants to be off or not.

What does that mean for Shay?

What does it mean for all of us?

The door to the hospital room is closed, giving us privacy.

I sprawl in my seat, looking sadly at the box of chocolates that I've balanced on my stomach.

Only one is left.

I poke the coffee cream with my nail.

It's always the fucking coffee cream.

Oh well, sometimes chocolate sacrifices have to be made.

I take a deep breath, before picking up the melted chocolate with a grimace and stuffing it into my mouth.

Yuck.

I swallow as quickly as I can.

I call it the candy oyster technique. It gets you through those tricky last asshole chocolates.

Yep, they exist.

Shay's watching me, fascinated.

He's sitting on the arm of the chair on the opposite side of the bed, tapping his foot. He's barely been able to stay still for days. He's wearing a crimson sweater and jeans, while D'Angelo's sprawled in the actual chair in a

smart suit, looking immaculate.

He's resting his large hand on Shay's leg, which appears to be the only thing that's holding Shay in place and stopping him from pacing around the room again.

He's also kept Eden looking as smart as he enjoys by shaving and washing him each morning and helping him to slick his hair back.

It's made me smile to see the brisk way that D'Angelo does it, which hasn't made Eden bristle.

He's also taken over Eden's caretaker role, making sure that we all eat and don't forget to drink, although he does it far more sternly than Eden does, along with a sprinkling of occasionally sexy threats.

It's been interesting to watch how focused D'Angelo's been on keeping Shay equally in line and calm.

In turn, I've just loved and comforted both twins.

Neither of them have been ready to talk yet.

At least, not about the elephant in the room.

"You've just eaten the whole box," Shay says in hushed tones, so as not to wake his brother. "I didn't know that was possible in less than one hour. Respect, love."

D'Angelo arches his brow. "You do know that your brother left those for Eden, right?"

"You snooze, you lose," I reply. "Or is it, you sleep, you weep? Anyway, it's not like Eden hasn't got enough other gifts."

I sweep my arm around, well, the entire room.

Helium **GET WELL** balloons, as well as some that are customized with the Bay Rebels' logo float from all four corners of the hospital bed, and there are so many vases of flowers dotted around the room that it looks like a florist's. In between those, are piles of chocolates, stuffies, and cards.

Shay shakes his head in amazement, picking up a teddy bear in an ice hockey jersey, which is attached to a balloon. "I thought that it was some kind of cruel prank, when these first started to be delivered, or they were being sent to the wrong room."

D'Angelo's expression clouds. "Didn't you think that the rest of the guys from camp and the staff would care or want to visit? We're a family. I've told you that. Plus, the fans saw it happen and they love us too."

"I know but..." Shay places the teddy bear down carefully. "My college team wasn't like that. And we've always been each other's best friends. I

mean, Eden doesn't have friends."

"He does now," D'Angelo says, firmly.

"I never thought that we were going to be able to get Cody to leave earlier." I smile. "He'd still be here I think, trying to win at that game on your phone—"

D'Angelo groans. "Don't get Shay started on that again because I refuse to play anymore."

"Hey, it's better than you trying to *amuse* us with crosswords," Shay shoots back.

I quirk my brow. "Then let's be glad that Code had to leave to get to the game on time."

Shay stiffens and then tries to hide it.

Dad agreed that neither of the guys had to play tonight, so that they could stay with Eden.

Yet Dad is also refusing to tell me the outcome of the team selection for any of the men.

I have a feeling that everything will come down to the final match on Saturday.

No pressure then.

Shay reaches forward, readjusting the blanket over his brother. "I know why Eden's not talking. The ice gave him his voice, but it's being taken away now. We need to get him to see the psychologist, but there's no therapy in the world that can fix this. I made a pact that I wouldn't leave him and I won't. I need to get him to communicate about this somehow, but on the other hand, how can I?"

"We both know how we'd feel, if this had happened to us," D'Angelo replies. "He needs time. But he has all three of us to support him. Plus, your parents don't seem like they'll be angry at or disappointed in him—"

"Never." Shay sits back, wrapping his arms around himself. "But he will be in himself."

"Do you want to know how this has been playing out in the press?" I ask. "Because as much as I haven't wanted to, I've needed to be ducking out and actually doing my PR job to handle this."

Shay nods.

"It's been positive," I reply. "Overwhelming sympathy and support for Eden and the Bay Rebels. Your cool response to the obvious attempts to abandon the attack on goal and go back to stop the dirty tricks on your

brother are praised, while the rival players, who were engaged on the checks from behind that have led to such serious injuries, are heavily criticized in the national press, as well as being under investigation.”

“They broke the honor code.” D’Angelo’s jaw clenches. “Everybody knows that. They’re going to find it hard to keep playing.”

“Yeah, but my brother definitely can’t play either,” Shay replies.

“Nothing is worth his life.” D’Angelo’s voice is firm. “Did Eden know about the risk of playing at all, when he’d already had so many concussions? And be honest.”

Shay shakes his head.

“Did you?”

My breath catches.

Shay stares at him in shock. “I may be smaller than you, Jude, but I can still kick you in the balls.”

“Try it and see what happens.” D’Angelo clamps his hand over Shay’s thigh. “So, did you?”

“If you think,” Shay hisses, “that I’d risk my brother’s life, even for a moment, then you don’t know me at all, and that’s a shame because I’ve shown you more of myself...let you and Robyn in...in a way that I haven’t anybody else in my life.”

“I know that you wouldn’t.” I shoot D’Angelo a glare, and he drops his gaze. “You’re the best brother in the world to Eden. The way that you two are together, you do nothing but look out for each other. Anyone can see how loyal you both are, to me as well. I love that about you.”

Shay flushes. “Cheers, love.”

“It’s merely that I get the feeling our principessa understands more about you and what’s going on than I do.” D’Angelo squeezes his hand more tightly around Shay’s thigh. “I don’t have a problem with that. I won’t pressure you to tell me more than you’re ready to about your past. But I haven’t been able to take you on a date, cucciolo. I’m sorry, if I upset you. I simply have some catching up to do, it seems.”

Instantly, Shay gives a sunny smile. “I should make you grovel more, darlin’. You look so bloody gorgeous, all earnest and apologizing. It’s a rare look on you.”

He certainly understands D’Angelo.

“It is,” I say. “Look, he’s bashful now.”

“Can I take it back?” D’Angelo sprawls in his chair. “And just threaten to

spank you, instead?”

“Nope,” Shay says, happily. “Although, I like this reset to grumpy as well. Do you really want to take me on a date? You don’t need to pretend.”

D’Angelo blinks. “Did I get confused about whose dick I was stroking the other night?” This time, it’s Shay’s turn to flush. “It’s customary, when you’re in a relationship, to go on dates. Did you think because we’re guys that somehow we miss out on that? Well, that’d be unfair. Of course, like when we’ve been taking our principessa out, we’ll need to be discrete.”

“I like curry, the hotter the better, and beer,” Shay says. “Plus, horror films.”

“Curry, beer, and movie night it is then.” D’Angelo smiles. “When Eden is home and things are more settled, it’s a date.”

Since I know that D’Angelo is more of a pasta, wine, and comedy movie kind of guy, and isn’t even putting up a token protest, when I know from a drunken night of swapping confessional stories at college, that he was even scared by *Labyrinth* as a kid, he’s really trying to make things up to Shay.

He’s going to cower from the horror movie, which at least will give Shay an excuse to put his arm around him.

I made the mistake to tell my brother the *Labyrinth* story, and D’Angelo will never live it down.

Shay glances across at me, as if trying to come to a decision, before pushing himself up and moving to stand at the far side of the room like he needs some space.

I watch him in concern.

“You’re right, darlin’,” Shay says. “There are things in our past that I haven’t told you yet. Some of it is violent. For four years, Eden and I lived with two people who hurt us. They hurt Eden more than me.” He’s refusing to look at us, staring at his feet now. My guts feel twisted up. I’m frozen to my seat. “I guess you know that from the scan. But the worst…” He darts a glance at me, and the terrible thing is that I know what he’s going to say. “We were held by this couple for two weeks, before we could escape. I think the worst damage was done then.”

D’Angelo looks like he’s struggling not to react.

His hands are clenching compulsively in his lap. “What do you need from me? Anything, you have it.”

Shay looks startled. “Well, that’s not how I thought you’d react. Believe me, I feel like a bastard. I didn’t know that it’d put Eden at risk now. Eden

never reacts much to pain normally. At least, maybe he's just learned not to show it or that it's normal to be in it. I don't know. We're both fucked up in different ways, okay? I was scared to tell you because if I did, why would successful, wealthy, in control people like you want to be with us?"

D'Angelo's eyes widen for a moment, before he barks with laughter. "Are you talking about *me*? You are kidding, right? Wait until I'm ready, and I'll tell you just how fucked up my own past is, how many times I've been beaten, why if I was lying in a hospital, I wouldn't have a kind mom and dad ringing to check in, and why I spend every day battling OCD."

Shay is staring at D'Angelo in shock.

"Jude," he breathes.

When D'Angelo stalks to his feet he looks dangerous. "I'm in control because I've trained myself to be. I work on methods that help me cope." His gaze slides to me, and his piercing gaze makes me feel warm all over. "Now, I have the woman who finally, makes me feel like I'm worthy of being loved. You're lucky that you're loved by her too. And loved by me as well. Don't you trust our choice of lover?"

Shay's breath hitches. "Always, darlin'."

"Right answer." D'Angelo prowls to Shay and pins him against the wall by his throat. Shay doesn't struggle. My heart races, and I hold tightly to the arms of my chair to stop myself from intervening. Shay needs this. "Now, listen. This is not going to ruin Eden. I won't let it. And I fucking won't let it ruin *you*. Eden is a man; he's not only a player."

"He's got a lot of talents," I add, quietly, remembering the day in the gym with Eden. "We're going to work this out together."

"Hear that?" D'Angelo tightens his hand around Shay's throat, and their gazes meet intently. "And *you*, the future star player with the potential to become one of the best players that the NHL has ever seen, is not going to give up his place in the Bay Rebels because of this."

Shay's lips twist. "You don't understand."

D'Angelo slams him more firmly against the wall. "I do. We're going to find a way for this to work, so that you're not separated from your twin. You're not giving up your dreams, however, or I will kick your pretty ass."

"Stop," Eden's raspy voice says, "or I'll kick *your* ass."

Hurriedly, I twist back to the bed. "You're awake!"

Eden's eyes are open, although he's still looking half-asleep. His brow is furrowed, and he's trying to look fierce.

It only has the effect of making him look like a sleepy kitten
I won't tell him that.

"I should have threatened your brother earlier. I knew that it'd be the most effective way to get you to talk." D'Angelo immediately lets go of Shay. "I'm deeply terrified of the man with a sling and the broken ribs. Please, take it easy on me."

"Sarcasm," I say, "the lowest form of wit."

"In that case," D'Angelo's lips quirk, "your wit matches mine in lowness."

Wait, is that an insult?

I scrunch up my nose, trying to work it out.

"Brother!" Shay's face lights up like the sun, and he bounces across the room, perilously close to knocking over several vases. He bats his way through the balloons. "You're talking again."

He perches on the bed next to Eden.

"I wasn't avoiding talking to you on purpose." Eden drops his gaze. "Aren't you meant to be in a game?"

Shay shrugs. "The game isn't as important as being here with you."

Eden's eyes narrow. "You're not damaging your career just because mine is over."

A deeply uncomfortable silence settles over us.

D'Angelo waves his hand. "Hello, I'm here too. I had it cleared for us both to miss this game. Coach is using this one to test other squad members. It gives us these few days to concentrate on you. Do I get a pass on the ass kicking now?"

"This once," Eden concedes.

D'Angelo huffs a laugh.

I lean forward to help adjust Eden's pillows so that he can sit up, and now that I'm looking for it, I notice how well he manages to suppress the wince, as the shoulder, which is in a sling, is jostled.

"Ehm," I glance at the empty box of chocolates on my knee, "these were from my brother, but I kind of ate them. On the plus side, I saved you from enduring the horror of eating the coffee cream."

"My savior." Eden reaches out, tracing a childish drawn crayon Get Well card. A big yellow sun and a pair of skates are scrawled on the front.

Shay smiles, fondly. "The operation manager's daughter made that for you. She's only four and dropped it off herself with her mum, but you were

sleeping. I mean, she's too young to understand about the..."

He snaps his mouth shut.

We all know what he was going to say: that she drew skates onto the drawing, but Eden likely won't be wearing them again.

"How are you feeling?" I quickly say. "Any dizziness still? Headache?"

"I'm feeling like I've just lost the thing that's given my life meaning since I was a kid."

My hands shake, and I sit back hard in my chair.

My eyes smart with tears.

What do I say?

I've had to start my life afresh but I didn't lose my career and sense of identity in a single, violent moment first.

I have no idea how that feels but I can imagine.

And it's horrifying.

"Eden," my throat is thick with tears, "please, don't risk your life over this. I love you, and we all need you. We're here. We'll support you."

Eden's eyes widen. "You love me, even if I can never be a hockey player like Shay? Even if I'm a nobody?"

I leap up, snatching his hands between mine. "I love you, right now, as you lie in this bed with lanky hair, bruises all over you, and bags under your eyes."

He blinks. "Flattering."

"I mean, I love you for *you*, Eden Prince. I started this pre-season quite literally trying *not* to date a hockey player. The only thing that matters is how you feel about it because I'll be fucking over the moon for at least one of my boyfriends not to be obsessed with his stick."

"Charming." D'Angelo crosses his arms.

Eden manages his first smile since Saturday night. "Then I'll have to find something else to do."

Shay looks like he's trying not to cry but he tilts up his chin. "Same, love. I always thought that I'd make a good mechanic."

D'Angelo actually growls.

"I don't think so." I point at Shay. "Fuck your pact. You heard D'Angelo. You belong in the Bay Rebels."

"But I made a promise..."

"Didn't you hear her?" Eden's gray eyes become molten, as he pins his brother in place with his stare. "*Fuck our pact*. I was never going to be

selected anyway. I wish that I'd been brave enough to say this to you before. See, it only took a whack on the head. I worked so hard, but you're the prodigy. Now, you can finally soar by yourself and reach your potential. It's going to be beautiful to stand on the sidelines, cheering you on and seeing you fly."

My eyes overflow with tears.

What Eden's just done? Letting his brother go with such selflessness?

It's the purest love that I've witnessed.

Shay's expression crumples, before he wraps his arms around Eden's neck carefully in order not to jostle him.

"But I can't," Shay's voice is muffled. "I'll be sent all over the place, and we'll be separated. We've never been apart. We promised that we wouldn't be. I won't leave you behind and abandon you."

"What if you didn't have to?" D'Angelo offers, quietly.

"What do you mean?" I demand.

Hope bursts through me.

Yet there isn't an official set up for relationships like ours. There's no way that Eden would be allowed to follow us around, once he's not selected for the team.

D'Angelo fiddles with his cufflinks. "I have two job offers, and there's no rush on accepting either of them. They're only an idea that..."

"You've been plotting over the last few days...?" Shay suggests but he's beaming like he already believes in D'Angelo's ability to save his brother and him.

D'Angelo smirks. "Stimulating as phone games and crosswords are, I needed something else to occupy my mind. I'm not in a romantic relationship with Eden, despite our setup, so it doesn't feel inappropriate for me to suggest this. I do volunteer work in a sports charity in Freedom but in fact, what isn't known, is that I'm its founder and anonymous backer. It's for disadvantaged teenagers, who otherwise, would never be able to see inside a gym or experience different sports. I've needed to find someone to help with the extra administrative work for a while."

"You know," I tilt my head, "considering that I've been trying to rehabilitate your image, you could have told me this sooner."

Of course, *Dad* told me, but it's interesting that D'Angelo didn't.

D'Angelo frowns. "I don't want to use the charity like that."

Warmth unfurls through me.

“You really are an angel, Jude,” I murmur. “You simply hide it well.”

“Are you offering out of pity?” Eden demands.

“Pity isn’t my style. Skating saved my life, and I know that it did the same for you. You’re not some rich, entitled kid like many players. You’ll understand the teenagers in the program. Also, you can do the admin from home mostly, so you can be around like an emotional support brother, for Shay.”

Shay bounces in excitement on the bed, and this time Eden can’t hide the wince. “Whoops, sorry.”

“Can I think about it?” Eden asks.

“Of course, you don’t need to decide anything straightaway. I’m only throwing out ideas.” D’Angelo cocks his head. “No matter if I employed you, nothing would change between us at home.”

Home.

The word strikes me, deep inside.

It appears to hit Eden as hard, and his expression instantly softens.

“Really?” He checks again.

“Really,” D’Angelo confirms. “I promise, I won’t be a tyrant. You can tell on me to our sweet principessa here, if I am. The fear of that will keep me in line.”

I can’t help giggling at the thought that D’Angelo would ever behave out of *fear* of me. Then I see the sincerity in his eyes, and it surprises me.

He wouldn’t behave out of fear like he’s joking. But he would because he doesn’t want to let me down.

It makes me thrum with joy and something else, a deep contentment and sense of safety, that someone values being with me so much.

Plus, that they value my respect.

Eden relaxes with relief. “Good. But I will want to work remotely. This will be Shay’s first season. I won’t leave his side.”

Shay waves his hand around excitedly. “What’s the second job?”

Now D’Angelo does look smug. “This is how you’ll be able not to leave Shay’s side. Remember you called me wealthy, before? Well, I am. I simply don’t choose to waltz around with a lot of staff. But I could.”

“I’m not being your butler,” Eden says with a straight face. “Or a maid.”

Pity.

He’d look incredible in either outfit.

“But you could be my assistant,” D’Angelo replies with a wicked smile.

“And that role can mean anything I want it to, including needing you at practices, appointments, and attending games, home and away. Now, all Shay and I need to do is play like devils on Saturday to make sure that we don’t lose our places in the Bay Rebels. Because now, we’re playing for all of our futures.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



Locker Room, Rebel Arena

“*I* shouldn’t be in here.” Anxiety skyrockets through me. “The rest of the team will be coming into the locker room at any moment, then there will be lots of...naked parts...waving around, a serious breach of pretty much every code of conduct in my contract, and the scandal of all scandals. I can see the headline now: Disgraced Coach McKenna’s Sex-crazed Daughter Caught in Full Team Orgy.”

Shay grins. “Oh, sounds like fun, love.”

D’Angelo frowns, possessively wrapping his arm around my middle, while snagging Shay by his team tie to yank him closer. “We can’t have that. I’ve had a few wild orgies in my time, but now, I’m faithful to the woman and man who I love. And *no one* is touching them with *naked parts* or otherwise.”

Both D’Angelo and Shay are dressed in matching navy suits with arctic blue waistcoats.

They look stunning: dramatic opposites who fit together.

D’Angelo insisted that I wear my favorite dress, which is the gorgeous, off the shoulder floor length emerald dress with a slit up the thigh that I picked out for my first date with D’Angelo. He’d given a small, pleased smile, when I’d chosen it.

“You’re our PR Director,” D’Angelo pointed out. “You know how many news crews and journalists will be out there, filming this and wanting quotes

about the Bay Rebels and Eden. You need to look in control. Plus, you want to show the world just how amazing you look, now that you're not with that asshole, Wilder. He's made everyone think that you're nothing — broken — without him. You're going to show them that they're wrong." Then his expression darkened. "And don't you want to show *him* that too?"

I do.

I want to show Wilder how good I look.

I want to show him that I'm wearing a dress that he didn't pick out for me, but which I chose myself.

I want to show him that I have a career now.

I want to show him that I'm happy.

Because the team that was selected to play the Bay Rebels for this crucial final match is Wilder's team, The Pittsburgh Penguins.

Wilder is D'Angelo's rival.

My ex.

It literally couldn't get worse, right?

"Then why have you smuggled me into the locker room? I'm not against trying some exhibitionism, if you're thinking about sneaking forbidden fun with the risk of being caught, but do you really think this is the best time to try it?" I demand, looking around. "It's Saturday night. This is the most important game of your lives so far, and we have to face my dick of an ex as well."

The Bay Rebels' locker room is state of the art. It's lit with neon, blue lighting that circles the floor and ceiling. A black bench runs down the center of the room.

The walls are lined with stalls. The players' equipment is hung up on each stall: pads, helmets, skates, and jerseys.

An archway in the corner leads through to a large set of gleaming showers.

My nose wrinkles at the disgusting chemical stench of rubber mixed with sweat and the mildew stink of hockey equipment.

Locker rooms are not romantic places for fucking.

Trust me. It's one of the reasons that *stinking gear* is in my Guide.

"Our team aren't dicks like Wilder is," D'Angelo replies. "They've been deeply affected by what happened to Eden and they want to support Shay in any way that they can. They know that you're directly managing and helping us. As Captain, when I asked for us to have five minute's privacy in here,

where the press won't be looking for us, of course they gave it to us."

My eyes widen, and I relax into his hold, resting my head on his chest. "Your team truly are like brothers, even when they're competing for places. I'm impressed."

"It all comes from the ethos of the Captain," Shay says, admiringly. "They model themselves on how Jude behaves. If he was toxic, then the team would be too."

D'Angelo lets go of Shay's tie to smooth it down, smartening it up again. "Remember that."

Shay nods.

"Coach knows how important this game is." D'Angelo twists me, and my breath rushes from me. He cages me against a metal locker. His piercing gaze holds mine. "He's been drilling us on strategy more than for any other game that I've played in. It's like a fire's been lit under him, and that's for you, principessa. He knows that we're playing Wilder, and he wants us to kick his ass for *you* too. I respect the Pittsburgh Penguins. The team themselves are good guys, as well as being outstanding competition. It's Wilder, their Captain, who's the asshole."

"Dad sent me a text this morning," I reply. "He was just checking in on me, but I know that it was because of Wilder."

"Your phone went off more than once," Shay points out.

Damn him for being so adorably observant.

"That was Cody and Neve," I reply. "They've been asking after Eden every day, especially now that he's settled back into the house with us. Plus, they wanted to check that I was going to be able to deal with this whole evening without, you know, breaking down, setting fire to Wilder's equipment, or drawing dancing dicks on his stick."

D'Angelo blinks. "Is it better if I don't ask?"

"Probably."

Shay strolls to lean against the locker, exchanging a glance with D'Angelo. "So, none of those texts were from your stalker ex?"

It feels like I've been punched in the gut.

I pale, before squirming out from underneath D'Angelo to get some distance from the guys.

I wave my finger around angrily, as my cheeks heat like somehow I can turn this around to them doing something wrong.

I can, right?

“How do you know about that?” I demand, waving my finger even more angrily. “You better not have looked at my phone and violated my—”

“Violating sounds sexy when you say it looking like an angry fox,” D’Angelo drawls. “But no, neither of us broke your trust. Possibly, you should have guessed that if you share something so important as being stalked and harassed by your ex-husband with the security team, who in turn share it with the coach and senior staff, that as captain, I’ll be told as well.”

“Oh,” I deflate. “And I guess that you told...?”

I gesture at Shay.

D’Angelo shrugs. “How could we protect you, if we didn’t all know? Don’t worry, I’m not going to give you a hard time about not telling us. We agreed to share what we could. I imagine that this felt—”

“I wouldn’t let that asshole steal anything else from you.” I march toward D’Angelo, and his eyes widen in shock. “I thought that if I told you and risked your focus on the training camp or these games, then Wilder would have stolen yet one more thing from you. That’s why I didn’t tell you.”

“Now that’s romantic.” Shay smiles. “Go on, give her the gift.”

D’Angelo rolls his eyes in frustration. “I’m going to need to teach you the skill of timing.”

Shay stretches, rolling his shoulders. “It won’t stick.”

D’Angelo pulls a pretty velvet box out of his pocket, which is bound by an emerald ribbon.

Excited, I raise my hands, and he places it into my palms. “Thank you.”

I pull the ribbon off and open the box.

Inside, lies a glistening gold pendant of a hockey jersey.

“Why?” I ask.

“We wanted to give you something of ours,” Shay replies. “But people can’t know that we’re together. It’s shattering my heart, love.”

“I’ve always had a fantasy about choosing some lucky woman from the crowd and giving her my jersey,” D’Angelo adds with just enough of a quirk to his lips that I can’t tell whether he’s joking or not.

“It was Eden’s idea. He drew the picture for the jeweler.” Shay moves behind me, lifting up my long hair.

My heart’s beating hard, and my stomach is fluttery.

D’Angelo lifts the pendant on its chain out of the box. His cheek brushes against mine, as he leans forward to do it up around my neck for me.

I hold my breath, trying to stand still.

When the pendant settles around my neck, I brush my thumb over it.

It feels like having all my men always with me, even when they're in public or on the ice.

That Eden was brave enough, even in the midst of the process of accepting his loss and healing from that, to choose this for his twin to give me, makes it even more special.

Shay lets my hair drop. "Do you like it?"

I hate that he sounds unsure.

"I love it." I meet D'Angelo's eyes. I want him to hear this. "And knowing that I'm wearing your jewelry — jersey — because I choose to and love you, when I have to see my asshole ex for the first time again, makes me feel even stronger."

D'Angelo smiles. "That may be the only thing that stops me smashing in his smug face."

Shay prowls to his stall, resting his hand on the helmet. "I don't think that anything can stop me."

"Shay," I say, "you'd better control yourself. Dad will be making selections after this game. All your focus must be on scoring, team work, and following any strategy and tactics that Dad gave you. Impress him. The press' sympathy for Eden hasn't helped with their attitude toward this game."

D'Angelo's lips twist. "You mean how they've been playing it for laughs. Perhaps, journalists are thwarted stand-up comics."

"Wilder's been feeding the fire. In his last interview, he called it: *The Winners vs the Losers*."

D'Angelo's eyes flash. "I saw that one. It was charming. I believe that he once again called me the *loser captain of the Misfits* and added that I was a *washed up has-been*, who was a *danger on the ice* because I *couldn't even keep my team safe*."

Shay's eyes become molten with rage. "That fucking bastard. How dare he use what happened to Eden to smear you? None of it was your fault. How can he use a fellow player's injury to score fucking points?"

"Welcome to the world of my ex," I reply. "It's what he's like. I managed to counter his interview, however, by spinning it with the David vs Goliath angle. He won't have been expecting that. I wish that I could have seen his face, when his ploy backfired in his mean face. The press love to frame things like that, and fans in general love to root for the little guy."

"Lucky for us." Shay pulls off his tie with angry motions.

“We’re going to be out there, playing with zero expectations,” D’Angelo smirks, “while Wilder has heaped all the pressure onto his own team. Principessa, you’re so much smarter than that idiot. It’s going to be beautiful to watch him finally realize it.”

I flush, as warmth from his praise rushes through me.

I’m not used to it.

Dad’s not a man who liberally praises.

He’s had to deal with a lot in his own life, including Mom’s death, and raising us two kids by himself. He struggles to show his positive emotions with words.

He expects, as he does with his own team, good performances each time.

Being around these men who can praise me, has made me blossom in a way that I didn’t know I could either.

“Eden’s watching the game from his bed at home.” Shay bites his lip. “I set him up with beer and nachos. This will still be agony for him, however, no matter what happens. We *have* to win this. We need to do this for Eden.”

Suddenly, the room fills with tension.

We all know what the stakes are.

Eden has already lost his hockey career but he can still work at the rink as D’Angelo’s assistant and at the sports charity.

But only if D’Angelo retains his place as captain.

Shay’s place is definitely not secure.

This is the game that both my men need to put everything into.

“I know that you can do this.” I hold out my hands, and both D’Angelo and Shay rush across the room to take one of them. “You can do it for Eden. You can do it to kick Wilder in the metaphorical balls. And most importantly, you can do it for yourselves. We’re not losing our lives and home together.”

“Hello, birdie,” an aristocratic, sneering voice says from the doorway.

My blood runs cold.

Wilder!

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



Locker Room, Rebel Arena

“*W*ilder.” My heart beats as quickly as a humming bird in my chest. My hands tighten around D’Angelo’s, as well as Shay’s. I must be hurting them with how hard I’m clinging onto them, but they don’t complain. “What the fuck are you doing here? Have you wandered into the wrong changing room? Why didn’t security stop you?”

“That’s a rather rude way to greet me. But then, you never did have good manners, no matter how many times I bought you etiquette books.” Wilder lets the door close behind him with a bang.

I jump.

The door was locked. I know that it was.

There was a member of our team stationed outside there.

What the fuck is going on?

Wilder is the same age as me and is scarily large like a Viking with a beard.

He reminds me of a dark Thor.

I used to love that about him. Now, it simply worries me that he’s taller than D’Angelo.

Wilder’s eyes are gunmetal blue, and his champagne blond hair falls to his shoulders.

He’s wearing a black suit with a flashy yellow waistcoat and official Pittsburgh Penguin tie.

...Stalker NHL ex-husband with perfect abs but also, perfect lies...

He's here. But this time, I'm not avoiding the warning in my Guide.

My breathing becomes rapid, and my chest is rising and falling too fast.

I've seen this guy butt naked with his own hockey stick *up* that butt, hugging the toilet, as I held his long hair back, while he vomited after one too many champagnes, and farting like he was trying to compose a hit record.

After five years of married life, there aren't many intimate or embarrassing situations that I haven't seen him in.

After his controlling tirade of stalking since I left him, however, it's hard to remember the times that we were happy (and they did exist), or simply domestically getting on with his insanely busy schedule.

Instead, this first sight of him makes me shake.

It takes all my resolve to stand my ground.

I can feel the pendant at my throat, the grip of both my guys' hands, and the knowledge that there's no way I'm going to show Wilder that he can still intimidate me.

Or hurt D'Angelo.

Yet it's D'Angelo who takes a step protectively forward without dropping my hand.

After everything that I know Wilder has done to D'Angelo, that takes courage.

I shouldn't still be clinging to my guys but I can't help it.

"What a sweet picture. Also, you're wearing a beautiful dress. I'm not certain that style suits you though. It shows rather a lot of thigh, don't you think?" Wilder's gaze darts between us, and he crosses his muscled arms. I notice that he's blocking the exit. "I didn't expect to find you here. I've missed you so much, birdie."

In a twisted way, I'm pleased that he doesn't like my dress.

"You didn't expect to find Robyn here, huh?" D'Angelo says. "Then what *did* you expect, Talon? Because you'd have been just as unwelcome, if you'd discovered the rest of my team, getting ready for the game. Why don't you get lost then?"

Wilder ignores D'Angelo like he's too beneath his notice to even talk to.

Instead, he takes a step toward me. "You blocked me."

I freeze and I feel like I'm going to hurl.

I knew it.

He's the type to do something dramatic and fly into a narcissistic rage

because he's being ignored.

"You weren't getting the message that I didn't want to talk to you," I reply, struggling not to let my voice waver. This is my chance to say what I want to and I'm going to take it. "You cheated on *me*, Wilder. Cheated, plural. You took me for granted, didn't care about my pleasure, and acted like I didn't have a right to an independent life. On top of that, you lied about my best friend and broke both our hearts. I'm done with being manipulated. I see you for who you truly are now. I've moved on. I have a new job and home. I have friends who like me for who I am and not because I'm hanging off your arm. So, fucking leave me alone and move on yourself. It's what we agreed to in the divorce. If you don't, then this time I will involve lawyers and even cops, no matter the scandal."

I'm bracing myself for Wilder's rage.

D'Angelo and Shay both let go of my hands to stand in front of me like a shield.

To my surprise, Wilder merely smiles, fake and charming. "I can sleep with other women and still love you. I'd have thought that you understood this now. Your leaving has been the one stain on my golden career and reputation. Please, can't you see that I'm sincere? I can give you the world, but these losers play for a team that's never even made the playoffs. Look, I let you fly solo into the world with broken wings, so that you could see how much safer you were in my feathered nest."

I stare at him in shock.

A cold ball of worry is forming in my stomach.

Does he know about my full relationship with my men or is he only guessing?

"You let me divorce you to teach me a lesson?" I whisper.

The arrogant jerk.

Wilder rubs at his beard like the answer is obvious and not sociopathic. "We were young, when we got together. You didn't know what life could be like without me. Now, you do."

"Yes," I meet his gaze, "I do. *And I fucking love it.* So, get out, stay away from me, and never contact me again."

Wilder's smile dies. "Come over here and away from that..." He looks dismissively at D'Angelo like he's dirt. "...worthless fuck." D'Angelo's shoulders stiffen. "The way that you're huddling together, one would almost think that this club of losers were fucking my wife...excuse me, ex-wife. For

now.”

This isn't about loving me, it's about possessing me.

It always has been.

Wilder's gaze is too calculating.

My nerves are shredded.

D'Angelo's hands are balled into fists, and this time, it's Shay resting his hand on his arm to calm him. “Robyn told you to get out.”

Wilder squares his strong shoulders and looks even taller. “Are we getting all protective, Jude boy?”

“Don't call me that.” D'Angelo grits his teeth.

“Sorry, that's one of the nicknames you never liked the rest of the college team calling you, isn't it?” Wilder says, managing to sound both entirely non apologetic and condescending at the same time. “Along with Mr. Stick Up His Ass? Limp Stick? Never Been Pucked? Being Pucked? Or my personal favorite because of its simple brevity: *Loser*? How interesting that it's stuck with you all the way through your career. Some things must simply be fated.”

I can see how hard D'Angelo is working not to let his shoulders slump. His hand is twitching like he needs to adjust his cufflinks, ritualistically.

I bristle, peering past D'Angelo's shoulder to glare at Wilder. “You're right about fate. After all, do you know what your name is on my phone? *The Mistake*. See, fate.”

The way that the smile is wiped off Wilder's smug face is priceless.

“Wow, he really is a bastard.” Shay stands solidly at D'Angelo's shoulder. “And honestly, not as handsome as he looks in those magazine spreads that he's so keen on. I bet that they're airbrushed.”

Wilder is vain enough to touch his hair, as if checking that it's pristine.

Shay's expression becomes dangerous.

I'm beginning to learn that it may be good to keep a golden retriever personality as a friend or lover. They're also a good guard dog, if anyone attacks you.

“I bet your dad really loves you,” Shay says like it's an insult. “In fact, I bet that you had a perfect childhood. Your parents have always told you how proud they are of you, right?”

I try not to laugh.

Wilder is looking freaked out. “Stop...whatever this is.”

“I'm sure that your mum supports you. She calls you before every game. She does, doesn't she?”

“I said, fucking stop it!” When Wilder storms across the locker room, D’Angelo immediately steps forward and presses his hand on his chest to hold him back.

“Not. One. More. Step,” D’Angelo says, coldly.

I can’t stop the tremor that’s running through me. Sweat is dripping down the back of my neck.

Wilder is so much larger than D’Angelo.

He’s a mountain of a man.

I used to be proud of the fact that he was always the largest man on the ice, when I watched him play. Now, I hate that he’s used his physicality all his life to be a bully.

Wilder bats D’Angelo’s hand away.

Wilder’s eyes flash with rage. “Are you seriously going to pretend that you’re an Alpha male, Jude boy? Standing there with some rookie, who’s even smaller than you, like you can protect the woman I love? *You?* I could snap both of you in half without breaking a sweat.” He gives a nasty smile. “I have already. I’m sure that you haven’t told my birdie that I left you broken on the floor of the team bus, or how we had such fun in your hazing with a belt, wooden coat hanger, and rope.”

“That’s enough.” Shay launches himself forward, and D’Angelo catches him, holding him back with his arms around his heaving chest.

“It’s all right,” D’Angelo says, coolly.

But I know him well enough to see the pain that he’s hiding.

I hate knowing the hazing that happened to him.

It was going on, while D’Angelo and I were friends, chatting late into the night and having our comedy movie marathons, and while D’Angelo was comforting me over my own fears and worries.

Yet he hid it from me.

Why didn’t he tell me?

My eyes burn with tears.

“It’s not all right,” I whisper.

D’Angelo casts me a surprised look. “It’s in the past. Nothing that Wilder and his bullies could do to me, no matter how sadistic their sick little minds were, could break me. Now, I’m a fully grown man. He can’t touch me.”

And I have you.

He can’t say it, but we both hear it.

Unfortunately, I also know why Wilder couldn’t truly hurt D’Angelo.

D'Angelo had already been broken by his own family and the private boarding college for troubled teens, where he suffered.

We're all survivors in our own ways.

I don't care if that makes people label us misfits or losers.

Shay named us the *rebels*.

Now, we're stronger than Wilder will ever understand.

Together?

We're fucking unbreakable.

"That doesn't make him less of a man." I'm vibrating with rage. "It makes you and every other elitist son of a bitch who joined in or cheered it on less of one."

"Where's the security team?" Shay shrugs out of D'Angelo's hold. "How did this hulking bastard even get in here? It's not like he's hard to miss."

Adrenaline rushes through me. "What's going on, Wilder?"

Wilder looks smug. "You have too much faith in the wrong people. You always were too naïve and easy to trick, birdie. Don't look like that. Your klutzy innocence is actually what made me fall for you. It's what I like best. But obviously, it makes you vulnerable."

I feel each word like a blow.

"I, on the other hand, am a cynical asshole." D'Angelo reaches into his pocket and pulls out his iPhone. "So, I'll simply call the cops now."

Wilder chuckles. "You're still bad at bluffing, I see. If you do that, you condemn all of our careers."

D'Angelo's lips pinch. "I'm not bluffing."

Wilder pales, before lightning fast, smashing the phone out of D'Angelo's hand.

I gasp, as the phone shatters on the floor.

"You're paying for that," D'Angelo growls.

"Bill me." Wilder holds up his hand to stop Shay pulling out his own phone. "I will say this for you, your new home has good taste. I love the beams and marble countertops in the kitchen and the grand lounge is beautiful. Purple can be a difficult color to pull off but not in this case."

"What did you say?" I whisper.

My skin goosebumps.

Is he guessing? Has someone on the security team been bribed to give him these details?

Wilder excels at mind games.

D'Angelo and Shay both look ashen but on high alert, watching Wilder, who's circling us like a predator.

"But of course, it's that versatile, large bed in your room, birdie, which I love the most. I could bind you to it..."

My skin is crawling.

Fear coils through me. It chokes me.

"He's been watching." D'Angelo's voice is faint. "Are you watching now?"

Unexpectedly, Shay lets out a yell and leaps at Wilder.

Taken by surprise, Shay is able to snatch Wilder by the collar and shake him.

"Is he safe?" Shay tries to push Wilder back but can't move him. "If you've hurt my twin, or are threatening him, then I swear, I will fucking kill you."

Eden is alone in that house, isolated in the mountains.

He's still got a busted shoulder and ribs.

And apparently, the security team can't be trusted because at least one is on Wilder's payroll.

I'm breathing so fast that I feel like I may hyperventilate.

"Talon, this is between us," D'Angelo speaks quickly, "it always has been. If you want to hurt me, then let's do it. But don't bring these rookies into it. They have nothing to do with—"

"But they do, don't they?" Wilder shoves Shay, sending him tumbling to the floor.

Shay hisses in pain.

I rush forward, blocking Wilder from getting to Shay again.

D'Angelo immediately kneels next to Shay. "Are you okay?"

Shay nods but he doesn't look away from Wilder.

He looks like he's shaking apart. "He has Eden."

"And he knows that he better not do anything to him." D'Angelo's voice is deadly, as he helps Shay back to his feet.

"How chivalrous." Wilder's gunmetal eyes settle on me disconcertingly. "I wouldn't unfairly hurt the precious concussed *royal twin* of the press."

And that does it.

I refuse to be frightened of this bully any longer.

Wilder works to find our weaknesses and then uses them against us.

But yeah, he may mock my press spin, but it's worked so far, and I'm

here with the men who I love, while he's alone.

He only knows how to destroy and not how to have a functional relationship.

It's clear who's the true loser here.

"If you lay another hand on these men," I say, deathly cold, "then I'll destroy you. You know that I have enough dirt on you from the years that we were married and about your cheating. I also have enough friendly contacts in the press to bury you. I won't care if you destroy me too."

Wilder's smile freezes. "So fierce. It's almost like you love these men."

He knows.

By D'Angelo and Shay's expressions, they realize it at the same moment.

Wilder adjusts his tie. "I haven't been watching inside your home, by the way. I am a busy man. I'm captain of one of the top teams, after all. But my man on the inside put up secret cameras with the direction to send me stills of anything interesting. I was only being protective of you, since you were living with three men. But fuck, I didn't expect the stills to be so interesting."

"Say it," D'Angelo snarls. "You're not afraid to illegally spy and be a pervert but you can still act superior."

Shay moves to my side, sliding his arm around my waist, and I only notice then that my knees have been about to buckle.

But Shay did.

"We'll get through this," Shay whispers.

"Call the cops." A tear chases down my cheek. I feel violated. "Right now."

Shay nods.

"Wait." Wilder looks panicked like he didn't expect that reaction. "You could. But how would it look in the press? You were under a non-fraternization contract. Copies of these photographs will be leaked everywhere, and you know, you can never get everything deleted, once it's out on the web. You guys certainly know how to be creative together in the bedroom. Do your families know about the whole poly thing? Are you ready for the world to? And Shay, what about *your* family, do they know that you're bisexual? You haven't come out yet, have you? I guess that it'll be one way for them to find out, looking at a picture of your mouth around another man's..."

He trails off.

Now, it's Shay who looks like his knees may buckle, and I'm glad that I

have my arms around him.

D'Angelo has reached his snapping point, however, triggered by Wilder.

He roars, rushing Wilder with enough momentum to ram him into the lockers with a clang, denting them.

Then he knees him in the balls.

“Yes,” I hiss.

Wilder doubles over but he still manages to rasp out, “Assault me again. Then threaten to call the cops because I can’t wait for us to share a jail cell.”

Instantly, D'Angelo backs away from Wilder.

He’s been played.

D'Angelo throws Shay and me an apologetic glance.

But I get it.

Wilder knows how to push everyone’s buttons.

But now, he’s got intimate photographs of us, which prove that we’re in a relationship.

It’s a relationship, which is still fragile and new. I’ve spent a life hounded by the press and I can’t bear to have something so special ripped apart by the way that it’s thrown into the world.

Shay doesn’t deserve to be forced into labeling himself either, while he’s still in the beautiful stage of discovering himself.

We’re trapped.

Unless, we play along.

My shoulders slump in pretend defeat. “What do you want?”

Wilder’s eyes brighten. “Beyond your love, I want us to have a bet on the outcome of this game. You see, I can be fair and I also love taking risks.”

That’s true.

Wilder would bet on anything — the higher the stakes the better.

He loves the thrill and the danger.

“You could call the cops and mire all of us in scandal for the rest of our lives, but you saw what that did to your dad (and you know what it’d do to him to be dragged down by it again). It’d finish off the Bay Rebels. Isn’t your brother working here too?”

Wilder looks at me pointedly.

I hate him for knowing my weak spots.

“What’s the bet?” Shay tries to smile. “I love them.”

“It’s not with you,” Wilder replies, sharply. “It’s with my ex wife and her best friend from college, with whom she’s betraying me.”

D'Angelo exchanges a glance with me.

So, that's what this is really about.

"But you involved me," Shay straightens, "the moment that you threatened my brother, took photos of me without my consent, *and fucking pressured me to out myself.*"

Wilder waves his hand. "Collateral damage."

D'Angelo steps closer to Wilder. "If this is about me, then stop hurting other people to get to me. What are the stakes?"

"If my team and I win, then I get to go public with the photographs, without you accusing me of a crime." Wilder's gaze darts to me, and my stomach clenches.

Asshole.

"What if my team and I win?" D'Angelo is tapping his fingers in rhythmic patterns of three on his forearm, but his voice is steady.

"In that unlikely event..." Wilder hesitates, and just for a moment, I read something in his expression that I never expected to see. Wait, in his own way, does he truly love me? "If you win, I promise never to contact Ryn again, if that's what she wants."

"It is," I say, hurriedly.

"I'll destroy all versions of the photographs, including the digital ones."

D'Angelo catches my gaze. "We'll do whatever you decide on this. I'd do anything to keep those photos of you off the web and protect your privacy from the press. I wish that I could keep you all safe."

I smile at D'Angelo because he means that.

He's not thinking of himself, only the rest of us.

"How do I know that you'll stick to what you say, Wilder?" I demand.

"You don't," he agrees. "You know, however, that I keep to the honor code of bets. And really, what choice do you have?"

The rest of us exchange pensive glances.

D'Angelo crosses his arms. "I kept evidence from our time in college, including my own set of photographs, messages, and notes. I'm glad that you're so proud of how you bullied and hazed me because if you go back on what we've agreed, then I'll go public with this evidence. Do you understand?"

Wilder looks shocked but he nods.

I know Wilder.

He's only making this bet, however, because he's definite that he's going

to win on the ice tonight.

He's been shaking up Shay and D'Angelo in every way that he can, and they're the best players on the team by a long way.

The Penguins already heavily outmatch the Bay Rebels.

To Wilder, the outcome is already inevitable.

What he's doing now, which seems like a mercy, is just like an ice hockey version of *The Hunger Games*.

It's another mind game.

Mindfuck.

Cruelty.

But really, he's the idiot.

For the first time, I need to suppress my smile.

Because as much as Wilder's dismissed my new PR role, he's fallen for my David vs Goliath spin in the press.

With my men in the Bay Rebels, and some rookies in the Pittsburgh Penguins, the difference isn't that great between the teams.

No one has seen Shay at his peak.

Wilder is in for a shock.

Plus, the incentive that Wilder has just given my guys isn't going to rattle them. They're fucking stronger than he'll ever know.

"This has always been about destroying D'Angelo, hasn't it?" Somehow, the realization doesn't hurt like I thought it would. "I was a pawn. Why do you hate him?"

Wilder's brow furrows with surprise. "You used to be easier to manipulate. I hated him from the moment that I met him in college as the scholarship boy, with his cheap clothes and inability to pay for meals off campus, who just showed up like he had a right to be there. Like he had a right to the praise and attention."

"He was better than you." Shay's eyes widen with understanding and then fury. "You tormented him then, and are doing this now, because your cock's so small, you couldn't handle the fact that he turned up and was effortlessly better than you. *He made you look average.*"

D'Angelo's cheeks tint pink, and he looks confident and in control again.

He casts a loving look at Shay, who appears energized and triumphant.

Excitement thrums through me.

They believe in each other too.

It's Wilder who looks average in every fucking way.

Wilder opens and closes his mouth, finally silenced.

Because being mediocre, not special, when he's such a peacock...?

That's his weakness.

D'Angelo swaggers toward Shay and me, wrapping us in his arms. He's warm and smells freshly masculine.

Perfect.

"We won't let Wilder destroy us," D'Angelo murmurs, "your dad's second chance, or the Bay Rebels. We'll play tonight. We'll win. And we'll free you from that psycho, principessa, forever."

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Rebel Arena, Freedom

“**S**core, score, score,” I chant under my breath like any of the Bay Rebels can actually hear me amidst the roar of the crowd and the intensity of the game.

I like to think that they can.

I mean, whenever you scream advice at athletes on the television, they can definitely hear your armchair expert ranting.

Plus, they definitely take it, which is why they win.

Right?

I glance up at the huge screen, which hangs above the arena, when it flashes the score:

3 — 3

It’s so fucking close.

Too close.

My pulse is pounding. I’m shaking.

I pace up and down in front of the metal bench beside the rink with my hand wrapped around the jersey pendant that the guys gave to me like it’s a good luck charm.

D’Angelo is superstitious, and at times like this, so am I.

I’ve been screaming so much that my throat is raw.

I glance back at the scoreboard again.

“You know, looking at that score won’t nudge it to go up.” Neve stands

up from the bench and strolls to slouch next to the boards.

“As long as you can’t prove that theory,” I reply, “I’m going to keep trying. I’d strip naked and stand on the bench singing ABBA, if there was even a tiny chance that’d help.”

In reality, I’ve never felt this helpless.

I know that this is all down to the guys on the ice now.

I must trust them.

The atmosphere in the arena is electric.

There are just as many news crews and journalists here, as I expected there to be, and equally as many local fans excited to see the Pittsburgh Penguins and their *friendly rivalry* play out with their own captain, since it’s been playing out in the press.

To me, that’s a toxic mix.

Neve scrunches up her nose. “Ballsy offer, Robyn Hood. But I’d rather not see your ass...again.”

I stop pacing to give her the finger. “We agreed to never talk about that wardrobe malfunction incident.”

I look around long enough to check that no camera crews caught *that*.

Neve laughs.

She’s wearing her long, floor length military black coat done up tightly, along with matching gloves. She wound her **FALL OUT BOY** scarf around my neck earlier, but I’ve made certain that my pendant is still showing.

I forgot all about keeping warm rink side after my faceoff with Wilder.

It drove everything from my mind, apart from the need to win this bet.

My life and future, along with my guys’, rests on the final five minutes of this ice hockey game.

I’ve never been this tense.

I want to hurl.

Neve reaches out, brushing her hand over the back of mine. “Are you holding onto a talisman against evil, RH? Because it didn’t work.”

She glares at Wilder, who’s skating aggressively across the rink.

He’s the tallest man out there, and his long blond hair flies out from underneath his helmet.

My expression sours, as the crowd cheers for him, even as he checks a Bay Rebels defenseman hard enough to spin him into the boards, rattling the glass.

Wilder’s a dirty player, using the advantage of his height and physical

strength to intimidate and beat other players into submission.

Yet he can't skate as fast as Shay.

He can't score like he can.

He's not as good a tactician as D'Angelo.

He can't pull a team together like he can.

D'Angelo and Shay are playing with a powerful focus.

My glaze slides to them, and I tighten my hand around the pendant.

They look like fucking gods.

An ice prince and his angel.

And they're mine.

They're fighting for all of us.

I swallow, battling back my tears.

They can do this.

They have to.

I've never seen two talented players with such potential playing with every shred of energy and commitment like this before.

Yet it's more than that.

They're playing with fear, desperation, and love.

It's mesmerizing to watch.

I will never forget Wilder's growing shock and frustration, when he realized that he'd wildly underestimated the challenge they posed.

David has been fighting back against Goliath.

Wilder's rage at knowing that he'd been tricked by people who he believed to be *beneath* him was delicious.

"I wish that it had kept that monster a million miles away from me," I reply. "But no magic can keep that asshole away. Perhaps, something else can."

Like winning this bet.

I don't know if Wilder will honor it, but he does have an honor code about bets, and I'm damn sure that he won't want the truth about the hazing to come out.

This is my only chance to get him to stop contacting me without the photographs being exposed to the world.

I'd do anything to stop that happening.

None of my guys wanted to play sport to be famous or for the celebrity.

I certainly never wanted my entire life to be lived under everyone else's scrutiny and judgment. I can't even have personal social media pages. It's too

risky, and everything has to be *on brand*.

I was born into this and I studied PR to make the best of my situation.

If I had to live with this, then I may as well know how to protect myself and others.

I'm going to protect my current clients, who are D'Angelo and the twins.

But clearly, I suck.

Because as much as I've improved their image and protected them from press disasters, they're now laid open to the worst possible invasion of their privacy.

Plus, it's happened because of my own hot mess of a private life.

My hands clench into fists, as I glower at Wilder.

This is my chance for a fresh life.

I've been working hard for it.

I love my men.

And they love me.

I'm going to make certain that Wilder pays for trying to destroy this for D'Angelo and me.

Neve arches her brow. "What are you thinking about? You're wearing my expression, when someone oversteps the boundaries with Tom. He's my favorite fierce but tiny bartender, and a lot of people want to fuck the bartender, you know? But they have me to get through." She leans closer, jerking her head toward Wilder. "I know where to bury a body."

I'm not sure that she's joking.

Always make certain that your best friend knows where to bury a body.

"Thanks." I try to smile. "I may need to know that later."

That's not too much of a stretch.

When she nods, I'm still not sure whether she's joking or not. "Mike called in the last intermission."

Fear rushes through me, and I let go of the pendant to grasp her arm. "Is Eden safe?"

Neve shakes me off. "He's not safe from being fussed over by Mike or probably forced to eat some boring shit like hummus, while he's watching the game. But yeah, relax, RH. Mike drove to Captain's Hall and collected Eden to take him back to stay with him at your brother's place. Are you still not going to tell me why?"

I shake my head. "Not now. It's complicated. But Eden was in danger."

Neve's eyes narrow at Wilder. "Because of that asshole, right? I also

know how to wield a shovel, since he totally ignored the shovel talk that I gave him on your wedding day.”

That speech had been in front of everybody just before the cutting of the cake.

Ironically, I should have paid more attention to it, and Wilder definitely should have done.

“Hmm.” Distracted, I watch as Wilder shoulder checks the same defenseman again.

It’s one of the rookies, who took Eden’s place. I don’t know him. He’s half Wilder’s size.

Is Wilder trying to injure him?

After what happened to their teammate only a couple of weeks ago, it’s more than just a dick move.

It’s sick.

The crowd is watching in hushed, shocked silence now.

Some are booing.

Wilder must be obsessed.

Doesn’t he realize that he’s tarnishing his own reputation?

The world is watching. No one being over aggressive in this pre-season game on a team who’s already had a shocking incidence of violence against one of their own, leading to the loss of their entire career, is going to be seen as the *golden boy*.

There’s no way that Wilder can win this game now.

He could score a goal every ten seconds and he’d still be seen as the villain.

This is revenge.

Worried, I glance across at Shay, who has the puck and is passing to D’Angelo.

Luckily, Shay hasn’t reacted so far to Wilder’s behavior.

Then my eyes widen. “Shit.”

Wilder is deliberately trying to recreate what happened in the game, when Eden was so badly injured.

Of course he is.

He can’t win this game by fair means, so he’s waging psychological warfare on Shay.

“Please,” I whisper.

I’m surprised, when Neve’s hand closes around mine.

It's not like her.

I glance at her, and she gives me a lopsided smile. "They'll win, then we'll bury the body, okay?"

It shocks a laugh from me. "Okay."

My gaze snaps back to the rink.

One minute...

The score's still **3 — 3**.

D'Angelo weaves around the rival players toward the goal.

Wilder slams the defenseman into the boards again.

To my shock, three of his own team skate toward Wilder with grim expressions, abandoning their positions.

I can see Wilder screaming at his Pittsburgh Penguin teammates, as spittle sprays from his mouth.

He's their captain.

But they ignore him like he's nobody or possibly, somebody who they despise.

They drag Wilder away from the defenseman who he's attacking.

They hold him by his arms and the front of his jersey, which rips, as he struggles.

The crowd cheer at his humiliation.

If he tries to shame D'Angelo and Shay now by posting those pictures, he won't be wrecking their careers.

Instead, he'll end his own career and be charged with a shopping list of crimes.

Sympathy for the Bay Rebels is at an all-time high.

It's been turned around within a matter of weeks.

By acting the bully tonight, Wilder can't pretend that exposing a private relationship is in the public's interest.

I *am* smarter than my ex, and that feels good.

"Well," Neve whistles, "that's not something you see every day. I may have to stop hating penguins."

"You mean the Pittsburgh Penguins?"

"Nope, penguins, the evil assholes. The horny fuckers will stick their dicks in *anything*, even inanimate objects. Actually, that does sound like Wilder."

I turn to watch as D'Angelo grins at Shay.

Then D'Angelo glances at me, and just for one moment, our gazes meet.

I know then.

Everything that's happened tonight — how hard they've played and with such stunning beauty on the ice — has been for all of us.

For our new family.

The goal is now undefended, apart from the goalie.

The Bay Rebels are going to do it.

Please, please, please.

The fans are howling, cheering, and roaring.

I'm frozen, unable to look away.

Thirty seconds.

“Shoot,” Neve screams. “Fucking shoot!”

D'Angelo passes to Shay.

Ten seconds.

Shay readies to shoot.

Don't miss.

The goalie scrambles to the side, trying to stop the puck.

Five seconds.

The puck hits the back of the net.

Shay scores.

Then sirens sound over the arena to end the game.

“They did it,” I whisper. “They won.”

The crowd erupts. Their hollers are deafening.

My knees buckle, but the rush of joy and adrenaline keeps me standing.

Neve is howling in victory. “Take that, evil penguins.”

I close my eyes just for one moment, then a smile spreads across my face. I allow Neve to pull me into her victory dance, as we jump up and down together.

Finally, I glance across at the benches with the other players and coaches.

They're celebrating, just as wildly as I am.

So is Dad.

It's amazing to see him smiling.

I want every camera here to capture that and show it all around America: Dad as the successful, happy coach.

Not the failure.

Reject.

Misfit.

But the coach of a team that's going places.

I'm shaking this time but with a mix of relief and intense emotion.

I glance back at the rink.

Wilder has been abandoned by his own team and has fallen to his knees like an abandoned toy in the center of the rink.

His shoulders are slumped, and his head hangs down.

He pulls off his gloves, hurling them down, before dragging his helmet off. I've never seen him looking truly defeated before.

My expression hardens.

I don't need to find somewhere to bury Wilder.

He's already buried himself.

Who's the *loser* now?

I let go of Neve's hand and rush to the glass, as D'Angelo and Shay skate toward me with their sticks raised in triumph.

We share a secret smile.

The cloud that's been over Shay, ever since Eden was taken into hospital, has lifted.

His smile is as bright as the sun.

D'Angelo skates close enough to Shay for their shoulders to brush.

D'Angelo looks powerful and in control of his entire team, as he has throughout the game.

More than that, he looks confident in a way that he hasn't before because he's defeated at least one of the demons from his past.

Both D'Angelo and I have faced a monster today.

A monster who has hurt us both.

We've not only survived, however, *we've fucking won.*

After such a star performance, Dad will have to select D'Angelo and Shay for the team.

The next challenge will be the season itself.

Because all this controversy will have firmly put the Bay Rebels under the scrutiny of the press, social media, and fans.

There will be expectations and pressure on this newest team in the NHL. This underdog, who bit back at their bully rival.

The narrative is already out there.

I rush forward, resting one hand on the glass and touching the other to my jersey pendant.

D'Angelo's expression softens.

I know what he wants to say to me but can't.

At least, not yet.

That's the next challenge too.

Shay and D'Angelo rest their gloved hands on the other side of the glass.

We may be divided still but we're also free now.

Free from Wilder.

Free from the fears of our pasts.

Free to continue with our found family that means the world to all of us.

Free to love.

And *that's* winning.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



Lounge, Captain's Hall

*I*t's Tuesday night, and I'm sprawled on the crushed velvet couch in the lounge in Captain's Hall, wearing only Eden's **CATTITUDE IS EVERYTHING** black t-shirt. I'm in my favorite position with my head resting on Eden's chest.

Eden's dressed in nothing but a pair of gray joggers. His sling has been covered in drawings of kittens drinking tea by someone.

Okay, by me.

Plus, the core team and staff of the Bay Rebels have signed the sling like it's a cast.

Eden actually smiled, when they knelt down one by one to sign it.

At first, when they traipsed into Tide Cottage, he was anxious and overwhelmed by so many people crowding around him.

Dad was firm that Eden was part of the pre-season, however, and had been in all of their hearts in the last game.

That was what being in the Bay Rebels was about.

It's moments like that, which make me forgive Dad for being a gruff dick.

I can still call him a dick, however, because even after the incredible game that Shay and D'Angelo played, he won't even tip me a wink by text emoji to at least put my mind at rest that he's picking them.

He has to, right?

After everything that we've been through...

After the game, I told Austin what had happened with Wilder, including about the photographs and the threats.

I thought that Austin would explode with rage on the spot. All his anger management training was sorely tested.

Wilder was lucky that he'd already been dragged away by his own coach, or Austin would have found a creative place to stick Wilder's hockey stick.

And Wilder wouldn't have found it so fun.

The headlines the next day, for once weren't negative about D'Angelo, but rather Wilder: **Bully Golden Boy Falls from Pedestal. Since Penguins Can't Fly, Is His Career Dead?**

I loved that headline the most.

But there were others, lots of them.

Plus, Austin spoke to Wilder's coach, who's an old friend of his. He kept my name out of it, but strongly suggested that he start an investigation into Wilder.

Stalking, harassment, filming without consent, and blackmail.

The fellow coach had been ashen by the end of that list. He promised to keep the conversation quiet but to open up his own investigation because if Wilder had done this once, then it was likely he'd been doing similar things to other people throughout his career.

It's never only one person.

Until then, Wilder has been suspended for his behavior during the game.

I'll take that.

Now, I'm warm, comfortable, and relaxed in Eden's arms.

Idly, I trace my finger up the stem of the black rose with spiky thorns, which winds around his forearm.

I understand it now, or at least, some of what it represents.

His pain, struggles, and survival.

How Eden's still blossomed, despite those who tried to make him wither to the ground, when he was small and struggling to grow up.

With this fresh setback, I also feel that he's going to be like the beautiful phoenix tattoo on his back; he'll come alive again from the ashes.

He'll be reborn into his new role and life.

I believe in this strong, brave man.

The silver moon shines through the windows over the purple and black furniture and in-built bookcases in the lounge. A roaring fire glows in the marble fireplace.

I wrinkle my nose at the smoky, sweet scent.

In the furthest corner of the room stands the Steinway grand piano.

Shay's wearing a scarlet t-shirt and black jeans and has been sitting at the piano for the last half an hour with an air of delighted mischief, whacking away at the keys like he's playing Mozart but is actually creating a racket.

He wasn't joking about not being able to play.

I wince.

Yet he looks so excited and happy like he's just been given a new toy. In fact he has because D'Angelo never allows him to touch his precious piano.

With the way that he's thumping at the keys, I totally get why.

Shay is only risking this because D'Angelo said that he was arranging a treat for me upstairs, which was going to take a while, and we needed to stay in here and not sneak and look.

He should have known not to trust a bored Shay with an hour on his hands.

Shay closes his eyes and throws his head back dramatically, as he slides his hands up and down the keys.

I wince again. "Wait, that's meant to be a D'Angelo impression, isn't it?"

Shay grins, opening his eyes to wink at me, before stretching his hands and starting to play again with an exaggerated flourish. "Do I make a good virtuoso, love? I think that I'm getting the hang of this. I just need to think Jude like thoughts: whiskey, suits, and spanking."

I snort. "It's you who's going to be spanked, if he finds you abusing his baby."

I found D'Angelo stroking the top of the piano and crooning to it as his *baby*, when he didn't think that anyone could see.

Shay looks hurt. "She's having consensual fun too. She likes being played a little more roughly, don't you, baby?"

There's no way that I'm continuing this fantasy fight over the love between a piano and my two men.

I cross my arms. "Well, it's your ass on the line."

"You know that I like to live dangerously."

"He's smiling," Eden's voice rumbles. "Let him enjoy himself."

Shay turns back to the piano, and I look up at Eden.

He's been quieter than normal, and I pay attention when he talks. He's always observant about his brother, and if what Shay needs is to brat a bit after the pressure and stress of Saturday night, then it's fine by me.

I nod.

Eden leans down and kisses me tenderly on the lips. “Are you okay with being here?”

I take a moment to think about it.

After Wilder’s violation with the cameras, it was hard to return to Captain’s Hall, but I won’t let him take this house from us.

It’s begun to feel like home.

“Cody and Mike were kind to let us live with them for a few days, and I know that Cody would have let us move in for as long as we wanted. He’s been in full-blown bro protective mode. He’ll always do what he needs to look out for me. But Dad brought in an independent company from outside Freedom to sweep Captain’s Hall for bugs and cameras. They were the best. We’re safe now. Then he had the entire security team interviewed.” I shudder. “I still can’t believe that the corrupt asshole in Wilder’s pay was the Head of Security, Mr. Hust. I trusted that dick. Dad’s had them all replaced and the new team are thoroughly vetted but still, none of them are going to be allowed inside the property.”

“But are you comfortable here?” He presses.

“Dad offered us a new house, but this one, it holds so many of our firsts. I don’t want to leave those memories behind yet. You love the forest here, Shay has trails that he rides his Harley on, and I know that D’Angelo finds it hard to adjust to new places, even if he won’t say it. So, I want to stay here. If the guys get picked for the team, I’m going to ask Dad, if we can live here together, during the home games.”

Eden arches his brow. “Will he allow that?”

“Well,” I smirk, “as the two players who will without doubt be at the heart of rehabilitating the team, and already at the center of a press whirlwind, they’ll need me to continue to *handle* them. A lot. Every day. And sometimes at night.”

“How terrible.” Eden kisses me again, stroking my cheek with his strong finger. “How will we survive such...a lot...of handling?”

“You’ll be okay. A gym bunny like you has stamina.”

Shay laughs.

“What the hell is this?” D’Angelo bellows, bursting into the lounge.

“W-what? H-huh? I’m not d-doing anything.” Shay breaks off playing the piano with a stutter of broken notes and tumbles off the stool onto his ass.

D’Angelo blinks at him. “What? I mean *this*.”

He brandishes a book above his head like it's a sword. He's shaking it so fast that it's not much more than a blur.

An arctic blue blur.

Oh, hell.

He couldn't have found *that*, could he?

I'd almost forgotten about it.

Dressed in his suit, D'Angelo looks like an ancient, wrathful god, and I'm about to be struck down.

No, no, no.

Finally, he holds the thin book out in front of him like he wants to explain what he's upset about but can't bear to say the words, and I get a proper look at it.

It's a pretty book, which could be hockey strategy, in arctic blue and white with lines, arrows, and arcs on the front.

There's also a crude puck and hockey stick.

I drew those.

I also wrote the scrawled words, which are along the top:

A GUIDE TO AVOID DATING HOCKEY PLAYERS

And those words now damn me.

Shit.

How did he find my Guide?

I scramble off Eden to stand and face him.

He was never meant to see the things that I'd written, when I still thought that he was an asshole.

I mean, right now he looks like exactly the grumpy asshole that I was writing about.

But still, he's *my* grumpy asshole.

Eden twists around to look over the back of the couch at D'Angelo. "What is it?"

"Nothing," I squeak. "Give that back."

I rush to D'Angelo, trying to snatch it from his hand, but he holds it above his head and no matter how much I dance around, I can't reach it.

Unfair height advantage.

I knew that there was a reason not to date hockey players, which I left out of my Guide.

I feel like adding it.

Shay is actually looking excited, the traitor. "Okay, now I have to know.

What the hell is in that little book, darlin'?"

"Don't tell him." I look at D'Angelo pleadingly.

D'Angelo's eyes are cold. "Don't tell him that you think hockey players are *gorgeous, passionate assholes, who you should never date* because of *their late-night training, canceled plans, and stinking hockey gear?*"

Shay scrunches up his nose. "Is that her diary?" He pulls himself to his feet. "Stand still, while I punch you in the dick for violating her privacy."

D'Angelo's eyes widen.

To my surprise, he actually does stand still, and I end up throwing myself between Shay and him.

"It's not my diary," I force myself to admit. "It's more like therapy. After Wilder, I wrote this Guide to Avoid Dating Hockey Players. It was reasons to make myself avoid making the same mistakes. Since I'm with you three, it didn't work out that way. But you're different. The problem was Wilder and not the hockey."

Eden's gaze is heavy. "Great idea."

I turn and smile at D'Angelo, vindicated. "How did you find it? Snooping?"

Shay crosses his arms.

D'Angelo looks between the twins and me, as if not understanding how the power dynamic has shifted.

Then he waves the book wildly again. "I was looking for...something... okay, lube. Are you happy? I was looking through your drawers for lube, in order to prepare your treat. And I found this. Don't think that I have a problem with the general principle of your Guide. But *I'm* in the pages of this. *Never forget that it all began with D'Angelo.*"

Oh, yeah.

I no longer feel quite as vindicated.

Damn.

Unfortunately, you can't take back a smug face.

Shay rocks forward on his heels. "Are Eden and me in it? Can I see?"

"She hasn't got sections on Ten Most Fuckable Players or Players Most Likely to Take Me on Walks on the Beach Under the Moonlight in here," D'Angelo drawls, eyes flashing with indignation. "She's got an entire chapter devoted to why she shouldn't date me."

"I mean," I wet my dry lips, "it's a short chapter."

It isn't.

Shay wanders to stand next to me, peering at the Guide with interest.

“It’s bullet pointed, numbered, and even in different colors,” D’Angelo continues. “She uses glitter pens on the section about my negative characteristics.”

“I’d just bought a new set of glitter pens. They look pretty.”

Shay doubles over with laughter.

He’s not helping.

D’Angelo is winding himself up.

He stands even straighter, adjusting his tie. “There are clippings and photos; one of them is me pole dancing.”

“I’m a visual learner,” I try.

Shay laughs even harder. “You and me both, love.”

I elbow Shay, but he makes a dive to try and grab the Guide to look at it. D’Angelo growls, holding the book above his head again.

See, he’s using the height advantage against Shay as well.

Dick move.

Shay doesn’t let it deter him, dancing around D’Angelo.

“You’ll have to get tired at some point,” Shay points out. “Come on, let me see, darlin’. I bet that you look like the most fuckable player on that pole, who *I’d* want to walk with on a beach under the moonlight.”

D’Angelo’s cheeks pink. “I’m lowering my arm now, but don’t steal it.”

He lowers the Guide, ripping it open to jab at an offending page. “You even drew stick drawings. Rude ones.”

Now, I can’t help laughing, and neither can Eden.

I’d been having a bad day, and by the looks of it, so are those stick men.

D’Angelo is looking more hurt now than angry or offended, so I lean closer and wrap my arms around him.

Grudgingly, he allows it.

“I’m sorry.” I push myself onto tiptoes to kiss him on each word. “I made this before I returned to Freedom. Before we met again.”

Shay snatches the Guide from D’Angelo’s hand and begins to avidly read through it.

“I know.” D’Angelo replies. “I know that you don’t feel like that now. I guess...I just didn’t realize how much you hated me before.”

My heart shatters.

My breathing becomes ragged, and I look up, forcing him to meet my gaze. “At college, you were my best friend. I was falling in love with you.

When Wilder lied by telling me that you never liked me or wanted me, then that broke my heart. It's why I wrote that everything started with you. If I hadn't cared about you, then I'd never have felt so strongly. But all the reasons that I thought I had in that Guide to hate you were wrong. They were based on lies or misunderstandings. Perhaps, it's a good thing that you found it. Now we can start this relationship with everything out in the open. Do you want me to throw it in the trash?"

D'Angelo shakes his head. "Not if you're only doing it because of how I feel. It was simply a shock to find myself talked about like that by the woman I love. Yet I guess you weren't really talking about me, cara mia. You were talking about the villain who Wilder had invented."

"You could write a new book," Eden suggests. "One about us now."

Genius.

I smile, grabbing the Guide back from Shay and looking around myself. "Anyone got a pen?"

D'Angelo elegantly pulls a silver pen out of his suit pocket and passes it to me.

I think for a moment, before scratching out the **AVOID** in the title to the book.

Now it reads: **A GUIDE TO AVOID DATING HOCKEY PLAYERS**

I turn over the last page that I wrote on inside onto a fresh page, which is a deeper blue, and write boldly across the top:

A GUIDE TO DATING HOCKEY PLAYERS

"This is our fresh start," I say. "We all have pasts but we can choose to make a new future together."

"And I want to be the one to draw the rude stick drawings from now on." Shay waves his hand, volunteering.

"Done."

"So, after all those dramatics," D'Angelo grips my chin, "I was preparing a romantic scene to reward you upstairs with petals, romantic music, and of course, lube, but do you just want me to ravish you here?"

My breathing picks up, and my pupils dilate. "Fuck, yes."

"As you wish, cara mia."

I let out a shocked whoosh of air, as D'Angelo picks me up and throws me over his shoulder.

He swaggers across the room.

"Is this carrying me around going to become a thing?" I demand, sliding

my hands down to fondle his ass in his tight pants.

Because, damn, he has a fine ass.

“Yes,” D’Angelo replies like it’s obvious.

“Just checking,” I say, happily.

D’Angelo lowers me gently, however, onto the sheepskin rug in front of the fire. Then he pulls my **CATTITUDE** top over my head, folding it and placing it neatly to the side.

The fire warms my bare skin, and I sigh, stretching out and basking both in the heat and D’Angelo’s attention.

He slides his hand down from the hollow of my throat, pausing to trace over the pendant that I never take off now, before stroking lower between my breasts and all the way down my stomach. He circles my belly button and hesitates, just above where I’m desperate for him to touch.

I’m panting.

I widen my legs to encourage him.

Instead, he sits back on his haunches, slipping off his suit jacket and folding it neatly on top of my t-shirt. He loosens his tie.

“My sweet twins, don’t you want part of this reward as well?” D’Angelo calls.

“Always,” Shay replies.

Shay bounds to join us by the fire, dropping to his knees by my head and kissing down my throat. He stops, however, when he notices that Eden is still sitting on the couch.

“Jude meant you as well, Dee,” Shay calls. “Get over here.”

Eden looks down. “Why do I get a reward?”

My heart aches. “I want you with us.”

“I’m still your captain.” D’Angelo’s voice is hard. “Don’t tell me some bullshit like this is because you’re no longer in the Bay Rebels. You are, as my assistant. Do you think that I look down on Cody or Robyn? Or on their contribution because they’re staff? More than that, in this relationship, we’re a team, whatever happens. Do you understand?”

Eden’s expression is unexpectedly vulnerable. “So, I’m still going to be an equal?”

Shay looks like he’s going to cry. “Bloody hell, how did I miss that you didn’t think you would be? Of course, you are. Now get over here. We’re about to have some kinky fun.”

Eden meets my gaze, and his lips twitch at the corners in a relieved smile.

I smile back, holding out my hand to him.

Eden stands up, strolling to join us.

When he sits next to his brother, clutching my hand, it's close enough that their legs are touching. Shay slips a protective arm around his shoulders.

"Make sure that you're careful with both your ribs and shoulder. We're taking no risks," D'Angelo says. "Now, onto the fun part. You each get to choose a kink as a reward. I'll work out a way to make it happen. You then get to show the pleasures of it to Robyn, as long as it's not any of our hard limits, of course."

My pulse speeds up.

"You wicked, wonderful man," I breathe.

"Do you like the sound of that?" He murmurs.

"I love it." Then I glance between them. "I want Eden to go first."

Shay shrugs. "Fine with me."

D'Angelo smirks. "Probably a good choice because if it was me, then I'd likely go for spanking but show Robyn how enjoyable it is to give them, using Shay as the model."

Shay tries to look like he hates the idea but doesn't pull it off, since his pupils dilate and his dick looks painfully hard, pushing against his jeans. "What did my arse ever do to you?"

"Your ass is innocent. But your fingers, on the other hand, were by the loosest definition, playing my piano."

D'Angelo snatches Shay by the hair and tugs, pulling Shay's head back hard.

Shay swallows. "Yeah, that. How about you teach me, then I'll be able to play for real."

For a long moment, D'Angelo doesn't reply. Then he pulls Shay in for a hard, passionate kiss.

It appears to surprise Shay, who possibly expected to be scolded. He lets out a startled sound, before melting into D'Angelo's hold.

Finally, D'Angelo eases his hold on Shay's hair, but keeps him close. "Good boy, asking for what you need." Shay's eyes gleam with happiness. "Of course I'll teach you. I'd be honored."

Bets on how long before D'Angelo regrets that offer?

At the same time, the true devotion with which Shay looks at D'Angelo because he shows care, kindness, and love to him, fills me with such a pleasurable emotion.

It's the same feeling that I get, when I see D'Angelo enjoying Shay's company, or Shay sucking D'Angelo's cock.

It's the opposite of jealousy.

Compersion...?

We're each other's found family, and we fit together.

We don't work without all our pieces.

"I'm not my brother," Eden states. "Robyn is my first girlfriend."

Shay looks pleased. "Do I win the *kinkiest boyfriend* medal?"

"No." D'Angelo lightly smacks Shay's hip. "Who says that *you'd* win it? If you're uncomfortable doing this, then you don't need to, Eden." My heart sinks. I've guessed that I'm all Eden's firsts. Is this too much for him? "But you can choose something that you've always wanted to try, and I'll guide you."

"There's no problem," I add. "If you don't want to—"

Eden furrows his brow in thought. "Temperature play. It was on that list you gave us, Jude. Having spent so long on the ice, I like the idea of bringing pleasure with it."

I draw in a sharp breath.

Temperature play is one of my favorites, but it wasn't Wilder's. So, I've barely got to experience it.

I've always wanted to.

We talked about this, during our negotiations.

Is that why Eden chose it?

Our gazes meet, and he smiles, softly.

Fuck, I love the man.

Instantly, D'Angelo takes charge. His wicked grin makes me shiver in anticipation.

"Eden, go and make yourself a cup of tea," D'Angelo orders. "I know how much you love tea. Then bring it back here, along with a glass of ice."

Immediately, Eden stands, obeying him.

Wait, does D'Angelo think Eden is so freaked out that he needs to calm himself down?

"Huh, so is this English kink? Drinking a cup of tea, while we play?" Shay raises his brow.

D'Angelo's eyes flash. "I've had enough of that bratty mouth."

D'Angelo shoves Shay back, until he's lying next to me. Then he grips my hands and pulls me up onto my knees, dragging me to kneel by the side.

I watch, wetting my lips, as D'Angelo undoes his belt and releases his dick. It's already at half-mast, as he pushes on Shay's cheeks.

"Open your mouth. Now," D'Angelo commands. "Do you want my cock?"

I know that he's checking in.

Shay nods. "Yes, sir."

D'Angelo becomes even more dominant, straddling Shay and burying his hand in his hair. "This is how bratty mouths get used. Say, thank you."

"Than—" Shay chokes, as D'Angelo thrusts into his throat.

D'Angelo doesn't let up, owning him in a way that I'm beginning to realize Shay needs.

Shay has played around with this side of himself with me, but there's no playing with D'Angelo.

When Shay chokes, D'Angelo pulls back and allows him to take a desperate breath. As he does, D'Angelo reaches back, palming over Shay's clothed crotch, and Shay whines, high and pained.

"Look how turned on you are, just by servicing my cock, cucciolo." D'Angelo starts to vigorously thrust into Shay's mouth again, and Shay rests his hands on D'Angelo's chest, not pushing him away, but instead, holding on. He's doing his best to lick and suck but mostly, he's just letting himself be used. "You must have been made for this." D'Angelo turns his head as he's ruining Shay. My breath hitches. "Made for us."

Suddenly, I realize that Eden has entered the lounge again.

He's holding a mug (the **SORRY, I WAS THINKING ABOUT CATS** mug that I bought him), of steaming hot tea in one hand.

I can tell by the fragrance that it's Earl Grey.

I'd forgotten that he wouldn't manage both ice and tea with his arm in a sling.

He passes the tea to me, expressionless.

He ignores D'Angelo's vigorous fucking and walks out of the room again.

Finally, D'Angelo lets up on Shay. "Lick the head, that's it. Make me come now."

To my surprise, Shay's hand reaches out desperately toward me.

I take it, and his fingers squeeze mine.

My chest is tight that Shay's hand is in mine, D'Angelo's gaze is meeting mine, and these two men are so intimately connected.

Then D'Angelo's eyelashes flutter, his back arches, and his hips stutter. "I'm about to come," he warns, starting to pull out.

But Shay, raises his free hand and clamps it around D'Angelo's hip to hold him in place.

D'Angelo's gaze shoots to Shay's in surprise, before he grins and then with a groan, he comes, and Shay swallows.

This is new to Shay. Serious respect to him.

D'Angelo is being rougher with Shay than he's been with me.

Yet it appears to be what Shay needs.

D'Angelo is fantastic at reading these things. He did say that he was trained.

When did that happen?

D'Angelo gently lifts himself off Shay, tucking himself away and doing up his belt.

Then he leans down, carding his fingers through Shay's hair, affectionately.

Shay beams.

When Shay tries to sit up, however, D'Angelo keeps him down with his hand pressed to his chest. "Stay there. Your pretty mouth hasn't finished its job yet."

Confused, I glance between them.

Then Eden returns with a glass of ice.

D'Angelo smiles. "Perfect. Come and set that next to me, then lie down on your back next to Shay."

Eden nods, following the direction.

D'Angelo waves his hand at me. "Tea, please."

I pass it over. "Thirsty, are you? I'd have thought that Shay is the one who deserves a drink. He's the one who's put in the hard work, so far."

"You're right."

Why is there a dangerous edge to his tone?

D'Angelo slips his hand beneath Shay's neck and offers him the mug, then encourages him to take several deep swigs.

He passes Eden an ice cube.

To my surprise, Eden drops the ice into his mouth and sucks on it.

Have I totally misunderstood temperature play?

Is the kink about tasting things of different temperatures? Because then, I'm disappointed.

Like the devil master of ceremonies, D'Angelo edges behind me, wrapping his arms around my waist, sneaking in a tweak of my nipples that makes me gasp.

Shay lets go of my hand.

D'Angelo lifts me up. "Straddle the twins' gorgeous heads. Put your sweet pussy over their sweet mouths." His voice drops to a sensuous rumble. "Then Eden is in charge. Do you understand? Use your safe words, if you need to. Remind me what they are."

"Red, yellow, and green. And I am so fucking green right now," I murmur.

"Close your eyes."

I do, and suddenly, in the darkness, all the sensations are amplified.

D'Angelo chuckles, adjusting me so that my pussy is just over the twins' mouths. He steadies me so that I balance.

I can feel the twins' breaths against my pussy: one hot and one cold.

Then one shockingly warm mouth closes over my clit, sucking.

I would've bucked away from the sensation, but D'Angelo holds me in place, and I'm glad that he does because as I become used to it, the heat is toe curlingly incredible.

When a hot tongue curls to confidently lick a stripe down my pussy, I scream.

Someone chuckles against my pussy.

Then hands on my hips are readjusting me.

It's the only warning that I get, before a devastatingly cold tongue is circling my clit. The movements are hesitant and less sure (and it makes my heart flutter that this must be Eden, experiencing his first time worshiping a woman's pussy), but after the heat that'd come before, the contrast is overwhelming.

"Cold," I gasp. "Fuck, fuck, fuck."

"Color?" D'Angelo asks from behind me.

All I can imagine, as the mouth closes on my clit, sucking, is my men on the ice.

This is literally Eden, tormenting and teasing.

But it's also his talent on the ice still, given voice.

His voice on the ice, expressed in a new way just between us.

I relax into the sensation now, sinking down.

I feel floaty and safe.

“Green,” I whisper.
D’Angelo caresses down my spine.
He pushes my hair to the side and kisses my neck; I can feel his curls.
“You look so beautiful like this, cara mia.”
I shiver, and pleasure winds through me.
It’s pushing me closer and closer to the edge of a cresting wave.
I reach back, clutching onto him.
I feel anchored now, safe. Held. Loved.
I don’t open my eyes.
I don’t need to because I’m just where I need to be with these men.
Ice and fire.

Then I’m being readjusted again, and suddenly, one warm tongue is licking down my pussy, flattening itself and pushing inside, while one cold one is sucking hard on my clit.

I scream, as the wave of my orgasm sweeps over me at the sensation.
My back bows, and D’Angelo holds onto me tighter.
I shake my head side to side.
Then he’s kissing me, over and over. “My good cara mia. So perfect for us.”

Dazed, I don’t move, still wracked with aftershocks, as I’m lifted and laid gently onto the rug.

I feel warm bodies nestling next to me, arms being slung around me, and legs thrown over mine.

“Open your eyes, when you’re ready,” D’Angelo says.
My eyes slowly open.
I feel sated and sleepy as a happy cat.
I need my **CATITUDE** t-shirt back.
That was fucking amazing.

Eden and Shay are wrapped around me on either side, in the way that I’m learning to love best, pressed as close to me as they can. Shay is massaging my shoulder, and Eden is playing with my hair.

“Did you enjoy that?” Eden asks.
“In case the level of my screaming didn’t make it obvious enough,” I reply, “that was incredible. I’d love to do that again and explore more things like it. Did you enjoy it?”

Eden nods. “I loved it.”
He says it so earnestly.

D'Angelo is busy putting the mug and cup onto the coffee table for safety, or knowing him, neatness' sake. "Now it's your turn to..."

Suddenly, his phone rings, and he pales.

"Answer it," I yell, startled out of the fuzzy, happy place that I'm sunk in.

This is the call that we've been waiting on.

It's the call that will tell us if our hopes for a future together at Bay Rebels can come true.

It's when Austin will tell us whether D'Angelo and Shay have officially been picked for the team.

D'Angelo takes a steadying breath, before pulling the phone out of his pocket. He looks at it for a long moment like it's a snake about to bite him, before answering and holding it to his ear.

"Good evening, coach." He clenches his jaw, listening intently.

Eden and Shay sit up on either side of me, and I struggle up to join them, slipping an arm around each of their shoulders.

"We're going to be okay," I whisper. "Whatever the outcome. We're getting through this."

I believe that.

"Uh-huh. Thanks for letting me know, coach. Yeah, I'll tell him." D'Angelo tosses the phone onto the couch.

Shay looks up at D'Angelo, clenching his hands in his lap. "I didn't get picked, did I?"

"Why wouldn't he pick his star player?" D'Angelo drawls. "Sorry, but you'll have to put up with me as your captain busting your balls all season now. Don't think that I'll be going any easier on you because you're so cute. The global press have their eyes on Bay Rebels, and coach was clear that we can't be fuck-ups, we must get this team to the playoffs, or we won't have another season."

"We're on the team!" Shay leaps to his feet, whooping in joy.

Then he grabs D'Angelo, who tries to shake him off but can't, and dances around with him.

I laugh, and for the first time possibly since I've met him, Eden gives a full and genuine smile, which lights him up from inside.

He looks beautiful.

As beautiful on the outside as he is on the inside for being so happy for his brother making a team, for which he can no longer play.

This means that now, we have time.

Shay conveniently ignored the rest of Austin's warning.

I don't blame him.

We need this moment of happiness. Our found family won't be ripped apart. We've been labeled as misfits, rejected, abandoned, and broken.

Yet we have each other...*we love each other.*

I'm going to make it my mission to protect these men from the press, as much as they make it their mission to protect me.

After Wilder, I never thought that I'd find (or even want) love again.

Perhaps, I didn't get the renaming of my Guide right.

It shouldn't only have been A Guide to Dating Hockey Players, but A Guide to Loving Hockey Players.

The season is only just beginning with its own pressures and dangers to our careers, along with the added difficulty of keeping our relationship secret from the press.

I'll do anything not to lose or break what we have.

It'd break all of our hearts.

I mean, going into this new season, together we'll be under more press scrutiny than ever before.

Shay will need to play without his twin, as well as in the NHL for the first time, while keeping a lid on his volatile temper.

Eden will need to cope with recovering from his injuries, being unable to skate, and learning how to be D'Angelo's assistant.

D'Angelo will need to captain a whole new team, which includes his lover, with Austin making it clear that it's his final chance to make the playoffs.

And me?

I'm the PR Director who has to spin these PR nightmares into successes, making sure that the Bay Rebels are not devoured by the world's new interest in the youngest team in the NHL.

I'm also the woman who'll do anything to protect her men.

Nothing can go wrong, right?

[CLICK HERE NOW to continue reading the next Bay Rebels adventure in SECRETLY PUCKING and find out what happens to Robyn, D'Angelo, and the Prince twins once the season starts!](#)

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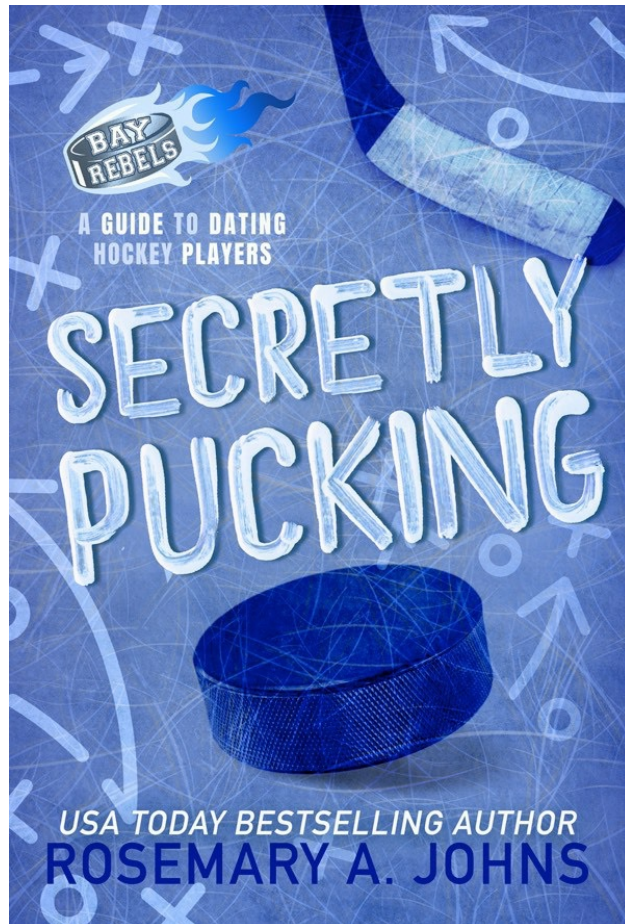
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SECRETLY PUCKING



WHAT TO READ NEXT: SECRETLY PUCKING, BAY REBELS!

I'm the coach's daughter and I'm in love with a gorgeous NHL player... well, *three* players.

Now, I'm PR Director to a whole team of ice hockey rebels. My hardest job? To manage three beautiful misfits.

The captain, D'Angelo, is intimidatingly hot, grumpy, and my first love from college.

The star player, Shay, has a smile like sunshine, mesmerizing gray eyes, and a body that makes my breath catch. Plus, he has a twin, the sweetly protective, tattooed Eden, who has a heart-wrenching secret.

They're obsessed, and I'm falling just as hard.

Yet our new lives, rising careers, *everything*, depends on them winning this season.

If I'm caught secretly pucking these hockey players, will our hearts be broken?

[ONE-CLICK TO READ WHAT HAPPENS TO ROBYN AND HER GUYS IN THEIR MOST IMPORTANT HOCKEY SEASON!](#)

STANDALONE ICE HOCKEY ROMANCE!



[YOUR NEXT WHY CHOOSE ICE HOCKEY ROMANCE WITH AN](#)

OMEGAVERSE TWIST
PUCK AND HER BLADES!

My name is Puck, and I'm the only Omega hockey mascot.

After a tragic figure skating accident, I'm marked as a Reject Omega and sold to the most notorious team in the Alpha NHL to become their puck mascot. All alone, I'm a nobody who's only brave enough to throw off my costume and dance at night. When a dangerous heat hits me mid-game, surely the star players, the Blades, won't leap from the ice to save me?

But will the Alpha Captain, his wild child best friend, their fiercely protective Beta, and the sweet and funny male Omega put me above their hockey? I'm falling hard for these men who smell like my dream pack, but will they bond with a reject?

The Blades always play to win, but when all our secrets are revealed, will they lose me?

A puck. Her blades. A pack bond that changes everything.

[CLICK HERE FOR YOUR NEXT ICE HOCKEY ROMANCE!](#)

ABOUT THE AUTHOR



ROSEMARY A JOHNS is a USA Today bestselling and award-winning romance and fantasy author, music fanatic, and paranormal anti-hero addict. She writes sexy shifters and immortals, swoonworthy book boyfriends, and epic battles.

Winner of the Silver Award in the National Wishing Shelf Book Awards. Finalist in the IAN Book of the Year Awards. Winner in the Best Indie Book of the Year Awards. Runner-up in the Best Fantasy Book of the Year, Reality Bites Book Awards. Honorable Mention in the Readers' Favorite Book Awards. Shortlisted in the International Rubery Book Awards.

Rosemary is also a traditionally published short story writer. She studied history at Oxford University and ran her own theater company. She's always been a rebel...

Thanks for leaving a review. You're awesome!

Want to read more and stay up to date on Rosemary's newest releases? [Sign up for her *VIP* Rebel Newsletter and get FREE novellas!](#)

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APPENDIX ONE: BAY REBEL MEMBERS

PLAYERS

Jude D'Angelo, Captain, Center
Shay Prince, Right Wing
Eden Prince, Left Defenseman

COACHES

Austin McKenna, Head Coach
Assistant Coach
Goalie Coach
Strength and Conditioning Coach

TEAM SUPPORT/OPERATIONS/MANAGEMENT

Robyn McKenna, Austin's daughter, PR Director
Seal, the Mascot
Operations Manager
Equipment Manager

Finance Manager
Manager, Marketing Operations
Cyber Security Analyst

MEDICAL SUPPORT

Cody McKenna, Austin's son, Director of Physical Therapy
Team Doctor
Team Nurse
Sports Therapist
Nutritionist
Psychologist
Massage Therapist
Mental Skills Coach

APPENDIX TWO: FRIENDS, FAMILY, AND ENEMIES

Doctor Michael Gaines, Cody's husband, Doctor at Freedom Heart Hospital
Neve, owner of Merchant's Inn
Tom, bartender in Merchant's Inn
Mr. Hust, Head of Security Team
Melanie, journalist at Peninsula Daily News
Wilder Talon, Robyn's ex-husband, player at Pittsburgh Penguins
Maria, D'Angelo's sister
Bruno, D'Angelo's brother
Mr. and Mrs. Prince, Shay and Eden's adoptive parents