

BLUE LINE SERIES

# CROSS CHECKED

*by Love*



CAROLINA MAC

# Cross Checked by Love

Blue Line Series: Book One  
A Hockey Romance

Carolina Mac

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To: My friend Sharon who shares the memory of the fight we got into with those feisty girls from Parry Sound in the hockey arena in Port Perry.

*All hockey players are bilingual. They know English and profanity.*

—GORDIE HOWE

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# Chapter One

Tuesday, October 3<sup>rd</sup>.

## Georgia

Moving to a strange city in a strange state I'd never even visited scared the hell out of me. But I had to do it if I wanted to pursue my dream career in song writing and change my life.

Locking myself in my room at my parents' house in Wellston, Ohio, playing my guitar and writing song after song hadn't gotten me anywhere. I had to step outside the box and make something happen.

I'd been saving every cent the past two years working as a bartender in two different pubs in Wellston, and I figured I had enough to keep me going for a minimum of six months—if I couldn't find a job working at least part-time.

If I found a job in the music district of Austin, so much the better. I'd be living and working with people who could help me get my career started.

Not usually outgoing, I'd have to paste on a smile, break out of my comfort zone and try to meet the right people—music biz people. Record executives and producers. A Google list to work from.

All I had to do was drive to Texas in my beat-up Honda—eighteen hours of drive time from Wellston, Ohio, according to Google—find a place I could afford to live and find the best person and the best company to produce my songs.

A big ambition that would take a lot of hard work to make a reality, but I wanted it badly. Did I have the talent and the drive and whatever else it was going to take? That remained to be seen.

All my friends told me to go to Nashville and flaunt my talent there in music city, but everybody I knew had done that already and never made it.

They packed up their guitars, left full of enthusiasm, got to music row, and struggled for a couple of years. Then they gave up and came back home to Ohio, broke, all depressed and worn out.

My best friend Kayla was full of talent, and she saved up enough to go to

Tennessee for a couple of months. She ran out of money before she got a record deal and she had to come back home.

Convinced she was a loser, she cried her eyes out for two weeks after she got back home. I did everything I could to make her feel better and nothing worked. She was heartbroken.

I wasn't going to let that happen to me.

Austin was a huge music center and I wanted to try there first. Following in the footsteps of people I knew who had failed to make it in Nashville wasn't something I wanted to do. My mind was made up and I wasn't changing it for anybody. I was going to make it big in Austin.

My cell rang on the passenger seat, and I could see it was Kayla's number. She was the only person who was truly on my side, and I missed her already. I put the call on speaker so I could drive and talk at the same time. "Hi, Kayla. I'm in Texas and I'll soon be in Austin."

"I can't believe you're doing something so crazy, Georgie. I wish I had the money to go with you, but I have to work and save up all over again. I wasted all my savings in Nashville."

"When you save up enough, you can come out here and stay with me. I'll introduce you to the right people."

She laughed. "You don't know the right people, girl."

"Not yet, but once I get my job in the music district, I'll make it my business to meet the people who can help me. I can't wait to see all the clubs and studios they have."

"You have to email me every night and tell me what progress you made. Promise me."

"I promise."

"I saw Todd at Barnaby's the night after you left, and he was hanging off Brittany Tate."

"Can't he do better than that?"

"He knows he made a mistake not going with you."

"I doubt if he's sorry."

"I was pretty sure when it came down to it and you were ready to leave for Austin, he'd go with you and the two of you could start a life together."

"That wasn't the way it turned out, Kayla. He yelled and hollered at me and called me an idiot for thinking anybody would want to buy my songs. He said I would starve to death before I made enough to pay the rent."

"That was so cruel, George. I bet he's sorry he said those things to you."

“I doubt it. Hockey meant more to him than I ever did. I don’t know why I thought I was so in love with him. I cried for hours the night we broke up, but I’m over him now. In retrospect, he was a jerk and I’m better off without him.”

“Attagirl.”

“I’ll call you later when I’m settled in my motel.”

“Don’t forget.”

“I won’t forget. I’ll tell you all about Austin and everything I’m doing.”

After I talked to Kayla, I felt a little better about being far away from my home and family. My parents weren’t supportive of my career choice—they wanted me to be a nurse—and I never sang any of my songs in front of them. The way they poked fun at me when I played my guitar was too humiliating.

My dad was a butcher and my mother worked in the butcher shop helping him wrap roasts and serve customers. They offered me part-time hours doing the same thing, but I didn’t want to wrap meat—I wanted to sing.

They took my rejection of the family business as an insult and refused to help me with my career. Now, I feel like I’ve got something to prove to them. I should thank them for making me try harder.

Shutting off my inner dialogue and tuning in to the map lady, I turned off I-35 southbound at the first Austin exit and looked for a motel I could afford for the night.

It was late and I should’ve stopped when I first entered the state of Texas at the northeast corner, but I pushed it all the way through to Austin to save the cost of an extra night in a motel.

A sign for the Super Eight came up on my right and it looked good enough for one night. I stopped at the office, ran inside, and paid for a room.

With a key card in my hand, I hauled my luggage into room two-fourteen, locked the door and flopped down on the bed.

“I’m here.”



# Chapter Two

Tuesday, October 3<sup>rd</sup>.

## Jaxon.

Tryouts for the hockey team had been brutal. Five days in a row, morning until night, with drills and scrimmages and off-ice trials, before the coach finally told me I made the team.

And I was like... “Yeah. ‘Course I’m on the team, coach. Y’all begged me to come here to play for y’all’s school, so why would you cut me?”

I never said that out loud to the coach. My mama raised me better than that.

But the way they went about it seemed like it was a lot of hogwash to me. Why would they give me a full hockey scholarship to their school if they didn’t want me to play for them?

I wasn’t the brightest star, but I had common sense. My daddy whipped that into my ass when I was younger, and I still had the scars to prove it.

I didn’t know anybody in Austin, capital of Texas—never been here even once—think I was sick the day of the school trip when I was in the eighth grade.

People I met so far at the school and on my team didn’t seem all that friendly to a twenty-one-year-old boy from a little town in the north end of the state. Nobody ever heard of Turkey, Texas.

I didn’t give a rosy-red if they liked me or not, they weren’t in my plans for the future. The only reason I said I’d come here and play for this team was so I’d get picked up by a scout for the NHL.

Daddy said playing for the Texas Tornados was one step from me facing off at center ice with the fellas from Canada who knew how to play hockey better than anybody in the world.

I believed Daddy because he never once lied to me. When those guys from the school came to our house with their offer, I picked up that pen with the name of the school on it, and I signed the deal they gave me because Daddy said it was the way to the NHL.

Full tuition and an apartment off campus. All I had to do was play my nuts

off and whip whoever got in my way. That's what all-star defense was all about. I scored goals every chance I got, but my main job was in the corners.

If I kept the other team off the puck, my team would score more goals and win more games.

Daddy bought me a used pickup so I could get around the city, and he said I could pay him back when I got my deal from my first NHL team.

Down deep in his heart, Daddy wanted me to play for the Toronto Maple Leafs, so he could move across the border and feel the snow and ice that went with the hockey season—just for the sheer experience and joy of it.

I wanted that too. When a drought swept through our end of the state a while back, Daddy lost our ranch after Mama died and now about all he had left was me and hockey and our hound dog, Cooter.

Mama always thought I had the goods to make the NHL. She was my biggest supporter and made me eat healthy and take care of my body. I stopped growing when I got to six feet. I worked out four times a week and bulked up and now I weighed one ninety-seven and most of it was muscle.

The apartment the team gave me was big enough for me. Furniture already there, a flat screen on the wall and a comfortable bed.

I'd gone out and bought groceries and beer. Nothing else I needed. I sat down with a beer and worked at shaving down the blade on my stick. I knew what was important.

I jumped when my cell rang, then I smiled when I saw who it was. "Hey, Daddy."

"I didn't know if you'd be home or at the arena, son."

"Tryouts are over, and I made the team, so I'm home today. I'm supposed to be in class learning stuff, but I figured I'd take the day off."

"Why wouldn't you make the team? They begged you to play for them. Driving all the way up to Turkey to recruit you, must have taken them hours."

"Yeah, I didn't get that part about the tryouts, but they're over and done with. First exhibition game is coming up soon with another school. I have a practice in the morning. One day to relax and work on my sticks."

"I'll try to get down there to see one of your real games, son. Maybe you can send me a schedule when you get one."

"Will do, Daddy. Didn't get one yet, but maybe tomorrow at practice."

"Take care of yourself, son. I'm so proud of you playing for the U n'all."

"Thanks, Daddy. I'll be careful. I know you worry about me getting hurt."

“You can’t win games for your team if you’re on the DL, son.”

“True enough, Daddy.”

# Chapter Three

Wednesday, October 4<sup>th</sup>.

## Georgia

I stared straight up at the ceiling for a full minute wondering where I was before I remembered I was in a hotel in Austin, Texas.

I sat on the side of the bed trying to get the cobwebs out of my brain and mentally organize day one in Austin. Today would be an exciting one for me.

So much to do.

I'd use my laptop to find a place I could afford to live and hopefully I wouldn't have to wait too long to move in. A long wait would kill my budget and I'd already made up my mind not to let financial worries dampen my enthusiasm for my new life.

When I was on a downer, my songs reflected it and I had enough sad songs already. I needed more that were upbeat and made people sing along. That type of song turned into a gold record.

A quick shower and I got dressed up a little bit. Black dress pants, silk blouse and a short black jacket. I'd have to meet people today and I didn't want to look like a starving songwriter.

I set my laptop up on the table by the window and ran down to see what the complimentary breakfast was giving away. If nobody was around, I might be able to grab a couple of apples to get me through the rest of the day. Save money on my food budget.

A handful of people were eating. Lots of empty tables. I helped myself to a strawberry yogurt, a bagel with cream cheese and a coffee. I took a blueberry muffin for later along with an apple and a banana.

I shoved the extras into my purse and carried the rest back to my room. I could eat while I looked for a place to live.

I sipped my coffee as I typed in the search words: *move in ready apartments for rent*.

A bunch of stuff came on the screen, and I had to sort it out. Closer to downtown meant more expensive but also more convenient.

One-bedroom apartments in Ohio were about a thousand dollars a month

—some a little cheaper and some more—depending on the amenities. I didn't want amenities, I wanted cheap rent for a place that wasn't a dump.

Too much to ask? Maybe.

There were two places that I could move into today if I had first and last months' rent. I did. The first place wasn't far from the University campus and that would be a great location. The second one was in a busier area right downtown.

*Parking might be a problem.*

I called the number for the rental near the University and the woman in charge could see me at ten. That would work out because I had to check out of this room before eleven anyway.

Happy to be making progress so quickly, I enjoyed my free breakfast and the hot coffee.

Oak Gardens Apartments consisted of four identical buildings built around a green space. Lots of trees and benches in the common area if you wanted to sit outside. The flowerbeds were overflowing with blooms in autumn colors. I felt like picking a handful but didn't give in to my urge.

Maybe later when no one was looking.

I parked in the visitors' area, slung my purse over my shoulder and headed for the entrance to building one to look for Mrs. Lonnigan. When we spoke on the phone, she'd told me her office was right off the lobby.

I stepped inside, looked at the listing on the wall and pressed the buzzer for Mrs. Lonnigan—also marked *office*.

“Georgia Vance. I'm here to see Mrs. Lonnigan.”

The door buzzed and I grabbed for it and pushed through. Her office was right where she said it was and she opened her door to meet me.

“I called about the one-bedroom apartment. The one that's available to move in today.”

She smiled. “Are you new in town, dear?”

“Yes, I just got here last night from Ohio, and I need my own place as quickly as possible.”

“Let me show you the apartment I have available. It's on the second floor in building two.”

“Sure. I'm dying to see it.”

As we strolled across the common to the building on the opposite side, I felt a warm breeze. “It's nice here. The grounds are pretty.”

“We’re proud of Oak Gardens,” said Mrs. Lonnigan. “This is a well-maintained complex, and we have low tolerance for parties or disruptive tenants.”

“I won’t be having any parties. I don’t know a single person in all of Texas.”

“Now you know me. I’m your first Texan.”

I laughed, happy to know somebody—anybody at all.

Mrs. Lonnigan used her key and let us into the building, a short ride on the elevator and down the hall to apartment number two-oh-four.

She opened the door and let me go in first. A small living room with a u-shaped kitchen off to the right. Behind the living area was the one bedroom, a storage area containing a washer and dryer and the small bathroom.

“It’s not huge, but it contains everything you’ll need. I’m guessing if you drove from Ohio that you don’t have any furniture with you.” She laughed.

“No, I need a furnished place, at least for now.”

“This apartment has only been vacant for a week, so you were lucky you called when you did. I don’t usually have any vacancies at all. Rarely a one-bedroom. They are the most sought-after by younger people just starting out.”

We went back to her office, and I was afraid she wasn’t going to rent it to me because I wasn’t employed. “It won’t take me long to pick up a job, Mrs. Lonnigan. I’m a bartender and a good one. I’ll check the online listings and pick up a job today. I have two month’s rent ready if that’s what you need.”

“You seem to be a sensible girl, Georgia, and you do need a place to stay. I’d be happy to have you join us here at Oak Gardens.”

I let out the breath I was holding. “Oh, thank you so much. Now that I have a place to call my own, I can get my life organized.”

“Why exactly did you move from Ohio when you didn’t know anyone in Austin? Is that too personal a question?”

“No, not at all. I’m a songwriter and I need to be here to talk to people in the music industry about my songs.”

She smiled. “I see. I wish you luck with that, dear. I know very little about the music industry, but I’ve heard that’s a difficult profession to break into.”

“Yes, it is, but I wanted to give myself a chance to try. I’d always regret it if I didn’t.”

“Yes, I can see what you’re thinking, and I wish you all the luck in the world.” She flashed me a genuine smile and I liked her a lot.

She gave me the keys to my new apartment after I filled out the forms to

take responsibility for the utilities. “Water is included. Electrical, heat and cable are your responsibility.”

“I’ll pay my bills. You can count on it.”

I left her office on a high and ran to visitors’ parking to move my Honda from there into tenant parking where I had my own spot. A short drive.

I found the number of my spot, parked and was grabbing the first load out of my trunk when a hunky guy parked an old pickup next to me.

He got out of his truck with a Taco Bell bag in his hand and watched me loading up.

“You can’t carry that much, ma’am. You being in that spot means you gotta be moving into the empty apartment next door to me on the second floor.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“Let me take one of those bags for you, ma’am.”

“Thanks. That’s so nice of you.”

He chuckled. “Ain’t usually this nice, but you’re a pretty girl and I was raised proper.”

He opened the front door of building two and held it for me. Same with the elevator and when we got to my door, he set everything down. “Let me put my burrito in my apartment and we’ll go down and get the rest of your stuff.”

“Thanks. You have a cute Texas accent.”

“Uh huh.”

I hauled the first load inside and was ready for the second. When the guy came out his door, I asked his name.

“Jaxon Dempsey. Been here a couple of weeks. Recruited to play for the Tornados at the U and this is where they want me to stay.”

“Wow, you’re an athlete. I thought you looked strong.”

He smiled and he was cute. Really cute. All that long hair and a bit of scruff on his face. I wasn’t even sure he was old enough to shave.

Young. Definitely younger than me. Next to Jaxon, I felt old at twenty-three.

“You gonna tell me?”

“Tell you what?”

“Your name.”

I laughed. “I forgot that fast. Georgia. Georgia Vance.”

“Nice to meet you, Georgia.”

The way he said my name sent a little shiver up my spine. I never had a Texas guy say my name before and it sounded kind of erotic.

The silence between us was a little awkward as we went down to the parking lot for the second load. Jaxon cleaned out the trunk and closed it while I got my guitar and my portfolio of songs from the back seat.

“You play guitar?”

“Yes.”

“You gonna play me a song sometime?”

I laughed. “Maybe. I’m more of a songwriter than a singer.”

I unlocked my door, and he carried in the rest of my stuff. “I’d offer you a drink to thank you for helping me, Jaxon, but I don’t have any groceries yet. I’ll have to find the closest market.”

“Thanks enough to have me a beautiful neighbor. I ain’t from down here and only know the guys on my team. Not well, neither. Don’t like most of them...but that’s only so far. I might change my mind.”

I laughed. He was cute and funny...and strong.

After he went into his own apartment, I felt safer somehow. Just knowing that I knew the guy next door, and he was there. It made me feel a lot better about being in a strange city all alone.

I plugged in my laptop and, using the code Mrs. Lonnigan had given me for the internet, I started searching for a job that was within the musical core of the city.

I had a map of the area with the names of the record companies and the studios and all the rest of it and I wanted to work within that defined area. Doing so would increase my chances of meeting the right person to help put me on the path to success.

*Bartenders wanted* was where I started and there were lots of jobs all across the city. Tons of them. I selected three in the area I wanted to be in and made appointments to go talk to the bar owners or managers.

Would I be lucky enough to find an apartment and get a job all in one day?

I’d soon find out.

Barnaby’s Bar and Grill was the first place I went. The manager was expecting me, and she was a nice lady. She read over the copy of the resume I gave her while I sat and waited and crossed my fingers.

“You have lots of experience, Georgia, and you’re a pretty girl.” She



smiled. “You’d attract a lot of customers and of course that’s what we want, but this is a sports bar and sometimes the crowd in here is a little rough.”

“You mean rough for a girl?”

“That’s what I meant, yes.”

“I’ve worked in several bars, ma’am. A couple not in ideal neighborhoods and I know what to expect. If you’d rather hire a male, I totally understand your point of view.”

“Your number is on your resume, Georgia. I have one more person to interview today, and then I’ll decide. If I choose you, can you start right away?”

“Yes, I could start tomorrow.”

“Great.”

She shook my hand and I left with a feeling that she was going to hire a guy, even if he wasn’t as good as I was. The fact that she didn’t ask me to make any drinks kind of confirmed it.

My second appointment was at Jerseys. Another sports bar in the downtown core. It seemed to have warmth and a homey feel to it, and I liked it right away.

One of the waitresses wearing a referee shirt showed me where the manager’s office was near the back of the building, and I knocked on the door.

“Come in.”

“Mister Wakefield, I’m Georgia Vance.”

He smiled. “Yes, you are.”

From the tone of his voice, I knew he would be trouble. Sexual harassment trouble in my future if I took the job in his bar. Strike one.

I passed my resume across the desk, and he barely looked at it. This interview was totally based on my looks and availability. I’d had interviews like this before.

Then and there I decided not to work for Mister Wakefield, the Texan leech.

But then, he looked up and smiled and said something that made my day. “This is my last day here at Jerseys, Miss Georgia. I’m moving on to one of the big hotels and a new manager will be replacing me starting tomorrow. So, I’m going to hire you to fill our vacant spot and let the new lady coming in tomorrow morning get you set up.”

“Wonderful. Thank you so much.”

“You come at noon tomorrow and fill out your paperwork. She’ll probably want you for tomorrow night, so keep that in mind.”

“I will. Thanks again.”

As I drove back to my apartment, I couldn’t stop smiling. I now lived and worked in Austin, Texas. Who would believe it? Probably not Kayla. I couldn’t wait to text her and tell her the news.

# Chapter Four

Thursday, October 5<sup>th</sup>.

## Jaxon.

I slept through my alarm and had to skip breakfast. Breathing hard, I got dressed fast and dragged my tired ass out the door for morning practice.

I shouldn't have stayed up so late watching the sports roundup. Serves me right.

No breakfast—I'd be starving by the end of the practice. I checked the time on my phone, and nope—there was no way I could do a drive-thru on the way to the arena.

Blasting out my door with my new stick in one hand and my hockey bag in the other, I crashed right into my beautiful neighbor and banged her up against the wall.

Cross checked her by accident, but her body felt warm and solid and made me want to watch the replay.

“So sorry, Miss Georgia. I wasn't thinking about there being any traffic in the hallway.”

“Wow, you're as solid as a freight train, Jaxon.”

She laughed and I let out a breath.

“Hope I didn't hurt you. I wasn't looking where I was going. I'm late for practice and that's no excuse for behaving like a bull in heat.”

“You didn't hurt me. I'm fine. I'm in a hurry too. I'm starting a new job and having my orientation this morning.”

“What's your job, Georgia?” I kept moving down the hall because I had to when I really wanted to stop and talk to her.

“I'm a bartender, and I got a job at Jerseys.”

“Yep. I been there once or twice with a couple of the guys. Listen, I'm really late and I've got to go. Good luck with your new job.”

“Thanks, Jax. Have a great practice.”

I hurried on ahead and left Georgia behind. I felt mean taking the elevator and making her wait until it came back to the second floor, but the coach was gonna holler at me if I was more than a couple of minutes late.

My stomach growled as I parked at the arena, and I noticed I was almost out of gas. Too many things to think of. I wasn't used to living in Austin and I didn't know where anything was.

Georgia wouldn't know her way around either if she just got here. Huh. Let me think about that. Maybe tonight I'll go to Jerseys, grab a beer, and see how she looks behind the bar.

The door to the locker room was locked. Had the coach warned us about that? He might have mentioned locking us out if we weren't on time for practice.

I banged on the door. "Come on, Coach, open the door. By my watch, I'm only one minute late."

The door opened and Coach Haney glared at me. "Dempsey, I warned you. Next time this happens, I will not let you in and you'll be penalized for missing a practice. It will go against your scholarship."

"Okay, thanks for the reminder. I had a bad morning."

"Let's see how bad you can be on the ice."

"Yes, sir."

My first shift in the scrimmage, the guys from the other team—our guys with colored markers on—were all over me and I figured the coach had put them up to it. They tried to smash me into the boards and crush me in the corners every chance they got.

Nobody passed me the puck and I was getting pretty pissed by the time my shift was over. Now that I knew what was going on, things would be different my second time on the ice.

You want it? Here it comes.

I flew out the door, my skates hit the ice, and I bulldozed through everybody. I was on the puck, and nobody was going to take it away from me and live to tell about it.

After showing my teammates what could happen to them if they didn't let up, I skated off the ice for the line change and Coach Haney was smiling at me.

If that's what he wanted to see from me, I had lots more where that came from.

My next shift, Howie Lintz—the guy who lived in my building—tripped me intentionally and pissed me off.

Mad as hell again, I turned into a steamroller and went on another rampage. Scored two goals on that shift.

That made the coach grin.

Because I was starving, practice seemed to last forever. When the final whistle blew, I showered and changed and headed for the closest IHOP.

The waitress filled my cup with coffee, and I thought about how rough the practice had been. Didn't matter much how rough it got, I was the toughest defenseman on the team, and I dished out more than I took.

My lumberjack breakfast came a few minutes later and I concentrated on eating. While I shoveled in the eggs and biscuits, I kept thinking about crashing into Georgia in the hallway earlier, and how pretty she was.

I met a couple of girls in one of my classes and they seemed willin', but I wouldn't ask them out. My girlfriend from high school married one of my friends and moved to Abilene. After that, I didn't feel much like taking a chance on a girl.

Georgia seemed different than the girls at home. I figured she was a bit older than me but not much. Just enough to make her...what? Unavailable?

I might be interested in her, but would a girl like Georgia be interested in a guy like me? Don't think so. Why would she?

I finished my breakfast, paid the check, and headed back to the U for my compulsory afternoon class. I had to show up for so many of them per week to make the scholarship work.

I'd signed up for criminology in case hockey didn't work out and I wanted to be a cop instead. Turned out I loved the criminology course and hated to miss it.

Once I got my education for the day over with, I'd grab a couple hours sleep and think about going to Jerseys to watch Georgia work her shift.

# Chapter Five

Thursday, October 5<sup>th</sup>.

## Georgia

“Good morning, I’m Georgia Vance and I was hired yesterday by the former manager. He said it was his last day and you’d handle my orientation today.”

“He told me about hiring you, Georgia. Welcome to Jerseys. I’m Lisa Bowman and I’m new here in our Austin location, but not new to the Jerseys’ family—I transferred from one of our other restaurants in Houston.”

Lisa was pretty, about forty with long curly hair. She had a nice smile and friendly blue eyes. I liked her right away and we were both new and starting at the same time.

“I see by your resume you have a lot of experience behind the bar, so I’ll skip over the making of the drinks and spend a little time on how we do things at Jerseys.”

“Sure.”

After Lisa went over everything I’d be expected to do on each shift, she put me on the payroll and issued me a timecard. “Do you have any questions for me, Georgia?”

I wanted to ask her about the clientele, but realized she wouldn’t know any more than I would. She’d just arrived from Houston.

We wrapped up and she said, “Your first shift will start at seven. We close at two and then an hour of cleanup and you’ll be out of here by three.”

“Thanks. I’ll be here before seven to get a feel for things and meet the others on my shift.”

She shook my hand, and I was free for the afternoon. If my shift lasted until three in the morning, I should go back to my apartment and sleep for a couple of hours.

I parked in my designated spot at the Oak Gardens complex and noticed that Jax’s truck wasn’t there. He was probably at the University taking a class or hanging out with his team.

*I wonder what his major is.*

He looked like the kind of guy who might take engineering or a guy course like that. I didn't go to college or university because all I ever wanted to be was a songwriter and a singer.

A guy with shaggy blond hair and a bandage over his right eyebrow rode in the elevator with me to the second floor. We got out at the same time and headed down the hallway in the same direction.

"Think I might have seen you yesterday, babe. You just move in?"

"I did." I stopped and unlocked my door and pushed it open.

"I'm Howie, babe, and I live at the other end of the hall. Maybe we can have a drink sometime."

"Not sure about that." I went into my apartment, closed the door, and locked it. Howie was good-looking, but he wasn't a guy I would have a drink with. For some reason, he made me a little uneasy and without knowing exactly why, I wished Jax was at home in his apartment next door.

Trying to shake off the creepy Howie feeling, I boiled the kettle to make tea and headed into my bedroom to get my guitar.

I should sleep to get ready for my first shift tonight, but there was a song I've been thinking about. Writing the melody in my head, and I want to get some of it down on paper.

Parts of the melody I was sure of, but the words needed more work. The chorus would be last. Always the easiest part of any song I'd ever written, I always wrote the chorus last.

Strumming away and humming my song while I scribbled down notes in my music book, I hadn't realized how much time had gone by until there was a knock on my door.

I crossed the room and looked through the peephole and saw Howie standing there with a bottle in his hand. He wasn't hard to look at, but he was one of those guys you wouldn't want to trust.

Being a bartender, I saw dozens of guys exactly like him every night at work. Easy to spot and they weren't hard to sort out into the *taboo* pile.

Wondering whether I should open the door or pretend I wasn't home, politeness won out and I took the lock off and opened the door a crack.

"Hi, Howie."

"Hey, girl. I brought a bottle of tequila over for that drink you promised me."

Howie had an accent, but it wasn't Texan.

"I don't remember promising you anything, Howie, and I'm going to pass."

I'm starting a job in a couple of hours and I'm not drinking before I go to work."

"Aw, come on, babe. I walked all the way over here from the other end of the hallway just to share a drink with you."

"I'm busy right now, and I don't have time to sit around and drink."

"Let me in, babe. I promise I'll be on my best behavior."

"No, thanks."

"Come on, girl. Let Howie Lintz show you a good time."

"She said *no*, Lintz."

I heard Jax speak in his Texas drawl, and I let out a sigh of relief. I couldn't see him with my door practically shut, but I could feel his presence in the hallway.

"Don't mess in my business, Dempsey."

"Why not? You're messing in mine."

"Bullshit, I am. You got no dibs on her just because your apartment is next door."

Wanting to get rid of Howie, I opened the door a little wider so I could see Jax and smiled at him. "Oh, good, you're home, Jax. I was waiting for you. Come on in."

Grinning like a Cheshire cat, Jax pushed past Howie and stepped into my apartment. I closed the door and locked it.

"I shouldn't have opened the door when I saw it was him. My mistake."

"Did Lintz try anything?" asked Jax. "He can be pushy."

"We met in the elevator, and he wanted to have a drink. I brushed him off and didn't pay much attention to him, then he came over with the tequila in his hand."

"He's got a rep at the U for hustling girls. I don't like him much."

"Sit down, Jax. Want a drink? I'm only drinking tea because I'm starting work at seven, but I have beer in the fridge if you want one."

"I'll have one beer and then I'll let you get ready for work. This is your first night at Jerseys, right?"

"Yes. I had my orientation this morning and my new boss is nice. Her name is Lisa and she just moved here from Houston. I'll meet the rest of the staff tonight."

I grabbed Jax a beer and handed it to him as he sat down on the sofa.

"I see you have your guitar out and a paper and pen there on the table. You write a song today?"



“Part of one. I have the melody and a few words. None of the chorus. Not yet.”

“You want to sing it to me?”

I laughed. “Not ready for that yet.”

“Can I hear it when it’s ready for the radio?”

“Okay, sure.” I laughed. “If you want to hear me sing.”

“You ever sing in a bar or anything yet?”

“A few times at home in Ohio. Made me pretty nervous to get up there in front of the microphone.”

“That feeling must go away after you sing in front of people a few times,” said Jax. “If it’s like playing in an arena full of people, you’re scared shitless the first few times you step on the ice, but now I don’t even know if people are there at all.”

“I’d like to watch you play sometime.”

“You a hockey fan?” He tipped up his beer and finished it and I jumped up and got him another one because I didn’t want him to leave.

*Where did that crazy feeling come from?*

I ran back to the living room and handed it to him.

He grinned and said, “I guess I’m having another beer.”

I laughed. “I think Howie put me on edge and I’m bribing you to stay a little longer.”

“That’s okay. I’ve got nothing to do for the rest of the night. I was thinking of coming to Jerseys to watch your first shift at the bar.”

“That’s sweet of you, Jax. The man who interviewed me for the job said it was a rough bar. How did you find it?”

Jax shrugged. “Sports bar with a lot of guys watching games and betting on them. Been a few fights the times I was there.”

“Were you in any of them?”

“I’m not much of a fighter—off the ice. I leave that to the other guys. If I got hurt in a stupid bar fight, I might not be able to play and I don’t want to miss a game. I hate sitting on the bench.”

“Sounds like you have common sense.”

“I’ve got it, but sometimes on the ice I forget to use it.” He laughed and I laughed too.

“What classes are you taking at the University?” I asked him.

“Umm...criminology and sports medicine.”

“Wow, those are kind of diverse.”

“I want to be a cop, but if I don’t get into the Texas Rangers’ academy, then I’ll have sports med and I’ll be able to get a coaching job at a school or with a pro team.”

“You surprise me, Jax. You have a good handle on your future. A better one than I have. I might sell a song or cut a record, or that may never happen. You’re a long ways ahead of me.”

“Not a long ways, Georgia. You seem like a pretty solid person to me.”

“Thanks, Jax, and thanks for saving me from the Howie thing. I hope he doesn’t come around for a second try.”

Jax didn’t comment, but I saw the look in his eyes.

He left and I ran into my bedroom to get ready for work. While I brushed my hair in front of the bathroom mirror, I thought about how nice Jax was. He was the kind of a guy you would want for a best friend—kind of a big brother to look out for you.

# Chapter Six

Thursday, October 5<sup>th</sup>.

## Jaxon

I left Georgia's apartment, and it was all I could do not to go the opposite way down the hall and kick Howie Lintz's door in. If he hit on her again, I might have to do more than knock down his door.

I made myself a couple of sandwiches, then hit the shower and cleaned up real good. Best I could. My hair was a little long and getting a bit shaggy. Might be time for a haircut.

Hated having it too short under my helmet. Just felt wrong somehow. My long hair was like my security blanket. I laughed at myself and was grateful I still could laugh at all.

Jerseys was only a ten-minute drive from the apartment where I lived, and nothing would be happening there until after nine. I took my time and got there about nine-thirty.

When I walked in, I picked a table where I'd be able to watch Georgia working. That was my main reason for being there. She looked at home behind the bar. She was fast making the drinks and she smiled all the time at the customers. Her new Jerseys' shirt fit her nice and snug and showed off her perfect body. I noticed a lot more guys sitting on the bar stools than usual, and every one of them was staring at Georgia, watching her work the bar.

One of the guys from my team hollered to me from across the room, and I sat in a booth with him and a couple of other guys for a while.

Every once in a while, I'd sneak a look at Georgia, and I had to admit to myself I was starting to like her a lot.

Paul O'Brien on the other side of the table said, "Hey, Dempsey, you keep looking at the new bartender. You gonna hit on her?"

I shrugged. "You never know."

O'Brien laughed. "Howie's over there now. You shouldn't let him get too close to her. You know how women love him."

*Georgia doesn't like him. That's a good thing.*

“Yeah, I know, O’Brien. I’m not worried about Lintz. He don’t scare me none.”

The next time I looked at the bar, there was a guy filling pitchers and Georgia was on her break. While she was gone, I hit the men’s room.

I stepped into the hall when I was done, and she was coming out of the ladies’ room next door. She smiled and said, “Hey, Jax. I saw you sitting with your friends.”

“Guys from the team. Haven’t made any friends in Austin yet. Howie bothering you?”

“We’ve got the bar between us, so no problems I can’t handle. Thanks for asking.”

She went into the employees’ break room, and I went back to my table. I sat with the guys a little longer, then Howie started getting loud and he made me nervous.

Just in case he was going to be an asshole to Georgia, I moved to a stool at the opposite end of the bar so I could hear what was going on.

“What time to you get off, beautiful?” Howie was drunk and slurring his words.

Georgia filled another pitcher from the Bud tap and ignored him. She moved back and forth behind the bar getting drinks for the bar customers and when the servers came to their station at the end, she got the drinks they needed.

Busy night, but Georgia kept up pretty easily. Easy to see she had lots of experience. She had a rhythm and never got flustered. Nothing seemed to bother her.

Howie hollered, “I’m gonna sit here until this bar closes so I can take you home, Georgia. I can wait all night if I have to.”

*Shit. I have to get up for practice. I can’t sit here all night and watch Lintz.*

Wasn’t long until one of the bouncers came around and told Lintz to tone it down or they would toss him. He stayed quiet for a while, but he never left his stool, and he kept on drinking.

Coach didn’t like us drinking a lot—in fact, he preached against it. A couple of times he told us if we came to practice hungover, he’d suspend us for three games.

Didn’t take long before Howie started hollering at Georgia again and this time he did get thrown out. I let out a sigh of relief thinking I could go home

and get some sleep.

Georgia was busy when I was on my way out, but I gave her a wave anyway. Didn't think she saw me.

When I got to my truck, I could see Howie sitting behind the wheel of his silver Mustang three cars down the row.

"Damn it. He's waiting for Georgia to get off work."

I was already tired, but I went back inside and sat down at the bar. When Georgia came to get me a beer, I whispered, "Howie is waiting in the parking lot. I'm going to stay until you finish."

"You don't have to do that, Jax. You'll be tired for hockey tomorrow."

"It's only another hour until the bar closes," I said.

"Then I have to clean up after that. You go on home. I'll be okay. I can get one of the boys on shift to walk me to my car."

"I'd rather wait."

She smiled. "Okay."

A few minutes later she brought me a coffee. "On the house," she whispered.

The bar closed and I went outside to wait for her. She would come out the employees exit at the back of the building. From my truck, I watched the door.

When the staff started coming out, I walked to the door, waited for Georgia, and walked her to her Honda.

"I'll follow you, Georgia. Howie will be following us too, so when we get to our complex, don't get out of your car until I'm there parked next to you."

"Okay."

I called it.

Howie followed Georgia home and before he could put a move on her in the parking lot, I was standing beside her car door waiting for her to get out.

We went into the building together and I walked her to her door—next one along the hall from my door.

Wasn't long before Howie staggered past us, and he waved his fist at me. "You're landfill, Dempsey."

"Yeah, I hear you, Lintz." He was in no shape to fight me, and he knew it.

"Thanks for being there, Jax. I'm worried about how tired you'll be in the morning."

"Yeah, I'll be tired."

She was close to me, and I wanted to lean down and cover her mouth with

my own. But I didn't. We barely knew each other, and I had no idea how she'd react if I suddenly kissed her.

For me, there was no doubt about how much I wanted her at that moment. I had wood. A lot of it. Trying to forget about how hot I was for her, I asked if she had her key.

"Sure. I have it here somewhere." She fumbled in her purse and found it. After two tries, she got the door open.

We were both a bit nervous and...tired. I was extremely tired.

She opened the door and turned towards me. "Thanks for tonight, Jax. I appreciate having you next door to me so much. You're like the big brother I never had."

"No problem. See you tomorrow."

I went into my own apartment not wanting to be her big brother. Not even her bestie. I wanted to be something else. Her hot new boyfriend.

Would that ever happen?

# Chapter Seven

Friday, October 6<sup>th</sup>.

## Jaxon

My alarm went off and I couldn't believe it was morning already. It seemed like I'd just put my head on the pillow. After double-checking the time, I dragged my tired ass out of bed and staggered into the bathroom.

Standing under the hot water and wishing I could skip practice; all I could think of was Georgia and how beautiful she was. Her eyes, her hair, the smell of her perfume.

Am I in love with her? What I feel for Georgia feels a lot different than when I had a girlfriend in high school.

I thought I was in love with Amanda Potts, but it didn't feel like this. Not a bit like this. If I still lived in Turkey, Texas, I'd probably marry Amanda someday, just because everybody expected me to.

It couldn't happen now. Not after I met Georgia and feel this crazy feeling every time I come near her. It's like I can't get enough air when I'm around her.

By the time I dried off and got dressed, I only had time for toast while the coffee brewed, but no time to cook anything—like eggs or bacon.

I sat down at the kitchen table and drank one cup of coffee wondering how late Georgia slept after working her shift.

*Is she awake on the other side of that wall?*

I stared at the living room wall as if that would help me. None of my business how late she slept, but I still wanted to know. In fact, I wanted to know everything about her. What did she eat for breakfast? How did she like her coffee? Like that.

I checked the time and had to get going. I'd have to save time later for thinking about Georgia. I'd been doing more and more of it since the day I met her.

“Got to focus on practice or I'll get killed out there.”

I parked at the arena and hauled my bag inside. The door to the locker room

wasn't locked this morning so I figured I had a couple of minutes to spare.

Most of the guys were already suited up when I walked in with my gear. They ignored me and that was the way I liked it.

"Morning, Dempsey," said Coach Haney. "Nice of you to show up."

"I ain't late, Coach."

"You're about one minute away from being late. Get suited up. We're burning ice time."

I changed fast and while I got my pads on, I saw Lintz glaring at me from the other side of the room. He should be penalized for coming to practice hungover, but Haney wasn't doing anything about the shit shape Lintz was in. Howie's eyes were kind of bleary and half-shut and he had a helluva headache. I could see that by looking at him. Served him right. Asshole.

Maybe Lintz would be in worse shape for tomorrow's practice. More than a little headache. Never know how things would work out.

On the ice, my energy level was dragging down around the zero mark. My skates weighed more today than they ever had before, and my legs were too tired to give me any speed.

After the warmup—all the sprints and exercises and shots on goal—Coach handed out the markers for the scrimmage.

Lintz and I were on opposite teams, and I couldn't wait to smash him into the corner and knock every ounce of wind out of his body. A couple of teeth missing would go a long way to spoiling his looks.

I smiled thinking about him with a couple of gaps.

Whistle blew and O'Brien took the face off against Taggart. Taggart passed to Lintz, and I raced down the ice after Lintz, caught up to him and stick-checked the puck away from him.

I shot the puck to O'Brien, and he took the shot on goal and scored against Tim Grady, our second-string goalie.

We were one up. I gave O'Brien a fist bump.

Lintz was pissed because I made him look like a dick of a stick handler. I wanted to laugh but had to push harder because in practice Haney rated each one of us on performance, and we had to measure up or he'd rat us out and it would go against our scholarship.

The line changed and I sat in the box for the next few minutes thinking that first shift plus the colder temperature in the arena had helped to wake me up.



Lintz was off the ice at the same time and shouted shit at me from the visitors' box next door. "Watch yourself, Dempsey, or you'll be lying on the ice looking up at the scoreboard."

I gave him the finger. The whistle blew and it was time to get out there and kick ass again.

Digging one out of the corner for my teammates, my back was turned, and I didn't see Lintz coming at me like a runaway freight.

He slammed me into the boards so fuckin hard he made my teeth rattle and while he was doing that chore, he flicked the blade of his stick in the air and cut me real close to my eye.

Whistle blew when the ref saw the blood running down my face. He gave the hand signal and hollered out, "Boarding. Major. Five minutes."

Haney was on the ice with the team doctor to see how bad I was hurt, and they made me skate off and go to the dressing room. Three stitches to close up the gash on my face.

When the scrimmage ended, Coach Haney came charging in and had a close look at me. Nothing to see, there was a bandage over the stitches.

He turned and pointed at Lintz. "Just a scrimmage, Lintz, you jackass. You took out my best defenseman on purpose and you can sit out for the next two games and think about what a fucking stupid move that was."

"Aw, come on, coach. It was an accident. Anybody could see that."

O'Brien shook his head. "Nope. I was right behind Dempsey and the stick action was deliberate."

"Fuck you, O'Brien." Lintz gave him the finger.

I stripped off my gear and hit the showers. Washed the blood out of my hair and at the same time, tried not to get the bandage on my face wet.

Dressed in jeans and a sweatshirt, I packed up my stuff and headed for my truck. The doc had given me a few of the little white pain pills and told me to lie down for an hour when I got home.

That meant I'd be skipping my criminology class, but I had a good reason. Still, I hated to miss my favorite class and my fav teacher. I'd make it up tomorrow.

Moving slow, I got to my truck and Lintz was leaning on the driver's door waiting for me.

"Aw, shit," I mumbled to myself. I didn't want to deal with Lintz right now. I wanted to lie down on my own bed and close my eyes and forget all about him.

“You got me a two-game suspension, you prick.”

“Wasn’t me.” I pointed to the bandage on the side of my face. “You were an asshole, Lintz.”

“You’re pissing me off, Dempsey—on and off the ice.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, I’m not fond of you neither.” I gave him a shove. “Get out of my way. I have to get home.”

“I ain’t moving. You want in your truck, you’ll have to move me out of the way.”

“Sure, no problem.” I smashed my fist into Lintz’s pretty-boy face and knocked him to the pavement. He lay there moaning and holding onto his jaw. Still in my way so I gave him a kick with my Dan Post boot and rolled him farther away from my truck.

I jumped in and headed for home.

When I got back to my apartment, it was afternoon, and my stomach was growling. I ignored being hungry and sat on the side of my bed wondering if Georgia was up yet.

My phone in my hand made me realize I didn’t have her number and she didn’t have mine. As soon as I rested for an hour like the doc wanted me to do, I’d go next door and get her number.

I needed to text her. Never texted much before but I was almost going nuts because I couldn’t text Georgia. Yep. I was losing it. Pretty sure.

“Lay down and close your eyes and stop thinking about her.”

In my dream I could hear knocking on my door.

I didn’t wake up right away because of the drugs. I kept closing my eyes and dozing off. The knocking got louder, and I figured whoever it was wasn’t going away.

I shook off the drugged sleep and dragged my ass out of bed, down the hall and across the living room to my front door.

Georgia gasped when I opened the door. “Oh, my nerves, Jax, look at you. You’re hurt and you were sleeping. I’m so sorry.” She pulled me into a hug and when she let me go there were tears in her eyes.

“Don’t cry. No need to cry, Georgia.” I backed up a couple of steps to let her in. “Sorry it took me so long to open the door. The team doc gave me drugs to make me sleep and I woke up half stupid.”

“I’m so sorry. Did this happen at practice?”

“Yeah, tough practice this morning.”

“Did Howie do that to your face?”

“Umm...”

*If I rat Lintz out, I'll sound like a cry baby.*

I said nothing and Georgia drew her own conclusions. “It was him. That butcher. I know it.” She leaned towards me and touched my face so gently I barely felt it. “There’s a lot of swelling around the bandage. I’ll make you an ice pack.”

“You don’t need to fuss, Georgia. I’m okay.”

“Have you eaten anything today?”

“I can remember eating toast a few hours ago.”

Georgia opened the freezer, pulled out an ice tray and emptied the cubes onto a kitchen towel. She wrapped it up into a nice, neat package and brought it to me.

“Here you go. This might help with the swelling.”

I leaned back on the sofa and held the ice to the side of my head. Nice and cool and it did calm down the throbbing.

“I’ll make you a sandwich and some soup,” she called from the kitchen.

“Not sure I have any soup.”

A few minutes later she brought me a sandwich on a plate and set it on the coffee table. “I’ll start a pot of coffee. I know you like coffee better than tea.”

“I can drink tea.”

Georgia laughed. “I saw your face when I gave you tea at my apartment.”

While the coffee brewed, she sat beside me on the sofa and stroked my hair. She was fussing over me a lot and I wasn’t minding it too much. Almost worth a couple of stitches.

“I love your hair,” she whispered to me.

Having her body so close to mine made me hard. I hadn’t been with a girl since I left home to come to Austin. Couldn’t remember how long I’d been doing without, but it was a few months.

I turned my head towards her, and the smell of her almost made me unload in my boxers.

I put the ice pack on the table so I could pull Georgia into my arms and hold her properly when I kissed her for the first time. When I reached for her, she shook her head.

“No, Jax. You’re hurt and I don’t want to make out with you. That’s not what I’m here for.”

My brain spun and it was impossible to tell if it was because of Georgia’s

perfume, or if I was dizzy because of the damage to my head.

She stared into my eyes and shook her head. “Your eyes look funny, Jax. I think you might pass out. You should be lying down.”

“I can lie down right here on the sofa. I’m okay.”

“Let me get you a coffee. Do you want another sandwich?”

“No thanks. I’m not hungry.”

“Cream and sugar,” she hollered from the kitchen.

“Cream. No sugar.”

“Same,” she said as she came from the kitchen. “We take our coffee the same way.”

Big smile as she set the two mugs on the coffee table.

I tried to sit up straighter and couldn’t do it. I was almost falling asleep whether I wanted to or not.

“You should skip the coffee and go straight to bed. That’s the best thing for you right now. You need to sleep.”

“It’s the drugs. I can hardly keep my eyes open, and I don’t want to sleep when you’re here. Sorry, Georgia. I’m happy you came over and look at me—I’m a mess.”

She flashed me another one of those smiles and held out her hand. “Come on. I’ll tuck you in.”

“No. My bed ain’t made and my room is a mess. I don’t want you to see what a slob I am.”

“Okay. I’m stressing you out and I don’t want to put you through that. You’ve had enough trauma for one day.”

*I have to clean up my room.*

“You should have my cell number, just in case you get worse, and you need me.”

I nodded. “I want your number. Could you put it in my phone? Thanks.”

I watched Georgia put her number in my cell and she put my number in her list of contacts. “I have to leave for work at six, but if you need me, I’ll come home.”

“I’ll be fine. I’m not going to call and make you leave work, girl. That’s a new job and you might get canned.”

“Not if it’s a true emergency. I’ll text you later to see how you’re doing.”

“Okay. I’ll keep my phone handy.”

She waved to me from the door, and I hated to see her go. I wanted to kiss her and hold her close to me, but that would have to come later. She was

thinking of me like her big brother right now.  
That had to change.

# Chapter Eight

Friday, October 6<sup>th</sup>.

## Georgia

From Jax's apartment, I ran down the hall to the far end where I'd seen Howie Lintz go into his place. Furious at what he'd done to Jax, I wanted to make him pay.

Jax was my first friend in Austin. He helped me move in and he stood up for me. Now he was hurt, and I wanted to be a good friend back.

At first, Howie didn't answer his door and I wondered if he wasn't home, but I wanted and needed him to be home so I could tell him how I felt about him hurting Jaxon.

I pounded harder and kept it up until I got a response. Howie opened the door and looked surprised to see me. I punched him in the gut as hard as I could and when he took a step back, I charged forward and kicked him in the package.

He flopped down inside the door, rolling around on the tile floor and hollering while he hung onto his private parts.

"You keep away from Jax, you asshole," I yelled at him. "This is only a sample of what you'll get from me if you hurt him again."

I turned to go, and Howie grabbed my ankle and jerked me off my feet. I fell on my face and kicked out at him behind me like a mule on coke. One of my boot heels connected with his face and made him holler.

When Howie let go of me—in that second—I jumped to my feet and pushed the door wide open so I could get at him.

An umbrella stand near the door held a half dozen of his hockey sticks—blades up. I grabbed one and slashed him across the head with it, while he was trying to get to his feet.

*Snap.*

The stick broke over his hard head.

"Don't you touch Jax ever again, you prick. He's my next-door neighbor and my friend."

I threw the broken stick at him and took off down the hall running full-out

for my apartment. Howie was right behind me, and he was pretty fast on his feet.

I made it to my door, ran inside, and locked the door behind me. As soon as I caught my breath, the first call I made was to the super downstairs.

“Sir, this is Georgia Vance in apartment two-oh-four. I want to report a tenant who is harassing me.”

“Is he there now?”

“Right outside my door.”

“I’ll be right up, Miss Vance. Keep your door locked until I get there.”

“Yes, sir.”

Howie was pounding on my door when the super got off the elevator and I could hear them in the hallway shouting at each other. I ran over and watched through the peephole.

“I’m calling the cops in on this one, Mister Lintz,” said the superintendent. “Get yourself ready for a visit from the Austin police.”

“Don’t call the cops. Don’t. I didn’t hurt her. She hurt me and this is just a misunderstanding.”

After Howie left to go back to his own apartment, the super knocked, and I let him in.

Ten minutes later, the cops arrived. Two men in uniform came into my apartment and I told them about Howie pounding on my door more than once. How he watched me at Jerseys where I worked, and how he got drunk and waited for me in the parking lot.

“You’ve definitely got yourself a stalker, Miss Vance. We’ll go have a chat with Howie Lintz and see what he has to say.”

“Thank you so much, officers. I’ve got to leave for work now, but if you want me, you’ll find me behind the bar at Jerseys.”

“Been there a few times, Miss. Busy bar.”

“Thanks for coming so quickly, officers,” I said.

“We’re always ready to help young ladies in distress,” said the shorter one. “To serve and protect. That’s our motto.”

The air crackled at Jerseys on the weekend. Crazy busy and I loved working at that pace. No time to worry about anything but keeping up with the drinks and the servers.

For me, it was a time when I truly loved my job. So busy at the other end of the bar filling the trays for the servers, I didn’t notice Howie sitting on a

stool at the far end.

Didn't see him until I had to run down to that end of the long bar to serve a customer. I tried not to, but I smiled when I saw his black eye and blue swollen face.

His hockey buddies sitting at a table across the aisle hollered stuff at him and made fun of him. Their razzing didn't help Howie's mood much.

He started drinking doubles and it wasn't long before he was drunk and began hollering threats at me for siccing the Austin cops on him.

Wasn't long after that, one of our bouncers grabbed Lintz by the shirt and showed him to the door. Next time I worked that end of the bar, O'Brien had taken Howie's spot.

I considered Paul O'Brien to be one of the nice guys on Jax's team. Always clean and polite. A cute face and perfect dark brown hair. He wore his hair a lot shorter than Jax did, but it suited him.

"I heard Lintz making an ass of himself again," said Paul.

I put a Bud in front of Paul and spun a coaster down the bar to him. "Yeah, that's his thing. We don't like each other, and he doesn't keep it a secret."

O'Brien shook his head. "I think you're wrong about that, Georgia. Lintz is crazy out of his head liking you and you won't give him the time of day. That's what's turning him into a maniac."

"Maybe you're right, but he's sure not making me like him any better doing what he's doing. He repulses me and we've had more than a few words about him getting in my face."

Paul laughed. "I find it funny, because Lintz is usually a guy with at least three girls on a string and he brags about it all the time. Especially in the dressing room and in class—if you're unlucky enough to have a class with him."

"No classes for me. I'm older than you guys and been done school for a while."

"Come on, Georgie, you can't be more than what...? Twenty-two or three."

"Twenty-three and I have plans for my life. I'm not getting messed up by a twenty-year-old self-centered womanizer. Howie will only get worse as he gets older."

Paul laughed again. "Love your attitude, Georgia. Talking to you puts me in a good mood."



“Glad to help you out, Paul.”

“Why isn’t Jax here, hanging off you?”

“Howie hurt him. You must have seen it happen if you were at praccy.”

Paul chuckled. “You said *praccy*. Some of the guys say that too.”

“Guess I remembered it from the hockey guys on *Letterkenny*. That’s a crazy show about Canadians.”

Paul took another pull on his beer. “Yeah, I saw the stick to the eye at practice. Lintz definitely did it on purpose. How bad is Jax?”

“He has meds for the pain and he’s mostly sleeping. I saw him earlier today and he’s okay.”

“You live in his building?”

“Next apartment. He helped me out with Howie a couple of times, and I like him. Nice guy.”

Julia, one of the servers came into the bar to give me my break and whispered to me, “Booth on the far wall. See the dynamite looking guy with the blond hair sitting by himself?”

“Yeah, I see him.”

“Dooley O’Rourke. Go talk to him.”

My heart pounded in my chest listening to what Julia was telling me. “Dooley O’Rourke is in this bar?”

“Quit drooling and get over there. I’ve got you covered here for the next fifteen minutes.”

“I’m going.” I whipped my apron off and handed it to Julia as I ran to the end of the bar.

My hands trembled as I crossed between the packed tables to get to the booth where Dooley O’Rourke sat by himself with a pitcher of beer in front of him.

He is such a great musician and song writer—almost like a god in the music industry here in Austin. They talk about him in Nashville too. He’s not going to want to talk to me.

I stood next to the table ready to get down on my knees and beg. “Mister O’Rourke, I’m Georgia Vance. I hate to bother you, but could I talk to you for a second?”

He smiled at me, and I almost peed my pants. He was beyond cute and had dimples on both sides of his face when he smiled. “Sure, sit.”

“Umm...I just got to Austin. I’m from Ohio...this probably isn’t possible, but could I get an appointment to show you my songs?”

“You’re a songwriter, Georgia. Great. Have you showed your portfolio to anyone else in Austin?”

“No. I just got here, got an apartment, and got this job here at Jerseys. I’m so new I don’t know anybody or where to start.”

“You play an instrument?”

“Guitar and banjo. Probably the same as everybody else who approaches you.”

“Banjo makes me smile. Give me your number and I’ll check my appointment schedule for next week. I’ll see when I have a couple of hours free, and you can come to my studio and sing a couple of your songs for me.”

My hand went to my heart, I was so excited. I thought I might have an infarction right there in Dooley O’Rourke’s booth.

I gave him my number and thanked him. I had to run to the ladies’ room and pee and run back to the bar. No time to eat, get a drink or anything else, but it was truly worth it.

I’d gladly starve until I got home at three in the morning if that’s what it took to get Dooley O’Rourke to listen to me sing my songs.

Floating back to the bar on cloud nine, I hugged Julia and thanked her for pointing me at Dooley. “I owe you big time, girl. Buy you dinner for sure.”

“I take it he liked you?”

“Don’t know if he liked me or not, but he’s going to call me next week and give me an appointment at his studio. I’ll have to sing some of my songs for him.”

“Aw, Jeeze, Georgia, I’d faint if I had to do something that hard.”

“I’m going to try super hard not to faint. But I’ve got a lot of practicing to do before I go see him.”

“Hey, can I get a drink down here?” a guy hollered from the end of the bar.

“Sure thing. Be right there.”

I had to give my head a shake and get to work.

When the cleanup was finished and I was done for the night, I asked Rocky—one of the bouncers—if he would walk me out to my car. Just in case that nitwit Howie Lintz was waiting out there in his Mustang.

I exited the employee door at the back of the building and there was no sign of Howie Lintz or his Mustang.

*Was I being paranoid?*

Then I saw the cop car parked by the back fence and I gave the officers a little wave as I started my Honda and drove out to the street.

Cops didn't think so. Maybe Howie was a legit nutbar.

# Chapter Nine

Saturday, October 7<sup>th</sup>.

## Jaxon

I wasn't conscious when I rolled over on my pillow and accidentally laid on the gouge in my head. That was a wake-up call. Pain ripped through me like a bolt of lightning, and I sat up feeling in my hair for dripping blood.

Yep. A warm trickle ran down the side of my face. I dragged myself to the bathroom to see the mess in the mirror and it was worse than I thought. The bandage was soaked through with blood. Probably on my pillow too, but I didn't notice.

Using a cloth soaked in warm water, I cleaned my face up and went back to get my phone. I'd texted Georgia once yesterday and last night before I sacked out. I needed her to answer me.

Scrolling through the texts from yesterday there weren't any from her. I checked twice, then shuffled to the kitchen in my boxers and started a pot of coffee.

Practice this morning would be important because we had a real game tonight against a tough team from San Antonio. I wanted Georgia to come and watch me play if she wasn't working at Jerseys.

*It's the weekend. She'll be working.*

As soon as the green light came on, I filled a clean mug with coffee and added cream to cool it down so I could swallow a couple of the pain pills. I had to shine in practice to show Coach Haney I could play tonight.

He wasn't fond of letting any of us play if we were injured. *Playing injured leads to more injuries*—I'd heard him say that a hundred times.

While I sat at the kitchen table sipping my coffee, I texted Georgia again about the game. The phone was on the table in front of me and staring at it didn't help a bit.

I made toast—cursed because I was out of jam—ate it anyway and checked my phone again. Still nothing.

Had to get ready for practice. Headed for the shower. Got that job done, put a clean gauze pad over the stitches, taped it down tight and got dressed.

As soon as I had clothes on and was on my way out, I decided I'd knock on her door before heading for the elevator.

Gathering up all the crap I needed to take to the arena, I thought I could hear her singing on the other side of the bedroom wall.

I left my apartment and plopped my bag down in front of my door. Took the few steps down the hall to Georgia's door and knocked loud enough for her to hear me.

Second time I knocked was the charm. Georgia opened the door with headphones on and her face flushed. I should've smiled and said hi to her first, but I didn't think of it. I blurted out, "You didn't answer my text."

"What? Sorry, Jax. Haven't looked at my phone. I'm rehearsing."

"I've got an important game tonight, and I wondered if you wanted to come and watch me play."

"Love to, Jax, but I have to work. It's the weekend and I'm the new bartender. I won't be getting weekends off for a long time yet."

"Yeah, I get that."

Kind of disappointed that she couldn't come, I left Georgia to her singing and hauled my hockey bag down to my truck.

As I tossed it into the load bed, I could see Lintz putting his stuff into the trunk of his Stang. He had a two-game suspension for high sticking me, but it looked like he was coming to practice anyway.

Lintz wasn't my problem today. It was convincing Coach Haney that I was in good enough shape to play a regular shift in tonight's game.

No way I wanted to sit on the bench with Lintz while the rest of the team was on the ice.

O'Brien was suited up when I walked into the dressing room, and I sat down in the spot next to him. Right away he started talking to me about going to Jerseys the night before and talking to Georgia at the bar.

"She had a meeting with a big music producer guy," said Paul.

"How do you know that?" I asked as I stripped down to my boxers.

"Julia, the cute server with the short blonde hair told me who the guy was, and she sent Georgia over to talk to him."

"Georgia never said nothing to me about that," I said.

"Why would she? You sleeping together?"

"Hell no. I hardly know her."

"Right," said O'Brien. "She wouldn't tell you her business."

“But she was rehearsing this morning when I talked to her for a minute. Before I left the building, I asked her if she wanted to come to the game tonight.”

O’Brien’s face lit up. “She coming?”

“Can’t. She’s working the weekend at Jerseys.”

“Yeah,” said O’Brien, “she’s dynamite behind the bar. Fast and slick. I bet she can toss stuff in the air like...you know what I’m talking about.”

“Nope. No idea.”

Coach Haney walked into the dressing room and pointed a finger at me. “Dempsey, take it easy in practice. I’m not convinced that you should even hit the ice today.”

“I’m good, Coach. Good to go. I don’t want to miss the game tonight.”

“Let’s wait and see how you do in practice.” He turned to Lintz and pointed his whistle at him. “You, Mister Lintz, are definitely not seeing any ice today.”

“Aw, come on, Coach. At least let me practice. I’m gonna be as stiff as a fucking frozen dick if you don’t let me skate.”

“I’ll watch your first shift and if I don’t like what I see, you’re on a two-day vacay. Frozen dick or not. Hear me talking, Lintz?”

“Got it, Coach.”

Before the coach let me on the ice, he called the team doctor to check the stitches in my head. I had to sit there while the doc cleaned everything up and put cream and a new bandage on it. Even though I’d already done it.

“Don’t like the fact that you’ve had overnight bleeding, Dempsey. I’d prefer it if you didn’t practice today.”

“But if I don’t practice, Coach won’t let me play in tonight’s game.”

Doctor Mickelson looked at Coach, “What do you think, Coach? You gonna give this boy the day off practice so he can play tonight?”

“Wouldn’t let you play at all if I didn’t need you so bad, Dempsey. Go on home and sleep for a few hours. Be back here at six for the warmup.”

“Sure thing, Coach. I’ll be in top shape tonight.”

“Hope so. Those fuckin Sharks are a tough team to beat.”

Relieved that I didn’t have to practice, I changed into my street clothes and hauled my gear back to my truck. On the way home, I lined up in the drive-thru at the Golden Arches and got myself two Big Macs and a chocolate shake.

Should I bring Georgia lunch, or would she think I was a pushy dick if I did that? I ate in the parking lot, then drove straight back to the apartment.

I let myself in with my key and after I closed the door, I stood and listened to see if Georgia was still singing. Didn't hear anything.

Time to sleep if I expected to play in the game. No way I could play my best if I was tired. I swallowed two of the pills the doc gave me and flopped down on my bed.

An hour later, I woke up and I could hear banjo picking coming from Georgia's apartment.

*Love the banjo. I only saw her guitar when I was there before.*

I cleaned up a little and tried brushing my crazy hair before I went next door to hear Georgia play. I knocked and she didn't look happy that I was disturbing her again.

"I wanted to hear your banjo pickin, Georgia. Love the banjo."

That was when she smiled and invited me in. "Come in and have a seat. Grab a coffee in the kitchen if you want one. So sorry I can't come to your game, Jax, but I have to work."

"Sure. I get it." I filled a mug and came back and sat down to listen to her play. She played me a blue grass song and she was so good I couldn't believe it.

"You are so damned good, Georgia. You should make a CD."

"That's what I'm trying to do, Jax. I have a possible appointment this week coming with Dooley O'Rourke."

"Don't know who that is. Sorry."

"He's important in the music business—especially in Austin—and I'm lucky he even talked to me."

She set the banjo down and went to the kitchen for a coffee and she brought back muffins for both of us. "This is my breakfast time." She laughed. "Two in the afternoon."

After we finished our coffee, she said, "I've got to sleep for an hour, Jax, or I won't make it to three o'clock in the morning. Don't mean to kick you out, but it's my routine and I don't like to change it up too much."

"No problem. I should rest before I go back to the arena too. I've got to be good tonight, or I'll be benched like Lintz."

Georgia walked me to the door, and I didn't get a kiss goodbye. Maybe she was saving all the kissing for when I was her official boyfriend.

I laid on my bed thinking about Georgia and how pretty she was. She was a musician, and a great singer. She was so amazingly good she was going to be a big star and play concerts and stuff like that.

Even a guy like me could tell that.

I set my alarm for five o'clock and closed my eyes.



# Chapter Ten

Saturday, October 7<sup>th</sup>.

## Georgia

I woke up when I heard the knocking on the door, and I hoped it wasn't Jax again. I liked him a lot, but I had to get ready for work and there was a part of the song I was working on that I wanted to fiddle with a little more. Hard to do your best work when somebody is staring at you.

I ran to the door and opened it a bit roughly because I wasn't in the mood for company. Jax had already used up too much of my practice time.

"Howie. Didn't expect to see you standing there. What do you want?"

"Nothing, Georgia. I don't want anything. Just came to apologize for the way I've been acting. Been a little out of my head since I first saw you, and I acted like an asshole... and I'm sorry."

"I'm also sorry about the way I reacted when you hurt Jaxon. I hardly know him, but it just caught me the wrong way and made me so mad that you would hurt another person on purpose. Moreso—a guy on your own team. I think that's what put me over the edge."

Howie's hand went to his face, and he winced. "I'm on a two-game suspension so I can't play tonight even though I want to."

"Jax mentioned it."

"Would you be okay with it if I came to Jerseys and just sat there? Promise I'll be on my best behavior."

I laughed. "Public bar. Anybody can come in for a beer as long as they don't disturb the peace."

"I won't."

He glanced past me and saw my guitar and banjo both on their stands. "You play both of those?"

"Yeah, and a little piano, but it's at home in Ohio at my parents' house and was too big to bring in my Honda."

He smiled and I had forgotten how cute he was. "I play bass guitar and sing a bit. Music is my first love, but I got into university on a hockey scholarship, so I have to try to balance it out."

“No kidding? You’re a musician? I never would’ve guessed that.” I don’t know why I did it, but I opened the door a little wider and let Howie Lintz into my apartment...voluntarily.

On my guard, in case he tried to touch me or make any other stupid moves, but he didn’t. He sat down and asked me all kinds of questions about my music and the songs I wrote, and how long I’d been trying to get a start in the music business. We talked and talked, like real people, and time just flew.

“I’d love to play one of your songs with you, Georgia. Sometime you have a couple of hours when we could get together.”

“That might be fun. I don’t know any other musicians here in Austin and I don’t have anybody to practice with. I’m practicing hard alone right now because I talked to Dooley O’Rourke at Jerseys, and he said he’d try to free up a couple of hours for me this week.”

“Are you kidding me? Dooley O’Rourke. If I ever got the chance to make a CD, he’s the guy I’d want to produce it.”

“I’m pretty excited that he even talked to me.”

“How did you get to meet him?” asked Howie.

“He came into the bar for a beer, and I didn’t even know who he was. One of the girls I work with pointed him out to me.”

“Amazing. When are you playing for him?”

“He took my number and said he’d call when he had a time slot for me this week coming.”

“Goddammit, Georgia. I hope he calls you.”

“Me too.”

“Do you want me to come over tomorrow and play some bass for you while you practice?”

“Sure. I’d love that, Howie. I usually get up around noon, so say one o’clock. Are you back from pracky by then?”

Howie shrugged. “I’m on suspension, so all I can do is practice. One more game to sit out. I should be done by eleven. I’ll let you sleep and come at one. Fine for me.”

“Have you tried to get into a local band?” I asked him.

“Been so busy starting at the U and going through the try-outs that I haven’t had time to go to any clubs and check the locals out yet. Love to do that with you, Georgia. Guess you don’t get too many nights off.”

“None yet, but I’m hopeful.”

He laughed. “Yeah, you should get the odd night off once you’re on the

regular bar schedule. And by the way, I watched you working and you're one helluva bartender."

"Thanks. That's how I made enough money to pack up and come to Austin to try my luck at the music scene."

"Not saying you came the wrong way, but wouldn't Nashville be closer to Ohio?"

"It is, but I had friends that saved up every cent they could, then busted out in Nashville. They couldn't get anywhere in Music City. I picked Austin instead."

He smiled. "I'm glad you came to Austin. I never would have met you."

I talked to Howie for another half hour and couldn't believe how much he knew about music. I wanted to hear him play, but I had to get ready for work.

"I've got to get ready for work. Sorry. I'd sit here and talk to you about music until midnight if I didn't have to work."

"I can drive you to work."

"No. I'll need my car to get home."

*He might be drunk later, and I'd be stranded.*

"I'm so glad we had this little talk, Howie. I think we know each other a little better now. You're nothing like I thought you were at first."

He smiled. "I admit it, Georgia. I gave you the wrong impression. When I first saw you moving into this building, I lost my mind. Can't deny it. You could drive a guy like me around the bend."

I laughed. Howie Lintz could be pretty funny once you got to know him.

Later, when I was at Jerseys working, I returned to the bar after my first break and Howie was sitting on the end stool next to the servers' station. Seeing him sitting there made my heart do a little flip flop.

I couldn't tell if it was for him...personally... that caused the excitement in me, or for the fact that he was coming over tomorrow to play bass for me. Hard to separate the two, but my heart hadn't been excited about anyone in a long time.

"Hey, Howie. What can I get you?"

"Pitcher of Lone Star will do it, Georgia." He gave me a big grin. "By the way, you look great in your Jerseys' shirt."

"Thanks." I took a long look at Howie's face and had regrets about hurting him. Wasn't all me. Jax had punched him too when he was acting goofy in the parking lot. That didn't make me feel any less guilty.

After my supper break, I went back to the bar and was surprised to see that Jaxon and Paul O'Brien had come in after the big game.

"Hey, guys. Did you win the game?"

Paul smiled. "Won by one goal. Those guys were super tough. We missed you, Lintz."

"Thanks," said Howie. "I'll be back for the next one. For sure."

"I never missed you, Lintz," said Jax.

"Don't start any trouble, Jax," I said. "Howie's on his best behavior."

"For how long?" Jax growled and cast a nasty look at Howie Lintz. "You on Howie's team now, Georgia?"

"I'm on team Georgia, Jax. Don't piss me off."

"Sorry. I won't. Don't want to do that."

"Let's try to get along, guys," I said. "Sometimes I think you forget you are all on the same hockey team."

Howie nodded his head and smiled as I ripped a strip off Jaxon Dempsey. I liked Jax a lot, but I didn't want guys fighting over me. And especially not at work.

Didn't have time for a boyfriend at the moment. That could come later when I had my music career in place.

A customer hollered at me from the far end of the bar, and I ran down to see what I could get him. When I came back, Jax and Paul had moved to a booth on the other side of the room. Fine with me. I was tired and had no time to be a referee.

I got Howie a refill on his pitcher and noticed he was drinking a lot slower tonight and beer only. No tequila shots. Made him a nicer person to talk to.

"Your next-door neighbor moved to a booth," said Howie. "I got nothing against Dempsey. He's by far the best defenseman we've got, and we need him to win games."

"But? Did I hear a *but* in there, Howie?"

"But...he's out of his head over you and I'm not a guy who likes competition."

"Funny guy, Howie. Maybe you should get used to it and learn to handle it a little better. Show your mature musician side instead of your bratty high school hockey player side that needs to grow up."

He laughed. "Sounds like good advice."

"It would go a lot farther with me," I said.

"Noted, Georgia. Thanks for the tip."

“Happy to help you out, Lintz.” I winked at him and ran to the other end of the bar to serve a customer.

After a long, busy night of running my legs off behind the bar, all I wanted was to go home and flop into my bed and close my eyes.

Figuring I had crossed a bridge with Howie Lintz and no longer needed to fear him waiting for me in the parking lot, I was surprised to see Jax leaning on the hood of my car.

“Jaxon. I thought you went home about an hour ago when we closed up.”

“I wanted to wait and talk to you before I went home.”

“Too important to save until tomorrow?”

“For me it was. You don’t get up early and I have to go to practice first thing in the morning—so a long time to wait to get this off my chest.”

I unlocked my car and stood with the door open talking to Jax. “Go for it. I’m tired and I want to go home.”

He let out a breath and I figured the important stuff he had to say was going to be something about Howie Lintz. Jax didn’t let me down.

“Lintz seemed to be your favorite customer tonight, Georgia. I thought you didn’t like him much and then tonight you acted like... you liked him a lot more. Want to explain that to me?”

“Nope. I don’t. What I do is no concern of yours, Jax. We’ve only known each other for a couple of days and we’re starting to become friends. Howie and I are starting to become friends too. Also, Paul O’Brien and I are starting to become friends. This happens when someone new moves to a new town or city and they don’t know anybody else. See what I’m saying, Jax?”

“Not really.”

“I’m saying that I just met you and Howie and Paul and a few other people at the bar and I don’t know any of you too well. None of you have any rights where I’m concerned. If, for some reason, you think you have rights on me, Jax, you are sadly mistaken.”

“I got it.”

Feeling I might have been a bit harsh on Jax because I was so tired, I drove home to bed.

# Chapter Eleven

Sunday, October 8<sup>th</sup>.

## Howie

So excited about playing bass for Georgia and getting to spend time with her, I didn't sleep worth a damn. Awake at dawn, I tried three times to go back to sleep and couldn't do it.

At seven, I hauled ass out of bed and made coffee. While that was in the works, I hit the shower and washed my hair again. There were still bits of blood in it, and I had to get them out.

This would be the first time I was alone with Georgia in her apartment, and I wanted everything to be perfect. No way I would rush her into anything she wasn't ready for. She wasn't the type of girl who could be pushed. I'd already learned that lesson.

Staring at my reflection in the bathroom mirror I winced. A lot of damage to my face and I could clearly see what Georgia could do if she was pushed the wrong way. Seeing what a wildcat she was made me smile for other reasons.

I poured myself a coffee and drank it while I sat on one of the kitchen chairs and tuned my guitar. In the top drawer of my desk, I had an extra package of strings, and before I left the apartment, I'd shove them into the pocket of my jeans, just in case.

Couldn't remember when I'd been so wound up about anything like playing bass for Georgia today. It was like...one of the most exciting things that had ever happened to me.

Knowing full well I couldn't go to her apartment until one o'clock, I kept checking the clock in the kitchen, and the time on my phone, and my watch. Didn't speed things up, but I did it anyway.

To fill in the time, I sweated over all of my music theory homework. Boring stuff but it might help me someday to get a music career...maybe...if I got lucky enough.

That took me a couple of hours and made me hungry. I piled all of my homework neatly into my backpack and headed for the kitchen to make a

sandwich and get more coffee.

There was lots of beer in the fridge and on a regular day I might have a couple in the morning, but this wasn't a regular day. I wanted to be as sharp on my guitar as I possibly could be.

Georgia would hand me the music for the song we were going to practice, and I'd have about five minutes to learn the melody. No way I wanted to look like an untalented dick in her eyes.

I'd never written a song and wasn't sure I could, but I planned to be supportive of Georgia's songs—no matter what they sounded like—just because I was so crazy in love with her.

Thinking about a lot of heavy stuff, I nearly jumped out of my shirt when somebody pounded on the door of my apartment.

Could be the super but nobody else I could think of. My rent wasn't behind because I didn't pay it. The U paid the rent as part of my hockey deal.

I stood at the door looking through the peep hole and saw Dempsey standing in the hallway. I didn't want to be mean, but I also didn't want to let him in.

I opened the door a crack. "What do you want, Dempsey? I'm not in the mood for a fight with you."

"Didn't come here to fight, Lintz. Need to talk to you."

"If this is about Georgia, I'm not talking to you about her."

Dempsey was a big guy—solid muscle—and he pushed his way into my apartment. "Don't matter if you want to or not. We're talking this out."

"Okay, stand right there and talk. You're not my buddy and I'm not inviting you in."

"This won't take long."

"Shoot."

"I saw Georgia first and we got something going on between us. I want you out of the middle of it."

"That it?"

"Yep. I want you to stand down and stop messing me up with my girl."

"Thing is, Dempsey, she isn't your girl. She just moved to Austin looking for a music career and you and I have only known her a few days. Don't matter who saw her first or who saw her second. Georgia is a beautiful girl and a bit older than either one of us. It's up to her if she wants a boyfriend and I think you should wait on her to make that happen."

Jax shook his head. "I ain't waiting on nothing, Lintz. I'm going to talk to

her right now about being my steady girlfriend.”

I checked my watch, and it was only twelve-thirty. “She’s just getting out of bed. You should wait a bit.”

“Since when do you know when she gets up?”

“Since yesterday when she told me to come at one o’clock to practice—that’s when.”

Jax turned and wheeled out of my apartment, and I figured I shouldn’t be too long behind him. If I gave him the time to get in Georgia’s face the minute she got out of bed, she would be in a bad mood for our practice session.

Grabbing up my guitar and the amp sitting by the door, I hurried down the long hallway to Georgia’s apartment. The door was open, and she was talking to Jax when I got there.

Looking past Jax, she smiled when she saw me. “Oh, good, Howie, you’re here. I was just telling Jax we’re practicing today.”

“I’m ready to get started.”

“Good. I’m almost set up. I slept a little longer than I should have.”

“I want to watch the two of you practice,” said Jax.

“No,” Georgia snapped out her answer. “I don’t want an audience, Jax. This is a serious practice. I’m getting ready for an audition, and I don’t want you watching me today.”

“What are you and Lintz going to do that I shouldn’t see?”

“Don’t say stupid shit, Jax. Remember our talk last night? You don’t have any rights on me, and I want you to go home to your own apartment while Howie and I practice for my audition. I’m not blowing my chance with Dooley O’Rourke because you’re acting like an asshole. Get out of here.”

“What if I promise not to say anything?” Jax was digging in and he wasn’t leaving. “Let me hear one song.”

“Might take us a while to get one song down, Dempsey. I’ve never laid eyes on any of Georgia’s songs until this very minute.”

“That the truth?”

“Of course, it’s the truth,” Georgia hollered. She spun around with her guitar in her hand, and I thought for a minute she was going to take a swing and crack the Fender over Dempsey’s head.

I sat on the stool she had ready for me and tuned my guitar. “Georgia, you starting with guitar or banjo?”

“Guitar until I get the feel of how you play.”



“We need to play something we both know until we get the feel down,” I said. “Mesh the sound a bit.”

“Yeah, let’s do that. How about Tennessee Whisky?”

“Yep.” I started into it and Georgia came in on cue. Not one second off. When she started to sing, the breath left my body. I could not believe how good she was.

Dempsey stared at her, and hearing Georgia singing right next to me, it was all I could do to remember the notes.

We finished the warmup song and she smiled. “Loved that, Howie. Felt so...right.”

“Yeah, it did.” I knew right then I only wanted to play with Georgia.

She rifled through the pile of material on the coffee table and gave me one of the songs she had written. “Let’s practice this one. I want to sing it tomorrow.”

I looked it over and spent a little time learning it.

“This is a beautiful song, Georgia. Let me run through the base one time before we give it a shot together.”

“Sure, Howie. Take your time. Want a water?”

“Yeah, a water would be good. Thanks.”

She brought a bottle back for Jax too and he drank it and never said a word. It wasn’t long until he’d had enough of the practice, and he went back to his apartment next door.

Georgia visibly relaxed after he was gone, and she locked the door. “I don’t like anybody watching me, which is crazy for a person trying to get up on a stage in front of fifty thousand people.”

“Yeah, it is.” I laughed. “But you’re gonna make it, girl. Your voice is incredible, and you’ve got so much power behind it. I can’t wait to sing some harmony with you.”

“I want to try that too. Two or three of the songs in the pile are duets. How do you feel about duets?”

“No feelings. I’ve never sung like that with anybody before. I’m a virgin.”

Georgia giggled. “Yeah, and I’m Cinderella.”

We focused solely on the music and practiced for a solid two hours before we took a break. The time went by so fast I could hardly believe it. Guess that happens when you’re in your happy place. Music was mine.

Georgia put her guitar down and picked her cell up off the table. “I’m

ordering pizza. Name your toppings, Lintz.”

“Umm...pepperoni, onions and mushrooms.”

“I can live with that.”

Georgia called the order in and got us each a beer. We sat on the sofa, chilled out, and talked about the music for twenty minutes until the pizza arrived.

After we ate and had another beer, we were both more relaxed and used to each other and the practice went even better.

“We’re doing so great, Howie, I hate to call it, but I have to get ready for work.”

“This has been like...my best day ever,” I said. “You showed me a lot of things I need to work on and practice to get smoother and faster. You’re good, Georgia. A lot better on your guitar than I am on mine.” I laughed. “I don’t want you showing me up.”

“Loved our harmonies, Lintz. When you learn the duet I have in mind for you—the one with a lot of bass—we’re going to have a platinum record.”

I laughed, but in my heart, I hoped it was true.

Georgia walked me to the door, and I set the amp down for a minute to kiss her goodbye. “If I kiss you before I go, are you going to hurt me?”

“Not this time.” She laughed and wrapped her arms around me with no encouragement at all.

I covered her sweet mouth with mine and we were locked in that kiss for a long, long time. I never wanted to let her go, but she had to get ready for work and I had to haul my wood back to the other end of the hall.

“Do you have pracky tomorrow?” she asked.

“Yeah, I do. Until about eleven and then I have two classes after that. Do you want my number so you can text me?”

“Yes, please. We’ll have to squeeze practice in whenever we can.”

“You should get a night off soon, Georgia. I’ll take you out for dinner and then we can practice as late as we want.”

“I’d like that, Howie. Thanks for your patience today. A lot of stopping and starting to get things right, and that can get frustrating.”

“No problem. I loved every minute of it.”

I went back to my apartment and sat down with a beer to think about everything I’d learned from Georgia during our session. She was so far ahead of me in music that I sponged up more in those hours than I’d ever learned at

the University.

I should be taking classes from Georgia.

After being with her all afternoon, would I be too much in her face if I went to Jerseys tonight?

The answer to my own question was *yes*. I'd stay home and work on everything Georgia taught me in case we had another practice session again soon. She talked like us practicing together was going to be a permanent thing.

*I want that to be true.*

Now that she had my number, she might text me. I could hardly wait for that to happen. Staring at the screen, I dropped the phone when it rang in my hand.

"Hello?"

"Lintz, this is Coach Haney."

"Hey, Coach. What's up?"

"Be at practice tomorrow morning. I want you in shape for this week's game against Houston."

"Sure think, Coach. I'll be there."

"And don't be late."

"Nope."

I planned to go to practice anyway to see if Haney would let me on the ice, but now that he called to make sure I'd be there, it was even better.

I leaned back and closed my eyes. My life was all falling into place.

# Chapter Twelve

Sunday, October 8<sup>th</sup>.

## Georgia

Howie left and I had to hurry and get ready for work. All I wanted to do was play my music and write new songs, but if I didn't go to work at the bar and earn enough money to support myself, none of that could happen.

Spending the day with Howie made my spirits soar. He was supportive and he offered suggestions based on solid knowledge of what would make a better song. The guy had talents of his own and I intended to uncover all the stuff he had hidden under that tough hockey player persona.

I changed into my Jerseys shirt, brushed my teeth and my hair and I was in the middle of putting my makeup on when somebody started banging on my door again.

*Better not be Jax. That is getting old.*

With my eyeliner in my hand, I ran to the door and looked through the peephole. "Yep, there he is." I stepped away from the door and hollered, "I'm late for work, Jax. Can't talk to you right now. Sorry. See you later."

When I left for work, he wasn't in the hallway and the door of his apartment was closed.

*I probably hurt his feelings, but I didn't mean to.*

I ran into the bar through the back door and punched my card. Only three minutes to spare and I didn't like cutting it so close. I liked to sit in the break room and have a coffee before starting my shift.

No time for that today, but the practice session with Howie had been so productive, I was super happy. Music was my ultimate goal, and I had no time to sweat the small stuff.

I'd been working behind the bar for a solid two hours before I noticed Dooley O'Rourke come in for a beer. This time he didn't sit in a booth alone, he sat at the bar and waited to talk to me.

As soon as I had a spare second, I ran down to where he was sitting and got him a beer along with chips and salsa.

He grinned and showed me his dimples and I almost fainted. “Hey, Georgia. I stopped in for a beer, but also to see if you could come tomorrow at one. I’ve got a couple of hours open, and I’d like to hear your songs. I’m always in the market for new material—especially if it’s good.”

“I hope you consider my songs to be good, Mister O’Rourke. I’m praying for that to happen.”

“Some will be better than others, Georgia. Happens with everybody’s work. A lot of emotional factors go into every song that’s written and some will be better than others. Just a part of human nature.”

“I believe that to be true. I feel positive about some of my songs and a little unsure about others.”

Dooley chugged down half a glass of beer and then looked straight at me. “Sometimes you think, I’ll sit down and write a new song, and nothing happens, and another time, you can’t get the words and the notes down fast enough.”

“That does happen to me,” I said. Hearing Dooley talk about the songwriting process gave me goosebumps.

“Hey, can I get a beer down here?” Some guy hollered from the other end of the bar.

“I have to run. Sorry.”

“No problem. I’ll move to a booth. See you tomorrow at one.”

He gave me one of his cards with the address printed on it. “I’ll be there. Thanks for the chance.”

I worked like crazy, up and down the bar, making drinks, filling glasses and filling pitchers for the servers, and when it was time for my break, I couldn’t wait to sit down with a coffee and text Howie.

*“Dooley O’Rourke came in and he wants me at one tomorrow.”*

*“Unbelievable. I have practice and classes tomorrow and I won’t be able to hear about the session until tomorrow night.”*

*“I can’t wait to tell you all about it. I’m so excited.”*

*“You go, girl. You’ve got enough talent for two people. You can’t miss.”*

*“Thanks, Howie. I appreciate your support.”*

*“Text me later if you’re not too tired.”*

My break was over, and I went back to the bar feeling good about having Howie in my life. The two of us had so much more in common than either Jaxon Dempsey or Paul O’Brien. Underneath all of his chick-magnet front, Howie Lintz was a genuine person. Never would have believed it when I first

met him.

Jaxon came into the bar later with O'Brien and they sat at the bar for a while and talked to me. I didn't bother telling them about my upcoming session with Dooley O'Rourke. There was no point. They didn't know what a music icon O'Rourke was, and they probably couldn't care less.

Nice guys, but I wasn't attracted to either one of them in a romantic way. Jax was like my big brother neighbor guy, and Paul O'Brien was almost a friend, but that's as far as it went.

"When's your next big game, guys?"

"Houston is next," said O'Brien. "Not sure we can beat them unless Lintz is at his best and tosses a hat-trick into their net."

"What night is that game?"

"They're in town Tuesday night," said Jax. "They ever going to give you a night off so you can come and watch me play, Georgia?"

I smiled at Jaxon. "You got lucky, Jax. I think I might have Tuesday night off. If I do, then I'll come and watch the Tornados play one. See what stuff you guys are made of."

"You like hockey, Georgia?" asked O'Brien.

"Yep. We have hockey in Ohio. I've been to a few games with my dad. He loves hockey."

"My daddy too," said Jax. "He lives and breathes hockey. Wants me to play in Canada."

"How would you get on a Canadian team?" I asked.

"Have to be scouted," said Jax. "Get an offer from a team up there and then go try out. It's tough to get noticed and even tougher to get a contract."

"Same as the music business," I said. "Tough to get anybody to listen to your songs, and then even tougher to get a CD made to peddle to the recording companies."

Jax nodded his head. "Yep. Both are hard careers to break into, Georgia. You're right."

# Chapter Thirteen

Monday, October 9<sup>th</sup>.

## Howie

I set my alarm and got up extra early to gain a little practice time on my guitar before I had to leave for the rink.

While I played through my warmup exercises, I thought about Georgia playing for Dooley O'Rourke at one o'clock. If that was me auditioning like she was, I'd be scared shitless and might not even show up.

Messages hit my phone while I practiced and when I finished playing, I checked to see who wanted me. Two girls in my English Lit class. I removed both of their names from my contacts.

"I can't believe I'm trashing their numbers, but they don't interest me anymore. Time for me to grow up and quit fooling around and partying so much. I'm ready for a steady girlfriend. Somebody I can talk to seriously about the future. Somebody like Georgia who will listen to me and talk to me about music."

I made a pot of coffee, and while it brewed, I tried going over all the stuff Georgia and I had worked on the day before.

Time for two pieces of toast with jam and one cup of coffee before I had to pack my hockey bag and get my ass to the arena.

When I blasted out the door and hit the ice for practice, I couldn't remember ever being this happy in my entire life. I skated like the wind, took the checks from the other guys in the scrimmage and didn't let anything faze me. I didn't even let Dempsey get in my face.

I played like a maniac and made Coach Haney smile like never before. I couldn't remember him ever grinning at me at practice, but maybe I missed it.

"Don't know what you've got up your ass, Lintz, but I love it. And don't you dare lose it before tomorrow night. We need you to score a few goals against those Houston bums."

"Count on it, Coach. I'm gonna burn my way through that Houston

defense. They won't even see me coming."

"Good attitude, Lintz. I'm liking the new you."

When practice was over, Haney sat us down and gave us a huge pep talk about the upcoming game with Houston. They were a tough team with a lot of top-level players, and we couldn't be coming at them with anything less than our 'A' game if we expected to pull off a win.

"Hold the line on the beer tonight, boys. Anybody showing up hungover for practice on game day won't be in tomorrow night's lineup. You can take that to the bank."

"We're gonna beat their asses," said Dempsey. "Show them who the best team in the state of Texas is."

"Good attitude, Dempsey," said Coach.

I showered, dressed, and drove over to the campus for my class. Got there with half an hour to spare so I hung out in the cafeteria and ate an early lunch. I was always starving after practice anyway.

After eating a big chunk of lasagna and two pieces of garlic bread, I figured I'd be good until suppertime. If I could last that long, I'd wait and eat at Jerseys while I talked to Georgia about the audition.

Sitting in class, I kept checking the time to see if Georgia was at the music studio. When it turned one o'clock, I mentally sent her my best thoughts.

*You go, girl. Show O'Rourke what you've got.*



# Chapter Fourteen

Monday, October 9<sup>th</sup>.

## Georgia

My alarm went off at eleven. An hour earlier than my usual wake-up time. But I wanted to run through the songs I was going to play in the audition one more time.

With me playing and singing alone, the songs sounded a little empty. They definitely sounded better with Howie playing bass and harmonizing in some of the parts with me. He seemed to know just when to jump in.

We were so busy getting the songs down, I never asked him how he learned to play. There's so much I don't know about him.

"I like playing with him," I mumbled to myself. "There's something about it that just feels right."

After practicing, I drank a mug of coffee and only ate one piece of toast for breakfast. Better not to have too much in my stomach if I got super nervous and had to throw up before I went into the studio.

I wore my best black leather pants and paired them with a green silk blouse. My hair was down to my shoulders when I didn't have it tied back for work. I gave it a good brushing and let it hang loose. A bit of lip gloss and some eyeliner and I was ready to go.

The GPS in my Honda found the studio where Dooley O'Rourke worked. I parked in the small lot out back and hauled my guitar, my banjo, and my song portfolio into the studio.

Once inside the door, I had no idea which way to go. The receptionist wasn't at her desk and the outer room was empty.

I sat down to wait and a couple of minutes later, Dooley came down the hall looking for me.

"Sorry, Georgia. Krystal isn't back from lunch yet. Come with me. Do you need a hand with your instruments?"

"No. I can manage."

He gave me that grin and picked up my banjo case. "Any trouble finding

the studio?”

“Nope. The GPS found it for me. I have to depend on the nav system in my car for now. I know nothing about driving around in Austin.”

“There’s a bit of a traffic problem downtown. I live out at La Grange and drive into the city every morning and the commute can test your nerves.”

Dooley made me comfortable in the studio and just sitting with him and quietly talking to him before I had to play and sing helped a lot to ease the shakes.

He was gorgeous to look at with that curly blond hair, his dimples, and the ink. That man was covered in ink. A lot of it beautiful and colorful. I was surprised how young he looked. Mid-thirties or a bit less and look how much he’d accomplished. He was already one of the most sought-after producers in the music business.

“Do you have a song you want to start with?”

“I practiced three yesterday. A guy who lives in my building came over to my apartment and played bass for me. He harmonized a bit, and he helped me out a lot getting my confidence level up.”

“Have you ever played in a band, Georgia?” Dooley asked.

“No. But I’ve always wanted to try it, just for the experience.”

“You should. Before you leave, I’ll give you a list of bands in town who are looking for people.”

“Wow, that would be amazing. I know Howie is looking for a spot, but I’m not sure how many bands would be looking for a girl singer.”

Dooley smiled. “You’d be surprised. Why don’t you sing me two of the songs you practiced and then I’ll look over the rest of your material?”

“Sure.”

He plugged my guitar in and set me up in front of a mic. Adjusted it to the right height for me and then went and sat down. I stood there in the middle of the studio wondering if I had it in me to do this thing.

My heart pounded so loud in my chest, I could hear it, so I took a minute to breathe deeply and calm down enough to sing for him.

He leaned back in his chair, and I just started in on the song like Howie and I had practiced the day before. I strummed a few chords and once I got going, I just let it all out and didn’t really look at Dooley too much.

When I finished singing the last note, I glanced over at him, and he was smiling at me.

“Uh huh. That was rough, Georgia, because you’re so nervous, but I think

you have some amazing talent inside you. Let's hear the next song."

"This one is a little more up tempo and I'm going to play my banjo for you on this one."

"Sure. Let's hear it. There aren't too many female banjo pickers around town. A couple of the bands on the list want a banjo."

I sang the song for him, and he was still smiling when I finished.

"That's a cute song and it could be great with a couple of minor changes." He pointed to a chair. "Sit down and relax. You're a little tense."

I laughed. "I'm a lot tense."

"You'll get used to performing in time. Ease into it. There's no big rush for you to run up onto a stage before you're ready. You're young."

"I feel like I need to get moving if I'm ever going to make it."

Dooley went to a fridge in the corner of the studio and got us both a Coke. He came back and sat down, popped the top on his Coke and thought for a long moment before he spoke.

I was terrified of what he was going to say to me.

"What I'd like to do is spend some time with your songs, Georgia. I'll sort through them and pick out the best ones to see if you have enough for a CD. It will take time to put things together using brand new material."

"Sounds wonderful but I don't have a lot of money to pay you or to pay for studio time."

"On rare occasions, when I find somebody who has the kind of talent you have, there is a fund I can dig into. It's earmarked for special people with a whole whack-load of talent. I don't mention this to many people because they don't qualify, but I think you do, Georgia. You are a shining star."

"I can't believe you're telling me this. I might faint." The can of Coke shook in my hand, and I set it down on the floor next to my chair.

"The music business is not an easy career path," said Dooley. "Believe me, if somebody special in my life hadn't helped me, I'd still be picking acoustic guitar on my uncle's back porch."

He laughed and made me laugh too.

"Give me a week with your portfolio and I'll schedule studio time when I'm ready and give you a call."

"Fantastic." I wiped a tear away. "I don't know how to thank you. There is no way."

"No crying allowed Georgia. Let me get you the names and numbers of the bands looking for a female singer, banjo, and a bass player. You need a

lot of performing time to give you stage presence and confidence. It will show up in the music when you're recording, so you have to put in the work."

"Okay. That sounds sensible."

"A few dozen gigs in smoky bars will help you out a lot."

I laughed. "Okay."

He went into his private office and came back with the list of bands. Names and numbers and handed it to me.

"Do you think any of these bands would take me with no experience?"

He gave me the grin. "If they don't, then the guy doing the hiring is an idiot. They will take you, Georgia. I guarantee it."

I thanked him again and said goodbye, picked up my guitar and banjo, and left my best songs with Dooley O'Rourke.

In the parking lot behind the studio, I stowed my instrument cases in the back seat, slid behind the wheel of my car and called Kayla in Ohio first.

I told her everything that happened in the past two hours and all the great stuff that Dooley said, and about the CD and she was thrilled for me.

"I'm crying right now, Georgie. I'm so happy for you."

"Me too. I'm finally getting started."

"Makes me want to save up again and come to Austin."

"You should, Kay. You're definitely good enough to make a CD."

After I talked Kayla's ear off and we both cried, I dried my eyes so I could see my phone screen and I texted Lintz.

*"Finished the audition and it went well."*

*"Great. How well?"*

*"Unbelievable. I'm sitting in my car crying, I'm so happy."*

*"Aw, Jeeze, that's fantastic."*

*"Can you come to Jerseys tonight? I've got so much to tell you."*

*"I'm coming. I'm dying to hear all of it."*

*"Can't wait to see you."*

*"Same."*

By the time I got home from the studio downtown, it was almost time to get ready for work. I hadn't eaten much all day, so I made myself a sandwich and nuked up a coffee.

After I ate, I changed into my uniform and tried to center myself. Still high from the audition, I took my guitar out of the case and practiced for twenty minutes.

Thinking about playing in a band, playing in a smoky bar to get my confidence up, working on a CD in the studio with Dooley—it was all so unbelievable. Even though I always wanted those things to happen, I had doubts that they ever would. Now my dreams were coming true, and thoughts were tumbling through my brain like dice in a bubble.

“I can’t wait to tell Howie everything.”

*I want him to play in the same band as me.*

I started work at seven and I kept watching the door for Lintz to come in. When had I ever been so crazed to see another person and tell them something? I couldn’t think of a time.

He came in shortly after my last glance at the door and sat on the end stool at the bar. I ran down and got him a pitcher of beer and a frosted glass.

“Before you start with the news, order me a burger and fries. I’m starving to death because I waited to eat here with you.”

“Sure.”

I ordered Howie’s food from the kitchen, and then a bunch of customers came and sat at the bar and by the time I served them all and got back to Howie, I was almost crazy.

“Calm down a bit, George. I’m not leaving until I hear all of it. You can tell me bits at a time between customers.”

“Okay. Here goes. I’ll start with Part One: Dooley O’Rourke is sorting through my songs to see if I have enough material for a CD.”

Howie grinned. “That’s unbelievable.” He reached across the bar and squeezed my hand.

“I know. I couldn’t believe it either. When he decides where we’re going to start, he’s scheduling studio time and calling me. Won’t be for at least a week.”

“A week. Okay.”

I ran down the length of the bar and gave a customer a refill and ran back to talk to Howie a little out of breath.

“Part Two: He gave me names and numbers of bands in town who are looking for people. You and I are both going to join a band to get experience. Dooley said I need to play some smoky bars to get my confidence up.”

Howie started laughing. “We’re joining a band?”

“Yeah, we sure are. It’s one of the things Dooley wants me to do. I’ve got the names and numbers at home, and we’re going to go and audition. Some

bands in Austin want bass players, and some want drummers, some want girl singers. One of them wants a banjo player.”

“But if we’re doing it...like for real... I want to be in the same band as you,” said Howie.

“I want that too. I can’t join a band by myself. We have to do it together. We’ll go over the list tomorrow. It’s my day off.”

“I am so in for that, Georgia. I want to join a band—wanted to for a long time now. I’ll come to your place right after practice. We have one for the game tomorrow night.”

“Right. I’m coming to your game. It will be my first one.”

Howie grinned. “You’re coming to my game? Tomorrow is going to be one helluva day, Georgia.”

“Today was pretty exciting too,” I said. “I was crazy scared and crazy out of my head for most of it.”

Howie laughed at me, and I wanted to hug him—more than just hug him. Hard to believe I was filled with an almost uncontrollable urge to grab Howie Lintz and do him on the bar.

He kept talking while I wondered what sex with him would be like. For sure, I was losing my mind.

“I know I would’ve been, Georgia. Don’t think I could even do what you did. Stand up there and sing in front of Dooley O’Rourke. Did you have a mic?”

“Yep. I stood in front of a mic and I was tense. Sooo tense.”

“Play the banjo for him too?”

“Yep, on the banjo song we practiced.”

“I love that song,” said Howie. “I was humming the melody after I left your place.”

“Mister O’Rourke said it was a cute song that could be a great song with a couple of minor changes.”

“Wow,” said Howie. “That’s exciting.”

“Hold on. I’ll run to the kitchen and check on your food order.”

“Thanks. I am close to starvation.”

I laughed at Howie. He could be so funny once you got to know him. And I wanted to know everything about him.

O’Brien and Jaxon came in later and they sat at the bar and talked about the game with Houston. Jaxon had lost some of his aggressiveness towards me

and I figured he'd accepted that I had no interest in him romantically. Nice guy, but not a guy I wanted to sleep with.

After the bar closed, Howie sat in a booth waiting for me to finish and I could see how tired he was, but he wouldn't go home. He was slumped in the corner of a booth half asleep.

When I was finally done the cleanup, he walked me out to my car. "I'll follow you home. I want to make sure you're safe."

"I can always get one of the guys to walk me out, Howie. It's too late for you to wait for me."

"But I want to wait for you, Georgia."

"You're sweet."

When we got back to Oak Gardens, it was the middle of the night. Howie held my hand as we went into the building together. Totally silent. Everybody sleeping.

On the second floor, Howie stopped at my door and waited for me to get the key into the lock. We stepped inside and he pushed the door closed and pulled me into his arms.

He started kissing me and I wanted him in a big way. He pushed me up against the door and things were heating up for me and I could feel that he was feeling the same way.

"Can you stay?"

"I want to stay with you, Georgia. More than anything, but I'd better not stay tonight. I have an early practice and it will be morning in two hours."

"That's okay. Another night. I'm tired too."

He left and I was a little disappointed, but it was better to take it slow and be sure.

# Chapter Fifteen

Tuesday, October 10<sup>th</sup>.

## Howie

It was still dark in my room. Wasn't even daylight and I was wide awake. I hadn't gone to bed until almost four and yet I wasn't even tired. Couldn't explain it. Only thing different in my life was Georgia.

Since the first day I saw her, I'd been half crazy in love and obsessed over her. That was before I ever knew she could play the guitar like Lukas Nelson and sing like Shania Twain. Her banjo picking would give Billy Strings a run for his money.

This was going to be a great day. Once the practice was over with, George and I were going to do the band thing and my heart pounded thinking about it. I'd always wanted to play in a band, but I came to Austin on a scholarship to play hockey and I didn't know anybody here.

My best chances for getting into a band were back home with guys I knew from high school in Bowling Green, Kentucky.

I rolled out of bed, started fresh coffee, and headed to the bathroom for a quick shower. Once I was dressed, I ate more breakfast than usual to get me through the practice. It would be a grueling one because Coach Haney wanted to beat Houston in the worst way. He was counting heavily on goals from me to make it happen.

I drove to the rink with my head so full of stuff, I didn't remember getting there. Ran to the dressing room and changed into my practice jersey and didn't talk to any of the guys. Couldn't. For some reason, I couldn't think of a sane word to say.

I was so hyped up about going to Georgia's place after practice to talk about the bands, I stood at center ice, my stick down ready, and it was all I could do to focus on the face off.

But I had to pull it together. We had an important game with Houston, and I promised Coach Haney I'd come through for him.

The whistle blew and I took the puck and deked my way through the



defense all the way to the other end of the rink.

Zippering up and down the ice, my lack of sleep reared its head, and I realized how tired I was. It would be great if I had time to crash for a couple of hours before game time.

When I came off the ice from my last shift at the end of the practice, Coach nodded and he didn't holler at me, so I figured I'd done okay.

*I can't remember much of it.*

Dempsey was on my squad for the scrimmage, so I didn't need to worry about him breaking my ribs against the boards and taking me out of the Houston game.

The scrimmage ended, then a big pep talk from Haney before we hit the showers. I got dressed, packed up my gear and I was out of there.

All the way back to Oak Gardens to Georgia's apartment, my mind was cluttered with thoughts of joining a band and what that would mean and how it would affect my life.

How much time would the band take up, and would it mess up my hockey schedule? Would I have to skip classes and lose my scholarship? Would I be as good as the other band members?

I parked in my spot and tried to clear my head. Way too worked up about the band. It would all work out.

I got off at the second floor wondering if Georgia would be up by the time I got to her door.

I was supposed to be in class at two, but I couldn't be there and be auditioning for a spot in a band at the same time. A person had to establish priorities and adhere to them. My mom always told me that and I was missing her so much since I'd met Georgia.

She always said I'd know the right girl for me when I found her, and Mom was right.

*Georgia is the one, Mom.*

I knocked softly on Georgia's door to see if she was up. If she didn't answer the door, I'd go to my own apartment for an hour and sleep. I could sure use it.

She opened the door a few seconds later with a big smile on her beautiful face. Tight faded jeans and an army t-shirt. What a turn-on she was.

"Come on in, Howie. Have you had lunch?"

"Nope. I came straight here from practice."

“I made grilled cheese and tomato soup. My mom used to make it for me.”  
I laughed. “My mom did too.”

After lunch, Georgia got the list Dooley O’Rourke had given her of bands wanting people. She spread it out on the kitchen table, and we looked at it together.

“See? This one wants a drummer.” Georgia ran her finger down the page to the third name from the bottom. “I was thinking we’d try this guy first.”

“What does he want?”

“His band needs a bass guitar and a banjo. It’s the only one on the list where we could go together. There are three others where you could try. Lots of bands need a bass guitar player. Only one is asking for a female lead singer.”

“I’d rather go with you, Georgia. We want to be together, don’t we?”

She smiled. “Yeah, we do. I could never join a band on my own. Walk into the middle of a bunch of guys staring at me—I’d be too scared to do that. I’m going to call the number and see if we can go talk to the guy in charge of the band.”

“I hope we can go now while you’re off work.”

“Yeah, my first day off. I don’t get many of them.”

Georgia called and she told the guy this was her only day off and the only time she could come and play for him. He said to come over and he’d listen to us before he had to go to work.

“He wants us to come now. His place is in East Riverside.”

“Okay. Pack up your instruments and I’ll run down the hall and get my guitar and ditch my hockey bag. Be right back.”

I drove my Mustang with the top down and our instruments in the trunk. It wasn’t a hot day in Texas, but it was sunny and nice enough to have the top down.

Georgia looked great sitting in the passenger seat with her long hair blowing in the wind. I was totally nuts over her and figured I was in pretty deep already.

“How did you afford such a nice car?”

“My mom bought it for me when I got my hockey scholarship.”

“That was sweet of her.”

“Yeah, it was. It wasn’t long after that she was hit by a bus, and she never saw the car or saw me go to university, like she wanted.”

“Oh, that’s so sad.”

“I miss her a lot. She and my dad were divorced. I lived with my mom. No idea where my dad is. How about your parents?”

“Both in Ohio. They think I’m making a big mistake moving to Austin. Neither one of them are supportive of my music career.

I shook my head wondering how they could not be. “Have they heard you sing?”

“Sure.”

“Then their attitude is just crazy.”

I parked in front of a small frame bungalow on a quiet street in East Riverside. The Colorado River flowed behind the houses on this street, filling the air with the smell of the big river, and the wide green space only a few feet away.

I popped the trunk, and Georgia and I got our instruments out and hauled them to the front door of the house. Georgia rang the bell and a young guy with shoulder-length dark hair opened the door.

“Hey. Glad y’all called. Me and my buddies have gigs coming up and we lost our bass guitar player. He moved out of state, and we’ve been trying to replace him. We never had a banjo player, but we wanted one all along and talked about it enough. Come on in.”

“Thanks,” said Georgia.

I held the door and let her go into the house first.

“Do you have a lead singer?” she asked.

“Yep. Me. I usually do the vocals.”

“I can’t wait to hear you sing,” said Georgia.

I couldn’t wait until this guy heard Georgia sing either. He’d be blown away.

The drums and the amps and the mic were all set up in what should have been the living room of the small house. But the room had been cleared of furniture with just a sofa up against the window wall.

“Nice big practice space you have here. I’m Georgia and this is Howie.”

“Nice to meet you both. I’m Joe Don. Have you two played any clubs in town?”

“Nope,” said Georgia. “Not yet. I’ve only been in Austin for a short time. But I have auditioned for Dooley O’Rourke and he’s putting my songs together for a CD.”

“Dooley O’Rourke? You’re shitting me, right?”

“No, she’s not,” I said. “Georgia Vance is an amazing musician.”

“Okay then. Let’s see what you guys can offer my band. The other guys aren’t here in the middle of the afternoon, but I’ll play with y’all. I need to see if y’all can fit in with the southern rock we play. What songs do you know?”

“I know a lot of songs,” I said. “Tell me what you want to play. Georgia plays her own music. She’s a singer-songwriter.”

“Huh,” said Joe Don. “Wish I had that talent. I’ve tried a few times but never finished a song. Let’s play a song with a lot of banjo in it. I want to hear the lady play. There aren’t many decent banjo pickers out there. I should know. I’ve been looking for a while now.”

Joe Don struck a chord for a Billy Strings bluegrass song and expected Georgia to be able to jump in and play it. He was picking something really difficult to test her and I didn’t like his attitude much.

As soon as Joe Don got into the song, Georgia jumped in and I could tell by the look on his face that he couldn’t believe how good she was.

When the song ended, Joe Don smiled at Georgia. “Uh huh. No doubt about it, Georgia. You can play the banjo. I’ll take you for sure. Not sure about your partner.”

“Howie is a decent bass player, and he goes with me. Do you have a girl singer?”

Joe Don grinned. “Like I said, I do the vocals. I never needed a girl singer up front.”

“Maybe you do now,” I said. That made Joe Don glare at me. He was a bit high on himself.

“Okay, let me hear it,” he said looking at Georgia. “If you can make me want a girl singer in front of my band, I’ll take both of you.”

Georgia sang him one of the songs at the top of the southern rock charts and Joe Don stared at her.

“Why in hell would you want to be in my band, Georgia?”

“I need experience on a stage.”

“Okay. I guess that’s a reason. I’ll ride the Georgia wave. Maybe you can introduce me to Dooley O’Rourke when you get to know me a little better.”

“That might happen.”

“Rehearsal Saturday morning at ten. We have a gig Saturday night.”

“I’ll have to book Saturday night off,” said Georgia. “I’m a bartender in

my other life.”

When we left Joe Don’s house, I was so pumped I could barely drive. “Wow, can you believe that, Georgia? We’re in a band. Does our band have a name?”

“I think I heard him say Joe Don’s Devils.”

“Aw, Jeeze, Georgia. That’s a terrible name for a band.”

She laughed. “We’re lucky he took us. We can’t tell him the name of his band sucks.”

“That was so much fun. I’d love to chill at your place and just play for hours, but I have to go home and get ready for the game.”

“Did you have to miss a class for the audition?”

“Yeah, I did. But totally worth it. Right? I mean, we’re playing in a club on Saturday night.”

“Hard to believe. We have a pracky on Saturday morning and a gig on Saturday night. Do you think we’ll be ready that fast?”

“Hardly. Can’t see how we would be. We’ll just have to wing it.”

I dropped Georgia off at her apartment and kissed her before I left. Every time we kissed things were getting hotter and hotter between us. I could tell by the way she touched me that she wanted me as much as I wanted her.

It was all I could do to tear myself away from her. “I’ll pick you up for the game at six-thirty.”

“I’ll be ready.”

I tried to sleep for an hour when I got to my own apartment at the end of the hall. But I couldn’t seem to settle down.

Too much life-changing stuff had gone on today for me to relax and fall asleep. I was in love with Georgia, and she was loving me back. We joined a band, and we had a gig coming up. Band pracky on Saturday morning.

Wow. What a day.

# Chapter Sixteen

Tuesday, October 10<sup>th</sup>.

## Georgia

Howie returned to my door to pick me up for the game and it didn't look like he'd slept much at all. I knew exactly how he felt because I was still worked up about the band too.

I opened the door for him, and he stepped into my apartment and held me in his arms for a couple of minutes before he said, "I'm not sure I'm believing today, Georgia. It all seems like a fairy tale."

"For me too." I grabbed a wool cap and pulled it down on my head then stuck an arm in my coat. "I hate being cold."

Howie laughed at me as I put a pair of fur-lined mitts on. "It's cold in the arena, but not freezing cold. Not like that."

"I'm wearing my warmest mitts anyways. I don't want frozen fingers when we practice tomorrow."

"Your hands won't be frozen. I swear, it isn't that cold."

"Not for you when you're skating and getting into fights. But I'll be sitting all by myself watching you score goals."

Howie laughed. "That's what we both hope I'll be doing. Come on. We've got to get going."

I sat alone at the arena to watch the game. Howie got me a good seat and I could see him in the box a few rows down below me. I didn't know anyone in Austin except Jax, Paul O'Brien, Howie, and the people at work.

Today I'd met Joe Don and soon I'd meet the other members of our band. Joe Don's Devils. Howie was right. That was a terrible name for the band.

The first period went by fast and furious. The guys from Houston were good and they seemed determined to win. They scored a goal and held onto the lead until the buzzer sounded.

The teams left the ice and I headed for the ladies' room and then to the refreshment booth. I bought a coffee to warm me up and went back to my seat.

Waiting for the teams to come back on the ice for the second period, I sipped my coffee, and it helped a lot to thaw me out.

A few minutes later, the teams flooded onto the ice for the second period, and I couldn't take my eyes off Howie. He played center and he was a superstar. Up until tonight, I hadn't known that about him.

The more I discovered about Howie Lintz, the more I was attracted to him. Was I falling for him? Not sure about that. He was a little young for me, but did that matter?

Midway through the second period, Jax got a penalty for unnecessary roughness and that caused his team to play short-handed for two minutes.

O'Brien was one of the penalty killers and he was good in that role. I watched him going for the puck, keeping control, and shooting it down to the other end of the rink time and again running out the clock until Jax was able to come back on the ice.

There was about ten seconds left in the penalty when one of the Houston defensemen cross-checked Howie into the boards and knocked the wind out of him.

While Howie lay on the ice catching his breath, one of the Houston players skated in on the action too fast and the blade of his skate caught Howie's leg.

As soon as the referee saw blood on the ice, he blew the whistle and motioned for the team doctor to come look at Lintz.

There were so many people crouching around Howie and hovering over him, I couldn't see what was happening or how badly he was hurt.

My heart picked up speed and I couldn't hold back the tears when paramedics ran onto the ice with a stretcher and carried him off.

I couldn't believe how freaked out I was over Howie getting hurt. Maybe I shouldn't come to any of his games.

From my seat in the stands, I ran down to the bottom level of the arena to the dressing rooms. With no idea which room the Tornados were in, I paced up and down the hallway waiting for somebody to come out of one of the rooms. The doors were identical all along the curved hallway and I couldn't do anything but lean on the wall and wait.

I'd been standing there about ten minutes when one of the doors finally opened and the team doctor came out with Howie.

He tried to smile when he saw me standing there like a love-sick puck bunny. "Doc is going to drive me home, Georgia."

“I’ll do it, Doctor. I live in the same building, and I can drive Howie’s car.”

“Okay, young lady. I’m trusting you with our star player.”

“Don’t worry. I’ll take good care of him.”

Howie limped along slowly, and I kept pace beside him all the way to the front door of the arena.

“Can I have your keys? You can wait here, and I’ll go get the car.”

He gave me a cockeyed grin. “I never let anybody drive my car before, Georgie.”

“I’ll be careful. You can trust me.” I pointed to a bench outside the entrance. “Sit right there and I’ll pick you up.”

I ran around the arena to the huge parking lot trying to remember where Howie had parked. I finally found the silver Mustang, got behind the wheel and drove it around to the pickup loop at the front of the building.

Howie grinned as he slid into the passenger seat. “You look so cool behind the wheel of my car, babe.”

“Thanks. How bad is your leg? I thought I saw a puddle of blood on the ice.”

“Doc bandaged it all up after he put a couple of stitches in. Still numb from the freezing. I’m good.”

*Seeing you get hurt freaked me out.*

I drove back to our building, locked up the car and put my arm around Howie to help him get to the front door.

When we stepped out of the elevator on the second floor and trudged along as far as my apartment, Howie was out of breath. His place was at the far end of the building, and I didn’t know if he could make it.

I stuck my key in the door. “Want to stay here tonight? I’ll take good care of you.”

“I’ve never had a better offer.”

Holding Howie’s hand, I pushed the door open, and we walked inside. “I’m putting you to bed and then I’ll make us hot coffee.”

“You’re going to let me sleep in your bed?”

“Yep. It’s your lucky night. Come on. I’ll get you settled.”

Wearing a big grin, Howie limped into my bedroom and sat down on the side of the bed. I helped him undress, stripped him down to his boxers and tucked him into my bed.



While he was getting between the sheets, I had a peek at the big gauze pad taped onto the side of his leg, but that was all I could see.

“Get comfortable.”

I came back with mugs of coffee and snuggled into the bed beside Howie.

“This is a new experience for me, Georgia.”

“You’re the first guy I let climb into my bed, so this is a first for me too.”

We finished our coffee and I put the mugs on the nightstand and turned out the light. I cuddled into Howie’s warm, muscular body and wrapped my arms around him.

He moaned but he was already half asleep. The drugs and the warmth of the bed did the trick and Howie was out like a light.

# Epilogue

The following morning, I was awake long before Howie's drugs wore off. I got up and made coffee and pancakes for breakfast, and brought a tray into the bedroom.

Howie opened his blue eyes and for a few minutes seemed disoriented... like he couldn't remember sleeping at my place.

"Didn't you remember you slept over?"

"Umm... no. I wish I did."

"Nothing happened. You were drugged from the stuff the team doctor gave you and you went straight to sleep."

"Why in hell would I sleep when I was in bed with you, Georgia? Do you know how much I love you?"

"No. You never mentioned it."

"I want something to happen between us, Georgia, and I want to remember it."

"Don't worry, Howie. As soon as you eat your pancakes, something is going to happen in this very bed, and I guarantee you will remember it."

Author notes from Carolina:

I sincerely hope you enjoyed reading Cross-Checked by Love. This book is the first of a hockey novella series.

If you have a moment to leave a quick rating or review on [Amazon](#), I'd love to know what you thought about the book and I'm sure other readers would too.

If you'd like to know more about my other series drop by my [Facebook page](#).

To access my author page on Amazon and see all my books published to date, [click here](#).

Carolina Mac is the author of over a hundred and eighty-five books in fourteen different series. The Regulators, Quantrall PI, The Blackmore Agency, The Night Vipers, The Creed, The Agency: Young Guns, Paradise Park, Broken Spur, The Moonbeam Chronicles, and the Taming the Stallion series.

Also, four Novella series: Heaven's Gate, Midlife Magic, Suddenly Magic, and The Sabbats.

She's the co-author with her daughter JL Madore/Auburn Tempest of Misty's Magick and Mayhem series. Being translated into German. The first seven books available now.

Watch for the new thriller series – True Colors coming on March 5<sup>th</sup>, 2024. A collaboration between Carolina Mac and her son D.K. Mac. First three books – Period of Adjustment, Devil's Son and Deep Red are available for pre-order now.

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