



DEAL

THE ACADEMY YEARS

BREAKER

CATHRYN FOX

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR



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DEAL BREAKER

Novella, Scotia Storm's Series

Cathryn Fox

“The girls here definitely aren’t like the ones at home,” my brother Dane announces as he wags his eyebrows at his best friend, acting like an ass. No way am I putting up with that behavior. I turn to him as he takes in the crowd of sorority girls walking around Storm House, a post-Christmas party in full swing. Of course, it’s nothing compared to what the place is going to look like on New Year’s Eve—and I’m so goddamn tired of it.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I ask, tipping my cup up to take a sip of beer as I stare at my kid brother, who I’ve been keeping a close eye on. After Christmas, he and his friend came back to the city with me. They’re both attending Scotia Academy next year, and I agreed to let them stay in my dorm room and show them around. But I am so over this partying shit. Thank God I only have one semester left, then it’s off to play defense for the Boston Bucks.

Dane snorts. I’m not sure why he feels the need to act like the big man on campus. It pisses me off. “The girls back home are basic, and the girls here are DTF.” I smack the side of his head. “What the fuck, Cheddar?” he complains.

“Down to fuck? Really? Have some fucking respect.”

He rubs his head and exchanges a strange look with his friend. Yeah, I get it. I have a reputation a mile long and they both know it. But a reputation is one thing. Wild antics and partying is what people expect from me. Over the last four years, I've watched all my friends grow up, and settle down. Damned if I'm not jealous. The only problem is that girls aren't attracted to Rhys Taylor. They all want a piece of Cheddar—a nickname given to me because I have red hair, and because my parents operate the biggest artisan cheese company in Bass River, an hour outside the city.

"I need another drink," Dane mumbles under his breath and nudges his friend Jesse.

"Don't drink too much," I shout out after him.

"Okay, Dad."

I shake my head as he leaves. Maybe my kid brother is trying to impress me, and maybe I am turning into Dad. That makes me laugh. Now I know how Dad feels when he was trying to tame me back in the day. I have to say, my kid brother is definitely following in my footsteps, and I'm not sure that's a good thing. The truth is, I want him to respect women. I might have slept around, sure, and partied as Cheddar, but I'm still Rhys underneath it all, and I treat women the way they should be treated, with respect.

As my brother disappears, my phone pings and I pull it from my back pocket. I take another fast glance around Storm House before I read the message. Even though I still have a room in the frat, I barely know anyone here tonight. I know the players, just not as well as I know the guys from my coming up years. The team has changed over the last four years, taken over by the new kids ready to make their mark in

the world. I turn my attention to my phone and my heart beats a little faster as I read the message.

Lisa: Hey Rhys, how's your night going?

Me: Not bad. At Storm House. Keeping an eye on my younger brother. Are you still in Calgary?

Lisa and I have been chatting for weeks now. I'm on an app, and yeah okay, it might be a bit pathetic, but I own that. Seriously though, I wanted to meet someone who didn't know me as Cheddar. Someone who'll call me Rhys and get to know the guy beneath the jersey. Lisa, who I'm chatting with now, went home for the holidays but she goes to college here. We've yet to meet in person, and I'm not in a rush. I like getting to know her like this first.

Lisa: Still here with the fam. You're a good big brother.

Me: I still have a few more days with him and if he keeps talking shit, no one will ever find the body.

Lisa: (Laughing emoji) You're too funny. I won't keep you. Go have fun, but not too much fun. <wink>

Me: I'd rather be talking to you.

Lisa: Such a sweet talker.

I laugh at that. Okay, that might have come off a bit cheesy, but then again, they do call me Cheddar. Lisa doesn't, though, and I want her to think I'm more than a FBOI. Sure, I've always been a fuck boy. Is it so want to want more? I glance up and spot my brother handing Nate's sister Kendra a cup. Shit. Nate will be replacing Caleb as team captain next year when we all graduate and Dane—who will be the new kid on the team—should not be messing with Nate's little sister.

Me: GTG, my brother is about to get himself into a world of hurt.

Lisa: Uh oh. What is he doing?

Me: Looking at Nate's sister like he's DTF.

Lisa: Go, save his butt.

Me: I'll message you later, okay?

Lisa: Sounds good.

Before I tuck my phone away, another message comes in.

Lisa: I'm looking forward to it, and you ARE a good big brother.

I can't seem to wipe the stupid smile off my face as I slide my phone into my back pocket. I really like Lisa, even though I have no idea what she looks like. All I know is she goes to school here and is studying English. She wants to be a writer. I thought about checking with my buddy Brandon to see if he knew her. He's an aspiring writer too, but I kind of like the idea of keeping us in this bubble for now. I like having her all to myself.

I push off the wall and start toward my brother, when a pretty girl I've seen around stumbles into me. I grip her shoulders before she falls and she smiles up at me.

"Cheddar." Her hands go to my chest and she widens her fingers. "Thanks for saving me."

I hold onto her and inch back, afraid she'll fall if I let her go. I glance at her half-closed eyes, trying to place her. I think her name is Leeza, but I'm not sure. I've seen her around campus before. Never at a frat party, though. What is she doing here now?

“Are you okay?” I ask.

She giggles. “I am now.”

I lift my head and spot my brother moving in closer to Nate’s sister, and that’s when I turn and catch the way Nate is staring at them, his brow furrowed. Oh fuck. I need to get to Dane before Nate does, but there’s no way I can let go of the girl I’m holding up.

I scan the room, and note the girls on the stairs, some headed up, some headed down. “Where are your friends?” I understand girl code. They come together and check in with one another before they leave.

She waves her hand. “Gone, they all hooked up.”

“Did you text them?” She pulls out her phone and waves it in front of my face, too fast for me to see anything. “They’re not messaging back. Too busy hooking up.”

While I’d like to take her phone and look through it myself, I don’t want to invade her privacy. “Come with me.” I put my arm around her, and she sags against me.

“Where are we going?”

I push through a few people, and hurry toward Dane. “I need to get my brother.” Luckily, I reach him before Nate.

I grab him by the shirt. “Time to go.”

He shrugs me off. “What? No. The party is just starting.” The girl in my arms hiccups, and my brother gives me a knowing nod. “Ah, I get it.”

No, he doesn’t get it. You’d think he knew me better than to think I’d take a drunk girl back to my room and fuck her. “I need to get her home.”

“I’m not stopping you, bro.”

I growl. “Dane—”

“Hey,” Nate says pushing in beside me. His sister stands a little straighter, and Nate takes her cup and smells it.

“It’s just beer,” she says.

Nate takes a drink and hands it back. She rolls her eyes, and I get it. Nate is crazy overprotective of her and I can’t blame him. The players on the team have a reputation of sleeping with anyone willing, but he also knows better than to think we’d drug anyone. We’re a good bunch of guys, despite the reputation, and it’s up to the captain to ensure the new recruits follow the straight and narrow. My brother, however, is my responsibility right now and the opportunity to teach him a lesson is right in the palm of my hand.

“Dane is my brother,” I explain, and Nate relaxes.

“Oh, hey man. I heard about you. Looking forward to you being on the team. If you play anything like Cheddar...” Nate pauses and puts his hand on my shoulder. “We’re well on our way to winning another season.” He pulls Kendra closer to him, a not so subtle indication that she’s off limits. My brother is smart enough to pick up the cues he’s dropping. At least, I hope he is.

“I need to get her home,” I say as the girl in my arm hiccups again. “Do you know where her friends are?” I ask Nate.

He glances around. “Don’t see them.”

“Do you even know who she is?”

He shakes his head. “I don’t think she’s ever been to one of our parties before.” I nod, my thoughts exactly. “You want to put her in one of the rooms upstairs?”

I shake my head and bite the inside of my mouth. I don't really want to just abandon her. Maybe she landed in my arms because fate put her there, knowing I'd help her out. Not that I'm a big believer in fate or that things happen for a reason.

"I'll take her home." I glance at Dane. "Find Jesse and come with me."

He looks like he's about to protest. Nate puts his hand on Dane's shoulder. "Go, I'll watch out for your little brother."

Dane looks at me with pleading eyes and my protest dies on my tongue. "I'm going to get her home safely, and then I'm coming back here." I deepen my voice and glare at my brother. "Stay out of trouble."

Honestly, he's a good kid. We were raised with the same morals, and I trust him. My only problem is, those working at the Scotia Gazette, the campus paper, have been out to get us. I have no idea what we did to piss them off. I only know one small mistake and my brother's name and face will be all over the front page.

He gives me a grin that's no doubt going to get him into trouble one of these days. "I'm good, bro."

I nod and hold the wiggling girl in my arms tighter. I fight through the crowd and snatch my coat up off the sofa. "Where's your coat?" I ask. Nova Scotia winters are fucking cold, and she'll freeze to death in seconds.

"I...I don't know."

"Shit." I scrub my face and sort through the pile of coats. "Any of these look familiar?"

"Nope." I put mine over her shoulders. "Wear this."

For a split second, as her gaze reaches mine, I think I see pure clarity there, and something that looks like disbelief. I angle my head, narrowing my gaze as I assess her. She stumbles a bit, and that drives home the point that she's wasted.

"Here." Pushing down my strange sense of suspicion—I'm not normally a distrustful kind of guy—I help her into my coat. Once I get her dressed, I guide her outside and the cold night air instantly chills me. I glance up and down the street, pissed that her friends would leave her like that. "Where do you live?"

"Not far. That way." She points down the sidewalk, and I hug her to me and hurry our steps, needing to get inside before I get hypothermia. I should have grabbed Dane's coat. At least she said she wasn't far. After a few blocks, as we're just about to pass by my buddy Ryan's house, where I've been staying to get away from the frat house, I turn to her again.

My breath turns to fog in front of my face when I ask, "Are we close?"

"I...don't know." She pulls away from me, and turns in a wobbly circle. Her eyes cloud over, lost and confused. I curse under my breath, and reach into the pocket of my coat, which is dangling on her body.

"Whoa," she says, flinching back as my hands connect with her waist. She blinks up at me and once again I question if she's intoxicated, until she hiccups. When did I get so paranoid? Oh, probably when the team heard the paper was out to get them.

"Just getting my keys." I nod toward Ryan's place. "My buddy Ryan lives there. He's away for the holidays and he lets me stay when I want. I need to get us both inside and warm as we figure out where you live."

“Oh, okay.”

I hurry up to the house and unlock the door. She winces as I flick the lights on, and I guide her to the sofa. “Do you have a purse or anything with you?”

She glances at her waist. “I don’t see one.”

“Fuck.”

I need to get back to the party, to my brother and his friend, but there’s no way I can just leave her alone in my buddy’s house. What if she gets sick, or falls asleep and wakes up confused and tries to find her way home in the cold? That has disaster written all over it.

She grips the sides of her head. “The room is spinning.”

I help her up. “Yeah, I know.” I walk her toward the stairs.

“Where are you taking me?” she asks.

“To bed.”

My heart thunders against my ribs, hard enough to reverberate in my ears as Cheddar carefully guides me up the stairs and I can't help but think he can hear the pounding too. God, everything about this is wrong. I don't want to be here, trying to get dirt on this guy or any other guy on the team. I can't even believe Samantha, the chief editor at the Scotia Gazette put me up to this, threatening to replace me this semester and not give me the chief position next year when she leaves.

Sometimes it takes extreme measures to get to the truth.

That might be her philosophy, but as Cheddar pushes open a bedroom door and takes me inside, I can't say it's mine, or that I can keep my emotions out of a story. I stumble a bit, keeping up the ruse that I'm drunk. My phone is in my back pocket and Samantha has been tracking me all night, ready to run to my rescue and get pictures of Cheddar engaging in something sordid. Isn't this called entrapment?

How did I ever find myself in the middle of this?

This is not who I am, not the kind of journalism I want to do. I turn to him, about to shut this whole thing down and tell him the truth. But the warm concerned look on his face as he

lightly brushes my hair back from my face, steals the words from my throat.

“This is the room I sleep in when I’m here. The sheets are freshly washed. I did laundry today.” I almost snort out a laugh as I imagine the toughest guy on the hockey team home doing laundry. I actually kind of like the image...I actually kind of like him. “Why don’t you crawl in. I’m going to get a glass of water, and some meds and put them on the nightstand for you, okay?” He waits for me to nod, and continues with, “I’ll knock before I come back in.”

My throat tightens as he gazes down at me with those gorgeous blue eyes. I don’t care what Samantha said about him. Everything in my gut tells me he’s a nice guy. She warned me over and over though, implying that he’d try to trick me into thinking he was a good guy because his brother was in town, and he’d be on his best behavior for the kid’s sake.

Did he do something to piss off Samantha?

All I can manage to do is nod, and he walks me backward, until I’m sitting safely on the bed. “If you want to get into something more comfortable...” he says as he glances at my jeans and sweater—and not in a sexual way. He walks to his dresser, pulls out a T-shirt and a pair of sweats and brings them to me. “...you can put these on. They’re big but they tie at the waist.”

I take the clothes and the fresh scent of fabric softener reaches my nose. Without thinking I bring them to my face and inhale. A strange, ridiculous noise crawls out of my throat.

“Are you going to be sick?” I drop the clothes and find Cheddar squatting in front of me, concern dancing in his eyes as they assess me. “I can take you to the bathroom.”

“No...I should leave.”

“Nope. You’re not going anywhere.”

It’s crazy, because I don’t want to go anywhere. I want to sleep in his bed tonight, and this is all so out of character for me.

“Your brother. He needs you.”

He exhales and scrubs his fingers through his hair. “He and his buddy are staying in my dorm room. Nate will take care of them.” He pulls his phone from his pocket, and the warmest smile comes over his face as he reads something.

“What?” I ask.

His hair falls forward with a quick shake of his head.

“Nothing, just a friend.”

Wait!

Is he reading our exchange from earlier tonight? If so, is that how he smiles when he reads messages from me—or rather Lisa? Yes, Samantha insisted I go on the app and friend Cheddar. I didn’t want to, so she went ahead and set the whole profile up, and swiped on Rhys Taylor, which she somehow found out was Cheddar’s real name. This is all so horrible.

My heart pounds so hard it hurts all the way to my throat. Honestly, I couldn’t hate myself any more than I already do. I stare at the man with a player reputation. So what if he does? That doesn’t mean he’s a bad guy, or takes women home without consent, like Samantha assured me he did, and we just needed proof. Of course, I want to shut down guys like that, but everything in my gut—and his actions tonight—tell me he’s not that guy.

“I...I should get changed.”

He stands and hesitates. “Bathroom is across the hall, and I’m going to run downstairs to get you water. Can you make it by yourself or do you need help?”

“I can make it.”

He nods and my gaze drops to take in his perfect backside as he walks to the door. “Wait,” he says and turns back to me. He comes back to me, a look of determination in his eyes. What is he doing?

“Phone?”

“What?”

“I want to put my contact information into your phone.” He jerks his thumb over his shoulder. “I’ll only be across the hall, but if I don’t hear you and you need me, you can call.”

I swallow the guilt and hand over my phone. He puts his information in, and calls himself. “There, now I have yours.” He angles his head. “It’s Leeza, right?”

He knows my name?

How the hell does the hottest guy on the hockey team know my name? More importantly, why do I like that so much? I’m not into players. I’m a serious student and have my journalism career to focus on. I shake my head to clear it, working to convince myself that it’s not important if he knows my name.

Wait, does he know I work for the gazette?

“Yes,” I say. “It’s Leeza.”

“I’ve seen you around, but we’ve never met. I’m Cheddar, but I think you already know that.”

“Everyone knows that,” I mumble and try to remember I’m supposed to be intoxicated. “I should sleep.”

“Agreed. I’ll be right back.” He leaves and quietly clicks the door shut. I listen to his footsteps on the stairs and I hurry out of my clothes and into his. I shoot off a text to Samantha that nothing is happening, and she can go home, and by the time I hear him coming up the stairs, I’m all tucked into his bed. He knocks.

“Are you decent?”

“Yes, come in.”

My phone pings repeatedly, and he glances at me as he sets the water down. “Sounds like one of your friends might be trying to find you after all.”

“I’ll answer in a second.” He hesitates. “Thanks for the water, and meds.”

He nods and backs up. “If you need anything...”

“I’m good, thanks. Can you get the lights?”

“Sure.”

“Night, Rhys.”

He spins so fast, I nearly fall out of bed. “What?”

Oh God, no one calls him that. I only know that’s his real name from the app we’ve been using.

“Peace,” I say quickly and hold my hand up and spread my index and middle fingers. His eyes narrow in on me, and I hold my breath. If he figures out who I really am and what I’ve been doing he’s going to toss me out the window and into the cold and I don’t blame him. “Peace,” I say again and his shoulders relax.

“Peace,” he responds. “See you in the morning.”

The door clicks shut again, and as I hear the shower down the hall turn on, I grab my phone.

Samantha: What is going on?

Me: He tucked me in. He's not who you think he is.

Samantha: You don't need to stay any longer tonight.

Oh, she's worried about my safety now, is she? I'm not worried, though. Not once tonight was I worried. I see the way he acts on campus, loud, obnoxious, the life of the party. The girls love him and he loves them back. Yet...there's a different side to Rhys. A quiet, soft side that I've gotten to know through our texts. That side came out tonight when he brought me here. Maybe I'll stick with this ruse, and do an article disputing Samantha's claims. That would get me fired in a hurry. But do I really need the chief editors position next year? Yeah, I kind of do.

Me: As soon as he falls asleep, I'll leave.

Samantha: Fine, we'll meet tomorrow and come up with a new plan.

I set my phone down and snuggle back on the pillow, bringing the T-shirt to my nose to catch hints of fabric softener, and... Rhys. The guy really does have two personas, and I don't think he's playing nice on the app to get into my pants. Samantha is wrong about that. Heck, he has no idea what Lisa even looks like. Truthfully, Lisa or Leeza...neither of us are his type. Although I really do enjoy texting with him.

My phone lights up and I exhale a huff, expecting more from Samantha, but my heart jumps as a message comes through the dating app.

Rhys: Hey...still up?

I run my finger across the phone and realize how hard I'm smiling, much like the smile I saw on Rhys' face earlier, when he checked his phone. I'm about to message back when the journalist side of me kicks in. This could be a good opportunity to test his integrity.

Me: I'm up. How was your night?

Rhys: A bit strange actually.

Me: Your brother get into trouble?

Rhys: No, there was a girl on campus, and she needed some help.

I sit up a bit straighter and two things go through my mind. He knows I'm Leeza and feeling me out, or he's just an honest, open guy who's misjudged.

Me: Did you help her?

Rhys: Yeah, actually I'm at my buddy's house, and I put her to bed. She was pretty drunk and I couldn't find her friends.

Me: That was nice of you.

Don't do it, Leeza. Don't freaking do it!

Me: Was she pretty?

God, I am so pathetic.

Rhys: Yeah, she's pretty. Not as pretty as you, though.

Like a silly girl with a crush, my pulse jumps in my neck.

Me: You have no idea what I look like.

Rhys: Doesn't matter. I like...this.

I settle back into my pillow as I imagine him doing the same, liking this texting back and forth a lot too. I also like that our calls are not sexual in nature. I like asking questions about his team and he always praises the guys, telling me how they visit the hospitals and want to set good examples for the rookies. I honestly don't see the toxic culture the editor-in-chief talks about. When Rhys asks me questions, he's always respectful and curious, wanting to know about my life and my plans. I'm always careful to share what I can. I can't have him finding out what I do. Once again, another burst of guilt moves through me.

Toying with the T-shirt I'm wearing and rereading his messages, my lids close, and for the briefest of seconds I feel a tinge of disappointment that this conversation always stays clean.

What the hell, Leeza?

I push that thought down, even though there is a part of me—maybe even a huge part—that would like to know what it's

like to be touched or kissed by the sweet man texting me—the sweet man in the room across the hall—not the one who showboats at parties. For the next thirty minutes, I text with a guy I can't believe I'm falling for. Not that we could ever have a relationship. If he ever found out what I was up to, he'd never want anything to do with me and I can't blame him. He stops texting and I think he's falling asleep. I know I am.

Me: Am I keeping you up?

Rhys: I could ask you the same. Oh no, wait, you're three hours earlier in Alberta.

Me: Yeah, but the holidays are killing me. I'll be glad when I get back to my regular routine.

Rhys: I'll be glad when you're back too. Tomorrow night, right?

Me: Yup.

Rhys: Are we finally going to meet?

Me: We'll see. Night, Rhys.

Rhys: Night, Lisa.

I set my phone down, my heart full of...happiness. I roll and tuck my hands under his pillow, liking that he's in the next room, watching over me. My lids drift shut and the next thing I know, banging sounds downstairs wake me. I slide from the bed, make a quick trip to the bathroom, and quietly go down the stairs.

The second I round the corner and find Rhys, or rather Cheddar, standing before the stove, dressed in nothing but low-hanging sweats, all my girly parts go weak, but it's nothing compared to what my body does when he turns, and smiles, and points to the table where a big glass of juice awaits me.

“Sit. Bacon and eggs. It helps with the hangover.”

I swallow against a tight throat. Honest to God, if this man is playing me, and really is part of the toxic culture in hockey, and I refuse to write an article on him, I risk losing the coveted position at the Gazette.

But if he isn't playing me and isn't part of the toxic culture, and I *do* write the article, then I risk losing a chance at the man I'm falling for. Either way, I'm screwed.

I take my last bite of bacon and set my fork down, staring at the gorgeous girl across from me. “If you have no plans, why don’t you come along?” I’m not sure why, but I’m just not ready to let her go yet. It’s strange. Just chatting with her this morning, I felt like I knew her forever. She’s as easy to talk to as Lisa. It’s weird, I barely know either one, but I have the strangest feeling I could fall for both of them.

“I don’t want to intrude. You’re here with your brother and his friend.”

I snort. “Trust me. Dane would rather hang out with a beautiful woman over me. He’ll enjoy it. Just don’t listen to any of his bullshit. He has a lot to learn about women.”

Her head lifts, her interest piqued. “What do you mean?”

“He’s young and stupid and thinking with his...” I glance down. “Well, you know.”

She laughs. “I guess I could say I hear the same about you.”

I cringe. Yeah, it’s a side of me everyone knows, and you know what, she doesn’t know me well and isn’t looking to hook up, so maybe I can shelve that side while we tour the city with my brother and his friend. Maybe I can simply be myself

around her. I feel my shoulders relaxing as that idea settles into my brain.

“You shouldn’t believe everything you hear.”

She lifts her phone and pulls up social media. “Should I not believe everything I see either?”

I snatch her phone away. “No. How about we just hang out and you can make up your own mind.”

Her smile is sweet, and soft, and it curls around me in the oddest way. “I like...that.”

I angle my head and eye her. Something in the way she worded that reminds me of Lisa, and I’m about to ask her if they know one another when my phone pings. I grab it from the table and flip it.

“I’m surprised he’s up.”

“Dane?”

My stomach tightens and I sit up a little straighter as I read the message. “Mother fucker.”

“Uh oh.”

“Uh oh is right. I need to go.” I stand and reach for our empty plates. “I should never have left him.”

“I’m sorry, Cheddar. It was all my fault.” I turn back to see her and take in the paleness of her face.

“Hey, no. None of this is your fault.” Jesus, she’s really fucking upset and I hate everything about the guilt swimming in her big blue eyes. I touch her chin lightly and lift her face to mine. “Everything is okay, Leeza. I promise.”

That soft easy smile, even though it’s forced, nearly takes the air from my lungs. Okay, wait, maybe hanging out with her is

wrong. I'm sort of trying to build a relationship with Lisa, and I don't want to string two women along. "If you want me to take you home—"

"No, I think I'd like to take you up on your offer." I swallow and her face tightens at my reaction. "If you've changed—"

"No, not at all. We just...have to pick my brother up from Nate's sister's place."

Her eyes go wide. "He did not?"

"Oh yeah. Little fucker did."

"After you warned him not to mess with her?"

I eye her as something niggles in my brain, something that questions her sobriety last night. "You remember that?"

She twists the hem of my T-shirt between her fingers like she's said something she shouldn't have. "Yeah, parts."

"Do you want to shower here and wear something of mine, or do you want me to take you back to your place?" I have no idea why she's paling again. It's a simple question.

"Here," she says fast, like the idea of me taking her to her place is out of the question. Maybe she has house rules about guys or something.

"Go on up, then. Grab some clean clothes out of the dresser. I stay here enough that I keep a lot of things here and you'll find a spare toothbrush in the bottom of the bathroom cabinet."

She nods and I stare after her, liking what I'm looking at as she disappears upstairs, but I don't have time for admiration, not when my brother might have made a big fucking mistake.

I hurry to load the dishwasher, turn it on and dash upstairs. I go to my bedroom, grab some clothes from my drawer and

when I turn to go into Ryan's room to dress, I find Leeza standing in the doorway dressed in nothing but a big fluffy towel, that has me tenting my sweats. I let my hands fall, using my clean clothes to cover myself.

"I...uh...I was just getting my clothes," I explain. She stands in the doorway, like her legs aren't quite working. Maybe she's too afraid to come in when I'm in there, now that she's sober. "I'll just get out of your way." I take a step toward her.

"It's your room. You can change here."

I gulp as my feet come to a resounding halt. "Oh, you want to go to Ryan's room to change?"

"No. I wasn't suggesting that."

Holy shit, what is she suggesting?

"I'm not going to kick you out of your own room again. You left last night because of me." She circles her finger. "You turn that way, and I'll turn this way." She walks to my bed, to where her clothes are laid out, and turns her back to me. Does she not realize I can see her in the mirror? Maybe she does and goddammit, maybe she wants me to look.

Fuck me twice.

I turn to avoid temptation, and since I showered last night, and don't have time for another this morning, I quickly dress, and when she's done, I turn and take in my sweats on her. She's in the same sweater she wore last night.

A few minutes later we're outside and sliding into my car, which has been sitting in Ryan's driveway. I vaguely remember where Kendra lives. I pull into the driveway and the front door opens, and out walks my asshole brother, looking mussed and well fucked.

I'm going to kill him.

I crook my finger and at least he looks a bit worried. He should be. I'm going to kick his ass. I'm about to open my door and grab him by the scruff of the neck, stopping when Leeza's hand lands on my lap. It does two things at the same time: heat me up and cool me down. I turn to her.

"Don't be too hard on him."

If only she wasn't being too hard on me.

"Leeza—"

"They're both young, doing what young people do. You can't help who you like, or that her brother is the captain of the hockey team. Also, is it fair, Cheddar? Shouldn't she do what is right for her, what's in her heart? She's old enough to make her own decisions and shouldn't be a puppet on a string, manipulated by some marionette."

Why do I get the sense she's talking about something personal here?

"Her brother just worries about her."

"I understand. You worry about your brother too. But I'm guessing it was all consensual..." I scrub my face as Dane opens the back door. "Last night, you took me home and cared for me, showing your brother how it's supposed to be done. I think you both come from a good place."

I smile at that. She's pretty astute for a girl I just met. "What did I tell you?" I growl at my kid brother as he slides into the car.

"Sorry, bro."

"Sorry, bro. That's all you have to say?" Leeza eyes me, but I have to be hard on the kid. I don't want him getting his ass

kicked in the streets, or booted from the team next year.

“I like her, and I think she likes me too.”

“Clearly.” I adjust the rearview mirror and catch his grin. He might like her now, but it will be eight months before he’s going here full time and I’m sure they’ll forget all about each other. I relax and let my worries go. “Dane, this is Leeza. Do you remember her from last night?”

“Yeah.” Dane leans forward and grabs the back of Leeza seat. “How are you feeling?” I smile at his concern.

Leeza folds her hand on her lap and stretches them out. “Great. I slept it off, and your brother took good care of me.”

“Did he cook you breakfast?”

“Of course. Did you cook Kendra breakfast?” she asks with a raised brow.

“No, I left her sleeping, and didn’t want to mess around in her kitchen, but do you think we could grab a breakfast sandwich and coffee so I can bring something back to her for when she wakes up?”

I nod, my heart warming at his consideration. Maybe he’ll do okay here after all, and maybe he was just showing off in front of his friend last night, pretending to be something he wasn’t—something everyone expects of him—especially since he’s my kid brother. Shit, maybe I’m not setting a good example at all. But today, I plan to be Rhys, not Cheddar, and show him it’s okay to be who you really are. If people don’t like Rhys, screw them. I laugh to myself. It took me long enough to figure that shit out.

“Yeah sure, kid.” I back out of the driveway. “Where’s Jesse?”

“Asleep in your dorm.”

“Alone, I hope?”

He holds his hands up. “What Jesse does is not my business.”

“He’s in my room, which makes it my business. Let’s go get breakfast, deliver it, and go get him. You still want to see the campus and sights today, don’t you?”

He nods. “Will you be joining us, Leeza?”

She glances at him over her shoulder. “If that’s okay with you?”

“It is, as long as you’re up for it, and you’re not too hung over.”

She nods emphatically and I don’t know about her, but whenever I was that wasted, I was hurting the next day. I guess the water, meds and breakfast helped her recover faster.

The streets are pretty quiet this morning, so I make through the drive-thru fast, grab the food, and deliver it back to Kendra. Dane takes so long inside I wonder if he went back to bed with her. I’m just about to go get him when he comes outside a big smile on his face.

“Get in,” I grumble. As soon as he’s buckled, I go back to the dorm and park. “Come inside and stay warm,” I say to Leeza. “I’ll get Jesse.” I hurry upstairs and find him alone in my bed, and for that I’m happy. Although by the mussed sheets, I’m not sure he was alone all night.

I nudge him. “Rise and shine, Jesse.” He grumbles and I wave the breakfast sandwich in front of his nose. Like any young, growing guy, he rises up and rubs his stomach. “Get dressed and meet us downstairs.” I drop the bag on the nightstand, and head back downstairs to find Dane and Leeza sitting close and talking and a weird, sharp pang of jealousy hits me in the chest.

Whoa, what the hell?

“Back off,” I blurt out before I can stop myself, and Dane’s head lifts. He grins, a knowing little grin I’d like to smack off his face. Honestly, I shouldn’t be possessive of Leeza. I barely know her. Despite that, I feel like I do. I have this strange draw to her, a strange sense of familiarity.

Jesse comes barreling down the stairs, his clothes and hair disheveled. “Dude,” he says to Dane and pats him on the back. “What a night, eh?”

Since I don’t want to hear the details and I’m sure Leeza doesn’t either, I pipe up. “How about we walk the campus and then hit up the boardwalk and find a place for lunch?”

“Um, actually I have plans for lunch,” Dane announces a sheepish grin on his face.

Jesse pulls out the breakfast sandwich, bites into it and adds, “Yeah, me too.”

I shake my head. “I thought you guys wanted to experience the city.”

Dane nudges Jesse. “We are.”

“Dane,” I warn. “I told you—”

He throws his hands out, all innocent. “What? We’re going skating at the oval. I heard a few people at the party putting a plan together last night.”

I narrow my eyes. “You’re going in a group?”

“Yup.”

I nod. I guess that’s okay. Better than one on one time with Kendra. Next year I’ll be out of here, unable to look out for

him. Right now, I can only guide him into making smart choices.

I glance at Leeza, and I'm about to speak when my phone pings. I pull it from my pocket and check it to find a message from one of my buddies. It's nothing urgent so I tuck my phone away and ask Leeza, "Feel like skating later?"

"I'm not keeping you from something, or someone, am I?"

I get it. I have a reputation, so she expects that I'll be hooking up over the holidays. "I cleared the day to spend with these two." I glance outside and shove my hands into my pockets and decide to tell her what I really think. "I'd love it if you came."

A smile lights up her face, and as I take her in, I try not to remember her standing in my room with nothing on but a towel. "I think it will be fun."

"Okay, let's show these guys around." She turns and walks toward the door and as my gaze takes her in, my body reacts. Goddammit, there are a lot of things I'd like to show her too, and every one of them involves us being naked. But I'm so over fast hook-ups. I want something more permanent, which is why I went on the app. I want to get to know a girl, have her get to know me as Rhys, not Cheddar.

Wait, did she call me Rhys last night?

I wobble in my skates and grab Rhys' arm before I face plant.
"I'm not very good at this."

"You're doing just fine," he lies, and I laugh.

"I'm making a fool of myself."

"No, you're not."

"You're right. No one is looking at me when I'm with you."

He angles his head, his brow furrowed together as he adjusts his hat. "What's that supposed to mean?"

I laugh and wave my hand, catching the way the women are admiring him and looking at me with envy. No one has ever looked at me with envy before, and while I don't exactly revel in that, I do love the intent way Rhys looks at me, especially when he doesn't think I'm watching.

"You're like a God around this place, loved by everyone," I inform him, even though I'm not telling him something he doesn't already know.

An almost sad look comes over his face, and it wraps around my heart. "I'm just me, Leeza."

This is Rhys I'm talking to, the sweet guy from the app, not the life of the party Cheddar everyone knows and I strangely

find myself falling a little more for him. Why does he keep this side of himself hidden? I'm not sure, but since last night, since taking me home, he's been gifting me with insight into the man beneath the jersey, and I don't think he's putting on a false show for his little brother. I think this is the real Rhys, and I like him a lot.

Maybe that's why I absurdly told him not to leave the room while we changed. Holy hell, what was I thinking? That's so unlike me. I think though, there's a part of me that really likes his attention, and maybe, just maybe wants to know what it feels like to be touched, kissed by him—to be the sole focus of his desire.

A fine shiver goes through me and he tugs me to him and I almost moan as his big body dwarfs mine, making me feel warm and safe. "Are you cold?"

"Maybe a little," I fib. Wait, why am I fibbing? Maybe I should just come right out and tell him what he does to me. There's no denying that I want him, and I think he might like me too. Oh right, I know why I can't do that.

I'm getting close to him to do a story on him.

Ugh, kill me now.

He narrows his eyes. "Hey, are you okay?"

I swallow and try to put on a happy face, as his brother, Jesse and a group of girls all skate by and wave to us. "Yeah, I am."

"I think you disappeared for a second there. Something on your mind?"

Oh, if he only knew.

I gesture toward the small kiosk serving up drinks and snacks. "Yeah, I was thinking a hot chocolate would be nice."

He laughs. “Let’s do it.”

His palm leaves the small of my back and captures my hand and as we skate toward the kiosk, Samantha glides by, her gaze going from me to Rhys, back to me again. Rhys scrubs his face, and averts his gaze.

“Do you two know each other?” I ask, taking in his strange behavior and the snarl on Sam’s face when she looked at him.

“Something like that.”

My stomach instantly tightens and I have a suspicious feeling they might have hooked up in the past. All I know is there’s bad blood there, and maybe that’s why Samantha is out to get him. I want to ask, but don’t want to make him suspicious.

My mind races with questions as he starts skating, and I try not to look like such a novice next to him as we head to the back of the line forming at the kiosk. He lets my hand go and just like that, my stupid skates go out from underneath me and I’m flat out on my back, my head hitting the ice a little too hard.

“Leeza.” Rhys’ voice reverberates in my brain as he drops to his knees and brings me to his body, cradling me in his arms. “Are you okay?”

I blink as he carefully examines my eyes. “I don’t even know what happened.”

“This was a bad idea.”

I touch his face. “No, I liked coming here with you.” His face softens but concern still brims in his eyes. “It’s just been a long time since I’ve been on skates.”

“Let me take you home.”

Panic erupts inside me. We can’t go to my place. I can’t risk him finding out that Leeza and Lisa are one in the same. My

heart thumps. I hate betraying him like this, but I guess at the end of the day, I'm glad Samantha put me on the case, because I'm not going to fabricate a story for shock value. That's not why I want to be a journalist.

"If your friend's place is still empty, maybe we can go there." His brow furrows in confusion, and I jerk my thumb out. "It's closer and maybe the faster I lie down the better."

"Good plan."

His brother comes to a halt beside us. "Leeza, are you okay?"

I nod and Rhys explains that he's taking me back to Ryan's and that he'll check in with him and Jesse later.

"Yeah, we're good," Dane assures Rhys. He zeroes in on me. "I'm sorry you're hurt, Leeza. If you need anything—"

"She's got me," Rhys says, his voice so possessive and commanding, his brother backs up an inch, a grin on his face.

"Yeah, she does," Dane adds with a nod, and then the two exchange a look I don't understand. Before I can ask what's going on, Rhys pulls me to my feet and scoops me up. I glance around a little embarrassed as a crowd stares on.

"I can walk," I say quietly.

"And I can carry you." He takes me to a bench, keeping a close eye on me as he unties my skates and then his. Since I rented mine, he drops them off and takes me to his car, setting me inside.

"We could have walked, it's not far."

"You banged your head pretty hard. Maybe we should go to the hospital."

I touch the back of my head. “Not even a bump,” I tell him. “Good thing I was wearing a thick hat.” I take his hand and put it on the back of my head and he feels around, the rough pads of his thumbs lightly feeling their way around and the sensations rocket through my body and settle between my legs. I swallow and his hand goes still. I turn his way and I’m pretty damn sure he knows what his touch is doing to me.

Five minutes later, he’s carrying me inside his friend’s place. We take off our boots and coats at the front door, and he’s taking me up to his bed, which I neatly made after sleeping in it last night. My phone pings, and I’m sure it’s Samantha, so I ignore it.

“Do you need to get that?” I shake my head no, as he pulls his phone out and frowns as he checks it. Is he waiting for a message from Lisa? My throat clogs with guilt, and a part of me is tempted to just blurt out the truth. I just...don’t want to hurt him or for him to hate me.

I glance at my phone and read the message from Samantha.

Samantha: You’re supposed to be the one playing the player, not the other way around. Don’t fall for it, you’re just another notch, you’ll see and if you don’t get me my article you can forget about becoming editor-in-chief.

I get it, she thinks he’s the one playing me, but as he pulls the covers down, I don’t think either of us are playing any kind of game here and I can’t even seem to think about the job, not when my body is burning from the inside out.

I turn my phone over on the nightstand so he can't see it, and slide between the sheets. As he tucks me in, something comes over me and before I can stop myself, I slide my hands around his neck, my pulse pounding so hard in my throat, I can barely breathe. Am I really doing this?

"I...don't think I'm supposed to be left alone. You know, possible concussion."

His eyes narrow in on mine, a careful assessment that sets my blood on fire. "I thought—"

Sexual tension arcs between us and his chest rises and falls a bit faster. "It doesn't hurt to be careful."

Which makes me wonder why I'm not being careful—I should be making decisions with my head, not my body and heart. I shouldn't be doing this, I shouldn't be pulling his lips to mine, but I can't seem to stop. The only thing I can do is blame my behavior on a brain injury. Maybe I hit my head harder than I thought, or maybe I simply, just once, want to be coveted and touched by this sweet man hovering over me in his bed—a sweet man he keeps hidden but has exposed to me numerous times.

Seconds before his lips touch mine, he stiffens, like he's having second thoughts, and I go completely still. "Cheddar?" I say about to scramble away. Oh God, maybe I've read this all wrong.

"Leeza," he says quickly and puts his hand on my arm to stop me. "You banged your head. I just want to make sure this is what you want. That you're making decisions you'd make if you hadn't fallen."

As he stares down at me, checking in on me and looking for consent, I fall a little more for him. Sam is so wrong about

him. “I want you,” I say quietly, and put my hands around his head again.

“I want you too.” He glances at the nightstand where we set our phones. “I just...I should probably take care of—”

“Me,” I say, and lift until his lips are on mine, and the second I feel the softness of his mouth, a moan catches in my throat and whatever it was he wanted to do is long gone from his brain, because he’s kissing me with heat and hunger, a growl rumbling in the depths of his throat.

I inch up, lift my arms and he peels my sweater off, his gaze turning feral as he takes in my lacy bra. With deft hands, he unhooks my bra and I don’t want to spend too much time thinking how easy that was for him. A second later, he’s standing, and I can’t tear my gaze away as he peels off his sweater, unzips his jeans, and kicks them away.

Holy freaking God.

My gaze bumps up and down over his hard abs, coming to rest on his steel cock. My breathing changes, becomes fast as he climbs back on the bed, moves between my legs and releases the knot holding his big sweatpants to my hips. But I’m not the only one breathing hard, or shaking. I’m not sure if he’s like this with every girl—and in this moment, I don’t want to think about it—but for a man with his reputation, he seems a little off kilter at the moment.

He removes my pants, and spreads my legs, his gaze going from my face, to my breasts to my sex. He takes a couple fast breaths, and his head lifts, gaze locked on mine. “You are so damn beautiful, Leeza.”

I gulp at the hunger in his eyes—the honesty and vulnerability in his tone—and as he devours me with his gaze, I can’t say

that any man has ever looked at me the way he's looking at me right now. He bends forward and buries his face between my legs and as he licks me, his thumb going to my clit, my entire body trembles and my hips come off the bed.

"Yes," I say. "Ohmigod, yes." I run my fingers through his hair, holding him to me as pleasure spikes in my body. He licks and laps and sucks and nibbles and never in my life has oral sex been so mind-blowing. Before I even realize what's happening, I begin to burn from the inside out and he must know what's going on with me, because he applies more pressure to my clit, and inserts a finger and the second he does, my body breaks around him.

"Rhys," I cry out, my delirious, lust-saturated brain shutting down, as pleasure pulses through me, and I soak his face with my liquid release. I pant and struggle to breathe as he stays between my legs, letting me ride out the orgasm, but as soon as I do, he expertly begins to arouse me up again.

What is this man doing to me?

He climbs up my body, pressing hot wet kisses to my trembling flesh before his lips crash down on mine, eating at my mouth with the hunger of a starved animal who'd just taken down its prey. No man has ever quite wanted me like this, and I have to say, it excites and thrills me, and fills me with a new kind of confidence. I wrap my legs around him and he growls, and reaches into the nightstand. He produces a condom and bites into the wrapper, tearing it open. Once again, his eyes seek mine out, seeking permission, and I nod quickly.

He slides the condom on with expertise and falls over me again. His hard cock presses against my sex, and I wiggle, trying to force him in. While he seems as anxious as I do, he

slows things down and shifts lower, like he wants to draw tonight out, because it could be our one and only time and that thought brings tightness to my heart. My thoughts scatter as he takes one nipple into his mouth and I roll my head from side to side, taking pleasure in the delicious way his hot tongue laves and savors my hard bud.

I rake my hands through his hair and move against him, eager for everything. “That is so good,” I murmur and my words seem to do something to him. He angles his body, taking his cock into his hand and I go up on my elbows, wanting to watch him slide inside me.

My breath is coming so fast, I’m getting lightheaded, and I bend my knees, and let them fall open. He growls, and the sound of pure need curls around me, driving my desire.

“You want this, Leeza? You want my cock?” I nod, not sure I can actually vocalize anything. “That’s good, because I want to be inside your gorgeous pussy.” He lightly pets my sex, and a second later, he’s over my body, his mouth claiming mine as he powers his hips forward and pushes all the way inside me, filling me like I’ve never been filled before. I try to gasp, to groan, to claw at the bed, but he swallows my sound and pins my hands above my head, taking full control of me and I love it.

He inches out, and the friction creates heat and pleasure. Once again, my brain shuts down, nothing existing but this man and the sheer pleasure he’s giving me. I lift my hips as he powers back in, encouraging him to give me everything he has and then some. Soon enough, we’re moving in sync, creating a rhythm of lovers, each giving and taking and somehow knowing exactly what the other needs.

My body quakes and small ripples begin in my core. “Fuck yeah,” he murmurs and lets go of my hands. I slide them around his back as he buries his face in the crook of my neck. I want to hang on, want this to last forever, but my body gives in and my sex pulses around his steel cock.

“Leeza,” he murmurs, and drives into me, going still as my sex milks his release. He grunts, and trembles, moisture breaking out on his flesh as he too gives himself over to the pleasure.

I hold him to me, letting each pulse of his cock reverberate through my body and loving every second of it. He lifts his head and the second his gaze lands on mine, my heart misses a beat, the intimacy in what we just shared creating a new closeness between us. I’m sure he feels it every bit as much as I do.

“Hey,” he says quietly, and lightly brushes his lips over mine. “You okay?”

“I’m better than okay?”

He shakes his head, like he’s trying to get it on right, and I totally understand that. “Next time, I’ll try to go slower.” His grin is soft and sheepish and wraps around me like a warm blanket.

I arch a brow. “There’s going to be a next time?”

He laughs and brushes my hair back. “Of course. Wait, you want there to be a next time, don’t you?”

“Yes,” I answer honestly. How can there be, though? When he finds out who I am and why I sought him out at the party—and on the app—I’m sure he’ll never speak to me again.

He exhales and his eyes are warm, brimming with apology. “I just...this time, I really wanted you, and I kind of lost it. I’m sorry, babe. I’ll do better next time.”

“Nothing to be sorry about.” I brush my hands through his hair. He isn’t the only one who lost it. His warm, tender gaze locks on mine, and my heart pinches tight. Oh God, I need to tell him everything, but how, and if I do, would my actions be a deal breaker for him? I can’t say as I’d blame him, really.

“Hey, are you sure you’re okay?” He lightly brushes the back of his knuckles over my cheek.

“Yes,” I croak out, even though I’m not and he’s astute enough to sense it.

“Thirsty?” he asks as I swallow. Hard.

Needing a moment of reprieve, I nod, and he stands, and tucks me in. “I’ll be right back.” He tugs on the sweats I was wearing and snatches his phone off the nightstand. I watch him go, and while my body should be relaxed after sex it’s not. I’m completely wound up. I reach for my phone, and notice I have a message in the dating app. I open it and my pulse leaps in my throat as I read the message from Rhys.

Rhys: Can I see you tonight?

The room instantly spins around me, as everything Samantha said about him bounces around inside my brain. Maybe he is playing me, and maybe I should write the article on the toxic culture in hockey, using him as an example. Yeah, sure I’ll get the editor-in-chief position and secure my future, but if I do write it and I’m wrong, I risk losing Rhys and the future I might actually want more.

So, what are you going to do, Leeza?

I walk around Storm House, the New Year's Eve party in full swing. I walk by a room where my brother and Jesse and a few others are playing a drinking game. Kendra is nowhere to be found, and I think that's a good thing.

You know who else is nowhere to be found? Leeza, or Lisa. Unease erupts in my stomach. After sex this morning, Leeza said she had things to take care of and practically bolted out the front door. As she fled, I asked her if she'd be here tonight, and she said she would be, but she had a paper to write first.

We're on Christmas break, so I have no idea what paper she has to write...unless. Bile punches into my throat as I glance around and spot Samantha. What the hell is she doing here? She hates hockey and parties, and me in particular.

I pull my phone from my pocket and check my app. As suspicion wells up inside of me, I shoot off another message to Lisa, asking her when she's going to be here. I stare at the phone, waiting for a response, but none comes. I tuck my phone away as Samantha seeks me out.

"Samantha," I say, bracing myself, because she looks like she wants to murder me. It's been years since we hooked up, and she's hated me ever since. "Happy New Year."

She laughs, but it's humorless. "Oh, it will be. For me anyway."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

Her grin is sly and she has a look of victory on her face. "You'll see."

I take a sip of beer, and it's flat on my tongue. "Did you come here tonight to play cryptic games with me?"

She points an accusing finger. "I'm not the one who plays games, Cheddar."

"I don't know what I ever did to hurt you, but I'm sorry," I say and truly mean it.

"You're sorry," she shoots back. "Sorry for sleeping with me and then acting like you didn't know me."

I lower my head, my stomach cramping. "I'm not that guy anymore, Sam. I never meant to hurt you. I thought it was just a hook-up."

"Maybe you should have clarified that with me first to let me know where I stood before you took me back to my place."

"You're right, I should have." I honestly had no idea that she wanted more from me. I was just a guy who partied. Everyone wanted a nibble of Cheddar and no one took me seriously. At least, I didn't think they did. Leeza though, I thought she saw me for me, but now...I think things aren't quite as they seem.

She folds her arms and gives me a look that suggests she doesn't believe me. "You're only putting on a show because your brother is here. I know who you really are..." She nods and gestures to the front door, to where Leeza is standing. "So does she." Sam laughs. "Looks like the player has been played."

“Leeza,” I say my heart squeezing tight when I spot her standing in the doorway, nervously nibbling on her lower lip, a sheet of paper in her hand. “What...” I swallow, hard. “What have you done?”

I honestly don’t need to ask, because I already know. All this time, she’s been playing me. That first night I brought her back to Ryan’s place, when I silently questioned her sobriety, she called me Rhys. I was sure of it, even though she tried to play it off. Then this morning, during sex, she called me Rhys again. There’s no way she could have known my real name, unless...

“Hi Lisa,” I say, as all the pieces fall into place.

“Cheddar...” She shakes her head and corrects herself. “Rhys. I’m...I’m...”

Samantha squares her shoulders. “Let the show begin.” She walks over to Leeza and takes the paper.

I shake my head and start to walk away. “Rhys, please...” Leeza reaches for me, and I jerk my arm away. “It’s not what you think.”

“Are you telling me you weren’t pretending to be drunk to see if I would try to take advantage of you?” She pales. “That you weren’t pretending to be Lisa on an app, looking to get dirt on me?”

“I fell for you,” she blurts out. “I fell for Rhys Taylor.”

“You don’t know who Rhys Taylor is Leeza, or is it Lisa?”

“I do know,” she says, a new kind of panic in her voice. “We spent hours talking, and I loved every minute of it. During those conversations, you showed me with words who you really were, and when you took care of me the other night, and we went skating, and I fell and you took me to your bedroom,

and well...you know. You showed me with actions who you really were.”

“Who am I, Leeza?”

She blinks rapidly, a pleading look in her eyes as she says, “You’re the nicest, sweetest guy I know.”

I snort out a laugh. “And this is how you repay me?”

Her hair flares as she shakes her head hard. “It’s not what you think.”

“Does it matter?” I rake my fingers through my hair, my heart aching in my chest. “I thought we could have something great together.”

“But you wanted to see Lisa.”

“Yeah, to tell her about you, and that I was falling for you. I wanted to be a stand-up guy and do it face to face. What does any of this matter now? I don’t even know who you are, and now you probably destroyed our team’s reputation, painting them all with the same cruel brush you painted me. Fine, if you wanted to take me down, then take me down. None of the guys deserved it.” I turn my back to her.

“You don’t deserve it either.”

I spin back around. “What?”

I stare at Leeza as Sam clears her throat. “Okay everyone, listen up.” A crowd gathers as Sam raises her voice and starts reading the article, and my heart lodges somewhere in my throat. I knew the paper was out to get dirt on the team, but how could Leeza have done this? How could she have tricked me, even going so far as to sleep with me? I thought she wanted me...wanted us.

“Wait, what did you just say?” I ask Samantha, as her face turns a dark shade of red. Anger flares in her eyes as she crinkles the paper in her hand and glares at Leeza.

“What is this shit?”

“I told the truth,” Leeza says. “The guys on the team might sleep around, but what business is that of ours or anyone else’s? They’re grown men, and they’re not hurting anyone, and as far as I can see, every hook-up is consensual, just like ours was. He’s a good leader on and off his team and is leaving behind a good healthy culture for the rookies.” She catches Dane’s eye, and he nods and smiles.

“This is ridiculous,” Samantha practically shouts. I’m pretty sure steam is going to come out of Sam’s ears as she takes a step toward Leeza. “You know you’re fired, right?”

“I know.” Leeza lifts her chin. “I’m not going to falsify a story because you wanted revenge. If that’s the kind of journalism the Gazette expects from me, I don’t want any part of it. I’ll find work elsewhere.”

Everything inside me softens as Samantha storms out of Storm House. “Nothing to see here,” I say to the crowd, waving them off. As soon as they disperse, I close the distance between Leeza and me and take her hand in mine.

“Thank you.”

“I’m sorry, Rhys. I didn’t want to do the article. Samantha held the chief’s position over my head.”

“You really needed it, huh?”

“Yeah, kind of, but I’ll figure out something else.”

“You don’t have to.”

“What do you mean?”

“My aunt works at the Chronicle, here in the city. I’ll make some calls.”

Her eyes go wide. “I can’t believe you’d do that for me, after...”

I hold my hand out. “Hi, my name is Rhys Taylor, a hockey player who’s been drafted by the Boston Bulls. Want to grab a drink and get to know each other better, maybe even a kiss when the ball drops?”

Her laugh is light and joyous as she takes my hand. “Hi, I’m Leeza Hansen. I’m a budding journalist with morals and I’d love to grab that drink.”

I put my arm around her and she smiles up at me.

“Rhys, I want you to know the girl you chatted with on the app, the words I spoke, that was the real me.” She glances at the crinkled paper on the floor. “The words in my article, that’s me too. If you give me a chance, I’d like to show you through actions who I really am, too.”

“I think I’d love that,” I say, and cup her chin, lifting her lips to mine.

Seconds before our lips touch, she speaks. “You know what I think I’d like?”

“What?”

Her grin is playful, sexy downright naughty and I’m not sure what she’s about to tell me, I only know I’m going to like it.

“A little bit of cheddar,” she answers.

I laugh and scoop her up, taking her up the stairs to my dorm room. “Forget that, you’re getting a whole lot of cheddar.”

Thank you so much for reading Deal Breaker, a novella in my Scotia Storm's series. Be sure to check out the other books if you haven't already. It's a series but all books can be read as stand alone titles, but it's always fun to start from the beginning!

Happy reading, FOXY friends!

Love Cathryn

ALSO BY CATHRYN FOX

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Torn Between Two Brothers

Holiday Spirit

Unleashed

Knocking on Demon's Door

Web of Desire

ABOUT CATHRYN

New York Times and *USA today* Bestselling author, Cathryn is a wife, mom, sister, daughter, and friend. She loves dogs, sunny weather, anything chocolate (she never says no to a brownie) pizza and red wine. She has two teenagers who keep her busy with their never ending activities, and a husband who is convinced he can turn her into a mixed martial arts fan. Cathryn can never find balance in her life, is always trying to find time to go to the gym, can never keep up with emails, Facebook or Twitter and tries to write page-turning books that her readers will love.

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