



POWER

Play

LAURA MARQUEZ DIAMOND

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Columbus Mavericks

Laura Marquez Diamond

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Cover by: Olinart

Edited by: Lindsey Hinkel

Formatted by: No Sweat Graphics & Formatting

CONTENT *Note*

This book contains adult material, including explicit sex scenes, foul language, and references to predatory behavior directed at a minor.

ABOUT THE *Book*

MAEVE

Sergei Petrov is sex on legs—thick, muscular, hockey-player legs.

He's also a rich Russian flirt who can make women swoon in multiple languages.

The man strolled into my life the way he walks into every room he enters.

Like he belongs there. Like he *owns* it.

When I find myself in trouble, he uses his influence to save me from disaster. In return, I'm supposed to convince his posh family that we're engaged. I told him there's no way anyone would believe that we're together.

Of course, he doesn't listen to me. His enormous ego gets in the way of his hearing, after all.

The bigger problem is, the more time we spend together, the more I realize his ego isn't the only huge thing about him.

I meant his heart, guys!

(Although, yeah, that too.)

SERGEI

Maeve MacElroy is a badass auto mechanic with a mouth that haunts my dreams.

She also has a sharp tongue impressively fluent in sarcasm.

The woman walks into a room and it's like I'm watching an IMAX movie. She fills my vision. All I want to do is reach out and touch her.

Like she belongs with me. Like she's *mine*.

When my family harasses me about settling down, I convince Maeve to fake our engagement. She's terrible at it, to be honest.

But she's incredible at everything else. She has a kind heart, a fascinating mind, and a remarkable spirit.

Unfortunately, the more she learns of my reckless past, the less she believes in our future.

If only she used her pretty mouth for something other than denial.

I meant admitting she loves me!

(Although, yeah, that too.)

TABLE OF *Contents*

[Chapter 1: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 2: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 3: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 4: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 5: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 6: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 7: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 8: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 9: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 10: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 11: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 12: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 13: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 14: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 15: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 16: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 17: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 18: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 19: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 20: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 21: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 22: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 23: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 24: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 25: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 26: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 27: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 28: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 29: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 30: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 31: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 32: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 33: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 34: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 35: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 36: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 37: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 38: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 39: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 40: Sergei](#)

[Chapter 41: Maeve](#)

[Chapter 42: Sergei](#)

[Epilogue: Maeve](#)

[What's next for the Columbus Mavericks Series?](#)

[It Happened One Night Teaser: Chapter One: Abby.](#)

[It Happened One Night Teaser: Chapter Two: Elijah](#)

CHAPTER ONE

Maeve

My life is full of men.

I, Maeve MacElroy, am a sister to three older brothers, a daughter to the sweetest dad in the world, a proud aunt to the best kid I know, and the top mechanic at a shop full of guys. Even they can't deny this.

If only I won the lottery, everything would be perfect. The shop I co-own with my brother Matthew would have the funds for a much-needed expansion, my nephew wouldn't need to work multiple jobs to pay for college, and my dad could comfortably retire from his job as the ice technician of the Columbus Mavericks' arena.

Resurfacing the ice during the intermissions of NHL games is a fun and public part of his job. But there's so much more to it than what the crowd sees. Unfortunately, at his age, the sporadic late hours, the physical demands, and the constantly evolving technology are taking their toll.

Which is why I'm here after a Saturday night game helping him. When he called to see if I could walk him through the computer update over the phone, I volunteered to drop by instead. I had been keeping my friend Whitney company as she tended bar at the hotel tonight. It was hardly any trouble at all to drive a few minutes to the arena.

My dad knows the mechanisms of an ice resurfacer like the back of his hand. He's a genius with tangible mechanical issues. Computer tasks, however, boggle the guy.

Unfortunately, since the Mavericks purchased a state-of-the-art computer-regulated monstrosity, any lapse in updates tends to stop everything in its tracks. As in *literally* stops. Dad had finished the final pass on the ice and plugged in the machine to install an update. Now the damn thing won't start.

“It’s not reading the oxygen sensor and battery charge correctly. This will fix it,” I state while navigating a sequence of instructions more vague than any IKEA manual. While he is customarily a patient and trusting father, his current scowl indicates that he’s not convinced of my theory.

While we wait for the update to finish, I help him inspect and clean the contraption. Wheels, axles, bearings, and tires are some of the components that frequently require replacement. The various hydraulic parts also need regular checks for pressure and leaks. Keeping the five-mile-an-hour behemoth in optimal shape is not as easy as it looks.

“Where does a computer like to go dancing?” he asks out of nowhere. My groan is automatic yet resigned. It’s futile to stop him; Declan MacElroy loves his dad jokes.

“Where?”

“The disk-o. Get it?” He chuckles.

I don’t have the heart to tell him that no one has used disk drives in over a dozen years.

He sways slightly. “When was the last time you ate, Dad?”

“I had a bit of dinner.”

“Yeah? What did you have for dinner?”

“Don’t worry about me, Maeve. Let’s just get through the computer shenanigans.”

“Sounds to me like someone didn’t have dinner at all. Go to the staff room and see what catering might have put aside.” Sometimes, the arena kitchen fills the staff fridge. And there’s always a stash of fruit and granola bars.

“I’ve got this, Dad.”

“You know, I wasn’t hungry before you brought it up,” he grumbles.

“And *you* know the doctor said to keep your glucose level steady. These late-night games are affecting so mu—”

“OK, fine.” He cuts me off before I can get into it. “I’m going to find something to eat. Please, no more lectures about

healthy-heart habits and sugar levels. I'd rather not be reminded of how ancient I am."

"You're not ancient," I mumble regretfully. It isn't the first time I've crossed the line between helpful and overbearing.

Before he heads to the public corridor that leads to the staff room, my father puts his arm around me and lays an affectionate kiss on my temple. "I know you're looking out for me, sweet pea, because you love me. And I love you, too. Thanks for helping your old man tonight."

"No problem, Dad. Now go!" I play-nudge him.

As he shuffles away, my chest tightens a little. Dedication and hard work are essential to his job. But at his age and with his recent health troubles, it's time to think about the next chapter of his life.

I dab lube to the chassis while trying to keep sludge away from my favorite black sweater. It's the only one I've ever found that flatters my modest chest. If it wasn't a thrift store purchase, I would have gotten one in every color.

Out of nowhere, a woman screams. I stop working and hold my breath. Holy shit, is there someone getting hurt out there? Or did I imagine the scream?

It happens again. Except this time, the scream changes into giggles so jarringly high pitched it reminds me of a fork squeaking down a plate.

That's good, right? At least now I'm certain there isn't a damsel in distress who needs five-foot-two me with a lube spray to come to her rescue. I'm two inches taller than my normal height if you count the ankle boots I'm wearing, but still.

I put the can down to investigate. The sound came from the entrance farthest from the street. There aren't any guards watching that door. A key card would have gotten anyone in. Stretching my neck, I watch them turn a corner.

Two women in shimmering, short dresses flank a man. They're like cheap ornaments hanging off a work of art.

Because the tall, muscular man dressed in only a pair of tailored dress pants is the very picture of sculpted perfection.

His thick, pitch-black hair is styled to look expensive yet smutty. Like he got his hundred-dollar haircut while getting a blow job.

Wait, what?! That was awfully inappropriate, even for me.

My eyes are inevitably drawn to his wide shoulders. Without his shirt, they look mountainous. He has one arm over each giggling woman. Unfortunately, at this point, my brain has malfunctioned. Reason and decency can't stop me from gawking at the carved abdominal muscles rippling when he laughs.

He sees me, his amusement replaced by curiosity. "Hello there. Who are you here with, beautiful?"

My answer comes out as "Mu-huh?"

While I clear my throat, my gaze lifts to his intensely alert dark-brown eyes. He extricates himself from the two women, moving with grace and confidence like a hunter stalking toward his prey.

Toward me. I'm his prey.

It proves impossible to turn away or walk backward as he approaches. Suddenly, he's in my personal space. A mist of masculinity wafts over me, an aroma of sandalwood and whiskey with a hint of sweat. Just like that, I'm thinking about blow jobs again.

As if he's read my mind, the swaggering, shirtless stranger licks his lips. When he glides his tongue against the inside of his cheek, my face heats and I have to look away.

"You're welcome to join our party," he says.

The insinuation rattles me out of my initial shock. What kind of asshole propositions a woman who is minding her own business while updating the computer system of an ice resurfer? *This* asshole, that's who!

I glare at him and stiffen my back. "I don't think you're supposed to be here."

“I could say the same about you.” The smugness of his words is expected, yet the gentle cadence of his tone, as if he’s cautious about spooking me, is surprising.

“Actually, I’m here for a service call. As you can see”—I raise my thumb and point it over my shoulder—“you’re disturbing a very important job of—”

“Of lubing?” he interrupts with a snicker, eyes darting toward my discarded tools.

“If you leave right now, I won’t call security.” My confidence prevails although my lame notion of security is Dad having a snack in the staff room on the other side of the arena.

The man’s eyes narrow, their twinkle turning into dark pools of ink. They roam over my face and lower, making me acutely conscious of my fitted sweater.

“How do I know *you’re* not trespassing?” His voice is a gravelly whisper. “What if you’re damaging this priceless vehicle?” He gestures dramatically behind me. “Maybe I’m the one who should call security so that finally, after countless crimes against machines, the serial Zamboni sabotager can be locked away for good.”

“Serial Zamboni sabotager?” I guffaw. “That doesn’t even make sense, and not only because this model is made by a different company.”

“Where’s the locker room?” one of the women whines.

The other one follows up with, “I thought we were all showering together.”

The man’s features harden with annoyance. The megawatt smile he had a second ago flattens to a line. Without turning around, he states, “Night’s over, girls. My driver will drop you off wherever you want to go.”

Their whines of disappointment are short-lived when he lifts a finger with a flicking motion. The entire conversation occurs while he continues to stare down at me as if he truly intends to lock me away for good.

The clang of heels against the cement floor recedes before a door slams shut. His eyes haven't left my face and, because this man's sex appeal has mystical powers, I haven't looked away from him either.

I'm tempted to wipe that smirk off his face with the dirty rag balled in my fist.

"Wow, what a gentleman. It would serve you right if they asked to be dropped off on a beach in Mexico."

My idiotic snark breaks the staring competition. He chuckles like he can't believe how wacky this conversation is. We've got *that* in common.

My eyes lower to his chest, which is impossibly wide. Since I'm too short to see over his shoulder, all I can do is glance down. Impeccably fitted trousers provide the outline of an impressive bulge.

"Do you like what you see, beautiful?"

His smugness has reached absurd proportions. And why the hell is he so close? Obviously, I'm free to step back and create distance. But I grew up with older brothers. The only way to stake your space is to fight for it. I lift my empty hand to shove him away. He's as immovable as a boulder.

"Get over yourself, Poser. You're not even my type!" I gripe.

"Then why is your hand all over me? Perhaps you should reconsider what you think your type is."

True enough, my shoving palm failed in its mission. It is, instead, tingling with the sensation of muscles under the faint fuzz of dark hair. I harrumph in frustration before turning around and walking away.

Grabbing the lube bottle, I continue to work like my concentration will cure cancer.

"Poser?" He snorts while leaning on the machine, his arm lifted so a flexed bicep pops. "Sergei Petrov is no poser."

Ah, *that* guy. I don't watch hockey, but I know the player names of the team my father works for. My face remains

placid because the last thing this Mavericks star will get from me is confirmation that he's famous.

With my haughtiest of brows and wryest of grins, I tilt my chin to his raised arm.

“You made my point for me, Poser.” Running my eyes up and down his model-like posture, I continue, “Congratulations. You got at least one thing right tonight.”

CHAPTER TWO

Sergei

I had woken up this morning wondering when my life turned so... *skuchnyy*: dull and predictable.

I, Sergei Petrov, brother to a spoiled debutante, miscreant son to disapproving parents, and target of puck bunnies from coast to coast, am bored to death.

Even the fancy hotel I exited this morning had seemed dull and dreary. The woman I had left on the hotel bed was as depressingly indistinct and predictably clingy as the others. In fact, my lame attempt to distract myself tonight by agreeing to go out with *two* indistinct and clingy puck bunnies backfired. I had suggested we sneak into the arena because another hotel room, for another one-night stand, with another woman—even two women—had become tedious. *Skuchnyy*.

Only hockey keeps my attention these days. The Mavericks are on top of our division this year. If it wasn't for the nineteen teammates who push me on the ice rink and manage to be occasionally entertaining, I'd spend all my days napping and fucking. Even then, I might still be bored.

I'm far from bored right now, though. My conversation with this sharp-tongued spitfire is the farthest thing from dull and predictable.

Her full lips part slightly when she grins. It's so fucking sexy I'm tempted to put my finger on that puffy lower lip and strum it. Except I know for a fact she'd try to bite my finger off. Goddamn, that's sexy, too.

"I'm at a disadvantage. You know my name, but I have yet to meet the ice-resurfacing mechanic who works in secret, like she's one of Santa's little helpers. Like a fairy. I think that's what I'll call you. Pretty little fairy."

Feya. Moya feya, I think in my head, because the nickname sounds better in Russian.

“Because I’m tiny.” She scowls up at me. Her eyes are *kariye glaza*, or what Americans call hazel, I think. The black pupil at the center is surrounded by orange and yellow like there’s a sunflower inside her eye. The rest of the iris is brown with streaks of olive green.

“And pretty. Don’t forget that part.”

“Does this bullshit actually work on women, Poser?” she asks before moving to the other side of the machine.

“In my experience, yeah, it usually does.”

“I’m sure you have *experience*,” she utters derisively. “The number of women you slept with could probably populate a small country.”

“Are you saying you want to join the population of this imaginary country? No need to ask. All my borders are open to you,” I tease with wiggling brows.

A blush spreads from the top of her breasts to the roots of her hair. Even under the unflattering fluorescent lights, she’s glowing.

“Gross! And stop distracting me. I have work to do.”

“Let’s make a deal, pretty little fairy.”

“Stop calling me that!” She tries to match the harsh words with a straight face but fails. Her grin lingers.

“Give me your name and number and I’ll stop distracting you. Your digits for my silence.”

“I have a better idea,” she declares. “My silence for your departure!”

An unexpected laugh busts out of me. I understand attraction. Attraction mixed with genuine amusement is, however, an unusual cocktail.

Before we can resume this—whatever this is—her phone rings.

A crinkle mars her forehead. “Dad? Oh, my god!” Terror floods her features before she runs past me and shrieks, “911! Call 911!”

Adrenaline spikes, and it takes great effort to keep my hands steady enough to make the call. We’re running hard, making my voice jumpy. “Hi! I’m at Nationwide Arena. There’s an emergency.”

“Where in the arena are you located?” the 911 operator prompts.

We skid to a stop. The woman turns left and crashes into a door that leads to an eating area. This is not the usual player entrance, so I have to ask, “Where should they enter from? Where?!”

When I get her attention, she hollers, “One hundred level, south side.”

“A man has collapsed. He needs an ambulance,” I state before repeating our location. When the operator confirms the dispatch, I focus on the scene before me.

Moya feya, my pretty little fairy, is squatting on the floor beside a man propped against the wall. He’s conscious, although pale and in obvious pain. It’s Declan, the Mavericks’ ice guy. Things click into place as to why she’s here and who she’s with.

“Dad, is there an emergency kit in the staff room?”

He points across the room. I’m on it, frantically opening cupboards till I find the red bag.

“See if there’s aspirin in there!” she orders while filling a cup from the water dispenser. When she walks back to her father, her hands are shaking. Before she can drop the water all over the floor, I grab it and place it at Declan’s side. Ripping the emergency kit open, I feel around for anything resembling pills. There’s a handful of packets that each contain two aspirins. I tear a packet and spill the tablets into her open palm.

“Take this with a bit of water,” she says more calmly. “The ambulance will be here any minute.”

He leans his head against the wall, eyes focusing up and on me. “Why are you naked, Sergei?”

Dammit, my shirt is at the back of the car after those girls stripped me down. Her eyes do that thing again—openly roam over my torso before shutting herself off.

“I’ll make sure they can find us,” is my answer. Jogging to the nearest entrance at the south side, I open the door for the paramedics.

Within minutes, security is alerted and a medical team rolls in. Voices carry from inside the room, ensuring Declan’s vital signs are stable enough for safe transport. When people emerge from the room, she’s holding her father’s hand while walking beside the stretcher. I snag her attention.

“Are you riding in the ambulance?”

She nods.

“Where’s your car? I’ll bring it to you.”

We head outside, still following the patient. The early spring evening chills my sweaty back.

“No, it’s fine. I’ll worry about that tomorrow,” she says with a shake of her head and unfocused eyes.

“Give me your keys. I’ll park your car at the hospital in case you need to get him something from home.”

They’re loading Declan. She considers the option and hands me a set of keys. “It’s the red Fiat parked at the back lot by the garage entrance.”

“Of course you drive a tiny car, little fairy,” I tease to cheer her up.

She blinks slowly, the ambulance’s lights gliding over her pretty face.

“Thank you, Sergei,” she says earnestly. And then she’s gone.

I grab a random shirt from the locker room before heading to the hospital. It's tight, short, and makes my arms look like sausages. It'll have to do. With my legs cramped in the miniature version of a vehicle, I'm reminded to text my driver to pick me up at the hospital and not the arena.

While I'm navigating the parking garage, my agent calls. "Hey, Chris," I answer. "This is late for a check-in, even for you." It's past midnight.

"Why are there pictures of you outside the arena in the middle of an emergency and without a shirt?"

"How the hell would that get to you? And this quickly?" Sometimes I think my agent has a drone following me everywhere.

"You pay me to know these things. Fill me in on the details."

I give him the scoop while walking to the emergency wing.

"So, you saved the guy's life," he announces.

"What?!" I screech to a halt. "That's not at all what I said."

"You're the one who called the ambulance and found the medication. How is that not saving his life?"

"Chris, stop the bullshit."

"There isn't a better time to change the narrative about you, Sergei. You're renegotiating your contract at the end of the season. Putting you in front of the news as a hero instead of a fuckboy would go a long way."

"No." My voice is firm. "I can't believe you'd suggest that."

Chris is highly regarded in the business for his cutthroat approach to everything. This is not business, though. Thinking about Declan, helpless on the floor, with his daughter hovering in stress, awakens a dormant protectiveness in me. I don't want Chris anywhere near this situation.

"Using a guy's heart attack to get positive attention is disgusting. I gotta go."

“Whatever you say, buddy,” he claims before hanging up.

The waiting room is crowded. It takes mere seconds to hone in on the woman with wavy auburn hair and a black sweater. She’s hunched in a corner, paperwork on her lap and a phone against her ear. I wait for her to finish the call before approaching.

“Hey,” I greet softly. “How’s Declan?”

“He’s stable. I stepped out to talk to my brothers, but I’ll head back in a minute. I’m glad you found me.” The words are offered with a tired smile.

“I couldn’t miss you if I tried.”

“And I barely recognized you with a shirt,” she blurts.

With wide hazel eyes, she slams her hand over her mouth. Speaking between her censoring fingers, she mumbles. “I’m sorry. Jesus, I can’t even be nice to the guy who helped my dad.”

I shrug. “You’re funny. I think that’s nice.”

“Thanks for bringing my car. I bet it fit as well as the shirt.” She squeezes her eyes and tilts her head back like she’s lost patience with herself. I get a tantalizing view of a long, smooth neck.

“I’m done teasing, I promise. The more stressed I am, the sharper my tongue. Where’d you park my car?”

“I texted you the location,” I answer with a sly grin. “Oh wait, I don’t have your number. Or your name.”

“Maeve. It’s Maeve.” When she says it, there’s a slight exhale. It’s not a name I’ve heard frequently, so it sounds exotic and breathy. “Where’s my car, please?”

“Maeve.” I focus on the sound and try not to get distracted by a slight pout that makes her lips even fuller. “I want to know how he’s doing as soon as you receive solid news. Give me your number.”

She puts her hand out, palm up. Our fingers graze when I give her my phone into which she texts her number. Her own

phone rings to confirm the receipt.

“Can I get you anything?” I know, instinctively, that it doesn’t matter how stressed she is, Maeve won’t expect help or ask me to stay. Unlike every other woman I’ve interacted with lately, she wants to get rid of me instead of cling to me.

Still, it doesn’t feel right to leave her in an emergency room to deal with her father’s heart attack alone. I’m often a jerk, but rarely a monster.

“My family’s two minutes from barreling through that door and making a ruckus. You don’t want to be around for it.” Despite her worried tone, a ghost of a smile softens her features.

“They sound entertaining.”

“That’s one way to put it,” she says before reaching out and lightly placing a hand on my forearm. “Thanks, Sergei. For everything.”

“It was nothing. You’re the one who acted quickly.”

I cringe at the memory of Chris yapping about me saving Declan. A flash memory of Maeve bursting into the room and dropping to the floor to comfort her father hits me. For some reason, it makes me feel... alone.

Her fingers contract for a friendly squeeze. I take advantage of the contact to close our distance. Her aroma—the hint of fruity shampoo mingling with the muskiness of machinery—is like all her other contradictions: delicate yet fierce, beautiful yet sharp, subtle yet inexplicably overwhelming.

Maeve steps back. “I’ll see you around, Poser,” she quips before disappearing behind swinging doors.

CHAPTER THREE

Maeve

I'm listening to the rest of the doctor's diagnosis from the corner of Dad's hospital room. The words *heart bypass surgery* were a punch in the gut. I stumbled back and had to hold the wall to keep myself up.

My brother Aiden and his wife Noeleen stand by the bed and nod their heads in agreement with Dr. Wu. Staying in the hospital all night has left me drained, anxious, and lightheaded. I'm grateful someone else is here, making note of the details.

"The good news is this procedure has a very high success rate. Your father is an ideal candidate for a minimally invasive approach using robotics and video imaging instead of an open-chest surgery. The recovery is much faster."

Aiden asks a few questions and I take in snippets of information. Dad will be discharged tomorrow on a strict pre-surgery protocol for the next ten to fourteen days.

"If it's urgent for him to have the operation, why wait two weeks?" My voice is scratchy because my mouth is so dry.

The doctor, who is far too young to be a cardiologist if you ask me, answers. "We'll have to coordinate with a few people, including the anesthesiology team and the post-surgery care. He'll be staying at the hospital for as long as a week, depending on circumstances."

And then the surgeon turns to me completely, seeming to read the concern on my face. "If I thought there was any risk to waiting, any at all, we would proceed. I understand your concern, but implementing a plan in the near future is most beneficial, in this case."

"Hey, sweet pea, what happens when you steal someone's heart?" We all jump because we thought Dad was sleeping.

Noeleen moves to the side and gestures for me to approach the bed. I do, trying to wipe the worry from my face.

“What?” I croak. I don’t feel like laughing at any jokes.

“You get cardiac arrested.”

We all snicker because he’s the sweetest and silliest dad and I can’t imagine living in a world where... Stop. My head cannot go there.

This is a common surgery and he’s going to be fine. I kiss my dad’s forehead and hold his icy hands.

“Can you do me a favor, sweet pea?”

“Anything, Dad.”

“Has anyone told the Mavericks?” He’s waiting for my reply attentively, barely blinking.

“Matthew took care of calling them this morning,” Aiden answers.

“Good, good. And did you finish the download or update or whatever?” His tone seeps apprehension. It takes everything not to show my frustration that he cares so much about that damn job when what he needs to do is focus on his health.

“It’ll be fine, Dad. I’ll check with the arena manager today,” I promise.

“It needs to be ready tomorrow night. They can run with one machine today, but they’ll need two for the game.”

“I know. Don’t worry about it. Please.” I squeeze his hand and he squeezes back.

“Delivery for Mr. Declan MacElroy.” A young woman peeks into the room, holding an arrangement of roses.

“My secret admirers are coming out of the woodwork,” Dad says with a wink at the woman. His eyes crinkle with delight.

She places the flowers by the window. “Do you want the card?”

“I’m sure it’s from the Mavericks,” I say apologetically to the cardiologist, whose time shouldn’t be spent listening to get-well messages.

He nods curtly before returning to the details of bypass surgery. “You’ll be undergoing various tests, x-rays and EKGs, that sort of thing...” He keeps going but I’m barely keeping up. Something about no stress, no drinking, no smoking.

I wonder how many times he’ll do this today: explain the procedure to families with just the right amount of authority and care. He’s good at it, I decide. This must mean he’s a great surgeon, right? He’s not too young for the job at all! In fact, he is the perfect age. He’s one of the best, I’m sure. Really, I am.

“How long before I can return to work?” Dad asks and I can’t help flinching in annoyance.

“You’ll be in the hospital for about a week, give or take. Depending on your recovery. Then there’s important post-surgery rehabilitation to schedule. I’d say taking a leave of absence for a few months is the best approach.”

The light dims from my father’s eyes and I almost feel bad. Almost. Because if this isn’t a sign that he should retire, what is?

Once the doctor leaves, my sister-in-law takes the card and hands it to Dad. He opens it and laughs, muttering, “Russian goon.”

“What’s so funny?” Aiden asks, craning his neck to peek at the card.

Dad reads the message out loud. “Give a rose or two to every pretty nurse that comes around. Let me know when you need more. Sergei.”

As if he’s watching the scene unfold, Sergei’s text hits my phone with perfect timing.

Poser: How is he?

Me: Busy handing out roses.

Poser: **What did the doctor say?**

Me: **Dad will come home tomorrow. Everything is well so no need to worry. Thanks for the flowers. I gotta go.**

I'm in no rush to give health details to strangers. It doesn't matter how much concern Sergei expresses; it's not my place to disclose Dad's condition.

"Was that him?" my dad asks, a deep trench between his brows. "When did you and Sergei become such close friends?"

"Mu-huh?" is my brilliant response.

"Why was he with you last night?" Dad asks with narrowed eyes.

"Does Maeve have a hockey boyfriend?" Noeleen perks up. She puts her hands together like she's saying a prayer. Looking at the ceiling, she exclaims, "Finally! It pays off for Dad to work with the Mavericks."

Aiden gives his wife the side-eye. "Sergei *Petrov*?" He states the last name unnecessarily. It's not like the team has a bunch of hot Russians named Sergei.

"That guy is with a different super model every other night," Aiden grumbles.

"So what? Maeve is as pretty as any super model," Noeleen says coyly. "Even if she is a shorty and has a weird cowlick in her hair that she won't let me fix."

She's a few inches taller, so she easily reaches the back of my head. Noeleen points accusingly at the cause of my wavy and unruly hair. I swat her hand away.

My sister-in-law is a beautician who repeatedly bugs me about getting a Brazilian blowout. No, thank you. Any time I think of "Brazilian" as a treatment, it's about removing hair and not straightening it.

"He's always reminded me of that guy she dated in high school. Colin?" Dad muses. I do not know who he's talking

about.

“Geoff,” Aiden corrects him. “You’re right. They have the same cocky look. Except Sergei always has a woman hanging on his arm.”

“He’s an outstanding hockey player.” Dad picks up where my brother left off. “But even his teammates will tell you, the guy has a terrible reputation.”

“He’s one of those cocky *bad* boys, is he? Clearly Maeve has a type,” Noeleen joins the conversation.

The phrasing “has a type” jars me.

“Hello! I’m right here, guys. I’d appreciate it if you didn’t talk about me like I’m a social experiment with deplorable taste in men. At least not while I’m in the room.”

They stare at me expectantly.

“What? I met him yesterday and he jumped to help when Dad called. He texted to ask how Dad’s feeling, that’s all.” If my eyes could roll further into the back of my head, they’d be stuck there.

“Who did you meet yesterday?” my brother Matthew asks from the doorway.

“Sergei Petrov,” all three of my family members answer in unison.

“Who did you leave in charge of the shop?” I ask, steering the conversation to something useful.

“Bruno’s got it. I’ll stay with Dad if you want to take a break.”

I rub the back of my neck and see the coffee stains on my once favorite sweater. “Yeah, I’ll be back in a few hours.” Giving everyone a quick hug, I make my way out.

“Before I forget, the Mavericks want to talk to you,” Matthew says by the door, for my ears only.

“Dad should not be on any work call,” I bark, finally letting my annoyance show.

“Not him. They want to talk to *you*. Read my text.”

“I know the arena manager’s number,” I say. A flicker of uncertainty passes over Matthew’s features.

“Check my text,” he repeats before strolling into the room.

I read the text while walking to my car using Sergei’s instructions on the parking location.

Matt the Brat: The Mavericks human resources office was expecting my call. They reviewed the security report last night and want you to meet them as soon as you can. Something about a lawyer.

Me: Lawyer? Any idea what this could be about?

Matt the Brat: Nope.

Me: What if I was getting arrested?

He doesn’t text back. I get in my car and shoot him another text.

Me: I know that’s dramatic. Indulge me. This can’t be good, right?

Matt the Brat: No one is getting arrested. Don’t be silly. But just in case, better you than me.

Someone remind me why I keep him around.

CHAPTER FOUR

Sergei

The internet is useless.

Every hockey-related or Columbus-linked news outlet is running the ridiculous story that I saved Declan MacElroy's life when he had a heart attack at the arena premises on Saturday night. Chris is dragging his feet on removing the media coverage. He claims it will go away eventually.

"I'm not paying you for eventually, Chris," I had complained. "Get that shit down." It could not be erased fast enough.

Meanwhile, when I google Maeve MacElroy, all I get are random Instagram profiles. None of them feature the auburn-haired spitfire whose sunflower eyes I can't stop thinking about. The same woman who refuses to return my progressively desperate texts.

1:12 p.m., Sunday: If you read that bullshit about me saving Declan's life, I had nothing to do with it. My agent exaggerated the events and is beefing up my image with the team. Call me so I can explain.

3:30 p.m., Sunday: I'm so fucking sorry your dad got dragged into it. I'll fix it.

3:45 p.m., Sunday: If you don't know what I'm talking about, no worries. I'll have everything removed as soon as possible.

7:00 p.m., Sunday: We've sent corrections to all the outlets we've identified. There's a cease and desist for anyone who names your dad. His health should never have been public knowledge. I'm really fucking sorry, Maeve.

7:10 p.m., Sunday: **Can you tell him I'm sorry? Is he well enough for visitors?**

That last one remains undelivered. She blocked me. She. Blocked. Me. And now I have no other way of reaching her.

Goddamn, the internet is useless.

During morning skate on Monday, I feel the inquiring eyes of my teammates. Even if the story was pulled, the entire Mavericks organization got a whiff of it. Everyone is saying nice things about how great Declan is and how awesome it was that I was there for him. No one believes me when I tell them it's all fake news.

"Humility is not a look you've ever worn," Dexter, the Mavericks captain, says. "Don't start now."

"For fuck's sake, I'm not goddamn humble. I'm telling you I was just *there*, saving absolutely nobody!"

Instead of listening to me, the guys pat me on the back and offer sympathetic smiles. They're treating me like a nice guy instead of an asshole. I am very uncomfortable with this change.

When practice ends, I don't grab food with the team. Instead, I race to my penthouse to take my sister's video call privately in my home office.

The final arrangements for her debutante ball are underway. It's being held at the Lake Shore Country Club, an old and uptight establishment in one of the oldest and most uptight states—Connecticut. If I don't calm Ana down, she will kill our mother. That was her threat when she texted me to arrange this emergency video call.

"Sergei, you look terrible! Are you not using the gold eye pads I sent you?"

Anastasia Johnson Petrov considers it her responsibility to keep everyone around her as beautiful as possible. It's a typical pastime for a seventeen-year-old girl whose father's

contacts include Russian oligarchs and whose mother comes from one of the oldest families in New England.

They're my parents, too, but that's not a fact or a condition I put much stake on. Not since I decided to be a professional hockey player.

Hockey itself isn't the point of contention. It's the fact that I've turned it into a job, grinding it out in the NHL like all the other athletes whose parents' net worth isn't in the millions, that shames my father and upsets my mother.

"You, on the other hand, look radiant. How are things, *mladshaya sestra*?" Little sister.

It's one of the few Russian terms she knows because, being nine years younger than me, she had a very different upbringing. When I was a child, we all lived in Moscow. My mother stuck to it for a while but insisted that her second child would be raised close to *her* home.

So began the great divide. Ana and our mother moved to Connecticut while I stayed with our father in Moscow. Mr. and Mrs. Petrov aren't officially divorced, yet their lives are worlds apart. The family arranged tepid reunions during the holidays. Ana and I spent a portion of our summers together.

Although we didn't have a normal family life, Ana will always be my little sister. Spoiled rotten and occasionally annoying, she remains the only person I truly consider my responsibility. One of the many benefits of being drafted to the NHL is living on the same continent as her for once.

"I already agreed to wear an ugly outfit with white gloves and the most unflattering bodice, but now Mother won't let me dance with my boyfriend!"

"You have a boyfriend?"

"I told you about Billy last month. You never listen to me, Sergei!" She lands her chin on a fist and rolls her eyes in a pose of weariness.

"Did you?" I have no memory of this conversation and, frankly, it's likely Ana is bullshitting. Making me feel neglectful is how she gets me to take her side. I should tell her

it's unnecessary. I'll always take her side in an argument against our parents.

"I'm supposed to dance with a loser named Sheldon Sullivan. Have you ever heard such a ridiculous name?"

"Yeah, that's a pretty stupid name."

"Will you talk to her, Sergei? Please? Billy will learn all the waltzes she needs him to learn. He would look so good in a tux. Unlike Sheldon Sullivan, who can't even find his own date! Ugh!"

"I'll talk to her."

She beams and flutters her eyelashes before sitting up suddenly, as if she remembered something.

"Is it true that you saved a man at the arena?" My sister sounds scandalized.

"Where did you hear about that?" As far as I know, the news never reached mainstream media and remained confined to hockey outlets and Columbus gossip.

"My friend Caroline told me. You know she's obsessed with you. Her computer pings every time your name comes up on the internet."

"That's rather terrifying."

"Don't underestimate the stalking power of a seventeen-year-old girl. Anyway, tell me what happened! How does it feel to be a hero?"

"I'm not a hero. I was in the arena with a..." *What do you call a woman you're not sleeping with?* "A friend," I decide.

"Her father is the arena ice technician. He called her when he collapsed, and we both made sure the ambulance got to him on time. I made a phone call and everyone is making a big deal of it."

"The article made you sound like an upright citizen. I nearly puked!"

"Rest assured, I remain an unrepentant delinquent."

“Good. I’m so excited to see you! How long will you stay for my party?”

“If I miss one practice, I’ll be in town for two days.” Her debutante ball is in a couple of weeks. Ana insisted on everyone consulting me for the hockey schedule before securing the date.

“Who are you bringing?”

“Do I have to bring a date?” I ask.

“If you come alone, I can’t guarantee Caroline won’t maul you.”

“You might consider changing your friends, Ana.”

“Are you kidding me? Maulers make the best kind of friends!”

CHAPTER FIVE

Maeve

I need a day between Sunday and Monday. I don't remember where I heard that insightful wish, but it's never been truer than at this very moment.

My head feels like a construction worker has been drilling into one ear to make a hole straight across. Unfortunately, said drill gets stuck in the middle, so that hardworking laborer has to keep grinding into my skull. Just what I need on this fine Monday morning.

Aiden and I sit across from the arena facilities manager (our dad's boss), the Mavericks human resources manager (apparently everyone's boss), and two lawyers who look like they're attached to their chairs with poles up their asses.

"We've been coming to the arena with Dad for years!" Aiden bursts out.

It didn't take long to understand why I was summoned. The security reports showed my unauthorized presence in the facilities. Trying to figure out why they're making such a big deal out of it is doing wonders for my headache. Not.

"What my brother is saying is that our dad has worked here for almost twenty years. The new owners took possession, what, five years ago?"

"Seven," the arena facilities manager, Mildred Jennings, corrects me.

She's in a pickle. Everyone knows Declan MacElroy occupies a semi-special status in the arena as one of its oldest employees and as a generally beloved guy. She's a smart lady. Turning her back on any of Dad's mild rule bending—like inviting his grandson to watch important games or having me around when he needs help with the ice resurfacer—is a form

of accommodation. If Mildred never reprimanded Dad, it's because she's practical, not ignorant.

"We're sorry to bring you here at such a trying time," the facilities manager says. "How is Declan?"

"He's recovering from a heart attack without us beside him. Thanks for asking," Aiden answers rudely.

"What's going on, Mildred?" I eke out. This needs to wrap up as soon as possible.

"Mr. Tyson Galvan and the legal team need to iron out some details."

The three suited stooges all touch their ties like it's an activation switch for corporate drivel.

"Call me Tyson," he says. "Please send our heartfelt concern for your father. We won't keep you for very long. In fact, it is Ms. MacElroy, um, Maeve, who we hoped would lend us a hand."

"Huh?" Aiden and I ask at the same time.

"Lend you a hand with what?" I'm not sure if *lend us a hand* is corporate speech for *arrest her for trespassing*.

"The only reasons our attorneys are here is to speed up the paperwork if we need to process a workplace injury and," he pauses, which is good because I'm still trying to understand what the hell is going on, "and your official employment."

He's looking at me. Why is he looking at me?

"Why are you looking at me?"

"You were at the premises. In order to be within compliance, we'll have to put you down as a contingent employee. Believe it or not, we called this meeting to ensure there's no trouble for your father and there's an official reason, in the books, for your presence that night."

"You make it sound like a crime scene."

"Just dotting the I's and crossing the T's."

“Sure, if that’s best for Dad then dot those I’s and whatever,” I say, resigned to the bureaucracy.

“We’re glad you agree.”

“There’s one more thing,” Mildred says with an apologetic grimace. “We need you to actually work. At least for a bit, until we find a replacement.”

“Our dad is taking a leave of absence. He’s not going to be happy with just any replacement,” Aiden says suspiciously.

“Exactly,” Mildred agrees good-naturedly. I’m missing something.

“Back up. You want me to work till there’s a replacement. This is a full-time job. I already have one of those. In fact, as the co-owner of a garage, I have the equivalent of ten jobs.”

“We wouldn’t need you to take over or anything. Just help us transition till we find a replacement,” Mildred says.

“Starting tonight,” Tyson adds.

“I’ll do it,” Aiden says. “Dad will want Maeve around when he goes home tonight.”

We are a tight-knit family, but no one bothers to contest the fact that Dad and I are super close. We literally do errands together.

Aiden is right about me wanting to be with Dad the first night he’s back from the hospital. He still lives in the bungalow we all grew up in, about fifteen minutes from my apartment. But Aiden is wrong about one thing. There’s no way he can take my place. He has no idea how this machine is different from the previous models. Unless you regularly work on the computer mechanisms of cars, it would be a steep learning curve. Besides, I was basically doing it for free anyway.

“So, like show up on game nights till you train the official ice tech?”

“It would be two nights this week and then the team is out of town, which is when we’ll decide on a replacement. A temporary one,” Mildred says.

This is a major inconvenience. However, if I think about what Dad would want, there's no doubt he would find some comfort in knowing I'm around. He wouldn't trust just anyone with his machines.

"Yeah, I can help this week."

"What are you paying her?" Aiden asks. "A consultation fee is much higher than an employee's salary."

I knew I brought him here for a reason.

"We're prepared to pay your father's overtime salary, which is at the rate of time and a half."

"That's fine," I say before Aiden gets carried away with his *show me the money* act. "I'll do it."

It's just tweaking the machine a few times this week. Nothing too out of the ordinary, right?

Wrong.

CHAPTER SIX

Sergei

We're in the first intermission of what is turning out to be a crappy game. For us, I mean. Edmonton is looking fresh and fast out there. We, however, are skating with cement feet.

Randi is on the net tonight. He's our second goalie, but that's no excuse. We are a professional hockey team and simply not performing like one.

"I've seen you defend before," Coach Zach begins with a snarl. "I know it's fucking possible. So, what the hell are you doing out there, huh? If that's how you think the game is played, if that's all the juice you have, I've got news for you. We will get killed tonight. Is that what you want?"

"No, Coach," we all mumble half-heartedly.

"If that's all you've got, pack it up." He's screaming now, his face beet red, saliva flying. This is why we put the rookies closest to the front.

"Do you have what it takes to wear a Mavericks uniform? Prove you fucking deserve to be here! Now let's show those motherfuckers who this house belongs to!"

Coach Zach knows how to turn a group of swaggering athletes into moping grumps. His wrath is justified. I'm a first-round draft pick and finalist for the Norris trophy for the best defenseman last year. I take responsibility for our zero-to-three deficit.

The swell of cheers from the arena reaches us. Bowed heads in the locker room perk up because it's unusual to have a ruckus when the players aren't even on the ice. Maybe the five-year-olds are playing out there. That usually gets everyone riled up, all that cuteness. Nothing cute is happening here, though.

The rest of the intermission is spent in silence, the sound of tape wrapping around blades like a morbid soundtrack: rip, pause, rip, pause, rip.

Everyone is rethinking each and every terrible move from the first period. In a sport as fast as hockey, you learn from your mistakes in hindsight. There's little room for thought or doubt when on the ice. Instincts have to take over. Muscle memory and all that. The hours of practice pay off or prove useless. I love that about the game: it demands one hundred percent of your attention in the present.

I close my eyes and remember the last goal with slow precision. The centerman shouldn't have entered the zone with that much speed. Can't fight for the puck in front of the goalie like a scrambling amateur. I need to slow things down *before* anyone even enters the offensive zone.

I imagine an Edmonton player's face pressed against the plexiglass boards and it warms my heart. Smashed offensive players are to me what puppies and rainbows are to most people: the source of never-ending delight.

I open my eyes, fired up for the second period, when two locker room staffers walk in front of me. They're gathering dirty towels and discarded equipment. I catch the tail end of their conversation.

"It's not that unusual. My neighborhood rink has a woman in charge of the ice."

"But is she that hot?"

"Nah. She's older than my mom." They cackle.

The hair at the back of my neck prickles. "What are you guys talking about?" I'm looking down at them from my elevated height on skates, daring them to confirm my suspicion.

"Hey there, Sergei. We've got a new Zamboni driver. They put her on the jumbotron and the crowd went nuts."

"*Her?*" I say so vehemently one of them whips his head back like I smacked him.

“Yeah, it’s—”

I don’t let him finish before stomping out of the locker room, mumbling, “It’s not a Zamboni,” to no one.

The thought of Maeve in the building, taking over her dad’s job and turning the crowd rowdy, is like an ignition for my internal engine. Hoping she’s watching me right now is the boost I need to play my best.

Hoping? Nah, she is watching. She’s definitely watching.

Crash. I land a solid hit on Connor Parker, one of the fastest forwards in the league. His face is pressed flat, a fan’s palm smacking on the other side of the plexiglass.

“Fucking goon,” he hisses, while stumbling toward his bench. Wimp. What do you expect from a guy with two first names?

He’s replaced by the big man on the bench: Mijat Brđanin Amomčilo. Everyone calls him MBA because Serbians have unnecessarily complicated names and because he’s famously dimwitted. Even jocks are capable of irony.

My teammates keep the puck moving, but MBA is tracking my every move, waiting for me to get to a corner so he can give me a taste of my own medicine, namely the flavor of the arena boards when my face is smashed against it. He’ll have to catch me first.

Dex, our captain, sets up behind our goalie to gain speed and leaves me with a drop pass. It only takes two long strides to get to the offensive zone. Dumping the puck around the boards, I wait for our power forward to make his move.

I circle MBA, whose only job is to keep me from the zone. “You have a better chance of catching me if you take a picture,” I mock him.

He grunts and swings his stick against my calves. For a split second, I consider falling hard to sell the penalty. But there’s a play developing at the corner. Lance fights hard against two guys practically sitting on him. He shoves the puck out of the rumble, straight to me at the blue line. There’s

no hesitation. I unleash a slap shot with over two hundred pounds of weight behind it.

Instead of watching rubber rip past the goalie, I see our captain drop like someone shot him. Fuck, fuck, fuck. My hundred miles an hour shot hit Dex who was creating a screen to distract the goalie. He tried to avoid the puck by turning sideways. Unfortunately, the puck still managed to get him on the leg.

By the time the whistle blows to stop the play, I'm close enough to see his face reddened and his eyes glazed.

"Dex, fuck, I'm—"

"Don't say it asshole," my captain interrupts. "Wrong place, wrong time, that's all."

The trainer rushes over to give his leg a cursory inspection. "I'm ordering a stretcher."

"No. I've never been rolled out of the ice, and I never will," Dex says. "Get me up, Sergei."

I do as he says, supporting his upper body as he scrambles to his feet. Rather, as he scrambles to his one functional leg. He can't be putting any weight on the busted one. I'm on the injured side, Dex's arms slung over my and the trainer's shoulders as we move across the ice.

Vaguely, the crowd's appreciative claps reach my ears. My heart is pounding with stress and my stomach twists like a pretzel. We all know the risks. Injuries are part of the roughest game in professional sports. The league allows fights, for god's sake. But it doesn't make an injury any less awful, especially when you're the one who caused it.

The trainers take charge once we get to the bench. Before he leaves, Dex gives me a wink. "The next slap shot is going in, I fucking know it."

"That's right, Dex. The next one's going in."

CHAPTER SEVEN

Maeve

The second intermission is even more of a shit show.

When my face was projected on the jumbotron during the first resurfacing pass, I thought it was the height of embarrassment. Nope. The marketing folks found me in the garage and said they thought it would be cute if I put my hair down and wave at the crowd.

Are they kidding? What am I, a damn prom queen?

“Fuck off” was at the tip of my tongue, but these people know my dad. Even if he’s on his way to retirement, I don’t want there to be any tarnishing of his record with the arena. Telling people to fuck off, in my extensive experience, usually leads to a less-than-stellar impression.

So, instead, I say, “no thanks” and find a big jacket in my dad’s locker. Next time I come here, I’ll be wearing a baseball cap and my coveralls from the garage instead of a sweater and leggings.

In my garage, I’m one of the guys. Sure, customers give a little side-eye toward the short woman running the show. They get over it real fast when I fix their cars, though.

Here? I might as well be one of the crop-topped girls who shovel shaved ice from the corners. Don’t get me wrong. They’re cheerful and cute and fun. But a twenty-eight-year-old professional business owner with more repair hours than most mechanics in the city, they are not.

Tell that to the guy riding beside me. The Mavericks have a tradition of inviting fans to sit on the ice resurfacer making its rounds. Usually, the passengers are kids on their birthdays or attendees who win a lottery. Tonight, unfortunately, my companion is the head of the Mavericks fan base. He comes with a massive flag and a loud mouth.

He's obnoxious, screaming my ear off, raising his flag, and pumping a fist. I keep my lines straight and my head down throughout the ordeal. When the crowd has enough of him, he turns his attention to me.

"I think you should show me your license, sweetheart, for driving all the guys in the arena crazy."

"Are you kidding me right now?" I say to the universe because I did not sign up for this.

Abruptly, the music lowers and the announcer bellows, "Mavericks fans, it's time for tonight's kiss cam!"

I keep my head down, determined to schedule someone else for the Wednesday game. Or get Aiden to take my place, like he'd offered.

"It's us! It's us!" the rabid fan screams even louder. "The kiss cam! It's us!" The second I realize he's leaning toward me, everything speeds up. A disgusting wet blob touches my face, the smell of stale beer making my eyes water.

There's no time for thought. As the youngest of four siblings and the only girl, I learned how to compensate for being the smallest kid in a room. Rough play has ingrained swift and definitive instincts. I go for the nose. In a flash, I've pivoted my waist slightly for a solid torque, lift my elbow, and make contact.

The screech of a big man in pain sounds like any other screech: high pitched and hair-raising. "You broke my nose, you fucking bitch!"

"I didn't mean to," I screech back. If he's expecting an apology, he's going to wait for a very long time.

He's swearing and stomping and sort of sobbing. I finish the last section—because c'mon he might as well wait for me to complete the job—before exiting.

A small crowd awaits in the corridor, eyes wide and mouths agape. His buddies swarm around him. They make room for a medic who pulls him aside to sit down. While his face is being wiped of blood, the guy keeps his accusing eyes on me.

“Holy shit, Maeve. That’s going on ESPN for sure!” Ian announces. He’s the other driver. Lucky him, a retired army officer was his passenger. To clarify his statement, Ian shows me his phone. I see a video of the jumbotron and finally understand the stupid expression “watching a train wreck.”

The guy’s mouth is moving while he’s pointing up. My profile reveals narrowed eyes and a steel jaw, completely unresponsive. And then he leers in my direction, his hand touching my back and his neck extended. Wet, puckered lips land at the side of my mouth. The sight of it makes me heave.

I shove Ian’s phone against his chest. “I was there.”

“Maeve, can you follow me, please?” Mildred states what is obviously not a question. We walk away from the bustle and down a hallway. After entering her office, she closes the door with her back to me.

“Mildred, look, I know it was very unprofessional of me to injure him, but you saw what happened, right?”

The arena manager turns around, looks me square on the face, and busts out a loud laugh. She doesn’t stop for a full minute, snorting and cackling so hard she can’t speak.

Should I be laughing, too? Or calling a mental health expert?

“Oh, god, that was...” she starts before taking a deep breath and wiping her eyes. Shaking her head like she’s recalibrating her face into the appropriate shape, Mildred speaks.

“That was long overdue. Michael Neill has been a pain in the ass to the staff and the players. He’s the son of one of our big sponsors and gets all kinds of special access. It’s about time he had his nose broken.”

I don’t immediately process her words, but when I do, relief floods my veins. “Oh, good. Does that mean I won’t get into trouble?”

“Can’t say for sure. He’s probably making a fuss, complaining to people as we speak. Let me get David on the phone. He’s in the owner’s box tonight.”

“David?”

“You met him this morning. He’s one of the lawyers.”

“Oh, right!” I have no idea which one she means. “Thanks for having my back, Mildred.”

“Of course. He’s in the wrong and there’s no convincing anyone otherwise. I hope your dad isn’t upset about the situation. How is he doing?”

“Oh! My phone!” It’s been on do-not-disturb the whole time.

When I fire it up, a slew of notifications floods the screen. I bypass everything and call my dad. The last thing he needs is to get stressed or angry on my behalf.

“Maeve!” he answers. “Are you OK?”

“Dad, hey, you saw it?”

“They’re running it on repeat on every sports channel.”

“Damn it. I’m sorry, Dad.”

“Sorry? There’s no reason for you to apologize! You know who is going to be sorry? That goddamn son of a—”

“Dad, relax.” Aiden’s voice filters in from the background.

“Please don’t get upset,” I say. “And you’re right; I’m not sorry. He was an asshole and Mildred told me he’s a regular pest.”

“Is she helping you?”

“Yes, she is.” I give the woman a nod and a slight smile. “Along with me and everyone else, she’s worried about you getting stressed. Relax, OK? This will blow over and, hopefully, that asshole thinks twice before forcing a kiss on anyone.”

“Sweet pea, you’d tell me if you’re not OK, right?”

“I’m OK, Dad. I’m glad I hit him.”

“Me too, Maeve. Me too.”

CHAPTER EIGHT

Sergei

The moment the game ends, I'm the first one in the locker room.

"Is he still here?" I ask a trainer. Before the team went into the last period, Dex was on his way to get x-rays in the arena facilities. They needed to eliminate any fractures before deciding on the next tests.

"He's with the doctor."

I rush to the private office to find him sitting, his back propped on a medical table with his legs stretched. There's an ice pack wrapped around his right knee. The doctor is by his side. They're both looking at a phone and laughing.

"Sergei! Did you see this yet?" Dex asks. I ignore the question because who the fuck cares about a video right now? Our captain is injured, we got our butts kicked, and somewhere in this building, there's a very rude and pretty fairy who won't take my calls.

"What did the x-ray show?"

"Nothing's broken. Once the swelling goes down, we'll get a scan. It can wait till tomorrow," Dex answers.

"First thing in the morning," the doctor adds.

Dex rolls his eyes but nods in agreement.

"Have a look at this." He gestures to me again.

Before I can walk over, the assistant coach yells from the locker room. "Everyone, sit the fuck down! Coach isn't done with you!" Even Dex shuffles over with his crutches.

We all sit our asses down and listen to Coach Zach scream at us for the loss. Doesn't matter how much he rails, everyone in the room is just as pissed. At some point, something other

than irritation at our performance snags my attention. The “you call yourselves professionals” tirade turns into a faint buzz in the background.

A different train of thought picks up steam. Maeve is in the building. If I get out of here fast enough, I can catch her and ask about her dad. It doesn't take me long to shower and begin dressing.

At the corner of my eye, I see the guys lean into Dex's phone and burst into hoots of laughter at whatever they're watching.

“Fucking brutal! Serves him right, the asshole,” Gordon says with admiration and amusement. He ambles back to his locker beside me, still chuckling.

“What?” I bark. Gordon taps on his phone and lifts it to my view.

It's Maeve. She's covered up in a big jacket and her wavy hair is piled in a messy bun. There's no mistaking those long lashes and plump lips and high cheekbones. It takes a second to realize I'm looking at a screen through a screen. It's the jumbotron.

“What the fuck?” I mumble and sit down.

The heart-shaped frame of the kiss cam is ludicrous. When the guy in full Mavericks gear points up, Maeve refuses to acknowledge him, keeping her lips pressed and eyes forward. Despite the blurry footage, I see her white-knuckle grip and clenched jaw.

It happens in a blink. The guy leans over and places his filthy mouth on her face. Her torso twists and an elbow whips upward, aimed at the pervert's nose. His head pulls back and hands cover his face. Blood from the broken nose spills past his fingers.

“Tonight? That happened tonight?”

Gordon is laughing and nodding until he sees my face. “What?”

“That’s Declan’s daughter,” I spit angrily. “She’s probably helping with the arena because of his heart attack. It isn’t funny that she got attacked in front of everyone! What’s so fucking funny about that, huh? What if that was your sister having to fight off an asshole?”

With every sentence, my volume increases. The last question booms so loudly, everyone in the room goes quiet. My vision is tunneling, and I hear a growling sound I realize is coming from deep in my chest.

“Hey now, take it easy,” Dex says, hobbling over to stand in front of me. “Of course, that wouldn’t be funny if she was in danger. We’re laughing because she kicked his ass.”

Through my blinding rage, I put on pants, shove my feet into dress shoes, and grab my shirt. I don’t know Maeve well, but I saw how tightly she was holding herself even before the incident. She deserves more respect than what she got tonight. From that guy, from the crowd, and from the organization who put her in a compromising situation. A woman having to protect herself from a fucking predator is not a joke.

People don’t hit because they’re having a good time. She hit him because she felt threatened. That fact alone makes my blood boil. I’m so distracted, I don’t fully register that everyone around me is gawking. Ask me if I care.

Nearly running out of the room, I walk away from the crowds and through a labyrinth of corridors. I fix my eyes straight and my long strides steady. Not really sure what my purpose is, stomping like a psychotic idiot. I’ll figure it out when I see her.

I need to see her.

A man’s condescending voice trickles into the public corridor. I turn the corner to find a small group huddled by the ice resurfacing machine.

Maeve’s back is to me, her stance wide and shoulders squared. My pretty little fairy is in battle mode.

The guy talking is sitting on a folding chair and staring at his phone. “If you sign off on the messaging, we can wrap

things up by tomorrow.” Something about his casual slouch in contrast to her ramrod straight back enrages me. Maeve’s arms are locked across her chest when she tilts her head to an older woman in Mavericks athletic gear.

“It’s the surest way to sweep everything under the rug,” the older woman says.

“Sweep what under the rug?” I boom, making them all jump.

Maeve turns to look at me, her expression confused. “Sergei?” she asks.

“Mr. Petrov.” The man stands to shake my hand. He suddenly looks flustered. “David Mills, from Ross and Rogers Corporate Law.”

“Why does that sound familiar?” I ask.

“I’m the general counsel for the Mavericks but our firm handles other businesses, including Petrov Shipping Company.”

I can’t help my humorless chuckle. It doesn’t matter how much I extricate myself from my family’s reach, big business makes for a small world.

“I saw what happened tonight. Is that what you think you’re sweeping under the rug?” I sound like someone poured sand down my throat.

“I’m not at liberty to say, sir.”

“Mr. Neill, that’s the guy that I—” Maeve pauses and lifts her chin defiantly. “The guy that I hit. He’s threatening to file an assault charge unless I sign off on a public apology.” Her brows are twisted in worry.

I give Maeve all of my attention. It takes effort to register the details of her sentence. I’m too distracted by the rosy color on her cheeks and the sprinkling of freckles over her nose and under her eyes. They must have been covered up with makeup when we first met. My fingers twitch with the impulse to touch her scrubbed face.

“You have nothing to apologize for,” I grunt through a clenched jaw.

She looks surprised at my vehemence and blinks twice before exhaling. “I know but...”

“He’s also threatening to get Declan fired, the bastard,” the older woman adds. “Mr. Neill, I mean the father, is a longtime member of the Mavericks board and a corporate sponsor.”

“Mildred, please,” the lawyer says to censor the woman. “Everyone’s tired. Let’s deal with this in the morning, OK?”

“In the morning,” I say with a growl, “the only one who will apologize is that fucking asshole and the Mavericks’ management. It was sexual assault, and this organization should protect its employees more vigilantly.”

“Sergei, hey, don’t worry about it. I’ll deal with this tomorrow.” Maeve looks tired. The dimming of her features is unacceptable.

“I’m glad you mentioned Ross and Rogers Corporate Law.” I turn to the man, who is shuffling his feet. Keep shuffling, asshole, because I’m about to turn up the heat.

“I know Frank Ross. He’s in charge of my father’s company, is he not?”

When my parents throw their parties, it’s always business mixed with pleasure. I’ve met my share of corporate lawyers. This guy’s boss, with his expensive cigars and booming laugh, is harder to forget than most suits.

The man looks confused and suspicious. “Yes, sir. He’s a senior partner.”

“That’s what I thought,” I say before squaring off against—or more like looming over—the useless idiot.

“Here’s the thing, Donald.”

“David.”

I gesture my hand in a stop position because he needs to shut up and listen.

“If all you can do is bend forward and have a shit-eating pervert fuck you in the ass, then you’re dismissed from this incident. I’ll call Frank right now. I’m sure he’ll find a better fit in the form of a real lawyer. You can’t all be idiots in that office, right?”

“What? Um, no sir, that won’t be necessary.”

My phone is out and everyone around me is watching like I’m crazy. Maybe I am, but here’s a fact: my father’s executive assistant can reach anyone working for Petrov Shipping in the time it takes to order a pizza.

“Sergei?” Artem Dima answers groggily.

“Hey, Art. Sorry to bother you. I need to reach Frank Ross right now.”

“Sir, please, I can—” The useless lawyer steps toward me. I grab a shoulder and push him back down to sit on the chair.

“Why?” Art asks irritably. “If this is about the video, we already have people on that. Wait, there isn’t another sex tape is there?” He doesn’t even sound shocked.

“Art, listen to me,” I say impatiently. “Ross and Rogers are on retainer for the Mavericks, but they sent an idiot. Get Frank on the line so we can get a real lawyer.”

That’s when Maeve steps in front of me. She looks panicked while she’s shaking her head vigorously. Her hair has completely fallen from its tenuous bun, fluffy auburn swirls grazing her smooth temples and delicate jaw. She moves her full pink lips to form the words: *Stop. Please.*

“Is this about the Mavericks?” Art asks with a sigh. “You know it’s best to avoid that topic with your father.”

“No. It’s about a sexual assault charge that needs to be handled as soon as possible.”

“What? Who got assaulted?”

It must be the feel of her fingers on my upper arms, or maybe it’s her weirdly sexy aroma of garage oil and fruity—peaches, I think?—shampoo. Whatever makes me say it, I’m determined to prop the full force of my name behind Maeve.

“My fiancée.”

CHAPTER NINE

Maeve

Sergei has a fiancée? If I feel a pinch of disappointment, it's because I'm freaking exhausted. No other reason.

He hangs up and, to my surprise, reaches out to entwine our fingers. My open mouth is mirrored by the equally shocked features of David and Mildred.

I'm about to pull away when Sergei leans into my ear to whisper, "Just go along with it, *moya feya*. I'll explain later."

The puff of air accompanying his words is hot, making me aware of how cold I am everywhere except where we're touching. His hair is still wet, releasing an aroma that's herbal yet woody, like a posh lumberjack.

Go along with what? Wait a minute...

"You're completely certifiable," I mumble. Reality has left the building because Sergei Petrov is claiming that *I'm* his fiancée?

That's the moment I realize that all the handsome features and chiseled bodies and charming smiles in the world cannot guarantee the sanity of a man.

"How wonderful!" Mildred chirps. "I can't believe you're engaged! I've been with you all night, Maeve, and not a peep. Remind me never to play poker with you."

"It was her idea to keep it a secret. If it were up to me, I'd be screaming the news from the rooftop." Sergei lifts my hand and lightly grazes his soft lips on my knuckles. Sergei's mouth on my skin short-circuits my brain.

Because I'm tired. Obviously.

He's wearing the smile of a kid who snuck out to play when he was grounded. I get a flash of what this towering man must

have looked like in his youth: smug, mischievous, and too charming to scold.

“Congratulations?” David says.

The sound of the lawyer’s voice snaps Sergei out of his jovial mood. He’s back to handing out threats like they’re candy on Halloween.

“You see, Daniel,” Sergei pauses, daring David to correct him, “there is no way in hell my woman is going to issue an apology. If Frank Ross has to go head-to-head with that asshole’s lawyer, that’s exactly what he’ll do. As for the Mavericks”—he makes a *tsk tsk* sound—“if they’re smart, they’ll take the side of the victim. A bunch of corporate suits ganging up on a pretty woman who was publicly attacked? That’s not a good look, Drew. Not a good look at all.”

I’m shocked by the turn of events and by the fact that the lawyer is nodding.

“You’re right, you’re right. I’ll ta-take care of it, Sergei. I mean Mr., um, Mr. Petrov.” David’s words stumble out, rushed and sloppy.

“You do that.”

There’s complete silence till it dawns on Mildred and David that they’re dismissed. Both shuffle away, my dad’s boss looking over her shoulder and giving me a wink. I don’t need a wink. What I need is an alarm clock because it’s time to wake up from this bizarre nightmare.

“You still have stuff to do?” he asks. “Or can we leave?”

“Your? Woman?” My thoughts snag on several confusing details, that being on top of the list.

“Should I have called you my pretty little fairy? I thought that nickname was just for us.” He snickers. Sergei’s phone buzzes in his pocket. He pulls it out and gives me a look that communicates: *don’t move and you’re welcome*.

“Hey, Frank. Thanks for calling me back.” Pause. Nod. Smirk. Nod.

“Perfect. I wouldn’t have it any other way. Thank you. Yeah, we’ll hit the links as soon as the weather gets better.” Another pause.

This time, the full force of Sergei’s gaze lands on me. The guy on the other end is doing all the talking, the hockey player only making subtle sounds of agreement. I’m not sure what bothers me more. That I’m not privy to the full conversation or that Sergei’s tongue pushes against the inside of his cheek while he’s staring at me.

“Absolutely. My fiancée is incredibly grateful,” he drones, eyes half-mast. “She’s *all over me* to thank you again and again. You’re the best, Frank.”

He hangs up, puts his phone away, and declares, “There’s no way that pig will be within five feet of you, never mind force you into a lawsuit. He was bluffing, of course. But just in case, this is the best way to get him to back down. I’m assuming you don’t want a countersuit?”

“God, no! I want the whole thing to go away.”

“Then it’s done.”

“Just like that? You make up a story, dial some numbers, and poof my problems go away,” I state incredulously.

“That’s not the half of what I can do, *moya feya*.”

“Ma-yeah-fey-ya?” I venture to repeat. “That’s pretty fairy in Russian?” I confirm, referencing his obnoxious nickname for me.

“*My pretty fairy*,” he says, voice so low I feel the words as much as hear them. “Or maybe I should call you *nevesta*.”

“Let me guess. Your woman?” My mockery is diluted by relief and gratitude. I believe him when he tells me he’s made the problem go away.

“My fiancée,” he corrects.

I snort. “That was overkill for your damsel-in-distress story, don’t you think?”

“If there’s one thing my family and everyone around them will do, it’s protect anything or anyone associated with the Petrov name. Calling you my girlfriend wouldn’t have had the same effect.”

“Well, um, thank you. Things were escalating quickly. Plus, I’m trying to keep my dad calm. The last thing he needs is to hear that he’s getting fired because I broke someone’s nose.”

“The guy deserved to have his hands broken, too.” Sergei’s angry mouth is carved into a straight, stern line. “And his teeth knocked out.”

“Let’s not get carried away, Poser,” I tease to lighten his mood. Without my permission, my hand reaches out to land on his forearm. The contact draws his attention and suddenly that smile is back. Smug, mischievous, gorgeous.

“Now, will you unblock me?” he asks.

Did he say *unblock*?

“Is that a Russian euphemism? Or are you asking me to get you a laxative?”

He laughs. “On your phone, Maeve.”

“Huh?”

“I texted you all day yesterday because of the news.”

I tap my screen and find nothing from Sergei.

“Here,” he says, handing me his phone where I see a bunch of messages delivered to me. The last one remains undelivered.

“I don’t understand.”

“Would anyone else have access to your phone on Sunday?”

“I left the hospital and went to my garage.”

“Do you have a housemate?”

“Not my garage at home. I mean the auto shop. I’m a mechanic. Worked for a few hours before Matt brought me dinner.”

His brows furrow. “Who’s that?”

“My brother and business partner.”

He lets out a shallow breath, like he’s relieved. “Does he have access to your phone?”

Goddamn, I hate my brothers. Aiden probably told Matt to “look out for me” which, in the MacElroy vocabulary means *get in Maeve’s business where you don’t belong*. The jerk didn’t just block Sergei. He deleted the thread.

“I’ll unblock you,” I say by way of answer.

He chuckles and takes a step closer. “A garage, huh. What’s the name?”

“A1 Auto Repair.”

“Like the steak sauce?”

“The name makes more sense for a garage than a condiment,” I say irritably, because I’m tired of the comparison.

“Hmm. That’s interesting.”

“The name or my opinion on condiments?”

“A1 sounds kind of generic. Expected. Common. You’re the farthest thing from expected or common, Maeve.” If words could wink, that’s exactly how he sounds.

“In fact, A1 means the opposite of common,” I can’t help lecturing. “It’s used to identify the highest quality of something. The top classification of a product. The best in class.”

“Never heard of the expression. Are you bullshitting me with your slang because English is my second language?”

“No! Look it up. Besides, A1 puts me on top when people web search garages in the area.”

“Now *that* makes sense.” His eyes twinkle with amusement.

“What?”

Sergei leans his head down and lowers his voice. “That you like being on top.”

I snort because I’m classy that way. “C’mon, Poser. Was there ever any doubt?”

He says nothing though remains intently focused on my face. We’re grinning like idiots and I’m a little breathless.

What is wrong with me? This hockey hunk activates a sassy flirt mode that usually takes a couple of drinks during a vacation to find. Sergei comes within two feet of me, and my tongue can’t stop wagging.

Like he’s read the perverted version of my thoughts, Sergei runs his tongue from the inside of his cheek before grazing his lower lip, moistening it so his mouth looks as full and juicy as a ripe plum. I imagine my teeth grazing it before I take a delicious bite.

“I should go,” I rasp, turning away to gather my things.

“Have a drink with me.” It’s an announcement, not a request. His Adam’s apple bobs in the middle of his muscular neck and I want to bite that, too.

“I have to check on my dad. I’ve been gone long enough, and he’s worried about the incident.”

“Of course. Send my regards.”

He backs off. With added distance between our bodies, I’m given space to dispel more thoughts of biting into ripe plums and Adam’s apples. The man is not a fruit salad, for goodness’ sake!

“Thanks again, Sergei.” I try to sound casual and unaffected. “I’ll see you around.”

“You’re welcome, *moya feya*.”

CHAPTER TEN

Sergei

Once again, the internet is useless.

I've googled how to break my car without really breaking it and ended up with all the ways I can steal my own car. Without the proper guidance, I'd have to guess that the simplest solution would be an "accidental" crack on the windshield. A1 Auto Repair would be able to fix that, wouldn't they?

My phone rings with Ana's number. That's weird. We usually text or video chat.

"Hello?"

"It's unforgivable, Sergei! How dare you?!" I honestly think it's a wrong number. Not only does the accusation have zero context or cause, it's also because I never talk to Ana over the phone. This could be a random woman who stole her phone to call my number.

"Is that you, Ana?"

"Who else would it be! Your fi-an-cée?" She spits out each syllable dramatically.

Dammit. Art yapped about my phone call on Monday night. When I pulled the fiancée card, I simply needed my dad's top man to connect me to the right people. I'm about to explain the situation to Ana, but then she's back to screaming.

"Is she pregnant?"

"What?!"

"Is that why you proposed in a rush? Oh my god, tell me, Sergei! This is important." She pauses and takes a shaky breath. "I'm your little sister. I tell you everything and you never share!"

“Here’s the thing, *mladshaya sestra...*”

“Is that Sergei?” another voice inquires in the background.

“Mom! Give me my phone back!”

“Hush,” my mother snaps, ending Ana’s complaint. “You take Ana’s calls, but not one from your mother?”

She got me there. “Hello, Mother. I was in practice when you called earlier.” Or looking up ways to break my car. “I’m sorry I couldn’t pick up. To what do I owe the pleasure of hearing from both of you today?”

I’m clinging to the hope that this is about Ana’s debutante ball instead of about Maeve.

“It isn’t every day that I hear of my child’s engagement from his father’s executive assistant. How does Art know about this before I do?” The calmer my mother sounds, the more pissed she is. Right now, she is exceedingly calm.

“Put him on speaker, Mother!” Ana pleads.

“You’re on speaker,” she addresses me. “Speak.”

Gotta come clean, I guess. It’s been a few days since Maeve broke that jerk’s nose. No one brought up the incident during Wednesday night’s home game. Maeve wasn’t around, so that might be why. More than likely, she’s in the clear and there’s no reason to keep up the ruse.

“She’s not my fiancée.”

“You broke up?” Ana asked.

“Not exactly.” The less I talk, the less they’ll push, right?

“So you are no longer engaged...” My mother trails off. I know that tone. She has an idea. Unfortunately, her ideas have never fallen in my favor.

Scrambling to shift the conversation, I ask, “How’s the planning going? Have you been enjoying the dance lessons, Ana?”

“I never thought the day would come when you’re ready for a serious relationship, Sergei.” My mother refuses to

acknowledge anything except her own train of thought.

“Um, what?”

“Remember Georgina Schmidt? From the tennis club?” she asks, though doesn’t wait for my answer. “I know it’s been years, but you practically grew up together! She studied law and is a very successful interior designer. Such a respectable family, a pillar in the community.” These are code words for rich and influential.

I know Reggie, alright. Every summer I’ve spent hanging out with Ana at our mother’s estate, I’ve been subjected to tennis and golf. Not a hockey puck in sight. One way to stave off the boredom was to get to know the local girls. And by *get to know*, I mean accept the blow jobs they enthusiastically offered.

“Yeah, I remember her.”

“She’s going through something very similar, coming out of a long-term relationship. I’ll make sure she knows you’ll be single and ready to date when you come to Ana’s party.”

I don’t know if my mother is purposefully clueless about how ridiculous she sounds, or if she simply believes manifesting this bullshit will make it come true. Either way, panic clenches around my throat. The last time my mother launched into matchmaking mode, I had to change my phone number.

“I’m not single,” I blurt out.

“I thought you said—”

“Maeve and I didn’t break up. Just postponed the engagement. Pressure and stuff.” I sound so fucking lame. I’m seconds from getting called on my bullshit.

“You’ll bring her to my party?!” Ana pipes in excitedly.

“She’s not available next weekend,” I say. “I already asked, and she’s busy.”

“Remember Caroline?” Ana lets the question linger.

That's when I know I've been defeated by the circumstances of my own making. I have only two choices. Show up at the party alone and be mauled by seventeen-year-old Caroline when I'm not having painfully awkward conversations with Reggie.

Or I can show up with *moya feya*.

"I'll ask her again."

Chuck's frown deepens as he grabs the back of his neck. It's his tell that he's anxious. Or disappointed. Those two emotions usually go together when he's around me.

"It has to look like something I caught while driving down the highway," I whine, after my two attempts at throwing a small rock on the windshield failed.

"I don't get paid enough to watch you make a fool of yourself."

Chuck gets paid plenty. I met him when I started ordering a car service for weekend benders. He's now my driver-slash-assistant, I guess, picking up dry cleaning and groceries when I'm in town. Lounging in my penthouse when I'm away. He's discreet and irreverent—two characteristics I find appealing in a designated driver with access to my personal space.

We're at the corner of a parking lot adjacent to a Columbus Metro Park. There are no cars or people around us to watch my frustrated efforts at windshield vandalism.

Maeve's shop is two blocks away.

The plan is to throw a tiny rock at the windshield so the glass would have to be replaced. Simple, right? A little damage, but not too much. Unfortunately, it doesn't matter how hard I throw the little rocks, my Mercedes is rock proof!

Chuck is correct; I'm being colossally stupid. After all, I've got Maeve's number. It's easy enough to call, ask about Declan, and see if she's willing to deceive a few hundred people next weekend. I'm not delaying that request at all by concocting a scenario that would naturally take me to her

shop. And if I'm curious about seeing her at work, that's because I've never met a female mechanic before.

"Why not get a bigger rock?"

"Yeah, OK." I get one that's nearly the size of a puck. I throw it tentatively.

"Throw it harder," Chuck eggs me on.

"I don't want everything to explode," I explain. "I just need a crack!"

"Hockey players simply don't have the upper body strength of baseball players," he says, daring me to go all in. "Or, I have an idea," he amends. "You want a tiny hole, right? Nothing crazy."

"That's why I started with small rocks."

"The car has a toolbox at the back. Get a screwdriver and tap it in."

I scramble to open the trunk and grab a screwdriver that I'll use to crack my windshield before procuring the services of A1 Auto Repair where I'll convince Maeve to accompany me to a debutante ball in Connecticut so everyone believes I'm engaged.

Wow, that *does* sound idiotic. At this point, I'm in too deep. There's no turning back.

I place the sharp end of the screwdriver on the windshield. Small bit, small hole. Since the rock I threw is close by, I use it as a means to tap the screwdriver into the glass.

Tap. Nothing.

Tap. Nothing.

Tap. The entire windshield morphs into an elaborate mosaic of intricate, web-like patterns. The glass is fully covered in cracks. It's practically opaque.

I feel Chuck's hand on my shoulder as he howls in laughter. Bent over and barely able to talk past his nose-snorting chortles, he says, "You know what, buddy, I take it back. I love watching you make a fool of yourself."

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Maeve

“Maeve. Hey, Maeve, check this out.” Bruno has the tone of someone pointing out weird things at the zoo. Generally fascinated and a little disgusted.

My head is deep in a 2012 Volkswagen Passat in which I’m finishing the installation of a new alternator. I’m at the stage of checking the drive belt and electrical connections. Once I clean and connect the battery cable, this one’s done.

“What is it?” I ask, wiping my hands before lining up the next set of tools.

“What the hell?” Matthew mumbles from under one of the lifts.

I follow everyone’s attention and can’t believe my eyes. It’s a 2023 Mercedes-Benz SL Roadster.

Color: Dark blue.

Sticker price: close to a hundred grand.

Driver: Sergei Petrov.

From deep in the garage, I can already see his smile. It’s contagious. He stops the car a few feet from the garage. I walk around the car I’m working on, fighting the grin that possesses my face.

“Wow, you really know how to make an entrance.” All the guys in the shop turn to me, surprised that I talked to a customer. I usually leave that to Erin at the front desk.

My brain registers that his face is clearly visible because he doesn’t have a windshield. “How did this happen? Did you get into an accident?”

“No, nothing like that.” I see him glance at a screwdriver on his passenger seat where a bunch of the glass fell. “Would

you be worried about me if I was in an accident?”

“I’d be worried if something is breaking the windshield of cars driving thirty miles an hour along a city street.”

“Can you fix it?”

“I do auto repair, Sergei,” I say regretfully. “Not windshield replacement. Haven’t you called your insurance? They work directly with glass companies.”

He opens his door and bits of glass fall around him. Standing to his full height, I see that he’s wearing a shirt and fitness pants. Something about the everyday-ness of the outfit is appealing. I realize I’ve only ever seen him in a suit, a suit without a shirt, and hockey gear. Today’s look is nearly ordinary. Nearly.

When his muscles ripple and the pants pull at all the right places, he’s as “ordinary” as a model who stepped out of a fitness magazine. As in, wow, do that again.

“I don’t want to run it by insurance.” For the first time since I met him, Sergei looks unsure. “I was hoping you would be able to help me.”

We haven’t talked since Monday night when he pulled all kinds of strings to get me out of a difficult situation. I can say thank you ten times, or I can do him a solid.

“Leave it here. I’ll call my guy and send you the bill.”

“Thanks. Perfect. Do you have time for coffee? Or a lunch break?”

“I don’t get lunch breaks.”

“What’s the point of owning a business if you can’t even have a long lunch?”

I snicker, walking to the shop to grab a broom. Over my shoulder, I say. “The concept of entrepreneurship seems a little lost on you, Poser.”

I see Matthew shake his head in disapproval, but I don’t make eye contact with my brother.

Returning to Sergei, I sweep the glass that fell on the pavement. He bends down to help, and I let him hold the dustpan.

“C’mon. Let’s get coffee. Tell me about Declan.”

“He’s good. Grumpy about the diet they put him on, but we’ve got the date set for the surgery.”

“When is it? I’ll make sure the team knows. Everyone in the locker room is rooting for him.”

After returning to the garage to dump the glass and hang the broom, I’m about to tell Sergei that I’m too busy. However, when I see Matthew shake his head at Bruno like they have a secret code to transmit their displeasure at my behavior, I change my mind.

“You know what? Yeah, I’d love a coffee. Let me wash up.”

Three sets of eyes follow me as I enter the employee break room. After washing my hands and removing my overalls, I put on a jacket over my shirt.

Matt the Brat: Isn’t this the guy Dad doesn’t like?

I shut my phone. That’s the answer he deserves. My family needs to know their place, which is out of my freaking business. Walking past cars and coworkers, I only have eyes for Sergei. He has no right to look that elegant in fitness clothes while I’m wearing a ratty old shirt that smells like grease. And yet here we are.

“Let’s go.”

It takes him no effort to match my brisk pace. We enter English Club, a cute coffee shop with a library theme.

After grabbing our drinks, we find a quiet corner away from the large bay windows up front. The gorgeous Russian draws a lot of attention. The last thing I need is everyone in the neighborhood walking by and getting nosy about why the

short mechanic—yours truly—is hanging out with a tall, dark, and handsome NHL player.

“Thanks for the coffee.”

“You’re welcome. How’s your dad? What should I tell the boys?”

“That he misses them. Can’t wait to get back to work. His surgery is on the seventeenth.” My voice hitches somewhat. Any time the topic comes up, there’s a section in my esophagus that tightens and twists. Deep breaths help, when I remember to take them.

“That’s good,” Sergei says vaguely.

“Did you say *good*?” Who the hell calls heart bypass surgery good?

“I mean, you know the surgery will be successful, right? It’s the best hospital in the area. They do this all the time and Declan will come out better than ever.” His soft voice is comforting.

“I know.” I do. I know he’ll be fine.

“It’s also good because the seventeenth is after next weekend.”

I tilt my head in confusion. “Yeah, so what?”

“I need to ask you for a favor. A big favor. For next weekend.” He leans closer, rosy forearms on the table. A whiff of woodland and herbs and fresh air hits me.

“What?” I inhale deeply, loosening the tightness in my chest and getting more of Sergei’s posh lumberjack aroma. His shirt stretches over impossibly wide, shapely shoulders.

“Remember when I claimed you were my fiancée?”

Because I’m deep in thought about shoulders and such, his words are jarring. “Don’t talk so loudly! I know people around here.”

He snickers. “OK, you remember.”

“Of course I do. It’s not every day I find out I’m engaged.”

We both smile easily, in agreement about the ridiculousness of that night.

“I had to say that to Art Dima, my dad’s right-hand man. Otherwise, he would never have directly connected me to the law firm.”

“I’m not complaining. You did it to make my problem go away.”

“Anyway, he told my mother, who then told my sister.”

“That we’re engaged? You were helping me,” I say with a dismissive shrug. “It’s easy enough to explain.”

“I did explain. I mean, I tried. The truth is, they would have been really upset if they learned I lied about being with you. We’re not really supposed to pull those strings—waking the lead attorney in the middle of the night—unless it’s for family.”

“What did you tell them?”

“That we postponed the engagement.”

“That’s digging deeper into the lie, isn’t it? But, hey, they’re your family.”

“The problem is, now they think I’m heartbroken.”

“Because I left you?” I know I shouldn’t think it’s funny, but Sergei *ever* being the one with the broken heart instead of the one breaking hearts is too ludicrous to take seriously.

“For the record,” I continue to tease, “you really would be heartbroken if I left you.”

“I have no doubt,” he says with a crooked grin. “Now, my mother got it in her head that what I need is another serious relationship. She’s scrambling to set me up.”

“I honestly can’t imagine you in a serious relationship,” I mumble.

He’s quiet for a minute and now I’m worried I insulted him. I should apologize. “I mean—”

“That’s because you’re not delusional like the women in my family. My point is, the fiancée news threw them down a path and now they’re like two dogs hunting for my mate.”

“That is a disturbingly weird way to describe your mother and sister,” I say. “What do you need from me? To tell them what happened? I can do that. I’m happy to talk to your mother and sister.”

“Didn’t you hear the part where they’re hunting for my mate?”

“I don’t get it. If you don’t want me to explain the situation to them, what else can I do?”

“There is, in fact, one thing.”

CHAPTER TWELVE

Sergei

What else can I do?

Maeve looks adorably confused, her hair piled in a bun and a slight smear of black by her jaw. I reach out to wipe it with my thumb.

“Grease,” I rasp. A rush of color floods her silky skin.

“Occupational hazard,” she says before taking off her jacket. “It’s boiling in here.”

She’s wearing a sleeveless shirt. Or rather, it’s a shirt with the sleeves ripped off. With her haughty expression, defiant eyes, and buff arms, Maeve looks like the lead singer of a rock band. It’s hot as fuck.

Leaning back on my chair so I don’t come off like a pervert, touching her face and staring at her biceps, I begin my prepared speech.

“Like I was saying, I need a favor.”

“I owe you, Sergei, so just spit it out. Stalling makes me nervous.”

“My sister’s debutante ball is next weekend.”

“What the hell is that?”

“It’s when we go back to the nineteenth century to celebrate postadolescent girls as they enter the marriage market.”

“That’s gross.” Her forehead creases slightly and her lower lip hints at a pout.

“I agree with you. However, this is what Ana wants. My sister loves all kinds of themed parties. And one where she’s the center of attention is the best kind.”

The slight furrows on her forehead deepen above perfectly arched brows. I'm about to continue when my phone rings. The name *Madelaine* flashes. It's my mother.

"Speaking of the devil," I mutter before sending Madelaine Petrov to voicemail. Again.

"I thought you said she was busy hunting for your mate."

"Even busy mothers need a break," I say pointedly.

"Speaking of which," she says, glancing at her watch.

Now or never. "Come with me to Connecticut on Saturday night. We'll attend the party while you pose as my girlfriend and sort-of-fiancée. Everyone leaves me alone."

She frowns and tilts her head. "You can't be serious."

"It's open bar."

"Well, in that case..." The joke falls flat.

I'm looking out for anger and annoyance or, worst-case scenario, an elbow to the nose because she's insulted. I've prepared for any of those reactions. And if she said no, I'd drop the topic in a heartbeat.

But her strangely weak response alerts me.

"Forget it. It's too much to ask," I say. I'll handle my family. The last thing I want is to completely scare her off.

"Even if I wanted to help you, I can't. I'm busy next weekend. We're having a car wash fundraiser for my nephew and his robotics team. The university covers the materials for their build and a bit of gas allowance. The kids need money for food and lodging to cover four nights in Nashville."

"What is a car wash fundraiser?"

"Not the kind of thing they have at fancy prep schools, huh?"

"I spent my childhood in Russia and played hockey around Europe before getting drafted by the NHL. I have never heard of that term in fancy prep schools or in any other corner of the world."

She laughs. “We wash cars and get donations for it.”

“How much do you expect to make on donations?”

She chuckles. “We’ll raise a few hundred bucks. The sandwich shop down the street is donating food that we could sell, so there’s money from that, too.”

“I can’t imagine a few hundred dollars will cover a school trip.”

“Bryce and his friends have multiple jobs while attending college. The entire team is pitching in what they can. This is a way for the garage to help. Matt and I are sponsoring part of it, so we’ll round it up to a thousand. Better than nothing.”

I pull out my phone to look for a cash exchange app. “Would five thousand cover it?”

“Cover what?”

“The trip. For the team.”

She doesn’t answer right away. “You drive a hard bargain, *moya feya*. I’ll send the ten grand through PayPal.”

“Dollars?”

“Done. Sent to your phone. Accept on your end.”

“No. I can’t do that!” Her eyes are saucer-like and her mouth is agape.

“Consider me a sponsor.”

“It’s a lot of money, Sergei. I’m not taking it.”

“Are you sure you don’t want to ask your nephew before turning me down? It’s not a big deal to me, Maeve. I know that sounds crass and cocky, but it’s the truth. I can afford it.”

She doesn’t respond immediately. After a beat, Maeve clears her throat and swallows with effort. When she finally speaks, she sounds determined. “He’ll pay you back. We’ll pay you back.”

“Consider it a favor from a friend. Which is exactly what I’m asking of you. Tit for tit.”

That gets me a slight chuckle. “I think you mean tit for tat.”

“Do I, though?” This time she laughs. It’s impossible to get sick of that sound.

“But, Sergei,” Maeve states, lowering the curtain of her thick lashes and looking almost shy. “I’m doing you no favors by pretending to be your girlfriend at a posh party. A debutante ball isn’t exactly my scene. Beer in the backyard or a martini at happy hour, I could do. Prancing around in a country club wearing a fancy dress is not in my wheelhouse.”

“There will be no prancing. And you can wear whatever you want.”

“I want to help you, Sergei. It’s not even the first time I’ve stepped in as a pseudo girlfriend for a buddy.”

That gets my attention. “Are you saying you are in high demand as a fake date, Maeve MacElroy?”

“Bruno, our other mechanic, asked me to pretend to be his girlfriend for his high school reunion,” she says with a shrug.

“He’s the big guy? At the shop?”

“Don’t let the muscles fool you. He’s a teddy bear. My point is, that was a high school gym with semi-intoxicated ex-schoolmates. It was the farthest thing from a debutante ball with an eager mother and attentive sister. They’ll take one look at me and know this is fake.”

I try to assure her, but she keeps going.

“Inevitably, I’ll say something to offend your family, spill spaghetti sauce all over my dress or, worse, spill it all over your mother. Trust me, Sergei, I am not the right person for the... the job.”

“It isn’t a job, it’s a favor.”

“Whatever.” She pulls at the elastic band keeping her hair in a bun. A cascade of fruity-smelling curls falls past her shoulders and then it’s gone. In one efficient sweep, she’s gathered her hair back into the bun. Tight and controlled.

“Are you finished?” I ask, fighting the urge to tug at the elastic and release all of those soft-looking strands again.

She nods.

“We won’t serve spaghetti, you’ll wear a black dress so anything that spills won’t matter, and if you accidentally launch food at unsuspecting guests like we’re in the middle of a cafeteria food fight, I’ll put myself in harm’s way, willingly sacrificing what will surely be the most stunning suit in the room.”

She snorts and rolls her eyes. But she’s also grinning.

“Please, Maeve. The last time my mother played matchmaker, I got stalked by two deranged women. It was embarrassing for everyone.”

“What makes you think there won’t be *three* deranged women stalking you after the party?”

“That’s where you come in. We show them I’m completely enamored, unavailable, blah blah blah. It buys me at least a few months, possibly an entire year of peace if I keep talking about you.”

“Let me think about it.”

That’s as good an answer as I’m going to get, so I quit while I’m ahead. “In the meantime, tell your nephew the good news. No car wash fundraiser is necessary. The donation isn’t contingent on this favor.”

“No chance. Tit for tit, remember.” When Maeve smiles, her tiny ears lift slightly. She really is a little fairy.

“The favor is me calling Frank Ross and you coming to the party. Nothing to do with your nephew. In fact, it’s been on my bucket list to sponsor a college robotics team. You’ve saved me a lot of time and energy.”

“Shut up.” Her harsh words are tinged with amusement.

“I mean it, Maeve. The kid deserves that trip.” My phone pings. “Chuck is at your garage.”

“Chuck?”

“I hire him to drive me when I’m out drinking on the weekends or have an emergency. The broken windshield is

sort of an emergency.”

“Back from a beach in Mexico with your dates, huh?” she says with a snort. “Why don’t you bring one of those girls? You could bring both!”

“I have no idea who you’re talking about.” I have a vague sense of two other women that night. However, I hardly recall details of anything before I saw Maeve.

We walk back in silence, our steps oddly in sync despite the height difference.

“If I said yes, how would it work?”

I resist the urge to make a victorious fist pump.

“I’ll already be on the road since I’ve got a Thursday night game in Montreal and promised my sister I’d be with her all of Friday. You won’t even have to travel with me. I’ll book you a flight that leaves Columbus on Saturday morning and meet you at Hartford when you land. Obviously, you’ll have your own room for an overnight stay. That’s where you’ll get ready. Unless you want me to book you a spa or something. The party is that night. Your flight back to Columbus is the next day, whereas I go to Dallas to meet the team.”

She looks at me like I’ve got an insect on my face.

“What? Did a bug land on me?” I swear I ate one when I was driving without a windshield. Brushing my hand on my hair and across my mouth, I wait for her to speak.

“No, you’re perfect,” she says. “I mean, not like perfect. As in, there’s no bug on your face. Or anywhere else that I can see. On you, I mean.” Her flustered state is adorably unexpected.

“I see you’re coming around to realizing my perfection,” I tease.

“Oh, please. My point is, you’ve got it all figured out.”

“Sure, though the decision is yours.”

She takes a deep breath before speaking. “I’ll call you tomorrow with news about your windshield replacement. I’ll

have my decision by then.”

I see Chuck standing by the SUV and looking at his phone. Beyond my driver is the face of her two coworkers. The brother is fit and tall, with a hint of Maeve’s high cheekbones and long lashes. His lips are in a tight line and his jaw is scruffy. Kind of like the enormous guy beside him. They’re both sending daggers our way.

Maeve stiffens beside me.

“Thanks for hearing me out, Maeve,” I say. “Tell your dad we’re all thinking of him.”

She turns to me, eyes so focused that their mix of green and brown and yellow is overtaken by black pupils. Maeve is always gorgeous. But when she’s fired up, it’s impossible to look away from those hazel eyes.

“Yes. The answer is yes,” she blurts in a rush.

“Do you mean yes, you’ll tell Declan we’re thinking of him?”

“No. I mean yes, but that’s, ugh,” she harrumphs. After a resigned sigh, she announces, “I’ll go with you. Saturday, for one party in Connecticut. I’ll do it.”

“Yeah?”

She confirms with one sharp nod. “Now get out of here before I change my mind.”

This time, I don’t bother holding back my victorious fist pump.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Maeve

I go into the office Matthew and I share for a bit of privacy. I need to talk to my nephew Bryce. I text him to call me as soon as he gets my message.

“Are you dating hockey players now?” My brother has followed me into the room, closing the door.

“Just getting right up in my business, huh? You have the subtlety of a Vegas billboard.”

All my brothers think they know what’s good for me. Seeing Matthew in the garage, ready to pounce and tell me what to do, was the final straw that tipped me over the side of helping Sergei. If I’m going to be judged every time I think for myself, well then judge away, brother.

When are they going to realize I’m no longer the baby of the family? *Though you’ll always be the baby that brought tragedy*, my brain says before I can shut it down.

“Dad told me Sergei Petrov is famous for having a different hookup in every city the Mavericks play. Does that sound like dating material to you?”

“Who I spend time with is none of your business. But since you asked so fucking nicely, we’re friends. I’m not interested in his love life, and he’s not interested in mine.”

Matthew’s guffaw is so loud, it can probably be heard by customers in the waiting room.

“Friends? You barely know him.”

For a moment, I indulge in a daydream of stapling my brother’s mouth shut. Realizing that would leave the garage understaffed, I stop myself from grabbing the stapler on my desk.

“This is what I know about Sergei,” I begin calmly. “He helped me with Dad, made sure the ambulance found us, and stayed cool when I thought I was going to lose my mind.”

I continue, “He also stepped in when I thought I was going to get sued for breaking that asshole’s nose. Yet never, not once, has Sergei made a pass at me.”

That’s if you don’t count the smolder that occasionally passes over his features. He’s a famous flirt, that’s all. It occurs to me I might have stumbled onto an answer to something that’s been bugging me.

Why me? Why is he so nice, attentive, and mellow with me when his reputation screams *passionate panty melter*?

It’s because I’m not a genuine threat to his bachelorhood. He can parade me as a girlfriend because it is so beyond the realm of possibility. I’m a friend who can buffer the attention of all those women. That’s not surprising, to be honest. I’ve always been the girl in the middle of a group of boys. That’s just my vibe. The hockey player trying to dodge relationships picked up on it immediately.

Good old Maeve: fun to be with, famously sarcastic, and dependably platonic.

My phone rings. Bryce.

“How’s my favorite aunt?”

“I’m your only aunt.”

“I don’t have to like you,” he says, and I can hear his smile. “But I do because you’re the best mechanic I know and the prettiest girl in the family.”

“Again, the only girl in the family. You’re so full of it, Bryce. Did you visit Grandpa yet today?”

“I will. I will.”

“Bryce—”

“Promise. I just need another half an hour at the lab and then I’m visiting Grandpa and definitely not bringing him any donuts.”

“If you weren’t so adorable, I’d... I’d...”

“You’d what, Aunt Maeve?” he asks in a sweet tone he’s been using on me since he was in kindergarten.

“Ugh! Nothing. One day your adorableness will run out and then what?”

“Then you’ll indulge me out of the goodness of your heart.”

“Ha!” I exclaim with a snicker. “That’s even less reliable than your charm.”

“I’ll take my chances. So that’s the reason you wanted a call back? I thought it was because of the fundraiser this weekend.”

“I called about that, too.”

“Oh, crap. Do you guys have to cancel it? I can look for another venue. Totally understand.” There’s a slight crack in his voice.

“Yes, we’re canceling it.”

“What! I can’t look for another venue at such short notice!”

I chuckle. “So much for your *understanding*. We’re canceling because it won’t be necessary. What if I told you there’s a sponsor who has donated enough money to cover the expenses?”

Silence. “Don’t mess with me,” he whispers.

“I wouldn’t do that to you, buddy.”

Matt has stepped closer, too, so I put our nephew on speaker.

“Are you sitting down?”

“No! Tell me already!” No longer whispering, Bryce is in a frenzy.

“The youth of today are too impatient for their own good,” I continue to jive.

“Maeve,” Matthew warns, equally piqued.

“The donation is ten grand. Do you want it? I need to be sure before I accept.”

“If I, what? If I want it? Of course I do!” he says and then follows up with, “Wait, what’s the catch?”

“Is this from the Russian?” Matt asks.

“Russian?” Bryce echoes. “Did you get muddled up with the bratva for my robotics team?”

“Yes, guys, that’s exactly what I did. Pledged my loyalty to an underground organized crime unit so you could go to Nashville for four days. Totally worth it.”

No one speaks. “I’m just kidding! Jesus, what’s wrong with you guys?”

“She’s seeing Sergei Petrov.”

“The hockey player who claimed he saved Grandpa?”

“He never said that!” I object.

“Yes, that guy,” Matthew answers Bryce. “And Grandpa doesn’t want Aunt Maeve hanging out with him.”

“What part of me being a grown-ass woman is lost on all of you!”

“You can date whomever you want, Aunt Maeve.”

“Thank you, Bryce. I’m happy someone in my family is enlightened about my rights as a single female adult to choose who I spend time with. For the record, we’re not dating.”

“Is he doing it because he likes you?” Bryce asks. “That makes me feel kinda weird.”

“Because it *is* weird!” Matt again, always with the opinions.

I know what they mean, though. It isn’t about whether Sergei can easily afford or truly be sincere about donating the money, it’s whether it’s ethical for me to accept the donation.

“You won’t use the whole ten grand, right? Think about it as a loan for a few thousand. We will definitely pay him back.

But for now, go win the competition and try to enjoy the experience. You deserve it.”

“Oh my god, I can’t wait to tell the team. Thank you! Thank you so much!”

“Don’t forget to visit Grandpa today.”

“Going right now. I love you guys.”

“Love you, too,” Matt and I say at the same time.

When the kid hangs up, I avoid my brother’s suspicious glare and announce, “Let’s get to work.”

“There’s no way there isn’t a catch.”

“It’s not a catch. It’s a favor. And before you get judgy on me, it’s a favor that helped me out when I was about to get sued.”

“I’m not following.” Matt crosses his arms over his chest.

“Sergei claimed I was his fiancée to convince his family’s fancy lawyer to help me. His sister’s birthday or ball or whatever is next weekend so we’re making a show of it for one night. Not a big deal.” I open the door and Bruno semi-stumbles in.

He’s red with embarrassment or irritation, it’s hard to tell.

“You are not his fiancée,” he grunts. Yup, Bruno is irritated.

“That’s ridiculous!” Matt exclaims. “Who would believe that?”

Something twists in my gut because, unfortunately, Matt is right. No one would think a hot NHL player would look twice at a girl like me. Self-consciously, I touch the part of my jaw where Sergei’s thumb had grazed to remove a smear of grime. That just about sums it up, doesn’t it? Sergei can wipe away my imperfections and quirks because he’s a friend who needs a favor.

But to the rest of the world, a girl with grease on her face is just a girl with grease on her face.

That's when Tristan video calls, second to the eldest and the bossiest one of all. Good thing he lives in Arizona.

"Hey Tristan," I answer. "Everything OK?"

"Wait," he barks. "Aiden's joining the call, too. Is Matt free?"

"I'm here!" Matt says.

Aiden gets his face on my small screen and, just like that, all three brothers and a mechanic are staring at me.

"I'm so happy to have this reunion, guys. Unfortunately, I HAVE A GARAGE TO RUN," I screech. Definitely loud enough to be heard by customers in the waiting room.

"My kid told me about the donation from the hockey goon," Aiden says.

"He has a name," I say defensively.

"What do we know about him, guys?" Tristan says dramatically because he thinks he's in a police show.

"C'mon, Tristan," I complain. "Just because you're a cop it doesn't mean you have to investigate everyone."

"Dad doesn't like him," Matt says by way of answer. "He came around with a fancy car, flashing his money. I don't like him either."

"What does he want from Maeve?" Aiden asks.

"What do you think he wants?" Tristan answers and Bruno grunts.

Unfortunately, this talking about and over me has been part of my existence since Tommy Sharp tried to kiss me after school when we were in sixth grade. It doesn't stop me from doing what I want, but right now, I'm so over it.

"You don't need me around to gossip about my life. I'm heading back to work."

I don't even bring my phone with me, leaving it on my desk as I slip back into my overalls and return to the garage. My life

is full of men and, right now, they all need to mind their own business.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Sergei

We're at the hotel bar after we beat Montreal four to zero tonight. Every visiting team knows you don't venture too deep into the city after a win. Canadians are famously friendly until you shutout their beloved Leafs or Habs. At which point, a recognizable defenseman like me would be asking for trouble, parading my ass around a defeated hockey-obsessed city.

"All you gotta do is wear gray sweatpants. Women go feral." Randi, our second goalie, is shoveling poutine into his face—an unlikely concoction of french fries, cheese curds, and gravy.

"You're telling me, if I parade in front of her with gray sweatpants, she'll go out with me?" Sean asks.

"If you flash a six-pack, sure she will." Randi lifts his shirt and shows his abs. There's no explaining how he can eat so badly and remain ripped. What a freak.

"You're serious about dating her?" I ask. Wendy, a woman from his hometown, recently moved to Columbus. It's no secret Sean has been trying to get in her pants for months. I had no idea it was more than that.

"That's what I've been saying! Why does no one listen to me?"

"No need to overthink this shit, boys," Gordon butts in. "Buy her flowers. Take her to a movie. Have dinner. Keep it simple, stupid."

"Nah, just take your clothes off," Randi pipes up again, gravy on his hands and around his mouth. Seriously, he's a pig on two legs. "That makes it harder to resist the primal attraction. At least, that's how it is for me."

I hate to admit that he's probably speaking from experience.

“We should ask Logan,” I say as a joke because I always give the guy a hard time. He’s completely in love with his wife and never shuts up about her. Logan doesn’t care that we call him pussy whipped, either. Just smiles and shrugs like he’s privy to a joke we aren’t smart enough to understand.

“Hey, Logan. We got a question for you,” Gordon calls him over. The guy is at the end of the bar with his face glued to his phone. Probably on a video call with his wife.

“What’s up?” He walks over after his call, smirking the whole time.

“Sean wants to bang a girl but getting naked isn’t doing it for him,” Randi drones.

“You don’t need to be naked to bang a girl,” Logan says thoughtfully. “Unless you’re having a hard time with, you know...”

“What?! No! She doesn’t believe that I want to date her exclusively. I’m stuck in the friend zone. Since you’re in the longest relationship I know of, tell me what to do.”

“My idea was to take her to dinner and a movie. He won’t listen to me,” Gordon comments.

“If I were a woman, I wouldn’t date any one of you guys, either,” Logan says.

I don’t know why that bugs me, but fuck does it ever. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re like kids in a candy store. Stuffing your face with a variety of cheap sugary shit like gummies, or licorice, or lollipops—”

“I haven’t had a lollipop in years,” Randi says dreamily.

“Because you’re a fucking adult.” That’s Jeremy, our main goalie who I didn’t even realize was listening.

“Focus, guys,” I scold. Logan had better have a point.

He continues, “You boys can have all the Jolly Ranchers and Sour Patches and chocolate bars in that store, but none of

it matters if what you're really craving is sweet apple pie straight from the oven."

Everyone stares at him with disbelieving eyes, stewing over what has to be the most ridiculous advice any one of us has ever heard.

Randi snorts. "Pie. I get it. Pie, like a woman's—" Gordon smacks the back of his head to shut him up.

"Are you saying I should ask her to bake me a pie? Or I should bake *her* a pie? I'm confused." Poor Sean.

"No! What I'm saying is, she's not easy or convenient or like the other women you're usually with," Logan says before taking a long swig of beer, basking in the attention. "No offense to anyone who wants a one-night stand or a casual hook up. I was all for it before I met Beatrice. But at some point, you'll have to figure the difference between what's available and what you actually want. Often, the latter takes more effort."

His confident smile, after such a facile point, is completely unearned. "So that's it? Put in the effort? Even *I* could have said that," I say, irritated.

"Sergei, you wouldn't know what kind of effort to put into a relationship if you got hit on the head with it." He's such a smug ass.

"That doesn't even make sense," I state dismissively though it's difficult to ignore the insult. "I know how to give a woman what she needs in a relationship. I've just never wanted to."

"Right. Like what?"

"What suckers like you do." I shrug. "Make charcuterie boards and scrapbooks. Go on vacation and post it on social media so she can brag to all her friends how rich her man is. Buy her stuff and give her babies. Easy."

"Wrong." Logan actually looks pissed. Maybe I shouldn't have suggested that his wife is superficial, but whatever. He's way too sensitive about her, anyway. "You have no idea, do you?"

“OK, enlighten me Dr. Phil. And drop the candy store and apple pie talk.”

“It’s making me hungry,” Randi whines.

Logan leans on his forearms, glaring at me. “A woman you want to spend your life with as a partner and a companion, she won’t settle for anything less than your *self*. The real you. The dreams and secrets and fears that you’ve never told another woman. The things you can hardly tell yourself. Anything less than complete honesty and vulnerability, she’ll see through the act. And she’ll either go along with the act, in which case you’ll never have an authentic connection. Or, if there’s any hope for a future, she’ll call you out on it. Either way, she’ll know if you’ve opened yourself up to her. That’s the effort I’m talking about.”

No one speaks or moves for an entire minute. I want to tell him that’s ridiculous because opening up is the same as asking to be gutted.

I want to tell him there’s no such thing as a fully authentic connection, as my parents’ twenty-seven-year marriage has made abundantly clear.

Most of all, I want to tell him honesty and vulnerability isn’t something any woman would want from me.

Instead, I stay quiet, glaring back at him.

It’s Sean who breaks the silence. “Yeah, I think I’ll go with Gordon’s idea instead.”

“Keep it simple, stupid,” Gordon says while raising his glass. A few people clink in solidarity.

Not me. I’m suddenly exhausted. “Heading upstairs,” I declare to no one in particular.

“Are you sure you want to leave now? Things just got interesting,” Randi says, glancing at a bunch of puck bunnies walking into the bar.

“I’m sure. See you guys in a couple of days.”

I got approval to travel without the team, so everyone knows to expect me in Dallas for the Sunday night game.

Seeing Ana tomorrow and being part of her celebration should make me happy. I am. Except the added complication of getting my mom off my back.

Thank god I made arrangements with Maeve.

I down my beer, throw money on the table, and head to the lobby. Before I exit the bar, however, two women block my way.

“Sergei, hey, it’s been forever.” A brunette in a skimpy black dress croons. She’s talking like we’ve met before and maybe we have. It doesn’t matter. I just want her out of my way.

“Yeah, nice to see you,” I say automatically.

My thoughts are elsewhere. Maeve better not change her mind about Saturday. I make a note to text her in the morning.

“You’re not going to sleep already, are you?” the other one asks. She’s got a shiny gold dress bright enough to land a plane.

“Do you want some company upstairs?” the first one asks while reaching over to touch my upper arm.

My skin crawls at the contact. I step back. “I’m good, ladies. Have a great night.”

Giving them a wide berth, I find my way to the lobby and then the elevators. I feel their laser eyes on the back of my head.

Although my reputation says otherwise, I’ve only ever slept with a fraction of the puck bunnies who have thrown themselves at me. Tonight, it’s the last thing I want to do.

I wonder if Maeve is awake.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Maeve

“But black is soooo boring!” Whitney whines from outside the dressing room.

“It doesn’t have to be,” Noeleen says. “Not if she flashes enough skin.”

“It’s a fancy party so there will be no flashing,” I call out from a room with several black or blue cocktail dresses. Considering the high odds of spilling something on myself, I’ve stuck to the dark colors.

“But your skin gets so washed out with black. We’re not going for the goth vibe, for goodness’ sake.” My best friend, Whitney, isn’t normally this bossy. Or picky.

“May I suggest something like this? Maeve has such a lovely figure, but all the dresses are just the wrong length and color.”

I don’t recognize the voice. Peeking out to check who the third member of this self-proclaimed fashion committee is, I see Louise. She owns the place. Back on the Rack is a consignment store around the corner from my apartment.

“Oh, Lou, how did I miss this?” Noeleen gushes.

“It came with a recent batch. I was steaming it in the back and just had to bring it out.”

“It’s not black,” I say, though no one is listening to me.

They’re too busy admiring the fitted top with a puffy tulle skirt. In pale pink! I never wear pink, never mind the pale kind. Whitney holds it up against my flushed cheeks. If her wide grin is any sign, she likes what she sees.

“You have to try it!” she screeches. “It makes your skin glow and your eyes pop.”

“No offense, guys. That isn’t... me.”

“Just because you’ve never tried something, it doesn’t mean it isn’t *you*,” Noeleen lectures.

“I’ve never pulled this card before, Maeve, but I’ll have to insist,” Lou says with forced harshness. “If you don’t at least try this on, I don’t think I can sell you anything.”

“Seriously? You’re supposed to be a fashion expert and businesswoman. Don’t let Whitney and Noeleen impose their questionable judgment.”

The thought of wearing something out of my comfort zone makes my skin prickle. I’m nervous as it is. I don’t want to embarrass myself and, I have to admit, I’m scared of embarrassing Sergei.

“Please, Maeve. For me?” Whitney begs.

“Fine.” I take the dress and hold it up against my body, looking at the full-length mirror. I’m not sure if it’s something a little girl would wear to a pretend tea party or the perfect outfit for a Barbie-themed prom. Sighing loud enough to be heard across the store, I slip it on.

“This top won’t work with my bra!” I call out grumpily.

“It’s called a corset style. It doesn’t need a bra,” Lou chirps.

I don’t bother facing the mirror knowing I probably look like an adult-sized cotton candy. The zipper closes and looking down at the top—or corset, excuse me—I notice the subtle glitter effect of sequins in a pretty pattern. But the color! Why pink?!

Unceremoniously, I pull the curtain open and drag myself out. All three women stare at me, slack jawed and wide eyed.

“I told you this is stupid!” Frustrated, I step back into the dressing stall.

“Maeve! It’s gorgeous. What are you doing?” Whitney circles my wrist and tugs.

“Stop it, guys. The flight is tomorrow, and I haven’t even packed. Let me find the perfect black dress already!”

“Pink is the new black,” Noeleen declares. “Now get out here.”

My so-called friends pull, push, and drag me toward the trifold mirror at the main area where various people are shopping in peace. I’m too annoyed to notice that the store floor has quieted.

“Look at yourself, Maeve. You’re beautiful,” Noeleen gushes.

I turn to the mirror. It takes me a minute to realize what I’m seeing. The dress doesn’t look pink at all. Not *pink*-pink, you know? Against my skin, there’s a subtle tint that both blends with my coloring as well as highlights it. Witchcraft, really. And the top is perfect for my small breasts, cradling instead of gaping. My shoulders look pretty good, too. What do you expect from a full-time mechanic? The tulle that I was afraid would come across as a tutu is sweet but not childish. It’s short enough to showcase my calves. With the right shoes, I might actually look tall.

“That looks incredible,” a stranger walking by comments. “If you don’t buy it, I will.”

“She’s buying it,” Whitney barks.

“Do you like it, Maeve?” Lou asks expectantly.

“I do. Thanks for finding it for me,” I say with a light squeeze on her forearm. She’s a sweetheart to help me, considering I only ever buy from her clearance rack most days.

“Any chance you’ve got the perfect shoes back there?” I ask, already dreading shoe shopping.

“Take a picture of yourself in the dress,” Noeleen says, “and bring it to Macy’s. They’ll help you find something. Go with simple and strappy. Don’t distract from the dress. I’d shop with you myself, but I have an appointment for highlights. Those take all afternoon.”

“Unfortunately, I have to work, too. Pose and I’ll take your picture.” Whitney has already grabbed my phone. Right when she clicks the camera, a text alert pings.

“Who’s Poser?” she asks, looking at my screen.

“Give that to me!” Why is everyone in my life so nosy?

Poser: Confirming I’ll be picking you up tomorrow. I’m already in Hartford. How’s Declan?

Me: Yes, I’ll be there.

Now that I have a suitable dress, I’m more confident about the statement. Good thing he didn’t text five minutes ago.

Me: Dad is well. He says hi.

Poser: No he didn’t. No need to spare my feelings, moya feya.

“What are you smiling about?” Whitney asks, looking over my shoulder. I step into the dressing room and briskly shut the curtain.

Me: My brothers made him paranoid about you. He’ll get over it.

Poser: My sister, however, sincerely sends her greetings. I’m having lunch with her and Ana insists I tell you.

Me: Hello to her too.

I realize this might be a good time to confirm that I’m on the right track for clothes.

Me: Hey, since I’ve never been to anything this fancy, can I send you a picture of what I’m wearing to the event? Be honest if you think it won’t work.

Poser: I'm afraid I can't give my valuable opinion unless you're actually wearing it.

Me: That's what Vera Wang said which is why I fired her.

Poser: Send me the picture. That's what a good girlfriend would do.

Me: Even if she turned out to be a terrible fiancée?

Poser: Especially if she's a terrible fiancée.

I chortle while sending him the picture Whitney took. In less than thirty seconds, he texts, **You're gorgeous. But you should send me a picture from behind, just to be sure.**

Before I can text my snarky "you wish," another one comes in.

Poser: This is Ana. Hi! I love the dress. And if you don't already have the perfect necklace, I have one you can borrow. That color is ah-ma-zing BTW. [clapping emoji, heart emoji, wink emoji]

Me: Thank you Ana. And thank you for inviting me.

Poser: Are you kidding? I wouldn't miss meeting my brother's first serious girlfriend.

That makes me pause. She's a lot younger, so it makes sense that she wouldn't know about Sergei's extremely active love life.

Me: I appreciate your opinion on the dress, knowing how busy you must be today. Thank you! I'll see you tomorrow.

Poser: I can't wait! [Thumbs up emoji]

Poser: She finally gave my phone back.

Me: I don't know how she turned out so much sweeter than her brother, but hanging out with Ana can only benefit you. Get back to lunch. I'll see you tomorrow.

I put my phone away and absentmindedly slip into my street clothes. For some reason, that brief exchange with his sister feels like I learned something about Sergei.

If you told me last week that a playboy hockey player who spends his weekends with multiple women hanging off his arm would indulge his sister's whims, I would have said you were crazy. Yet there's no denying they're close and that Sergei has genuine affection for the young woman.

A brother who cares for his sister can never be all bad. I should know. My siblings irritate me most days, but they'd do anything for me, and I'd do anything for them.

It's nice to know Sergei has that, too.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Sergei

She doesn't see me right away, allowing me to linger over details that would probably irritate Maeve MacElroy if I pointed them out.

The way her hair looks longer when it's straight and how nicely her dark-blue jeans hug her hips. She has a high-neck sweater that's slightly cropped. It's the color of burnt orange which I'm almost sure would pick up the sunset shades of her eyes. And she looks a little unsure, biting her plump lower lip and fumbling with her phone.

My phone pings. I'm here. Want me to wait at the curb?

I didn't go to the airport to be an Uber driver. I'm here for my fake girlfriend who I would never send to the curb to get picked up. It only takes a few strides to get her attention and close the distance.

Her features soften when she sees me. I was right. The sunflowers at the center of her hazel eyes are in full bloom. Maeve is always pretty; but up close, she takes my breath away.

"For a terrible fiancée, you're easy on the eyes," I say as a greeting.

"I'm not a terrible fiancée. I'm a fake one. There's a difference," she replies with her trademark sass. "You're not too shabby yourself. Nice shirt."

"Thanks," I say with a shrug. "Although I'm sure you'd rather see me out of it. That can be arranged."

She sighs in exaggerated annoyance. “Your ability to go from functioning adult to rude pervert is truly remarkable.”

“That’s the least remarkable thing about me, Maeve.”

“Wow. You really are full of yourself.” Her chuckle is a smooth, sexy thing. “Are all Russians this cocky, or is that why you got kicked out of the country? They unleashed a weapon of mass annoyance on Americans.”

“You’re not annoyed, Maeve. You’re in denial. I’m irresistible.”

Her eyes narrow like she’s making an important decision. “I’m already at the airport. I should just turn around and catch the next plane back to Columbus.”

I ignore her threat to leave and double down on my teasing. “In fact, you’re practically in love with me.”

“Looking at flights now,” she says, lowering her head to study her screen.

I reach out and use a finger to tilt her chin up. It’s soft and delicate against my calloused hands. When she faces me, we’re both smiling like fools. At the moment, I can’t imagine being anywhere else.

“Excuse me, are you Sergei Petrov?” a little boy asks with a timid wave.

Maeve steps away. I try not to growl at the source of our interruption.

“Yeah, kid. How’s it going?”

“Can I take a picture with you?”

“Sure.” That leads to some selfies with him, then with his mother. Another kid comes up. I look for Maeve who is patiently waiting from a distance, her face amused and her body relaxed.

“Let’s do a quick picture, kid. My girlfriend’s waiting for me.”

When I finally extricate myself from the growing huddle of people, I grab Maeve’s hand and walk briskly. She keeps up

without complaint and with an impressively fast pace. When we're finally in the parking garage, I exhale.

"Sorry I had to drag you like that. Are you OK?"

"Don't worry about me. I can keep up with you. That must happen all the time, huh?"

I open the door for her before slipping into the driver's side.

"I'm more recognizable here because I spent my summers in the area."

"Are people going to be asking for selfies all night tonight?"

"Ana would kill anyone who takes the spotlight from her." I shudder at the thought.

"You make her seem vicious. I bet she's a sweetheart."

"She is sweet. Can't believe she's seventeen. That's practically an adult." We drive out of the airport.

"You're protective of her," she says as a matter-of-fact. "Good to know."

"Why? Why is it good to know? Are you planning to use my virtues against me?"

"They're too few to use against anything."

I don't expect the burst of laughter that escapes my lips. Maeve never lets up on the cheekiness and I can't get enough. Waiting to hear what she'll say next is my new hobby.

"Glad you can take a joke, Poser. By the way, can we stop for food on the way to wherever I'm staying? I skipped breakfast."

"There's a French bistro inside the Bellflower Inn. We'll have lunch there."

"I meant like a Wendy's, nothing fancy. I'm sure you're busy today, getting facials and whatever it is posers do before parties."

"I have to eat, too. Or did you think my impressive musculature is made by starving myself?"

“I’m putting a stopwatch for when you next bring up your body. I don’t think two minutes will pass before you threaten to take off your shirt or refer to yourself as *muscula-tooorre*.” She exaggerates the last syllable with a rolling r.

“Admit it, *moya feya*, you think about my body more often than I could possibly bring it up.”

“I lost my appetite. Just drop me off.”

“Not a chance. We’re having lunch. Besides, we need to get our story straight before tonight.”

That quiets her. I glance to check her reaction. Maeve is facing out the window, her profile revealing a heavy curtain of lashes closing as she takes a deep breath.

Although my eyes return to the road, I’m acutely aware of her breathing, her movement, and her sound. She makes a little squeak when we drive through the scenic entrance of the boutique hotel.

“I take it the Bellflower Inn isn’t an alternative to the Holiday Inn,” she mumbles.

“It’s close to the country club and has a spa if you need a facial.”

She chuckles. “I’ll save the facials for you.” She sits straighter and pulls at her high neckline. “Am I underdressed for lunch?”

“Are you fishing for compliments?” I park in front of a valet and am about to open my door.

“Sergei, should I go upstairs and change out of my jeans?”

That’s when I realize she’s serious about feeling underdressed. Before I can answer, the valet opens her door and offers his hand. Biting her lower lip and straightening her back, Maeve exits the car like she’s about to get a dental root canal.

How is she so sassy one minute and hesitant the next?

I tell the porter her room number. I’ve had it reserved since yesterday. Making my way to Maeve’s side, I gently place my

palm on her lower back. Leaning down, I whisper in her ear, “I’d tell you if you’re underdressed. Trust me.”

I relish the aroma of her fruity shampoo. She smells like peaches in the height of summer.

“Thanks,” she says with a smile. God, she’s pretty.

We hold hands as we walk into the restaurant. It feels unhurried and natural, unlike when we were at the airport. It feels good.

“The table at the back,” I tell the hostess. I don’t want to be interrupted while we talk. There’s been more than enough selfies today. We settle into our seats, taking the menu offered by the hostess who tells us the server will arrive shortly.

“What did you tell them? About how we met.”

“I was vague. I think we should keep it simple and as close to the truth as possible. We met at the arena and started dating,” I answer while checking the menu.

“How long ago?”

“How long do people date before calling it a relationship?”

“How would I know?” she snickers. “I never date.”

Before I can process Maeve’s answer, the waitress fills our water glasses and takes our orders. We both choose the quiche that the bistro is famous for. While waiting for the food, I relaunch our conversation.

“Never?”

“Too busy. I go out though and, you know...” She trails off. “Of course, you know. You could probably write the book on going out and never dating.” She blushes and grabs her water like she’s using the glass to hide behind.

I cradle my chin between my thumb and index finger as if in deep concentration. “The truth is,” I begin in all seriousness, “I haven’t seen or thought about another woman since I met my lovely, caring, sweet, gorgeous girlfriend six months ago. Remember, sweetheart? It was love at first sight.”

She catches on immediately. “Of course I remember, honey. You begged me to go out with you, practically sobbing and on your knees whenever I said no. Finally, for the sake of your health and sanity, I agreed to one date.”

“And what an amazing first date,” I say, my cheeks strained by an irrepressible grin. “Remember how you jumped me? We didn’t even leave your house. You were so eager to get in my pants.”

I give a *tsk, tsk* sound just as the server brings our plates.

Maeve worries her lower lip. “You’re not really going to tell everyone I slept with you on the first date, are you?” she whispers incredulously.

“It’s the most likely scenario, to be honest.” I take the first bite of my side salad, enjoying the gasp of the woman in front of me.

“Gah, you’re so full of yourself. Fine! Tell everyone it was fireworks from the start,” she says with her own wide grin. “We couldn’t keep our hands off each other and stayed in bed making love for days and days. Who can blame you? I’m the best you’ve ever had, Poser.”

The words linger between us as she takes a bite of her quiche.

Food gets stuck in my throat. It doesn’t help that blood has drained away from my functioning brain and straight to my cock. I take a long drink.

“It’s settled then,” I manage.

The rest of the meal passes comfortably, like we’re two old friends catching up. Maeve updates me on Declan’s upcoming surgery. She also talks about her nephew studying to be a mechanical engineer. We stay away from the topic of her overprotective brothers. I provide minor insights about my family; as in, I’m only close to Ana.

Lunch finishes in a blink.

“I’ll walk you to your room.”

“You don’t have to do that,” she states, walking ahead of me and providing a stellar view of her backside.

“It’s what boyfriends do.”

“You’re right,” she utters resignedly. “Speaking of which, we might want to make some decisions about what a boyfriend would do PDA-wise.”

“We hold hands,” I say, entangling our fingers as we make our way out of the restaurant.

“Yeah, obviously. I’m talking about the other stuff. Hugging. Touching...”

I turn to her while we wait for the elevator. “Ass grabbing?”

“Sergei Petrov, promise me you will not grab my ass in front of your parents!” she stage-whispers even though we’re entering an empty elevator.

“New rule. No ass grabbing more than once.”

“No ass grabbing ever!”

“How about a little pinch?” I ask with a wink.

She knows I’m kidding now, so of course she plays along. “Only when essential to the mission.”

“That goes for you, too, my pretty little fairy. I know you already find me irresistible, but you’ll have to restrain yourself. Don’t say I didn’t warn you. It’s going to be near impossible to keep your hands off me tonight.”

The elevator stops at the top floor. I walk her to the end of the hall and give her the two key cards.

“Charge anything you want to the room. It’s under my name.”

“Thanks,” she says absentmindedly while strumming her key cards with a thumb. “So, are we, um, expected to kiss in front of everyone? That won’t happen, right?”

The words draw my eyes directly to her mouth like a magnet. It’s slightly parted and as plump as the peaches that her aroma reminds me of.

“To be safe, we should probably practice,” I rasp.

“Right.”

“I’m not kidding, Maeve. We can’t look like we’ve never kissed before. For instance, where would I put my hands?” I stretch my arm to lean a hand on the doorway. It’s the only thing keeping me from grabbing her tight little body.

Maeve’s gaze roams my face and strays up my arm. She sways slightly before coming closer. “Around my waist and in my hair,” she says breathily.

Fuck, yeah.

“Show me, Maeve. Show me how you like it.” I sound like I’ve swallowed sand.

She wraps one arm around my waist, fingers fondling my lower back muscles and sending lava through my veins. With her other hand, she lightly scrapes her nails up my neck till her grip finds my hair. The slight pull makes me growl.

I mirror her movements.

Slowly, I let a hand graze her hip before embracing her back and pressing her close. With the other, I gently run my knuckles along her cheek, her jaw, her earlobe before cradling her nape.

“I miss your curls.”

“You don’t like my Brazilian blow-dry?”

“Your what?”

“My sister-in-law gave me a blowout.”

“Fuck, Maeve, stop saying blow.” I’m in agony.

“Blow,” she states stubbornly and with a sexy chuckle.

I spread my fingers, supporting the column of her smooth neck. She leans her head back, inhaling sharply and closing her eyes. I tighten my grip slightly, tugging her hair and watching her reaction.

“Yeah, like that,” she whispers.

“I’m gonna kiss you now, *moya feya*. Say yes.”

“Yes,” she moans, and I’m undone.

Our mouths meet. Her lips are even more generous than I imagined. Hot, wet softness welcomes me. It takes immense self-control not to press her hard against the door. I take my time instead, relishing her honeyed breath and playful tongue. We sweep into each other’s depths, her nipples pert against my chest and our moans filling my head.

Suddenly, *tragically*, it’s over. Her eyes are overtaken by dilated pupils as black as night. We’re both breathing hard.

“I’ll, um, I’ll see you later, I guess,” she says huskily.

Maeve slips away from me, ducks into the room, and closes the door in my face. What the hell just happened?

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Maeve

That was a big mistake. Knowing how Sergei Petrov kisses is not something I need in my brain. How supple his mouth, how expert his tongue, how delicious his taste. No wonder he has women hanging off both arms.

Not only is he handsome and confident and funny, he's also a world-class kisser. Sergei is to other kissers what a Lamborghini is to other cars: luxurious, exciting, and completely unnecessary to get from point A to point B. In other words, an expensive, frivolous mistake. I literally cannot afford a ride like that.

Ugh, now I'm thinking about riding him. Big mistake.

I bang my head against the shut door. I have a few hours before he picks me up at six. It isn't going to take that long to steam my dress and contour my face. Noeleen convinced me to bring her portable steamer and borrow some of her fancier makeup. My usual mascara and lip gloss aren't good enough, apparently.

I should go for a walk to cool down. From the restaurant, I noticed a scenic walkway that led to large Adirondack chairs around a fire pit. A stroll would unwind some of my tight nerves.

Turning around to get my bearings in the room, I realize I'm not standing at the entrance of a room at all. I'm at a short hallway that leads to a sprawling space about the size of my living room and kitchen. A gas fireplace is on. There's a fainting couch in front of it. I don't know what else to call those fancy, curvy chairs with super long seats. The fluffy pillows and lush blankets call to me.

Did I say I needed a walk? Nah. What I need is a good book and a nap.

Going further into the fancy suite, I'm amazed by a four-poster bed with drapes of the prettiest print in blue and white. There are touches of blue and white around me, interspersed with flashes of light green and pastel yellow on the bedding, pictures, and furnishings. It is, in other words, how you'd imagine a Coastal Bed and Breakfast in a Hallmark movie.

"Holy shit," I mutter, because I've never been surrounded by so much casual luxury. It doesn't scream money; it whispers *wealth here, wealth there, wealth everywhere*.

Faced with an environment so beyond my regular experiences, I have a couple of choices. There's always panic, obviously. As in, I'm a mechanic from Columbus pretending to date a playboy hockey player from a posh family. Kill me now.

The other choice is to get a handle on perspective. It's one night, one favor, one party. Even if I make a fool of myself, it's in front of people I'll never see again. That eases my mind a little. As my Russian fake boyfriend would say, tit for tit.

I can't help smiling at how much fun we have together. If I can get amnesia about how good he tastes, we might actually stay friends. Unfortunately, there's no forgetting a kiss like that. I'll have to get through the ruse and move on tomorrow. No fake fiancé and practice kisses and black-tie events in my future. Tonight is one and done.

Touching the soft fabric of the bedspread while leaning against an intricately carved bedpost, I come to a decision. If this is the first and only time I stay in a high-class suite, I should treat myself to a luxurious bath, a good book, and a quick nap.

Shit, shit, shit. I slept in and have less than half an hour before Sergei picks me up. After my long bath, I pulled up a thriller on my e-reader and promptly fell asleep. A romance would have kept me awake, dammit.

My hair is no longer sleek and straight, having absorbed moisture from the bubble bath. The steamer is barely strong

enough to unwrinkle tulle and I already forgot the makeup tutorial Noeleen taught me last night. It's a good thing she sent me a YouTube video, which I'm trying to follow as best I can.

Right at six, a text. I'm at the lobby. When you're ready can I bring the necklace upstairs? There's no pressure if you don't like it but Ana made me promise to show you.

Assessing my appearance in the full-length mirror, I decide I'm as ready as I can be. My hair is thick and wavy, perilously held back by an elegant clip. The dress does wonders for my skin tone. The fit also makes the most of my figure, or what Sergei would call my *musculature*. I snicker. He's smug about his gorgeousness. However, I suspect that attitude also keeps people from poking at what's behind the swagger.

Me: Come on up. I need a couple of minutes to finish my makeup.

I unlock the door and sit at the dresser, trying to apply highlights to my cheeks and nose. I feel like I'm adding shine to parts I just powdered down.

A light knock indicates he's arrived.

"Come in!" Standing and turning at the same time, I lose my balance.

Being wobbly has nothing at all to do with watching the spectacular specimen of a man in a tuxedo stroll into my room. Who am I kidding? It has everything to do with him.

Anyone witnessing Sergei's manly form and sly grin and searing eyes would swoon. And that hair. It's thick, black, and combed back, except for one wavy strand that strays over his perfect brows. He looks less like a fashion mannequin and more like a wet dream. I realize why fainting couches exist in the first place.

“You look amazing, Maeve,” he says huskily. Or I think that’s what he says. I’m mostly lip reading since all I can process is the way his tongue runs along his lower gums and pushes against the inside of his cheeks. It shouldn’t be so sexy, but knowing what that tongue can do is going to kill me.

“Stop doing that,” I mumble.

“Doing what?” he looks concerned and now I feel stupid.

“Nothing. Did I say something?” I’m flustered. I’m never fucking flustered.

“What’s wrong?”

“It’s me. I fell asleep. I’m frantic from rushing.”

“You don’t seem frantic or rushed at all, *moya feya*. What you are is stunning.”

We stare at each other, air crackling between us.

“The necklace?” I eke out.

“Right.” Sergei takes a velvet pouch from the inside pocket of his tuxedo jacket. A sparkling object spills into his palm. When he unravels it, I gasp.

He’s holding up a single-strand necklace made of diamonds and rose gold. The center pendant is a multi-carat, tear-shaped diamond that belongs on the neck of a princess, not a mechanic.

“No. I can’t wear that!”

“You don’t like it?” Sergei looks confused and disappointed.

“That’s not what I mean. It’s too beautiful, too precious, even to borrow. It belongs in a safe, not on my neck!”

“So you *do* like it.”

“Sergei, it’s too much.”

“Turn around. Let me put it on you.” He takes a step forward and tilts his chin toward the mirror.

In a trance, I turn to the mirror and can hardly believe my eyes. Within the frame, I see myself, but not as myself.

There's a woman in a pale-pink dress, cheeks flushed as her chest rises and falls, struggling to take in oxygen. Her eyes are dazed and half-mast, like she's recently awoken from an erotic dream. Behind her is a man who towers over her protectively, his eyes glued to her neck, his lips slightly parted. He lifts his arms to place a sparkling object against her throat. It fits in a perfect V between her collarbones. The dangling pendant catches and releases light. The man's hands are confident as he clasps the necklace. His jaw clenches while his fingers skim the curve of her neck and along her shoulders. It's a light grazing that nonetheless makes her feel marked. When he steps away, she shivers at the cold that descends to fill the distance between them.

Sergei says something in Russian, soft and reverent.

“What did you say?”

“*Moya krasota*. It means my beauty.”

“You could have just said that.”

“I did.”

“We should go.”

He nods in agreement. “We should.”

We don't move, staring at our reflection as our bodies tingle with tension. I see the restraint on his hard face, his stiff shoulders, his tight fists. I want to take his fists and open them, one finger at a time. I imagine guiding his palms to my hips, along my rib cage and under my aching breasts. His aroma of fresh outdoors and woodsy tones makes me want to bury my face in his neck. I nearly ask him to grab my hair and kiss me again.

His phone pings, breaking the spell. Sergei grabs it from his pocket and looks at the screen. He swears under his breath.

“My parents are hoping to meet you before the party. It'll get so busy, that might be the only chance to talk.”

Like he threw water on my face, the words jar me back to the moment.

“What would they want to talk to me about?”

“Nothing specific. Just want to meet and play host, I imagine.”

Or ensure I’m acceptable before I’m thrown into the fray. I keep those ungenerous thoughts to myself, though. The sooner we get this over with, the sooner I can stop swooning over Sergei Petrov like every woman within ten feet of him tonight.

“Let’s do this, Poser.”

He chuckles while entangling our fingers. When did holding hands start to feel so natural, like we’ve been doing it for years?

I add it to the list of the things I shouldn’t know, but now crave. Big mistake.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Sergei

The Lake Shore Country Club is a misnomer. Sure, it's by a waterfront and, officially, it is in the country. But it's no simple club. It's a fortress in the form of a fantasy. The fantasy, as thick and impenetrable as the highest castle walls, protects the moneyed class from the troubles and struggles of the real world. And like any fantasy, it's scenic and idyllic for the few, and a pain in the ass to sustain for the many.

It's possible to focus solely on the crystal chandeliers and flowing champagne, the booming laughs and excited giggles, the long gowns and expensive cars. With enough alcohol, I usually manage not to cringe at what my teammates would think if they saw me stroll through the marble floors and pillared vestibule like I belong here. When I'm drunk, I don't notice the strained smiles of servers and the fake smiles of those being served.

I won't be drinking tonight, though. Not when Maeve needs me sober and alert.

She's holding my hand like she means to crush it. It turns out being a mechanic means you have the grip strength of an elite athlete. Her shapely shoulders are stiff and she's holding her dainty chin high. She looks as fierce as ever, but I know her a little better now. She's trying not to show how stressed she is.

She'd rather be in pajamas huddled under thick blankets instead of walking into a cold wood-paneled room where my parents are waiting. Actually, I'd rather be in pajamas and under blankets, too. Preferably with her.

But Maeve is entering this intimidating situation for me. She's walking by my side because I asked her to. The thought floods me with affection and gratitude.

From the threshold, I see my parents standing on opposite sides of the room, turned away from each other. When we enter, they automatically step to the middle and face us. They hate being together; I know this. But they always erect a solid front.

“Mother, Father, I’d like to introduce Maeve MacElroy. Maeve, these are my parents, Madelaine and Nikolay.”

Maeve has to tug her hand from my grip because I don’t immediately let go. Mother’s eyes drop to where we were connected.

“Good evening, Mrs. Petrov. It’s lovely to meet you. Thank you for having me,” Maeve says, displaying more class than I would have had in her place.

Mother takes her hand limply and offers a reluctant smile.

“Mr. Petrov, I’m glad to meet you as well. Sergei has such lovely things to say about Connecticut. I can see why.”

My sharp-tongued fake girlfriend is smooth when she wants to be, I’ll give her that.

“Call me Nikolay, please. I think that’s the first I’ve heard of Sergei being fond of any place that doesn’t have an ice rink.”

If she’s surprised by my father’s jab, Maeve doesn’t show it. “Mavericks are at the height of the hockey season, so I’m sure this is a welcome reprieve. Congratulations on your beautiful daughter’s debutante ball. I can’t wait to meet Ana.”

“Have a seat, Maeve,” Mother says tightly. “Can Nikolay get you a drink?”

“No, thank you.”

“And you, Sergei?” Father says from the butler bar.

“I’m fine as well.” That earns me a disbelieving look from the parental unit.

“So, Maeve, I’m afraid Sergei hasn’t told us anything about you. Is there a reason you’ve been keeping your relationship a secret?”

I cannot believe she started with that. Is there any wonder why I've never considered bringing anyone home to meet my family? Unless my mother has vetted a person herself, she approaches each stranger like they're a snake in the grass; that is, with sharp eyes and a pitchfork. I'm about to say something but catch Maeve's eyes. In them, there's a flash of uncertainty before determination settles.

"It's my fault. My brothers are very protective. They're all older and have somehow gotten it in their heads that hockey players can't be serious boyfriends. Sergei and I are trying to ease them into the idea of us dating."

"I can't say I blame them," Father says between his sips of scotch.

"They're wrong about Sergei," Maeve continues earnestly. "What people see in gossip rags or the reputation hockey players have, they're exaggerated in order to sell stories. Once they give him a chance, my brothers will love Sergei like I do."

My heart leaps a hundred feet at her words before it crashes on the hard ground of reality. *She's* the one exaggerating in order to sell a story. It would serve me well to remember that.

"Why do you care what your brothers think? You're a grown woman."

"Mother, her relationship with her brothers is not our business."

"If it's the reason she's hiding you like a dirty secret, it most certainly is our business." The harsh words come out of lips so stiffly, her mouth barely moves.

I match her hostile tone when I say, "You are purposefully mischaracterizing the situation." If she thinks that's antagonistic, she should consider that I'm already holding back.

Mother, you of all people have no right to bring up dirty secrets.

"They raised me," Maeve says while placing a gentle hand on my knee. "My mother, um, died when I was a baby. My

oldest brother, Aiden, was almost twenty when our mother passed away. I'm only a few years older than his son, actually. And then there's Tristan and Matt, both in their early forties now."

She clears her throat before continuing. "Of course, my father was always sweet and caring. Yet he was grieving in a way that made it impossible to function without my brothers. So they stepped up. You could say I have four dads, all bossier than the next." She ends with a slight chuckle.

My insides twist, partly out of pity for the grief that permeated her childhood, and partly out of gratitude that she nonetheless had the love of her family. I've never experienced that kind of closeness, but I understand it a little. It reminds me of being part of a team except with much more at stake. The MacElroys are kin through blood, not teammates in a blood sport. There are obligations and duties and dynamics, but it all comes down to sticking together, no matter what.

These are concepts my parents will never understand.

"I'll meet them when they're ready. I don't mind," I say while entangling our fingers. "Maeve is worth the wait."

"Sergei tells me you own your own business," my father states.

"Yes, my brother and I run an auto repair shop."

"That's interesting. Do you do the books or..." He trails off, waiting for her to fill in the blanks.

"I'm a mechanic *and* I do the books. We're looking to expand, actually, since there's enough work to hire a few more mechanics."

"Does one go to college to be a mechanic?" Mother's voice is terse and shrill. I don't like the sound of it at all.

"I did, while getting my ASE certification. That's the industry-standard test that every mechanic has to qualify for. But no, the job doesn't require my English degree, if that's what you're asking."

"A woman of many talents," my father says half-heartedly.

Mother, however, unleashes more judgment in the guise of questions. “I think talent entails rigor and training, don’t you?” she asks haughtily. “Not just a few hours looking under the hood of a car.”

I’ve had enough of her rudeness.

“It is a rigorous career,” I say assertively, barely containing my anger. “Maeve has more hours within a few months of her trade than some police officers have before being given their firearms. She’s trained and successful in a job that requires hard work and talent. You should apologize for insinuating otherwise,” I end with a snarl.

“Sergei!” Both women screech my name but in entirely different contexts. My mother due to indignation and Maeve out of concern.

“No need to defend my job, sweetheart,” she says tenderly. “I know you’re proud of me.” She lifts our hands and gives my rough knuckles the sweetest kiss.

The room stills. My blood pressure lowers. By simply being herself, Maeve disarms the landmines in the room. That act of warm, sincere fondness outshines my mother’s cold and calculating ways. Suddenly, all that matters is that the woman beside me has claimed me as hers.

At the moment, I want to sweep her in the cradle of my arms, kiss her till I can’t breathe, and find the closest bed so we can bury ourselves under some blankets.

“I love you,” I say reverently. She blinks slowly twice before smiling.

“I love you, too, Sergei Petrov,” she states playfully, just loud enough for my parents to hear.

“Oh my god, Sergei? Maeve? Why didn’t anyone tell me you’re already here?!” Ana bursts into the room with even more energetic mayhem than usual.

Maeve rises to meet Ana’s hug. My sister is taller, yet something about the way she clings to Maeve reminds me of her as a child. Maeve gives a wide and indulgent smile in

return, her hazel eyes crinkling at the edges and her features softening with affection.

“I’m so happy you’re here,” Ana nearly squeals. “Can you come with me to the dressing room? I want to introduce you to my friends. Oh, your hair is so soft! Did I already tell you how much I love this dress? Because I looovvve this dress. Where did you get it? It looks like vintage Versace. Is it? Your necklace looks incredible, by the way. Like, wow. Let’s go to the dressing room. Everyone is dying to meet the woman who finally got my brother to fall in love.”

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Maeve

She's as dizzying as a whirlwind and rambles like an audiobook on accelerated speed. Still, I could kiss Ana for pulling me out of that room.

I was ready to meet parents reluctant to believe their son is in a serious relationship. I never expected such a hostile and leery interrogation.

Looking over my shoulder at Sergei, I see him bent over his phone. Almost immediately, my phone pings from inside my clutch purse. Grabbing my phone, I read his message.

Poser: Should I rescue you now or in five minutes?

Me: I don't know. Is Ana taking my fingerprints?

Poser: I'm so sorry about that. My mother was completely out of line.

Me: It's done. She'll be too busy to care about me when the guests arrive.

"I swear, he can't even leave you alone for two seconds! When he isn't talking about you, he's calling or texting you," Ana complains with an eye roll.

"Talking about me?"

"Non. Stop." She leads me to a bustling room that looks to be filled with a dozen young brides. There's so much white, it's blinding. Ana stands beside a dressing table and shoos away the young lady sitting on the chair.

Bumping the woman's shoulder with her hip, Ana orders, "Natalie, you've been hogging the makeup artist all night. It's

my turn!”

“You already had your turn,” the young lady grumbles while she gets up.

Ana takes the seat and gives the makeup artist instructions about touch ups and contours and highlights. Because of my recent tutorial with Noeleen, I understand one-third of the conversation.

“I’m sorry about your dad getting sick. Sergei told me you were together when it happened.” She has her face tilted upward in benevolent tolerance of the makeup artist’s efforts.

“I don’t think the ambulance would have found us in the arena if he didn’t grab them outside. He helped a lot,” I say.

It’s true. The more I think about that night, the more I realize meeting Sergei was a blessing and not the annoyance I originally thought it was.

“Then why did you cancel the engagement with my brother?” she asks loudly.

The entire room goes quiet.

“*You’re* engaged to Sergei?” a young woman asks vehemently as she approaches.

“I was. Not anymore.”

“They’re back to dating,” Ana says while having lip gloss applied with a brush, so it sounds like “yayr ak to ayting.”

“Since when?” the girl stalks toward me.

I can kick the ass of men double my weight so there’s no reason to fear a seventeen-year-old girl in a virginal white gown. Or is there?

“Don’t mind her,” Ana says to me. “Caroline has been in love with Sergei since forever. Actually, most of my friends are.”

“I’m... sorry?” What else is there to say?

My phone pings. I'd rather not go in there to save you, but I will if you want me to. I'm right outside the door.

“Speaking of the devil, he’s waiting for me. You look stunning, Ana. I can’t wait to see your entrance and your waltz,” I say with a pat on her hand.

I still have the attention of a majority of the girls, so I do an awkward Vanna White wave. “You’re all beautiful! Have a great, um, night everyone! Break a leg or whatever.”

Poser: I'm going in.

“Gotta run!” I say while I rush out, colliding into the broad, hard chest of Sergei.

We tumble back across the hallway with his arms around me. His back crashes against the far wall. Without losing our connection, Sergei moves us to a darker corridor and switches our position, so it’s my back to the wall with his hand cradling my neck. He’s looking down while caging me in.

“Hey,” he mumbles, staring at my lips. They are slightly parted because I’m out of breath.

“Hey,” I echo.

I’m filled with relief that we’re finally alone. There’s no need to be uptight and defensive around Sergei. The tension I’d been carrying since we walked into the country club melts. It helps that his hands are moving up and down my back and along my shoulders, kneading the knots into submission.

“Thank you and I’m sorry,” he says. “I’ll be saying that every day till the day I die.”

“All day or at a particular time? You should put an alarm to remind yourself.”

We both laugh at my lame joke. “They were reasonable questions, I think. Considering I’m a stranger she’s never

heard about. That's probably maternal instincts making her super protective."

"Kind of like your protective brothers, huh?"

"Actually, yeah," I say, because the comment is surprisingly perceptive. "I had four protective dads, but they were also nurturing in the way moms are expected to be. Aiden took a night shift so that I wouldn't have to be in day care. Tristan is bossy as fuck, but he was in charge of my after-school activities. Made me try everything from ballet to softball. Matt introduced me to cars. The garage is my livelihood; that's possible because of him."

Sergei is so close, our noses graze slightly. "You have an amazing family."

"I know."

"And you're too good for this place, Maeve," he says regretfully. "I should get you out of here. Let's go."

"No! I promised Ana I'd see her entrance and her dance. She'd be upset if we left. You know that."

Sergei's grip tightens, his closeness releasing pheromones I want to chase by climbing his tall, solid frame. Turns out, posh lumberjack aroma really does it for me. Sergei has his face by my temple and his nose in my hair. A deep moan travels from his chest to mine, where my heart rapidly pumps heated blood. If you told me the building was on fire, I'd believe you.

He moves his face slightly. Soft lips brush against my earlobe. "We'll stay for a while. But don't even think of leaving my side."

I shiver. My fiery body begins to ache. Lower. Right at the core of me, there's a force that builds and spreads. Need chokes my airways and squeezes my insides.

"OK."

He pulls back to assess my features. "OK? No snide remark to follow?"

"I can't think when you're this close." My confession should embarrass me. His smile should infuriate me.

There's no time for any reaction, though, when he mumbles, "Neither can I."

Then, Sergei kisses me. Hot and hungry, it makes my head spin and yet grounds me in the moment. Our tongues entangle in a tender dance, sweeping one second and delving the next. He tastes incredible. Arms clamp, fingers caress, and chests heave. It's not just his mouth kissing me, he uses his whole body. Nothing has ever felt this erotic.

A loud throat clearing grabs my attention, so I push Sergei away. He looks at me, hair flopping down and lips puffy. His eyes are molten brown and sleepy-looking, like I imagine he'd look first thing in the morning. God, it's sexy.

"Do you want me to stop?"

I point my finger over his shoulder. Sergei turns around brusquely, not bothering to hide his irritation. "What?"

"Sir, the guests are arriving, and your parents have asked for your presence in the ballroom," a uniformed man states.

"We'll be there soon," he declares dismissively.

When the man leaves, Sergei lifts my hand and presses soft lips against my knuckles. "We're staying till Ana's dance. And then we're leaving together. I want to be with you tonight, *moya feya*."

"I want that, too, Poser," I respond honestly.

"I never thought I'd look forward to a debutante waltz, but fuck, I can't wait." At that, we walk into the ballroom, hand in hand.

Much of the evening passes in a blur. We mingle and chat. He introduces me as his girlfriend and half the people raise their brows in either surprise or disbelief.

The other half glare at me when they think no one is looking. They're all women. I'm not sure I should go into the bathroom alone. It would only take one shiv made from an eyeliner to inflict serious injury, after all.

It's the way they look at Sergei that really bothers me, though. Like he's a piece of meat and not a person. A prize

that someone stole instead of a friend, a brother, a son. An object to covet and possess. If this is the kind of attention he gets in these places, no wonder he went to extremes to discourage his mother's matchmaking.

Finally, we're in our seats awaiting the entrance of twelve lovely young women, Ana being the most graceful and gorgeous of them all. They dance with young men in tuxedos. I've never seen so many bow ties and gloves since I watched the movie *Titanic*. Music wafts and bodies glide. Mercifully and with resounding applause, the waltz ends.

"Let's say hi to Ana before we slip out," he whispers in my ear.

His impatience, the second Ana leaves the dance floor, is nearly palpable. As we walk across the ballroom, a sea of bodies separates to make room for Sergei. He's always formidable. The kind of determination he's exhibiting right now, however, is downright intimidating.

I, however, am not at all intimidated. It's so much worse: I'm insanely turned on.

My body hums to the tune of its own elaborate waltz, a twenty-piece orchestra blasting Tchaikovsky like there's no tomorrow. And it recognizes only one dance partner: Sergei freaking Petrov.

CHAPTER TWENTY

Sergei

It feels like an eternity passes before we find ourselves in my car. Maeve has remained quiet since we left the ballroom. That's not unusual. I've learned that she can be silently thoughtful one moment and cheerfully witty the next. But right now, I need a clear sign of what she wants. Preferably in the form of throwing herself at me. Short of that dream scenario, I'll take verbal confirmation that I'm invited into her room.

"I don't like how they look at you," she says out of nowhere.

"Who?"

"People. The women especially." I glance to catch her shiver.

"How do they look at me?"

She doesn't answer right away. And then, apologetically like she's embarrassed on their behalf, she answers. "Like you're their next meal."

"It's the natural consequence of being so delicious looking," I joke. She offers a shallow laugh.

"If it was a matter of simple desire or longing, that's one thing. But there's this sense of watching other people watch you as well. It's a meal they want because other people want it, not necessarily something they'd enjoy," she muses before sitting straighter. "Sorry, that didn't come out right."

"If anyone else said that to me I'd take it as an insult."

"But not from me, right?" She squirms.

"You've been insulting me since the night we met and I still asked you to be my fake girlfriend," I say, shrugging. No point

denying the obvious. Maeve can say almost anything, and I'd still want her around.

She reaches out and lays a gentle hand on my shoulder. "I see why you needed a buffer. They're scary."

"As scary as Bruno ready to pummel me when I dropped my car at the garage?"

"Bruno is protective. Those women are predatory."

Something lodges in my throat, blocking any normal response. She can't possibly know what her words do to me. Without meaning to, Maeve stirred up past weaknesses, past mistakes, past regrets. But I can't resent her for her sharp insights. She offers them with no agenda. We stop at a red light. I turn to Maeve and watch her fingers brush over the necklace. Concern softens her otherwise fierce expression.

It strikes me that there's no room for the past in a moment like this. Tonight, no one else matters except *moya feya*. My pretty little fairy has a generous heart, a fascinating mind, and a remarkable spirit. The only woman who's ever made me laugh and lust at the same time. All. The damn. Time.

I park in front of the Bellflower Inn and throw my keys to the valet. It's me who opens her door and takes her hand. No one else touches her tonight. I don't let go as we wordlessly walk through the lobby, into the elevator, down the hallway, and in front of her door.

"Do you want to come in?" she asks softly.

"You know I do, Maeve. It's what *you* want that matters. We can say goodnight now and I'd still think you're the best girlfriend I've ever had, fake or real. A1, top-notch, best—"

She grabs my tuxedo's lapels and melds our mouths together. We don't stop kissing while she taps the key card and I push the latch down. The door swings open. We tumble in, grabbing and clamoring.

The suite is dark. I run my hand against the wall to find a light switch.

“That’s too bright,” she mumbles while I lick and nibble her neck. She tastes incredible, the hint of peaches mixing with a new flavor. Herbal and minty.

“I want to see you clearly, Maeve. All of you. Been wanting to, ever since I laid my eyes on your tight little body.”

“Me too,” she says desperately while giving my neck a gentle suck. My erection throbs. She moves her lips to my Adam’s apple and lower. Fingers tug at my bow tie and then flick one button open after another.

We can take our time later. Right now, we both need to be naked. I undo the rest of my buttons and rip the shirt off. Her eyes glaze over while her hands roam my torso. Maeve hand grazes outline of my cock straining under my pants. I groan at the contact, and she whines with need.

“This was never in the plan, Sergei.”

“Plans change.” I grab her hand and place her open palm against my groin. “Take it out and grab it the way I know you want to. Been thinking about your hands all night and how pretty they would look around my cock.”

Like she’s eager to unwrap a present, Maeve pulls and tugs till my erection bounces hard against my abs and I’m fully exposed. I step over the discarded pants, pushing my shoes and socks off.

“You cannot be real,” she mutters. “No one looks like that.”

“Your turn, *moya feya*. Unzip that dress before I tear it with my teeth.”

She does what I say and I almost chuckle because I couldn’t believe she didn’t have a comeback. When did Maeve ever do what I asked without objection or snark?

All thoughts disappear when her dress pools at her feet. She’s naked except for the necklace and a white thong. Her small breasts are perfect for my mouth, those nipples begging to be sucked. I bend over to drop kisses over the swells of her breasts. I keep Maeve standing as her knees buckle. My teeth graze her nipple before I suck hard, causing her to release the sexiest moan.

“You like that, Maeve?”

“God, yes. More.”

“So demanding. So perfect,” I croon, taking my time to explore her breasts, kissing along her collarbone, and behind her ear. I take a fistful of hair out of the way and suck her neck. My slight tug elicits another moan.

“On your back, Maeve.” My lips move along her earlobe as my hands grab her butt cheeks. “Get this ass on the bed and spread your legs.”

She lies down and I can’t believe she follows directions with no back talk. I watch her body wiggle in anticipation under my gaze. I can’t help testing my luck. “You’re stunning. From now on, you don’t wear a thing when you’re around me.”

She stops wiggling and sits up on her elbows, eyes wide and indignant. “Are you just ordering me around all night, or are you actually going to fuck me?”

I chuckle. “There she is.”

Kneeling on the bed and grabbing one leg, I run my lips along the inside of her calves while thumbing the back of her knees. Releasing her legs, I bend down to graze her thighs with a little teeth, approaching but never fully kissing the center of her body. Her hands find my hair and her hips arch upward.

“So eager for my tongue.”

“Not for talking,” she grumbles while continuing to grab my hair and move her hips.

“Need me to lick this delicious cunt, don’t you?”

“I could be dying of old age, and you’d still be talking,” she hisses while squirming.

“No one’s dying till you bend over for me, Maeve.”

I press my face where she’s been begging for pressure and lick her folds with long, firm strokes. Her legs tremble. Maeve’s grip on my hair tightens. I take her response as

encouragement to continue to glide my tongue, to suck her clit.

She's unbelievably wet, her arousal filling my mouth and that point at her apex getting firmer, rounder. I'm about to include my fingers in the exploration of her body when I feel it. A rush of liquid hits my throat, sweet and thick. Her back jerks off the bed in an erratic rhythm. Did she just...

"Almost there," she says weakly.

"You sexy little thing, did you already orgasm? I barely touched you."

"You're going to ruin this for me, aren't you?" she grumbles, splaying her forearm over her eyes.

"Maeve, wow, really?"

"I'm a freak. Just say it."

"What?! Why would I say that? You're the farthest thing from a freak. Baby, you're my fantasy come to life." I move up to kiss her hard and deep, her wet thighs rubbing against my arousal and making me crazy.

"Never hold back on me, Maeve," I say breathlessly. "Your pleasure is what I want. And now that I know how responsive you are, I'm going to make you come till you beg me to stop."

"Exaggerate much?" she says while swirling her hips against mine and nipping my ear.

"It's a promise, not an exaggeration."

"I'm sorry, what did you say? Your ego got in the way of my hearing."

We both chuckle at her sass. I cannot believe I'm laughing while remaining this painfully hard. How is that even possible?

Stupid question. I should know by now that this woman under me, my pretty little fairy, makes me feel like anything is possible.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Maeve

The deep V of his hips leads to the most muscular thighs I've ever touched. Are those quads even for real? His torso is lean and sculpted, contoured ridges undulating under his skin as he looms over me.

I had a glimpse of him shirtless that one time. I had tried not to stare. Now that I let myself see everything, feel everything, touch everything, I'm back on the edge. Sergei naked is nearly enough to make me come again.

In the past, some men have not reacted favorably to my... tendencies. Yes, I respond to sexual stimulation quickly. Is it weird? Sexual partners haven't said so out loud, but there's a distinctive look. It says: *You're not normal. Do I have a superpower or are you a freaky, clingy slut?*

It's come to where I hide my first orgasm. How do I explain that it's a physiological quirk? When I pleasure myself, it hardly takes a minute before my body peaks.

But Sergei knew. He reads my body like a book. It makes me feel helpless, this power he has over me. I want to tip the scales. Bring him to the edge where I'm teetering.

"I need you in my mouth, Sergei." I push him off me and straddle his hips.

"Don't let me stop you."

Blood rushes in my veins like a brewing storm, making me dizzy. I look at his erection, long and leaking and stiff.

"Grab my hair," I say. "The way I like it."

He wraps my curls around his fist and tugs. I smile and kiss my way down his abdomen, where his long cock twitches. My fingers move under his heavy balls, handling them with a little pressure and a lot of care. I watch as he pushes his head back

against the pillow and mumbles words in Russian. They sound like curses.

Hands in my hair, he guides me lower. It feels incredible to be directed, to be needed. My lips wrap around Sergei's smooth, rounded tip. The taste of his arousal spurs me on. I need more. Unrestrained, I hollow my cheeks and suck as hard as I can.

That aroma that drives me crazy? Woodsy and herbal with just a hint of salt? It's in my mouth and it's so fucking delicious.

"That's it. That's how I like it. Fuck, yeah."

His hips move up, his erection plundering and stretching my mouth. My body is already thrumming, an ache building between my legs. I reach down to touch myself, to relieve some pressure.

Immediately, Sergei stops his swirling hips. He takes my chin between his finger and thumb to tilt my gaze upward.

"There are condoms in my jacket pocket. Put one on me, then get on your knees."

"You brought condoms?" I snark, emphasizing the plural. "That was optimistic."

He pulls me up from my armpits, reminding me of how strong he is, and kisses me hard. It's like being manhandled and caressed at the same time.

When we part, he speaks into my mouth. "Condom. Knees. Now."

I scramble off the bed and grab his jacket. Feeling for the foil packets, I pull one out and shake it like a prize. He offers that deep, sexy chuckle when I crawl over him. It sounds confident and intimate, masculine and tender. It sounds the way Sergei feels.

I sheath him. His rod has a heartbeat when I squeeze it tightly. Sergei uses his powerful legs to flip me around and over. I end up facing the headboard, ass in the air.

"Holy shit, what kind of Magic Mike move was that?"

“Who the fuck is Mike?” he grunts. “Never mind. New rule. No talking or thinking about other men when we’re in bed together. Other names will not be spoken while my cock is inside you. Except mine. I’ll also accept master.”

“Oh, god, you’re impossible.”

“I’ll allow that one, too.”

He bites both my butt cheeks, harsh and swift. Sergei grabs my hips and tugs my body back, nestling his arousal against my slippery folds.

My arms shake and my core weeps. The head of his cock finds my opening. He teases me by moving it up and down the soaked seam. I lean back, silently begging for penetration, but he holds me in place, fully controlling the contact between our bodies.

Finally, he pushes into my channel, one torturous inch at a time. I’m quivering as I fight the need to fuck him back, instead letting my body accommodate his girth. He’s thick and nearly painful, but it’s the kind of pain that awakens everything inside me. Already, my body is clenching. I try to stop it, biting my lips and holding my breath.

When he pushes all the way in, the pulsing begins.

“Oh, yeah, that’s it,” he says, rocking into my body in strong, steady strokes so his tip reaches my depths. My orgasms are usually quick and *quick*. But not this one. He moves with the waves of pleasure, rolling his hips to coax more and more from me, building higher.

“Fuck, I’m still coming,” I say in disbelief.

He mumbles something in Russian, words that sound lewd yet loving.

Speeding up just as my climax crests, Sergei carries me through the longest and strongest orgasm of my life. I scream his name, I curse, I make up my own dialect of nonsense sounds.

And then he slows down, cautiously caring for my nether lips that are extra tender from his blissful penetration.

“I felt all of that, Maeve. Fuck, that was incredible. Again. I want to feel you squeeze my cock again.”

He grabs some pillows and places them under me, along my lower abdominals. His body presses me down. We're connected, my back to his front. Kissing my neck and tugging my hair, Sergei grinds against me in deep, swirling circles.

I push my face against the mattress, not caring that my makeup and drool will probably ruin the sheets. While continuing to grind against me and build me back up, Sergei takes one hand to cradle a breast. My nipples are so sensitive, his touch makes me shiver.

The pace increases, the circles wide and crushing. When Sergei bites into my shoulder and sucks hard, I feel it in my pussy like a tug. I'm raw from my orgasms, so the friction almost hurts. Sergei flips me over and enters with a smooth thrust. It's glorious, though my body is too spent.

“Give me one more and I'll let you rest for a while.”

He presses his tongue against his cheek while determination floods his features. The most gorgeous man I've ever touched is inside me. More magnificent than a dream and more astounding than any reality I've ever encountered. Hips pumping, he finds my clit and works it with his thumb. Watching his chest straining and his abs rippling sends me over the edge.

I scream. He roars. Pleasure floods our bodies, connecting us in a primal, intimate way. When bliss turns to satisfaction, we collapse, breathing hard and sweating buckets.

I look at the top of the four-poster bed, intricate patterns etched on wood. If I focus on it, maybe my postcoital awkwardness will pass. Normally, this is the point when one of us would start getting dressed. Usually, that's me.

“I see a spiderweb.”

His body shifts, head tilting to touch mine. “Should I be insulted that you'd rather stare at a spiderweb than look at a man who can't keep his eyes off you?”

Relentless flirt. “You already got laid, buddy. You can take a break.”

“Never.”

I feel Sergei settle on his side in order to face me. He runs a single finger over the diamond necklace, which is the only thing I have on. I didn’t feel it while we were making love. Now it’s distinctly solid while the rest of me feels disjointed.

“I love watching you come,” he says with a smirk.

“Please don’t talk about it.”

“You can’t possibly be ashamed of something so incredible, *moya feya*. Gifts from the heavens should be celebrated. I’m great at hockey and giving orgasms. You’re great at fixing cars and having orgasms. We call that *lyubov*.”

“Really? One word means all of that?”

“Maybe.” He’s holding back a snicker. The man is obviously pulling my leg.

Turning to my side to face him, I give Sergei’s shoulder a playful punch. “What does it mean? Be serious.”

“Yes. It means all of that.”

“Yeah, right. You probably made up the word.”

“You’ll have to look it up.”

“You are the worst translator in the history of translators.”

“I told you I’m good at two things, Maeve. Hockey and sex. There are enough translators in the world.”

“Let me guess. Only one of you.”

“Exactly,” he says with a sleepy grin. “Enough talk of spiders and translators and my sexual prowess. Let’s sleep for a couple of hours before you ride me again.”

“No one was talking about your sexual prowess, Poser.”

He snickers. “Not yet. Soon you’ll be calling me a sex god.”

He pulls me to him so my cheek nestles on his chest. My leg wraps over his hips without my explicit permission. A hand strays up and down his torso. I relish the soft fuzz of chest hair and the hills and valleys of his body's terrain.

Sergei's breath evens out. He's asleep.

I letting myself enjoy the rush of air from his exhale, the warmth of his body, the steadiness of his heartbeat against my palm. Before sleep pulls me into its depths, I mutter with a smile, "Goodnight, sex god."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Sergei

I wonder if she's awake. The early flight to Dallas forced me to get out of bed before full dawn. Maeve looked too peaceful and gorgeous to disturb, wearing only her necklace.

Last night blew me away. There's no other way to put it.

I knew we would be great together. From the moment she snarked her way into living rent-free in my brain, being with *moya feya* has been a fantasy I was determined to bring to life.

Not consciously. Or not *fully* consciously. There's simply a relentless force driving me toward her, making me say and do things I never thought I'd say or do just to be closer.

Fucking inconvenient, to be honest. I've never felt the tight clenching in the middle of my chest at the gift of a woman's smile. Never knew closing the door behind me while she's on the other side could be a tangible physical discomfort. And there's a phantom aroma that follows me everywhere: the peachy-herbal smell of her hair mixed with the fresh ocean taste of her arousal. If this plane crashes, I'll regret not sucking her tits this morning. Images from last night distract my mind and stir my body. Like I said: fucking inconvenient.

The four-hour flight felt like a whole day because I couldn't keep still long enough to fall asleep. When we land, I fire up my phone and find what I've needed since leaving Hartford.

Krasivaya Maeve: Good morning. You're probably in the air by now. I just wanted to thank you for last night. Have a safe flight and a great game.

Krasivaya Maeve: How do I return the necklace to Ana? I don't have her number. Should I just return it to you when I see you next?

Krasivaya Maeve: Not that I expect to see you right away or anything. I just mean I don't want to leave it here.

Krasivaya Maeve: I can also mail it if you text me her address. Like, if I don't see you. That's fine too.

Krasivaya Maeve: I know it's valuable so it would be registered mail or rush or whatever it is that makes Amazon packages arrive in two days.

Krasivaya Maeve: Can you do me a solid and erase this thread? I know you've read my texts and rolled your eyes to the back of your head, but I'd feel better if we can pretend I'm not text vomiting. Thanks.

Me: I had a terrible flight because I wish I was in bed with you. I'm safe and plan to kick ass tonight. There's no need to return the necklace because it's not Ana's. I will definitely be seeing you as soon as I get back in town so YOU should be texting ME an address. Finally, no. I will keep this thread of your text vomit because it is hard evidence that you miss me. You're welcome.

Krasivaya Maeve: You are the worst.

I gather my things and head to the terminal where I find a quiet place to make a call.

“Hey.”

“Hey,” I say with a grin so wide my cheeks strain.

“What do you mean this isn't Ana's necklace?”

“She was going to lend you something else.”

“Then who did I borrow this from?”

“No one. It's yours.”

She doesn't speak, the sound of the airport on her end the only indication that Maeve is still on the line. I knew she

would make a fuss, which is why I didn't make a big deal of buying her the necklace.

When she sent me a picture of her dress, I was on my way to go shopping with Ana after lunch. My sister likes to pick her own jewelry, which was my debutante celebration gift. While Ana tried half a dozen earrings, I kept returning to the picture of Maeve.

The rose gold made me think of her dress, and the diamonds reminded me of her eyes when they reflect the light. That necklace was made for her, even if she needs convincing. Seeing jewelry around her neck—jewelry I chose and bought for her—was a pleasure I didn't expect. I love that she didn't take it off while we made love. In fact, I don't think she should ever take it off until I buy her another one.

"It's not for you. It's for your dress," I lie.

"Is that something you usually do? Buy jewelry for the dresses your dates wear?"

Ouch. I know I have a reputation, but does she think so little of my gesture?

"You know the answer to that, Maeve."

"To accept something this extravagant is weird, Sergei. I don't know how I feel about it."

"It's not weird, *moya feya*. It's unusual. There's a difference," I say, fighting down the twist in my gut. Is this what rejection feels like?

"You agree that this isn't normal."

"There's nothing normal about us."

She makes a sound of exasperation. "You make me crazy."

"Thank you."

"It's not a compliment, Poser."

"You sure about that? It sounded to me like you're crazy *about* me. Who can blame you, after all?"

“You’ve got me all figured out, huh,” she answers with a sexy chuckle that tugs at my center. I’m in a public place so I have to put a sweater over my tented pants. Once again, wanting Maeve all the damn time is turning out to be perpetually inconvenient.

“My flight is boarding,” she says with a sigh. “1225 Linwood Court. Apartment number 333.”

She hangs up. I’m no longer on the plane, but I’m definitely on cloud nine.

“Have you made your dinner and movie plans?” I ask Sean from the adjacent shower stall.

We’ve wrapped up an exciting game that went into overtime. Jeremy was insane on net tonight, matching the veteran Dallas goaltender save for save.

It took six rounds of overtime shootout to determine the winner. Gordon was the hero of the game, ramming the puck between the goalie’s pads.

“I called her earlier to make dinner plans,” Sean answers. “She said she’s busy all week, so we’re meeting for lunch on Wednesday.”

There’s no point telling him that Wendy has no intention of taking him seriously. Midweek lunches are what girlfriends do with each other.

“How about you?” he asks me. “We’re not flying to St. Louis until noon tomorrow. Going out tonight?”

I turn off the shower and head to the locker room without answering his question. We’re two hours behind Columbus. Maeve is probably already asleep. I, on the other hand, am always wired after a game.

“This place is an authentic saloon guys,” Randi declares for everyone to hear. “We owe Gordon a couple of rounds.”

“Yeah, you do!” Gordon says, basking in his overtime glory. “You coming, goon?” he asks me with a nudge.

Instead of answering, I check my phone to see if there's a new text from Maeve. It's even later in her time zone, but I'm an asshole, so fuck it.

Me: We won the shootout at Dallas tonight. Flying into Columbus on Tuesday after the St. Louis game. Let's have dinner this week.

Krasivaya Maeve: Dad's surgery is Thursday. I'll be hanging with him at the hospital after work for the next few days. How about lunch on Wednesday?

Hell no. Lunch is what girlfriends do with each other.

Me: Invite me over Tuesday night because you miss me already.

I see the dots come and go. And then, boom: **OK. I'll see you Tuesday.**

Fuck. Yeah.

"What are you grinning about?" Gordon asks.

"Huh? Nothing."

"Didn't you have a hookup in Dallas the last time we were here?"

I honestly don't remember. I offer a noncommittal shrug.

"Well, are you going out with us?" Sean asks.

"Nah, I'm good. Tired. Came from my sister's thing."

"How about you, Lance?"

"I'm heading to the hotel, too." No surprise there. Lance never parties, and now that he's in a serious relationship, he's even more of a monk.

The coaches, the locker staff, Lance, and I load the team bus that will take us to our hotel. We both end up at the back even though we usually avoid each other. Lance and I didn't start off on the right foot because, well, I'm an asshole and he's a killjoy.

“How’s Cassie? She still your best friend’s hot baby sister?” I ask after his girlfriend. I had hit on Cassie before they were officially together. Like I said, I’m an asshole.

“Fuck off.” See? Killjoy.

“Why are you always in a bad mood when I talk to you?”

“I’m in a bad mood *because* you’re talking to me,” he says, but not harshly.

This is how we show we care. I think.

“One day you’re going to meet someone you actually like. I hope to be there when you make a fool of yourself while she kicks your ass,” he grumbles.

“I already met someone I like,” I blurt. “And the last thing she’s doing with my ass is kicking it.” That sounded better in my head than out loud.

“Can you hear yourself?”

“You grew up in the area, right?” I have a brilliant idea.

He shrugs, which I take as a yes. “Let me guess, this girl you like is from Columbus,” Lance drones.

“Where do people from Columbus bring people they like?”

He looks at me sideways. “Why don’t you do what Sean’s doing? Dinner and a movie.”

“C’mon, everyone knows that’s lame. There’s got to be better ways to impress a girl.”

“She’s not interested in your dance club orgies?”

“Fuck off,” I say grumpily. He doesn’t want to help me? That’s fine. I’ve got other resources.

“Actually—” The bus stops and staff begins to unload. Lance strides out and never finishes his point.

“Actually what?” I prompt, catching up with him.

“Forget it. It’s too Midwest for a city boy like you.”

“You don’t know that.”

He shakes his head and sighs, like I'm an object of pity and condescension. It irritates me though I'm also intrigued.

"Here's the thing. Girls I grew up with, they freaking love the farm experience. It's nostalgic. Romantic." He pauses to check if I'm listening.

To be honest, I'm fucking riveted.

"Cassie? I take her horseback riding and I don't have to tell you how much fun that turns out to be for both of us." His eyes glimmer.

"Horseback riding?"

"Yeah. There's this great place that has cute chickens, carriage rides, fruit picking, all kinds of romantic farm activities."

I think about Maeve on a horse or bending down to pick fruit. She'd be wearing super short cutoff jeans and one of those red plaid shirts with a knot at the front.

Yeah, that *would* be fun.

"What's the name? Of the farm, what's the name?"

"I'll send you the address."

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Maeve

When I return from Connecticut, I head straight to Dad's place to help him get the house ready for Sunday dinner. My brothers take care of the cooking, but I like the ritual of checking in with Dad before anyone gets there. It helps us catch up before the upcoming weekdays get too hectic.

"Matt said you were busy all weekend. What's going on at the shop?" he asks while we set the table. Shamefully, I convinced my brother to keep my trip a secret. Some might call it a lie by omission, but there's no denying I was busy yesterday.

"All good. Just catching up," I answer with a pinch of guilt. "We've got the last EKG test tomorrow. How are you feeling?"

"How do you know when a nurse is having a bad day?" he asks instead of answering my question.

"How?"

"She won't stop needling people!" he proclaims with a guffaw.

I chuckle. "I bet that went over well the last time you were with a nurse."

"Sweet pea, you know they love me," he claims, while dumping ice in a bucket and refilling the tray with water. Bryce drinks his sodas with copious amounts of ice and Dad refuses to buy some from a store.

"Of course they do," I agree. Who wouldn't love this guy?

Watching him, you wouldn't guess that he's having his chest opened in four days. Bile rises up my throat though I manage to keep a straight face. There's no point stressing about a surgery I know will go well, right?

Matt arrives first, with Bruno close behind. I forgot he was invited tonight. They both bring their dishes: my brother's pasta salad and Bruno's meatloaf. Our friend is famous for his recipe, although he recently changed the key ingredient to ground turkey for Dad's new dietary regime.

This is the last Sunday dinner before Dad's operation. We're all acting casual, despite knowing he'll be in the hospital this time next week. Bryce breezes in with his usual charm. He reminds me so much of Dad with his kind eyes and amiable smile. By the time his parents, Aiden and Noeleen, arrive with a spinach salad and cubed chicken breasts—yuck—we're in our Sunday groove of a little lazy and a lot chatty.

"Did you read the article I sent you on centrifugal effects and gravitational torques?" Dad asks Bryce. I usually like being part of my nerdy family's discussions on the highlights of mechanical engineering.

Unfortunately, I'm pulled aside by Noeleen—rather roughly I might add—to force me to talk about my trip.

"Well? How was it?"

"It was... fun."

"Fun? You know what's fun, Maeve?" she asks sarcastically. "Going to brunch and getting tipsy, that's fun. Winning fifty bucks with a scratch lottery ticket, that's fun. But getting flown first class to attend a posh ball—a ball!—with a gorgeous hockey player who wants to parade you around like you're the love of his life? That. Is. Not. The. Same." She performs the last sentence with a clap after each word.

"What are you guys talking about over there?" Aiden asks. He doesn't know about my trip because he is a gossip column on two legs.

"Menstrual cramps!" his wife answers, immediately shutting the ears of five men.

"It went well. The place I stayed in was incredible. The party, well, the party was a little rough. His parents, especially his mother, was suspicious and kind of snobbish. But Sergei,

he really stood up for me, you know? Told her he was proud of me and sold the *love of his life* part.”

“Oh my god, oh my god, that’s what I thought! He is so into you, Maeve. Seriously, it’s been obvious from the beginning.”

“Noeleen, you literally never met him.”

“And whose fault is that?” she prickles. “Besides, I don’t need to meet him to see the way he makes you happy. Give him a chance, Maeve. C’mon.”

“I did. We were,” I whisper closely, “together last night.”

“Yeehaw!” Noeleen whoops.

I don’t know why I admitted it. Part of me can’t believe what happened. In a way, saying it out loud confirms that it’s real. I had the most exciting and erotic night of my life with a man who makes me smile every time I think of him. How is this my life right now?

“Give me five, girl! Woohoo!” My sister-in-law continues to celebrate.

“That doesn’t sound like cramps,” Bruno says from the kitchen doorway, eyes twinkling with amusement. “Dinner’s served ladies.”

“Thanks, Bruno,” I say, walking toward the dining room.

Noeleen links our elbows and says, “Details. I need details.”

“Nope. Not gonna happen,” I declare.

I’m already towing the line of straight-up lying to my family and keeping things low key. I don’t need to kiss and tell. The thought of anyone else knowing how much Sergei *gets* me, how much he understands what I need, feels like an intrusion. Last night was special for both of us and for no one else.

The family settles at the table with the usual jokes and a sprinkling of news. It’s nice to see Dad so happy, all of us surrounding him. We might not have debutante balls or

country club memberships, but we've got a ton of laughs and great company. There's no need to bring up the weekend when

"Where were you yesterday?" Bruno asks me from across the table. "The windshield replacement bill for that hockey player came in. Thought you'd want to be the one to break the news of how much it'll set him back."

"Oh, yeah, I'll tell him on Monday. Which is tomorrow. I'll tell him tomorrow," I fumble.

"I thought you were working this weekend," Dad asks. "That's what Matt said."

"I said she was busy," my brother makes the correction before leaning back and glaring at me.

"OK," Dad says and drops it. That's almost worse than him interrogating me further. His silence means he knows something's up, and he doesn't want to prod. Maybe he doesn't trust me to own up to it. To be honest, I don't trust myself either.

When we clear the table and Bryce helps his mom wash the dishes, Dad puts on the last period of the Mavericks playing in Dallas.

"Do you have a minute, Maeve?" Bruno asks.

He hasn't spoken much since asking about yesterday. That's if you don't count his guilty eyes and apologetic expression. We go outside through the back door and sit on the porch steps.

"I don't know what happened, exactly, but I'm sorry if I put you on the spot."

"No problem."

"You were with him this weekend? Petrov?" His voice is lower than usual, so I have to lean closer to hear. The question surprises me, though it shouldn't. Bruno spends a lot of time with Matt and has absorbed my brother's paranoia.

"We're friends and did each other a favor. Don't worry about it, Bruno."

“Then why are you hiding it from Declan?” he asks with a deepened furrow between his brows.

Dang it. “The only thing I want my dad to think about is his health. When he goes into surgery, he needs to have zero stress,” I explain.

Not that I owe Bruno an explanation, but I can’t completely brush him off, either. We came into auto repair together. When we needed to log hours for our certification, Matt took us both on. My brother and I created a business plan and secured financing as co-owners. Bruno stayed on as an employee. He’s a talented mechanic and an even better friend.

I continue, “How his only daughter spends her weekend isn’t his concern, whoever I spend it with.”

My answer earns me a grunt, like he doesn’t want to agree, but has no choice.

“Let’s go in. They’ll wonder where we are.”

“Tell them we have cramps,” he says with a grin.

I nudge him with my elbow. “I’d rather talk about what you’ve been up to these days.”

“Working out, you know how it is,” he says while making a playful flex with his biceps.

“Good lord, where do you find the energy after a long day at work?”

He doesn’t answer me right away and simply stares like I’ve got spinach between my teeth and he doesn’t know how to tell me.

“I’ve got a lot of it,” he mumbles huskily.

“Well, share some of that energy, why don’t you? I’ll need it these upcoming weeks.”

He looks down at me with concern. “All you gotta do is ask, Maeve,” he says, before turning away and grabbing a seat in front of the television.

I chat with Bryce in the kitchen, confirming how much of the loan he’ll be using. Then, my nephew and I sit on each side

of Dad, squishing him between us. I didn't intend to finish the game with my family but ended up dozing off during the final period. Fatigue has caught up with me.

When I get home, the thought of another long bath is tempting. I brought back the rest of the bath bombs from the suite. No way was I leaving the good stuff.

My phone pings.

Poser: We won the shootout at Dallas tonight. Flying into Columbus on Tuesday after the St. Louis game. Let's have dinner this week.

God, he's bossy. I've never met anyone as relentlessly self-assured as Sergei. Part of me knows he's trouble, so I tease him about it. It doesn't matter how much I dish out, though. He's too confident to let my sass make a dent on his bravado. The man has a massive ego, and it isn't fragile.

Me: Dad's surgery is Thursday. I'll be hanging with him at the hospital after work for the next few weeks. How about lunch on Wednesday?

Within seconds, he answers.

Poser: Invite me over Tuesday night. You know you miss me already.

At first, I type "no, I can't" but then delete it.

Why can't I? There's the necklace I plan to give back and the fact that I'll be staying with Dad post-surgery. Who knows when I'll have time to see Sergei again?

I'm also stressed about the upcoming week. If there's one thing Sergei Petrov is good at—let's be honest, he's good at a

lot of things—it's keeping my mind occupied.

Before I lose my nerve, I send a text.

OK. I'll see you Tuesday.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Sergei

“Should I wait for you?” Chuck asks when we pull up to the entrance of Maeve’s apartment building.

“I fucking hope not,” I answer, exiting the car and texting her that I’m outside. Earlier, she had sent me the code to the front entrance. I let myself in and press the button for the elevator, which doesn’t open right away. Fuck that, I’m taking the stairs.

Apartment 333 is close to the stairwell, its door slightly ajar.

“Maeve?” I venture with a slight knock.

“Come in!” she calls. “I’m in the kitchen. Can I grab you a beer? Or water? I’m always thirsty after a plane ride.”

Her shoes are by the doorway, so I remove my own. Two steps lead to an open living area with a puffy sofa covered by a large blanket. There’s also a television, a desk with a laptop and letters, and a narrow alcove that likely leads to the kitchen. She’s leaning against that threshold holding a beer and a bottle of water. Maeve is wearing another one of her casual sleeveless T-shirts. Even from a few feet away, I can see she’s not wearing a bra.

“Put those drinks down,” I growl, barely recognizing my own voice.

“Why?” she asks breathily.

“The only thing I’m grabbing right now is your round ass,” I answer, smirking and closing our distance.

“You are so—”

I cut her off with a kiss, my hands cradling her head and angling it so our lips connect deeper, harder, wetter. I walk

forward till her butt hits a kitchen cabinet. I hear the clank of beverages on the counter behind her.

With her now-free hands, Maeve grabs the front of my shirt to pull me in. I take that as an invitation to run my hands up and down her pliant body.

I feel her untuck my shirt from my pants. Her fingers fumble with the buttons—our faces are squished after all, so we're both a little distracted. I encircle her wrists to guide them around my neck instead. I need her closer. If there's anyone who should be shirtless right now, it's the one whose tits need to be sucked.

With her arms grabbing my shoulders, I hike her legs around me and walk us to the sofa. The seductive sweep of Maeve's tongue, the silkiness of her skin as I grab a breast, and the grip of her legs around my hips consume all of my brainpower. I couldn't spell my name right now if you asked me to.

I stop the kiss for the brief second it takes to whip her shirt off. The movement releases her hair from a loose bun, the fragrance of peaches cascading around both our faces.

I lick down her neck, sucking hard on the soft junction between her collarbones before moving lower. Grabbing her ass to prop her higher, I clamp on those small, perfect breasts, twirling my tongue over a pert nipple.

She's panting and moaning. "Ho—how was your flight?" she asks between moans.

Is she kidding right now? Instead of answering, I go to the other breast and flatten my tongue around the areola. Meanwhile, my hands are busy kneading her ass while my fingers begin the gentle grazing of her wet center.

"I saw your win tonight."

My mouth still busy, I murmur against delicious skin. "Fuck the flight and the game. Tell me how you want to come first. My tongue or my cock?"

"That's the problem," she mutters.

Did she say *problem*?

I lean back to seek her expression. She is lust incarnate, jaw slack and mouth open, lashes lowered and fluttering. I nestle a hand on her nape and tug the way she likes it. My other hand comes between us to stroke her wet seam.

“What’s the problem, *moya feya*? Feel too good?”

She nods. “I don’t want to come yet,” she says timidly. “It’s too... soon.”

“So you have to talk about hockey games and boring flights?” I grin, because could this woman be any more fascinating?

She nods again.

“You really think that’s gonna work? You could be reading off a dictionary and I’d still make you come just by doing this.” I pinch her nipples and lift my hips so my erection rubs her core.

“You are the wo-worst,” she says, grinding down and swirling her hips. For a second I have to think about something boring, too, because *fuck* she feels incredible.

“Need me to edge you, Maeve? Do everything to keep you at the point of coming but not let you come?”

I realize I’m signing up for my own torture. To pleasure a woman *and* keep her from orgasm is not your regular nightly programming.

“Can you?” she asks in what sounds like a genuine question and a hopeful dare.

“Stand up,” I say. We have to take the temperature down if there’s a chance of delivering what she wants.

Scrambling to her feet, Maeve stands before me so my face is lined up with the top of her shorts. I run a finger around her belly button, amazed at her shivering torso.

“What was the hardest repair you had to tackle today, Maeve?” I ask before pressing soft kisses along her waistline and lowering her shorts a centimeter at a time.

She meowls and grabs my hair, her tremors intensifying. “I’m working on, on, oh god.” I’ve pulled down her shorts and am running the flat of my tongue along her hip bones.

“On what?” I prod, lightly blowing air on the trail of moisture I’ve left behind.

“Transmission.” She sighs. “Bl-black ca-caravan...” she says choppily before her voice trails off. “Twenty, um, twenty-fifteen.” The last syllable comes out as a squeak.

I graze her silky folds with my knuckle, staying clear of her clit but giving her nether lips enough friction to make her shudder. My hand is coated in moisture.

I pull her over me, propped high. Wrapping an arm around her back, I have access to the bundle of nerves between her butt cheeks. My wet fingers glide along her anus, spreading her arousal. I press a finger against the opening while my mouth worships her breasts. I don’t suck them hard, though, just lick in a relentless rhythm, like eating ice cream on a cone.

“Love thinking of your tight ass sticking up while you’re fixing cars. One of these days I’m going to fuck you in your A1, top quality, best-in-class garage, you know that? I’ll put your hands against a hood, spread your legs, and slam my cock from behind so deep you won’t remember your own name.”

“Fuck, dammit. Harder,” she says, pushing her tits into my mouth and grinding her slit against my torso. “I changed my mind. I’m so fucking close. I need—”

I give her a sharp spank on her butt. “Too soon, Maeve. Isn’t that what you said? Now walk me through it. How do you fix a transmission?”

She mumbles a frustrated “You are the worst” before breathily narrating the tedious details of car repair.

I don’t hear words, though. I hear her body. Maeve’s entire body hums and groans and shudders. Her tremors tell me when to push further and when to pull back.

I flip her on her back and stand, watching her breasts quiver while I slowly unbutton my shirt. Even slower, I remove my

belt and palm the large bulge busting through my zipper. That move prompts her to run her hand down her stomach toward her apex. It's so trancelike, I don't think she realizes what she's doing.

"Hands over your head," I say.

Her eyes never leave my bulge, and she licks her lips.

"Now," I demand, not letting her argue.

Maeve lifts her arms which plumps up her breasts, deep gulps of oxygen making her entire torso expand and contract, expand and contract. I move over her, wrapping my belt around her wrists while pressing my steely rod between her breasts.

"I need to see you. Please," she begs.

Standing over her, I lower my zipper. Maeve's eyes turn glassy when I pull everything away, revealing the curved thickness of my manhood. She squeezes her legs together, seeking relief.

Shaking my head, I put a hand between her knees. "Open your legs. You don't get to feel good yet, *moya feya*. Keep those sweet thighs wide while you watch me pump my cock."

Grabbing myself at the base, I move my hand up and down in even strokes. Everything tightens at my center. My abs ripple and my balls rise.

"Put it in my mouth, Sergei."

"How do I know sucking me won't make you come, you sexy little thing? Your cunt is so ready, all I'd need to do is blow on your clit to make you lose control."

Her eyes shoot fire and her nostrils flare. "I'm so easy, is that it?" She sounds defiant as well as a little hurt.

My stomach tugs. Whatever we're doing, it isn't merely physical. She's telling me what she needs in ways she's never told anyone. I know this. Maeve offers hard-earned trust, and I'd rather die than squander it.

“You’re the farthest thing from easy, Maeve. You’re a fantasy I want to last for as long as possible.”

“Then fuck my mouth,” she states nonchalantly, as if it isn’t the best sentence in the English language.

I crawl over her, my hands on the sofa arm and my cock lined up to enter her wet lips. Her wrists are still over her head, and it is the lewdest, sexiest thing in the world to watch the head of my penis disappear into her pink mouth. I move in and out, each stroke a little deeper. Her eyes water as she looks up at me, her nostrils quivering to take in air, her cheeks hollow as she provides heavenly suction. It’s incredible. Gently, my tip knocks the back of her throat. She tightens her lips and keeps me there.

“Holy fuck, Maeve. Don’t you have a gag reflex?”

As an answer, one corner of her lips tilts slightly.

I remove her hands from the binding. “Your hands stay on my ass. Dig your nails into me if I go too deep.” I pull all the way out and kiss her hard. She meets my tongue with the same fervor.

“Promise me you’ll tell me when it’s too far.”

She nods rapidly, hurrying me along. Knowing Maeve is eager for my cock in her mouth is another wet dream come to life.

“And keep your hands on my ass.” I’m so aroused, I can barely speak.

“Your bossy ass.”

I chuckle, the sound halting the second my cock stretches her tempting mouth. There’s no way I’m going to last if we keep this contact, yet I want to be on the edge along with her. After a few pumps, I have to stop.

Without a word of warning, I pull out, drop my knees to the floor, bring Maeve to the edge of the sofa, and bury my face in her apex. She releases the longest and most high-pitched sigh I’ve ever heard. I’m done holding back. I fuck her with my tongue and rub my face against her folds. Her fingers dig into

my hair and her thighs quiver. I French-kiss her clit. When the surge of ocean sweetness releases into my mouth, I clamp around the source and suck hard.

Maeve screams my name, her entire body bucking for what feels like a full minute. When her thrashings abate, I scramble on the floor for my pants, where I've stashed a bunch of condoms.

No one should be surprised that I am a well-prepared and optimistic son of a bitch.

Quickly sheathing myself, I return to Maeve and scoop her in my arms like a bride. There's a hallway, which better lead to a bed. As much as I love having her ass in the air, I need to see her face when I explode.

I drop her on the mattress, her hair splayed over white sheets and her chest heaving. Maeve's face is softened by the dim lighting, lips parted and lashes lowered. For a moment, I simply stare.

"What's wrong?" she asks, concerned.

"I'm calculating how long I can keep you confined to this bed without starving you to death. Actually, never mind, we'll eat our meals here."

"I can't decide if you're selfish, sexy, or scary."

My lips curve in amusement. "You should know by now, Maeve, I'm all of the above."

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Maeve

I pull him down for a kiss and arch my hips to rub my wetness against his thick length. In one glorious thrust, he's buried to the hilt. I feel possessed in every meaning of the word: I'm surrendering myself to Sergei as well as truly losing my mind. I'm turning into someone I've never been before.

For various reasons, I've never had a steady boyfriend. Which means I'm not exactly used to asking for what I want. The problem with penetrative orgasms is that for most men, it's a finish line. The goal, if a lover is halfway decent, is to arrive together. Since I'm usually in front of them, they're never far behind.

My one-night stands or the occasional fling have always been a way to scratch an itch. They provided the physical intimacy that battery-operated sex toys can't. As a means to an end, all my previous sexual partners were basically interchangeable.

Sergei gives me what I didn't even know how to ask for. A sense of surrender to another person's command, as well as an exploration of my own body. Sergei's ability to give pleasure seems endless. Tonight, there's no definitive destination or foreseeable end. Of course, that's not possible, in a literal sense. What I mean is, our peaks don't feel like the end of the trail. They feel like the beginning of the next height we'll ascend together.

He's deep inside me, moving his hips in circles that get increasingly wider, more erratic. And then he pumps me in a staccato rhythm, thrusting deep each time and stimulating my clit with the hard slap of his groin.

"You drive me crazy, Maeve. Been thinking about being inside you all day, every day. Hard all the fucking time." I

have no idea how he sounds tortured *and* in complete control.

“Really?” I can’t help prodding. “Even on the plane ride here?”

He continues to plunder my depths. “Especially on the plane ride here. And the drive. And the goddamn walk up three flights of stairs.”

We kiss urgently. Our bodies rock together, and it feels incredible. Still, I’m curious and can’t pass up the chance to tease him.

“How about when you’re playing hockey? Are you hard for me then, too?”

He repositions himself on his heels and pulls me to his groin. Lifting my legs over his shoulders, he continues the intense penetration. “You get off on that? Knowing I’m skating with blue balls because my face isn’t buried in your cunt?”

Sergei’s thumb moves in tight circles over my clit. The growing wave of pleasure is impossible to fight, but I try.

“How about in the, in the shower? Or with your teammates, in the locker room?”

He stops moving. Steely hard inside me, Sergei glares. “What did I say about talking or thinking about other men, Maeve?” He sounds severe, but the mischief in his eyes is unmistakable.

“I’m not allowed to talk or think about other men while your cock is inside me because you are a possessive and jealous neanderthal.”

“That’s right.”

He leans forward, nearly folding me in half. And then he swirls, providing friction I’ve never felt before. I gasp. He stirs my arousal slowly and thoroughly. The chaos inside me builds.

“It’s time, *moya feya*. It’s time to scream *my* name.”

Sergei shifts to another gear, plowing into me relentlessly and perfectly till there’s no choice. The wave builds from a

distance, picking up speed and elevation and velocity. When it crashes over me, drowning me in pleasure, Sergei releases a low roar. We ride the blissful wave together, soaring its incredible height till we reach the shores of satisfaction.

He collapses over me and we cling to each other, breathless and spent.

Putting his weight on his elbows, Sergei props himself up, face above mine. "Hey."

"Hey," I echo his greeting.

"Thanks for letting me come over," he says before pecking my nose and rolling off.

A cloud of disappointment passes over me before I can stop it. I turn away in embarrassment. At the recesses of my mind, I hear the unspoken yet familiar refrain accompanying every sexual encounter: *We're done. Time to dress up and leave.* My body tenses up, ready to leap with my dignity intact.

"You good?" he asks, not bothering to look at me.

"I'm great." The words barely make it past my gritted teeth.

"What's wrong? What did I say?" he asks, looking over his shoulder and scowling as if he's annoyed.

I sit up on the side of the bed. "Thanks for coming over," I say steadily, echoing his previous statement. "There's only one bathroom. Do you mind if I use it first?"

"Of course I don't mind."

Walking away, my head is held high. When inside the safety of the bathroom, I let my guard down and lean on the counter. In the mirror, I'm barely recognizable. My hair is so tangled and puffed, it could serve as the "before" picture in a shampoo ad. My cheeks are bright red, and my lips are swollen. I touch my fingers to them, remembering how Sergei tasted and felt inside my mouth. My eyes have turned aloof and dull, even as my heartbeat accelerates at the sensation of soreness in my channel.

I take my time washing up. Combing my hair, brushing my teeth, basically going through my nightly routine all over

again.

So this is how it's going to be? *Thanks for coming over! See you next time we need to get laid!* At least he's interested in my sexual satisfaction, if nothing else. A sharp pang strikes my chest.

I shore up self-preservation, crucial for the awkward conversation that ends every hookup. When I exit the bathroom, Sergei is already in the living room, dressed in pants and a half-buttoned shirt. OK, then.

"Do you want to bring a water bottle with you?" I ask because I am an excellent host. Hydration is important.

"What?"

"Were you dropped off by your driver? Get him a water bottle, too." I hate how fake cheerful I sound.

"Are you kicking me out?" he asks. For the first time since I've met him, Sergei sounds furious.

Sergei is always a daunting presence. When he put the lawyer in his place, the hockey player exuded authority and disdain, not anger. When he told his mother off after she insulted me, he had been cold and distant. He's never showed anger because, even under pressure, he didn't seem capable of feeling it.

At the moment, though, with his nostrils flaring and his eyes glaring, he is more than pissed. He's livid.

"I don't need to kick you out. You're already halfway out the door," I say, pointing at his dressed form.

Lifting his long arms in a sign of *what the fuck*, he bursts, "What the hell else am I supposed to wear?"

"Just leave."

"Really? That's really what you want." It isn't a question; it's an accusation.

"I'm tired." My voice is steady. Unlike my heartbeat, which is galloping out of my chest.

"Yeah, I bet," he says with narrowed eyes.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I snap because now I’m mad, too.

“It means stop treating me like I’m some fuckboy you picked up at a bar, Maeve.”

“If I picked you up at a bar, you wouldn’t be in my apartment, you jerk!” When did my voice get as shrill as faulty brakes?

He runs his hand back and forth over his head. “What the hell is happening right now?”

“You were leaving.” I stomp into the kitchen to grab two cold water bottles from the fridge. I hold them out to him. “Also, don’t forget to take the necklace. It’s on the table by the door.”

“Keep your water,” he barks in the same tone he’d use to say *fuck off*. “And don’t bring up the necklace again. It’s yours and the least you can do is accept a gift with some goddamn grace.”

“Sorry, I’m not one of your high-class dates who knows how to accept jewelry properly. Why don’t you give it to one of them instead? I’m sure they’ll grace the fuck out of it.” I sound crazy right now.

“Can you hear how crazy you sound right now?”

Yes, but I’d never admit it to this infuriatingly gorgeous man on his way out the door. He gets my anger and nothing else.

I’m not the only one fuming. If looks could kill, Sergei would be arrested for my murder. Not before I kill him first.

“How dare you come into my house and call me crazy? Get. Out.”

“Goddamn it, Maeve.” In two seconds, he’s grabbed his shoes. He doesn’t bother putting them on before he slams the door behind him.

The silence is suffocating. My entire apartment feels bigger because he isn’t taking up all the space, but it also feels

cramped because the walls are closing in on me. His words crash into my consciousness.

What the hell is happening right now?

Unfortunately, I know exactly what happened. We had sex. He prepared to leave. It was time to say goodbye.

It's so much easier to say goodbye when you're indifferent or mad. I'll never be indifferent, so here I am. Mad. Furious. Enraged. Open a thesaurus, because I could keep going.

I lean against a wall and slide down. The adrenaline spike from making love and then suddenly raging at each other is gone. In its place is an unwelcome realization. There's no mystery why things went badly.

Everything I said was a lie. I'm not mad at all; I'm confused.

I want Sergei to stay, yet don't know how to ask. Being near him makes me feel things I can't begin to articulate. Like I'm attached to a power source that feeds me the very thing it makes me crave. It's addicting and scary. How do I explain such an unreasonable attachment? We just met! It's not normal.

There's nothing normal about us.

Those were Sergei's words over the phone when we were at airports thousands of miles from each other. They were spoken casually, yet exactly what I needed to hear. The sentiment sounds as right tonight as it did then.

A fire lights up in my belly, refusing to be ignored. I spring to my feet and run to the door. Maybe it isn't too late to catch him outside! I bust the door open and launch myself into the hallway.

"Stop! Sergei—" I yelp.

My words are halted by the sight of a magnificent hockey player leaning against the wall across my hallway, both brows lifted so high they nearly touch his hairline.

I'm surprised and embarrassed. He's smug and vindicated.

“Yes, *moya feya*?”

“I don’t want you to leave,” I exclaim, that fire in my belly spreading everywhere. My cheeks heat up and my fingers tingle.

“I know,” says the arrogant and irresistible man.

“You were going to stand in my hallway all night till I admitted it? Was that the plan?” The relief of seeing him makes me sound giddy.

He pushes off the wall and annihilates our distance. “It didn’t take you all night, now did it?”

His warm body presses against mine and I melt. I don’t know how much time passes as we stare at each other.

“I am so bad at this,” I grudgingly admit. Not that I can name exactly what *this* is, but what it *isn’t* is easy and casual.

“You really are,” he retorts with a chuckle. I give him a playful push, but he doesn’t release me. Sergei’s gaze continues to roam my face as if there’s a secret only he can find.

“So am I, Maeve. And there’s no one I’d rather be bad with than you,” he whispers so close, I get a heady whiff of the arousal and climax clinging to our skin.

With the strength of an elite athlete and the confidence of a man who always gets what he wants, Sergei grabs my ass, wraps my legs around his waist, steps into the apartment, and shuts the door with the back of his foot.

He never even bothered to put on his shoes.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Sergei

It's been a week since I've seen Maeve.

Ya ochen volnuyus generally translates as troubled, but with an edge. That's me. An uncomfortable combination of restlessness and annoyance and worry has settled in my stomach.

We text all the time. She kept me up to date on Declan's successful surgery last Thursday. He's staying at the hospital for a little longer. Maeve visits him after work, staying for dinner and hanging out.

The two nights I was in town and didn't have a game, I had offered to visit the hospital to be with her. Maybe even meet the rest of her family, since she talks about them a lot. She said "next time" both times, which to me sounds like "never."

Although Maeve hasn't said it in so many words, she's not inclined to introduce me to her family. Probably because talking about who I am, and what we are to each other, is not the easiest conversation to have at this difficult time.

What would she say, after all?

Guys, this is Sergei, star hockey player and lover supreme.

Oh, I like the sound of that. She should say that.

Perhaps more likely: *Remember Sergei? The one who I met a few weeks ago? We faked our relationship and now we're sleeping together.*

Far less appealing as an introduction, although it's true. Weird, but true.

The most accurate one would be: *Meet Sergei, the guy who can't stop thinking about me and whose sanity will not return*

till he kisses me again. Would you give us a minute so he can stick his tongue in my mouth?

I'd like more than a minute and a lot more than kissing. Still, I'll take whatever I can get.

"No need to come with me, you know," Dex says, jarring me out of imaginary conversations between the MacElroy siblings.

We're getting dressed after practice. He's back to skating after the injury I caused. Good thing, too. Now I can stop being nice to him out of guilt.

"Why wouldn't I? It was my idea, after all." If I sound grumpy, it's because I don't know what to expect.

We're visiting Declan with get-well greetings from the team and a gift basket. The patient knows about the visit because management arranged it. However, he's only expecting the official representative of the team. That would be Dexter Whitby, Mavericks captain and all-around Mr. Popularity.

Of course, I could've told Maeve I'd be accompanying Dex. I didn't. Not sure why I didn't warn her, but here we are.

"Then stop fussing with your hair and let's go."

I'm not fussing. He's fussing.

We drive separately and meet at the lobby before heading to the post-surgery wing. Everywhere we go, people stare. Being big guys and hockey players means attention follows us around.

It's directions we need, not unwanted gawking. We walk nearly the entire floor before seeing a workstation with nurses. Dex steps up to ask if we're at the right place. Immediately, the three women behind the desk and another three who come out of nowhere gather in order to usher us to Declan. It looks like we're having a parade with the ruckus of eight people—two enormous ones—trying to fit down a hallway.

Perhaps it's the chatter of our approach that alerts her. Or she was already on her way out. At any rate, Maeve is at the

doorway when we approach the room.

I have no idea how *moya feya* manages to appear unbelievably gorgeous while also incredibly tired. Our gazes snag and, as cliché as I sound, she's the only one I see. Maeve MacElroy is a 3D figure in an IMAX movie, filling my vision and making me want to reach out and touch her.

"Hi, I'm Dexter Whitby. We're here to visit Declan." She blinks quickly before taking his hand and offering a smile.

"I see you've met the welcoming committee," she says, glancing at one of the nurses plastered by my side.

"I'm Maeve, Declan's daughter," she addresses Dex. "Please come in."

"This is my teammate, Sergei Petrov."

"We've met," I say. "Go ahead, Dex. I'll catch up after I chat with Maeve for a bit."

"Thanks for helping us, everyone." Dex waves to dismiss the nurses. Jovial cheers welcome him when he enters the room. Like I said, Mr. Popularity.

Maeve wordlessly walks past me, confident I'll follow. She's wearing black leggings and a hoodie, her hair in a loose bun I want to tug to release her wavy hair. When we turn the corner, she stops to face me.

"Hey," I say with a grin and a step closer.

"What are you doing here?"

"Visiting your dad. Hoping to see you."

"My whole family's in there."

"Are the MacElroys this welcoming to all visitors, or is it only me getting the VIP treatment?" I say sarcastically because this is not the reunion I expected.

Did I think she was going to jump in my arms and wrap her legs around my hips? Of course not. Did I want her to? Hell yeah, a man can wish.

“You’re right, I... I don’t mean to sound ungrateful.” Her eyes soften. “Dad was thrilled when he learned the team captain was visiting. I wish I was prepared, though. I’m surprised to see you, that’s all.”

“Surprised and happy to see me? Or just surprised.”

Smooth, Petrov. Not desperate sounding at all.

She chuckles. “There’s my Poser, always fishing for compliments.”

I don’t miss the “my” in her statement.

“How are you?” I ask solemnly, reaching out and lightly grazing her cheek.

Maeve stays silent, leaning her cheek against my palm. She sighs when I put my other hand around her lower back. Our bodies press together, and all my uncertainty and frustration melt away. Her eyes close and her head tilts back. My vision is filled with her parted mouth. I lick my lips in anticipation.

“Maeve?” The voice makes her jump away from me.

“Hey, Bruno.”

“Matt asked me to look for you.”

“Why? Does Dad need me for something?” She pats her hair anxiously.

“I don’t think so. Just wondering where you went.”

The three of us are silent for a beat. It feels like a hockey face-off, to be honest. Both guys with their eyes on the same spot, ready to pounce if given the chance. It doesn’t take a genius to know that the only one wondering where Maeve was is this guy.

“Sergei Petrov,” I say with my hand outstretched. “You work with Maeve. Bruno, right?”

He takes my hand in an iron grip that I match. “Yeah. Guy without a windshield, right?”

“Sergei and Dexter are here to represent the Mavericks,” she says. “You’ll want to say hi to Dad before you leave.” She

addresses me though her eyes are turned away.

“Of course,” I say. “Let’s go.” I place my hand on her elbow before letting it rest on her lower back. We walk past Bruno, who I know for a fact is staring at my spread fingers grazing the top of her ass. Let him stare.

We enter the room and it’s packed. Declan is laughing boisterously. When he sees me, he announces, “There you are, Sergei! We haven’t talked since that night. Thank you for everything.”

I don’t get flustered often, but his greeting disarms me because I’m still pissed about those stories that I “saved” him. I hope he doesn’t think I gave anyone that impression.

“No need to thank me. Maeve did everything,” I deflect. “You’re looking great.” We shake hands.

“I see you’ve met Bruno. Have you met Maeve’s brothers? These are my sons, Matt and Aiden.” I recognize Matt from the shop. Aiden is the eldest brother, shorter and stockier. They’re both scowling.

“I just remembered something,” Declan says. “That night, weren’t you naked?”

“What?!” Maeve and I say together.

“He wasn’t,” she says at the same time that I say, “No!”

Declan tilts his head slightly, like he’s confused. “I’m pretty sure you were naked.”

“I didn’t have a shirt on because I lost it!” I announce. Shirtless is better than everyone assuming I run around the arena after hours with my junk hanging out.

“Lost a shirt, huh. Never heard *that* before,” Matt says, while Aiden scoffs.

“If Sergei wasn’t there, the ambulance wouldn’t have found us. You should both be thanking him,” Maeve scolds her brothers.

That earns me grumbling thank you’s which I dismiss with a curt nod. This is not going well. I’m starting to wonder if

Maeve had a point about me being around her family.

“He’s also the reason we’re here,” Dex says. “The team was wondering how to show our support by sending something, but it’s this guy who said we should deliver our well-wishes in person.”

“You didn’t have to come all this way, but I appreciate it,” Declan says warmly. “I’ll be recovering at home for a few weeks, then I’ll be back stronger than ever.”

Because I’m beside Maeve, I hear her annoyed huff. Wonder what that’s about.

“Can’t wait to have you back,” Dex says and gestures at the gift basket. “The basket has goodies, signed Mavericks merch, and a food service subscription for a year. It’s the health company a few of us order from. Time for you to eat like an athlete, Declan.”

“Thank you, guys,” Declan says while touching his chest. “That’s really awesome. And I’m gonna start working out like an athlete, too. Get myself a six-pack like Sergei over here.” He winks at me.

“Hey, sweet pea, what’s my favorite machine at the gym? I told her when we were at physical therapy yesterday,” Declan says with a grin.

Maeve groans before mumbling, “The vending machine.”

Her eyes flick my way in embarrassment. I want to reassure her that never in the history of dad jokes has one ever been that adorable. Maeve is so fucking adorable.

“We don’t want to keep you from your family time. Get well and we’ll see you at the arena.” Dex shakes everyone’s hand.

I do the same thing, pausing in front of Maeve. She gives me a wary smile and a platonic pat on the shoulder. Fuck that.

Walking out of the room, I text her. **Not leaving till I get a hug moya feya. See you at the lobby.**

Before Dex and I part ways, he gives me a stern look.

“You sure you need to go there?” I know exactly what he means by *there*.

“Don’t start with me,” I grumble. “There’s a room full of men keeping me from talking to that woman. You think *you’re* gonna stop me if they can’t?”

He raises his hands in a sign of surrender and walks away.

I find a seat and lean forward, elbows to knees and head down to hide my face. Again, with the strangers staring. Because I’m looking at my feet, I don’t notice Maeve till she’s right in front of me.

Without thinking, I lean back and pull her over my lap. She lets out a squeal mixed with a giggle, confirming that she’s happy to see me. Without fully realizing how stressed I was, every part of my body relaxes when she eases onto my lap. My body unwinds at the certainty that she belongs in my arms.

Except there is one part that hasn’t relaxed at all. Namely, my cock pressing against her round ass.

Maeve’s arms wrap around my neck while her legs are stretched across my lap. I’d rather she straddle me, but we’re in a public place.

“Let’s get out of here and grab dinner together. Your brothers are around to keep Declan company.” I inhale her smell of summer sweetness and indulge in a swift kiss on her neck.

She sighs before lowering her head onto my shoulder.

When she gives me the bad news, she seems resigned to it. “We’re all here because of insurance issues and paperwork for Medicare. It’s so elaborate, it’s turning into a family project.”

“Then what’s Bruno doing here?” And why does *he* get to stay when I can’t?

She shrugs. “He’s been coming around when he can. Bruno is an old family friend.”

I snort because *yeah, right*. That guy is not interested in Maeve as a friend. Guaranteed.

“I want to take you somewhere. An actual date.”

“I thought we don’t date?” she asks, squirming her bottom for the sole purpose of torturing me.

“We do now,” I declare, while giving her hips a squeeze. “Do you have an afternoon you can get away?”

Maeve tilts her head like she’s confused. “Just to confirm, you mean date-date. It isn’t code for something else?”

“What code?”

“By *date*, I thought you meant come over and bend me over,” she says into my ear with a chuckle.

Just when I think she’s too busy or stressed to surprise me, Maeve proves me wrong.

“If you insist, we can do that first,” I say with a shrug, like I’m giving in.

“I can swing an afternoon.”

There’s no hiding the goofy smile on my face. “Friday. You and me, on a proper date.”

She snorts before declaring, “This should be interesting.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Maeve

“Where are we going?” I ask, not for the first time.

Leading up to today, Sergei hinted we were heading to a casual, outdoor expedition. However, he withheld all the details of where, what, and how. We could be hiking or building a house, for all I know.

He reaches over the console between us and grabs my hand. “It’s a surprise. You can wait another hour. Put some music on.”

“Can I look through your playlists?” I ask. He’s connected to the car for the GPS directions.

“I don’t have playlists,” he says. “Use the Sirius satellite stations.”

“Who doesn’t have playlists?” I ask rhetorically. “I have one for running, one for working at the garage, one for taking a bath. Seriously? You’re not a music fan?”

He shrugs. “What kind of music is right for working at the garage?”

“There’s no right or wrong answer. It’s just a way of moving that flows better with certain beats, certain songs.”

“Example.” He sounds genuinely curious.

“We play a lot of nineties grunge because everyone loves Rage Against the Machine, Nirvana, Stone Temple Pilots. The usual.”

His lips twitch. “And for taking a bath?”

“Same.”

He lifts his brows in disbelief. I snicker, confirming it’s a joke.

“Great vocalists like Lauryn Hill and India Arie. I can pretend I sound like them when I sing along.”

“Put one of them on.”

“I think we should start our own playlist,” I say before I can stop myself.

“Yeah, sure.” Sergei’s grin is so wide and sincere, I can’t help grinning back.

“I’ll connect my phone to your speaker.” I am disproportionately excited about what is simply a way to pass the time. “What should we call it?”

“Our First Date,” he says with a wink.

I don’t dwell too much on the fact that “first” means there might be more.

“What should we start with?” I ask.

“I don’t have a lot of songs off the top of my head except for the stuff they play before hockey games.”

“AC/DC isn’t a first date song for you?”

He shudders. “You go first.”

“Can’t go wrong with Prince. ‘1999,’ ‘Kiss,’ and ‘Little Red Corvette.’” I queue the songs and press play at a low volume. “Your turn.”

“Since you got us started on the driving songs, what’s the name of the one that’s in the movie *Cars*?”

“The Disney one?”

“Ana loved it. Something highway.”

“‘Life Is a Highway.’ Good choice!”

We spend the next forty-five minutes searching categories for “driving songs” or “artists like Prince,” picking which songs to add. We even checked a playlist called “your first date” but neither of us recognized the songs. Apparently, I am *never heard of new pop songs* years old.

We explore our favorite groups. Sergei has a thing for arena bands. He adds songs from Guns N’ Roses and U2 and

Aerosmith, their slower, sentimental hits like “Patience,” “With Or Without You,” and “I Don’t Want to Miss a Thing.” Who knew this guy could be so sappy?

I, on the other hand, leap at the opportunity to introduce him to some classic American artists: Bruce Springsteen, Aretha Franklin, Stevie Wonder, Joni Mitchell.

“I think this is it,” he says as we drive off the main road and through a farm entrance. The GPS confirms our arrival. Above a wooden structure is a faded sign: Southwest Ohio Farm Animal Sanctuary.

“A rescue sanctuary?” I ask.

“No, a farm. I thought we’d do romantic farm activities.”

Is he serious? I turn sideways and find Sergei assessing the barn structures and fences ahead. Oh my god, he *is* serious. I hold back an amused cackle and exit the car.

Two people emerge from a structure and head our way. To meet them halfway, we start walking, too.

“I don’t think romantic farm activities is a thing, sweetie,” I coo. “Has no one ever told you how horses make babies?”

“What? No!” He’s adorably flustered. “My friend said we could ride horses and, like, feed chickens. I think. Anyway, he said girls from Ohio really love the farm experience.”

Oh my god, did he really fall for that? My face hurts from holding back laughter.

“The guy who told you that *girls from Ohio really love the farm experience*, who is he?”

“Lance. He’s my teammate.”

“By any chance, does Lance not like you?”

He goes deathly pale.

“We can go,” Sergei says a second before we’re within hearing distance of the two people dressed in overalls and boots caked in mud. Sergei begins walking backward. I grab his hand and pull.

“Get back here,” I say, laughing. His wide-eyed confusion is hilarious.

“Hi folks! Always a pleasure to have volunteers on Friday afternoons. I’m Sam and this is my daughter Toni. Welcome to our SOFA sanctuary.” It takes me a second to recognize the abbreviation for Southwest Ohio Farm Animal.

“Get it? We want the animals to get comfortable. Like they’re lounging on a sofa.”

“Oh, Dad,” Toni groans. I understand her embarrassment all too well.

Sergei’s hand is clinging to mine. As subtly as I can, I disentangle our fingers. “I’m Maeve and this is Sergei. It’s our first time here. The farm is pretty big!”

“We need about thirty volunteers a week, though most of them come Saturday to Monday. Lots to do today if you can stay for a few hours.”

“There appears to be a misunderstanding,” Sergei begins. I cut him off.

“We can stay. We would love to help.” I look down at my jeans and hiking boots since he at least prepared me for an outdoor event. Sergei is dressed similarly, though each piece of clothing is spotless and new.

“This is Corinne and Cassidy,” Toni says when two large cows amble our way. “We care for nearly a hundred farm animals such as our friends here and other cows, horses, donkeys, pigs, chickens, goats, and sheep. If you didn’t bring your own gloves, we have extra you can borrow.”

“Where are the horses?” Sergei asks.

“They’re further out. Two horses came in yesterday, so the herd is skittish. They are all survivors of neglect or abuse. We ease them into the farm slowly. No volunteers around them for a while. Let’s start by cleaning the goat pen before heading to the pigs.”

“I’m sorry, *what?!?*” he blurts. I poke him in the side to shut him up.

We grab work gloves and disposable face masks. Sergei triples his because his eyes are watering at the smell.

“You’ll get used to it, honey,” I say sweetly.

“Aww, you two are so cute,” Toni says.

He grunts but doesn’t object when we’re handed the tools to sweep the stalls, pick up goat waste, replace the straw bedding, and refill the water barrels. Although I’m sure Sergei isn’t loving this date, I notice he puts all his energy into the tasks. The guy isn’t slacking, even though he gets no respect from the goats who ignore him when he tries to move them out of his way.

“Great job, guys,” Sam says when he walks past. He was fixing a fence. “We’ve got another couple and their kids—regular volunteers—arriving any minute.”

“Let’s go to the pigs. I’ll set you up before I make sure the other volunteers are settled,” Toni says. “Madelaine is a few months pregnant. She’s even cuddlier than usual.”

As we walk behind Toni, Sergei mumbles, “Remind me to tell my mother there’s a hog named after her.”

I try to give him a reprimanding look and fail. Instead, we both chuckle.

“They need some grooming if you’re comfortable doing that,” Toni says.

Sergei shakes his head vigorously. I take the brush.

“I’ll be right outside when you’re done,” Toni says.

“How about you rub pig bellies to relax them, and I’ll try to groom,” I instruct my terrified date.

“What?”

“You heard me. Get down here, babe.” I plop myself on a wooden bench. The seat is close to the ground and long enough for both of us to fit.

“He has no idea what I’ve got in store for him,” Sergei mutters menacingly.

“Who?”

“Lance. He is going to pay for this.” The vengeful words don’t match the way he’s gingerly holding a spotted pig. Sergei looks skittish rather than pissed.

“It’s not so bad,” I say with a wink.

Scooting over so our thighs touch, I give him the brush and show him how to use it while I do most of the pig maneuvering and petting. We find a rhythm and move to the next one.

“This is somewhat romantic, right?”

“Maeve, I have masks on my face and a pig sniffing my ass. There’s nothing romantic about this.”

I can’t stop smiling. As weird as this date is, I’m enjoying Sergei in an environment where he isn’t in complete control. Not because I want to see him helpless; in fact, he’s far from helpless. The man is surprisingly competent at shoveling manure.

What I enjoy is sharing a date he’s never had with anyone else before me. We’re doing something unique together. The experience is simple, but it’s ours.

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Sergei

We stay for almost three hours. When Maeve's stomach noises startle the sheep, it's time to put my foot down. Hopefully not on a cow pile.

We wash up, say our farewells, and make promises to return. Well, Maeve promises to return. I'll be sending them money instead. Or Lance. In a body bag.

In front of the car, our dilemma is apparent.

"Let's take off our clothes and drive home naked," I offer because I am occasionally a genius.

"I dare you," she says incredulously.

"Dare me? All you need to do is ask."

I open the trunk and begin stripping down. When I've got nothing but boxers and the sockless shoes I slipped back on, I'm rewarded with my date's slack-jawed appreciation of the chest I'm displaying.

"Your turn, *sweetie*," I say, echoing the affectionate terms she was using on me at the farm. I liked it a lot. If I have to go through that much stench and torment, it's nice to have a companion like Maeve trying to make me feel better. Only this woman could make farm work bearable.

"Make sure no one's looking," she says nervously. I position myself as a guard, facing the farm and away from her. She's using my height as cover while she gets undressed.

"Let's go," she squeals, trying to stick a foot back into her boots so she can walk to the passenger door. I glimpse her luscious ass barely covered by black underwear, her flimsy black tank top emphasizing creamy shoulders.

Instead of waiting for her to put her shoes back on, I carry Maeve in my arms. The back of her legs are smooth and soft, her torso chilled against my overheated chest.

“What are you doing?” she whispers, drawing my attention to her mouth. Her lower lip is fuller than the top. I lift her upper body closer to me so our faces line up.

“Carrying you to safety,” I say in mock gallantry. “And kissing you.” I kiss her sweetly. Lightly.

It is a feat of willpower. What I’d prefer to do is strum that lower lip with the tip of my cock before slipping into the heat of her mouth. The memory of Maeve in her living room, letting my manhood knock the back of her throat, hits me hard. I. Am. Hard.

Resolved to place her in the car, I end the kiss. Maeve has other ideas. She grabs the back of my neck and melds our faces. She offers her tongue with a playful press and that’s all it takes to unravel. Repositioning my forearm to take the weight of her upper back, my palm is free to cradle her nape. Holding our faces close, I sweep my tongue into her depths.

Our kiss is no longer sweet or playful. All the passion dampened by the last few hours roars like a forest fire taking over my body. She’s returning my fervor, grabbing the back of my head with one hand and clenching my shoulder with the other.

My hardness pokes against her body, alerting me to the fact that we’re outdoors in underwear. I pull away and look around. I don’t see anyone, although there is a van close by, presumably belonging to the other volunteers.

“I’m taking you home,” I declare, depositing her onto the passenger seat. I grab her footwear so she can slip into them while sitting down. For some reason, Maeve in flimsy undergarments while wearing bulky boots is hot as hell.

I get in the driver’s side and start the car. Before I have to keep my eyes on the road, I get my fill of *moya feya*. Her mouth is red and swollen from our kiss, her nipples straining

the fabric of her top. It makes my mouth water and my dick twitch.

“Let’s go before someone sees us!” she squeals.

I pull out of the farm, both of us laughing at the ridiculousness of being stinky and half naked while driving down the highway. Our playlist booms. We sing about walking five hundred miles at the top of our lungs.

More than one trucker or SUV lingers by our side to get a view of Maeve. I’m driving a sports car. The most anyone is going to get is a glimpse.

“Call Chuck.” The music stops and the call rings twice before he answers.

“What’s up, boss?”

“We’re about half an hour away. I need you to wait for me at my parking spot with two robes. We’re coming in naked.”

“You got it. Two robes by your parking spot in half an hour. Need me to get anything ready at the penthouse?”

“Penthouse?” Maeve mouths but makes no sound.

“Actually, yeah. Can you order in? What do you feel like eating, Maeve?”

“Whatever you have at home. I’m sure we can whip something up.”

“Chuck can hear your stomach grumbling, sweetheart. What do you feel like eating?”

“Considering where we were, I’m going for vegetarian tonight,” she answers.

“Order all the vegetarian dishes from Meadowlark.”

“You got it.” I hang up and glance at Maeve.

Surprisingly, this date is salvageable despite spending hours at the least romantic place I’ve ever seen. I wasn’t sure if I would be invited into Maeve’s apartment tonight. Now she’s coming to my place to shower and have dinner. Both those

things sound damn romantic to me. Couldn't have planned it better.

I might let Lance live, after all.

"He didn't even ask," she utters vaguely.

"Who?"

"Chuck. Your driver who also sounds like he's your assistant. You said you were arriving with a woman and that we were both naked. He didn't even sound surprised."

"He's discreet."

"Or maybe it happens all the time? You can tell me, Sergei. In fact, I'd prefer to know what to expect, getting involved with someone like you."

"Someone like me?"

"You know what I mean. Gorgeous and popular hockey player with charm coming out of his ears. Give a girl a heads up on what she's getting into."

"Getting into? Don't fool yourself, Maeve," I say teasingly. "You're halfway in love with this gorgeous and popular hockey player. I'm glad you can finally admit it."

"Ugh, never mind."

"You'll be head over heels once I feed you. Meadowlark is the best fusion restaurant in Columbus."

"We'll see," she says with a chuckle.

I glance to find her smiling but also pensive, her chin resting on a fist as she looks out the window.

"What are you thinking about?"

"My dad. He's leaving the hospital tomorrow. I'll text him to see how he's doing. I haven't checked in on him all day."

Head down and mouth pressed into a line, Maeve's attention is fully on her phone. We drive in silence for a while. She's more self-conscious when we hit the city streets, putting her hands over her thighs to cover her state of undress.

"How's Declan?"

“Good. He’s good.”

“Does he know you’re with me?”

“My dad doesn’t ask who I’m with, but he isn’t stupid,” she says thoughtfully. After a beat, as if she tried to censor herself, Maeve adds, “He knows I like you.”

“Almost as much as the pig liked me.” I’m trying to lighten the mood. I want to hear her laugh.

“Sergei, why don’t you date?”

She drops the anvil on my chest right when I’m turning into the building’s parking garage.

“Let’s, um, let’s talk upstairs.”

We pull up to my parking spot. Chuck is waiting with two white bathrobes. He hands them to me without a glimmer of reaction to my near nakedness. I accept the robes. Before I put one on, I go to Maeve’s side and make sure she’s covered.

Like two people lounging in a spa—but smelling the very opposite of a spa—we shuffle to the penthouse elevator.

“This brings a whole new meaning to the walk of shame,” she mumbles.

Chuck greets Maeve with a courteous smile. He gets into the elevator with us, facing front and pressing the code for access.

“Anything you’d like me to take care of in the car, Mr. Petrov?”

He always gets formal when we’re around people, like when he used to be a hired driver. I’ve asked him to relax when he’s around my guests, but he insists. Best thing about Chuck, though? He never once winces at our stink or dirt.

“Dump the stuff in the trunk. Better yet, burn them. Our boots, too, when we take them off upstairs.”

“What?! No, my boots are new!” Maeve says. “I can bag everything and wash them at home.”

“They are not new,” I say, because they are clearly scuffed and worn.

“I mean I bought them new,” she says.

“What do—”

“Ahem,” Chuck interrupts me. “I’ll take care of them as you wish, Ms. MacElroy.”

“I’ll buy you new farm clothes tomorrow, *moya feya*,” I say and venture to kiss her temple.

“I don’t want you to buy me anything.” Why does she seem pissed?

She addresses Chuck. “It’s OK if you don’t want to touch them, Chuck. I’ll bag them later. Sorry for the trouble.”

“It’s no trouble, Ms. MacElroy. Whatever you prefer.”

The elevator opens. Chuck steps out and gestures for us to enter. “The food should arrive in twenty minutes. I assumed you would want to clean up first. Text me when you’re ready for me to bring the order upstairs.” He leaves us alone.

Immediately, I do what I’ve been wanting to do all day: pick her up and cradle Maeve in my arms. She squeals in surprise.

“Tour later. Shower now,” I say as I walk us to the bathroom.

“Let me down, you oaf. Corinne and Cassidy had better manners than you,” she says, sounding a little more like herself.

“Moo. Now get naked.”

We enter the bathroom. Maeve sighs when her feet touch the heated marble floors.

“Sergei, I think I should shower by myself,” she says.

Doing a rotten job of hiding my disappointment, I ask, “Is that what you want? I can go to the guest bath.”

Her eyes roam my torso which I play to my advantage by flexing.

“Honestly?” she asks, stepping closer and running her hand down my abdominals.

Maeve hooks a finger inside the elastic of my boxers and releases it with a snap. “I don’t know if I should listen to my brain or to my body.”

She sounds sexy as fuck but there’s an edge to it. I can’t tell if it’s similar to the frustration I’m feeling because I want to hold her, or something else.

“Your brain and your body can take turns. Let’s take the edge off first, baby.”

“Does that line always work for you? *Baby?*”

“I don’t know. Never used it before. Never called anyone that,” I say honestly. “Or sweetheart or honey or whatever other things you were calling me at the farm. Don’t stop now. I know I’m just getting started.”

Maeve’s hazel eyes flare, the sunflower gold sharpening before the eclipse of black pupils. She takes a small step back in order to remove her tank top. The panties follow.

Naked before me, she’s breathing heavily, her mouth parted and eyes half-mast. Her nipples are diamond peaks on quivering breasts. God, she’s beautiful.

“Let’s take the edge off,” she says and walks into the shower.

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Maeve

The water is brown, and then sudsy, and then clear. It takes a few rounds of scrubbing. Sergei washes my hair, his long fingers massaging my scalp and removing the knots of stress from my upper back.

“What shampoo do you use?” he asks huskily.

“It’s made especially for wavy hair. My sister-in-law sells it at her beauty shop. Why?”

“It smells like peaches.”

“You like peaches?”

“I do now,” he answers.

Sergei draws me near and massages up and down my back. Big hands cup my ass as I press his erection against my stomach. The soap makes our bodies glide, silk on silk.

“I haven’t kissed you all day, Maeve. That’s got to be a crime.”

“A misdemeanor, at the very least,” I quip.

“When we go on our next date, I’ll spend the whole time kissing you,” he says. “New rule. No masks on our dates.”

My heart ticks up at his flirtation. Our dates? Plural? Suddenly, I can’t tell the difference between flirting and making promises. Which one is it?

I’m in no condition to make that distinction right now, not with my body begging and my mind muddled. I do what any horny, confused woman would do: avoid the question and pull him down for a kiss.

We’re both starving for each other, opening wide and greedily sucking and biting and plundering. This isn’t the sort

of kiss that ends a Hallmark movie. We're grunting loudly, clashing teeth, and bruising lips. I bet it's ugly to watch. But it feels fantastic.

Sergei lifts me up to wrap my legs around his waist. While my back rests on the shower tiles, he glides his cock against my seam. Need floods my system. Need to be held and crushed and *filled*.

"Condom. Gotta grab a condom." His words are garbled as we continue to kiss.

"I'm close," I whine while grinding into the ridge of his erection.

"Want to come all over my hand, Maeve?"

"No. Press your cock right there. Oh, god, right there."

While he holds me up, we both look at our point of contact. His cock is so hard, the veins look like they're going to burst. It's mesmerizing.

"Just the tip," I find myself saying, blinking to clear my eyes from the rainfall shower. "Put your tip where I need it, Sergei. Please."

"Fuck yeah. I need it, too. Need to feel you bare. Just the tip. Turn around so I can have better control."

I find my footing and place my hands on the shower bench, bending over.

He guides his rod to my center. "I love the way you're soaked for me, coating my dick."

I can't speak. I'm right at the edge and could probably come with a flick of his thumb. Some wayward part of me wants more. His manhood on my intimate parts, bare.

"Ready, Maeve?" he croaks.

I nod, unable to speak as I hold my breath.

His crown roams up and down my folds. It feels so good, my thighs tremble. And then he's at my entrance.

“Jesus, it’s so fucking hot. Your pussy is so goddamn wet and hot. You’re killing me,” he mumbles, and I feel him enter slightly.

Rigid thickness glides along the surface, offering pleasure and torture combined.

“Tell me,” he grunts while controlling the motion along my nether lips, “tell me what feels good.”

I chant his name as his hardness strokes my shallow folds. And then he finds it. “There. Oh god, yes.” He presses my clit at an angle, and I detonate.

Releasing his cock, Sergei grabs my hips and knees, pulling me back to sit on his face. His mouth finds my apex, cheekbones pressed into my ass and tongue flicking up to penetrate my channel. Shamelessly, I press into him to chase down the aftershocks of my orgasm.

“Fucking delicious. I need to be inside you,” Sergei’s voice is low and rough. I feel it reverberate through my core.

He turns the shower off and quickly wraps me in a large towel. I’m carried to the bedroom and thrown on top of the mattress. In a flash, he’s on top of me while his arm reaches into the side table and grabs a condom.

He rips foil, sheaths himself, and rams home.

We groan loudly. The sense of being filled and plundered overwhelms me. I move my hips, urging him to do the same.

“Not gonna let me rein myself in are you?” he asks darkly, starting to take charge of our movement. “I was so close to coming, watching the tip of my cock disappear inside you. Now that you’re under me, there’s no way I can stop.”

“Don’t stop.” I deepen the kiss, our tongues entangled and lips crushed.

He pulls away. “Sit on my lap and ride me.”

He leans back and pulls me over his groin, my legs wrapped around his lower back. Sergei grips my waist and lifts me before slamming me back down. Up and down, each time

harder and harder. Impossibly, I think he's gotten bigger. It's too much and yet I want more.

When his thrusts turn erratic, pleasure barrels through me.

"Fuck, yeah, Maeve. I *feel* you choking my cock. It's too good," he grunts as his manhood throbs inside me, prolonging my orgasm. We cling to each other through the climax. My mind goes blank. All the bones in my body crumble.

Limp, I find myself strewn diagonally on the bed with my head partially hanging over. Sergei pulls me to him and centers us, our bodies damp from the shower or the exertion, who knows anymore.

"Try not to fall off the bed before I get back," he says with a wink while heading to the bathroom to discard the condom.

Alone, I'm struck by a fact: while nestled on the most comfortable bed I've ever been on, I've never felt so uncomfortable.

First of all, a girl like me could live a hundred years and never end up in a room fit for a magazine spread. What's even more intimidating than that? This is Sergei freaking Petrov's place. A man larger than life with his looks and personality and style. His public persona as a careless playboy is already daunting. But nothing could have prepared me for the funny, smart, and considerate man I just made love to.

I am in uncharted territory and need to get a map before venturing further. Beyond the physical, beyond the need that grips me when I'm around him, beyond all the ways he steals my thoughts when we're not together, beyond the uninhibited laughter and unexpected affection, there's something else that makes me feel lost.

The truly uncharted territory is the one inside me, littered with feelings I've never had before: doubt, jealousy, insecurity.

How can I trust the fleeting nature of our connection? We met under weird circumstances, and nearly all of our interactions happened under some kind of pressure. In that condition, people make attachments that are intense yet

temporary. These kinds of bonds don't last when normalcy returns.

He'll eventually get bored. A guy like Sergei is used to variety and adventure.

Folks like me can't afford constant adventures and unlimited variety. That's simply a fact. I work, visit family, do errands, read or watch TV, occasionally go out for drinks, take an affordable vacation once a year.

When I'm not breaking noses in front of twenty thousand people in a packed arena or going on super fancy fake dates, my life is basic. From what I've gathered of the rich, superstar athlete who grew up amid luxury, basic couldn't possibly be enough.

Isn't that why he brings various naked women home so frequently? My throat clogs, stealing my breath and making it difficult to swallow.

On top of all of that, I can't help being defensive when he considers my clothes garbage. He didn't mean to insult me, but it stung. I'm reminded that we're from different worlds. One of these days, the disparities of our lives will be impossible to ignore. We're merely delaying the inevitable clashing of priorities, the incompatibility of expectations.

Before we made love, I stood in the bathroom wallowing in doubt and finding no way to express myself. Then, Sergei got naked and held me. Washed my hair and caressed my body. Made love to me.

Doubt evaporated, jealousy faded, and insecurities didn't matter.

Sergei Petrov is sex on legs—thick, muscular, hockey-player legs. When he looks at me like I'm the only woman he could ever want, I cling to the fantasy for as long as I can.

"I gave Chuck the green light to bring the food upstairs," he says, reentering the bedroom. "Do you want a shirt? Wait, that's a stupid question. You have no shirts here. Oh well, naked in bed it is." He winks.

“Can’t you lend me a shirt? You must have a closet of extra clothes for all the women who arrive naked.”

He stops and stares at me like I asked him to do cartwheels.

“First of all,” he says gruffly, “there’s no closet of women’s clothes because there are no women arriving naked except for one pretty little fairy who rolled around in mud.”

“Sure, whatever you say.”

His eyes narrow. “*Moya feya*, are you jealous?”

“That’s ridiculous. The fumes from the barn have destroyed your already compromised brain cells.”

“You are!” He dives onto the bed and cages me under him, an elbow on each side of my shoulders, body lodged between my thighs, eyes unwavering.

“I am not.” I sound so lame.

“Look at me,” he says seriously. Sergei doesn’t break eye contact when he speaks. “You’re the only woman I’ve brought to my bed, Maeve. Not *a* bed. *My* bed. My place. My *home*.”

I process what he’s saying while watching his features. Sergei looks almost embarrassed. Maybe even anxious? As if he didn’t mean to admit something and now wishes he could take it back.

“Really? Why?”

“Never wanted to. I...” He pauses, seeming to consider his words. “It feels good to bring you here. Natural. That’s not something I’ve felt before. Blame the romantic farm activities,” he says in a mix of seriousness and teasing.

“Then why did Chuck look unfazed by me coming over? You’d think it happens every weekend, the way he reacted to us coming in half naked.”

“He’s in professional mode. I could land an airplane and he’d offer to park it for me.”

That makes me laugh. “Chuck’s that good at his job, huh?”

“We’re in bed. Talking about Chuck or any other man is forbidden,” he quips. Sergei kisses my nose, my eyelids, my forehead, my lips.

“New rule,” he utters while rubbing our noses together. “No thinking or talking about other men *or* women when we’re in bed together.”

I roll my eyes, unimpressed yet ready to drop the topic. I don’t know how I feel about him saying he’s never brought another woman home before. I’ll think about it later. At the moment, I want to enjoy the rest of my time in Sergei’s home.

“And when we’re not in bed together?”

“Petitions will be handled on a case-by-case basis.”

I guffaw because he always knows how to catch me off balance. “You’re so bossy.”

“I think the word you’re looking for is brilliant.”

I find myself smiling because, goddamn it, he really is brilliant.

CHAPTER THIRTY

Sergei

We're both stuffing our faces with deep-fried eggplant strips dipped in thick, creamy sauce. Just because it's vegetarian doesn't mean it's lame. Almost everything in front of us is new to her: mushroom and taro satay, black pepper udon, curried shrimp, a couple of salads, and a rice dish. My dinner date tries them all, placing a bite in her mouth and closing her eyes to focus on the flavor.

Sounds become Maeve's new language. There's the high-pitched, lilting *ahs*, the melodic and thoughtful *hmms*, the lingering *ohs*. My favorite are the sexy moans that alert my cock to the party. Watching Maeve enjoy herself, because of something I provided, is nothing short of a celebration.

"Try the satay with the lime and cilantro rice," I suggest.

"Wow," she says incredulously after swallowing the perfect bite.

"Awesome, right? What's your favorite?"

Her eyes gaze at the ceiling as she considers the question. "I feel like I have to try everything again to be sure, but I'm too full."

"Need to work up an appetite?" I ask with wiggling brows.

"Let's clean up first." Maeve heads to the kitchen with our plates. "Do you have containers for the leftovers, or should we put the takeout boxes in the fridge?" she asks.

I come up from behind her and wrap my arms around her waist. Maeve leans back, exposing her smooth neck to my kisses.

"The cleaning service will take care of it tomorrow. Let's go to bed."

She straightens up and turns to face me. Based on her expression, you'd think I proposed to jump out the window.

“We can't waste food and expect other people to clean up for us, Sergei.”

“You said you were full.” If I sound impatient, it's because I want to grab her ass, not store leftovers.

“Someone never had to do the dishes, did he?” she prods with a twinkle in her eyes.

“That's not true. I've done the dishes.”

“Five bucks says you don't even know where your cleaning products are.” She gestures at the sink with a built-in, no-touch soap dispenser.

“It's attached to the sink.”

She rolls her eyes. “Where are the sponges?”

It doesn't take a genius to guess they're under the sink. She's leaning against the counter by the cabinet. I bend down like I'm about to kiss her. When her chin lifts to greet my lips, I dive lower to open the cabinet.

“You are the worst,” she says in a tone that's almost affectionate.

Unfortunately, the cabinet under the sink is empty. I open the one beside it and the one after that.

“I usually use the dishwasher,” I fib, opening the dishwasher to load it.

“Sure you do,” she says with a snort. Maeve brings the rest of the food into the kitchen, repacks the containers, and places them in the fridge.

When the kitchen is clear, I plop her on the counter and pull her ass to the edge. She's wearing one of my shirts and nothing else. I should get a medal for keeping my hands off her till now.

“You were raised with housekeepers, I guess?” she asks while wrapping her arms around my neck.

“I grew up in boarding schools and hockey dorms, mostly. Though, yes, my mother employs domestic help in her house. That’s where I spent my summers with Ana.”

“You didn’t live with Ana the rest of the year?”

“My mother left Moscow when Ana was a baby and I was a kid. We led very different lives.”

“Was that hard for you, Sergei?” she asks softly, running her hands up my neck and into my hair.

My first instinct is to change the subject and haul her over my shoulder caveman-style. I can’t wait to get back in bed. We need to make the most of tonight because I never know when I’ll see her again.

That’s not the only reason to avoid the topic of my childhood. One thing I’ve learned through the years is that it’s better to forget things not worth remembering.

Maeve waits patiently. Surprisingly, my knee-jerk compulsion to avoid the topic passes. Instead, I want to answer her question honestly.

“Yes and no. My mother was never affectionate, but she was *there*. And then one day, she wasn’t. My father was, I mean *is*, obsessed with a company that has carried the Petrov name for three generations. So, yes, it was hard at first. Especially when I’d come home for a school break and no one was around.”

She pulls me in and nestles her forehead in the crook of my neck. She runs her hands up and down my back. Without words, Maeve encourages me to continue.

“My father says he put me in hockey because it’s the only thing that kept me from burning the house down. I was an asshole of a kid. Destructive. Rude. Entitled.”

“No!” she exclaims, eyes wide as if in shock. I pinch her ass and we both laugh.

Maeve offers a peck on the cheek. “I can’t help teasing. You were saying hockey kept you from getting into trouble?”

“Yes. I was a natural at the sport—”

“Of course you were,” she deadpans. “Sorry, sorry. That’s my last interruption, I promise.”

“I thought I was so damn great in the club leagues, then I went to hockey camp at a national level. It’s competitive. I was there with kids who were hungry to prove themselves. They resented me because hockey was, for me, a fun sport I was good at. But for many, hockey is a ticket out of a tough life. When my father allowed me to move to Sweden to work with a famous junior coach, that set me up for the pros.”

I pause, recalling how that added another rift in the family dynamics. “My mother has yet to forgive him for letting that happen.”

My mind wanders to those years of proving myself *as* myself, not merely strutting my status as the son of Nikolay Petrov. Years of pushing hard physically and channeling my ambition mentally. It took a long time, but my peers came to respect me for my effort, my skill, and my dedication. Some players never stopped resenting me. I was, and continue to be, a rich asshole. Still, no one can deny that I’ve earned my place on every team I’ve ever joined.

“It wasn’t easy to know my family would never be whole again. I hated that I only saw Ana during some holidays and part of the summer. Everything important to me was out of my control. I was a kid who my mother left and my father tolerated. But hockey made me feel, I don’t know, *worthy*.”

Her breath hitches and she places her hand on my jaw to lock our gazes. Sunflower eyes bloom to fill my vision.

“You are worthy. With or without hockey, you were a kid who deserved a loving family. I’m sorry you needed hockey to feel good about yourself all those years ago, but you are so much more than the sport you’re good at.”

I can’t help my bitter chuckle. “Try telling my parents that.”

“What could they possibly object to? You have a career that most guys would kill to have.”

“I have a career. Yet I’m turning my back on a legacy,” I say *legacy* with my fingers in air quotes because I’m miming

my father.

“My father hates that I’m wasting my time with a sport when I should be groomed to take over one day.” Bitterness practically seeps out of my pores.

“The shipping company will be your responsibility one day? Is that what you want?”

“God, no,” I answer honestly. “I’d hate every fucking minute of it.”

I realize that’s the first time I’ve vocalized my feelings to someone. “But anything less than carrying on the name will be considered a failure.”

“Failure? That’s ridiculous. Going after what you want is what defines success. It’s one thing to work for your father if you want to one day, but to hate every minute? That sounds like you’re failing *yourself*.”

Maeve’s earnestness does something to me: rattles my heartbeat and twists my insides. I can’t tell if it’s because I’m thrilled by how much she seems to care about me, or because I’m worried that if she looks too closely, she’ll stop.

I shake my head. “Many people have jobs they don’t enjoy. Me taking over my dad’s company is no different.”

I have no right to complain when I’m guaranteed influence, money, and power. I never asked for those things, but I’m not enough of a hypocrite to deny that I’ve benefited from the very name I want to run away from.

“Not all shitty jobs are the same,” she utters gently. “Look at the people we met today. It doesn’t matter what they tell you, no one *loves* to shovel shit. No one wakes up in the morning eager to mend fences or bale hay or clean troughs. And yet Sam and Toni have a purpose. They believe in the bigger picture even if the daily grind sucks.”

She continues, “Sometimes that purpose is an animal sanctuary. Sometimes it’s family that makes the shitty jobs worthwhile. My brother, Aiden, he’s a grocery manager. You know why? Because it’s the only job that let him stay home

during the day for me and then later for his son. He was on third shift for years.”

“What’s a third shift?” I ask, embarrassed that I don’t know.

“It’s the one that starts at midnight. My point is, whatever your parents think success or failure means, that’s their opinion. Work for the company or don’t. But decide on your own terms.”

She speaks so passionately, I don’t have the heart to tell her she’s naive. The terms of my life were set a long time ago. I stay silent, which seems to worry her.

“I... I’ve been told that I don’t know the difference between helpful and overbearing,” she says with a squint.

“No!” I put my hand over my mouth and enlarge my eyes, evoking the same sarcastic tone she’d used on me.

She takes the jive the same way I took hers. We both laugh.

I’ve never met anyone who can give and take teasing like Maeve. Using irreverence to get through the tough topics works for both of us. Despite our joking around, this might have been the most honest conversation I’ve ever had about my family.

“It doesn’t matter if you know the difference between helpful and overbearing,” I say as I haul her over my shoulder caveman-style. She squeals and kicks in protest.

“You know why, *moya feya*?”

“Why, you oaf?”

“Because I like you either way,” I state as a matter-of-fact.

She stops kicking and lets me carry her to bed.

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Maeve

Dad and I get into a rhythm of living together as he recovers from surgery. The arrangement was that I'd move in for a few weeks or till the doctors say he's ready to fully function independently.

There's no hurry on my end. I lived at home while going to college to save money. We know each other's moods and rituals as adults. There's also the fact that Declan MacElroy is the most chill guy I know, always joking around and taking things in stride.

And there are new rituals, too. Physical therapy for him and healthier eating for both of us. The food service gifted by Sergei's team has made meal planning easy. No chips or chocolates around. Full disclosure: I've got a stash of Girl Scout cookies at work that Dad doesn't know about.

We've also started watching hockey together. He's always been a Mavericks fan. Can't say I understand the game, but I'm appreciating the physical toll it takes on players. And the noises of the game—the swishing of skates and slamming of pucks and banging on boards—make me feel close to Sergei.

He is thrilling to watch. The defenseman dominates every time he's on the ice. The hits he gives and takes make me jump out of my seat. His every move exudes powerful athleticism and pure masculinity.

But there's another thrill, private and more intense because of it. The secret thrill comes from understanding him not as a hockey player, but as a man. I know something that all these people in the arena don't know, a dimension of Sergei beyond the powerhouse on the ice.

He's not only a superstar, he's also a guy with gentle hands and a contagious laugh.

He's not just another celebrity, he's a man who kisses me deeply and is endearingly obsessed with smelling my hair.

He's not merely a public figure, he is, above all, a person who loves his sister and cares for people and holds me like he never wants to let me go.

"He's playing on his offside tonight," Dad says.

We both know who he's talking about. Although we've never officially discussed my relationship with Sergei, I don't hide it either.

Actually, the word "relationship" is too normal a word for what's happening. What do you call weeks of passionate sex and hilarious texts?

Nothing about us is normal is a refrain I return to. We don't have to define what we are to each other. Not when being together feels this natural.

"See how it isn't his dominant side? What makes Petrov so good is how he expects the forecheck before the opposing team dumps the puck. He positions himself for a forehand rim shot to create a breakout."

He's talking like there's a Google Translate I can activate every time he uses hockey lingo.

"Dad, Matt isn't here to get into technical hockey strategies, so you'll need to break that down for me."

He chuckles. "The guy knows where to be, even when he's at a disadvantage."

Well, I could have told him *that*.

Instead, I mutter vaguely, "Oh, cool."

During the intermission, we chat about the new mechanic we hired in order to keep up with demand.

"We're getting tight in there, especially through spring, when the detailing work usually picks up."

"Have you given more thought to another location? You're making a name for yourselves. Customers would follow. Maybe further west to get the traffic from rich suburbs."

“We checked out a space last year. I don’t know. Leasing a building in that area is more expensive.”

“Closer to the university could work, too,” Dad suggests. “Students always need car repairs.”

He’s right, of course. But that market is seasonal, peaking at the beginning of the school year and nearly shutting down during the summer months.

“You should do your squats,” I say to change the subject. “I’ll do them with you.”

One of the health habits he’s integrating is exercise throughout the day. As many squats as he can during hockey intermissions, for instance. Picture a guy and his adult daughter in pajamas doing squats in front of the television and try not to laugh. We look ridiculous.

“You better do this when I’m not around,” I say.

“I promise. Speaking of which, I should be good by next week, sweet pea.”

“I know. Maybe we can ease into it? I’ll stay for a few nights a week.”

“Or...”

“Or what?” I ask.

“Or, to save money while you’re expanding the business, you’re welcome to stay. Your rent would go from almost a thousand bucks a month to zero.”

I stop squatting and stare at him. “You can’t be serious.”

He raises his hands in surrender. “Just a suggestion, Maeve. I’m going to be fine either way. But if this is the only way I can help, you know I’d love to have you around. I’ll stay out of your business, don’t worry.”

For some reason, the “business” that comes to mind is Sergei. I’d never make a decision based on some guy I’m sleeping with. Still, I can’t deny that I’m unable to imagine him hanging out with me here.

“Think about it. The offer is open.”

My phone rings. It's Noeleen, which is a rare occurrence. When I answer, she's already talking at full speed, not bothering to wait for my hello.

"I know you don't stay on top of this stuff, but something came up. I mean, showed up, on my social media. It's, well, are you sitting down? You're going to want to sit down." She finally takes a breath before relaunching her speech. "It's about you and Sergei. Also, um, Sergei and someone else. Two someones, actually."

"Slow down, Noeleen. What about Sergei?"

"A video was leaked. Of him, um, having sex."

My ass plops down while bile lodges in my esophagus. "He's on a sex tape?"

Dad sits at the other end of the sofa, shaking his head before he turns away like he can't even look at me.

"The link has been removed from Twitter, but it's out there on a porn site. There were two women."

You know those moments in movies when the character does a mental collage of past events that lead to a critical moment? The point is to show how the past foreshadows the present.

Well, that didn't happen to me. There was literally nothing that could have prepared me for this moment. Yes, I know I'm being naive to think his playboy days wouldn't catch up with him. But from the second we met—the moment he pulled away from the clutches of two women—he's been incredibly attentive. Sweet. Present. Even loving.

Our sexual chemistry contributes to our compatibility, but how can it not be more than sex? At least, that's what I've allowed myself to believe.

"How do you know it's him?"

"It's him!" Aiden hollers from the background.

"Oh, sweet pea." My dad's pitying voice twists my gut.

"It gets worse," Noeleen says.

How? How can it get worse than having the man I'm sleeping with blasted across the internet fucking two other women?

I want to throw up. I want to smash my phone. Most of all, I want a fucking minute to think before reacting too quickly.

Deep in my heart, I'm sure he didn't do this while we've been together. I just *know*. What Sergei did with his time before we met is not my business, right? But it still hurts. Because it's not about what he did; it's about who he is.

There's no dodging the sting of reality: Sergei is a man who sleeps with two women at a time. How in the world could I imagine I would be enough for him in the long run?

"Are there two videos?" I ask and cringe when my dad sighs his disapproval.

"Worse."

"For god's sake, just say it!"

"You're, um, there's, um, we—well," she stutters.

I hear the swish of Aiden taking the phone from his wife.

"Someone posted a picture of you and Sergei together. Like, intimately together. He's carrying you, both of you wearing nothing except underwear. At least, that's what Bruno said. I didn't want to look at it. You're officially part of a goddamn fan page of Sergei Petrov's sexscapades. Didn't I tell you he was bad news? What a—"

"Aiden, stop," I say as a vise clenches my chest. "Please. I get it."

He huffs before Noeleen is back on the phone. "I'm sorry, Maeve. Do you want me to come over? I know I encouraged you to give him a chance. I'm sorry."

"Noeleen, the only thing worse than feeling stupid is being pitied. Let's talk later, OK?"

"Sure, hon."

I hang up and can barely look at my father.

The picture must be of Sergei and I at the farm when we undressed. I don't even want to know how much of me is showing. Good thing there's full-action footage of a threesome to distract people from my indiscreet kissing session. Yay for me.

“Are you—”

“I'm going out for a drive,” I announce and grab my keys before hauling my ass out the door.

I didn't know where I'd end up until I find myself at the arena where Dad usually parks.

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Sergei

I check my phone at the end of the game, hoping to find a text from Maeve. Instead, my agent's texts flood the notification thread. He had been blowing up my phone:

7:25 p.m., Monday: **I know you're playing but call me at intermission. You check your phone right?**

7:45 p.m., Monday: **You really fucked up this time, Sergei. Call me!**

8:30 p.m., Monday: **This can't wait till the end of the game. Call me right when you get this. I can't believe you don't check your phone during intermissions.**

9:12 p.m., Monday: **Seriously? Also, nice assist.**

9:45 p.m., Monday: **I swear to god I'm going to kill you. How are you not getting this?! CALL ME BACK!**

9: 50 p.m., Monday: **The game is over! What the fuck! If you think you can avoid this problem, you are way stupider than you look.**

A quick run through the rest of the notifications shows nothing from Ana or Maeve. If it's an emergency that concerns them, that's different. This is likely Chris being dramatic.

What could he possibly be complaining about, anyway? I've never been as chill as I am now, focusing on hockey and my woman. I should get a pat on the back, not a scolding.

My defensive coordinator throws me an irritated glance. I have to put the phone away. When we're dismissed from the

postgame rundown, I dial Chris's number. The line doesn't even ring.

"Goddamn it, Sergei. Why didn't you come to me for this shit?" he answers.

"You're going to need to be more specific, Chris."

"You haven't been on social media? Even before the game?" At least that's what I think he said. The sound of the showers is drowning everything out.

"No. Why?" Heckles and chatter make it impossible to talk. "Let me call you back when I'm dressed."

"Don't you da—"

I hang up and take a quick shower. While I'm putting on my pants, I notice a few guys huddled at the corner. The locker room is suddenly eerily quiet, considering you needed to scream to be heard five minutes ago. I'm too rushed to care; that is until Randi sticks his face in front of me with his hand up. Is this fucker about to slap my face?

"Don't leave me hanging, man," he says.

Oh, right. I match his high five. I'm about to ask him what we're celebrating when my phone rings.

Answering, I grab my suit jacket and personal items on my way out. "Chris, yeah, I'm walking out of the locker room now."

"Don't ever do that again, Sergei! When I tell you it's serious, don't fucking ignore me!" He's never lost his cool, not like this.

"Hey, slow down. Whatever I did, I'm sorry already! Just tell me what I did wrong!"

"I can't believe you still haven't heard!"

I'm running out of patience but take a deep breath. This call will never end if we keep screaming at each other. "Well, you've got my attention. I'm listening," I say calmly.

"Why didn't you tell me about the threesome video, Sergei? Huh? You think you can hide something like that by yourself?"

Are you insane?! Have I taught you nothing?"

"What video?" My mouth moves, but my brain freezes. No fucking way. It can't be. Art Dima cleared that up months ago. He told me it was done, and Art gets everything done.

"Do you have any idea how many favors I burned to get the links taken down from social media?"

"Fucking hell, you mean it's..." I can barely talk. "Out?"

"We haven't traced all the porn sites. It was uploaded some time around five o'clock this afternoon. It made the rounds fast. Your face is clear as can be, Sergei. There's no deniability."

Maeve. I need to get to Maeve.

"I gotta go."

"What the—"

Me: We need to talk. Can I call you?

Within two seconds, I get the last message I expected.
I'm in my car at the arena. Same place as the first night.

I call. She picks up but says nothing.

"Are you there? Maeve, I just heard."

"Did you know about it?" she asks in the saddest voice I've ever heard from her. "When you were, um, with them, did you know about the recording?"

The answer is complicated. At the time, I had no idea. I rack my brain because it's a struggle to remember details. It was right at the end of last season. I was drunk and horny. Two women were more than willing to keep me company. It was obvious they did it often—hunt down men for threesomes. It's not that unusual, honestly.

I never signed up to be recorded and never would.

“Let me explain, OK? I’ll be outside in a minute. Please, don’t leave.” I stay on the phone. She hangs up.

Running down the hallway to get to the back parking lot, my heart is busting out of my chest. It has nothing to do with the physical exertion.

Don’t leave, Maeve. Goddamn it. Don’t leave.

I push open the metal door and exhale when I see her little car. A tail of brake lights weave from a distance as the crowd evacuates the area. Where we are, it’s mostly isolated.

I walk briskly, open the car door, and immediately bash my knees against her glove compartment. No smooth entrance for me. My thighs jut up. It’s impossible to turn and face her, so I’m practically looking over my shoulder.

“I had no idea while it was, well, *happening*,” I begin. “I didn’t know about the recording until one of the women threatened to release it months ago. Art Dima had stopped it. Or I thought he did. He paid whatever she wanted and promised me it was destroyed. Turns out we were all fooled.”

She’s gripping the steering wheel so tightly, her knuckles are white. Her face is frozen. Flickering lashes are the only sign that she’s not made of stone.

I can’t stand how tightly her hands are clenched. I reach over to cover her ice-cold fingers. When she turns her palm up to link us together, twenty pounds of air leave my lungs.

She’s holding my hand. We’re going to be OK.

“Thank you for understanding, Maeve. I’m so sorry. It will go away, I promise. Now that it’s public, my agent will step in as well. There’s—”

“Sergei,” she interrupts. I shut my mouth and squeeze her hand, encouraging her to continue. She’s turned her body toward me and looks down where we’re joined.

“One minute,” she mutters to herself. “I just need a minute and I’m good.”

“Maeve?”

She lifts her eyes and holds my gaze. She releases her hand from mine. My fingers tingle at the loss. Maeve is staring in my direction but over my shoulder, not making eye contact. Her high cheekbones are exaggerated by the parking lot's lighting, enhancing the image of Maeve as a pristine statue in a museum. Breathtaking beauty I'm not allowed to touch.

My mouth opens and closes while I find the words that will fix this. "I'll make it go away. This time, I'll be a hundred percent sure. I promise this doesn't have to touch us."

"Us?" she says. "What *us*?"

My head recoils. I would have been less surprised had she punched me.

"I don't want to judge how you lived your life before we met," she starts. "And in return, please don't ask me to be someone I'm not. Unlike the women you're usually with—" We both grimace. She clears her throat. "Unlike, um, *them*, my private life flashing across the internet makes me sick."

"There is no them. You're the only one I'm with, Maeve."

Uncertainty flashes across her features, then it's gone and replaced by determination. "I work in a business with a lot of men, Sergei. I'm no stranger to how guys talk about sexual conquests. For you, this is an indiscretion that is currently inconvenient. For me, any time a person looks at me sideways, I'll relive the embarrassment."

"There's nothing for you to be embarrassed about." I try to sound calm. I really do. "You don't have to be pulled into this bullshit."

She blinks rapidly, her frown deepening. "You don't know."

"Know what?"

"Noeleen says there's some kind of sick fan page where people have posted you with different women. One of those pictures is you and me at the farm. When we were, um, kissing."

"You mean after we took off our dirty clothes?"

Maeve nods and leans an elbow on her window's ledge as fingers rub her temple.

"That's so fucked up." Anger tunnels my vision. "Who the hell are these people?"

It's one thing for my mistakes to catch up to me, a whole other thing for Maeve to be the object of anyone's lewd gaze. She never signed up for this. Anger fills the compact car like cigar fumes. I close my eyes to focus on calming down. My rage, while I can't do a thing about it, will only upset her further.

When I open my eyes, she's smiling at me. It isn't a smile I've seen on her before. It's the one people at the country club wear when they're stuck sitting with a person they don't like. It's fake. It kills me that the only time Maeve has ever seemed disingenuous is because of me.

"It's all good, Sergei. We had fun didn't we?"

The words rip into the air and lodge straight to my gut. "What the hell are you saying?"

"I'm glad we're able to do this in person." Again with that fake smile. "This is goodbye."

Wait, what? Goodbye? She can't mean it.

"No, it isn't," I say, nearly choking at the ridiculousness. "You're upset. You can't be serious," I declare.

I try to turn, banging my knees again. "Goddamn this car! It's not even big enough for two people. Jesus, all I want to do is hold you. Let me hold you, Maeve."

For a split second, I think she'll give in. Her eyelids flutter and her mouth parts slightly, the way she looks before I kiss her. A kiss would wipe that fake smile off her face. I want her laughter and her honesty. I'll take her anger and disgust. Anything but this.

"I don't want to remember us like this," she says softly. "No need to be bitter, right? When I think about you, I want to hold on to the good times. It's been an unforgettable few weeks," she says, the last word puttering to a choke.

Is she fucking kidding me? An unforgettable few weeks is what you have with a nasty virus. No need to be bitter, huh? Try frustrated with a side of rage. I don't trust myself to speak. I wait for her to continue.

"Let's be civil. We always knew what this was about."

"Don't fucking say that." My words are muffled because my jaw is locked. "Don't talk about us like we're done. We're. Not. Done."

"I'm only stating the truth. We got carried away with the fake dating. Tit for tit, right?" Her lame attempt to sound casual only makes it worse.

"Everything coming out of your mouth is a lie, Maeve MacElroy. And you know it," I seethe.

"Excuse me, are you, are you mad at *me*?" She's incensed, the stone facade crumbling. In its place is an expression of shock and indignation. Her dull eyes have turned fiery. Finally, something *real*.

"Get out of my car, Sergei. Or I swear to god I'll haul you out of it."

That's the first genuine sentence she's spoken since this nightmare started. I cling to her words' rough edges because this Maeve I recognize: spirited and passionate and true. I'll take her righteous fury over fake platitudes any day.

"Nope," I declare and cross my arms over my chest. "I'm staying right here, in your tiny fairy car, till you hear me and believe me. I will make all of this go away, Maeve. And when it does, we move on like it never happened."

I lean back as far as I can in her ridiculous car. If this takes all night, it takes all night.

"I said ge—"

Maeve and I see the reporters at the same time. They're heading our way with lights, cameras, and the vicious instinct of coyotes cornering a kill.

Fuck, I have to deal with this.

“I’m only leaving because I don’t want them around you. We’re not done, Maeve.”

I jump out, arms out like I can block her car from their view. It *is* a tiny car, after all.

By the time the reporters reach me, she’s already driven away.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Maeve

I almost gave in.

I will make all of this go away, Maeve. And when it does, we move on like it never happened.

He said all the right things. Just because he said the words I wanted to hear, that doesn't make those words true.

His obvious desperation made me come across like an unfeeling bitch. I'm the farthest thing from indifferent. But I have to remember to keep my head straight and my heart intact even as turbulent emotions clamor for my attention: resentment, disbelief, shame, hurt.

It's bad enough that his sexual conquests are broadcasted for public view. Hearing about it *from my family* is an extra dose of humiliation.

Even then, my resolve nearly melted when I saw him exit the arena and run toward me. When he first got into the car and held my hand, I didn't want to let go. My heart begged for comfort and reassurance. My body ached for his touch.

My brain, however, served an ultimatum. One minute. I got one minute to hold his hand and then it's goodbye.

The thought of going back to my dad's house is unnerving. The idea of entering my empty apartment makes me shudder. So, when I drive away from Sergei, I head to the bar. That is, the hotel bar where Whitney works.

A quick text to my best friend and a fifteen minute drive later, I'm close to changing my mind and calling Sergei. This is why I can't be alone.

By the time I walk from the parking garage into the lobby and past the hostess, I'm tired of people staring at me like I escaped a mental institution.

Yes, I know I'm wearing torn leggings.

Correct, my hair is at the end of its three-day wash cycle.

Oh, thanks so much for noticing the stain on my hoodie! And my Crocs? I got them on sale.

The second I walk into the sparsely lit area with plush leather armchairs and booths made of dark mahogany, Whitney scrambles from behind the bar to give me a hug. She ushers me to a booth in the darkest corner. Vaguely, I hear her tell the hostess to cover the bar. When my ass hits the cushion, my entire body deflates.

“Did you hear?” I ask.

“A little. Declan called to ask if you were with me. I'll text him so he doesn't worry.”

“Thanks, Whitney.”

She puts her phone down after texting Dad. Whitney wraps a slender arm around my shoulders.

We've known each other since we were in seventh grade, nearly half my life, but didn't become best friends till the summer before junior year when we worked at the community pool's concession stand. Nothing makes the best of friends or the worst of enemies than having to serve chlorine-bleached children sugar when they've been left unsupervised for hours.

“How much do we hate him?” she asks. “Give me a ballpark. Is it pretend he doesn't exist if we bump into him level? Or are we talking tire-slashing category? Like Blake Easton because he dumped me for Tracy William at prom.”

I play with a loose thread at the arm of my old hoodie. “We don't hate him at all.” It's true. I'll never hate Sergei. All I feel is regret that we aren't meant to be.

“Oh, Maeve.” Her voice drips with pity. “Why don't you give me your side of the story? All I got from Declan was something about a video leaking and a website with you on it.”

“I can't believe those words even came out of my father's mouth! It's so embarrassing.”

Whitney is quiet for a beat. “So, tell me. What’s your take on all this?”

“There’s not much more to add. He’s a hockey stud with women throwing themselves at him. I knew that when we got together. It just makes me sick to think about him with anyone else, and that’s not his fault. All of this happened before we started our... our...”

“It starts with an R. You can say it.”

“Oh, shut up,” I say, rolling my eyes.

“This is all before the two of you started your *relationship*,” she states like she’s teaching me a new language. “Go on.”

“All of it happened before we met. I have no right to be mad about it.”

“I think you have every right to feel whatever you feel. Are you saying you don’t trust him? Like he would cheat on you?” Her nose crinkles when she asks the damning question.

I pause in order to take Whitney’s question seriously. No. Sergei isn’t a cheater. He’s too proud a man to sneak around, too confident to hold back.

“He wouldn’t cheat on me. He’d leave me first.”

That’s the long and short of it: Sergei will eventually leave me.

This isn’t false humility or a pity party. OK, maybe a bit like a pity party. I’m not saying his attraction isn’t genuine. With my stable job and sense of humor and overall levelheadedness, I make a decent girlfriend. Don’t forget the sex. I’m practically a windup doll that sings every time you crank it. And who doesn’t want a person around who can fix cars?

But for a man like Sergei Petrov, a mechanic living paycheck to paycheck who will never be worldly or sophisticated or graceful cannot possibly be enough. I’m basic, and that’s not a bad thing. It’s only a matter of time before he realizes we’re not a good match.

“You don’t know that for sure, Maeve.”

“I’m not saying he’d dump me next week, but I can’t expect him to be with a person like me when—”

“Person like you? An amazing woman, you mean?” Her chin is raised and eyes steady.

“You have to say that because you’re my friend.”

“No, Maeve. I’m saying it because it’s true,” Whitney declares. When she sees that I’m not in the mood to agree with her, she relents. “OK, finish your thought. I’ll be quiet and listen. You think you can’t expect him to be with you when...”

“When he’s got everything going for him. Including an unlimited number of women and money, status, talent, charm. The man is incredible at *everything*. Maybe he won’t get sick of me right away, but six months from now? C’mon.”

A horrific realization hits me as the words leave my mouth. I’m not even that worried about six months from now. Uh-uh. I’m thinking about six *years* from now.

I can no longer deny how much more I want from our relationship. More dates and calls; more meals and laughs. More Sergei.

I don’t know what’s more terrifying. A future without him, or a future with him in which I’ll always wonder if the end is near.

Either way, I’m struck by a need so deep it takes over my body. Not only physically. There’s something fundamental about what I want from Sergei. As if the ability to live, and not just *exist*, depends on whether or not he is in my life. The last few weeks have opened up a future I didn’t dare consider too closely. A future so bright, it hurts to look at.

As if on cue, Sergei calls. I silence the ring immediately.

“That’s him isn’t it? Why do you call him Poser?” Whitney saw the caller’s name.

“It’s from the first night we met,” I say, remembering the swaggering hot guy who wore sex appeal like a heady cologne.

“He had women with him when he strolled into the arena. Like he owned the place. I called him Poser because I knew that would bug him.” Despite myself, I smile.

“That’s the night Declan had a heart attack.”

I nod, although my mind goes way beyond the night Sergei helped me with an emergency. Sergei stepped in when I was almost sued. He defended me against his mother’s scorn. No one has ever made me feel so precious, so desired.

Beyond how well he’s treated me, he bankrolled Bryce’s Nashville trip. Sergei came to the hospital to make sure the Mavericks didn’t send a lame corporate fruit basket for my father. The laughter and comfort he shared with me, through the last days and nights, had eased my worries about Dad’s surgery. I couldn’t begin to thank him for that. Everything was better because of Sergei.

No one ever talks about that aspect of Sergei Petrov: the funny, generous, sweet side of a man who is a good friend and a loving brother. The one who cares for other people, who uses his influence for good. The man who makes me feel more treasured than I thought was possible.

Instead, the leaked video paints him within the lines of what has already been rehashed in the public imagination: rich playboy who has it all. He’s so much more than that.

The thing is, I can get over the video as long as I know it’s in his past. That’s the problem, isn’t it? I don’t give a shit about the past. It’s the future that’s going to kill me. A future I want so much, I can taste it.

Unfortunately, the happiness that I feel when I’m with him in the present will be my ruin tomorrow. Having someone and keeping them are not the same thing.

“It doesn’t matter if he looks good on paper. Everything you named is superficial. You’re a person, not a thing. An incredible, kind, loyal, adorable person,” Whitney says. “If he’s smart, he would know what a catch you are, Maeve. Is that it? Is he stupid? All beauty and no brains?”

“No! He’s really smart and speaks multiple languages and has lived all over the world. And Sergei notices what people need. He gives without expectation. The way he *thinks* fascinates me. The way he *looks* is the least interesting thing about him.”

My outburst surprises both of us. Before we can address it, a raucous laugh alerts us to a large group of men in golf shirts entering the bar.

“Go. We’ll talk later,” I say. “You shouldn’t lose your job because of me.”

She nods resignedly. “Want me to get you something when I’m up there?”

“No, I’m good. Thanks, hon. I’ll be going home soon. Don’t want Dad to worry.”

My phone buzzes with a text.

Poser: I’ve been trying to call you. Please answer.

Poser: We’re not done Maeve.

I shut my phone.

I watch Whitney work and thank the stars for our friendship. In fact, there’s a lot to be thankful for. My dad survived a freaking heart attack. My business keeps food on my table. I have a loving family and a fulfilling life. I am blessed and refuse to feel sorry for myself or apologize for what I don’t have.

So what if there will never be another person who can make me feel like Sergei does? Or that I’ll never want another man the way I crave him? So what if he belongs in my past and not my future?

So. What.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Sergei

I knew she was staying with Declan.

Before I could go to her, I had to get rid of the reporters. It took way longer than I planned for them to leave my street. Chuck monitored the pack while I waited in the penthouse. There's no way I'm leading them to Maeve.

It's almost one in the morning when I pull up to a mid-century bungalow on a quiet suburban street. Her car is in the driveway and it's dark inside. For a split second, I'm ashamed of my stalker move of waiting outside her father's house. However, desperation will always outweigh logic.

Me: Are you awake?

I strain my neck to check if any of the lights inside turn on. Nope.

Me: I'll wait outside for as long as it takes moya feya. We're not done.

Exhausted, I lean my seat back and close my eyes for a bit. If she thinks she can avoid me forever, she doesn't know me at all.

A sharp knock startles me. The glare of sunlight shocks my pupils. The stiffness of my body tells me I fell asleep in my car.

Declan MacElroy stands outside the driver's side window, arms across his chest.

I slide the window down.

“Hey, Declan. Sorry to bother you like this. I was hoping to see Maeve. Is she here?”

He lifts his chin toward the driveway where her car is not sitting. She freaking saw me this morning and still drove away?

“Come in, Sergei,” he says, leaving the front door ajar when he disappears behind it.

I scramble out and groan at the tug of my lower back muscles and the bruising of my knees. Walking across the lawn, I enter a brick house painted white, with black shutters and a red door. The aroma of coffee wafts from deeper in the house. My stomach grumbles.

“Can I use your bathroom?”

“Bathroom is at the end of the hallway,” he calls. “Join me in the kitchen when you’re done.”

“Thanks.” I head over to tidy myself and gather my thoughts.

This is a good sign, right? It has to be. I’m about to talk to Maeve’s father. Camping outside a man’s house so I can see his daughter is not a scenario I had ever imagined for myself. But isn’t that what every minute with Maeve has been like? Totally unprecedented but, weirdly, exactly what I need. Declan has no reason to listen to me and yet here I am, allowed to use his bathroom and invited to meet him in the kitchen.

I decide this is a good sign. It has to be.

When I get to the kitchen, he motions for me to sit down in front of a place setting consisting of a bowl of oatmeal, a cup of black coffee, and a glass of water.

“We don’t do creamer or much dairy in the house since my surgery. I hope you’re OK with that.”

“I’m fine.” I’ve never seen a sadder breakfast.

“What’s wrong? Not the smoked salmon or eggs benedict you’re used to, Sergei?”

“Huh? No. I’m grateful. Thank you.”

He waits for me to sip the coffee and spoon the lumpy, tasteless oatmeal into my mouth.

“Not great, is it?” he jeers. “This tasteless food is what my daughter has been eating to support my heart-healthy diet. She eats chicken breasts, which she pretends not to hate. She moved in with me to make sure my transition into independence goes smoothly.”

“How are you feeling, by the way?” I ask.

Instead of answering me, he shakes his head in disgust or pity. Probably both.

“Maeve might be the baby of the family, but she’s our rock. The person who reminds us, every day, what a family is about. Plus, she’s smart and kind and funny. So, when I see her spirit zapped like it was last night and this morning, you have to understand it upsets me. A lot.”

“That was never my intention, Declan. I’m not sure what you know. Let me clarify that none of that shit happened after I met Maeve. My past caught up with me and that’s my fault. I never meant to hurt her. Once everything is cleared, I promise I never will.”

“I don’t enjoy seeing my daughter hurt. You should remember that the next time you take food from the father of a woman you took advantage of.”

I drop the spoon and lean back. Wiping my mouth, I return his glare. “I never took advantage of her. I did everything I could to be with her, sure. Maybe bent the truth a little about my car so I’d have a reason to see her. But every minute we’ve been together has been her choice as much as mine. No one took advantage of anyone.”

“You should have told her what to expect. I stay out of my daughter’s business. I trust her judgment one hundred percent. What I should have calculated is that her judgment is no match for the sordid shit you bring to the picture.”

It's impossible to restrain my growing irritation. "I'm here to apologize to Maeve. To win her back. If all you're going to do is lie to both of us about staying out of her business, then you'll have to excuse me." I push away from the table, the chair creaking with my weight.

"What did you say?" He glares and leans forward.

"You might not tell her what to do, but you sure let your sons control her life. They're the ones that are overprotective, keeping her from bringing anyone home, right? Meanwhile, you're the good guy. Fuck that. You're just as controlling as them. How is she supposed to take me seriously if she's worried about you guys all the damn time? I wanted to be with her at the hospital. I offered to meet her family properly."

"*You* wanted to meet her family? That's a load of crap. You're interested in one thing. Why would she bring you home knowing your reputation? You'll get sick of her. Then what?"

"I can say this as fact, Declan," I state, slowly and clearly. "It will take a lifetime for me to get sick of your daughter. And probably not even then."

We stare at each other, both shocked at what came out of my mouth. There's no taking it back. Every word is true. Maeve is the one person I see as far in the future as I can imagine. Not my team. Not my parents. Maybe Ana, but that's different.

I need Maeve in my life today and all the tomorrows that follow.

"I don't know why or how it happened. I don't have a name for how I feel about Maeve. But this"—I pound my chest—"this only feels right when we're together."

"You are either the best actor in the world, or you're in love."

Well, hell, that's easy to figure out. "I'm a terrible actor."

"You're telling me you're in love with Maeve?" he taunts.

“If I recall from two seconds ago, that was your diagnosis,” I snark.

The words linger as we stare each other down. Then, Declan seems to come to a conclusion. His face softens when he speaks, earnest yet calm.

“I want what’s best for her. Her mother died when she was a baby. Maeve never had what every child should have. A full family.”

He tears up. Declan roughly uses his sleeve to wipe his eyes.

“Perhaps if my Shannon were alive, things would be different. Maeve wouldn’t be so hesitant to share her private life. If things went well or badly, it didn’t matter because a woman like my wife would know what to do. We all did our best, though there’s no changing the fact that my daughter didn’t grow up with a mother.”

He wipes his face again, leaving wet streaks across his cheek.

It’s hard to watch a proud man cry. I’m compelled to comfort him, even if I’m likely to make things worse the longer I stay.

“Once, she described you and her brothers as four fathers and four mothers. Whatever nurturing she would have gotten from your wife, she got it from all of you together. It isn’t everything, but I bet if you ask her, she’ll tell you that it was more than enough.”

He looks a little shocked, tears streaming down freely. I have to look away.

“Thank you. Thank you for saying that, Sergei.” He sniffs.

We sit quietly for a few minutes. He seems to be lost in a flurry of thoughts, his expressions shifting erratically.

Me? I’ve got a one-track mind at the moment. I’m sticking around because there’s something I need to know.

“How do I get her back, Declan? Tell me. I’ll do anything.”

When he finally speaks, he sounds thoughtful. Nostalgic. “There’s this story Maeve made me tell her a hundred times. It was how I got her mother to go out with me.”

Pausing, he stares into space like he’s watching a film made just for him.

“I saw her at the State Fair where she was signed up for a pageant. Not by choice, exactly. Her friend dared her to parade in overalls instead of a fitted dress. It didn’t matter what that woman wore, she was impossible not to look at. Of course she won. That’s my Shannon. The most beautiful woman in the room but also the most mischievous. Maeve has her eyes.”

“Sunflowers,” I mumble.

He looks at me with a hazy expression. “That’s what I called Shannon. The way the yellow in her hazel eyes glowed when she was happy. It was like watching a flower bloom. My sunflower.”

Lost in thought, Declan has to be prompted. “So? How’d you get the beauty queen to notice a guy like you?” I ask, risking the jab.

He laughs. “I made a fool of myself.”

“That’s a little vague.”

“All the guys vied for her attention. She said no to every single one who asked her to ride the Ferris wheel with them. So, instead of asking her to ride with me, I challenged her to a whack-a-mole game. If I won, she would have to ride the Ferris wheel with me. If *she* won, I’d buy her a ticket to any ride for the rest of the night. She could go with her girlfriends or by herself. I’d pay for it.”

“Why would she take you up on that? You’d obviously win.”

“You’d think, right? But this is Shannon we’re talking about. No man had ever taken her seriously as an equal in a competition. She was determined to show us all,” Declan says proudly.

“Well? Did you let her win?”

“I had planned to. I wasn’t going to be alone with a woman who didn’t want to be alone with me. Honestly, the whole thing was my lame attempt to be around her a little longer. Anyway, she did her whacking and was, honestly, as good as anyone.”

He pauses and closes his eyes for a beat. When he continues, Declan’s voice takes a jovial quality. He’s reliving the past.

“Right when I began, three of my friends—or guys I thought were my friends—mooned me! She had convinced them to distract me and of course they were willing. If they weren’t going to ride the Ferris wheel with her, neither would I.”

We both chuckle.

“So, with all the money I had, I bought her and her friends passes to a bunch of rides. I can still see her on that carousel, gorgeous and happy, the wind blowing through her thick wavy hair and her laughter sweetening the air. That woman took my breath away.

“When she caught me staring, she threw me the sassiest wink. That was it for me. I was a goner. No other woman mattered after that moment. I hatched a plan with my friend in charge of the ride.

“He let me take the mic used for the carousel. Do you know what I’m talking about?”

“Like to tell people to get off and on.”

“Exactly. So I got on the mic and said, ‘I want a rematch, Shannon Dougerty.’ Right when she spun by, she hollered, ‘You’re a sore loser!’

“I grabbed the mic again. ‘You only won because you broke the rules.’ She whipped around and screamed, ‘What rules?’

“The fact that she wasn’t ignoring me spurred me on. ‘It’s the cardinal rule of carnival games. Don’t force my friends to drop their pants!’ There were shocked gasps from the people in the carousel and from the crowd we were attracting.

“For one round, she actually looked speechless. But when she came back around, she screamed, ‘They volunteered!’ After another circle, she added, ‘You loved it!’

“She was trying to sound indifferent, yet she was smiling as widely as I was. I pushed my luck and announced, ‘I’m gonna sing you a song, Shannon. And I won’t stop until you agree to a rematch.’”

“No fucking way,” I say, laughter bubbling in my stomach.

“I started singing into the mic. And let me tell you, Sergei, it wasn’t pretty.”

“What did you sing?” I ask, amused at the vision of a young man forcing a carousel full of people to endure his terrible voice.

“Elvis. ‘Love Me Tender.’”

“I’m sorry I asked.”

“I was so freaking out of tune, the entire carousel heckled me to shut up. People were crowding around the ride, laughing and booing. She went around a few times and each time I kept getting louder. I didn’t hit one right note throughout the auditory torture.

“Before I could belt out another refrain, she screeched, ‘Fine! Just stop!’ So that’s what I did. You should have heard the applause when I stopped. It sounded like the entire State Fair cheered.”

My amused snort comes out so hard, my nose hurts. We’re both smacking the table and laughing. When it passes, we lean back.

“Wow. I needed that. Thank you, Declan.”

He nods in a gracious gesture of *you’re welcome*.

“Here’s what you can do for me,” he says. “Don’t sleep outside and draw more unwanted attention on my daughter. If you can’t respect that, there’s no hope for you.”

“No camping out. No exposing her to the bullshit.”

“That bullshit? Fix it. Don’t talk to her till you have all your issues sorted out. She deserves at least that after what you put her through.”

“You’re right.” I gesture to the door and stand up.

“You sure you don’t want to finish your oatmeal?” Declan asks despite knowing the answer.

“I’m good.”

“You could be missing oat. Get it? Missing *oat* instead of out?”

“Yeah, I got it. Thanks, Declan.”

We part ways, not as friends exactly. I wouldn’t even say he likes me. But there’s an understanding between us. When I sort out the mess I’ve made, he’s not going to stop me from pursuing Maeve.

And somewhere in that crazy, hilarious story, there’s a clue to winning *moya feya* back.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Maeve

I've blocked him on my phone. Cold turkey is the way.

Bullshit. If I was going cold turkey, I wouldn't have kept our playlist open, would I?

Sergei drops a different song every day for the last few weeks. He's added twenty, which feels like a lot from a guy who never had a playlist.

He digs deep into the American classics: Simon & Garfunkel, Stevie Nicks, Billy Joel, Al Green, the Eagles. I roll my eyes at the song choices, each one sappier than the last. "Let's Stay Together," "I'm On Fire," "She's Got A Way About Her," "Leather and Lace," "Desperado."

Still, there's no denying that I'm curious every day. I look forward to seeing which song he's going to add. No reason to read too much into it. Just because I look forward to listening to the song and wondering what he's thinking, doesn't mean I'm falling for his charm. I'll cut myself off soon.

Yes, I realize I sound like an addict promising to quit.

"Remind me why I have to be here?" I ask my father. We finished chatting with his boss, Mildred, and are currently heading to our seats.

"Indulge me, sweet pea. I miss the games and I don't want to sit alone."

I pull my cap lower over my eyes. We're across from the players' bench, but we're still pretty close to the ice, eight rows from the penalty box. The last thing I want is for Sergei to see me. Out of sight, out of mind, right? Wrong.

When the players come out for the warm-up skate, it's like a spotlight is following over his head. He doesn't have his helmet on yet. Sergei is moseying around, his thick black hair

flowing unrestrained. My fingers remember the silky thickness of those strands and my lungs forget to take in air.

Now he's stretching. Heaven help me. When Sergei drops his body down to the ice and spreads his knees to work those glorious inner thighs, I nearly swallow my tongue. His hips are moving up and down to facilitate the stretch. I'm overtaken by the memory of what it's like to be under him.

"I need to go to the bathroom," I utter, and run up the stairs to reach the main level. The only thing worse than the attack of Sergei's sex appeal is suffering through it beside my father.

In the bathroom, I take my time. Once the music pauses, I know the practice skate is finished. Walking back to my seat, I talk myself off the ledge of panic. Sergei will never know I'm here. That's not the problem.

The real problem is yours truly. Can I focus on the game instead of obsessing over flowing hair and brawny hips?

Nope, I cannot. God, I miss him. I wish I didn't.

When the national anthem fills the arena, it takes everything for me to keep my eyes on the singer and not fidget like a bobblehead.

When the puck drops, instead of watching the Mavericks play, my eyes track one hot Russian defenseman, whether he's on the ice or on the bench.

Sergei plows through a Seattle player, and the crowd goes crazy. He throws his body to block a shot, and my heart stops. I'm barely following the play unless he's part of it. If you asked me which team is ahead, I'd have to check the scoreboard.

Knowing he's a superstar is one thing. Watching Sergei perform live is an out-of-body experience. In a game full of elite athletes, he stands out with his strength and grace and sheer presence.

My mind wanders to how he talked about choosing hockey over the legacy of his family's last name. I'm glad he did. It would have been a waste to suppress his talent. No matter how our time together ended, and no matter how much it hurts not

to be with him, I want what's best for Sergei. Happiness and fulfillment and success. On his terms.

A red lightbulb beside the player's bench indicates that the TV feed is on commercial. Players lounge around the ice or relax on their respective benches. The announcer tries to entertain the crowd with birthday announcements and Metallica.

“Join me in welcoming back Declan MacElroy, ladies and gentlemen. He is the arena's ice technician and part of the Mavericks family. Good to see you again, Declan!”

To my everlasting horror, the jumbotron features my father waving and smiling. Beside him is a frumpy woman wearing a trucker hat and an old hoodie, looking up with her mouth open.

That's me. I'm the frumpy woman.

I hear the swish-swish of hard skating and Sergei rams himself against the plexiglass closest to us. He lands with a resounding *boom*. Our gazes lock and I feel the floor under me give way. He's smiling and waving and stunning.

Lamely, I wave back so he doesn't look completely crazy. You can almost hear the collective cringe, as people witness the very definition of awkward.

The commercial light turns off and a referee calls the players. Sergei heads to center ice but looks over his shoulder one more time. He finds his place beside an opponent. The puck drops.

A sequence of events unfolds so quickly, I barely keep up. The puck is carried into the Mavericks offensive zone. A couple of guys battle at the corner. The puck pops out from the skirmish and finds its way to a winger. Instead of shooting at the net, the Mavericks forward passes it behind him. Sergei is at the blue line, stick cranked up, ready to use his body to turn that puck into a bullet.

His slapshot is as graceful as ballet and as precise as a gun. I don't know how the puck gets through at least four guys between him and the net, but it rips past the goalie's shoulder.

Everyone cheers. His teammates jump him. Sergei, however, doesn't celebrate by skating past his bench and fist bumping the team.

Instead, he skates to the exact spot he was at during the break. He smashes his body against the plexiglass with a *boom*. There's a smile on his face and a silly wave in my direction.

A referee taps his shoulder because Sergei has to get off the ice at the end of his shift. He skates backward, never once looking away from me. When he gets to the bench, his teammates shove him playfully, clearly bugging him about his strange behavior. There's no denying he's acting weird. Does he think he's in a rom-com or something?

Instead of being embarrassed, however, Sergei is beaming. His smile is broadcasted on the jumbotron and it's as if the sun rose in the arena.

Throughout the rest of the night, every time there's a break in the game, the jumbotron plays the sequence of Sergei scoring, rushing to the board, crashing the plexiglass, and waving at me. Cameras caught multiple angles and, in every single one that shows my face, I'm smiling like a fool.

Sergei resumes his stellar performance. He's recognized as one of the game stars, honored at the end of the four-to-two win.

The interviewer is about to ask him something. Sergei leans into the mic and says, charm on full force, "Can I borrow this?"

Surprised but amused, the journalist relinquishes the mic.

Sergei takes it, skates to his spot against the board closest to us, and says, his sultry voice carrying over the speakers, "Meet me after the game, *moya feya*. Where we first met. Raise your hand to promise me you'll be there."

Several women raise their hands.

Everyone is staring at me.

My dad is muttering, "He's lost his mind."

I freeze.

“Promise me, Maeve, or I’m gonna start singing till you do.”

What the hell?!

He begins to croon the opening lines of Elvis’s “Love Me Tender.”

I raise both my hands in surrender because no one should be subjected to this humiliation. Mine and his.

He winks, skates away, and hands the mic back. The surrounding people clap and whistle, curious eyes following my every move. I turn to my dad.

“You told him that story? About you and Mom?”

He nods and continues to chuckle, occasionally mumbling, “Lost. His. Mind.”

“Did you put him up to this?” I ask as we walk toward the staff areas.

“Does that boy look like he needs to be convinced of anything when it comes to you?”

We stop walking and I lean on a cement wall. “I can’t, Dad. After the video leak and all the attention, I just...”

“If Sergei is going to be remembered for a video, it’s this one.”

“Oh, god!”

“Listen, there are gonna be a ton of people in that garage trying to get a peek at the drama. You head back to your apartment, and I’ll wait for Sergei to tell him where you are.”

The thought of avoiding more eyes is tempting. The last thing I want is to go where we first met and have to explain our situation to even more people.

“How will *you* get home?”

“He’ll drive me. Someone has to tell him he’s lost his mind.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Sergei

When I enter the locker room, all the guys start scream-singing “Love Me Tender.” It goes for a few lines before Coach Zach finally whistles.

“All right. You’ve had your fun with Elvis over here. Sit down so we can go home sometime tonight.” His smile cracks.

“Yeah, guys! Sergei must leave the building,” Lance quips and everyone laughs.

Coach’s mouth moves. I can’t hear a thing over the gong in my chest. The blood rushing through my body feels like electric currents. I know we’re dismissed when my teammates head to the showers. I bodycheck people out of the way, so I’m first. It’s rude and I don’t give a shit.

The entire time I’m showering and getting dressed, my teammates roast me.

“Who’s pussy whipped now, huh?” I hear someone say. I don’t bother checking who it is.

“Explains why you never party anymore,” Gordon says beside me.

“I recognize her. She’s the Zamboni driver who broke the guy’s nose,” Randi says.

“Oh, yeah!” “Right!” A bunch of guys confirm.

“It’s not a Zamboni.” I feel compelled to correct him because Maeve would want me to.

The whole time, I’m trying to keep my fingers steady and my heart rate normal. The sooner I get dressed, the sooner I see Maeve. The second my shoes are on, I’m out the door.

The heckling in the locker room follows me down the hallway. I’m not proud to say that I begin jogging, the thought

of Maeve propelling me forward.

However, when I arrive, there are a bunch of people milling around. None of them are Maeve. It's like getting punched in the throat. I know what I'm talking about because I've experienced it. The defining feature of a throat punch is that you can neither talk nor breathe. This is my current state.

I hear a voice beside me. "She's not here. Let's go. We can talk while you drive me home," Declan says.

We backtrack to the player area where my car is parked.

"She promised to meet me tonight," I complain petulantly. "She raised her hand." God, I sound pathetic.

"Did you really want to have that conversation in front of a dozen people pretending not to eavesdrop?"

"No."

"Exactly. She's at her apartment. I stayed back to tell you. Also, I can't believe you stole my move, son."

"It was a good move, Declan. Can't let it go to waste."

We're both quiet for most of the drive. Closer to his house, he asks, "Is that leaked video still around? The one with—"

"No. Apart from hockey, that's been my priority. I'm also trying to figure out who leaked it. Turns out the woman who signed a nondisclosure *did* trash her copy. At any rate, all the sites have been served cease and desist orders. It won't resurface."

"Good. When you came over last time, you said you'd never hurt her again."

"I won't. I'd rather cut off my arm than disappoint Maeve. She'll have no reason to doubt me. I promise."

"Sergei, that's not a promise you can make. Relationships aren't about one hurdle and the rest is smooth sailing. I was married for over twenty years. I disappointed Shannon plenty of times. And we had our doubts. Even a good marriage has doubts."

"What are you saying? I'm going to fuck up?"

“I’m saying you’re both going to.”

“Nice pep talk.”

“Her brothers will not be as nice as I am.” He sounds amused.

“That’s fine.”

“And if she’s not ready to start up again, you’ll have to accept that. I’m helping because I don’t like that you never had a chance to talk to each other.”

“I know. I really appreciate it. You have no idea what it means to me.”

“I’ve been in love once, too, young man. I have an idea.”

We pull up to his house and he gets out, whistling the tune of “Love Me Tender” as he walks away.

I zip out of the driveway so fast my tires screech. The minutes it takes to arrive at Maeve’s street feels like an hour. I’m forced to park further away than I want, so I run down the street like Tom Cruise in an action movie. I feel ridiculous as well as cautiously hopeful.

I’m retrieving the text with her apartment building’s access code when I see her. She’s waiting for me on the outside stoop.

“Hey,” I say, panting.

“Hey. Walk with me?” she asks.

I’d rather go to bed with her, but sure.

“I don’t think I can go upstairs and have a proper conversation.” Maeve bites and then releases her puffy bottom lip. It’s almost impossible to look away from its glistening perfection.

“Understandable,” I say playfully. “I’m too irresistible in close quarters.”

“Actually, Sergei, you really are.”

“You say that like it’s a bad thing.”

That makes her smile. We stroll in silence and a bunch of questions fill my head, all of them competing to be asked first.

Should we talk about the video? Do I begin my groveling now? Does this mean we're back together? Can we kiss?

"I'm basic," she announces. I must have heard her wrong.

"What did you say?"

"Basic. Ordinary. I don't have exciting experiences or fancy things. My problems are boring, like doing my own taxes and hiding Girl Scout cookies from my dad. Your issues are winning championships and choosing which of a dozen women you'll bring to a posh hotel room."

"Stop it, Maeve. I don't want to talk about other women. I made a mistake and paid for it. I can apologize as much as you need me to, but no one regrets that indiscretion more than me."

"I didn't bring it up to make you feel bad, Sergei. Cutting you off wasn't about punishing you. It was about freeing you from having to attach to someone so basic, when clearly you need excitement and variety and thrills."

I stop and force her to look at me. "No one excites me more than you. Standing here on a street talking to you is a thrill. And the only variety I need from my woman is whether she's keeping her hair wavy or getting a Brazilian blow job."

That elicits the laugh I'd hoped for. Without pushing my luck too much, I come closer, rubbing the back of our hands together as we continue to walk.

"Remember when you asked me why I don't date?" I venture.

It's time to tell her everything. Now or never.

"Yeah."

"For one, you saw my parents. They taught me that when two people attach themselves to each other and things fall apart, it's those around them who suffer."

"Why do you think they never divorced?"

"Their financial and social interests are tied up with each other. It would be inefficient to get divorced when they can live separate lives with no consequences."

“Except being married to someone you don’t love. That’s a pretty big consequence.”

“I agree.” I run my fingers through my hair so she doesn’t notice the slight shaking of my hand.

“So you don’t date because you feel that being estranged is inevitable.” Maeve’s voice is barely audible, yet it reaches deep inside me, giving me the strength to continue.

“That’s part of it, but that’s not all of it.”

Maeve remains quiet, patiently waiting.

“When I was fifteen, my mother’s personal assistant, a woman who was probably in her late twenties at the time, she...” I have to clear my throat before continuing. “She seduced me.”

“What?! You were a child!” she gasps.

I plow on before I lose my nerve. “My body, well, tight pants could get me hard. I went with it, I guess. Sometimes your body will do things even when your mind doesn’t think it’s right.”

“Oh, Sergei,” she says and takes my hand between both of hers. She leans against my outer arm as we continue our stroll.

“I told my mom. She fired the woman.” The back of my hair prickles when I remember that conversation.

“And?”

“That’s it.”

“What do you mean? That can’t be it.”

I shrug. “What else is there to do?”

“Press official charges. Make sure that predator is never allowed to be alone with minors again. Help you process the abuse with therapy. There’s a lot she could have done. What did your father say?”

“He doesn’t know.”

She makes a choking sound. When Maeve finally speaks, the gentleness of her tone soothes me. “I’m so sorry, baby. I

can't imagine what that was like for you, so young and confused. The pain and devastation you felt. It wasn't OK for your mother to do so little. You deserved more support."

"I never wanted to feel that way again, Maeve. Helpless with my own body. Confused about what was wrong or right. When I figured out that casual sex allowed me to keep my power and never be confused, it made the most sense. Until you came along."

She blinks once before whispering, "What happened when I came along?" We stop walking and turn to face each other.

Of their own accord, our bodies meld and our arms embrace. She feels amazing, smells like summer, and looks at me with a sincere compassion I had never known existed.

"Power is meaningless when it comes to you and me. All I've wanted since we met is to *be* with you, craved to be closer in any way possible. You're like a magnet that clicks me into place, Maeve. And not one second since I saw you had I been confused. I want you and no one else. You're not a basic or a fancy woman, *moya feya*. You're another kind of woman altogether."

"What's that?"

"Mine."

Her eyes ablaze, Maeve is all I see.

"And I'm yours," I continue, words flowing for once. I don't have to think about what to say. "We belong together."

She caresses my jaw and runs a finger down my neck. Every surface she touches feels marked. Her hand splays over my chest. My heart thuds against her palm. I wait for her to speak, yet Maeve remains silent.

"If you're not ready to forgive me for my mistakes, I can wait," I continue. "If my music selection needs to be more obvious about my feelings, I'll write my own fucking songs. And I'll find all kinds of other ways to grovel. Want me to groom pigs or feed goats or—"

“Or perform various romantic farm activities? Yes, that’s exactly what I need,” she responds with a smile.

“If you need me to do anything to prove how I feel about you, I’ll do it.”

She blinks rapidly before looking away. When Maeve speaks, I have to lean closer to hear. “You’re really good at this.”

“I know,” I say cockily and then pause. “Wait. Good at what?”

“At saying what you mean,” she answers. “I don’t know how to ask for what I want, Sergei. That’s why I walked away. What bothered me about the leak isn’t that you did something indiscreet. Or, at least, not primarily that. We all do things we might regret. None of your actions were meant to hurt me. You would never purposefully betray me. I always believed that.”

She presses her lips together and takes two deep breaths before continuing. “I feared I wouldn’t be enough. I couldn’t get myself to say it. To say, *please Sergei, tell me how I can be enough for you*, so I walked away instead.”

Her misery breaks my heart, but her honesty puts it back together.

“Enough? You’re worried about being enough, Maeve? You looked my way and became my fucking world. If you can’t believe me right now, give me the chance to prove it.”

“Prove it with a kiss.”

I don’t have to be told twice. I swoop down, grab her ass, and hike her legs around me so our mouths line up. I give her everything I’ve got—yearning and relief and joy. Sloppy, clumsy, teeth-clashing happiness goes into that kiss.

I don’t even realize I’ve started walking until she says, our mouths still connected, “It’s the other way.”

I turn around and walk briskly, her body plastered to me. I continue to carry her as she presses the building’s access code. She wiggles out of my hold and runs up the stairs with me

close behind. Her door was left unlocked, so we spill inside together, grabbing each other and tugging off our clothes.

Finally, she's in my arms. Naked and soft and incredible.

We tumble on the sofa and I pull her over me, gripping her back as I plunder her mouth.

Moving down her neck, I mumble, "I need to be inside you, Maeve. Do you have a condom?"

There was no use carrying one around when Maeve was only taking my song selections and not my calls.

"I'm on the pill. I've only been with you since my last checkup."

"I'm clean," I say. "I always use a condom and test regularly. Are you saying what I think you're saying?"

"Not just the tip this time, Poser. Fuck me bare and make me come till I beg you to stop."

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Maeve

Yeah, I said that. I said what I wanted, and it felt fantastic.

We look down to where our hips are grinding, his cock rigid against my stomach. I rise to my knees and line him up, notched at my entrance.

Already, my legs are shaking and my arousal pulses through me like a current. Every inch of my skin tingles with anticipation.

“Are you sure?” he grunts, nearly incomprehensible because he’s busy licking my breasts, sucking my nipples, biting my shoulders. His mouth is hot and hungry, so skilled in its exploration of terrain, I’m rendered speechless.

“Are.” He licks a nipple.

“You.” Teeth graze at the most sensitive tip.

“Sure.” Sergei clamps down hard on my breast, taking all of it into his hungry mouth.

I moan, “I’m sure, Sergei. Please.” My words are obscured by gasping breaths.

He stops kissing me and rests our foreheads together while we both look down. I’m fascinated by the lewd image of a thick shaft lodged against swollen lips. Slowly, he glides along my entrance, prodding one torturous centimeter at a time. The feel of his crown as it disappears inside me makes my eyes roll to the back of my head. To ease his girth, his hands control my up and down movement. I use his wide shoulders for support. It’s mesmerizing to watch Sergei’s beautifully curved shaft disappear when it fully plunders my depths.

“Oh, fuck, it so much wetter. So much hotter,” he mumbles in a daze. “It’s too good. I’m not gonna last, baby...”

His voice trails off as I lose track of all sensations except the ones in my core. I feel every vein, my walls triggered by each stroke of his steely length. I'm barely moving, needing to savor the pleasure of being filled. Slowly, I rock my hips, denying myself the brutal friction that will take over my body.

"Don't hold back, Maeve. This is the first of many," he announces and then bounces me on his hips, roughly and deeply. Sergei uses his grip around my waist to lift my body and slam me against him again and again and again. I shatter. My climax is so strong, my body splinters into a hundred pieces of pleasure.

His cock pulses and kicks inside me. "Oh, god, I feel that!" I say as his orgasm unleashes heat. Another detonation erupts deep in my channel.

He clutches my nape and supports my back. Bliss works its way through our bodies, draining energy and replacing it with satisfaction.

When my vision realigns and heart rate lowers, I begin to push off in order to stand.

"Wait, *moya feya*. We're not done yet," he says in a sultry tone. Sergei remains inside me, half hard and spent. We kiss.

I feel it. Holy hell, what wonderful, magical spell is this?

"Are you hard again?" I exclaim even though I can answer that question for myself.

His smile is wickedly tempting before he lifts us off the sofa and starts walking to the bedroom.

"Told you we aren't done," he chuckles smugly.

"You are such a showoff!" I try to sound incredulous when what I am is impressed. Each powerful stride moves his cock inside me in the most stimulating way.

He sits at the edge of the bed, flips us around so I'm on my back, all while stroking my depths with relentless yet controlled penetration.

It's a classic Magic Mike move, if you ask me. Not that I'd say another man's name out loud while we're making love.

After all, it's against the rules.

“New rule,” Sergei declares while finishing his third granola bar. “We need to have steaks in the fridge when I sleep over.”

I snort because he looks both gorgeous and ludicrous, naked on my bed with crumbs on his chin. Sergei has been scarfing down everything from my fruit bowl and pantry for the last half hour.

Even while eating, Sergei has kept me close, touching and caressing me. I'm not sure he even realizes he's doing it.

“Are you worried the carbs will damage your perfect figure?” I ask, licking the bit of granola that snagged on his rough stubble.

“Finally, she admits to my perfection,” he says, addressing the ceiling.

“Sorry I don't have any proper food. I've moved back home but usually have dinner at my dad's place. To make sure he follows his diet.”

“He told me you hate chicken breasts and oatmeal but eat the dull food to keep him company.”

“When did he tell you that?”

“When I fell asleep outside his house, he's the one who woke me. We had, what do the kids these days call it?” He pauses. “We had a hot minute.”

“Um, I'm not sure that's the right context, but I get it,” I say, laughing. “You only needed a minute to dream up that crazy scheme at the arena? I can't believe you sang in front of all those people. And so damn badly.”

We both laugh.

“I'd do it again and a hundred other things to get you back,” he says, lips grazing my jaw.

I hide my severe case of the swoon virus by kissing him deeply. My feelings, as I process them, aren't ready to be

splayed all over the bed for examination. Instead, I lose myself in the tender caress of our lips and the heat of our bodies. When we part, his eyes are glassy. Sergei whispers something in Russian.

“I never heard that before. What did you say?”

“You first, *moya feya*. You look like *you* have something to say.” Sergei sounds different. Cautious, maybe? It’s impossible to be sure.

“What you told me, about your past, I know that was difficult to share.”

The entire story still bothers me. Sergei shouldn’t have had to carry the trauma of abuse by himself, as if he was at fault for the dirty secret. Worse than carrying it by himself, his mother’s reaction was selfish, calculated, and brutal. By suppressing the scandal, she undermined her son.

My anger on his behalf is a bitter pill I need to swallow. He needs my understanding, not more resentment.

When Sergei responds, he’s solemn. “You saw it, Maeve. When we were at the country club. Before I even told you anything, you saw through them, through their pretensions. I’m hardly a person in that world. I’m a pawn in a game of power and prestige.”

He pauses. Sergei’s dire assessment of his role as the heir of two influential legacies—his father’s global business and his mother’s social standing—is another burden he’s hidden from the world.

He gives my forehead a peck. “At least I’m a hot pawn.”

I take his cue to lighten the mood.

“I have no need of your power and prestige, sir,” I declare playfully. “In fact, I will happily support us both with my mechanic’s salary.”

“You think I won’t take you up on that?” he says as he pulls us under the blankets and positions me by his side, my cheek against his heart.

“Your turn, *moya feya*. How is an amazing woman like you single?”

“A lot of amazing people are single.”

“Touché,” he says, pointing at himself. “Or I was,” he adds.

My heart swells at how easily he expresses his feelings. How sure he is that we’re good together. Am I equally certain? There’s no other man I want beside me right now. I know that for a fact. He says we belong together, but how would that work in the long run?

What if we’re in the midst of a sex-fueled haze that colors everything a rosy hue? What happens when the black and white of our differences can no longer be ignored?

Sergei squeezes my shoulders, prompting me to continue our conversation. He wants to know why I don’t date. It isn’t all that interesting a story, to be honest. The whole thing could be summed up this way: no one ever considered me worth the trouble, and vice versa.

“Throughout high school, my brothers badgered any guy who came around. Later, when I lived with Dad through college, I thought things would be better. The guys I met were older and more confident, and so was I. A couple of times I had invited someone to join the family for Sunday dinner. Twice actually. One was Todd—”

“No other man’s name while we’re in bed,” he interrupts. “I don’t make the rules.”

“You are literally the only one who makes up rules!”

“Continue.”

“Adult men turned out to be worse than the boys who had ghosted me in high school. Has anyone ever told you how annoying and tedious it is to tiptoe around a man’s feelings? It’s like managing two things: his fear that he might get beaten up and his bruised ego because he’s afraid. The whole thing was exhausting and rarely worth it. Easier to keep things casual. Have a fling on vacation, that sort of thing. I get what I want, when I want it.”

Sergei is thoughtful for a beat, absentmindedly running his fingers up and down my arm.

“Tomorrow is Sunday. Are you all meeting for a family dinner?” he asks.

“Yeah.”

“I’ll be there,” he declares breezily, as if it isn’t the last thing I expect him to say.

“Excuse me?”

“You heard me.” He sounds relaxed, even sleepy.

“Why?”

Seriously, why? We’re barely past the miserable separation of the last few weeks. The pressure of including Sergei in the MacElroy circle is too much to take on.

“Why not?” His body stiffens under me, and not in a good way.

“Sergei, it might be too soon. How about another time? They’re still really mad about those pictures of us. Let me ease them into the idea of us together.”

“Maeve, if you’re truly sick of managing men’s feelings, then stop managing mine. I got this.”

“What if they...” I trail off.

“Beat me up? Scare me away? Make me cry?” he rattles out with a guffaw. “You could do more damage to me with your little pout than all of them combined if they jumped me.”

“You are the worst,” I say, but there’s no heat behind it because that was truly the best thing he could have said.

“Maybe Aiden and Matt will hate me. Maybe they won’t. At least your dad freaking adores me. He’s practically my wingman.”

If tonight was any indication, he isn’t completely off the mark.

“Are you going to make me sing Elvis to convince you? Because I will, you know.” He clears his throat and begins,

“Love me te—”

“Oh my god, please stop! Fine,” I relent, trying not to think of worst-case scenarios.

Ever since the video debacle, my brothers hate Sergei in a way reserved for sworn enemies. They don’t dwell on it explicitly, at least not in front of me, but the snide remarks have not been subtle.

But Sergei says he’s got it, and I’m done doubting him.

CHAPTER THIRTY-EIGHT

Sergei

My phone battery had died so I didn't get any messages till I plugged into my car. When I press play, text-to-voice activation bombards me with robot-sounding versions of Ana's texts.

11:10 p.m., Saturday: I need you to call me as soon as you get this text.

11:30 p.m., Saturday: I mean it Sergei. Why aren't you answering your phone?

12:03 a.m., Sunday: What if I was dying? You would let me perish without even saying goodbye? What kind of brother are you?

I chuckle because that's typical Ana. When she doesn't get her request immediately, it's the end of the world. I should probably call her right now, but I decide to let the messages continue while I drive.

12:45 a.m., Sunday: Now I'm worried! Where are you? I have something super super important to tell you. IT CANNOT WAIT!

2:00 a.m., Sunday: I booked a flight to Columbus for tomorrow afternoon. It arrives at 2:00. If you don't pick me up, you better be dead.

By the time I park my car at the Mavericks practice facility, I'm almost late for the 10:30 a.m. practice. Can anyone blame me for staying in Maeve's bed till the last possible minute?

I stroll into the locker room to the hoots and hollers of teammates who notice I'm wearing the same clothes I had on last night.

"I've heard of the walk of shame, but what's this?" Lance pesters me as I get changed into a practice jersey.

"The victory tour," Randi hoots boisterously. "Sergei got himself some fine a—"

Before I know what I'm doing, I've grabbed Randi's jersey and pivoted him to face me. "Do not. Finish. That sentence." My hiss is the only warning he'll get, talking about Maeve like that.

"What?! I was going to say fine *affection*."

"Yeah, right," I say, though it's hard not to find his save a little amusing.

Logan walks by on his way to the ice. "I think you meant to say some fine apple pie." He exaggerates the last two words and winks.

Am I annoyed that these guys are up in my business? A bit. However, having other people talk about Maeve and me makes our time together more real. They're teasing me, which means yesterday wasn't a wishful dream. The night had a surreal quality that made it seem both the longest and the shortest span of time. So much happened and yet all of it happened in a blink.

No one told me that being in a relationship—I'm calling it that and no one can stop me—alters your perception of the everyday events of your own life. The memory of lying in bed with Maeve this morning, smelling her hair and crushing her body, is more tangible than the ice skate I'm lacing on.

My phone buzzes showing a call. It's Ana. I know for a fact she will not let me hang up if I answer. I send her a quick text to appease her mind. She'll still be mad though hopefully less worried.

My battery died last night. I'll pick you up at the airport at 2. At practice right now.

Did I say my sister was going to be mad? Well, I was wrong. Ana emerges outraged when I pick her up at the airport curb.

“I can't believe you didn't even have a driver escort me!”

“Aww, you had to pull your own Gucci bag? For how much it costs, you'd think it could walk itself.”

“How dare you speak ill of my Celeste?”

“You named your bag?”

“Of course! It's the easiest way to identify what I need to get fetched from storage.”

I'm getting major whiplash after spending the last few hours with my stinky, sweaty teammates. It's like Ana landed from another planet where the air smells like money and no one sweats.

“I'm happy you're here,” I say sincerely.

Her mood changes almost immediately from annoyed to timid.

“I wish I had come under better circumstances, Sergei. I've got something to tell you. And you will not like it.”

“Are you pregnant?!” I ask, recalling that was her question when she found out Maeve and I were engaged. Rather, fake engaged, but she didn't know that.

“What? No!” she screeches. “This isn't about me at all. It's about... about...”

My sister at a loss for words is as rare as a blue moon.

“Relax for a bit, OK? You just got here. There's time to talk after you settle in. How long are you staying?”

“You're right,” she concedes. “We should talk about this when you're not driving.” I notice she doesn't answer my

question about her stay.

The airport isn't too far from my building. The drive offers Ana her first view of Columbus's skyline. Although I've played here for three years, no one from my family has visited before.

"I have to tell you something about tonight," I say as we park.

"What?"

"I've made plans and there's no way I can miss it."

She makes two fists that she lodges against each side of her hips. "You cannot leave me on my first night in Columbus! I'm calling sister privilege and will not be abandoned."

"Seriously, Ana, you should write for television," I say with a snort. "You're so dramatic." We exit the car and walk side by side.

"I should, shouldn't I?" She tilts her head thoughtfully, following me into the elevator.

"I had no intention of abandoning you," I explain. "In fact, I'm happy you're here because it's kind of a special occasion."

Before I can continue, the elevator brings us to the penthouse. Ana enters with a skip and a twirl.

"Oh, Sergei, it's gorgeous!"

"Thank you." Honestly, I was a little nervous about meeting my sister's taste. After all, she's the only family member whose opinion I care about.

"You have your own room and bathroom." I walk by and ruffle her hair. She squeals the way she did when she was a self-conscious preteen. I continue the mini tour. "This is the kitchen, which I'll make sure is better stocked tomorrow. Text me a list of what you want."

"Cook at home? We should just go out. What's the restaurant scene like?" she asks, while walking to the window.

"Let's play it by ear, shall we? First, tell me why you sounded like there was an emergency. You're welcome to visit

me anytime, Ana. No emergency necessary.”

Ana looks over her shoulder at me before returning her gaze outside.

“Want anything to drink or—”

“Sit down, Sergei,” she orders me solemnly.

I take a seat and watch as she walks to the sofa. Instead of sitting, Ana paces in front of me.

Her giddy mood has evaporated and is replaced by a grave expression. Ana is often dramatic, but she’s never somber.

“Are you well, Ana?” I ask hesitantly, like I’m talking to a skittish pet.

She continues to walk back and forth. “I don’t know how to say it, so I’m just gonna blurt it out. Mom and Da—”

My phone rings. It’s Maeve. I want to take the call, but I shouldn’t. Ana is in the middle of something and needs my attention.

“I’ll call her back later,” I say.

“No! Take it!” my sister demands, surprising me.

“Really?”

She nods vigorously.

I answer my cell. “Hey.”

“Hey. How was practice?”

“Good, good. Is everything OK?”

Maeve clears her throat. “Well, um, I thought I’d give you an out in case you changed your mind about tonight. Before I tell everyone you’re coming.” She sounds nervous.

“Actually, I’m glad you called,” I say sincerely. “I’ll have a plus-one. Ana visited me out of the blue. Is that cool?”

“Ana is in Columbus?” she asks with a squeal. I have to pull the phone farther from my ear. Just as loudly, Maeve continues, “Yes! Yes, I’d love to see her!”

“Maeve says hi,” I tell my sister who plops down beside me.

“Hi, Maeve!” Ana screams and I have to cover my other ear.

My ears are ringing between the two of them, though I’m not complaining. There’s something about the two most important people in my life screeching happily from each side of me that warms my heart. Breaks my eardrums, but warms my heart.

“That’s settled then,” I say. “It’s in a couple of hours, so I should probably start cooking. Good thing my sister’s here to help me.”

Ana’s eyes widen in disbelief. I cackle because that was obviously a joke. Ana wouldn’t know how to turn on a stove.

We say our goodbyes. I’m back to giving Ana my full attention.

“Is this the special occasion?” she asks thoughtfully.

“It’s my first—our first—MacElroy Sunday dinner.”

“Are you kidding me? Sunday dinner? That’s so... American!” she exclaims with a skeptical chuckle.

“Why doesn’t that sound like a compliment when you say it?”

“It’s a thoroughly neutral descriptor,” she states innocently. “I just mean it’s the stuff of American television.”

What she isn’t saying is that Sunday dinner is the farthest thing from how she and I grew up. We were and continue to be a very privileged family. Our childhood never lacked food or luxury. However, sitting down together as a family was rare. Going out of our way to schedule a gathering that wasn’t for public show? Never.

“Who will be there?” she asks.

“Her brothers who hate me, her dad who tolerates me, and Maeve who loves me.” The words leave my mouth so

naturally, Ana believes every word. The problem is, I think I believe it, too.

“Well, what was so important that you flew to Ohio? Is everything OK at home?”

Immediately, her features shift from thoughtful to distressed.

“Actually, no. It’s about Mom and Dad.”

CHAPTER THIRTY-NINE

Maeve

He isn't himself. On the surface, Sergei is confident, as usual. But without his familiar swagger, it's as if he forgot something at home. Like when you're used to someone always wearing a baseball cap and when they don't, they seem different. Maybe even a little naked.

He looks at me with a film of distraction over his eyes, as if focusing takes enormous effort.

Before I can ask if everything is OK, Ana pushes past her brother to hold out two massive flower bouquets for me and Noeleen.

"Absolutely beautiful! Thank you! And the tulips are divine!" Noeleen gushes. I see Aiden across the room, rolling his eyes.

Ana and I hug tightly. She's tall and leans down. The young woman turns her head outward to rest her cheek against my shoulder. I hold her for a beat, struck by how fragile she seems at the moment.

"I'm so glad you're here, Ana," I say sincerely. "What a delightful surprise for your brother. He misses you so much."

She pulls back to see if I'm serious. "He does?"

"Are you kidding me?" I say, looking between the two of them. "You are his pride and joy. Hockey is second." I sense she needs comfort. I doubt Sergei voices his affection directly. Ana should hear how much her brother adores her.

Instead of a smile, her eyes well up. We both turn to Sergei whose jaw is screwed tight. A flash of sadness passes between them and then it's gone, replaced by Ana's cheerful voice.

"Don't you think the tulips and hyacinths are so much better than roses?" she declares. "Sergei only ever buys roses

and it's so predictable.”

Instead of disputing Ana's criticism, Sergei merely shrugs. “We also brought beer and wine. Where can I put them?” He lifts the offerings.

“In here!” Dad calls from the kitchen where he's putting the finishing touches on a pot roast. He'll have to stick to the chicken breast but insisted on making a proper Sunday spread for our guests.

Sergei gives my brothers a nod since his hands are full.

Before the Petrov siblings arrived, I had a serious sit-down with Aiden and Matt, explaining that whatever happens between me and Sergei is none of their business. They also had to be on their best behavior for Ana.

“Using his sister as a shield, huh?” Matt had grumbled.

“Say that again and see what happens,” I had barked, surprising even myself with my defensiveness.

I've spent most of my life either ignoring or avoiding my brothers' opinions about my dating life. That's not happening tonight. If they have a problem with Sergei, they'll have to deal with me, too.

“Hi, Declan,” Sergei says, jolting me back to the present. He's placed the beer and wine on the kitchen table. My man—that sounds so much better than boyfriend—shakes my father's hand.

“This is my sister Ana, visiting me from Connecticut. Thank you for having us.”

“It's our pleasure to meet you, Ana. Both of you, please make yourselves at home,” Dad says, shaking her hand and throwing a glance at my brothers.

The usual greetings go without a hitch. Aiden and Matt offer pleasantries and ask mundane questions. It's not exactly friendly, but it's fine for our first of many dinners.

“Our son, Bryce, will join us soon. He's running a bit late,” Noeleen says. “Can I pour you both a drink?”

“They’re making final touches for the robotics competition next week,” Aiden offers to explain Bryce’s tardiness. He glances at Sergei and nods, which is my oldest brother’s form of *thank you for the loan*.

To Sergei’s credit, he acknowledges the gesture with a small, dismissive twitch of his lips. Sergei doesn’t want effusive gratitude. That suits my brother fine.

Noeleen looks at her phone. “He’s already on his way. He’ll arrive in less than ten minutes if there’s no traffic.”

“Robotics?! Did you say he’s preparing for a competition?” Ana perks up. “I’m part of a team in my high school! We finished second place in regionals last month.”

“You’re part of a robotics team?” Sergei asks, amused. “Why don’t I know about this?”

She rolls her eyes and shrugs. “You never asked, and Mom doesn’t know.”

Ana turns to my brother, Aiden. “Is it a mini-robotics competition? Like followers and mazes?”

Before they can respond, Dad answers. After all, he is the reason my nephew is obsessed with robots. “It’s IGVC which stands for Intelligent Ground—”

“Vehicle Competition,” Ana finishes the definition. “We’re working up to that. High school clubs are rarely selected to compete at IGVCs. Do you know what they’re tweaking?”

My father goes into “environmental mapping” or whatever. Matt takes a phone call. Everyone except Ana tunes out.

Sergei’s eyes are on his sister, full of pride. There’s also unease.

It alarms me, this side of him I’ve never seen. Sergei usually exudes effortless poise, like he expects to be welcomed in any room he enters. Tonight, he’s attentive and polite, yet not fully himself.

I don’t like it. Not one bit. I don’t want him to change, because I’ve made this meeting momentous in my head.

I take his hand and pull him to the hallway. Sergei is reluctant at first. He follows along when Noeleen and Aiden go to the dining room to set up drinks. My dad and Ana continue their chatter, oblivious to other people's disinterest.

Finally alone, I go on tiptoe to give him a quick kiss on the lips. "Did I freak you out too much about the dinner? It's going well, right?"

"Yeah, I think so." He looks bothered, but not exactly stressed. Sergei pushes his hand through his hair, messing up what is usually a perfectly tussled coif. One side of his hair sticks up. I reach over and pat it down. When my hand glides across his cheek to comfort him, he pins it there with his grip. Turning his head, Sergei kisses the inside of my wrist before lowering our entwined hands.

"Do *you* think it's going well?" he inquires.

"You're acting kind of weird, to be honest."

He grimaces. "It's not because of the dinner. Ana brought news about my parents and it's not good."

"Are they alright? Did something happen to them?"

Sergei shakes his head and exhales. "It's not something that happened, it's something they did. Let's talk about it later, *moya feya*. If we don't go back out there, your brothers will come barreling around the corner to defend your honor."

I snicker. "They can try. Please tell me if they're bugging you."

His mouth twitches in an almost smile. "Why? Is my pretty little fairy ready to defend *my* honor?"

"Someone has to," I say to be playful.

My words have the opposite effect. Sergei looks nearly heartbroken. It's alarming.

"Hey, what's wrong?" I prod again.

Instead of answering, he bends down and hugs me tightly. I feel like a stuffed toy he's holding for comfort. "Thanks for tonight. It's just that—"

“Sorry I’m late! Thanks for waiting!” Bryce calls from the front foyer.

We spill into the living room with haphazard hellos and hugs. When Sergei shakes Bryce’s hand, my nephew pulls him in for a hug. “Wow, I’m so glad you came. I never thanked you in person. We’re only going to use around two grand, and we can pay it back in—”

“You’re not paying anything back,” Sergei interrupts. He is so alarmed that Bryce brought it up at all, you’d think he ate something sour. “Please don’t mention it,” he mumbles, leaving no room for argument.

“Bryce, my sister Ana is joining us tonight. Ana?” He turns around to locate his sister.

“Ana?” he has to ask again. She’s apparently still in the kitchen with my dad.

“Bryce is here?!” Dad hollers. He was too busy chatting to hear his grandson’s entrance. Dad walks into the dining room. “I was telling Ana about the navigation issues.”

“Huh?” Bryce’s brows are raised in confusion.

Ana enters behind Dad, her eyes more animated than any other time I’ve seen her. She looks at Bryce and blurts out, “What’s the angle of the tail relative to the body?”

Her volume is a tad too loud for the enclosed space. It’s super nerdy and thoroughly adorable.

“Huh?” Bryce repeats, staring at Ana and blinking as if he has to restart his glitchy eyes.

“Why don’t we chat about this during dinner?” Noeleen offers. “Bryce, can you help me bring the food to the table?”

“I’ll do it!” I offer.

Ana looks like she’s going to bust a gasket if she doesn’t get an answer to her question. The young woman’s air of anticipation is so palpable, you’d think Bryce’s answer will solve the world’s climate crisis.

“I’ll bring the pasta salad,” Matt says. He’s a control freak when it’s time to mix the ingredients.

When I enter with the roast, Dad is already at the head of the table. He insisted on having Ana on his right and Bryce on his left.

The picture of Declan MacElroy, beaming with joy because he’s flanked by two nerdy science kids, is enough to make my night.

Sergei is in the middle of the table beside his sister. I take the spot on his other side. The rest of our company of eight find their seats and Dad says grace.

“Thank you, Lord, for this gathering of family and friends. Bless our food that will nourish our bodies and minds. Help us welcome Ana and Sergei into the family. I mean dinner, not like family-family. Although that would be fine, too! You know what I mean. Anyway, um. Amen.”

“Amen,” we all echo, trying not to laugh.

“Nailed it,” Matt mutters with a snicker. I kick him under the table.

“I hope you don’t mind that we’re having a rainbow for dinner,” Dad says. Those of us who know what’s coming silently cringe.

“What do you mean?” Ana asks.

“Because I’m trying to eat light! Get it?” He points to the chicken breast in front of him. The large pot roast sits in the middle of the table, beyond his reach.

The young woman laughs good-naturedly. She seems carefree tonight, compared to her role as country club princess.

Abruptly, her eyes widen. Ana claps her hands, the utensils clanging. “I’ve got one! Where do naughty rays of light go?”

We all stare at her. She might as well have spoken Martian.

“Well?” she asks, looking rather pleased with herself as she bobs up and down in her seat. How is this the same young woman who lorded over a room of prissy debutantes?

Sergei chuckles fondly. “Don’t look at me. I have no idea.”

I can’t pretend to guess an answer. I’m too busy quelling my amusement at how delighted she looks. Having stumped her brother has made *her* night.

“Well?” she turns to Dad. He’s equally delighted that there’s someone who loves silly jokes as much as he does. They’re both giggle-snorting as she repeats, “Where do naughty—”

“Prisms.” Bryce’s curt answer stops the laughter. He cuts into a piece of meat and stuffs his mouth, looking annoyed.

No one talks for a beat. I can’t help thinking I missed something when I stepped out to grab the food.

“Good one!” I say to lessen the tension.

“Thank you, Maeve,” Ana says with a sharp look at my nephew, her nostrils flaring slightly. “If only Bryce was as quick to answer my other question.”

“Ana, please stop.” Sergei sounds stern.

“What? I’m just asking about the range of variation for the angle of the tail. It really helps for terrain traversal and—”

“What do *you* know about terrain traversal?”

“Bryce!” Aiden snaps. “She asked you a question. Answer it respectfully. Now.”

I have never seen Bryce that red.

He drops his utensils and leans back before answering. “We use a framework that leverages mechanics via tail-ground interactions to mitigate failure and improve legged system performance.” He finishes with smug satisfaction. It’s followed by an “Ow!”

His wince is directed at Noeleen, who likely kicked him under the table.

“What he means,” Dad looks to Bryce with pursed lips before addressing Ana, “is—”

“I know what he means,” she hisses, glaring at Bryce. “You can move blocks to get around them. Please! I’ve been doing that since eighth grade.”

“Sure you have,” he says hoarsely.

“Bryce, help me in the kitchen right now,” his mother says in the same tone as one would say *you are in so much trouble, young man*.

Right when mother and son step through the kitchen door, Sergei’s phone buzzes in his pocket. He looks at me apologetically and checks the screen.

It is immediately apparent that something is wrong because Ana is at the edge of her seat. Sergei’s face turns to stone.

He looks at his sister and utters cryptically, “That’s Chuck. Mom and Dad are in Columbus.”

CHAPTER FORTY

Sergei

“Your parents are here?” Maeve asks. “Did you expect them?”

“We’re happy to have them over!” Declan offers as if two guests or twenty guests are equally agreeable.

The warmth with which he has welcomed me and my sister makes it glaringly obvious how awful our parents are. I would never subject the hospitable MacElroy family to the manipulative Petrov couple.

“Sergei? They came for me, didn’t they? They must be furious!” Ana’s eyes are the size of saucers, her lower lip trapped under a nervous bite. The innocent enthusiasm she showed two minutes ago is gone. In its place is resignation and worry.

I recognize, too late, that underneath Ana’s frantic energy and cheerful mannerisms are layers of worry and resignation. Our parents do not hide their expectations of us. Hockey enabled me to escape the worst of their control. Ana, however, has to deal with our mother’s constant surveillance.

Why had I failed to see this before? I didn’t even notice her passion for robotics or for anything other than parties and fashion. I’ve complained in the past about how Ana is spoiled and superficial. I’ll always love her to death, but figured those characteristics were hers, inherent to her character.

I didn’t consider that they were, in conscious and subconscious ways, imposed on her. Ana, all her life, has been expected to be a beautiful, well-bred, polished trophy. How much of her behavior as a materialistic debutante is part of that performance? A facade?

The brilliant, nerdy, adorable part of her she’s showing tonight has been stifled. It is one of the many betrayals our parents have enacted in order to maintain status and control.

The betrayal I heard about today, however, is the final straw.

“It will all be fine, Ana. I’ll take care of everything.”

She nods and continues to worry her bottom lip.

Maeve’s icy fingers wrap around my wrist. “What’s wrong, Sergei? Ana, honey, are you OK?”

“Can we tell her?” my sister pleads.

“*Pozzhe*,” I say in Russian to indicate “later.” She isn’t fluent, yet she’s heard that word plenty from our father.

“Let’s give you guys some privacy,” Declan says while giving his two sons the signal. The three men stand up and head to the kitchen just as Noeleen and Bryce attempt to return. The five of them bump into each other awkwardly, exiting the dining room in a trail of whispers and shrugs.

So much for a good impression. The most awkward Sunday dinner is in the books, thanks to us.

“Ana, why don’t *you* tell me what’s bothering you? Please let me help.” Maeve stands up and walks around the table to sit beside my sister.

Ana doesn’t let her sit. She wraps her arms around Maeve’s waist and releases a sob. “I hate them. I hate them so much!”

“Shh, sweetie. It’s going to be OK,” Maeve coos, petting my sister’s hair as Ana’s face is crunched into her belly. She sounds calm for Ana’s sake, but her eyes are shooting me arrows of panic.

“We should go,” I say to both. “Chuck can look out for you while I talk to them.

“I want to stay here with Maeve.”

“Ana—”

“Of course you can stay here. Let’s go to my old room so you can rest. Would you like that?”

Ana nods and then stops. “But your family will be mad. It would be rude.”

“You’re upset. My family will understand if you need to be excused. Let me bring you to my room so you can catch your breath and come out whenever you’re ready.” She holds Ana’s hand to help her up from the table.

I stand up as well, ready when Ana throws herself at me for a hug. “Are you sure I shouldn’t be there with you?”

“I’m sure,” I state, appalled.

I expected to confront our parents as soon as I had the time to travel to Connecticut. As it turns out, the confrontation is happening sooner than I anticipated. Under no circumstances would I have allowed Ana to be in the presence of this dire conversation. She’s already heard more than a child should ever hear.

Maeve and Ana disappear down a hallway. I head to the kitchen to say my goodbyes and express regrets.

“It’s an emergency. I’m sorry for this abrupt change in plans. Maeve has offered to keep Ana here while I deal with something. I hope that’s alright with all of you.”

“Of course!” “Yes, yes!” “We understand!” The sympathetic phrases barely reach my ears.

A haze of stress muddles my senses, dulling external sensations and sharpening an internal battle mode. There’s so much I want to say to my parents; so many proverbial punches I want to land.

How do I protect myself and my sister from their attacks? Especially since they unleash their worst weapons on their own children: shame, guilt, and manipulation. How do I even begin to express my disgust at their betrayal? And how do I make sure they never do it again to me or Ana?

Few people would dare oppose Nikolay and Madelaine Petrov. They haven’t lived together in decades, yet they are united in their public front. And when it comes to controlling their children, there isn’t a stronger team.

Heading out the door, I see Maeve grab her jacket and put on her shoes.

“Where are you going?” I ask, alarmed.

“Ana thinks I should go with you. I agree with her.”

“What?! No!”

Is she crazy? I’m about to have the most difficult conversation I’ve ever had. She shouldn’t have to watch the complete disintegration of my family. No one should have to witness that much ugliness.

Maeve steps forward and grabs my hands. Squeezing them tightly, she forces me to look into her eyes. They’re in full sunflower bloom, the golden yellow intensifying around the black center, light brown swirls softening the effect.

I let myself appreciate her beauty for a moment and think: How can I subject this incredible woman to the spitefulness of what I’m about to face?

“Ana says you’re going to need me. I believe her. Don’t fight me on this, please. I’m going with you.”

“I can’t do that to you, Maeve.”

“If you think I’ll make it worse for you, then I’ll... I’ll sit in the car or whatever. But if you’re worried that *I* can’t handle a messy, ugly, or difficult situation, you’re wrong.”

My body is already relenting, leaning into the comfort of her words and the promise of her constancy. “I shouldn’t need you, but I do. It will not be pretty, *moya feya*.”

“I like you even when you’re not pretty, Poser,” she says with a lilt of sweet familiarity. “Let’s do this.”

She takes my hand, and we walk out together.

The first few minutes of the ride are quiet. Maeve lets me stew in my thoughts. Her patience eventually prompts me to speak.

“The video that leaked,” I begin. Her breath hitches. “It was suppressed by Art Dima, my dad’s right-hand man. I thought the leak occurred because of his failure to confiscate or destroy all the copies. I was wrong. He kept one copy because...”

I have to stop. Bile rises up my throat and turns into a hard knot.

“He kept your video?” she exclaims in shock.

“He didn’t. My mother asked for it.”

“Wh-why?”

“To use it for leverage against me.”

Shame. I’m drowning in shame.

For the video.

For the betrayal.

For the fact that I have to relive all of it in front of the woman I love.

At the worst possible time, I’m struck by the fact that I’ve loved Maeve MacElroy for a long time. Not sure exactly when it started, but it was way before Declan called it. Maybe even before we went to Connecticut. How else do I explain how much she means to me?

My realization is darkened by shame. But not completely overshadowed by it. Somehow, Maeve’s presence provides me the strength to push past this nightmare. The only thing keeping me from completely losing my mind is this woman who has her hand on my shoulder and my heart in her care. I love her mind, her spirit, her beauty in and out.

“That can’t be right. That can’t be right,” she chants.

Those were my words as well when Ana told me what she overheard.

“Ana heard them arguing yesterday because their plan didn’t work. Based on the conversation she had eavesdropped on, the leak was meant to do two things. Get me fired from the team and break us up.”

“They threatened your career and risked your relationship by releasing that video. How can they do that to you? How can they cause all that suffering and heartache? I don’t understand. You’re their son!”

“They never supported my passion for hockey. And my mom saw how serious I am about you. The two most important aspects of my life were direct threats to everything they demanded of me: an industry figurehead to continue the Petrov name for my father, and the adult male equivalent of a debutant for my mother. Desperation contributed to their decision, though more than anything, it’s vindictiveness and greed. They both had plans for me that I was less and less likely to fulfill.”

She’s quiet for a while. When Maeve speaks, her voice is raw with emotion. “There are no words to describe this betrayal. But Sergei, what they did isn’t about what *you* did or didn’t fulfill. In every way that matters, you are fulfilling your life’s purpose by doing something you love and choosing your path. Don’t let them diminish your success.”

I let her words sink in. Maeve is right.

At some level, I was blaming myself for the disaster. And I *am* to blame for my reckless behavior in the past. But it doesn’t matter how much I fucked up—my parents should be the last people to broadcast my mistakes to the world.

“Thank you, Maeve. I, um, I needed to hear that.”

“I’m sad for your sister, too. Ana is so young.” Maeve swallows audibly, attempting to suppress a sob. “Having to pick a side between you and her parents is overwhelming. It’s incredibly sad that things have come to this.”

Her despair twists my insides. “Don’t be sad. This confrontation has been a long time coming. I just never thought they would go so far to get what they want.”

I’m not a perfect son, but no one deserves this treatment from people expected to protect and care for them.

We park in the building’s garage. Chuck had let my parents into my home. They’re probably sitting in my living room, looking down at everything I’ve worked for. Accusing me of poisoning my sister against them. Ready to unleash more threats and more guilt.

“Do you want to wait in the building’s lobby? I can call Chuck to escort you.”

“No. I don’t want to be at the lobby. I want to be with you,” she says adamantly. “Please don’t do this alone, Sergei. I’m here for you no matter what happens tonight or tomorrow or ever. Do you understand me?”

Her tears flow freely though she doesn’t seem to notice. All of her energy is focused on reaching out to me.

“I want to be with you. Things will get rough up there. I want you to know that no matter what happens, I’m with you. I’m on the other side of all that turmoil, Sergei. Because I love you. I love you so much.”

Something inside me unfurls when she declares her love. A warmth that floods my veins from the center of my chest to the tips of my limbs. It’s a thrilling mix of gratitude and passion and certainty, created by this woman who chose me. In this world of billions of people and random possibilities, I have the remarkable honor of choosing her, too.

We hug across the console. I bury my face in her neck, her aroma as essential as oxygen.

When I confront my parents for their unforgiveable betrayal, one part of my life may implode. Maeve and I will build a new one.

“I love you, too, Maeve. I have for a long time.”

“Oh, thank god!” she blurts, creating a small bubble of laughter between us.

It doesn’t matter what I’m feeling about the rest of the world, her happiness will always outweigh everything else.

Maeve’s spirit is my lifeline, and her love is my purpose.

Gently, we kiss. I take my time to relish the moment. When we part, we repeat the words that fill our hearts.

I love you. I love you so much. We’re doing this together.

Suddenly, the fight I’m about to have with my parents isn’t the first step to disaster.

With Maeve by my side, the conversation is the beginning of something I never thought I'd have from Nikolay and Madelaine Petrov.

Freedom.

CHAPTER FORTY-ONE

Maeve

They had been sitting on each end of the sofa when the elevator opened, the room as still and cold as an empty museum.

His father stands immediately while his mother uncrosses her legs, crosses the other way, and then releases an angry huff. Her chin is lifted. Even when she's sitting, she's still looking down at us.

"Maeve," Mr. Petrov says to me, clearly surprised. "As pleasant as it is to see you, kindly excuse us. This is a family matter."

"Maeve and I are here together. She's not going anywhere," Sergei declares. "Besides, it's rather debatable that you even know the meaning of the word family."

Sergei sounds snide and detached. It's chilling the way he has to guard his authentic emotions from these two people who should love and care for him. Protect him.

Instead, they've turned out to be the very people from whom Sergei needs protection. The way they've threatened everything important to him is nearly impossible to fathom.

I don't plan to say anything to his parents. My purpose is to make sure Sergei knows he's not alone. That doesn't stop me from having a running commentary in my head, though. As in, *you tell them, sweetheart!*

"Where is Ana?"

"She asked to stay in Maeve's family home. She's safer there than she'll ever be under your roof."

Another point for my man!

“Oh, don’t be ridiculous!” Mrs. Petrov says dismissively. “If you think you can poison her against everything I’ve worked for, you’re wrong.”

“You did all the poisoning yourself, Mother. And as much as it hurts me to watch Ana’s image of you shatter when she learned of your deception, I’m here to help her put her life back together. We’ve talked. She doesn’t want to go back to Connecticut. She’ll complete her junior year virtually and will be enrolled in Columbus as a senior. She’s not going back.”

And she’s better off for it!

Also, wow, protective Sergei is really doing it for me.

“Who do you think you are?” she snarls. “Just because you’re willing to throw your life away...” She pauses long enough to glance at me scathingly. “Don’t drag my daughter into it.”

“I’m not the one throwing my life away. I am doing what I love and choosing my path.”

That’s right, bitch!

Sergei uses the very words I offered earlier. Hearing them from his mouth makes me feel connected to him in a deep, fundamental way.

“What you did was unforgiveable,” he hisses.

“What *we* did? We never forced you into your gross debauchery!” Mrs. Petrov stands up and points her finger at Sergei, stabbing the air as she screeches. “You are the one who brought shame to our family! You’ve always been so, so *sick*! Your uncontrollable impulses got us here! If you had any self-control, we wouldn’t have to go to such extremes!”

Are you saying what I think you’re saying, you poor excuse for a mother?!

“Madelaine, calm down,” Mr. Petrov says exhaustedly. “That’s not the point of us coming here.”

“Why are you here?” Sergei’s question is delivered with a snarl. “What finally got you to lower yourselves and be in a city I’ve lived in for three years?”

Oh, Sergei. I hear your pain and it is heartbreaking.

“To get Ana and to inform you that you’re done,” Mr. Petrov answers. “Your trust fund has always had the condition of returning to Petrov Shipping. Since you insist on being selfish by denying us this one thing expected of you, there’s no reason for you to benefit from the company you seem to despise so much.”

“My trust fund? I make millions on my own. The only time I use that money is to buy Ana the extravagant gifts you’ve taught her to expect, or to get myself to the pretentious events that you demand I attend.”

Take that! Sergei doesn’t need your dirty money!

“In that case, we’re done here,” his father declares. “We’ve booked our rooms at the Meridien.”

“Only because the jet was grounded,” Mrs. Petrov mumbles.

“Bring Ana by eight in the morning,” Sergei’s father continues. “At which point, you won’t have to see any of us again.”

I feel Sergei’s body stiffen as he shores up all the emotional resources he’ll need to survive those cruel words. And to fight for Ana. There’s no way Ana is better off with these cold, selfish, dangerous people.

They nod curtly and Mrs. Petrov stomps forward, heading to the elevator.

Hell, no, I don’t think so!

“Hell, no, I don’t think so!” I burst out. “You need to apologize!”

“It’s OK, Maeve, let them go.” Sergei tries to tighten our entwined fingers. I wiggle out of his hold.

“No, it is not! They need to apologize for what they did to you, Sergei. You deserve an apology.” I force my lips to stop quivering and my heart to slow down.

“Who do you think you are, speaking in front of your betters!” Mrs. Petrov hisses.

“Hey!” Sergei bellows at his mother. “If there’s anyone who is better in every way, it’s Maeve. Don’t you ever talk to her like that.”

“Let’s go, Madelaine,” Mr. Petrov ekes from tight lips.

I don’t know what comes over me, but I can’t. I *cannot* let it go. I stand in front of the elevator, barring their way.

With a strangled cry of frustration, I demand, “Apologize for releasing the video! It doesn’t matter if Sergei has upset or disappointed you, what you did was beyond reprehensible. You have to acknowledge that!”

“Sergei, get this woman away from me!” his mother’s voice is shrill, her mouth twisted by malice. “I feel dirty just being in this room.”

From my periphery I see Sergei’s mouth open, but then everything else tunnels. I. Am. Livid.

“Dirty? You want to know what’s dirty? That secret you forced your son to keep. Sergei is *not* sick! He does not have uncontrollable impulses! He never brought shame to your family! You... you let that woman *touch* him! How could you let your son think, even for one second, that the abuse was his fault? How can you live with yourself knowing how much he needed you and doing nothing? He was a victim! And now you’re still blaming him? No. Just NO!”

Mrs. Petrov’s face blanches. For a moment, I think an inkling of regret passes her features. If so, it’s gone in a blink. “Get out of my way,” she says with bared teeth.

“What is she talking about, Madelaine?” Mr. Petrov asks, looking between the two of us. His jaw is steel, his eyes narrowed.

“Nothing. She doesn’t know what she’s talking about.”

“She does,” Sergei says quietly. “Because I told her.”

She whips around and faces Sergei. Her arms flail as she yelps, “What was I supposed to do? Announce to the world

that you were sleeping with a woman twice your age?”

“Oh my god, can you hear yourself! It’s called statutory *rape* for a reason!” I screech, ready to shake her shoulders. How can she be this clueless? This cruel?

“Somebody explain this to me right fucking now!” Mr. Petrov roars, his index finger pointing at the floor to emphasize *now*.

Sergei stands beside me in front of the elevator. The chaotic energy pulsing out of him envelops both of us. Our breaths are shallow but in sync. His hand grabs mine and squeezes. I do the same, transmitting the support he deserves.

Sergei’s back is straight, his voice unwavering when he addresses his father. “Mother’s personal assistant.”

“Mrs. Cornish? She’s a hundred years old!” Mr. Petrov steps back, confused.

“No. Before her, about a dozen years ago. Her name was Olivia Thompson.”

Recognition lands on Mr. Petrov’s features. His hand covers his mouth. Probably to hold back vomit. That’s what I’m doing: quelling the nausea at the thought of a sexual predator sinking her claws into a vulnerable teenager.

“Why had no one told me?” he croaks, slowly shaking his head.

“Your wife fired the woman but never fully acknowledged what happened to your son. And the way she continues to talk about him like he’s at fault is wrong. *Wrong!*” I answer emphatically.

I taste the salty liquid coming down my face. I don’t know when my tears started. They’re caused by indignation and anger and protectiveness that make my entire body buzz and my eyes gush.

“Maeve, I’m sending my wife downstairs so I can talk to my son. Please excuse me.”

Mr. Petrov opens the elevator and pushes Mrs. Petrov inside. She stumbles in and he doesn’t wait to see if she’s OK

before he presses the button to shut the door.

The two men stand in front of me, face to face. His father says something in Russian.

Sergei's features shift, as if the language reached him at a different level.

Stepping away to give them privacy, I wait by the sofa and watch.

They're whispering, still in Russian, their bodies angled in an intimate huddle. In slow motion, both men hold one hand over the other's shoulder. It isn't a hug. Rather, it's a reluctantly vulnerable gesture of two giants.

Leaning on each other for a minute might not seem like much. Yet there's something possible in that mutual stance. Hopefully, one day, father and son can eventually comprehend that they need each other, but not in the way the world has dictated. A future of respect and understanding is still possible if Mr. Petrov can value his son as a man, and not only as an heir.

Then, as if the most monumentally dramatic fight I've ever witnessed—OK, partially caused—didn't just happen, Sergei opens the elevator door and his father leaves.

The man I love is cemented in place. His pain calls to me. I approach with arms out.

“Sergei, can I hold you?” I ask cautiously.

My voice pulls him out of the haze. He nods silently.

Wrapping my arms around him and pressing my face to his chest, I feel his thudding heart. “I'm sorry that I lost it in front of your parents. I'm sorry it had to come to that. But I couldn't let them go without acknowledging how much they hurt you, Sergei. I couldn't.”

He pulls away in order to hold my face in the cradle of his hands. “You are the one person who shouldn't have to apologize. What happened to me as a teenager affected me, but it was still wrong to put myself in compromising situations.

And my mother's role in creating this disaster shouldn't be ignored. Thank you."

"Don't thank me. My big mouth could have made things worse."

"Maeve, if it wasn't for you, everyone would still be in the dark knowing nothing and lashing out at everything. I never had the courage to bring to light the past so fiercely, the way you did."

His eyes darken as he roams my face. "You are the bravest, strongest woman in the world, Maeve MacElroy. Standing up for me? No one has ever done that before. You're a gift I can't begin to deserve."

"Deserve? No, Sergei. It isn't about that. I love you. I'll be with you through the good and the bad. I know in my heart that's what you would do for me."

"Yes. Through the good and bad, I'll give you the world."

"I don't want the world. I want you."

"You have me, Maeve. I love you so much."

Our mouths connect gently, savoring each other and providing comfort. We stay that way for a long time, finding peace in the embrace, the caress, the kiss.

When we part, I ask, "What went on with your father in the end?"

Sergei makes a choking sound as a single tear falls from the corner of his eye.

"He did what I've never seen him do for all the twenty-six years I've been on this earth, *moya feya*," Sergei says tenderly. "Nikolay Petrov apologized."

CHAPTER FORTY-TWO

Sergei

“Why can’t I stay here?” Ana whines. “You’re in practice or playing games or out of town all the time. I’d be so bored by myself! Besides, Declan isn’t working full time for another month.”

She’s sitting on Maeve’s childhood bed. Ana plops backward dramatically, like my demands have zapped her of energy.

“That’s Mr. MacElroy to you,” I say, pulling at my hair. At this rate, I’m likely to be late for morning practice.

After our parents left my place last night, we called Declan to confirm that Ana was sound asleep. Coming back this morning wasn’t supposed to be this complicated.

“He said to call him Declan. And it was his suggestion to Maeve. I heard them talking. She said she’d run it by you.”

“This propensity to eavesdrop will need to be reined in, *sestra*.” My fingers rub my temples, trying to prevent a creeping headache from completely ambushing my brain.

She shoots up to her feet. “Why does Maeve have to run it by you? I’m seventeen. I should have a say in my own life. Isn’t that the point of getting out from under Mom’s control?”

“It’s not that easy. There are things to consider such as finishing your school year, arranging a tutor to help you adjust, enrolling you in a new school, maybe getting a live-in companion.”

“A nanny?! I swear to god, Sergei, if you get me a nanny I will die!” She plops back down on the bed.

I feel like I survived one battle only to take up a more formidable opponent: a teenage girl with a flair for the dramatic.

“I know you don’t need a nanny. My point is, let’s figure these things out at home. My place is your home now. We can talk about it there.” My voice is calm despite the nagging question: How the hell do parents with teenagers get through the day?

“There’s an exhibit I want to visit with Declan. And Noeleen knows the high school robotics teacher since she was a volunteer parent for years. Her asshole son isn’t much help, but the rest of them are nice.”

“Ana! Do not call anyone that!” I glance over my shoulder, hoping no one heard my sister. “Especially anyone who belongs in this family.”

“He was! He thinks he’s so much better than me because he has, what, two semesters of college credits more than me? What a jerk.”

“I said don’t call him that.” I cross my arms over my chest with an air of authority. I think.

“You said don’t call him an asshole. You never said anything about jerk, or dimwit, or idiot, or—” She’s counting her fingers with each word, like she could keep going to ten.

“That’s enough. Let’s go.”

“How about Maeve’s house? I don’t want to stay in the penthouse if you aren’t there,” Ana whines.

I hear a not-too-subtle throat clear behind me. “She has a point,” Maeve says timidly from the hallway.

“Are all the women in my life eavesdroppers?” I raise my hands in resignation.

“This is my room that I’ve invited Ana to stay in last night. Is it really eavesdropping if we have every right to be here?” Maeve states with a sassy grin.

I don’t miss the winks they exchange, either.

Maeve wraps her arms around my waist and goes on tiptoe to peck my jaw. “Just today, Sergei. You’re about to be late for morning practice. I don’t have to be at work till noon since I’m closing the shop at eight tonight. Ana and I can spend quality

time together this morning. Maybe go to Target to figure out what she needs for a longer stay.”

“I’ve always wanted to go to Target!” Ana exclaims.

Maeve smothers her snort by covering half her face with her knuckles. She straightens her features before continuing. “After lunch, there’s some kind of nerd exhibit my dad told her about. Think of the museum as a school trip.”

Even Maeve has a better grasp of what Ana needs.

I sigh, feeling the weight of my unpreparedness. The logistics of my sister’s move to Columbus still need to be sorted. Did I say logistics? I mean *basics*.

As in: What are the school options near my downtown building? Should we even stay at the penthouse, or would she do better in a house? Is that why she would rather stay in this home? Am I even capable of giving Ana something as loving and stable as what the MacElroys grew up with? What will she need from Connecticut, in order to feel at home here? Am I truly a better option than my mother?

The last question is the easiest to answer. Yes, I am definitely a better option than our mother, for no other reason than I want Ana to live her life without manipulation or guilt.

“Just today,” I say with a grimace, aware of how easily I’m giving in.

Before I can regret it, Ana and Maeve hug. The sight takes my breath away.

For the first time in my life, I see a future where I’m not a disappointment or a burden; a future where the people I love are happy because of me and beside me.

They are the center of my universe, but for entirely different reasons.

My sister is a person with interests and quirks and characteristics I have yet to fully discover. It’s an honor to be her guardian as she discovers *herself* as well, exploring passions and dreams that were previously repressed. I grew up

thinking my passion for hockey was a source of shame. For Ana, her dreams are hers to pursue and mine to support.

Maeve is simply and perfectly and permanently my person. I'm hers. I don't know how an asshole like me finds himself with the one woman who is right for him, but here I am. The luckiest jerk alive.

I will never take us for granted. Now that we've found each other, living without her is unthinkable.

My sister launches out of the room to tell Declan that their plan to visit the science museum for a robotics display is a go.

Maeve watches me lovingly. Whatever she sees softens her features. With parted lips and hazy eyes, she draws me close.

I kiss her deeply, running one hand up her nape and the other across her lower back. She returns my fervor, reminding me she's my match in every way.

"Maeve! Can we go to Target now, pleeeaaase?" I hear Ana yell from down the hall.

The woman I love laughs.

Her laughter and my sister's excited chatter become the soundtrack to the rest of my day.

From this moment onward, it won't matter where I am—beside them arguing over teenage whims or across the country at a game—they are my family.

Lyubov. Love.

In what feels like ages ago, I had teased Maeve about that word.

One word means all of that? she had asked.

At the time, my mouth knew something my heart was still figuring out.

Our love *is* all of that, and more.

EPILOGUE

ONE YEAR LATER

Maeve

“Way to go, Ana!” “Woo-hoo!” “You did it!”

We were supposed to hold off on the applause till after she got her diploma. But when the announcer said “Anastasia Petrov,” the cheering squad refused to be contained. Mundane instructions can’t hold back the MacElroys’ cheer and a hockey player’s holler.

Her flowing black robe swirls around her calves as she strolls across the stage. Ana waves at her adoring fans. She might as well be gliding on a red carpet instead of walking on a platform in the high school gym. Her black hair, the longer version of her handsome brother’s thick mane, bounces with each step.

Sergei’s tall stature puts him over most heads, so it’s easy for the siblings to lock eyes from across the gym. My man finds my hand and engulfs it in his calloused hand. He squeezes involuntarily, as if his emotions need to be expressed in some way other than applause.

Ana shakes the principal’s hand, takes her diploma, and lifts it over her head the way her brother plans to lift the Stanley Cup next week if they can clench the final game.

Did I say *if*? I meant *when*. They’re up three games to two in a best-of-seven series against Seattle. The championship is within reach. If there’s one thing I’ve learned about Sergei, it’s that when he sets his mind on something, he’ll move heaven and hell to get it.

And if he doesn’t? We regroup. We care for each other through the good and the bad. We nurture a love that is the foundation of all our efforts. When we fail—which is inevitable, if the past year together is any indication—we try again.

We've had a year of challenges and risks and rewards.

Challenges like getting Mrs. Petrov to agree to Ana living in Columbus, or like me opening a second location for the shop.

Risks like buying a house together, or teaching Ana how to drive stick shift on the 1985 Dodge Viper that she helped me restore.

Rewards like watching this smart, exuberant, and incredible young woman graduate high school and launch her life. She's decided to move to the other side of the country. California Institute of Technology offered her a place in their robotics team.

Ana has come a long way from the makeup-obsessed debutante at a country club ball. Don't get me wrong. Ana is still the makeup-obsessed girl who will waltz into—and perhaps occasionally trample—the hearts of many admirers. But she'll also make her mark in the world.

Our hollering and clapping peter off. The next kid is called.

We plunk down on flimsy folding chairs which were never built with the Petrov men in mind. Ana's cheering squad comprises me and Sergei, with his father on his other side. Mr. Petrov is conspicuous in a button-down shirt that costs more than some used cars. Thank goodness we talked him out of wearing the Tom Ford suit.

On my right is Dad, wiping his eyes and sniffing because he's already nostalgic for his pseudo granddaughter. Aiden and Noleen round out the cheering squad. Matt, Bruno, and Whitney, as well as a handful of Sergei's teammates and all of Ana's robotics team, will come over later for the big party at our backyard.

I look on each side of me, overwhelmed by the significance of the moment.

“Maeve? Are you OK?” Sergei asks as he kisses the back of my hand.

For a moment, I'm too emotional to answer, so I merely nod. Sergei gently uses his finger to tilt my face closer.

“Then why the tears, *moya feya*?”

“I’m happy for Ana. I’m happy for us.” I kiss his hand in return, lips grazing the scars of a hockey player’s knuckles.

He leans even closer and whispers, “Those lips are getting their own party tonight.”

My surprised snort is barely covered by the next round of cheers.

The rest of the ceremony proceeds as one would expect. Once all the seniors are called up, no one hears the final words of the school district superintendent. Everyone is at the edge of their seats, ready to throw their graduation caps and post selfies on social media.

Finally, it’s over. Chaos descends as graduates try to find their people. A round of squeals and kisses greet Ana when we reach her. Proud families, loud friends, and exhausted teenagers crowd us.

“Oh my god, that took for-ev-er,” Ana drones. “This robe is so itchy. Noeleen, my hair got squished!”

“We’ll fix it before the party, no worries,” Noeleen says.

I look at my watch. Just over three hours before people trickle in for the barbeque we’re hosting. “We’ll get a head start to make sure the event coordinator has everything set up.”

Yes, I said event coordinator. When Sergei Petrov throws his sister a graduation party, it is an *event*.

“Is Ana going with you, father?”

“I promised I’d take her shopping for earrings. We’ll head to Noeleen’s shop right after,” Mr. Petrov confirms.

“See you guys later,” Dad says. “I’ll rest at home and catch a ride with Bryce.”

Sergei and I head to our home in Dublin, a suburb of Columbus. It isn’t too far from the second A1 Auto Repair location. We’re sharing the lease on a building with Chuck, who has opened his business in luxury car service.

Pulling into the long driveway leading to our home, we're surrounded by tall oak trees that explode into fiery colors in autumn. When we went house shopping last fall, at the beginning of Ana's senior year, that dramatic entrance stunned us. The rest of the house was just as gorgeous. We made an offer by the end of the day.

From the distance, I see the outline of the three-story house. The catering and event planner's vans are parked on the cobblestone path. Beyond that is a hand-carved mahogany door so large you could fit my Fiat through it.

For me, this is an extravagant, dazzling home. For the Petrov siblings, it's downsizing. There have been worse compromises.

"We should park in the back garage, so the driveway is as free as possible for the valet drivers."

Sergei nods and turns off the main drive toward a detached four-car garage. Remember when I said we bought a place together? What I brought into the home purchase was the equivalent cost of this structure on the outskirts of our one-acre property. In other words, not much. Sergei sees it differently. He refuses to call the home anything but ours.

We park and close the garage door. The lights are motion sensed, revealing the built-in cabinets, wall-mounted racks, and workbenches where my tools are stored.

Some people get a kick out of fancy clothes or expensive houses. Me? This one thousand square foot space, with a state-of-the-art climate control system and heated stone floors, is a slice of heaven. It doesn't have all the engine hoists and stands of the shop, but one of the four spaces is a professional service bay equipped with an automotive lift. The business in this area includes restoration of collectible cars. There's a lot of rebuilding of parts that can be done off-site from the crowded shop.

By the time I get out of the car, Sergei has already walked around to grab me. I'm pressed to his body and surrounded by his fragrance as familiar and essential to me as home. In one

fell swoop, Sergei lifts me up. My back is pressed against the car and his groin grinds the junction between my thighs.

“Ask me what I’ve been thinking about since we got into the car,” he demands, while licking my neck and nibbling my earlobe.

“What have you been th-thinking a-about?” I stutter, distracted by his hand crawling under my blouse to roll a puckered nipple between his fingers. His thick erection rubbing my center muddles my normal faculties: eyesight turns fuzzy, fingers tingle, thoughts fly.

“This,” he says and strums my lower lip playfully.

I open my mouth and trap his finger between my teeth. He groans sexily. Instead of biting, I wrap my lips and twirl my tongue, sucking as my cheeks hollow.

“I need to kiss you before I lose my mind.”

He does just that, tenderly worshipping my mouth before roughly sweeping my depths.

We stop kissing for a beat, enough for him to ask, “How much time do we have?”

“Um-huh?” I mumble as he pulls off my blouse and lifts me higher to suck my breasts greedily.

“To help set up the party,” he says, grazing his teeth over my nipples.

“We should probably check on them now,” I eke out between shallow pants.

He grunts his disapproval, not liking my answer one bit.

“What’s the point of hiring an event planner if I can’t fuck my woman till the party starts, right?”

With my legs wrapped around him, Sergei lifts me to the front of his Mercedes where the hood is still warm against my ass.

“Lie back,” he orders.

Lust steals my ability to speak or move. Sergei takes charge, laying me back slowly before he pulls off the black skirt and lacy underwear I'm wearing. My clit aches when he roams his eyes over me and pushes his tongue against the inside of his cheek. I'm completely naked on top of a car and my lover is still fully dressed in a crisp shirt and dress pants strained at the groin. The contradiction heightens my arousal to near agony.

"I need you, Sergei."

Licking his lips, he unbuckles his belt. He continues to stare at me, eyes so dilated he looks almost high. I lift my arms to offer my breasts, hands resting on the windshield.

Sergei chuckles.

"What? What's so funny?"

"I broke this windshield on purpose for an excuse to see you. And now I'm gonna fuck you over it. I'm living a goddamn dream." He grips his cock, the liquid at the tip making my mouth water.

"Well, get on with it then," I say to the man whose massive erection belongs inside me.

I slide to the edge and rub my wet pussy along the length of his dick.

"Fuck, Maeve."

"Yeah, Poser. That's the idea."

He chuckles and lines up the head of his glistening stiffness against my soaked entrance. In a smooth yet powerful stroke, Sergei fills me. My walls clamp around him. I have to shut my eyes for a moment to hold back the rush of sensations.

"I'd break a hundred windshields to know what it is to be inside you," he says before plundering my depths. Sergei leans down to bite my neck, my shoulder, the top of my breasts, all while grinding my clit with his groin.

When our mouths meld, his tongue penetrates in a rhythm that matches his thrusts. Heat rushes down my spine, igniting the vibrating pulses in my core.

“Ah, yes, there it is,” he grunts. “Give it to me.”

I let go. Sergei grinds harder, intensifying and prolonging my climax. I bite his shoulder to muffle a scream.

When I come down from the orgasm, he lifts me up, places me on my feet, turns me around so my hands are on the hood, and uses a muscled thigh to widen my legs.

“Fuck, yeah,” he grunts as the thick head of his cock rubs the entrance to my most intimate parts. “Ready, *moya feya?*”

I nod my head and sigh at the bliss of his steady plundering. Too slow to push me over the edge, yet so forceful the car begins to rock every time his balls spank my ass. My back arches, inviting him to take more. Animal moans fill my ears, merging with the slapping of skin on skin.

“More,” I say between pants. “Harder.”

Sergei wraps an arm under my belly and lifts me so I’m dangling on my toes. He thrusts upward, hitting a spot so pleasurable, I think I’m sobbing.

“You love that, don’t you?”

“Yes, yes, yes.”

Deeper and harder, deeper and harder, my body begins to vibrate. I begin to drown in the turbulent waves of sexual pleasure, flailing my hand back to grip any part of him.

“I’m with you, Maeve,” he rasps to assure me, while capturing my stray hand in his grip.

The rush of his hot seed mixes with my aftershocks. As he climaxes, Sergei releases a masculine, rumbling noise that reminds me of the hum of a V8 engine.

He falls over me, licking the sweat that trickles down my back. I should probably find it gross—that he devours my sweat—but how can I? He moans like I’m a delectable flavor of ice cream. Then he tickles my ear with his tongue, making me laugh.

“I love hearing you laugh.” He pulls out and gives my ass a playful smack. When I turn around, he’s tucking his shirt into

his pants.

With a sly grin, Sergei pecks my nose. He grabs my blouse and skirt from the floor and dresses me carefully.

“I love hearing you come,” I say.

“Yeah? What do you love about it?”

“There’s my man, always fishing for compliments,” I jive before answering his question. “I *feel* what I hear, if that makes sense. Deep and low, but powerful, too. It’s the sexiest sound in the world.”

A smug grin overtakes his features. “Yeah, it is,” he says confidently.

I can’t help myself. “It’s so much better than your singing voice.”

“I just need practice.” Sergei clears his throat pretentiously and creates a fist like a mic. He tries to hit the first few notes. *Try* being the operative word.

“Love me tender. Love me tr—”

I capture his lips with a kiss, partly to stop the crooning but mostly because I love him so damn much.

When we come up for air, he speaks while our mouths continue to graze. “I love you, *moya feya*.”

“I love you, too, Poser.”

THE END

Thank you for reading [Powerplay!](#)

Unlike traditional titles promoted by big companies, indie authors like me can only reach new readers through your recommendations. Your ratings and reviews are essential! Word of mouth makes the biggest difference to ensure our community thrives.

I hope you're willing to recommend Maeve and Sergei's love story by leaving a [review \(please, pretty please leave a review\)](#). [Don't](#) forget to tell me what you liked about it. Your feedback means the world to me!

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SABRINA

Dexter Whitby is the captain of the Mavericks, my best friend, and my new housemate.

We made a deal to get married so I can receive the medical treatment I need to recover from a car accident.

Unfortunately, no one told me about the most important rule for surviving a marriage of convenience.

Do not, under any circumstances, kiss your husband.

DEXTER

Sabrina Ramirez is a phenomenal goalie, my best friend, and my wife.

My wife. Getting used to that idea is both the easiest and the hardest thing I've ever had to do.

Living with an extraordinary woman who makes me smile every day is a gift, not a favor.

Having that woman so close all the time, while trying not to think about her *that way*, is torture.

I wish someone had told me that a marriage of convenience is damn inconvenient when your wife is the woman of your dreams.

Need a break from reading a series?

Grab [It Happened One Night](#), an extra spicy standalone.

Check out the extended excerpt here:

It Happened
ONE NIGHT

LAURA MARQUEZ DIAMOND

CHAPTER ONE

Abby

“The problem with love,” Abby Riley said from behind the haze of mild intoxication, “is that no one ever asks if it’s worth the trouble.”

The Shroyer Club had closed ten minutes ago. The hot young bartender hadn’t asked her to leave, even after he’d cut off and kicked out the handful of patrons lingering on a Tuesday night. It was as if he knew she couldn’t take any more disappointments for at least another twenty-four hours.

He was stacking the last of the polished glasses like a tower of chunky jewels, having hovered and cleaned and mumbled the barest of responses throughout her ill-advised night of solo debauchery. He was the *God of Goblets*, she decided, appreciating the way the shimmer of soft lighting was reflected against the glass tower and mirrored bar behind him. The halo he donned, along with his saintly patience, was befitting of a minor deity.

When he looked up from his architectural masterpiece, she was newly struck by the thickness of his lashes. They accentuated his eyes starkly, reminding her of the dolls she used to collect as a child. A collection not by choice, but by default.

Girls between three and thirteen were often subjected to conventionally dictated assumptions. One of those common assumptions was that the more expensive and large-eyed the doll, the more beloved the girl who received it.

Abby had to admit it was a brilliant marketing strategy to hinge a young girl’s sense of worth on appearance and expense. When self-love was linked to appearance and expense, a lifetime of money could be extracted in pursuit of emulating the pretty, wide-eyed doll a girl equated with love.

As the founder of Abby Riley and Associates, an international public relations company, she knew all about assumptions and expenses and eyes. Less about love. *Obviously*.

Even at a young age, she had resented the easy benevolence of those passive, pretty faces. Their big eyes conveyed so much confidence about the world cherishing their silent beauty. Abby distinctly recalled how hard it was to stop herself from pulling the dolls' heads off and setting their hair on fire.

Abby didn't have big eyes. She was also neither silent nor beautiful. If she came across as confident, it was an act of sheer will and world-class cynicism. Tonight, she was short on will and low on class.

But the bartender's eyes—large and dark and stunning—didn't have the pretty doll's look of unearned self-assurance. His eyes were brazen but soft, intrigued but serene.

"*Is it worth the trouble?*" he asked, leaning over his side of the bar so she was hit with the blunt splendor of his barrel arms, supported by thick wrists, rosy forearms, and the rounded muscles of shoulders barely contained in a white shirt. "*Is love worth the trouble?*" he repeated because she was speechless for a moment.

"How would I know? I'm not even sure it exists," she uttered with amused incredulity that anyone was even listening to her rambling monologue.

His smile, as he wiped down the bar, was subtle. Abby had spent the last hour or so watching his stoic tolerance and easy sociability. That lilt of his lips was as close to a genuine grin as she had seen since she sat at his bar.

"So, what you're saying," he said gently, "is that it isn't so much a matter of assessing the value of love. Not so much about whether or not it's worth it, but a problem of establishing love's existence."

"Wow, when did the Shroyer Club get their bartenders from philosophy seminars?"

"I'm a graduate student, but not of philosophy," he said in a tone a little shy and a lot playful.

“Of modeling?”

He ignored the blatant flirtation and instead fussed with the towel he used for a final wipe down. “Music theory and stringed instruments. I’m a cellist.”

She looked stunned while he remained thoughtful. After washing his hands, the young man walked around to her side of the bar. He stood at a respectful distance and put out his hand to help her find her feet.

“Can I call you a cab, Ms. Riley?”

“Now you’re making me feel old.”

He appeared struck by her response. “You’re tipsy. And the farthest thing from old.”

“No doubt that’s what you would say to an old woman.”

“That’s bullshit, Abigail,” he grumbled, sounding almost irritated. Her first name on his lips was so unexpected, she couldn’t seem to breathe.

“Abby,” she managed to croak. “Call me Abby.” She looked down at their hands that remained entwined.

“Abby,” he echoed as the air between them crackled with energy. “Here’s the thing, Abby. An old woman wouldn’t be driving every man in the bar crazy wondering who she’ll choose to go home with.”

“Every man?” she uttered raspily. She stepped forward, bringing their bodies closer.

He looked down at her upturned face, the heat of his gaze a lightning strike to her core.

“Every. Single. One.” His voice was so low and husky, she wasn’t sure she heard him correctly. She stared at the glistening lower lip he had moistened with an errant pink tongue.

“It seems unfair that you know so much about me and I know nothing about you. Not even your name.”

“I’m just the bartender. You don’t need to know my name.” One of his hands, the one not cradling hers, clutched the back

of the stool she had been using as if to stop himself from lunging forward.

“You’re also a graduate student and the God of Goblets. Don’t sell yourself short.” Heaven help her, she wanted him to lunge forward.

His smile came at her in full force, making her head spin and her body tingle. Everything around them fell away when he leaned closer to whisper conspiratorially, “I’m no god. Just a man wondering why a woman like you is going into a cab by herself when she should be carried home by someone who adores her.”

A sound of disbelief burst out of her. *Is this guy seriously trying to bullshit a bullshitter?* she thought.

However, when she captured his gaze, she saw something else: passion in conflict with control, his vulnerability and his confidence at war.

“Are you going to make me beg for your name, bartender?”

“It’s Elijah,” he stated, letting her hand go.

“That’s too bad,” Abby uttered regretfully, brushing the back of her hand against the back of his, a wordless response to the cold that descended at the loss of his touch.

“You don’t like my name?”

“I love your name, Elijah. It’s just too bad you didn’t make me beg for it,” she said throatily, rasping through every word. Suddenly and out of nowhere, she wanted nothing more than to get down on her knees to worship his powerful thighs.

“Goddamn, you’re hot,” he said as if pained. “And way out of my league.”

Eyes flying to meet his gaze, Abby was truly perplexed. “Out of your league?”

“Abby, I got this gig four months ago and the only nights I remember are the ones that you’ve come in for a drink. Trust me when I tell you I’m the one who should be begging. But...”

“But?”

“But that doesn’t stop me from wanting to put you on your knees.”

Abby could not remember the last time she was overwhelmed with arousal. She put her hand over her throat in an attempt to steady her panting. Except her hand was shaking. That’s when she realized that what she really needed were *his* hands.

“Elijah, can you keep a secret?”

His gravelly voice was tinged with regret. “Everything about this moment is a secret, isn’t it? So what’s a few more?”

“Today, no less than four people lied to me. The one person I trust in all of New York City is a woman I grew up with who won’t tell me she’s in love with a man I slept with last summer. I’m dizzy with jetlag because during the red-eye flight from Barcelona two days ago I sat with a client who can’t get enough of the sound of his voice. And at the moment, the thought of going home alone is more upsetting than the question of love’s existence.”

He annihilated the space between them before mercifully, *finally*, cupping her chin. His palm on her throat was heaven. She inhaled his aroma of ale and aftershave. “I don’t like thinking about you being upset,” he mumbled.

She sighed into his caress. With a chuckle, he tightened and then loosened the grip on her throat, awakening her body to the possibilities of surrender.

“We need to get you better secrets, Abby.” She stared at his muscular neck, fascinated by his struggling Adam’s apple and thrumming pulse.

“Come home with me, Elijah.”

“If there’s a man who could say no to you, that man isn’t me.”

“Say *yes*,” she moaned. “Carry me home and adore me. Then put me on my knees where I belong.”

CHAPTER TWO

Elijah

She smelled amazing. Not like the girls he'd been with in Florida, where he'd lived before accepting a residential scholarship in New York. Not like flowers or candy or sunscreen.

Abby's aroma wasn't a smell. It was a *feeling*. Warm and sensual with a hint of newly discovered flavors he couldn't even name. It made him want to bury his face in her neck and inhale deeply. And maybe indulge in one perfect lick. A whiff of her was like a meal served to a starving man: promising satisfaction beyond nourishment, inspiring gratitude and greed.

She was probably around her midthirties, ten or so years older than him. When he first saw her walk into the Shroyer Bar, soon after he started working there, he asked about her. All the servers knew Abigail Riley as an aloof and powerful executive, racking a tab of thousands of dollars in food and drinks to woo clients and celebrate victories.

But Elijah saw something beyond her professional veneer of easy confidence and cosmopolitan class. She was beautiful, for one. Not in the conventional sense. Her face was narrow, her blue eyes and lashes so light as to be almost luminous. But they were so alert. Rivetingly alert. And her lips. Jesus, her lips were thick and shapely. Her mouth was unexpectedly wide and expressive on a delicate face, but perfect in its surprising lushness.

He was also distinctly and inexplicably attuned to the variations of her laughter: the controlled, melodious ones for clients; the hoarse, raucous ones for friends. But his favorite was the giggly chuckle he heard once when she was with another woman and they were talking about a vacation. In that

laugh was adventure and glee from a person who knew the rarity of time away from work.

It might be weird that he noticed so much about a woman he never thought he'd actually meet. The way she twirled the ends of her hair when she didn't think anyone was looking. The generous roundness of her hips, the accentuated muscles of her calves. The swollen wetness of her lower lip after she'd pressed her teeth into it while studying her phone.

Tonight was the first time she ever sat at the bar. Elijah couldn't help but lean in when she spoke and stare when he could. She took the seat farthest from the door and asked for a steady flow of expensive sauvignon blanc instead of her usual mix of cocktails and hard liquor dictated by the people she entertained. And about half an hour after the usual niceties, she began to talk. Really talk. About her work in Europe. About living in New York. And then, without warning, about love.

Elijah didn't have much experience with sophisticated women and their philosophical musings, but he liked the sound of her voice. And fuck, she smelled good.

"You need to get home safely. Let me call you a cab," he offered with a rasp. It was difficult to speak when he had a front-row seat to her cleavage peeking from a silky red top.

"You mean you don't plan to adore me and bring me home?"

"Abby, I already adore you," he blurted out. He bit the inside of his cheek to stop even more unnecessary confessions. Clearing his throat, Elijah attempted to sound less affected. "But I've gotta close out the bar and check the stockroom. I can't do that unless I know you have a safe ride home."

"I'll help you!" she piped up. "I worked at a bar in college."

"Is that so?" he asked, surprised and amused.

"I loved it. Well, the part about serving drinks and chatting with people."

"I feel like there's a part two to this story."

“Hmm, that’s the problem,” she ventured, fondness filling her gaze. “After the first shift, the moment they handed me a mop to clean up at the end of the night, I took off my apron and said my farewell.”

They both laughed and Elijah logged his new favorite laugh of Abby’s in his mind: the husky chortle brought on by a private memory.

“Good to know your idea of helping won’t include a mop.”

To his amazement, Abby walked towards the employee-only section, past swinging doors, and into the kitchen.

“What do you think you’re doing?” he exclaimed despite the distracting sway of her full hips. His eyes roved downward towards the high heels that served as pedestals for her legs.

She looked over her shoulder, offering an expression between a pout and a smirk. His cock thickened in response to her seductive pose. And since there was no bar to hide behind, Abby’s astute gaze immediately focused on his erection.

“Elijah, I think you’ll need help with something else.”

They were alone in the kitchen, which had closed a few hours before the bar. Only the barest of track lighting offered a view of stainless-steel appliances, stacked serving plates, and an inventory of cooking implements. He didn’t want to turn on the overhead florescent lighting because it would interrupt what was beginning to feel very much like a dream.

Abby turned around to face him and he couldn’t stop himself from walking up to her. When their fronts connected, he kept moving forward till her body reached the next hard surface. She was trapped between his heavy groin and a cold fridge door. One icy and the other heat incarnate.

As much as Elijah wanted to grab the back of her neck and suck that red lipstick off her mouth, he waited for her to decide how far this would go. Waiting didn’t stop him from grinding his cock against her moist center that she offered as a cradle.

They were both panting through shaky breaths. He kept his hands flat over her head on the fridge door and leaned in to

whisper, “Fucking hell, Abby. You don’t belong back here. But I’m not gonna lie. I’m dying to put you to work.”

She turned her head so their lips were a centimeter apart. “What’s stopping you from putting me to work, Elijah? After how well you took care of me tonight, I think it’s my turn to serve you.”

He couldn’t help grazing his lips against hers and pressing his hips forward in one controlled, powerful thrust. Their moans filled the dark room.

“And how do you plan to do that, Abby? What exactly are you going to serve?”

She kept her eyes on him while her hands roamed down his shirt, making his abdominals tighten and his balls squeeze. She clanked the metal of his belt and unzipped the pants that had trapped his throbbing need. When her palm made contact with his thickness, he growled his approval and lost control of his own limbs. One hand grabbed her hair at the nape and the other roughly kneaded her fleshy hips.

“Holy shit, did you sneak a wine bottle down there?” Abby burst out incredulously.

“This is me every fucking time you walk into the bar. No one makes me this hard but you,” he confessed through gritted teeth. “All you gotta do is move those hips and cross those legs and I lose my head. My body won’t let me forget when you’re in the room, Abby. I’m not like this with anyone else. Fuck, it makes no sense.” He didn’t mean to say that much, but he was losing his mind with her lips so close and her hand barely able to wrap around his manhood.

After she made a strange sound—somewhere between a choke and a purr—Abby rasped breathlessly, “Whoever looks for logic in lust is doomed to fail.”

Her words permitted more of Elijah’s frustrated pleas. “I’m not looking for logic, beautiful. What I want, what I fucking *need*, is some satisfaction from your gorgeous mouth.”

He clutched the back of her neck, tilted her head to a perfect angle, and delved into the mouth that had tortured him

for months. The leash that kept his passion at bay snapped. Their lips bruised each other as he swept the depths of her deliciousness with his tongue. He sucked the softness, licked the sweetness, and crushed Abby against the fridge with the potency of unrestrained lust.

She let him. He couldn't believe she let him.

At the moment, he didn't care about right or wrong. He wasn't thinking about how much he needed the job he was going to lose if anyone saw that he'd taken her to the kitchen. Most of all, Elijah didn't think about how much he wanted to make love to a woman who probably saw him as nothing more than a fuckboy.

All that mattered was Abby Riley's generous mouth, her lavish curves, and the nails that raked his shoulders as she clamored to hitch her thighs around his waist. His heart was going to burst due to lack of oxygen. Or the force of pleasure. Or the thrill of her taste. All of the above.

His heart was going to burst because Abby Riley was *all of the above*.

And then someone turned on the light.

CHAPTER THREE

Abby

She was blown away by the kiss of a lifetime.

And then there was light. Too much light as a woman's surprised yell mixed with Elijah's muffled curse.

The rest was a blur. Elijah moved quickly so she didn't see who entered the kitchen. He hid her with his body before shuffling-slash-carrying her to the back door. Once in the alley, he pointed at her sternly. "Stay here. Wait for me. This won't take more than a minute." He disappeared into the kitchen.

When he came back out, he had her cashmere coat, his ski jacket, and an armor of determination.

"Let's go," he ordered, entwining their hands before directing them towards the street.

"Who was that?" she asked. "Did you get in trouble?"

"It was my boss. I know you come here all the time for your work meetings. I didn't want her to see you."

"Oh, yes, um, thanks," she stuttered, having been too horny to process the implications of humping the young hot bartender in a place she regularly frequented with clients and colleagues.

"Wait, how about you? Did you..."

"It's fine, Abby," he said before stopping in front of the Lincoln Center station. "This is me but let's get you a cab before I go."

"Did you get fired because of me?" she screeched.

"I can always get another job. But what happened back there? I didn't think that would ever happen in a lifetime."

His words made her heart skip. They were outside and under a bright streetlight. When he smiled, he looked like a kid who ate the last piece of pie.

Now that the wine had worn off and the adrenaline waned, she was struck by how young he was.

“A rather limited lifetime.” She sighed. “Jesus, Elijah, how old are you?”

“Old enough to serve you a drink or two,” he said defensively. “Why do you ask?”

She felt the sting of his insulted tone and did not know how to amend it. Abby was wired to fix problems, especially the ones she created. But how to start when all she wanted to do was get into more trouble?

“Let me take you home. I’ll call my company car,” she stated, taking control of the situation. It was the least she could do after getting him fired.

His expression was barely restrained frustration. “Of course you didn’t even need me to call you a cab.”

She was on her phone, failing to ignore his wry comment. “It’ll be at the corner in twenty minutes.”

He gave a curt nod. “I don’t need a ride but I’ll wait with you till the car gets here.” His aloofness made her shiver. She longed for the scorching heat of their impassioned bodies.

“You’re shaking. Are you cold?” he asked, removing his jacket to put over her cashmere coat. He placed it on her shoulders before she could protest. She shouldn’t keep it, leaving him exposed to the chilly night, but for a moment Abby hugged the jacket closer, greedily seeking the aroma and warmth it offered.

“Thank you. Why won’t you let me take you home? It’s the least I can do.” He kept his hands in his pockets and rocked on his heels, looking over her head.

Abby’s concern was apparent in her sigh. “And now I even took your jacket.” She slipped it off her shoulders and

pressed it against his chest. He shook his head to indicate that Abby ought to keep the garment.

“How about you put it on and we keep each other warm?” she offered with a smile.

This time, she was the one who lay it over his shoulders. It wasn't a straightforward task since he was tall and wide. But it brought their bodies closer and she heard his deep inhale when her hair brushed against his cheek.

Brazenly, Abby undid her coat to better feel his chest when she wrapped her arms around his waist. She felt his agonized groan as Elijah's hands crept across her middle and, hidden by her coat, grabbed her buttocks firmly.

“If I get you within ten feet of a bed, I doubt I'll be able to let you go,” he whispered.

She was completely taken aback because the way he expressed his desires was a convoluted mix of hesitation and assertiveness. The contradiction was, for some reason, more intimately erotic than her last sexual encounter.

Abby realized the God of Goblets wasn't a minor deity at all. She could barely think of anything she would rather do than worship him if he let her.

“I don't want you to let me go,” she uttered, rubbing her lips against the pulse of his neck and tracing the muscular ridges of his lower back. “What are you worried about, Elijah? You know I want you.”

He seemed resigned when he spoke, one hand on her cheek as a rough thumb traced her brow. “I'm still not sure I'll get over that kiss, never mind a night with a woman like you.”

She pulled back. “Oh, Elijah, I truly misjudged you.”

“What do you mean?” He stared with startled concern.

“You really *are* going to make me beg.”