

THE SKATERS OF SEQUOIA VALLEY

The

Sloth

ZONE



TOMI TABB

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# The Sloth Zone

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*To my sixth grade English/History teacher, Mrs. S*

*and my tenth grade World History teacher, Mr. K.*

*The world does not have enough amazing teachers like you.*

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# Chapter 1



“All right, Gem, I’m ready.” Frankie gave her best friend a thumbs-up from the barstool she was sitting on.

Taking a deep breath, Gemma plastered a wide smile onto her face and began. “Cheers! My name is Gemma MacLeod. I’m twenty-eight years old and originally from Glasgow, Scotland. As a professional show skater with *Dreams on Ice*, I play Cinderella. For the last couple of years, I’ve traveled the world and performed in front of thousands of people. While it might seem like a fairy-tale job, unfortunately, living out of a suitcase makes dating difficult. If I ever want to get my own happily ever after and find a Prince Charming, I need help. This Cinderella is ready to trade in her skates for a pair of comfy trainers. If you’re looking for your next bachelorette for *Cupid’s Arrow*, you should cast me.”

“Cut,” Frankie said, tapping the stop button on her phone. “That line about finding your own Prince Charming is great! The producers of *Cupid’s Arrow* are going to eat this stuff up.”

Gemma blew at one of the ringlets of blond hair that had escaped the confines of her low ponytail. “You think so? It wasn’t too cheesy?”

“From all the websites I’ve looked at, the advice for putting an audition video together is all the same: Be natural.



Be yourself. That's exactly what you're doing. If you wanted cheesy, you could ask my dad for advice."

The two friends laughed. Hearing Frankie's words helped reassure her. Mr. Tomlinson, Frankie's father, had read quite a few books on dating over the last year as he figured out how to woo his girlfriend, and now wife, Suzy.

"I can hear Mr. T now." She dropped her voice an octave. "Gemma, you know it's one thing to say you play a princess, but it's better if you show them."

"You're right! Dad would say something like, 'Here's how you can really knock their socks off.'" Frankie's body shook with laughter. "I can see it now. Dad would have you wear your Cindy costume. Then he'd tell me to film the entire thing in black and white and direct me to have you lose your skate."

Gemma's lips twitched. That wasn't a half-bad idea. Anything to make herself stand out at this point would be worth considering. She was desperate to get onto the show, but she was a little afraid of Mr. T getting carried away. She wouldn't have the heart to say no to the man she viewed as her second dad. "Let's not tell him about filming this until *after* we've submitted it."

"Agreed." Walking over to the refrigerator, Frankie retrieved two bottles of sparkling water. "So what else are you thinking of including in the video? I think you said it could be up to three minutes long, right?"

Gemma nodded as she sank down onto the living room couch. "Yeah, three minutes is the max." Accepting the cold

bottle from Frankie, she popped the top off and took a long sip. “I was thinking maybe we could include a snippet or two of me skating and a brief clip of you and Suzy talking about the types of men you might pick out for me to date. You two are the ones I’d ask to be on the show with me if I’m chosen.”

“Aww, Gem, I’m honored. Suzy would be, too. I’m sure of it.” Frankie seated herself next to Gemma. “I guess the next question is, what excuse can I come up with to lure Suzy away from Dad for the afternoon?”

“A trip to the antique market?” Gemma suggested.

“No, Dad loves antiques. He’ll offer to come and be our muscle for the day, even if he can’t really lift anything.”

Mr. Tomlinson had a heart of gold, but now in his mid-seventies, he wasn’t in the best of health. A year and a half ago, he’d fallen and broken his hip. While he’d fully recovered, his health had never been what it was before the accident. At least with his new wife Suzy, a former nurse, Gemma knew he was in good hands.

Frankie opened her own bottle with an audible *pop*. “You’re on the right track. Some type of shopping thing is perfect.”

Gemma drummed her fingers against the couch’s arm. “What about a visit to the craft shop you took me to the last time I was in town?”

Frankie snapped her fingers together. “Hobby Land! That’s perfect. Dad hates craft shopping.”

The front door to the cabin opened and closed. The deep male voice of Frankie's boyfriend called out, "Frankie... Gemma... we're home."

"In the living room," Frankie shouted.

A moment later, a man with tawny-brown hair and green eyes appeared. He walked over to Frankie, kissed her, then said, "Hi, Gem."

She waved back. "Hey, Charlie."

Behind him stood a woman with the same eyes and orange-and-purple hair. She was a few inches shorter than Charlie, with curves that made Gemma jealous. "Did somebody say the words Hobby Land?" she interjected in her bubbly tone.

"I did," Frankie giggled, covering her mouth with her hand.

"I swear you're part canine. It's creepy how good your hearing is," Charlie muttered under his breath.

The woman rolled her eyes, ignoring him.

"Er... just a wild guess, but are you Leslie?" Gemma's eyes darted between her and Charlie.

"You got it. You must be Gemma." They shook hands. "Great to finally meet you. I missed you on the last go 'round."

"Likewise."

*It's strange to think they're twins. Physically, they look alike, but from what Frankie's told me, personality-wise, they're the total opposite of one another.*

Where Leslie was loud, outgoing, and opted to dye her hair bright colors, Charlie was reserved and often preferred to wear black or monochrome clothing.

When Frankie and Charlie had first met, her best friend had complained endlessly about him being a grump. Yet as they spent more time together, Frankie had discovered that underneath Charlie's gruff exterior was a man with a heart of gold.

*Charlie's the type of man I hope I can get lucky enough to find someday.*

“So... Hobby Land?” Leslie rubbed her hands together. “Are you guys going now? Can I tag along?”

“Les, that's a bad idea.” Slipping his jacket off, Charlie tossed it into the spare room Gemma was staying in that normally doubled as his man cave. “You have *way* too much crafting junk at both the rink and at your place.”

“It's *not* junk. I use *all* the stuff I buy.”

He snorted. “You still have three bags of stuff you bought during Hobby Land's semiannual sale sitting in your office at the rink.”

Leslie's cheeks colored. “That *stuff* is for your big surprise party next week. If you must know, the kids have been

working hard on making you and Frankie good luck cards. Promise me you'll pretend to act surprised."

"What are you talking about? What party?" He frowned.

"It's our send-off to the Skate United States competition," Frankie explained. "The kids have been gossiping about it every time they think we're out of earshot."

Charlie's eyes widened. "Really? I hadn't noticed."

The women in the room collectively snorted. Charlie was oblivious to most things around him. Together, he and Frankie had recently won their first national figure skating title. In just a week's time, they'd be leaving to compete in pairs at the prestigious Skate United States competition in Colorado Springs.

"Anyway, we talked about you not leaving your clothes on the floor, especially when we have a guest," Frankie said, changing the subject.

He crossed his arms. "How do you know my jacket is on the floor?"

Frankie raised an eyebrow. "I watched you stand here and blindly toss it into the room."

"Oh right, Gemma's staying in there. I'll, er... be right back."

Frankie hid a grin.

"So, Hobby Land?" Leslie asked again.

Gemma shot a curious glance at Frankie. “She’s serious about her craft shopping, isn’t she?”

“You have no idea.” She pointed to Leslie. “Les takes crafting to a whole new level.”

Leslie plopped down into the recliner opposite the couch. “I do.”

Charlie reentered the room and settled Frankie on his lap. “If there’s one thing my sister loves more than hockey, it’s buying supplies for projects. At the rink, she has an entire craft closet.”

*I should’ve guessed based on the bright hair that Leslie is a creative person.*

“I hate to be the bearer of bad news, but Frankie and I weren’t actually planning to visit Hobby Land. We were brainstorming.”

Leslie’s face fell. “Bummer.”

“But if we do go, you’re definitely invited,” Gemma added quickly.

“Gem is making an audition video for the reality dating show *Cupid’s Arrow*,” Frankie said brightly.

“Dating show?” Charlie frowned. “Gem, why would you put yourself through something as awful as that?”

“For the experience? To meet a decent bloke?” Gemma shrugged. “Not that I have much of a chance of being selected

for it, but both the bachelorettes from the previous two seasons ended up finding the perfect man. That's what I want."

She studied Charlie and Frankie. The tender way he held her best friend in his arms as she rested her head on his chest wasn't lost on her. Gemma wanted a guy who embraced her intimately like that too. She was tired of casual flings.

"Gem, it's not worth it." Charlie frowned. "You'd be putting yourself out there for millions upon millions of people to see."

"That's great. It means a bigger dating pool," she countered.

"What about kissing your private life goodbye?"

Gemma shrugged. "I have nothing to hide. Let the world see how glamorous it *really* is to be a show skater. We eat, sleep, work out, perform, and repeat. We don't have time for much else."

*Okay, that's not exactly true, but he'll get the point.*

Frankie gently placed a hand on Charlie's arm. He sighed. "If you're looking for a guy to date, how about looking locally? I'm sure that between Les, Frankie, and me, we could find someone you'd hit it off with. We know a lot of people."

Leslie fake coughed. "*We* know a lot of people?"

He rolled his eyes. "Fine, *you* ladies know a lot of people."

"That's more like it," Leslie corrected.

“I appreciate your offer.” Gemma repositioned her body. “And I’m willing to take you up on it, but only if it’s a guy who doesn’t ice skate or play hockey. I’d like to have a go at dating someone outside the skating bubble.”

Her eyes raked the room. The occupants stayed quiet.

“That’s what I thought.” She deflated. “Finding a normal bloke is almost impossible.”

“No. You have it wrong. It’s not impossible, just challenging.” Leslie scratched her forehead. “Have you asked our nan? She knows a lot of people.”

Frankie and Gemma exchanged glances. Suzy also happened to be Charlie and Leslie’s grandmother. “We haven’t, but we were thinking that she might be the perfect person to help with the audition video. On *Cupid’s Arrow*, the men who the bachelorette dates are selected by her two friends,” Frankie said.

“Wait, *Cupid’s Arrow*? Is that the show Nan is always raving about?” Leslie asked.

“Yes.” Frankie nodded. “She and Dad watch it every Tuesday.”

“Got it. In that case, Nan would be the ideal person to pick out the right guy for a person to date. She was scary accurate when it came to me trying to figure out my boyfriend Ron.”

Charlie glared at his sister. “Les, you’re supposed to be on my side,” he grumbled.



“What? There are no sides. We’re one team, and that’s Team Gemma. If this is what she wants, who are we to stop her?”

Frankie pecked Charlie on the cheek. “You worry too much.”

“Somebody has to.” He frowned and held Frankie tighter. “I just don’t want anyone to take advantage of you, Gemma. You’re like a sister.”

Gemma’s body flooded with warmth. Like Frankie, she’d grown up without any siblings. She’d always wondered what it would be like to have a protective big brother, and now she knew. Charlie was not going to let this go anytime soon.

“How about this: If by some miracle the casting directors decide to put me on the show, you can sit right beside Frankie and vet all the guys who want to have a go at dating me.”

His eyes twitched. “So there’s no way you’ll consider *not* trying out?”

Crossing her arms, Gemma attempted her best imitation of Charlie. “No. I’ve made up my mind.”

Frankie and Leslie giggled.

“Are you trying to be me? If you are, you need to clench your jaw a little more and furrow the brows.”

“Like this?” Gemma asked, attempting to follow Charlie’s instructions.

Leslie and Frankie laughed harder.

“Er, not really... you look as if you’re more bored than trying to be angry.” Charlie rubbed the back of his neck. “Maybe if you stood a little taller?”

“Charlie, nothing you suggest is going to make her look like you. Gemma doesn’t have a mean bone in her body. She’s as close to a real-life Cinderella as they come.”

Charlie held up his hands. “Fine. I know when I’m outnumbered.” Removing Frankie from his hap, he stood up and excused himself to the kitchen to start making dinner, leaving the ladies to their own devices.

“Have you ever tried out a dating app? Nan and Mr. Tomlinson met through one for seniors,” Leslie mused.

“Yeah. You name it, I’ve tried it. It’s only led to one bad experience after another.”

“Gem isn’t lying. She always pulls the short straw when it comes to dates.” Frankie started counting on her fingers. “There was the guy who only agreed to go out with her for a free meal. The guy who didn’t date women over five-foot-two because he didn’t want anyone towering over him. Oh, and my personal favorite, the guy who told her she’d have to quit skating so she could stay at home to raise their ten kids.”

Leslie winced. “Ouch.”

“The few blokes I’ve gone out with never end up being anything like their dating app profiles.” Gemma pinched the bridge of her nose. “After the bloke who wanted ten kids, I thought I’d move on to dating skaters, but that failed too. The

only thing I seemed to have in common with other skaters is skating.” She huffed. “I don’t know. Maybe I’m being too picky. I *should* woman up and give a skating or hockey bloke another go.”

“You’re giving up too easily. Don’t settle. You’ll never be happy with yourself if you do. I stand by what I said earlier. Ask Nan. She might surprise you,” Leslie said.

*What have I got to lose?* “Okay. Maybe I will.”

# Chapter 2



A few days later, the glass doors to Hobby Land opened with a whoosh. Gemma's eyes widened. "I've always known Halloween is popular in America, but I don't think I've ever seen so many decorations for it before."

To her left, there was a six-foot-tall black skeletal tree trimmed with orange, purple, and black baubles, and a string of twinkling ghost-shaped fairy lights. On her right, an entire aisle was dedicated to inflatable decor for a person's yard. She spied a black cat, a witch, a vampire, and a mummy. The store's soundtrack played haunting music, filled with the eerie howls of werewolves.

Gemma approached the nearest plexiglass. "Is that a haunted dollhouse?"

"Nope that's part of Hobby Land's luxury spooky mansion line," Leslie replied with a chuckle. "They're for people who love going all out decorating the inside of their homes."

"You're sure? It still looks like a dollhouse to me." Gemma continued watching the LED lights flicker inside the Victorian-inspired manor. "It's so detailed."

"I've always wanted to buy one for the rink, but Charlie and Uncle Jack veto me every time. They think it's impractical

to have something so expensive and fragile in a place filled with hyperactive kids.”

Gemma silently agreed with Charlie and their uncle on that one.

“Oh, look at those!” Frankie exclaimed, skipping over to the area of the store devoted to fall and Thanksgiving. She pulled out her mobile and snapped a few photos of a scarecrow perched on a bale of hay. “This would look amazing by the cabin’s front door. I just have to send a photo of this to Charlie. I was telling him last night about how we should decorate the porch.”

Leslie glanced at the price tag dangling from the scarecrow’s hat and frowned. “Fifty dollars? That’s too much. I can make you one that’s way better looking for half the price.”

“Would you?” Frankie said, placing her hands together in a pleading gesture.

“Of course.” Whipping out her own mobile, Leslie opened the note app. “What did you have in mind? How big should it be? What colors? Male or female?”

“Um, I want something medium-sized? So three feet?” Frankie began describing her vision to Leslie. “I think I want a scarecrow couple. Can you make them matching outfits? What about hats?”

Leslie’s fingers flew across the screen. “Hold on. You’re going too fast for me. Three feet... boy and girl... matching

outfits. OK, now I'm ready."

*These two are going to take all day to figure out what they want. They're too detail oriented.* Gemma's gaze traveled back to the Halloween items and the aisle with steam billowing from a cauldron. "I'm going to have a wander, if you two don't mind."

"Sounds good. We'll come find you in a few minutes," Leslie called out absently.

Exploring the costume aisle, she picked up a pair of wings at random, running her fingers over the delicate glittery mesh material.

*I had a pair like these when I was six. I wanted to be a fairy so badly, just like Tinker Bell.*

"If I were you, I wouldn't go for those. They're not very good quality. Go for the fairy wings made by Glamour and Co. They light up, and out of everything here, they look the most real."

Her head shot up and she dropped the wings. "Uh, thanks... I'll, er... keep that in mind."

A man with dark-brown hair picked them up off the ground and handed them to her. "Are you planning to be a fairy for Halloween? Because you look more like an angel type of person than a fairy."

*Does he mean that as a pickup line? Because if he does, it's pretty sad.*

She wrinkled her nose. "What makes you say that?"

He nodded toward her outfit. “The hair and the white dress you have on.”

She ran her hands over the light cotton fabric of her dress. “I suppose you have a point.”

Her attention traveled back to the man. He wore an untucked green plaid shirt and a pair of well-worn dark-wash jeans. His sleeves were rolled up to the elbow, teasing a hint of a tattoo on his forearm. Her gaze shifted back to his face, where the beginnings of a five o’clock shadow suggested he hadn’t bothered shaving for the day. Yet, it was his eyes that captivated her the most. They were a rich hazel color with flecks of green and brown, accentuated by the green tones of his shirt.

“And what are you planning to be?” she countered.

“I’m not sure yet. I was Dr. Henry Jones last year, but this year, who knows.” He shrugged. “Maybe I’ll change it up a bit.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Isn’t that Indiana Jones’s real name?”

“Yes,” he said. “If you wanted to get technical, it’s Dr. Henry Walton Jones Jr.”

Gemma shook her head. “I’ll never get over the fact that Indiana was the name of his dog.”

“You’re impressing me.” The man leaned his elbows against his shopping trolley, packed full to the brim with

Halloween decor, appraising her. “*Very* few people happen to know that.”

“My mum and dad are big fans of all the Indy films.” Gemma shrugged. “What about you?”

“Of course I’m a fan. Picked that up from my parents too. Who wouldn’t be? He’s the type of hero who doesn’t need superpowers to save the world. All he needs is logic and a bullwhip.”

She giggled and replaced the wings on the shelf. “Well, if it were up to me, I think you should be Dr. Jones again for Halloween.”

“You may have just convinced me,” he mused, stroking his chin. “The only problem is, I agreed to let my kids decide. Otherwise, I’d commit to it on the spot.”

*He has kids? What a shame. Yet another bloke who’s off the market.*

Her face fell. “Oh.”

“Gemma, you have to come and see the—oh, um... hi.” Frankie stopped short. She glanced at the man and then back to her. “I, er... didn’t mean to interrupt you two.”

“It’s fine; we were just discussing fairy wings.” Her cheeks warmed and she dry swallowed. “I’ll remember to pick up the ones by Glamour and Co. if I decide I need a pair. Thanks for the tip.”

“You’re welcome, Gemma.”



“Er, thanks,” she stuttered again.

“You can call me Henry.” He winked. “I better get going myself.” Whistling the *Indiana Jones* theme song to himself, he pushed the trolley up the aisle, disappearing around the corner.

“Henry. Is that your real name? Or is it an alias?” Gemma whispered to herself.

“Way to go, Gem. He’s cute. Did you get his number?”

Gemma threw her head back. “He has kids.”

“So? Maybe he’s a single dad. I didn’t see a ring on his ringer.”

“Frankie,” she whined. “Not helping. You sound like your dad.”

*Some men don’t wear rings on their fingers. Anyway, it doesn’t matter. I’m leaving town soon.*

Spinning around, she changed the subject. “What did you want me to see?”

“Oh, Les found the cutest little train set! We’re going to get it and put it away for Charlie for Christmas. He’s been looking for his next woodworking project, and we thought maybe the train set would inspire him to build a little town for it.”

“That sounds brilliant. Show me!”

Taking hold of Gemma’s hand, Frankie led her out of the Halloween area and toward the Christmas decor.

*In a couple hours, I'll have forgotten about Henry anyway.*

\* \* \*

Later that evening, Gemma swirled some white wine around in her glass while listening to the soft, soothing voice of Elvis play out from the jukebox in Suzy and Mr. T's den.

Frankie and Charlie hadn't returned from their after-dinner stroll by the lake. Knowing her friends, they weren't likely to come back anytime soon. They'd be too busy snogging or who knew what else.

"Dinner was delicious, as always. Thank you so much for inviting me over tonight," Gemma said.

"You're part of the family, dear." Suzy sat down next to her husband, who draped an arm across her shoulders, pulling her closer to him. "Frankie mentioned you had something you wanted to ask us about tonight?"

Before Gemma could find her voice, Frankie's father blurted out, "She's going to ask you to help with her audition video for *Cupid's Arrow*, and if you know of any single young men you can set her up with for a date."

Suzy swatted Mr. Tomlinson's hand. "Rich! You were supposed to be *subtle* and let her ask us. Not the other way around."

He shrugged. "Gem knows I'm a straight shooter who likes to get right to the point."

"It's true." Gemma's body shook with laughter. "Who told you about my lack of a dating life? Was it Leslie or Frankie?"

“Neither. It was Charlie.”

Gemma smiled to herself. “I should’ve known. He can’t keep a secret.” She set her glass of wine down on the side table. “Well, now that the cat’s out of the bag, here’s what I was thinking about for the submission video.”

Gemma explained what she and Frankie had already put together and her thought process for the remaining minute and a half of time she had left.

Mr. T stroked his chin. “That’s all well and good, Gem, but it’s too straightforward. I think you need to be a little more playful with the camera.”

“I’m afraid to ask, but what do you have in mind?”

He smirked. “I think you should play a round of rapid-fire twenty questions. Have Frankie shout things at you from behind the camera that will show the casting directors a little more of your personality and how quickly you can think on your feet.”

Suzy smiled and rubbed her husband’s shoulder. “Rich, that’s a wonderful idea.”

“I’ve been known to come up with something good every now and again. That’s old age for you.”

Gemma smiled. Here was another couple she could use as a source of inspiration. Mr. T had never thought he’d find love, yet he’d not only met Suzy on a dating app, but he was happier than ever. If it were even possible, they looked like they’d fallen even deeper in love since the last time she’d seen

them. They finished one another's thoughts and instinctively seemed to know what the other person needed.

"I was going to suggest that your video opens with a clip of you jumping in midair. I was reading something recently about how the human mind decides in the first three seconds of seeing a video if they'll be interested or not. You need to capture your audience right from the get-go," Mr. T said.

Gemma opened a blank note on her mobile and began writing down the list of suggestions being offered to her.

A half-hour later, they'd come up with an improved outline for her video.

***Opening Scene:***

***-Jump or spiral sequence***

***-Or a clip of me sitting in a chair in my Cindy costume with only one skate***

***Introduction:***

***-Give my name, age, and profession only***

***-Ten rapid-fire questions (know what they are ahead of time, but don't preplan the answer)***

***-Give one sentence of why I'm looking for love***

***Cutaway:***

***-Frankie, Suzy, and Leslie each give a sentence on the man they'd pick for me***

***-A grumpy Charlie issues a warning that he'll be watching***

***Grand Finale:***

***-Call to action reminding them to cast me***

***-Skate away from the camera and out of the frame as  
Cindy music plays***

“That looks much better, dear,” Suzy said.

Gemma clicked her mobile screen off. “Do you mind if Frankie and I film the clip of you when she gets back? I’m not sure if we’ll be able to come back to Lake Wakahanra before I leave the area.”

“Of course not.”

“If you’re done with the *Cupid’s Arrow* planning, we can talk about the other elephant in the room.” Mr. T rubbed his hands together. “Suzy, the list.”

Standing up, Suzy walked over to the antique desk that held the home’s landline and removed a notepad from the top drawer.

Curiosity boiled up inside of Gemma. “What’s on this list?”

Suzy’s cheeks colored a rosy shade of pink. “Rich and I were discussing a few of the single young men we knew who might be your type.”

“I don’t know...” It had never actually occurred to her that Suzy and Mr. T might take the idea of her dating a bloke from the area seriously. She accepted the notebook from Suzy and started reading. “Jack Conti, Brandon Webb, and Tim Lyons.”

“Jack’s a veterinarian. Brandon is a yoga instructor. Tim is a teacher.” Suzy returned to the couch. “Based on what Charlie said, you’re looking for a more normal man. These lads are as normal as they come.”

“And I’m guessing you’ve personally given all of them a background check going back two or three generations, Mr. T?” Gemma quipped.

“Of course,” he replied smugly.

She chuckled. “And if I had to ask which one you’d recommend contacting first about a date it would be...”

Suzy clamped a hand over her husband’s mouth. “All three men are wonderful people. You should take the time to get to know each one of them for yourself. Don’t let our opinions influence you one way or the other.”

Catching his wife’s eye, Mr. T relaxed and nodded. Suzy peeled her hand off his mouth. “What Suzy-kins said. It’s for us to know and for you to find out.”

“I guess if that’s the case, then I’ll just have to start at the top of the list and work my way down, beginning with Jack. Maybe I can set up a date for coffee in the next day or two.”

# Chapter 3



Gemma smelled the animals and chemical disinfectant the moment she walked into the empty waiting area of the Grizzly Springs Animal Hospital.

A receptionist in a floral scrub top wearing a phone headset glanced up from her computer screen. “Can I help you?” Her eyes seemed to be searching for an animal.

“Cheers. I’m Gemma. Jack asked me to meet him here for lunch.”

The receptionist’s eyes widened. “Oh, you’re Gemma. Dr. Conti is just finishing up with a patient. I’ll let him know you’re here.”

Gemma thanked her and sat down. Portraits of various cats, dogs, rabbits, and birds adorned the wall. The far corner of the room opposite the reception desk was packed floor to ceiling with cases of wet and dry pet food.

Her eyes traveled to the set of kennels labeled “Adoption.” She perked up, hoping to see a few puppies or kittens playing, but it appeared that they were all empty.

A door opened and closed. “Gemma?” a man’s voice called out.

Her gaze traveled to a man who stood about five-foot-eight and was wearing a white lab coat over a set of blue scrubs. The man had the beginnings of a beard and laugh lines around a set of sparkling baby-blue eyes.

“Hey, glad you could make it in. I’m Jack.”

“Hi, Jack.” She stood. “I’m Gemma, but you already knew that.”

“I did.” He chuckled. “Why don’t you come on back and we’ll have a coffee in my office? It’s the only place around here that has a clear surface,” he joked.

Gemma collected her purse and followed him through a door, past the receptionist, who was clearly more interested in watching the pair of them than working.

“So what type of animals do you treat?”

“Oh, the usual. Cats, dogs, birds, and maybe the occasional reptile. Life is a lot slower in Grizzly Springs than it was in Fort Collins.”

“And where is that?”

“Colorado. It’s where I did my vet schooling.”

Gemma nodded slowly and sat down. Jack had an easy manner about him. She could tell he was well matched to his profession. Slipping off his lab coat, he draped it on a peg near the door and walked over to a high-end coffee machine.

“I have dark roast, french roast, vanilla, and cinnamon. Pick your poison.”



Gemma grinned. "I'll have the vanilla, please."

He inserted the cup into the top of the machine and clicked the Brew button. "Would you care for any creamer?"

"No thanks." She crossed her legs. "What's the most unique animal you've ever treated?"

His lips twitched. "That would have to be a bison or a wolf."

"I would imagine a wolf is a lot like a dog."

"They are and they aren't. Modern dogs are descended from wolves, but wolves are much more cunning. Living in the wild means they haven't lost their problem-solving ability." The coffee machine beeped, and he offered her a steaming cup. He inserted a new pod into the machine and waited for his own cup to brew. "I'll be excited when I'm back in Fort Collins and I'm able to work with them again."

"Oh? Are you moving back?"

Jack nodded. "I am. At the end of the month. I've taken a research position at the vet school."

Gemma's heart dropped. Things had been going so well, but now, she was going to have to cross Jack off her list. He was moving out of the area just as she was looking to move in. As she'd started to have a serious think about all the things she wanted in a bloke, at the top, she'd decided she wanted someone she could see on a regular basis. She didn't want to commit to a long-distance relationship any longer than necessary.

“That sounds brilliant. What exactly will you be researching?”

“The impact of humans on the migration patterns of turkey and black vultures.”

“That sounds . . . interesting.”

“Oh, they are. Vultures have been given a bad reputation because they’re scavengers, but let me give you all the reasons they’re amazing animals.”

\* \* \*

“All right everyone, when you’re skating as a group, the key to success is being able to listen carefully. Do you think that’s something you can all do?” Gemma asked the group of twelve girls the next morning.

“Yes, Coach Gemma!” they yelled out enthusiastically.

“Brilliant.” She flashed them a smile. “Then let’s have a go at trying one of the first moves I learned when I was new to synchro too—the circle.”

A few of the younger girls giggled.

“Coach Gemma, that’s *baby* stuff. We *already* know how to skate in a circle,” a girl in a blue dress called out. She looked to be about ten years old and wore her hair in two french braids.

*That’s what you think.*

“If that’s the case, then this should be easy for you.” She winked. “Go ahead. Show me how it’s done.”

The girl in blue huffed. “Come on, guys.”

Gemma skated backward, allowing the group some space. She bit back a yelp as the muscles in her hip spasmed. Keeping her eyes pinned on her students, she watched as the girl led everyone out around the red circle in the corner of the rink. They performed a set of clumsy forward crossovers.

She bit back another wince as she watched everyone skate at their own speed. It was only a moment or two before two of the older and taller girls bumped into one another. Another few seconds after that, another girl tripped and grabbed the wall.

She clapped her hands together, and everyone stopped talking, giving her their undivided attention. “That was a good first attempt, but not quite what I meant. In synchronized skating, you guys don’t skate as individuals. You skate as a team,” Gemma explained.

The girls stared at her with a series of blank faces.

Reaching into her pocket, she retrieved her mobile phone and unlocked the screen. “Here, it might make more sense if you have a look at this video clip.”

The girls in the Intro to Syncro class huddled around her. She tapped Play, and the screen lit up with a clip from a Dreams on Ice practice. The skaters on the screen latched onto each other’s shoulders and performed a set of backward crossovers.

“Do you see how everyone in the circle is looking at one another? They’re watching each other to make sure they are all

skating at the same speed at the same time.”

Her students nodded in understanding.

“Oh, I get it now,” the girl in the blue dress exclaimed, her eyes widening. “We need to pretend we’re like Coach Frankie and Mr. C.”

“Yes, exactly,” Gemma affirmed, and lined them up once again. “Go ahead and grab each other’s hands. This time, when you get to the circle, we’ll try pumping our right skates forward, just like we do before a crossover.”

The girls glided over to form a circle.

“When I count off ‘one and two,’ pump. On the counts ‘three and four,’ I want you to glide.”

“I’m confused, Coach Gemma.”

“Me too.”

She exhaled slowly. “It’ll make more sense in a moment. I promise.”

Thirty long minutes later, the class was mercifully over. Gemma fled the ice for the safety of the pros’ room as quickly as she could. Closing the door behind her, she sank onto the bench by her temporary locker and removed her skates.

“Tough time?” Charlie’s amused voice called out.

Gemma’s head shot up. Frankie’s boyfriend sat at the end of the bench, tucking the bottom of his skating trousers over one of his skating boots.

She nodded glumly. “I don’t know why I volunteered to help coach this weekend. I’m rubbish at it.”

Charlie chuckled. “I doubt it went as badly as you think it did.”

Gemma’s brow furrowed. “I was so frustrated. I had no idea how to get them to do what I wanted. They kept staring at me with blank faces.”

“Did you yell or lose your temper?”

Slightly taken aback, she shook her head. “No, I’d never yell at kids, especially ones who are just learning how to skate.”

“Then you did just fine. Coaching is tricky, and at times, frustrating. We’ve all been there. You just need time and practice with figuring out how to explain things in a way that kids can understand and relate to.” He stood. “Wasn’t Les supposed to help you?”

She rubbed the ball of her bare foot and set her skate beside her. “She got called away to deal with a couple troublemakers.”

“Got it.”

“I’m surprised to see you here. I thought you’d be at home finishing your packing.”

“I have a student who wanted to squeeze in one more lesson before her competition next week. She’s got me wrapped around her little fingers. I can’t ever seem to say no to her.” He opened his locker and retrieved a puffy black coat

embroidered with the name “Mr. C” on the front pocket. “Are you done coaching for the day?”

“Yeah, that was my last lesson.”

“Tell you what, why don’t you come and join me.”

“I think I’m all coached out.” Gemma stiffened. “Some people, like Frankie, happen to be naturals at teaching. I don’t seem to have that gene in me.”

“Trust me when I say that coaching is like a muscle. You can train it to be strong. It just needs consistency and repetition.” He studied her for a moment. “I’m not a natural coach either. I had to work extra hard to be able to learn how to not scare kids and get over being an introvert.” He zipped the coat up. “Between you and me, I think you’re off to a better start than Frankie was when she began coaching.”

Gemma locked eyes with Charlie. “Do you really think so?”

“I do.”

“That means a lot coming from you.” She grinned. “But don’t think that gets you off the hook. I’m so telling her you said that.”

“Go ahead.” He closed his locker. “So what do you say? Will you join me? Richelle is a special student. I think you’d have fun with us.”

She knew Charlie was right. Frankie had said the transition from skater to coach had been a tough adjustment to make.

Her best friend told her she was constantly questioning if she was doing things right.

Gemma knew if this was a career she was seriously considering moving into, she needed to approach it with the outlook that it *would* get easier the more time and practice she got.

“You’ve talked me into it. Give me two minutes to put my skates back on.”

Charlie nodded. “I’ll meet you out on the ice.”

As he pushed the door open, a sweet high-pitched voice exclaimed, “Mr. C! I’ve waited all week to see you!” Tiny arms enveloped Charlie’s legs in a hug.

“Hi, Richelle,” he greeted her.

As they separated, Gemma heard the rustling of paper. “Look what I drew at school for you.”

Charlie knelt down, accepting the paper with both hands as if it were the map to a hidden treasure. “Is that us?”

“No, silly... it’s you and Coach Frankie. I’m standing over here in the pink.”

“Ah, I see.”

The door closed softly, and Gemma couldn’t help but smile. *If I had one student who was as sweet as that, it might all be worth it.*

As she stood, yet another twinge radiated up her hip. Inhaling sharply, she braced herself against the metal lockers

and waited a moment for the stabbing sensation to pass. “And things were going so well today,” she muttered. “I’ve overdone it.”

The door creaked open. “Gemma? Are you all right?”

She managed to flash a thumbs-up. “Just a foot cramp.” She reached her other hand behind her back and crossed her fingers.

Charlie shot her a sympathetic glance. “Those are the worst. Anything I can do to help?” He stowed Richelle’s artwork inside his locker.

“No. It just needs a second for it to pass on its own. I shouldn’t be too long. You go on. I’ll be right behind you.”

Charlie reluctantly agreed and left her alone.

She thought she had things under control and was on the road to recovery, but apparently not. She wondered if she should pick up a heating pad for her hip on the way home. If the last flare-up she had was anything to go by, walking tomorrow was going to be painful.

She knew Frankie and Charlie had a heating pad, but she couldn’t ask them. If she did, they might become suspicious. She couldn’t add to their stress levels. Their first international competition was this weekend, and she knew Frankie was nervous.

*No. I’ll figure it out all on my own.*

\* \* \*



Richelle changed feet and finished her combination spin with a blurred back scratch spin, then exited onto a sharp outside edge.

“Great job today, tiny mite.” Charlie high-fived his youngest student. “Promise me you’ll skate just like that next weekend.”

“I promise,” the nine-year-old skater said with a spark of determination in her eyes, approaching the area of the ice where Charlie and Gemma stood. “Can I have Mommy video call you after I skate my short program?”

“Absolutely! I’m hoping she’ll send a recording too.”

“Mommy always makes my big brother or sister film it. She says she gets too nervous to watch me.” She took a long drink from a glittery pink water bottle. “Mr. C, I forgot to ask, but can you and Coach Frankie come to my school’s Halloween festival? I want all my friends to meet you because you’re the coolest person I know. You’re like twenty years old!”

Gemma snickered. *Try thirty-something.*

“I’m a *little* older than that, Richelle, but good guess. When’s the festival?”

“Um...” She glanced to the door of the ice, where her mother stood in a thick white parka. Loudly, she shouted, “Mommy... when’s the Halloween thing again?”

“It’s this Friday at four. Now hurry up; we need to pick up your brother from judo.”

Without a care that they'd be late to pick up her brother, Richelle repeated, "It's this Friday. Can you come?" She laced her hands together in a begging motion. "Please, please, please?"

Charlie ran a hand through his hair. "Richelle, Coach Frankie and I are leaving for our own competition on Thursday."

Her face fell. "Oh."

Quickly, he glanced at Gemma. "Maybe you could ask Coach Gemma?"

Charlie's eyes pleaded with her, saying, "*Can you do me a favor? We can't disappoint her.*"

"I'm flying out to Austin, Texas, to skate—" Gemma started.

Richelle lowered her head, staring at the ice. "It's okay. Maybe next time."

"But I'm not leaving until Saturday morning. As long as I have everything packed and ready to go, I think I can make it."

Richelle's head rose. "Really? You'll come?"

"I'll come," she said, closing her eyes.

"Thank you!" Richelle launched herself at Gemma's legs with enough force to push the pair of them into the wall.

Charlie chuckled. "I know Coach Gemma isn't me, but she's the next best thing. You'll have a lot of fun with her, *and*

you can even tell your friends that Coach Gemma is a real-life princess!”

Richelle’s eyes widened. She glided back and appraised Gemma. “You are?”

“Er . . . in a way. I’m Cinderella with Dreams on Ice.”

“Richelle! Let’s go!”

“Coming, Mommy!” she called out, glancing over her shoulder. “Bye, Coach Gemma! Bye, Mr. C!” She waved, then powered her way to the rink’s door.

Gemma scratched her forehead. “Did I just agree to go to a kid’s Halloween festival?”

“Yup.” Charlie grinned. “I owe you one for going too. It’s like I was saying earlier, she’s such a good kid. I can’t stand to disappoint her.”

*I think it’s more that she sees you as her hero and you don’t want to fail her.*

They waited for a skater warming up their backward power pulls to cross in front of them, then started toward the exit.

“Should I bring anything to this school festival?” Gemma picked up her skate guards by the door.

“No, just yourself.” He snapped his fingers together. “Oh, and a costume. If you need something, I’m sure Les or Frankie can lend you one. I think Frankie was an angel last year.”

*Is the universe trying to send me a not-so-subtle message?*

As Charlie prattled on, her thoughts turned back to the guy she'd met at Hobby Land, wondering what he might be up to. She made a note to herself to see if she could stream one of the original *Indiana Jones* films later tonight.

# Chapter 4



On Wednesday afternoon, Gemma finally mustered the courage to send a text message to Tim.

**Gemma:** Hi, Tim. I'm not sure if Suzy Welch-Tomlinson told you about me, but my name is Gemma. She thought that since I'm considering moving to the area, you might be a good person to connect with.

She hesitated. *I better try and keep this sounding casual.*

**Gemma:** I was wondering if you might be free to grab a coffee with me. I'm only in town for two more days, so it would either have to be today or tomorrow. Cheers!

Before she could change her mind, she tapped Send.

*There. Now I can check that off my to-do list.*

It was about two in the afternoon. She knew she wasn't likely to hear from Tim until after three, when school was finished for the day. Shifting her attention to more pressing matters, she picked up the hangers of the two costumes laid out on the bed and studied them.

"You know, you don't *have* to be a sloth or a peacock." Frankie entered the room, running a towel over the ends of her damp hair. "You still have time to run over to Hobby Land and pick something else up."

“I might just have to. These are fun, but neither one feels like me.” Gemma’s cheeks colored. “I wanted to ask you earlier, but what happened to your costume from last year? The angel one.”

“I donated it.” Frankie sighed. “About a month ago, I was so fed up with not being able to fit stuff in my closet that I just did a major clean out.”

*What a shame.* Leslie had a ton of things to choose from, but she was so much taller than Gemma that nothing fit.

She mulled over Frankie’s words. “What about your skating dresses?”

“Those I’d never part ways with. They have a ton of sentimental memories attached to them.” Frankie disappeared into the bathroom, reappearing a moment later with her hairbrush. “They’re hanging in the armoire in the garage.”

“The garage? That’s an odd place for them,” Gemma remarked, placing the costumes back on the bed.

“It’s only temporary. Charlie’s reworking the closet for me.”

“That’s nice of him.” She started toward the door. “Then you don’t mind if I do a little snooping?”

“Feel free. You can borrow anything you find.”

Gemma thanked her, then made her way over to the garage. She flipped on the light switch, and the hum of electricity filled the room. The space was occupied with gym equipment, pieces of furniture Charlie had crafted, and a few

boxes of Frankie's belongings. The armoire was nestled in the far corner, near a stationary bike and a rack of weights.

"There you are," Gemma murmured under her breath. "Let's see what treasures await us."

Scooting around the equipment, she made her way over to the wardrobe and swung it open to reveal a row of bedazzled dresses, neatly organized by color.

Gemma laughed to herself, contemplating how a neat freak like Frankie managed to put up with Charlie's messy habits.

Thumbing through the dresses, she aimed to find ones with a longer skirt that could pass for a costume instead of just skating dresses. As soon as she laid eyes on a cap-sleeved ice-blue dress with a knee-length chiffon skirt, Gemma immediately knew she'd found her costume.

Pulling it out of the wardrobe, she held it up to her reflection in the mirror by the weight rack. "Old habits die hard. I guess Cinderella, it is. I have the perfect black headband that would work with this. All I need is some black ribbon to make a choker."

Humming the *Indiana Jones* theme song to herself, Gemma skipped back inside to show Frankie what she'd found.

\* \* \*

Tim replied to Gemma's message a couple hours later.

**Tim:** Hi, Gemma, nice to meet you. Suzy mentioned to me that a friend of her grandson who was new to the area might be

reaching out to me. Under normal circumstances, I'd love to grab a coffee with you, but unfortunately, I'm not free until Saturday. Maybe we can make it a rain check? In the meantime, feel free to save my number and text me anytime.

**Gemma:** Thanks for texting me back. I'm sorry this week doesn't work for either of us. I'll definitely save your number for the future.

Frankie glanced back at Gemma from the back seat of Charlie's car. "Did you hear back from Tim?"

"Yeah." She let out a deep sigh. "He's busy until the weekend. The coffee date is going to be a no go."

"What a bummer," Frankie lamented. "I can't believe you went oh for three on the dating front. Jack was moving, Tim is busy, and Brandon..." She hesitated. "Remind me what was wrong with him again?"

"Brandon was supposed to meet me for dinner, but he kept texting me to let me know that he was running late. After an hour, I gave up and left the restaurant." Gemma rolled her eyes. "Suzy heard that he has a girlfriend. What I don't understand is why he didn't just tell me."

Frankie frowned. "Me either. It doesn't make any sense."

"Anyway, it looks like finding a guy during this visit wasn't meant to be," Gemma mused, returning her mobile to her wristlet. "When I'm back in January, I'll give the dating thing another shot. I'm sure Mr. T and Suzy will have an entirely new list for me."



Charlie glanced at Gemma through the rearview mirror. “Then you’ve made up your mind? Are you going to let your Dreams on Ice contract expire in December?”

“I’m about seventy-five percent decided on it, but yeah, I think I am. I’ve been thinking a lot about the future recently, and I’m finally in a place where I’m ready to find a permanent home.”

“And you’re considering making Grizzly Springs or Sequoia Valley that home base?” Frankie asked in a hopeful tone.

“Yes. Leslie and I had a long talk yesterday. She hinted that the rink is always in need of good coaches and gave me an open-ended offer. Knowing that I’d have a job lined up if I moved here takes a big weight off my shoulders.”

Frankie squealed in delight. “This is the best news ever! I’ve missed having you close by. It’s going to be just like old times. Frankie and Gemma together again.”

Charlie cleared his throat.

“Okay, you, me, and Mr. C here.”

“That’s more like it,” he said.

As excited as Gemma was to hear Frankie’s words, she wasn’t naive enough to believe everything would be exactly as it had been a year ago. Both their lives had changed dramatically.

Frankie had found Charlie and had come out of retirement from competitive skating. They were on their way to

becoming one of the top pairs teams in the US, and arguably, the world. Gemma truly believed her friends had a real shot at making their Olympic dreams a reality.

As exciting as their lives were, Gemma was traveling in the opposite direction and down a different path. She'd been skating since she was three, more than three-quarters of her life, and now, she was trying to get a better idea of what life after skating looked like. She'd always known what she wanted, until now. Not knowing what was next frightened her.

*This is going to be one of the first real adult decisions I end up making.*

“What would it take to move from seventy-five percent to one hundred percent?” Charlie asked.

Gemma considered his question. “I don't know,” she admitted. “I guess I just need a sign that I'm really done with DOI.”

“Who knows, maybe you'll end up getting a call from the *Cupid's Arrow* team,” Frankie joked. “That would make it a no-brainer, then.”

Gemma laughed to herself. “That's true.”

“I wanted to ask you too, how is the video coming along?” Frankie continued. “Do you have everything you need?”

“Just about. I have a couple more final edits to make. I'll show it to you when we get back to your place and you can let me know what you think.”

“Awesome.”

Turning into the ice rink parking lot, Charlie parked the car in his normal spot and turned off the engine. “I hope the kids don’t make too much of a mess at our surprise party. I’d like to be able to leave at a decent time tonight. We have an early flight in the morning.”

“Charlie, you and I are excused from the cleanup. That’s Leslie’s department.” Frankie climbed out of the car. “Don’t worry, we’ll be out by eight so you can get a full night’s beauty sleep. I don’t want to skate with a grump. Been there. Done that.”

“I’m *not* a grump in the morning. By the afternoon, yes. If there’s anyone who’s a grump, it’s you, Miss Night Owl.”

“Okay, children, let’s go inside.” Gemma’s body shook with laughter as she closed her car door. “I know the kids worked hard this morning to decorate after you two left. I can’t wait for you to see it.”

As they approached the rink’s entrance, she heard Leslie’s voice directing everyone inside the facility to quiet down and get ready. The lights suddenly clicked off. Pulling the door open, she could hear excited whispers.

Gemma took hold of Frankie’s mobile, positioning herself behind them to get the best possible video of their entry into their surprise party.

Frankie cleared her throat, and said in a louder than normal tone, “I don’t know, Charlie, it looks awfully dark. Are you sure Coach Leslie said the staff meeting was at four?”

“That’s what I thought she said.” His voice boomed even louder than Frankie’s.

They turned past the skate rental counter, the lights flickered on, and fifty people yelled out, “Surprise!”

Gemma stood to the side, biting back laughter at the cartoon-like expressions that graced her friends’ faces.

“You mean there isn’t a staff meeting after all?” Charlie pouted, planting his hands on his hips. “Have you all been planning a party without telling me?”

“Yes!” the kids shouted, laughing.

One of the first students to step forward was Richelle. “We wanted to surprise you, Mr. C!” She giggled.

“You guys did a good job. I had no idea.” He shook his head.

Frankie linked her arm with Charlie’s. She pointed to the glittery banner that read, “Good Luck at Skate United States, Coach Frankie and Mr. C!”

Gemma panned the camera around the lobby. Cardboard cutouts of Charlie and Frankie, with holes where their faces should be, were set up for partygoers to take photos with. Two long tables were filled with red cups, drinks, snacks, and a cake shaped like an ice skate. The walls were adorned with artwork of the couple made by the children at the rink.

“Now that the guests of honor are here, who’s ready to eat?” Leslie chimed in.

The kids all scrambled to gather near the cake.

Gemma laughed.

“Mr. C, are you and Coach Frankie going to skate for us tonight too?” Richelle asked.

“Oh, um...” He exchanged glances with Frankie. “I don’t think... that is to say...” Richelle’s eyes widened, resembling an eager puppy dog. “If Fran—Coach Frankie agrees to it, I guess we could perform our exhibition program.”

“We’ll skate for you.” Hiding her mouth with her hand, Frankie whispered to Charlie, “I threw our skates in the trunk just in case.”

Richelle cheered and hugged Charlie, then Frankie. “Coach Gemma, will you skate for us too?”

She stiffened. “You don’t want to watch me skate. Tonight is about Mr. C and Coach Frankie.”

“But I *do* want to see you skate. Mr. C said you’re a princess.” She twirled and pointed to her outfit. “Mommy even let me wear my Sleeping Beauty dress tonight.”

She felt the internal push and pull at play. *On the one hand, I should be mindful of how much I skate. I’m going back on tour and that means performing every night without any days off. But on the other hand, it’s only an easy exhibition skate. As long as I don’t do anything too risky, I should be okay. My hip felt better today anyway.*

“I’ll do it.”

Richelle cheered again, then hugged Gemma. “I can’t wait.”

\* \* \*

Standing in the hockey box, Gemma filmed Frankie and Charlie’s modified exhibition skate to “Can You Feel the Love Tonight.”

*I can’t believe how much speed they have. Every time I see them together, they’ve improved.*

Charlie’s hands clasped Frankie’s waist. She bent her knees and was assisted into the air for an easy throw double Salchow. Holding a long landing edge, Charlie grasped Frankie’s hand and they finished their program with a centered pair spin.

“Way to go!” Gemma shouted.

Charlie and Frankie took several extended bows.

Gemma dry-swallowed, her body trembling with nervous energy.

Slipping her jacket over her tank top, Frankie swapped places with her. “Your turn. Go get ’em Gemma-rella.” She gave Gemma a fist bump.

Stepping onto the center of the ice, she rolled her shoulder a few times and pounded her legs. *Keep it clean and simple. Show off your spins and footwork. You don’t need to do any jumps.*

Assuming her opening pose from her normal DOI program, she exhaled. The music, “A Dream Is a Wish Your Heart Makes,” began to play.

Plastering a smile onto her face as she did every night, she bent her knees and gathered speed into a set of crossovers and her opening footwork sequence.

*It's so strange not to have props and the ensemble skaters that play the mice and birds around me. I'm so used to having them to interact with. I'll have to fill the empty music and choreography with something.*

Thinking fast as she performed a layback spin, Gemma made a spur-of-the-moment decision to add in a double toe loop-double toe loop combination. It was a jump she'd been able to do since she was seven.

Exiting her spin, she picked up speed into a series of fast crossovers. Bending her knees, she turned and tapped her left skate into the ice, vaulting herself into the air. Rotating twice around, she landed, then picked in once more for the second jump in the sequence, landing just fine.

*Okay, that wasn't bad. Maybe one more jump to close it out. A double Axel? Why not?*

Gliding out of an Ina Bauer, Gemma picked up one final burst of speed. But just as she was about to swing her leg into the jump's entry, the same burning sensation she'd experienced the last time she was at the rink shot up her leg. It was as if someone had taken a hammer and whacked it across her pelvis. She bailed, turning the jump into a single Axel.

Fighting to maintain her composure, only experience and adrenaline helped her through the remaining thirty seconds. Gemma completed a spiral and one final forward scratch spin, all while battling the stabbing ache. Each move became a struggle, but she refused to stop.

As the final notes of the music echoed through the rink, Gemma tried to mask the discomfort she was feeling. She struck her closing pose, a forced smile on her face, and took her bow.

As she came off the ice, Frankie gave her a big hug. “Gorgeous, but what happened on the last jump? It looks like you slipped off your edge.”

Gemma laughed nervously. “That’s exactly what happened. I slipped. You know how unpredictable Axel takeoffs can be every now and again.” Her pulse raced wildly in her ears.

Frankie shared a knowing glance. “We’ve all done that once or twice.” She elbowed Charlie. “Haven’t we.”

*Oh no. I forgot Charlie is a technical mastermind. He’ll know it was intentional. I hope he just doesn’t ask any questions about it.*

“We have.” He frowned. “But it almost looked like—”

He never finished his question, however, as Leslie burst her way into their small circle. Grabbing her brother’s and Frankie’s forearms, she gently pulled them toward the rink



doors. “Frankie, Charlie, you guys are wanted in the lobby for a group photo.”

Gemma managed a weak smile. “Go on. I’ll catch up with you in a few minutes.”

As her friends disappeared, she made her way to a quiet corner of the rink, taking a moment to catch her breath and gather her thoughts. Bracing her hands against the cold concrete wall, she dropped her chin to her chest.

*This can’t be happening to me. Not now. I’m about to go back on tour.* She didn’t understand. She’d been pain free for months, and then all of a sudden it was back with a vengeance? The medical team said it was tendonitis, but this didn’t feel like an overuse injury. What was she going to do?

# Chapter 5



It was around ten when Leslie dropped Gemma off at Frankie and Charlie's cabin. "Thanks for staying to help clean up. I really appreciate it. It probably saved me about an hour or two of work in the morning."

"It wasn't any trouble at all."

"My boyfriend is going to be excited I'm home before midnight."

"Oh, is he in town?"

"Yeah, but it's only a quick stopover. His hockey team is playing a series against the Jasper Ridge Jaguars. He'll be off to Seattle after this."

Gemma nodded, sympathizing with Leslie. "It must be hard to be apart for long periods at a time."

"It can be, but when you're in a relationship, it's all about compromise. It's Ron's dream to play pro hockey, just like it was mine to run a rink. We find time to be together when we can."

*There's that word again. Compromise.*

"You know, if you're interested, there are at least two single guys on Ron's team. I could put in a good word for you."

“I’ll keep that in mind, but for now it’s still a no.” Gemma pushed the door open and stepped out of the passenger side of the car.

“If my bro or Frankie are still up, which I doubt, let them know I’ll be here at five to take them to the airport.”

“Got it.”

“Do you have a key to let yourself in?”

Gemma opened her wristlet. “Right here.”

“Great. I’ll just wait until I see you get inside, then I’m off.”

Gemma approached the familiar front door, greeted by the faces of Leslie’s handmade scarecrow couple, and a wreath of orange and yellow leaves. Inserting the key into the lock, she turned it, and popped the door open. Turning around, she waved and watched Leslie drive away.

Once inside, Gemma locked the door behind her and leaned against it, taking a moment to catch her breath. She closed her eyes, knowing that if her hip was still this bad in the morning, she’d probably have no choice but to let the DOI physical therapist know.

Tiptoeing into her room, Gemma flicked the light on and plopped herself down on the bed. As she stared up at the ceiling, she could finally release the tangle of swirling emotions inside.

Everyone around her was so happy. Frankie and Charlie, Mr. T and Suzy, and now, Leslie and Ron. She was trying hard

and failing to suppress emotions of jealousy. She wanted what they all had. Why couldn't she find a person she just clicked with too? Was it too much to ask to find a guy who saw her as more than an ice skater?

Gemma thought back to the last four men she'd dated. None of them had gone past a third outing. Was something wrong with her? Maybe that was why her last few relationships had failed. She'd pinned all the failures on the lads, but as she lay there reliving the painful coffee dates and dinners, it hit her that she'd never really tried all that hard to make any of them work.

*I didn't put effort into my dates. I just let things fall apart.* She swallowed hard. The truth was now painfully obvious to her. *Because I didn't care.* Gemma had wanted to keep her love life casual. She didn't want to settle. *Because I didn't want what I wanted until Frankie met Charlie.*

She inhaled sharply. From here on out, she was going to put her best foot forward and take control of the situation. She wasn't going to leave her love life up to fate; she was going to set herself up for success, starting with her submission video to *Cupid's Arrow*.

Sitting up, Gemma grabbed her laptop and turned it on. As the blue screen glowed to life, she opened her video editing software and got to work.

\* \* \*

The next day, Gemma received a message from Suzy.

**Suzy:** Hi, Gemma, how are you doing this morning?

**Gemma:** Well! I had a long lie-in and a hot shower. I didn't even hear Frankie and Charlie leave this morning.

**Suzy:** I saw the video you sent off. Rich and I thought it looked wonderful. The *Cupid's Arrow* team is going to snap you up.

**Gemma:** Thanks for saying so. I felt good about it. Now it's a waiting game. I think applications are open until 31 December. So who knows if they'll even review it before then.

**Suzy:** I wanted to ask what your plans are for today.

**Gemma:** I don't have any. It'll probably be a lazy day.

**Suzy:** Would you be interested in a date of sorts?

**Gemma:** That depends. Tell me more.

**Suzy:** My granddaughter happened to invite a very single, strapping teammate of Ron's over for brunch. He's sitting with Rich and Leslie now. Let me see if I can discreetly take a photo of him for you. He's a pretty large man. I have to move back to fully fit him in the frame.

**Gemma:** Don't worry about sending a photo. Since he's already there, you can count me in.

Gemma huffed. She was frustrated Leslie hadn't honored her request, but she'd also promised herself to take advantage of every opportunity.

**Suzy:** That's the spirit. Would you like me to send Rich or Leslie to pick you up?

**Gemma:** No thank you. I'll take care of it. See you soon.

\* \* \*

Standing safely next to her grandmother, Leslie made introductions. "Gemma, this is Derrick. Derrick, Gemma."

Gemma extended her hand to a man who towered over her. He shook it firmly and with purpose.

"Nice to meet you, Gemma. I hear you're just passing through the area like Ron and myself."

"I am. I'm here for two more days before I have to leave town for Texas." They walked over to the kitchen island, and each pulled out a barstool.

She had to hand it to the man, he knew how to dress sharply. He wore an immaculately-tailored black suit with a crisp white dress shirt and a burgundy pocket square. With such a large frame, there was no way the suit had been purchased off the rack. It had to be bespoke.

"And what's waiting for you in Texas?" Derrick asked, appraising her with interest.

"Work."

Suzy moved around the kitchen, pulling out a few glasses. "Our Gemma is a professional figure skater."

"Oh, a twirl girl." He chuckled. "Are you free tonight? Maybe you could come down to the rink and see how *real* skaters skate."

Everyone else in the room visibly tensed.

A nerve in Gemma's face twitched. Trying to keep her voice calm, she blinked slowly and said in a flat tone, "You don't consider figure skaters to be real skaters?"

Oblivious to his insulting words, he continued. "No. What you do is tricks and frilly spins. Real skating is stuff that requires speed, agility, strength, and solid edgework like hockey."

"We do all of that in figure skating. How else do you think we're able to do jumps that require throwing your body into the air and landing with a force that's about five times our body weight?"

"Luck. If you ask me, figure skating isn't even a real sport."

The temperature of the room dropped ten degrees. Suzy and Mr. T watched worriedly as Gemma clenched her fists. There were so many things she wanted to say to the arrogant hockey player.

Before she could make a snarky retort however, Ron sprang out of his stool. "Derrick, have I shown you the majestic view of the lake? Why don't you follow me outside."

"Sure."

The two teammates stepped through the glass door.

"Who does he think he is. Not a sport? Not a sport! I can list fifty reasons why figure skaters are *more* athletic than hockey players." Gemma pounded her fist against the kitchen

island. “Reason number one, figure skating blades have a sharp, pointy edge called a toe pick. Reason number two—”

“I won’t argue with you, Gem. Figure skating is a sport. It’s just as difficult as hockey and requires a completely different skill set.” Leslie approached her with slow and even steps. “Derrick was out of line. I’m sorry for foisting him on you. I’d heard that he was, er... oblivious about some things when he opened his mouth, but I didn’t imagine he’d be this bad.”

“I’m sorry too, Gemma. I’d hoped Derrick might help break up the streak of bad luck you’ve had with men of late.” Suzy sighed. “Once we feed him, we’ll send him back to the hotel.”

Mr. T rubbed his hands together. “Does this mean I can show the young man how we handled those who stepped out of line in the Navy?”

Gemma’s lips curved up. Hearing Mr. T wanting to go into drill instructor mode made her feel lighter.

“Normally I’d say no, but in this case, I think a *small* dose of Chief Petty Officer Tomlinson would be welcomed,” his wife said.

His eyes glowed. “You’re the best Suzy-kins.” He pecked her on the cheek.

*That’s another guy to cross off my list. But maybe this morning won’t be a total waste. I’ve been wondering what Mr.*



*T was like back in his Navy days. I guess I'll finally get to find out.*

\* \* \*

Gemma decided to check in with Frankie the next day.

**Gemma:** How did your first practice session go for Skate United States?

**Frankie:** \*Shrugging emoji\*

**Gemma:** So a couple falls on your side-by-side and on your throw jumps?

**Frankie:** Pretty much. Our lifts were solid though.

**Gemma:** How does it feel to be back at an international competition?

**Frankie:** Surreal. This is my first senior international competition. I thought I'd be more nervous, but after Nationals last year, it just feels like Charlie and I are up to business as usual.

**Gemma:** I have the streaming schedule all worked out so I can watch your short program and free skate while I'm traveling.

**Frankie:** \*Smiling emoji\*

Three dots blinked. Frankie was typing.

**Frankie:** I wanted to ask you too... Dad said you had a date yesterday? Who was it?

**Gemma:** I did. Leslie invited one of Ron's teammates over to brunch at Suzy and Mr. T's.

**Frankie:** And?

**Gemma:** Wipeout.

**Frankie:** Bummer.

**Gemma:** The only consolation was that I got to see another side of your dad. He's scary when he's in military mode.

**Frankie:** Uh-oh. It must've been really bad if Dad went navy on the guy's butt.

**Gemma:** I wish I'd filmed it for you.

**Frankie:** I'll have to ask him to fill in the details. I'm sure he'll do so gleefully.

They exchanged a few more texts before Gemma realized it was getting late. She was just about ready to head out to the Sequoia Valley Elementary School Halloween Festival.

**Frankie:** You're going to have a ton of fun tonight! Charlie told me almost the entire town shuts down for it. Send me pics. I can't wait to see what costume you settled on.

**Gemma:** See for yourself.

She walked over to the mirror in Frankie and Charlie's bathroom, snapped a photo of herself, and sent it to Frankie. She was wearing Frankie's old skating dress that brushed the top of her knees. She'd accessorized with a black ribbon as a belt and secured her hair into a high bun.

**Frankie:** Va-va-voom! Princess Gemma is ready for her royal ball. All you need now is a glass carriage.

**Gemma:** No glass carriage tonight. Just a magical ride share. Speaking of which, the app on my phone is telling me it's here.

**Frankie:** Go, we can't have you be late for the ball.

**Gemma:** I'm going.

**Frankie:** Have fun and text me later.

**Gemma:** I will!

# Chapter 6



The air was crisp with the scent of fallen leaves. The Sequoia Valley Elementary School campus had been transformed into a magical wonderland of autumn colors and spooky delights. At the heart of the festivities was a hayride where a horse-drawn wagon, stuffed with bales of straw and carved pumpkins, carried children and parents through a child-friendly haunted forest.

In the middle of the school's track was a vibrant pumpkin patch and maze. Laughter filled the air as families roamed the rows of pumpkins, searching for the perfect canvas on which they might carve their Halloween masterpieces.

Following the signs to the school's gym, Gemma was greeted by the sight of a dozen game booths. Children tested their skills at tossing rings onto the neck of a grinning skeleton, aiming darts at colorful balloons, and knocking down a tower of bone-shaped bowling pins. The victors were rewarded with prizes, from plush monsters to candy-filled cauldrons.

Sniffing the air, Gemma detected caramel apples, roasted corn, and pumpkin-spiced treats. "This is brilliant; we don't make this much of an effort at home," she said softly to herself.

“Coach Gemma! You made it!”

Spinning around, she was greeted by the sight of Richelle, who was dressed as a mermaid princess. She stopped just short of Gemma, her eyes widening.

“Mr. C was right; you look just like Cinderella. Do you have glass slippers too?”

Gemma shifted her heel forward, revealing a pair of glittery clear plastic heels. “I’m afraid these aren’t made of glass, but they do light up.”

“Oh, they’re so pretty!”

“Richelle!” a man shouted. “You can’t just run off like that without telling me where you’re going!”

The young skater’s eyes widened. “Sorry, Daddy.”

“Just don’t tell your mom and don’t let it happen again,” he scolded, though his stern expression soon relaxed. “Is this your coach?”

“No, Daddy. Mr. C is competing this weekend.” She rolled her eyes. “*This* is Coach Gemma.”

“Well *pardon* me.” He extended his hand to her. “Nice to meet you, Coach Gemma.”

The man looked to be in his early fifties and was dressed in a doctor’s lab coat. Gemma had no trouble believing he might have just come from work. He had laugh lines around his eyes and was the opposite of the woman Gemma had encountered at the rink a few days ago.

She squinted at the name on the plastic badge attached to the coat's front pocket, "Cheers, Dr. Zhang. I suppose you can call me your daughter's stand-in coach."

Richelle nodded in confirmation. "Mr. C asked her to come so I could introduce her to my friends. Did you know she's a princess?"

"I can see that." Dr. Zhang winked. "You must be the Snow Queen."

Richelle face-palmed. "No, Daddy. She's Cinderella!"

The two adults shared a laugh over her dramatic behavior.

"Well, now that you've found Coach Gemma, let's take her to your friends. I think your mom said you guys were supposed to meet them by the haunted hayride."

Taking hold of Gemma's hand, Richelle tugged it. "Come on, it's right this way."

Caught off guard by the surprising strength of someone so tiny, Gemma stumbled forward, and her hand flew out of Richelle's. As she attempted to steady herself, one of her shoes slipped off her foot, and she bumped into the body of the person passing by on the left.

With the reflexes of a cat, strong arms reached out to steady Gemma.

"Oh. Thank you so much for catching me. I'm so sorry I knocked into you," she quickly apologized, her cheeks flushing.

“It’s no problem at all, Gemma. I’m here to save the day.”

She recognized that voice! Her gaze slowly traveled up from the khaki-colored shirt and well-worn brown leather jacket, finally locking on to the glimmering hazel eyes of the man she’d met at Hobby Land. Her pulse immediately picked up its pace.

“Henry,” she whispered.

“Coach Gemma, are you okay?” Richelle asked.

“I’m brilliant,” she replied, quickly breaking apart from Henry and smoothing out her skirt. Her face burned even hotter.

“Glad to hear it.” A look of relief crossed Dr. Zhang’s face. “Richelle, what should you say?”

She stared at the ground. “I’m sorry.”

Gemma plastered a smile on her face. “No harm done, except I seem to have lost my shoe.” She glanced behind Richelle and noticed the plastic footwear flashing in the distance.

Henry grinned. “We can’t have Cinderella losing her glass slipper. Can we?”

“No.” Richelle shook her head.

He walked over to the shoe and retrieved it, along with his hat. Approaching Gemma, he knelt down. “Princess, let’s see if this fits.”

Richelle giggled.

As Gemma slipped her foot back into the shoe, Henry remarked, “Well, it looks like this shoe was made exclusively for this princess. It fits like a glove!”

Their eyes locked for a moment, and there was an undeniable spark in the air.

“Coach Gemma, are you ready to go to the haunted hayride now?” Richelle inquired.

Reading the couple, Dr. Zhang cleared his throat. “I think she needs another minute or two, pumpkin. I’ll help you find your friends, and Gemma can join us in a moment.”

Richelle tilted her head to the side. “But she said she was fine.”

“How about we walk through the trick-or-treat trail on the way?”

“But Mommy said no candy.” She pouted.

Dr. Zhang blinked slowly. “It’ll be our secret. We can keep it at my office.”

Her arms flew around her father’s legs. “Daddy, you’re the best.” Taking hold of his daughter’s hand, Dr. Zhang led her toward the food booths.

A few moments of silence elapsed between Gemma and Henry.

He removed his hat and scratched his forehead. “So, are you enjoying the festival so far?”



“All five minutes of it, yes.” She sniggered. “I see you went with the Indiana Jones costume again after all.”

“What can I say? Never mess with success.” He spun around in a circle, modeling it for her. Gemma soaked up the sight of him. The dark brown trousers conformed to a very fit body and shapely bum.

“You have a bullwhip too?”

“Never leave home without it. And I see you didn’t go for the fairy route.”

“No. I didn’t know I’d need a costume until the last minute. It was either this, a peacock, or a sloth.”

His lip twitched. “Those are, um... interesting options. I personally would’ve picked the sloth, but I’m glad you went for the princess. It suits you.”

“Me too.”

“Come on. I’ll walk you over to the hayride, so your little friend doesn’t think I’ve turned you into a frog or something.”

They started strolling side by side.

“Cinderella would never get turned into a frog. A servant, maybe.”

“Noted.”

The scent of freshly-popped popcorn mingled with the sweet aroma of sugar, creating an irresistible blend that made Gemma’s mouth water.

“Oh, there’s candy floss too? That looks delicious.”

Henry wrinkled his nose. “What’s candy floss?”

She pointed to the fluffy pink candy.

“You mean cotton candy!”

“I do,” Gemma replied, shaking her head with a playful grin. “Americans have such odd names for things.”

“In our defense, it’s fluffy, pink, and looks like cotton, not floss.”

Gemma’s lips curved. “Whatever you say.”

“Do you have games like these back home?” Henry gestured toward a booth with a ring-toss game, where a group of kids was competing.

“Quoits? Of course.”

“Huh. I’ve heard a lot of British names for things before, but never quoits.”

“I visit America often, and I swear every time I’m here I learn something new. We may both speak the same language, but American English and British English still have so many differences,” Gemma said.

“Agreed.”

They continued walking. “What are some of the other words you’ve heard?” she asked.

“Um... jumper, trolley, trousers, and waistcoat to name a few.” Henry removed his hat and scratched his head. “Then there’s the more obvious ones, like football instead of soccer.”

“I hope you’re not one of those people who’s going to convince me that football should be called soccer.”

“No. If it were up to me, soccer *would* be called football.” Henry laughed, sending a few jolts of electricity up her spine. “It makes more sense for a game that’s played with your feet.”

“Just a guess, but do you play football?”

“No. I don’t like all the running involved. My sport’s baseball.” He brought his hands together and pretended to hit an invisible ball, smiling. “I’m sure that was going to be your next guess though.”

“Actually, I was going to guess your sport was playing with your trusty bullwhip.”

Henry pulled the brim of his hat a little lower. “Afraid not. This only comes out if they’re snakes around, or if I need a way to make a daring escape.”

Gemma grinned.

They’d reached the hayride queue, where Richelle was happily munching on a chocolate candy bar.

“Well, I guess I’ll leave you here. I’m supposed to take a turn in the dunking booth. It was nice chatting with you, Gemma.”

Her mind immediately conjured an image of Henry wearing a soaking-wet shirt, clinging to his chest like Mr. Darcy. Her body grew hot.

“You too, Henry.”

His gaze lingered on her for an extra moment. The butterflies in her stomach fluttering their wings. As he turned to walk away, Gemma called out, “Henry, wait! Can I have your mobile number?”

Turning around, he said, “You already have it!” Then he waved and continued walking away.

*I already have it? What exactly does he mean by that?*

“Coach Gemma!” Richelle yelled, waving.

She walked over to Charlie’s student. She’d have to leave unlocking the mystery of Henry until later.

\* \* \*

Gemma spent the next few hours with Richelle, her friends, and their parents. By the end of the night, she was surprised by how natural it was starting to feel around the children. She’d skated in front of thousands of them in audiences with DOI, but she’d rarely spoken to them one-on-one. They were a breath of fresh air with the carefree way they saw the world. Maybe coaching wouldn’t be so bad after all.

“Thank you for coming tonight, Coach Gemma. I had so much fun.” Richelle covered a yawn with her hand. “You’re almost as cool as Mr. C.”

Gemma chuckled. “I’ll take that as a huge compliment.”

Richelle hugged her, then climbed into the back seat of a maroon-colored SUV. She buckled her seat belt, resting her head against the window once Dr. Zhang closed the door.

“I was worried all the sugar would keep her up, but it looks like the ride home is going to be quiet. I might even get to pick the radio station for a change.” Dr. Zhang smiled.

“She’s a good kid. I hope once I settle into the area, I’ll have the opportunity to spend some more time with her. That is if Charlie will share her.”

“Assuming Richelle chooses to continue skating, I’m sure she’d be happy to have you help coach her.” Dr. Zhang leaned against the car. “She’s going to have to make a choice between ballet, skating, soccer, softball, violin, piano, art classes, and Chinese school soon. She can’t continue to do all of them and keep up her grades in school.”

Gemma’s eyes widened. “She’s doing *that* many activities?”

“We want Richelle to be well-rounded. Anything she’s expressed an interest in, her mom and I have wanted her to try.” Although it was dark, Gemma thought she could see the faint patch of color appear on his cheeks. “Between you and me, my wife hates the skating, but I think it’s where Richelle’s heart is. If that’s what my baby wants, who are we to stand in her way?”

“You’re a great dad to her.”

“I try to be. I just wish I were around more. Work keeps me busy.” He cleared his throat. “Anyway, if there is anything you need, feel free to reach out to me at any time.” He reached into his pocket. “Here’s my business card. It’s got my work number and email on it.”

“Thank you so much.” Glancing at the card, her eyes widened. “You’re the team doctor for the Jasper Ridge Jaguars hockey team?”

Dr. Zhang nodded. “I am.”

They chatted for a few more moments, then father and daughter departed.

*Richelle’s parents seem like they are the polar opposites of one another. Her mom seemed so uptight, and her dad is so easygoing. I wonder if they’re a case of opposites attract. Should I be looking for a guy who’s the opposite of me?*

A chilly gust of wind caused Gemma to shiver. She needed to request a ride home. Deciding she didn’t wish to wait out in the cold, she headed back to the gym. Inside, some of the adults were beginning to deconstruct the booths and pack away the leftover food. Locating the bleachers, she sat down and pulled out her mobile.

“Gemma? What are you still doing here? I thought I saw you leave about a half hour ago,” Henry said, his hands on his hips. He’d removed the coat and hat. The sleeves of his brown shirt had been rolled up to his elbows, and it was damp and transparent in a few places. Her lips grew dry.

“Oh hi, Henry. I walked Richelle out to the car to say goodbye.”

“You didn’t come together? Or in a pumpkin carriage?”

“Nope,” Gemma chuckled. “I ordered a car.”

“Is that how you’re planning to get home now?”

She nodded. “It was, unless you’ve got an airplane or a spare packet of magical pumpkin seeds.”

“No planes, magical seeds, or even a flying carpet. The kids and their families cleaned us out, but I’ll tell you what, if you don’t mind waiting ten minutes, I can give you a ride home.” He glanced behind him. “I think we’re just about done here. Most of the booths will get deconstructed in the morning.”

“Only if it’s not an inconvenience to you.” Gemma dry swallowed. “I, er... *would* like to spend some more time with you.”

“The feeling is mutual.” He winked. “I’ll be right back. I just need to make sure the cash boxes get signed back in and locked up. In the meantime, try not to trade your voice to a sea witch. And here”—he tossed his jacket to her—“you look like you’re freezing.”

*Wrong princess, but at least he’s trying.*

As she waited, Gemma opened the contact list on her mobile phone and started to scroll through the long list of names.

*Okay, Henry, let’s find out if I actually have your number. Aaron, no. Ashley, no. Airlie, no. Amanda, no. Andrew. Hmm. Where do I know him from?* Taking a screenshot of the number, she saved it to look up later.

True to his word, ten minutes later, Henry came strolling up to the bench where she sat with his jacket draped over her

shoulders. “Okay, I’m all set. Shall we head to the parking lot?”

Gemma stood, ignoring the tightness in her hip, and tucked her mobile into her wristlet. “Lead the way.”

They walked to the gym door and Henry opened it for her. “What did you think of the festival? Did you have a good time?” he asked.

“I did. This was my first taste of an American Halloween. It’s a lot more commercialized here than back home in Scotland. I guess what surprised me the most was the timing of the event. Halloween isn’t until next week.”

“We did that on purpose.” He laughed. “The PTA asked us to move it from the week of Halloween to the week before. They didn’t want to have the kids pick and choose between trick-or-treating and attending the school festival.”

“That makes a lot more sense.”

They reached a white minivan, and he clicked the key fob. The doors slid open, and lights clicked on.

“Oh, fancy.”

*It must be for his kids.*

“Not really, but it’s practical.”

Gemma climbed into the passenger seat. “I’ll wager that it makes it a lot easier to shuttle your kids around in.”

Henry closed the door, inserted the key into the ignition, and stared at her with a confused expression on his face.



“My kids?”

“Yeah, you know... your tiny humans?” Gemma chewed on her lip. “I’m surprised. I thought they’d be with you tonight.”

“Some of them were here.”

“Some?”

“Yeah, I think about twenty made it.”

Gemma blanched. “Um, exactly how many kids do you have?”

Henry started the engine. “Thirty-five.”

She gripped the armrest attached to the door. “Thirty-five,” she sputtered.

“Uh huh.”

Slowly backing the car out, he looked both ways, ensuring there was no approaching traffic, then turned out of the car park onto the darkened State Highway Three.

“I assume not all of them have the same mum, or um... live with you. You’d need to have an enormous farm, and about fifty washrooms.”

“Live with me? Fifty bathrooms?” His eyes suddenly widened, and he roared with laughter. Pulling over to the side of the road, Henry wiped the corners of his eyes. “Gemma, I’m *not* the father of seventy-plus kids. I’m a *teacher*.”

# Chapter 7



Gemma wanted to disappear. How could she be so wrong as to assume he had so many kids? The only word she could manage was, “Oh.” She placed her hands over her face.

Henry continued to laugh. “As much as I would love to be a dad in the future, I’d have to be in a relationship for that to happen.”

Gemma slowly lowered her hands. “You’re single? I assumed you were off the market.”

“Uh-huh. I thought you would’ve picked up on that.” He winked. “I thought I was being pretty clear that I’m interested in you.” He rested his hand on his stomach. “Oh, my abs are gonna be sore from laughing so hard.”

She sat taller. “You read me right. I’ve been thinking about you since Hobby Land, but you mentioned having kids the day we met.”

“I did?” He cocked his head to the side.

“You said you were planning to let your kids choose your Halloween costume this year. I thought... well, we both know where my mind went.”

“Ah. I can see where you might’ve thought I had kids.” He shook his head.

“Now that we’re talking about it out loud, the whole thing does sound pretty ridiculous.” She hung her head, giggling to herself.

“So you’ve been thinking about me that long?” Henry joked, pulling back out onto the road.

“You made an impression on me.”

“I have a confession to make. You made an impression on me too. I’ve been thinking a lot about the beautiful, funny, and obviously smart *angel* for days.”

Butterflies fluttered in her stomach. *Me too. You’ve made me watch all three Indiana Jones movies.*

Henry continued. “I’m just sorry I had to turn down grabbing a coffee with you. It’s not that I didn’t want to. It was more that I’ve been swamped trying to sort out some of the last-minute details for the festival. I agreed to take over organizing it this year.”

Hearing him say that left her momentarily speechless. “Wait, coffee? I didn’t text you. I don’t even think I have your mobile number. I scrolled through all my contacts.”

“I think that’s my fault. I should’ve clarified this earlier, but Henry isn’t my real name.” He blanched. “I told you it was at Hobby Land because I thought it was a fun nod to Indiana Jones.”

Suddenly, the pieces of the puzzle started clicking together to reveal the full picture. There had been a person she’d texted

about coffee. But it wasn't Henry. It was another guy from the list Suzy and Mr. T had given her.

"You're Tim," Gemma said slowly.

"I am. You can call me Tim, Timothy, Timmy, or Mr. Lyons. I answer to pretty much anything."

She face-palmed. "I do have your number."

They both laughed.

"Our relationship definitely has gotten off to an interesting start, that's for certain," she said.

"You can say that again." Tim glanced to his right.

"My friends are never going to let me live it down when I tell them what happened."

"Oh, I bet they will, especially Suzy. She's got an awesome sense of humor. She'll probably say that it was the universe's way of making your visit to town memorable."

"You're right. She will." Gemma smiled. "I'll have to call her in the morning. I wish I could tell her in person, but I'm flying out tomorrow."

"Is your work flexible? Maybe they'd give you another two or three days if you worked your magic on them." Tim wiggled his fingers. "Sprinkle a little pixie dust on their heads and *poof*. More vacation is magically granted."

"I wish it were that easy, but no, my work isn't flexible about extra time off unless somebody is ill or injured. I'm a figure skater with Dreams on Ice."

“Wow, an ice skater.” Tim let out a long whistle. “I bet that’s an awesome job. I can see where that could get tricky with certain cities and venues booking things way in advance and how you might only have so many people to take on certain roles.”

“That’s exactly it in a nutshell.”

“If it makes you feel any better, it’s that way with teaching too. We have subs when we’re sick or if an emergency comes up, but as a rule of thumb, any vacations we take have to line up with the school calendar.”

“What grade do you teach?” Gemma asked.

“Sixth.” His lips twitched. “I may be biased, but I think I won the lottery. My students are the best.”

Gemma winced. “Preteens?”

“You’re not the first one to give me that look.” Tim chuckled. “My kids really aren’t that bad. As a whole, they’re well-behaved. But then again, I have the permanent mind of a twelve-year-old. I share a lot of interests with my students, so I don’t usually have many problems.”

She cocked her head to the side. “What type of interests?”

“Oh, you know... stuff like baseball, comic books, and cartoons. What about you? What types of things are you interested in?”

Gemma fidgeted. “Uh...”

*I only have one shot to make a decent first impression. Do I tell him the truth? What if he judges me by it?*

Tim's eyes darted to the right. "Gemma, if you're not comfy sharing, it's okay. There's a ton of other stuff we can talk about."

*No. I made a promise that I'd go all in on this dating thing. I have to put myself out there and just be me.*

Her cheeks seared with heat. "My guilty pleasure is watching reality dating shows," she said in a squeaky voice. "I love all the drama."

"That's great." He sat up taller. "Have you seen *Cupid's Arrow*?"

Relief flooded through Gemma. "Er, yeah. That's my favorite show."

He raised an eyebrow. "You seem surprised."

"I am."

"Normally it isn't a show I'd gravitate to, but some of the other teachers at school talked me into watching a couple episodes. I tried to be open-minded about it and I'm glad I was. I enjoyed it. It wasn't what I expected."

She exhaled. "I thought you'd consider it a rubbish show and..." She trailed off.

"Gemma, I'm not the type of guy who'd ever judge a person based on what they like or dislike. If you enjoy something, embrace it. Life's too short to care or be worried

about what others think. Look at me—I waste most of my weekends reading *Batman* comics.”

Hearing Tim’s thoughts brought a rush of adrenaline through her body. Was he real? Had she actually found a guy who enjoyed the same telly programs as she did?

“What makes Batman your favorite superhero?”

“That’s easy, he’s a self-made hero. He doesn’t need any magical powers to save the world.”

*Think. What else do I know about Batman? He drives a Batmobile, doesn’t he? And there is some villain called the Joker.*

“Oh, he doesn’t have any powers? I’d assumed he did.”

Tim grinned. “Nope. Batman is just ultrarich. He hires other people to make his gear.”

“That’s a smart strategy. I suppose I’d do the same if I were a millionaire.”

Signaling, he turned left and started up the tall hill to Charlie’s cabin. “What else would you do if you had endless piles of money? Travel? Buy a mansion?”

“I’ve never actually thought about it. You’re really putting me on the spot here,” she teased.

“Sorry.”

“While I’m having a think about it, you tell me... what would you do?”

Tim slowed the car around the windy road up the hill. “Probably buy my own baseball team and have a real-life Batmobile made up.”

“Oh, that’s a brilliant idea. It’s better than anything I could come up with.” Gemma sighed. “The truth is, I don’t know what I’d want. Touring with DOI, I’ve done enough traveling to last a lifetime. And I wouldn’t need a mansion either because most of the space would sit empty.” She rubbed the back of her neck. “I guess I’d buy my mum and dad their dream home, pay off their debt, and save the rest?”

A few moments of quiet passed between them. The sound of the tires running over dry pine needles filled the silence.

“That’s the best answer I’ve ever heard. It tells me that family is more important to you than frivolous stuff like a baseball team.”

The car stopped in front of the dimly-lit cabin. Tim turned and gazed directly into Gemma’s eyes. “I wish the ride were longer. I don’t want our conversation to end. I felt like I was just starting to get to know you.”

Gemma shivered at hearing his words. She felt very much the same. There was so much she wanted to ask him. She wished she could just sit here and chat with him all night, unraveling the mystery of the man in front of her.

“You know, we don’t have to stop talking,” she said. “We *could* stay in touch through texts and video chat. That’s the beauty of technology. There’s no need to wait for a Bat-Signal.”



Tim grinned. "I'd like that."

Gemma unbuckled her seat belt. She knew that if she didn't leave the car now, she'd lack the willpower to do it. Tim's presence was intoxicating to her. She wanted to spend all night talking to him.

Forcing herself to open the door, she said, "Thanks again for the ride. I appreciate it. I hope I didn't take you too far out of the way." Climbing out of the van, she said softly, "Good night Tim."

"Good night Gemma."

Tim waited until she was at the front door and let herself inside before driving off. Gemma closed the door behind her and rested against it.

*I wonder what other types of heroes Tim admires. Would it only be self-made ones? Or does he also like heroes like Captain America and Thor? I guess I'll just have to ask him. But first I have a little homework to do on Batman. I wonder if the new film is available to stream.*

# Chapter 8



Gemma had a difficult time keeping the cheesy smile off her face every time she and Tim exchanged texts over the next few days.

**Gemma:** What's your stance on capes? Should superheroes have them?

**Tim:** That's a tough one. It depends if it's more for looks or if it adds to the hero's powers. What about you?

**Gemma:** You didn't answer the question, but I'm all for them. Capes add to a hero's coolness factor.

**Tim:** If I had to pick, I'm team no capes. If you've seen *The Incredibles*, you'll know why.

**Gemma:** That's one of the few Disney Pixar films I haven't seen. Is that one I should add to my must-watch list?

**Tim:** Yes! And when you do, look out for Edna Mode.

**Gemma:** Is that a superhero mode?

**Tim:** \*Face-palm emoji\* You're killing me. No. She's an important character in the movie.

**Gemma:** I'll take your word for it. Have a great day at school and send me photos of your haunted classroom when you can.

**Tim:** Likewise, and I will. Have a good show in Dallas.

\* \* \*

**Gemma:** How are you and Charlie feeling going into the Maple Leaf Trophy this weekend?

**Frankie:** Like a million dollars! I can't believe we managed to win Skate United States.

**Gemma:** It was never a question of *if* you were going to win. It was a when. You and C were amazing!

**Frankie:** It also helps that we were one of the only teams to skate cleanly.

**Gemma:** Don't tell Charlie I said this, but I think he might've been right. The judges love you two.

**Frankie:** That's the funny thing. We always seem to score better internationally than domestically.

**Gemma:** Oh, I have some news to share too!

**Frankie:** ???

**Gemma:** I received an email from *Cupid's Arrow!*

**Frankie:** And?

**Gemma:** They want me to send them a short video answering three questions they gave me.

**Frankie:** I'm so excited for you. You've got this. We can brainstorm your answers when we video chat tomorrow if you'd like.

**Gemma:** Sounds good. I'm excited just to have gotten this far, but I know it probably doesn't mean much.

**Frankie:** Don't give up yet. Gotta run. Talk to you later.

\* \* \*

**Suzy:** I saw your young man Tim this past weekend. He was helping out at his father's hardware shop. I needed some new brackets for a bookshelf Rich and I are putting up in the den.

**Gemma:** He's not my Tim. We're just getting to know one another.

**Suzy:** Uh-huh. Well, whatever you want to call it, he remembered that my first husband was Scottish and was asking an awful lot of questions about Scotland.

**Gemma:** Maybe he was just curious?

**Suzy:** Or maybe he wants to find a way to impress you.  
\*Winking emoji\*

**Gemma:** \*Blushing emoji\*

**Suzy:** You've turned that boy's head. About time too. His mother and I are tired of seeing him come up with excuses.

**Gemma:** Excuses for what?

**Suzy:** \*Zipper mouth emoji\* That's for you to discover.

\* \* \*

Later that evening, Gemma stepped onto the ice, and the cool surface beneath her skates sent a shiver of excitement through her. Although it was darkened, she could tell that the arena was filled to capacity. The audience buzzed with anticipation. As she took her starting position, the spotlight suddenly found

her, casting a radiant glow that made her feel like a true Cinderella.

The opening notes of the music filled the air, setting the tone for the performance. Gemma's heart raced. The first few glides were like a dream, her skates carving graceful arcs on the ice. She mouthed the lyrics to "A Dream is a Wish Your Heart Makes" as the crowd watched with rapt attention. Suddenly, the ensemble skaters dressed as mice appeared.

*I have a little leeway in this section. Should I do a flying camel or a layback spin? She contemplated the issue. I still have the transformation scene, the ball, and the finale with Fernando. I'd better keep it simple. I felt good today. I need it to stay that way.*

As the performance neared its climax, Gemma executed a series of spirals that left the crowd applauding wildly. With a final set of back crossovers, she wound up and stepped into a fast-forward scratch spin. She held her ending pose for a few seconds, catching her breath. Hearing the "ohhs" and "awws" of the audience never grew old.

An hour later, it was over. Removing her makeup and stowing her costume away, she transformed from Cinderella back into Gemma. A knock sounded on her door. "It's open," she called out.

"Special delivery for you," her frequent skating partner Fernando called out. "Do you want it in here?"

A skater from Spain, Fernando stood about six feet tall, and had dark-brown hair and large, expressive brown eyes.

He'd been a pairs skater for most of his career and was well-known for his partnering skills. Since Frankie had left DOI, he had been asked to skate with Gemma. She appreciated having a partner who was self-assured and confident in all his moves.

She turned her head, spying a massive box in his hands. "Um, sure." Twisting her hair up into a messy bun, she quickly wrapped a hair tie around it and walked over to the box. "What on earth is that? I didn't order anything."

"The delivery guy was asking for a Gemma-rella. I knew it had to be for you, so I risked my life and signed for it." Fernando rubbed his hands together. "Are you going to open it?"

Gemma rolled her eyes. Fernando was like an excited child. His eyes were as wide as saucers. "I suppose."

She leaned forward to inspect the box. It had several red-and-white "Fragile" stickers pasted to the side and an arrow pointing to which side was up. As Fernando had mentioned, it was addressed to Gemma-rella. There was no return address.

"You don't happen to have—"

"A box knife? I do." He whipped the item out of his pocket with surprising speed.

Gemma gestured to the top of the box. "Have at it. Just open it carefully, please."

Fernando made quick and efficient work of opening the box. As he peeled the top flaps of the box open, he retrieved a

black envelope, with white block letters that read *For the Fairest One of All*. “You’d better read this first.”

Accepting the envelope from his hands, she felt her heart flutter. There were only two people she could think of who would send her a package with a fairy-tale reference. One was Frankie and the other was Tim.

As she turned the envelope over, her hands trembled, and she pulled out an orange pumpkin-shaped card.

*Dear Gemma-rella,*

*At the Halloween Festival, you mentioned it was your first time experiencing an American Halloween. While you were given a small sampling of things, like wearing a costume, going on a haunted hayride, and playing games for candy, there is one major part of the holiday I know you missed out on. When you open the box, make sure you have plenty of room and a friend to do the activity with. Let’s talk after five tonight.*

*Best,*

*Tim*

Kneeling, Gemma placed the card to the side and peeked inside the box. She removed a layer of purple tissue paper adorned with ghosts, pumpkins, and bats, packing peanuts, and bubble wrap. A minute later, she felt something round, cool, and smooth.

Removing the protective wrappings from around it, she was shocked to discover there were in fact two medium-sized

pumpkins, a carving kit, a pack of permanent markers, tealight candles, a pack of pumpkin-flavored cookies, candy corn, a bag of kettle corn, and gummy bugs.

“I can’t believe you did all this for me, Tim,” she whispered.

“Whoever sent you all this is a keeper, Gem. Is that the guy you met when you were visiting Frankie?”

“It is.” She continued to stare at the pumpkin. How had Tim had time to go shopping for all these things? How had he known where to send them? She pictured him walking through a pumpkin patch, looking for just the right size and shape pumpkin to send her.

“There are two pumpkins. Does that mean I can carve one too? I haven’t done it in years. If you let me, I’ll promise I’ll do all the cleanup.”

Her thoughts broken, she glanced at Fernando, “Oh, um... sure. He told me to open the box with a friend. Do we have time before the next show tonight?”

“Sí. We have four hours.”

She furrowed her brow. “Does pumpkin carving make that much of a mess?”

Fernando snorted and gave her a knowing look.

“Oh.”

He glanced around her dressing room. “I’ll ask the backstage crew if we can have a couple of rubbish-bin bags.



We'll spread them out across the floor and use those as our work surface. Pumpkins have a lot of guts we'll have to remove. In the meantime, your job is to start figuring out what you want to carve on your pumpkin.

She frowned. "Can't I just make a face?"

"That's up to you, but the guy who sent this to you took a lot of time and thought to put this together. If I were you, I'd return the favor."

Fernando stepped out of the room.

Gemma sighed. He was right. She owed it to Tim to put in some effort carving the pumpkin, not blindly carving the first thing that came to mind. She started to scroll through Pinterest for some inspiration, amazed and in awe at how people could turn the orange member of the squash family into works of art.

# Chapter 9



“A little higher, Gem.” Fernando signaled for her to hold the pumpkin at chest height. “That’s perfect. Uno, dos, tres.” He snapped a few photos, then returned her mobile to her. “How did I do?”

Gemma skimmed the burst of images. “Brilliant. Do you want one too?”

He waved her off. “No, gracias. I’ll take pictures *of* it, but not me *with* it. I’m not as artistic as you.” He laughed.

Gemma studied the blob he’d claimed was a ghost. “Er... it’s spirited. Your pumpkin just has its own personality.”

Fernando laughed again. “You’re being too nice. Let’s face it, I screwed up and it looks like a blob.”

She held up her hands. “You said it. Not me.”

“Oh well, the important thing is I had fun carving it. Nobody except for you and me is ever going to see this.” He compiled all their rubbish in a bin bag, securely knotting the top. “I’m gonna run and shower before the nightcap show. We have about an hour and a half. Do you need anything else before I leave?”

Her eyes traced the room. “No, but thanks for asking.”

“When you phone your boyfriend, tell him I said gracias.”

Her cheeks burned. “He’s *not* my boyfriend. We haven’t even had a date yet.”

Fernando arched an eyebrow. “Not a single date?”

“Nuh-uh. He gave me a ride home, and we’ve been talking every night since, but that’s it.”

“So that’s the story you’re going to stick to?”

“It’s the truth.”

“Sure,” he said sarcastically, winking. “You mind if I leave my work of art here until later?”

*Why don’t Fernando and Suzy believe me? We’re just two people who talk. Maybe friends?*

“No, feel free.”

“Bueno.”

Taking the bin bag with him, Fernando exited the room, closing the door behind him. She stared once more at her pumpkin. Instead of a face, she’d opted to try and create a bat. Tracing her fingers over the rough, uneven edges of its silhouette, she had to admit, she was thrilled with how it had turned out.

Unlike Fernando’s, people would be able to tell what it was from a distance. When they returned to the hotel later that night, she planned to test out how the tealight candle would make the pumpkin glow to life.

Her mobile vibrated. Glancing at the screen, she noticed she had a message from Tim.

**Tim:** Nice photos! The bat was a good choice! I have a soft spot for them.

Gemma grinned to herself. He'd known what it was!

**Gemma:** Are you free from school yet?

**Tim:** Almost. I have two kids sitting in detention for chewing gum during class.

**Gemma:** And you're texting me in front of them?

**Tim:** They're busy playing on their phones. One of them has it under the desk, and the other kid is pretending to go through his backpack. They think I can't see what they're doing, but I know all the tricks.

She laughed to herself, trying to picture the scene.

**Gemma:** I won't keep you too long. Does eight your time work tonight? I should be back at the hotel by then.

**Tim:** \*Thumbs-up emoji\* I'm a little surprised you have a matinee show on a weekday.

**Gemma:** DOI likes to give out free tickets to local schools. They get a field trip to see us, and the company receives good PR in the media for it.

**Tim:** That makes sense. It's a win-win for both parties.

**Gemma:** Before I let you go, one follow-up question for you.

**Tim:** Fire away.

**Gemma:** Why doesn't American baseball have a time limit for its games?

**Tim:** Most people would probably tell you it's always been played that way, but it beats me. I love the game, but it *would* be nice if it didn't last three to four hours.

**Gemma:** They can last that long?

**Tim:** In the pros, yes. High school and college ball go a lot faster. My question for you?

**Gemma:** Yes?

**Tim:** What's the difference between hockey skates and ice skates?

**Gemma:** Two words. Toe pick.

**Tim:** That doesn't sound very hygienic.

**Gemma:** \*Laughing emoji\* It is. Search it out on the internet.

**Tim:** I will.

**Gemma:** Talk to you soon.

**Tim:** \*Grinning emoji\*

Closing out the messenger app on her mobile, she opened the library app and continued reading *Baseball for Beginners*.

\* \* \*

Covering a yawn with her hand, Gemma wiggled her mobile to reveal the time. It was nine forty-five. She still had about fifteen minutes before she was meant to call Tim. Setting it beside her, she threw her head back into the fluffy mound of

pillows and tucked two under her right side. Her hip was cranky, but a hot bath had helped.

*Double and triple show days are torture. At least I have my talk with Tim to take my mind off things.*

**Gemma:** Just letting you know I'm settled in at the hotel. We can talk anytime.

Getting up from the bed, she walked over to the room's balcony and slid open the glass door. The cool night breeze tickled her face. She shivered. Checking on her pumpkin, she was pleased to see the tealight candle inside still flickering and casting an eerie glow.

"I can't wait for Tim to see you."

Inside again, she noticed the screen on her phone lighting up.

**Tim:** Anytime is good. Just decorating my classroom.

Gemma frowned. Hadn't he already decorated it? She tapped his name. A moment later, the screen lit up with his face.

"Hey, stranger," he called out. She could hear him, but all she could see on the video was a flash of a red plaid shirt.

"Hiya, Tim. What are you up to? Didn't you send me photos of cobwebs, pumpkins, and paper bats hanging from your classroom's ceiling already?"

He picked up the mobile, cracking a cheesy grin. "I did, but tomorrow is actual Halloween, and that means I can go all

out. It's the only day of the year my principal allows me to fully express my creativity."

"And by that you mean?" she asked, curiosity piqued.

"Let me flip the camera. I think seeing my haunted hideaway will help you understand."

Gemma gasped when the video turned around. "This is your classroom?"

He laughed. "Yes, this is the Haunted Casa de Mr. Lyons."

The windows of the classroom were covered with yellow paper and stringy spiderwebs. His desk, also covered in spiderwebs, held a mega-sized cauldron filled with candy and two light-up plastic pumpkins.

The back wall of the room, adjacent to the bookshelf, was concealed with cutouts of the silhouette of a tree, a full moon, white ghosts, a haunted house with eerie yellow windows, and thirty-five pumpkins, each bearing a student's name. From the ceiling, Tim had also suspended flickering LED pumpkin lights, and about thirty more bats than the day before.

"I still have a long way to go, but it's getting there." He touched the camera, returning the focus to his face. The beginnings of a five o'clock shadow had started to grow in, and he wore a pair of stylish black glasses.

"What else do you plan to do? It looks like you've done a lot already."

"I have the fog machine to rig up, a witch and broomstick to hang on this empty wall by the whiteboard, a life-sized

model skeleton to assemble, and then I have all the activity stations.”

Gemma shook her head. “Are your kids going to learn anything tomorrow?”

“A little.” He shrugged. “The truth is that the next two days are lost causes. Halloween day, the kids are too excited to pay much attention to whatever I’m trying to teach them. It’ll go in one ear and out the other. The day after, the kids will be tired from staying up all night trick-or-treating.”

“Aren’t they a little old for trick-or-treating?”

“Not until they’re in high school. On average the last couple years, more than three-quarters of my class has gone out.”

She winced. “That does put you in a tight spot.”

“I wish the school district would schedule a half day on Halloween and cancel classes the day after. They could call it a staff development day and still have us teachers come in, but hey, what do I know.”

Gemma nodded. “Teachers are never given enough of a voice when it comes to making the important decisions. At least that’s what my mum always says. She taught A-level English literature for years.”

“I have mad respect for her. Is your dad a teacher too?”

“No. My dad struggled in school.” Gemma laughed. “He’s an electrician. How about your parents?”



“Dad runs a hardware shop in town. But my mom is like yours. She was a school librarian for Sequoia Valley High School until last year. Now she’s the volunteer librarian at the public library three days a week.” Tim’s eyes softened. “She’d probably still be working if the district hadn’t had such a budget shortfall.”

“Was she forced into retirement?”

“Yes and no.” Tim sighed. “Mom was told the school could only afford to keep one librarian on staff. She had the most seniority, so she had to choose who was let go. Mom being mom decided she didn’t want to be the reason anyone lost their job, so she took an early retirement.”

“Wow. She sounds like such a selfless person.”

“She is. Mom is my hero. She’s one of the major reasons I ended up becoming a teacher.”

“If our mums ever meet, I bet they’ll get on well. Once my mum finds a kindred spirit who loves books as much as her, she can talk their ear off for hours.”

Tim’s body shook with laughter. “What’s the old saying? Great minds think alike.”

Gemma’s gaze traveled to the box on his desk labeled “Biohazardous.” “What’s in there?”

He glanced over his shoulder. “The cauldron? I have some packets of candy in there.”

“No. The box.”

The lines on his forehead wrinkled. “Oh, that! It’s a bunch of owl pellets.”

“Are you bringing a live owl into your classroom too?” Gemma asked quizzically. “Where are you getting one?”

“No. The pellets aren’t food. They’re the regurgitated parts of an owl’s meal that its body can’t digest.”

Her brow furrowed. “Owl vomit?”

Tim’s cheeks colored. “I guess that’s what you’d technically call it.”

“What are you going to do with it?”

“That’s the day after Halloween’s lesson. The pellets contain things like bones, fur, claws, and teeth. I’m planning to have my kids dissect them for a science experiment and piece the bones of the animal back together on construction paper. Then they’ll write a short report on the experience.”

“Oh. That sounds like a fun hands-on activity.”

“The past two years, I’ve had my class work on it the day after Halloween. The students get excited because they’ve never really worked with bones before.”

She scooted back onto the bed, resting her back against the headboard. “Can the kids be trusted not to act out? I can just picture a couple of them getting rowdy and throwing pieces of the pellet at one another.”

“That’s the beauty of this project. The kids have heard about how fun it is from their friends and siblings. If they want

to participate, they know they have to behave.” Tim smirked. “But on the off chance I have a rebel on my hands, I have the school principal hang out in the classroom during the setup. They’ll behave when he’s around. He gives them a speech on proper hygiene and handling techniques. He used to be a biology teacher at the high school, so this is right up his alley.”

Gemma eyed him with a newfound appreciation. “I can’t believe how thorough you are. You’ve literally thought of everything.”

“Not everything, but I have a pretty good idea of what to expect.”

She sighed. “I hope I can be on your level if I end up becoming a skating coach. It terrifies me that people are going to trust me to teach their kids.”

“That was my biggest fear when I was student teaching,” Tim shared. “But I’ll give you a spoiler alert. With some practice, that fear goes away.”

*That’s good to know.*

He squinted. “Is that the pumpkin that’s lit up behind you?”

Sliding off the bed, Gemma made her way to the balcony and gave him an up-close look at it.

“Wow. That looks fantastic. I wouldn’t be able to tell in a million years that you’d never carved a pumpkin before,” he mused.

“I had a brilliant time doing it.” Gemma’s face flushed. “I can’t thank you enough for sending me the Halloween care package. It was so thoughtful of you.”

“I just wanted to make you smile,” he said quietly.

“Well, you definitely succeeded in doing that.”

“Your smile is one of the things I admire most about you, especially your dimples.” His voice dropped even lower. “When I saw you at Hobby Land, you had this angelic look on your face while you were studying the wings. It literally took my breath away. I left the store that day kicking myself for not getting your number. All I had was your name.”

*Why didn't you ask me? I may have given it to you.*

“I’m glad Suzy brought us together.” She stared at the flickering candle. “Talking to you is one of the things I look forward to every night.”

“Me too.”

The past couple of days had been especially tough. Knowing she’d be able to talk to Tim at the end of the day had kept Gemma going.

They spent a little time discussing the first episode of the current *Cupid’s Arrow* season and the purpose of toe picks, which Gemma explained assisted a skater with jumps.

An hour later, Tim reluctantly said, “I had better finish this up if I hope to get home before midnight tonight. Is the same time tomorrow okay for you?”

Gemma ran through the schedule in her head. “That’d be perfect. I’ll be free after four.”

“It’s a virtual date.” He winked.

Disconnecting from the call, Gemma hugged her mobile to her chest.

*Tim called it a date! Should I get dressed up for the occasion? Or are things going to be like they usually are? Or was he just calling it a date and it’s not really a date? I’ve never been so confused.*

# Chapter 10



Another week slipped away. Halloween was over and Thanksgiving was around the corner. The mood among the Dreams on Ice cast shifted to discussing what everyone was going to do over the long weekend. Some people, like Fernando, were planning to travel home. Others, like Lisa, were planning a skiing trip.

“Should I count you in again this year, Gem?” she asked as they collected their newly-sharpened skates from the equipment manager.

“What resort have you guys picked?”

“Snow River Run in upstate New York.”

Gemma hadn't given it much thought. Her family had always gone straight into Christmas once the calendar changed to November. Although she enjoyed the idea of people's families getting together, American Thanksgiving didn't hold much meaning for her.

“Can I get back to you?”

“Sure.” Lisa nodded. “Just let me know by Friday if you want in. I need to get a final tally for hotel rooms and rental cars.”

They chatted for a few more minutes before Gemma slipped into her dressing room. Changing into her practice clothing, she debated what *she* wanted to do for Thanksgiving. In the past, she'd always had Frankie by her side. But this year was different. She was alone.

*It doesn't make any sense to travel home to Scotland for three days. I'll be seeing Mum and Dad at Christmas, and again in March assuming Frankie and Charlie compete at Worlds.*

Gemma wondered if she should consider asking Suzy and Mr. T if they might be willing to host her. They'd always insisted she was a part of their extended family, but she knew it wasn't right to assume anything. What if they planned to travel to spend time with some of Suzy's children and their families?

She could ask Frankie and Charlie what their plans were, but she didn't want to get in the way of their training for the International Prix Final. There was a lot at stake. It was the biggest skating competition outside Worlds, and they had a great chance of winning.

There was also Tim to consider. She could use the time to see him in person. They chatted with one another every night. On the rare days they missed each other, Gemma felt his absence. It was like she was missing a small piece of herself.

*Everyone I care about is back in California. Maybe I should book a hotel room in Sequoia Valley. I could visit and use it as my home base. That way I wouldn't have to ask*

*anyone to commit to anything. They could drop in on me if and when they wished.*

She secured the laces on her skates, tying them tight.

*Yes, that's what I'll do. I'll spend some time in Sequoia Valley. I hope the last-minute airline tickets and hotel room won't cost a small fortune. I can't wait to tell Tim!*

As Gemma stood, there was an audible pop and her leg buckled slightly. She grabbed the wall for support. Testing the leg again, she tentatively placed her weight on the limb. It held without any problems.

She took a few steps. A sharp sensation like a rug burn shot up her hip. She inhaled and clenched her jaw. A few seconds later, the pain subsided just as quickly as it had come.

“Okay, this has happened before. I can do this. I only have two numbers tonight,” she told herself. Pulling open the door, she stepped out into the hallway. Another sharp pain shot through her body. Her hands returned to the wall.

“Gemma, I didn't see you out on the ice for warm-up. I was just coming to check on you,” said the concerned voice of Mel, the DOI physical therapist. “Is it a flare-up?”

Short of breath, Gemma managed to tell her, “It just happened.”

“Can you make it to the exam room? It's at the end of the hall on the left.”

She slowly raised her head. The hallway had never seemed so long. She chewed on her bottom lip. “I think I need help.”



Mel, who stood a few inches shorter than Gemma in skates, wordlessly slipped her arm under her shoulder and helped her limp along.

“You know the drill. Out of ten, the pain is a...”

“Seven. This is the worst it’s been.”

“You’re not going to like what I’m about to tell you.”

“I know.” Gemma’s body deflated as they entered the PT room, Mel depositing her on the black padded table. “You’re going to tell me I need two full days of rest.”

“Actually, I think it’s time for us to consider a more extreme treatment. One or two days off here or there isn’t making a difference. It’s time you took two to three weeks off to see if that helps manage the pain.”

Her jaw fell open. “Two whole weeks?”

Mel crossed her arms. “We’ve been doing PT exercises for five weeks, but it’s not having the impact I’d like it to. If you want to give your body a fighting chance to recover, it needs rest. You’ve been pushing yourself too hard.”

Gemma deflated. Two weeks? She’d never taken so much time off from skating before.

“I think you should also go get a second opinion on your hip. I’m not convinced we’re dealing with tendonitis. Between you and me, the doctor that management sends you guys to doesn’t fully understand the nature of injuries to figure skaters.”

Gemma winced. “My contract ends in six weeks. Management hasn’t offered me a new one yet. I wasn’t sure if I was even going to accept it if they did, but now, if they hear about this injury...”

“I can delay writing up a report on the condition while you rest.” Mel took a deep breath. “There isn’t any point in jumping to conclusions when we don’t know for sure if the medical diagnosis is correct and how your injury responds to you taking some time off.”

“Thank you, Mel. I owe you for this.” She swallowed hard. “I’ll do whatever you tell me to.”

“Good, because I’m completely shutting you down for the next two weeks. That means no skating, jumping, running, or anything that puts additional stress on the hip. You’ll be limited to low-impact workouts and the strengthening and range-of-motion exercises we’ve worked on together. After two weeks, we’ll reevaluate and go from there.”

“It’s going to be miserable having to sit here and watch everyone from the sidelines.”

Mel knelt down to help Gemma remove her skates. “You know, you don’t have to stay with DOI if you’re not skating. Why not visit Frankie? I’m sure she’d love to have you drop in on her. You were so happy after your last visit there.”

“Maybe I will.”

“Good. Now that that’s decided, let’s have you lie on your back. We’ll heat and massage the flexors and extensors.

As Gemma relaxed, letting the heat seep into her ailing hip, knots churned in her stomach. What if the injury *was* more serious than either she or Mel thought? What if the time off did nothing and she wasn't able to skate any longer? What did that mean for her future?

*I've started to wonder if the timing was right to say goodbye to the world of show skating. Is this the sign I've been waiting for? I never thought that I wouldn't have a choice in the matter. I wanted to be the one who made the decision when the time was right, not have it made for me.*

\* \* \*

Later that day, Gemma texted Frankie and Charlie.

**Gemma:** So is that open invitation to come and stay with you guys still good?

**Frankie:** Of course!

**Charlie:** For a nominal fee.

**Frankie:** Charlie... \*face-palm emoji\*

**Charlie:** I'm not asking much.

**Gemma:** What's the price?

**Charlie:** Help with figuring out what to get Leslie for her birthday.

**Gemma:** Done.

**Frankie:** I thought we decided to just get her a gift card to Hobby Land.

**Charlie:** That's the easy way out. We need a gag gift too.

**Frankie:** Count me out on this one.

**Gemma:** I'll still help.

**Charlie:** You're a real gem, Gem.

**Gemma:** \*Grinning emoji\*

**Frankie:** When's your flight?

**Gemma:** I haven't booked anything yet, but I'm probably going to try to get into Fresno sometime early on Saturday. Could I trouble you two for a ride too?

**Charlie:** We're a full-service place. All transportation is included.

**Gemma:** \*Wide smiling emoji\*

**Charlie:** Mind if I ask why you're coming back so soon?

**Gemma:** I missed your winning personality?

**Charlie:** Sure you did. What's the *real* story?

**Gemma:** Injured hip.

**Frankie:** Oh, Gemma, I'm sorry.

**Charlie:** I am too. I hope it isn't too serious.

**Gemma:** We're hoping two weeks of rest does the trick, but I'll know more after I see a doctor.

**Frankie:** Let me know if there's anything I can do to help.

**Gemma:** Just continue to be amazing friends. That's all I need.

\* \* \*

**Gemma:** Hope you don't mind, but there's been a slight change in plans. I'm going to have to cancel our video chat tonight.

**Tim:** Oh, okay. Reschedule for tomorrow?

**Gemma:** Yes, but how about we do it in person instead?

**Tim:** Does this mean what I think it means?

**Gemma:** What do your superhero powers tell you?

**Tim:** My Gemma-rella is coming to town?

**Gemma:** \*Winking emoji\*

**Tim:** Are you flying in? Do you need a ride from the airport?

**Gemma:** Yes and no. My bestie is picking me up. What I would like to do, though, is to cash in that rain check for a coffee.

**Tim:** I'll do you one better. How does dinner sound?

**Gemma:** Dinner would be amazing.

**Tim:** I know just the place too.

**Gemma:** As long as they have some ice cream on the menu, I'm game.

**Tim:** And what kind of ice cream would that be?

**Gemma:** Take a wild guess.

**Tim:** Pumpkin? Since you're the type of princess who might ride in a pumpkin carriage.

**Gemma:** Brilliant skills of deduction, but no. I'm not a fan of pumpkin. It's not something I ever had growing up.

**Tim:** Chocolate?

**Gemma:** Tim for the win. Just a nice plain chocolate ice cream puts me in my happy place. What about you? Are you a strawberry man?

**Tim:** I'll give you a hint: I enjoy classic flavors.

**Gemma:** You don't mean vanilla do you?

**Tim:** \*Blushing emoji\* I do.

**Gemma:** Well, it's good to know our favorite flavors complement one another.

**Tim:** It is.

Three dots blinked. Tim was typing something else.

**Tim:** There is one thing on my mind though... Why are you coming back so soon? Not that I don't want to see you, but is everything okay? I remember you telling me how hard it is to get time off.

**Gemma:** I'm nursing an injury. I have to take at least the next two weeks off, starting today.

**Tim:** Gemma! Are you okay?

**Gemma:** Physically, the time off is probably the best thing for me. My body needs to rest. But mentally, I'm struggling.

There is so much on my mind that I've had to come to terms with.

**Tim:** Would a chat help?

**Gemma:** Yeah, I think it would.

A moment later, a video request popped up on Gemma's mobile. Swiping right, she accepted, and balanced the device on its Pop Socket. "Hey."

Tim's face appeared on the screen. The room was semi-dark, illuminated by the glow of a computer. He removed a pair of black glasses. "Hey, stranger," he said tiredly.

"I'm sorry to interrupt you. I know you're probably busy. Why don't I just wait until I see you on Saturday?"

Gesturing to the laptop screen, he said, "This stuff can wait. You're my priority. Talk to me. What's on your mind?"

She pulled her knees to her chest. "I wish you were here right now. I could really use a friend who isn't a skater. I love Frankie, but..."

"But she's not injured, and you are."

She nodded. "I shouldn't be jealous, but I am."

"I think when you've been given tough news, it's human nature to be jealous and maybe a little resentful."

For the first time in several weeks, her tight grip on her emotions was beginning to waver. "It's my own stupid fault. My hip has been hurting for a long time. I thought I'd be able

to push through it, and maybe by some miracle it would just go away. But all I managed to do is muck it up.”

“That’s the mentality we athletes have. We’re trained from an early age to ignore any aches and pains and push through them.”

Her lips quivered. “I’ve been injury free almost my whole skating career. Why did this have to happen now?”

“As much as we might wish it, our bodies aren’t machines. They break down.” Tim stayed silent for a few moments, then he said, “Believe me, Gem, I understand exactly what you’re going through and how it feels like the universe hates you.”

She rested her head on her knees. “You do?”

“Uh-huh.” He moved his phone to the side and removed his shirt. Her body flooded with warmth. Gemma was able to get an up-close and personal look at the muscles in Tim’s upper chest and shoulder. Underneath all those plaid shirts, his body was ripped.

“Do you see these?” He angled the camera, focusing on an area with a few puffy pink dots and a long silvery scar. “And this one here...” The camera was fuzzy for a second, then came back into focus. There was a scar that looked like a baseball seam on the backside of his elbow. “I have these scars because like you, I thought I could ignore my body when it was sending me signs to stop playing baseball and rest. I thought that if I missed a day of practice or a workout, it was the end of the world.”



“That’s how I’m feeling now. I’ve never missed a workout or taken time away from the ice.”

“This is your first major injury, then?”

She nodded.

“Do me a favor. Take a deep breath. Hold it for three seconds, then exhale.” Tim shrugged his shirt back on as she did so. “Good. Now here’s what I always tell my students. Put your listening ears on.”

Gemma giggled and mirrored his hands, putting on a set of invisible ears.

“Any time away from a sport is hard but know this: Taking time off is the first step in the recovery process. Use the time to learn more about yourself and put together a plan of action to come back better and stronger.”

*He’s so passionate about this.* Her gaze traveled to his shoulder.

“It’s all over your face—you want to know what happened.”

Her face seared with heat. “Yes, but I was afraid to ask. I didn’t want to bring up any painful memories.”

“I wouldn’t have shown my scars to you if I wasn’t okay talking about them. It happened a long time ago. I’ve had years to come to peace with it.” He ran a hand through his hair. “The round scars are from AC joint and rotator-cuff surgery, and the elbow is from a Tommy John procedure.”

Gemma remembered reading that name in her *Baseball for Beginners* book, but it wasn't clicking where it was from. "Tommy John?"

"Tommy John is the nickname for reconstructive surgery of the UCL ligament in the elbow. It's the ligament that allows a player to be able to throw a ball at a high velocity."

She sat taller. "Tommy John was a pitcher, wasn't he? I remember now. He convinced a doctor to try replacing the ligament in his elbow. There was no way of knowing if the surgery was going to work, but it did, and it revolutionized modern baseball."

"Somebody's been learning about baseball. I'm impressed."

Her ears would soon be as red as cherries at this rate.

"You're right. TJ surgery is sadly common."

Gemma swallowed hard. "Both of those surgeries sound awful. I'm sorry you had to go through them."

"For a long time, I was too, but you know what? In a weird way, I'm kind of glad it happened the way it did. It changed the course of my life, and without the injuries, I never would've become a teacher or a junior baseball coach."

Gemma thought about her hip and the way the sequence of events had unfolded of late. *I wished for more time in Sequoia Valley, and I got exactly what I wanted. He's right.*

"I guess if I had to find something positive about all this, it's that I'll be able to spend more time with you and my

bestie.”

“I would never wish an injury on anyone, but I’m glad you’re coming here too.” Tim sighed. “I’ve missed you.”

She drew a small circle on the fabric of her bedsheet. “I’ve missed you too.”

As Tim leaned forward toward the camera, his desk chair squeaked. “Is there anything else on your mind you’d like to get off your chest right now?”

“No. I don’t feel as alone as I was before. I feel a little lighter knowing that if you can get past two major injuries, I can too.” A few pangs of guilt pulled at her. “What about you? You sound exhausted. Can I do anything to help you?”

“I am.” He smiled, but it didn’t quite reach his eyes. “But as much as I appreciate your help, these reports are ones I have to do on my own. We have parent-teacher conferences coming up. The prep always leaves me anxious.”

“Are the parents that scary?”

“If their kids are doing well, no. They’re happy to sit and chitchat with me. If their kid is struggling, yes. Teachers are the ones who take the blame for the poor results of kids in the classroom.”

“Do they yell at you?”

“Sometimes. On the whole, most parents are good, but there are a couple who I know are going to have to be handled with kid gloves. The bright side is that you’ll be around to distract me.”

“I will.” She nodded emphatically. “You can count on me to do whatever it takes to help get your mind off work.”

“I’m looking forward to having some quality alone time with you.”

Her spine tingled in delight.

“I won’t keep you. I have a flight to book.” She picked up the mobile and winked at him. “Try and get some rest tonight, so you’ll be ready to go tomorrow.”

“I’ll try,” he chuckled. “Good night, Gemma-rella.”

“Good night, Timmy.”

Clicking off her mobile screen, she couldn’t help but feel as if something between them had shifted. Tim had shared something intimate and personal about his past. It wasn’t the type of thing that people who were just friends shared with one another. Yet, she didn’t know what to label them as.

*Tim has walked the same path as me. He knew exactly what I needed to hear. If only I could return the favor and tell him what he needs to hear. Maybe if I talked to Mum, she’d be able to help. She’s been teaching for more than twenty years. If there’s anyone who has experience with difficult parents, it’s her.*

Gemma glanced at the time on her mobile. If she called home now, she should be able to catch her parents before they went to bed.

# Chapter 11



Gemma's heart raced as she navigated the winding, leaf-covered road.

*All this time, Tim was only a ten-minute walk away from Charlie's cabin. If only I'd known sooner, we could've spent more time together the last time I was here.*

The cabin came into view, nestled among tall pines, smoke rising gently from its chimney. Gemma could see Tim using the cozy building as his sanctuary like a modern-day superhero, a refuge from the busyness of life.

Walking up the driveway, she passed a wooden carving of a sloth and paused in front of the entry to his home. A pair of sheer white curtains were drawn in front of the kitchen window, which was open three inches. Sitting on the windowsill, she noticed a few succulents, and an Indiana Jones Chia Pet.

She leaned closer to the window to inspect it. A thick green layer of green shoots grew out of the top of his iconic bowler hat. "Where did he manage to find that?"

"A gift from a student."

She jumped as the front door opened. Tim crossed his arms and leaned against the door frame with a cheeky grin. He wore

a pair of dark-wash jeans, a white T-shirt, and a green plaid shirt.

“Tim, I’ve been waiting to see you!” Unsure if she should hug him, she shoved a brown paper bag Frankie had given her in front of her body. “I brought pie.”

“The way to my heart.” He signaled for her to come inside. “What did you bring?”

“Er, I don’t know. Frankie bought it yesterday and said she and Charlie already had two pies in the freezer for Thanksgiving.”

Peeking inside the bag, she read the top of the box, wrinkling her nose. “Pumpkin.”

Tim roared with laughter. “The expression on your face is priceless.”

*Even if it’s at my expense, seeing Tim laugh is worth it. If there’s anyone who needs it, it’s him.*

“Here, I’ll put the pie back in the freezer. Tell Frankie thank you, but between you and me, I’ll probably take it over to my parents’ place for Thanksgiving.”

Tim’s cabin was laid out in an almost identical fashion to that of Frankie and Charlie’s. The main living area was open concept. There was a kitchen, living room, and two bedrooms. She’d expected his home to be wildly decorated just like the classroom she’d seen during their video chats, but instead, it was minimalistic.

Gemma slipped the canvas bag she'd also been carrying into his hands. His eyes widened. "What else is in here?" Reaching inside, he pulled out a shoebox-sized box. Brushing his hand across the lid, he read the paper she'd taped to the top. "A Box of Awesome? What do we have here? Did you make this, Gem?"

She glanced away, rocking back and forth on her heels. "Uh-huh. You'll have to open it to find out what treasures await."

She heard the sound of him setting the pie box and shoebox down on the counter and the lid opening.

He started looking through the box. She had put in sticky notes, pens, highlighters, hand sanitizer, tissues, a bag of chocolates, a pack of mini donuts, tea bags, a bottle of soda, a baseball, and a bottle of aspirin. "This is all so thoughtful, and as a teacher, exactly what I need!"

"According to Mum, I learned yesterday that all teachers need four things: carbs, caffeine, a couple school supplies, and sanitizers. So I thought I'd make you a teacher survival kit of sorts."

"I love the name you came up with. It's perfect for this."

"A Box of Awesome made me think of you."

"How does the baseball fit into this?"

"I thought you could use it for two things: a self-defense weapon against angry parents..."

"And the second?"

She raised her head and locked eyes with him. “You can use it to keep your hands occupied to help you focus. I usually use a tennis ball.”

“I love it! Although I’ll have to convert you to using a baseball instead.” Holding it in his hands, he adjusted his fingers over the red seams. “Catch.” He tossed it to her underhanded.

Gemma caught it, then tossed it back to him. “An underhanded toss?”

“I can’t toss overhand anymore, but even if I could, I wouldn’t do it in the house. There are too many breakable plant pots.”

Tim’s antique wooden desk contained a couple more Chia Pets and a small collection of cliché coffee cups that said, “World’s Greatest Teacher.”

“I see that. Is that another sloth?”

“It is. If you were to look out on the back porch, you’d find two statues of sloths doing yoga and the rest of my Chia Pet collection.”

Gemma opened and closed her mouth.

“I have a Yoda, a Darth Vader, Thing from *The Addams Family*, an Oscar the Grouch, a llama, and Baby Groot from *Guardians of the Galaxy*.”

“Those are all from your students?”



“Most of them.” He shrugged. “The sloth and Baby Groot I bought on my own.”

She shifted her weight from one foot to the other. Her eyes squeezed shut for a moment as a sharp twinge jolted her leg.

“Gemma?”

Her eyes fluttered open. “I’m okay. The pain comes and goes. It’s usually worst first thing in the morning and late at night.”

“And I bet sitting on the plane for a couple hours didn’t do you any favors either.” Tim’s forehead was creased with worry.

“No.”

“Why don’t you have a seat and pop the bottom of the couch up? Stretching out might feel good.”

He led her over to the sofa and pointed to the buttons built into the arm. With a whoosh, the foot of the couch flipped up. “Do you like using a heating pad? I have one I use on my shoulder when I’m having one of my bad days.”

Gemma hesitated. “Er... are you sure you wouldn’t mind?”

“I’m not using it. You might as well if you’re achy.”

“In that case, yes please.”

He walked over to the cabinet below the entertainment system. “While we’re at it, maybe we should crack open some

of the goodies from the Box of Awesome? I'm thinking about the donuts?"

"Aren't we going to dinner soon?"

"Yes, but it's a whole twenty-minute drive. I don't know about you, but I could definitely use a little pick-me-up." He winked and plugged the heating pad into the outlet in the wall.

"They're *your* goodies. Do what you want with them," she teased.

"Don't mind if I do." He rubbed his hands together, then plucked out the donuts from the box, the plastic wrapping of the package crinkling as he ripped it open. "These smell so good. I haven't had a donut in a long time."

"Oh." Her face fell. "I'm sorry, I didn't know what type of desserts you liked besides pie. I just picked up what was available at the airport."

"No, I love donuts! I'd eat them for every meal given the chance, but I try really hard to limit sugary treats to once or twice a week. Type 2 diabetes runs in my family. I have a higher risk than the average person of developing it in the future, so I try to eat clean as much as possible." He took a bite. "Oh, these are so good. Have one."

Taking the soft treat for herself, she popped it into her mouth. She could taste the sugary sweetness melting on her tongue. "Mmm... brilliant," she agreed. She couldn't remember the last donut she'd eaten either.

“Can I get you anything to drink? I have diet soda, water, coffee, tea, juice, and a couple protein shakes.”

“Just water, please. I’d love a coffee, but it’s a little too late in the day for me.”

“I swear we’re on the same wavelength. I was just thinking about coffee too, but it’s not that late if you want one.” Moving around his kitchen, Tim picked out two glasses and turned on the sink’s tap. “On school days, I usually have my last coffee of the day around four.”

“That late?”

“Uh-huh. I need that little jolt of caffeine to be able to grade papers. Some of my kids have horrible handwriting and it’s a mental workout trying to decipher what they’ve written.”

Gemma laughed.

“It’s true. I have a couple essays sitting on my desk to prove it.”

She held her hands up. “I trust you.”

“Here’s your water.”

“Thanks.” Gemma took hold of the glass and nibbled on the remainder of her donut. Tim sat down next to her. “So there’s one question I’ve been wondering about since I walked into your place.”

“And what’s that?”

“Why do you have so many sloth things?”

“It’s not some weird obsession, if that’s what you’re thinking.” He grinned. “There’s actually two reasons: baseball and Costa Rica.” Rolling up his trouser leg, he exposed the tattoo of a sloth wearing a green baseball uniform holding onto a baseball bat. “This guy here is the logo for an exhibition baseball team called the Scottsdale Sloths. I played three seasons with them right out of college.”

The muscles in her forehead wrinkled. “Exhibition baseball?”

“Uh-huh. The Sloths are a baseball team that doesn’t focus on baseball. They focus on performance.”

“I’m confused. How does a baseball team perform? Do you sing and dance between innings?”

“Yup, but it wasn’t just between innings. We did it throughout the entire game. Think of it as if baseball were to be turned into a musical comedy show.” Locating the remote, Tim clicked on his smart telly and opened the SearchTube app. “It’ll make more sense if I show you.” Typing in the words “sloth ball,” he loaded a video onto the screen with baseball players in the same neon-green uniform as his tattoo.

Over the next five minutes, Gemma watched in fascination as the Scottsdale Sloths performed a Rockettes-style kick line, sang classic nineties pop songs, and assembled a cheerleading pyramid while playing a game of baseball.

She sat taller. “How have I never seen this before?”

“When I played for the team, it was still up-and-coming.” Tim laughed again. “We played mostly in the Scottsdale area, but now, thanks to social media, the Sloths are growing in popularity. They went on their first national tour last year.”

“Wow! And you played three years?”

“Uh-huh, I did. They were some of the best years of my life too. The Sloths gave me the second chance I never thought I’d have.”

“Because of your injuries?”

He nodded. “After I tore my rotator cuff, I was told by the doctors that my shoulder was one of the most messed up ones they’d ever seen. I didn’t have much cartilage left, and if I wanted to limit the number of problems I was going to have in the future, I had to give up playing baseball.

“At the time, it was one of the toughest decisions I ever had to make. I was nineteen and thought that the future was so far away. I couldn’t believe there wasn’t some surgery out there that could just fix me. It wasn’t until my dad took me to the UCLA Medical Center to see one of the top orthopedic surgeons in the country that the reality of the situation sank in.”

Gemma winced and placed a hand on his knee. “That must’ve been incredibly hard to overcome.”

She remembered being nineteen too, and how it felt to be so hopeful about making it big on the international stage.

She'd dreamed of becoming the British National Champion and going to the World Championships and Olympic Games.

Unfortunately, her jumps were too inconsistent, and she'd never had enough difficulty in her routines to compete with the younger girls who kept rising in the ranks. By the time she was twenty-two, she learned her future lay in performing, not winning medals.

"I was in a dark place for the first couple of months, but eventually, I just accepted it," Tim said.

"What helped you overcome it?"

"Comic books and my dad taking me on a long road trip. We had a *lot* of time and space to talk and reflect on life. I also learned how to meditate. It helped me to be able to clear out my mind when things got too heavy."

She adjusted the heat level on the pad. "Do you think you could teach me how to do that? I'm rubbish at trying to keep my mind empty."

"Of course. We can do it now if you want."

Gemma shook her head. "No, I need to hear the rest of your story first. I know it has a happy ending. Where do sloths fit into this?"

"Oh, the Sloths thing happened my senior year of college. I was heating up a cup of soup in the student union microwave when I saw a bright green flyer pinned to the corkboard, looking to recruit performers for a theatrical baseball team. The next thing I knew, I was filling out my contact info,

answering a couple questions over the phone, and by the time I graduated, I had a job as a designated hitter playing for the Sloths.”

“It sounds like a dream scenario.”

“It was, but there were certainly a lot of challenges that first year.” He shook his head. “Only half the guys the Sloths hired had any sort of baseball experience. The other half were all performers. It was trial by fire. We had to learn how to work together to develop the skills we were missing, and quickly. The performances started six weeks after our first practice.”

Gemma could sense that Tim was reliving the past. His hazel orbs were shimmering with excitement.

*Spending so much time with such a tight-knit group of people can either be a good thing or a bad thing. In Tim’s case, it’s all over his body language.*

“They became your best friends and a second family, didn’t they?”

He nodded. “They’re still the best friends I have.”

“I know the feeling.”

He shifted his gaze in her direction. “Dreams on Ice?”

“Mm-hmm. The year I joined DOI, the company was launching a new tour. All of us skaters got really close to one another.” She sighed. “Those first six months, we were one big happy family, but then we were told by management that they

wanted to expand, and skaters started getting moved around to different locations.”

“It was that way with the Sloths too. Some of the guys decided it wasn’t for them. Others didn’t think we were getting paid enough or just didn’t like living out of a suitcase. When I decided to leave, there were only five of the original twenty-eight left.”

“What convinced you to leave?”

“I just instinctually knew. I loved playing for the Sloths, but baseball didn’t seem like the most important thing to me anymore. There were other things I wanted to do with my life, like teach.”

Gemma soaked in the information. “I wish things would become clearer to me. I thought I was ready to hang up my tiara and join the real world, but this injury has thrown me off. I don’t know what I want anymore.”

Tim rubbed a few circles on her hand. “Give it time. From experience, it’s never good to make any decisions when emotions are raw and you’re still coming to terms with an injury. When you’re ready to make a choice, you’ll know.”

*Tim sounds so self-assured and confident. Will I really know, or is he just saying that?*

Gemma thought about the last twenty-four hours and how she’d gone from skating in front of a crowded arena one moment to sitting on a couch in a small California town less than a day later.



*I've always lived to perform. I've never wanted to do anything else or be anywhere other than on tour. But sitting here with Tim, just the two of us, feels so right. I wouldn't want to be anywhere else right now. Tim understands me. He sees me. He wants me.*

*I've never ever wanted to be with a guy more than I have with Tim. Does he want the same things I do? Does he see us as being more than just friends?*

# Chapter 12



Sometime later, still sitting on the couch, Gemma yawned and stretched. “Oh no, please don’t tell me I used you as a human pillow?” she squeaked.

Tim removed his glasses and put down his book. “Okay, I won’t.”

Covering her face with her hands, she shook her head. “I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to trap you. The heating pad felt so good, and I guess I was just so tired from traveling and . . .”

“Gemma, you don’t have to explain it. It’s fine. I could tell you’re exhausted. Plus, I *liked* it. You kind of remind me of a baby sloth. They’re super cuddly and rest on your chest just like you did.”

Gemma rubbed her eyes. “Baby sloths? Did your baseball team have a real sloth as a mascot?”

“I wish, that would’ve been awesome, but it also would probably have been illegal.” Reaching for his mobile, he unlocked the screen and opened the photo app. “No, the baby sloths I’m talking about live in Costa Rica. I taught English there for a year after I retired from the Sloths, and my host family helped rescue and rehabilitate them.”

“Was it part of your master plan to go to Costa Rica?”

“Not at all. Actually, I thought I’d end up somewhere like Portugal or Spain. I didn’t have a choice on where the English teaching agency sent me.”

Gemma took hold of the phone. Her heart wanted to melt at seeing the oversized eyes and cartoon-like expressions on the fuzzy baby sloth faces. “They’re so precious.”

“They really are. I miss them. The closest I can get to a sloth around here is by visiting the zoo.”

She returned his mobile to him. “What’s the strangest thing you learned about sloths?”

“Believe it or not, sloths only do their business once a week.”

Her eyes widened. “You’re joking.”

“Nope, definitely not.” He slid the mobile back into his pocket. “Sloths digest their food slowly. It’s something that they’ve evolved over millions of years to be able to do since a lot of the plants they eat are poisonous. Their stomachs have to be able to break down the toxins, and the result is a once-a-week poop.”

“Fascinating. I’m learning more about sloths than I ever thought I would. I can see why you love them so much. They’re kind of your spirit animal.”

“They are. Sloths do everything in their own time and in their own style.” Standing up, Tim stretched too. “It’s seven-thirty. Are you okay if we go out for dinner? If not, I understand. We can order some takeout and keep things low-

key. I just thought it might be nice if our first date was a little special.”

“Our first date,” she whispered. Her pulse quickened, and the butterflies in her stomach fluttered their wings. “It’s really happening. I wasn’t sure if you might be ready to take things to the next level. We haven’t had all that much time being with one another in person.”

“Just because we haven’t taken the traditional route to dating doesn’t mean anything to me.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “We text, talk, and video chat with one another every day. I think it’s safe to say we’re well into the friend zone. But I want more.” He swallowed hard. “I knew when we first met that you were special, and I’ve been waiting to spoil you for a long time Gemma-rella. I have the patience of a sloth.”

Gemma’s body warmed. “I guess that means we’re in the sloth zone, then? We’re doing things our own speed and style.”

“The sloth zone,” he mouthed. “I couldn’t have put it better myself.” His smile reached his eyes, highlighting the flecks of gold within his hazel eyes. “So, Gemma-rella, does this mean it’s a yes to going out for our first formal date?”

“Yes. It’s a yes.”

Tim fist pumped. “Let me show you how a princess should be treated.”

*Oh, Tim, you’re already spoiling me just being so sweet.*

\* \* \*

“Have you ever been to a classic American diner before?” Tim asked a half hour later as he parked the car in front of the Lucky Dog Diner.

“No. This is a first.”

The building’s brick walls were adorned with vintage soda-pop advertisements and contained cheerful hand-painted murals depicting scenes of life in Sequoia Valley. Her eyes, however, were drawn up to the roof, where a giant dachshund dog sat wearing a chef’s hat and a bow tie.

“This is one of my favorite places in the area. In the summer, they host weekly drive-in movies. The servers will skate out to the car to take your order, and bring you your food.”

“That sounds amazing. We have a few diners in the UK, but I’ve never been to one.” Gemma closed the car door and followed Tim to the entrance. “What is the story with the large dog?”

“That’s Zippy, the mascot of the place.” He held the doors open. “When the dinner opened in the forties, the real-life Zippy used to greet customers as they walked in. He’d wear a little hat and tie, just like the statue.”

“Is there still a Zippy?”

“I wish. The current owners have huskies. They don’t allow dogs inside unless they’re service animals.”

Entering the restaurant, Gemma was immediately enveloped by the scent of brewing coffee, sizzling bacon, and

freshly-baked pies. The air hummed with the lively chatter of customers seated at the counter facing the cook. Retro big-band music played softly in the background.

“Hey, Steve.” Tim waved hello to the chef who gestured for them to take a seat at one of the red vinyl booths in the back corner of the diner. Large windows looked out onto the darkened pine forest.

“This is my go-to place whenever I need some comfort food. The Lucky Dog has the best burgers, fries, hot dogs, and milkshakes. I used to come here as a kid every weekend with my dad after fishing on the lake.”

“I love that.”

“I know this might not have been what you were expecting, but this is me in a nutshell.” He handed her one of the laminated double-sided menus situated on the table by the ketchup and mustard. “If you don’t see anything you like, we can go to Millie’s Steakhouse or somewhere else.”

She placed a hand on top of his. “No. This place is perfect.” A few moments of silence elapsed between them as she stared at the menu. “Just remind me when I order to ask for fries instead of chips.”

“Um, sure...”

She giggled. “In the UK, chips are the equivalent of American fries. Last time I forgot, and I ended up with a plate of crisps, which are what you call potato chips.”

His eyes widened. “You learn something new every day. I’d always wondered why fish and chips are called fish and chips and not fish and fries.”

“Now you know,” she giggled, then scanned the menu one more time. “I’m debating between the traditional burger and onion rings or the fries.” She glanced over the top. “Which one would you go for?”

“You can’t go wrong with either. Everything is made from scratch.” Tim leaned back in the booth. “How about if we order one of each and split them?”

“You’re okay with having more carbs?”

“Uh-huh. One of the rules of being in the sloth zone is...”

“We do everything our own style,” Gemma finished.

“Exactly.”

“Then it’s a deal.”

Gemma watched as Tim waved to the chef again. He nodded and tapped a bell. A couple moments later, a server in a red-and-white checked uniform roller-skated over to their table. Gemma was impressed she was able to glide so effortlessly on the slick tile floor. “Welcome in, Tim and...”

“This is Gemma.”

“And Gemma. Can I get you guys started with drinks? Did you want your usual?”

“Actually, I think we’re ready to order.”

“Perfect.” She pulled a notebook and pencil from a red apron. “What will it be?”

“I’m changing it up on you. Tonight, I think I’ll have the cheeseburger, a Cherry Coke, and an order of fries,” he rattled off.

“And for you?”

Gemma glanced at the menu once more. “May I please have the All-American Burger with the onion rings?”

“Got it. And how do you guys want your meat?”

“Medium rare,” Tim said.

“Well done for me,” Gemma added.

“And your drink, Gemma?”

“Just water.”

Confirming their orders, the server promised she’d be back with their beverages momentarily and skated away.

“What’s your usual order?” Gemma inquired.

“When I splurge, it’s a piece of hot cherry cobbler topped with a scoop of homemade vanilla ice cream.”

She licked her lips. “That sounds much better than pumpkin pie.”

“It is,” he agreed. “The cobblers are popular. On the weekends, they’re gone before the lunch rush. People turn up as soon as the place opens to order whole pies.”

“What about food?”



“I like the hand-carved roast beef sandwich on sourdough, dipped in au jus, with a pickle and coleslaw on the side.”

She cocked her head sideways. “That’s oddly specific.”

He shrugged. “I’m a creature of habit. I know what I like. Why mess with success?”

“I can’t say that I blame you.”

“Do you have any favorite restaurants or food orders?”

Gemma thought about her small townhome near the city limits of Glasgow. “Not especially. There aren’t too many places to eat near my parents’ home except for the pub. Their food is average. I usually order curry, a wrap, or a steak and ale pie. I’ve been spoiled by traveling so much.”

“I can understand that.”

Gazing around the diner, she noticed there were a few black-and-white photos of celebrities adorning the walls, some vintage pinball games, a red-and-chrome jukebox, and a small open space.

“Curious. It looks like they’re missing a booth.”

“No. That’s the dance floor.”

“A dance floor?”

“Uh-huh. After dinner, we can test it out if you’re feeling up to it.”

She fidgeted. “I want to say yes, but…” Her eyes traveled to her lower body.

“You’re afraid to push it.”

She nodded. “Another rain check?”

“I’ll do you one better. We’ll go out dancing once you’re feeling better.”

Her lips twisted. “I’m dying to see some of your best dance moves.”

He rested an elbow on the table. “I’m not that good of a dancer.”

“Says the man who played for an exhibition baseball team. I bet you have a couple more moves than Charlie.”

*Although he has been taking some ballroom dance lessons.*

“I can do a decent box step, waltz, and swing dancing.”

The server returned with their drinks, placing the fizzing Coke in front of Tim and the icy water in front of Gemma. “Is there anything else I can get you two?”

“No, we’re good. Thanks, Selena,” Tim said.

As the waitress left, Gemma mused, “I can see why you’d choose a place like this. It’s cozy and just puts a smile on your face being here.”

Tim smiled. “Totally. This place has a lot of memories. It’s where my parents had their first date, and where I celebrated my high school graduation.”

“Your parents had their first date here?”

“Uh-huh.” He took a drink of his Coke. “I’m the third generation Lyons family member to live here. My grandparents moved here in the 1920s from LA. What about

your family? Have they moved around? Or are they all in one place still?”

“My family has lived in Glasgow for a couple generations. My great-great-grandparents are from an area of the Highlands near Fort William. It’s not too far from Ben Nevis, if you’re familiar with hiking.”

“That’s the tallest mountain in the UK?”

“It is.”

He ran a hand over his jaw. “I’m trying to come up with something else clever to say about Scotland, but I’m failing. All I can think about is that it’s the birthplace of golf, there’s a monster that lives in Loch Ness, and not to ask for haggis if I’m at a restaurant.”

“That’s better than most people. I’ll just have to fill in those gaps in knowledge, especially when it comes to Nessie.”

Tim raised an eyebrow. “Do you think the Loch Ness monster exists?”

“I do. The loch is deep and there is no way of knowing for certain all of its secrets. An ancient sea monster might just live in its murky depths.”

Tim laughed. “I believe you, and I agree. I think there’s a monster too. Humans know more about space than we do about the oceans and life under the sea. Amazing, isn’t it?”

“It is.”

They chatted a little more about the legend of the Loch Ness monster and the different sightings people had claimed to have had over the last century. When their food arrived, their conversation circled back to Gemma's plans.

"My calendar is wide open. The only things I have to make sure I fit in are my PT exercises and some quality girl time with Frankie and Leslie. How about you?"

"Weekdays, I'm free every day after four, except on Wednesdays—then it'll have to be after five-thirty. The weekends are fully open."

"What's on Wednesdays?"

"I coach junior baseball."

"Can I come to watch a practice?" Gemma asked.

"Sure, but I don't think you'd find it all that fun. My kids are eight and hitting on a tee."

"On the contrary, I think it would be a great way for me to observe and learn from a top coach."

"I'm flattered, but I'm just an average coach."

"Still, I'd like to come watch." Reaching for a chip, she glanced around the table. "No mayonnaise?"

"Why would you need mayo?" he asked quizzically.

"For my chips?" she said, gesturing to them.

"That's not a thing in the States."

They launched into a spirited debate over the merits of American fries versus British chips. His fun personality was a

breath of fresh air amid the uncertainty of the unknown. She knew that with Tim by her side, she'd never wallow in self-pity and he would always help her see the bright side of things. They said laughter was the best medicine of all, and she hoped in this case, it would help her ailing hip heal.

# Chapter 13



A few days later, Gemma rapped her knuckles against Tim's cabin door.

"It's open," his voice called out from inside. She turned the doorknob and let herself in. Tim stood in the kitchen, watering the last of his plants on the windowsill. "You're early. I didn't expect you until noon."

"I wanted us to maximize our time together."

He grinned. "Good to know you find me irresistible."

She rolled her eyes.

Putting down the blanket she'd borrowed from Frankie, she asked, "What's on the agenda for today?"

"It's a surprise."

"You're not even going to give me a hint about where we're heading?"

"It's somewhere on the coast."

She pouted. "That doesn't do me any good. California has a long coast."

Tim chuckled. "That's all I'm willing to say for now, except it's about a two-hour drive to our picnic spot. If you need to use the restroom, I'd do it now. Otherwise, you might be stuck having to use a bush on the side of the road."

“No, I wouldn’t,” she countered. “I’d wait until you found the nearest petrol station, even if it was quite a few kilometers away, and use its loo.”

Picking up his car keys from the nail by the door, he gestured to a wicker basket on the kitchen island. “Can you manage that?”

“Yes. It’s my hip that’s bad, not my arms.” She flexed her arm muscles. “See, this skater is strong.” He stared for a moment, causing her to suddenly second-guess herself.

He swallowed hard. “If you ever join me at a comic con, I think you’d make the perfect Captain Marvel.”

*Is he picturing me in a formfitting bodysuit? Because if he is, I’m okay with it. I work hard to stay strong and I’m proud of the work I’ve put in.*

“Is she a self-made superhero like Batman?”

“Most people would say no, but I say yes.” Tim wheeled a cooler behind him, locked the door, then opened the car doors. “Before she was a superhero, Captain Marvel, aka Carol Danvers, was an Air Force fighter pilot. Trust me when I say that speaks volumes about how talented she was just to get that far.”

“How did she gain her powers?” Gemma asked as they got in the car.

“She was caught in an explosion.”

“Uh-huh. And what are her superpowers? Does she fly?”

“Yes, among other things. Her main superpowers have to do with the ability to absorb and manipulate energy.”

“You had me at flying. That’s the one power I’ve always thought was the best. What about you? What would your power be if you weren’t a self-made hero kind of bloke?”

Tim backed the car out of the driveway and out onto the main road. “I’d want to be able to manipulate the weather or to breathe underwater. I wouldn’t want anything that’s too flashy.”

“You know, with the power over the weather, you’d also have the ability to wield thunder, lightning, hurricanes, and all of nature’s most powerful forces,” Gemma countered.

“Fair point.” His eyes crinkled. “In that case, I’d just be happy to make the sun appear at will.”

*That old saying is true. With great power comes great responsibility. Having a person like Tim be in control of a lot of power would be important. He’s not the kind of guy who’d abuse it. He’s humble and would only use a small amount of what he’s capable of. That’s exactly the type of person who should have power like that.*

Gemma couldn’t believe she was debating what made a good superhero. Tim pushed her to think outside the box.

“I have another question for you. What’s all this about comic cons? Do you go often?”

“Not as much as I’d like. I try to get to LA Comic Con during my spring break. If I’m lucky with the ticket lottery for



San Diego Comic Con during the summer, I'll go to that one too."

"What do you do at a comic con?"

"For me, the biggest draw is hanging out and attending panels with other people who like the same stuff I do—comics, anime, sci-fi films, et cetera. But there's other stuff like shopping, and costume contests too."

"Do you wear a costume?"

"Take a wild guess," Tim challenged.

She blinked slowly. "Of course you do."

"It makes the experience more fun. Why limit dressing up to Halloween?"

"What's your favorite character to portray?"

As Tim began to hum the *Batman* theme song, Gemma had her answer. She tried to picture what he might look like in a formfitting superhero costume.

*Batman is brilliant, but I think I'd prefer you as Captain America.*

\* \* \*

The landscape stayed relatively the same for the first forty-five minutes. They were still surrounded by dense forest. State Highway Three seemed to wind around the same mountain for miles and miles. The constant popping of Gemma's ears, however, told her that they'd changed elevation several times.

Then the trees began to thin out, and as the road descended, she spotted towering sand dunes and the beach. Pelicans, seagulls, and other seabirds circled overhead. Waves broke against the soft-looking white sand.

“I’m surprised there are no people on the beach.”

“The area we’re passing through now is all a protected part of the national seashore. There’s a lot of seabirds that can only nest here.”

“Got it, so no people allowed.” The water sparkled like turquoise jewels under the expanse of a clear blue sky. “I’m kind of glad. It’s beautiful to see what untouched land looks like.”

“Agreed. It reminds me a lot of Costa Rica.” Tim glanced over to his right. “We’re almost there.” He turned the minivan down an unmarked road surrounded on both sides by yet more trees. It bumped along until coming to a stop in a deserted clearing.

“Here we are!” He glanced at the clock. “Right on time too. The warmest part of the day is when they’re the most active.”

Gemma unlatched her seat belt. “When what’s active?”

“What we’ve come to see—monarch butterflies.” Climbing out of the car, he rubbed his hands against his forearms. “We’ll come back for the picnic supplies. For now, all you’ll need is your jacket.”

Her heart dropped, and she swallowed hard. They were going hiking? Would she be able to keep up with him? Why hadn't she asked what they were doing beforehand? It was her own fault. Now, all she could do was hope that the trail wouldn't be too steep.

“Um, Tim... how far are we going?”

“Not far, maybe a half mile.”

“Uh...” She chewed on her lower lip.

“Don't worry, I thought about it. The part of the path we're taking is all flat,” he reassured her. His eyes locked with hers. “We can take it as slow as a sloth, if you'd like. If it's too much for you, I can give you a piggyback ride.”

“I think I can manage.”

“If your hip starts to ache, will you let me know?”

She nodded.

“Pinky promise?”

She exhaled. “Pinky promise.”

They took a slow, cautious pace over the dirt path. The scent of fresh pine and mud overpowered them. Between the trees, rays from the sun warmed her cheeks. In the distance, she could hear the trickle of water.

“Where are we?”

“The Pacific Cove State Lookout area. This part of the park is an estuary. Think of it as the transition or buffer zone

between the beach and the mountains. Where the mouth of the Sequoia Valley River meets the Pacific Ocean.”

“I love the way you explain things.”

“I have a *little* experience with putting things into layman’s terms.” He chuckled.

“And you said that we’re here for butterflies?” she asked. “Is there an open field where they all gather? It looks like a lot of tall grass and trees to me.”

“Nope, but good guess.” He didn’t elaborate, and Gemma knew that he was waiting to surprise her.

They walked another few minutes in silence. Tim’s eyes scanned the tops of the pine, eucalyptus, and cypress trees. “Aha, got you,” he muttered under his breath.

They stopped walking. She glanced at the top of the tree, wondering what he’d seen.

“Okay, bear with me here. Do you see that long orange-and-white thing that resembles a party streamer?”

Gemma stared at the tree. She saw leaves, branches, but no streamer. “No.”

Taking hold of her hand, Tim gently repositioned her to where he stood. From around his neck, he removed a pair of binoculars. “Look again and try these. I forgot I had them on. They’re nestled near the top. There’s about three or four hundred of them.”

He pointed to a long, flowing ribbon-like structure. Pressing the binoculars against her nose, she gasped. “Are those . . .”

“Monarch butterflies. Beautiful, aren’t they?”

There were indeed hundreds and hundreds of butterflies with black, orange, and white markings clumped together. She’d discounted them a moment ago as a branch, but now that she was able to get an up-close look at them, there was no mistaking them for being a part of a tree.

“They migrate and go dormant here for the winter. The trees along the coast have the perfect shelter from the cold, and any storms or rain.”

Gemma’s hands twitched. “Can we get closer?”

“Yes. Just as long as we stay on the path. We don’t want to disturb them.”

Their voices grew to a soft whisper as they stepped carefully, mindful of any flying insects that might be resting on the ground. Tim pointed out more groupings of butterflies as they approached one of the trees they favored.

This area of the path was bathed in a patch of warm sunlight. Gemma’s eyes widened with wonder. She felt like she had stepped into an enchanted forest. The butterflies around her were more active and seemed to dance around her. She reached out her hand, and a monarch butterfly landed on her palm, its tiny legs tickling her skin. She watched, mesmerized, as it flapped its wings.

Looking up at Tim through her eyelashes, she watched as he held his arm out in front of him. No less than twenty butterflies flocked to him.

“Sugar water,” he whispered. “It’s the closest thing I have to nectar. Do you want some too?”

“No. I’m happy to just watch.”

Gemma felt a growing connection with Tim. The beauty of the moment intensified her desire to bridge the gap between them and kiss him. She’d been itching to since the night they’d had dinner at the Lucky Dog Diner. She’d searched long and hard for a man worthy of her affections, and it seemed that at long last, she might have found him.

Tim wasn’t a guy who would brush her off. He was a guy who’d take an active role in their relationship. Everything they’d done together had confirmed to her that he was a man who she could see herself with long-term.

Like a butterfly emerging from a chrysalis, Gemma instinctually knew that Sequoia Valley was where she wanted to begin the next phase of her life. Her relationship with Tim was still so new and growing, but she *wanted* to give it every possible chance at succeeding. She *wanted* to be by his side, and not hundreds or maybe even thousands of kilometers away in a long-distance relationship.

*Tim told me that I would know when I knew I was ready to leave DOI. Once again, he wasn’t wrong. Skating just doesn’t seem as important to me as being near him right now. My head is telling me we still need more time to get to know each other,*

*but my heart is screaming at me to throw caution to the wind and live in the moment. What do I do? Should I listen to my heart or to my head?*

“Gemma?”

“Hmm?”

Tim shook his arms, and the butterflies took flight. “You look like a nature sprite,” he said, licking his lips. Their eyes locked. She realized his were wide with lust. He *wanted* her.

“At home, we’d call that a fae.”

Gemma’s pulse took off like the speed of a hummingbird’s wings, beating several hundred times a minute. She nodded at him, and the butterfly on her hand took flight. She carefully closed the distance between them. Their bodies were pressed close to one another now. Heat rolled off him.

Turning her head to the side, Gemma granted Tim access to her neck. Slowly, he planted a soft trail of kisses leading up to her mouth. The stubble of his facial hair rubbed against the tender skin of her cheeks.

“You’re so beautiful,” he whispered. Moving her hair out from around her face, he traced her lips with his thumb. “I’m going to kiss you just like the butterflies here drink nectar from a wildflower.”

True to his word, his lips brushed against hers, and alone in the estuary, with the company of several hundred butterflies, they kissed.

# Chapter 14



The remainder of the weekend passed all too quickly for Gemma, and before she knew it, it was Monday again. She lamented that Tim was back at work. She could still feel the way he had held her and feel the warmth of his kiss upon her lips.

“Which date are you reliving?” Frankie teased, joining Gemma at the kitchen island with a cup of green tea.

“The butterfly picnic.” She smiled into her cup of coffee and took a long drink.

Frankie sighed. “I have to hand it to Tim. He’s a genius at coming up with unique dates.”

Charlie huffed as he opened the fridge and pulled out a protein shake. “And I’m not?”

The two friends exchanged glances.

“You are in your own way,” Frankie said diplomatically. “You took me hiking and to Millie’s Steakhouse. Those were places that were special to you. I love that. It allowed me to see your sparkling personality and into your heart.”

“That’s better.” Charlie was still frowning. “You know, Frankie, I was thinking... we’ve been training really hard. How would you like to take a day off Wednesday to go out on



a romantic boat ride on Lake Wakahanra, or we could do something like go horseback riding?”

Frankie perked up with interest. “Do you mean that, Charlie?”

“Yup. In fact, why should we wait until Wednesday? Let’s go tomorrow. There’s a ranch on the far side of the lake that does half-day rentals. I’ll give them a call now and see if we can reserve two horses.”

Gemma and Frankie giggled as he disappeared into his man cave.

“Charlie is so adorable when he’s jealous. I would’ve said something about Tim earlier if I’d known it meant he would take me horseback riding.”

“Now you know.”

They giggled again.

“You look so happy, Gem. I’m thrilled things are going well with Tim. Does this mean you’re going to pass up *Cupid’s Arrow* if they call you again? You’re supposed to hear back from the producers soon if you make it, right?”

“They said around Thanksgiving if I was successful.” Gemma wrinkled her nose. “That’s still more than a week and a half away. I’m not going to even worry about it because we both know it’s not going to happen.” Changing the subject, she asked, “What time are you guys heading back to the rink for your second training session today?”

“Not until one. We both figured that having a midmorning break in the schedule is the best way for us to unwind. We need time to do things outside of skating and coaching. The morning gets eaten up by the gym, coaching, and our first training session. By the time we get home at six, all we have time for is dinner, a shower, and bed.”

Gemma nodded in understanding.

“We miss you around the rink. Just because you’re not supposed to skate doesn’t mean you can’t come and hang out. The kids, especially Richelle, have been asking about you.”

She gripped her mug of hot chocolate tightly. “I’d love to see the kids, but I still need a little bit more time and space. Maybe next week.”

“After your visit with Dr. Zhang?” Frankie asked, lowering her voice.

Gemma nodded. “I had a scan done this morning, and now it’s just a waiting game until I see him this afternoon.”

“Why did you decide to pick him as your doctor?”

“A gut instinct. He seems like a person who I can trust and knows a lot about figure skaters.”

“Uh huh. Dr. Zhang is one of the good ones.” Frankie agreed. “How is your hip feeling? Better without the skating?”

“It’s better, but still achy. What’s frustrating is that I’ll wake up some mornings and feel like a million pounds, but then out of nowhere, it’ll start to hurt again with a vengeance. It’s so unpredictable.”

Her bestie looked at her with sympathy. “Hopefully we’ll have some answers soon. When Dad was recovering from his hip surgery, he found that hot baths made a huge difference.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

Charlie reentered the room with a cocky swagger in his step. “I snagged the last pair of horses. We’re all set for tomorrow.”

Frankie smiled as she walked over and kissed him. “Thank you.”

*I wonder what Tim’s up to right now. Is he sitting at his desk munching on his lunch? Reading a comic book? He mentioned he had big plans for us this weekend. How can he possibly top the butterflies?*

Gemma pictured herself standing under the canopy of trees again with Tim’s strong arms wrapped around her.

“Earth to Gemma...” Charlie cleared his throat.

“Er... yes?”

“Suzy just sent a text over reminding Charlie to find out if you wanted to join us for Thanksgiving,” Frankie said, resting her head on his chest.

“Oh, I’m invited?”

Frankie’s eyes widened. “Gem, why would you even think you wouldn’t be invited to join us?”

“I’d hoped I was, but I didn’t want to assume. It’s your first Thanksgiving being with Charlie and your dad with

Suzy.” Her body warmed. “What if you wanted it to only be family?”

“Gem, you *are* family.”

“Ditto to what Frankie said. You’re just as much a sister to me as Leslie,” Charlie told her. “Nan would be insulted if you didn’t show up to dinner. She loves you.”

“And so does my dad,” Frankie added.

“As long as you’re sure, it’s a yes from me.”

*Sequoia Valley is where my second family is. Maybe I should consider looking at a couple places to rent. It couldn’t hurt.*

\* \* \*

Around two, Gemma ordered a car service and was dropped off in the car park of a nondescript-looking concrete office building. Unless a person looked closely, it was difficult to tell that it was the headquarters of the Jasper Ridge Jaguars pro hockey team. While the car park was filled with high-end vehicles, the exterior of the building was labeled as Lake Wakahanra Business Park.

Entering the building’s lobby, Gemma spotted the team’s logo, a fierce orange jaguar jumping out of a circle with a hockey stick in its mouth, painted on the wall behind a reception desk manned by two security officers.

“Can I help you?” one of the officers asked.

She shifted her handbag from one shoulder to the other. “Hi. I’m Gemma MacLeod. I’m here to meet with Dr. Zhang at two-fifteen.”

“Do you have your ID with you?”

“Um, no. I didn’t think I’d need my passport.” She blinked twice. “I have a photo of it on my mobile. Will that do?”

The security officer stared at his computer screen and typed in a few things. “If that’s all you have, I guess we don’t have much of a choice.”

Gemma located the photo of her passport, passed her mobile to them, and answered a few other questions. She was issued a temporary visitor’s badge.

“Dr. Zhang’s office is on the fourth floor, suite number 405. Keep this visible at all times and don’t forget to turn it in when you depart.”

She thanked them, stepped into the lift, and pressed the button for four.

A few moments later, Dr. Zhang greeted her at the lift’s exit. “Gemma, nice to see you again. The front desk just buzzed me that you were here.”

“Hi, Dr. Zhang, the feeling is mutual. Thanks for fitting me in.”

“I’m happy to help.”

“The Jaguars certainly take security seriously.” She laughed nervously.

“When you’re owned by a family of billionaires, unfortunately, it’s a necessary evil.” He ushered her inside a room filled with all different types of top-of-the-line gym and medical equipment.

“Billionaires?” she sputtered.

“Yes, the Nunez family operates all their businesses out of the building. Off the top of my head, the two largest companies in their portfolio are SearchTube and the airline they just acquired, Pacific Skyways.”

*I guess when you own a huge tech firm, an airline, and a pro sports team, everybody might want a piece of you.*

Dr. Zhang sat behind a large desk and gestured for her to do the same on the other side. “How are you doing?”

“I’m hanging in there.” Gemma shrugged. “Since I haven’t been skating, when I wake up in the morning, the deep ache that’s been bothering me for the last couple of months has lessened. The shooting pains are also less frequent.”

“Excellent.” He took a few notes. “How many hours a week were you skating until you stopped? And what off-ice activities have you been doing?”

“It varies depending on how many shows we have, but I skate anywhere from four to six hours a day. Off-ice, I usually do jump rope, the elliptical, or cycling on the stationary bike for warm-up and cardio. For strength training, I do some weight training and Pilates. This last week, however, all I’ve done is go out on some walks and some stretching. Oh, and

I've made sure that I'm doing the exercises the company PT gave me too."

"Are those the ones you emailed me on Friday?"

"Yes."

"Good, good." Dr. Zhang made another note. "I have your medical file and the results of your latest MRI. I'd like to run through a quick examination of my own on the joint before we go over everything. Does that sound okay?"

"Absolutely."

Dr. Zhang asked her to demonstrate a few different exercises that revealed how much range of motion and strength she had in her leg, then he palpated the area. He was quick and efficient. A couple minutes later, she was once again seated at his desk.

"I can tell that a lot of the ligaments in and around the acetabulum, which is the fancy name for the hip bone, have been overused for a long time. Based on your history and my own examination, I'd say that having some time off from all the activity has been beneficial."

"The original diagnosis was tendonitis," Gemma offered.

"I agree that you may have had some tendonitis of the hip flexors early on, but it's secondary to the other issue going on inside your hip." Dr. Zhang loaded a black-and-white image on a tablet. "This is the MRI of your good hip." He zoomed in. "This area here, where the head of the femur meets the

acetabulum, is where we have what's called the labrum. It's a ligament that acts like a cushion between the two bones."

"Uh-huh."

"When we change and look at the image of your right side, you can see that we have all sorts of fraying." He enlarged the image. "Have you ever experienced a sensation where your hip didn't feel stable?"

Gemma nodded. "Yes, it used to happen every once in a while on jumps, but lately, it's been more frequent."

"That would be because the labrum is torn."

She inhaled sharply. "Torn?"

"I'm afraid so." Dr. Zhang folded his hands together. "Gemma, what you need to know is this is a relatively-common injury for figure skaters and hockey players. I've seen quite a few in my career. The good news is that, one, it's repairable with surgery, and two, you don't have a complete tear."

"Surgery?" Her fingers coiled tightly around the arm of the chair. "Are there any non-surgical options?"

"That depends entirely on what your long-term plans are."

"I'd like to be able to get back on the ice, coach, and continue to have an active lifestyle."

He nodded. "Those are all extremely realistic with both types of treatment available to you."

"And what are those options?"



“If you went the non-surgical route, we’d focus on treating the symptoms of your injury. I’d have you continue with physical therapy to continue to strengthen the muscles around the hip and recommend a few more weeks of rest.”

“Would I be able to skate again?”

“Yes, but not at the same pre-injury level. The labrum is a ligament that doesn’t heal on its own. You would still experience instability. Also, standing for prolonged periods of time on your feet, or in your case, skates, will continue to be painful.”

“And if I had surgery?”

“I’d go in and repair the ligament. After a few months of recovery, there is a high probability you’d have a normal hip. As with everything else in life, there is a small chance of complications, but based on your age and you being in excellent physical shape, it’s my professional opinion that any complications are slim.”

“This is a lot of information to digest.” Gemma swallowed hard. Her mind was whirling with the news of the torn ligament and trying to process all of the facts.

“What questions do you have for me?” Dr. Zhang asked.

“Let’s say I did elect to have the procedure. How does it work?”

“The surgery is done by arthroscope. I make a few small incisions about the width of a pencil around your hip and tie the frayed parts of the ligament back together. These days, it’s

an outpatient procedure. Patients walk out of here on the same day they check in to go home.”

“Oh, that’s brilliant. One of my major worries was that I’d have to be on bed rest.”

“Sometimes patients do, but it depends on the extent of their injury. For example, you don’t have a full tear, so you wouldn’t need me to resurface the joint.”

Gemma resisted the urge to cringe. Resurfacing a joint sounded horrid. “What’s the total recovery time?”

“Bodies all heal at different rates. On average, however, it tends to take about three to four months to be back to full activity. Patients start with six weeks of PT, three times a week, and adjust accordingly. You could be on the ice in as little as a month if you’re hoping to coach as you recover. Of course, that would be no jumps, spins, or anything risky until I fully clear you.”

Gemma’s eyes widened. “I’d be a model patient.”

“I’m not worried about you. Unlike my hockey players, figure skaters are more patient.” Dr. Zhang chuckled. “They understand that recovery can’t be rushed.”

Her eyes darted over the side-by-side images of her bad hip and her healthy hip. It was amazing that something that looked like a stretched-out hair tie could affect her so much. Turning back to Dr. Zhang, she asked, “Which of the two options would you recommend for me?”

“You’re more physically active and have higher stress loads on the hip than the average person. Based on our chat, I’d recommend a surgical repair.”

Sensing her anxiety, he quickly added, “Take your time when you’re making a choice. Remember, you can always begin with the nonsurgical option and change your mind at a later date. However, if the surgery is something you decide to do, I’d highly recommend you consider doing it sooner rather than later.”

*When Mel first gave me the news to take time off, two weeks felt like the end of the world, but now, I can understand that in the grand scheme of things, two weeks is nothing. There are so many different factors to consider. I don’t want to do all this hard work to rehab and injure myself again in the future. But I still don’t know about having surgery.*

“Thank you, Dr. Zhang. I think I need a few days before I decide how I want to handle all this.”

“Of course. I don’t blame you.”

“When do you think I’ll be able to start skating again?”

“I’d like to see you off the ice another one to two weeks. Rest seems to be working well for you, but there is still a large amount of inflammation. Why don’t we schedule a follow-up right before you leave town?”

“Sure.”

Originally, Gemma hadn’t decided how long she would stay in town, but now that decision had been made for her.

They agreed on a date and Gemma promised she'd let him know if any additional questions came to mind.

As she walked out the doors of Dr. Zhang's office, she was faced with a harsh reality. She had hoped that the news would be positive, but her injury wasn't just tendonitis. It was a torn ligament, and the only way to guarantee a fix was surgery.

*Whatever my next step is going to be will decide my future.  
Where do I go from here?*

# Chapter 15



“You can just drop me off here,” Gemma said as the car entered the downtown area of Sequoia Valley.

She muttered a word of thanks as she climbed out, and her gaze locked onto the window of a shop filled with brightly-colored comic books and cardboard cutouts of superheroes. Before she knew exactly what she was doing, she’d entered The Caped Crusader’s Corner. A bell chimed.

“I’ll be right with you,” a man’s voice called out from behind a black curtain.

“Okay,” she replied.

Taking a moment to figure out what she’d say to the clerk, she glanced at her surroundings. The shop was definitely a place where Tim would feel at home. Each wall was covered in floor-to-ceiling shelving, but to Gemma’s surprise, there weren’t only comic books. There were also a number of rare vintage toys, stuffed animals, and DVDs, and a small coffee bar was set up in the corner. A handwritten sign indicated that drinks were free, but donations were appreciated.

“How curious,” she mumbled to herself as she felt something warm rubbing against her legs. Glancing downward, she spied a black-and-white tuxedo cat studying

her with large yellow eyes. Its fur was long. Its tail wagged side to side, like an excited puppy.

“Hello...” She glanced at the collar. “Ivy. That’s a very pretty name.” On cue, Ivy began to purr and butt her head against Gemma’s hand. “Aren’t you a friendly feline.”

“Ivy? How did you get in here?” said a man with salt-and-pepper hair, thin wire-rimmed glasses, and a blue striped shirt, his hands on his hips. Gemma stood and brushed the stray cat hairs off her jeans. “You’re supposed to be napping in the back, not exploring the front where you can knock things over.”

Blinking slowly, Ivy arched her back, scratched the carpet, and hopped up onto the glass counter next to the register. She tucked her paws in as if to say, “I know I’m not. But I’d like to see you try and get rid of me now that I’m here.”

The man sighed. “All my life I’ve been a dog man. Then, two years ago, I let my wife talk me into getting a cat and now Ivy runs our lives.” He absently scratched the cat’s head.

“She’s lovely.”

“She is. My wife and I can’t help but spoil her. She’s the daughter we never had.” Gemma and the man stared at Ivy for another moment before he turned his attention to her. “I’m sorry about not being here when you walked in. How can I help you today? Is there anything in particular you’re looking for?”

“I’m not sure. I saw the shop and thought it could help me take my mind off some things.” Gemma scratched her forehead. “The, uh, bloke I’m dating loves comics and said they’re the best way to escape the world. I think I’d like to see if I can find a series I’d be interested in reading. And maybe something special for him too.” She stared at the packed shelves. “I have no idea what he already owns, or where to even start.”

“I can try and offer you a little guidance.” The man adjusted his glasses. “I’m not as up to date with the new comics these days, but I’m well versed in the classics like Superman and the X-Men.”

“Your secret is safe with me.”

“Let’s take care of you first. What types of tropes do you enjoy reading about?”

“For tropes, my favorite stories are romances with enemies to lovers, secret identities, or grumpy and sunshine couples, but I don’t think that would be of much help with finding a comic book.”

“You’d be surprised.” The owner chuckled. “I find that asking a person about what tropes they enjoy is more effective than asking what types of characters they like.” Walking along the rows, they stopped in front of a section of books that were thicker than an average comic book. “Have you ever read any of the Sailor Moon manga?”

Gemma shook her head. “No, but I’ve heard of it.”

“Let’s try this one and oh . . . this one.” Staring at the shelf a moment longer, he added one more to her pile. “Those should tick the enemies-to-lovers and secret-identity boxes. Now to see about a grumpy-sunshine book.”

Following him around the store, Gemma couldn’t believe how many different titles they stocked. It seemed that they carried just as many as a traditional bookstore. It wasn’t long before she had a stack of eight titles.

“Your boyfriend might be a little trickier. You said he’s a collector?”

“Yes, he’s a fan of anything featuring self-made heroes, but Batman tops his list.” Gemma’s cheeks burned. “You don’t happen to know if there’s a sloth character, do you?”

The man lit up. “A sloth?”

“Uh-huh, my boyfriend also has a fondness for them.”

“That wouldn’t be Timmy would it?”

“Oh, yes. It would.”

“He’s one of my best customers. No sloths, but there’s a villain who’s named Penguin in the Batman series.” The man opened a glass case and ran his finger over a few books kept in plastic sleeves. “This comic is the first issue he appears in.”

He handed it to her. “December 1941? I hadn’t realized the series dated back that far.”

“Yes, off the top of my head, I think May 1939 was the first printing.”



For something so old, the colors on the comic appeared to still be bright and vibrant. The paper was pristine, and there were only a few creases on it. Her eyes bulged, however, upon seeing the orange price tag on the corner of the plastic sleeve. “Nine thousand dollars?” With two hands, she carefully set it on the shelf and took a step back.

“That’s the same reaction I had when my nephew explained the value of certain issues to me. We have a few Superman and Spiderman comics that are worth just as much.” The man’s eyes crinkled in amusement. “I can’t say I understand it, but he’s the one who stays up to date with the market and pricing. If it were up to me, I’d say these books are supposed to be enjoyed, not stay in plastic their entire lives.”

“I agree with you.” Gemma nodded. “Do you, er... have any more reasonably-priced Batman books you’d recommend, or another series?”

The man stroked his chin. “I’ll see what I can find, especially if it’s for Timmy. Somebody just came by and donated a bunch of comics that were sitting in their attic this morning. Give me a few minutes to go through what’s inside.”

“Take your time.”

“Help yourself to some coffee.” He disappeared behind the curtain.

Gemma sat in one of the oversized chairs in the corner of the shop, cracked open the top book in her stack, and began to skim through the pages. She became so engrossed in the reading that when the man returned, he startled her.

“It’s easy to get lost in a good story. I’m glad you found something that piqued your interest. Feel free to leave the ones that don’t appeal to you here and I’ll restock them later.” He gestured to the counter. “I managed to find something special. Here, have a look. If you think Tim will enjoy it, I’d be happy to give it to you free of charge.”

“Free?”

“Yes,” he confirmed. “The comics aren’t in our inventory, and if they’re going to the home of a comic lover, I’m sure my nephew wouldn’t mind.”

“Oh my goodness, thank you so much.” She shot him a bright smile. “I don’t know what to say.”

The man walked behind the counter. “Just tell that boyfriend of yours to come on down to the shop with you again soon. It’s been too long since we’ve had a good chat.”

“I will, and I’d still like to buy all of these. I can see myself enjoying each one for a different reason.”

“Of course.” The man rang her up and placed the items into a paper bag.

“Thank you so much again for everything today... er, what’s your name?”

“I’m Hank.”

Her lips twitched as they shook hands. “Gemma. Nice to meet you.”

In the distance, she heard a woman's voice call out to him. Hank sighed. "Looks like my wife needs some help. Is there anything else you need?"

She assured him she didn't and waved goodbye to Hank and Ivy, her spirits much improved.

\* \* \*

An hour later, she got a text from Tim.

**Tim:** Hey, Gemma-rella. How did the big appointment go?

**Gemma:** So-so.

**Tim:** That sounds ominous.

**Gemma:** It's a torn labrum.

**Tim:** \*Sad face emoji\* I'm so sorry. How are you doing?

**Gemma:** I was upset earlier, but I'm a little more settled now.

**Tim:** Anything I can do to help or make you feel better?

**Gemma:** Seeing you would help. Would you mind if we met up later?

**Tim:** How about now?

**Gemma:** I thought you had a teacher's meeting and a special baseball camp.

**Tim:** We just finished the meeting. Camp doesn't start until five. You could even stay and watch tonight if you were serious about wanting to see what practices with the team look like. We can go out for a late dinner after.

**Gemma:** I'd like that.

**Tim:** Where are you now? I can come pick you up.

**Gemma:** Norma's in downtown.

**Tim:** I'll be there in five.

**Gemma:** Do you want a coffee as your reward?

**Tim:** Please and thank you.

**Gemma:** An almond milk caramel macchiato with an extra espresso shot?

**Tim:** \*Thumbs up emoji\*

**Gemma:** I'll see you soon.

\* \* \*

“The grand tour of the elementary school grounds concludes with the pièce de résistance: the playground, basketball courts, and baseball field.” Tim gestured to the open grassy area.

“It's so different to see it during the daytime. Are all American elementary schools so big?”

“By this school district's standards, Sequoia Valley Elementary is small. It's one of the reasons they've decided to move the sixth graders to the new middle school next year.” He sighed. “We got the confirmation at the meeting today.”

Gemma's face fell. “Tim, I'm so sorry. I knew how much you were hoping you could stay here.”

“It sucks, but everybody could see it was coming. I'd hoped the school board would listen to what we teachers had

to say, but everything we do seems to fall on deaf ears.” He placed his hands in his pockets. “Anyway, that’s *not* something we need to delve into. Tell me about *you*. What are you thinking and feeling?”

“I’m confused and I’m scared.”

“About?”

“Do I take the surgery route? Or the non-surgery route? Do I contact Dreams on Ice and fill them in on what’s going on? Or do I just wait it out? They still haven’t offered me a contract for next year. Then there’s the question of if I’m even ready to retire. I *thought* I’d decided, but now I’m second-guessing everything.”

“That is a lot,” Tim said matter-of-factly. They walked over to one of the picnic tables and sat down. “From my own experience, you’ll be doing a lot of second-guessing for the foreseeable future.”

She sighed tiredly. “How did you know surgery was right for you?”

“With the rotator cuff, I didn’t have a choice. My shoulder kept popping in and out of its socket. I needed the operation to stabilize the joint. The Tommy John surgery was a little different. I didn’t have to have it. I was told that with the damage to my shoulder, my baseball days were significantly numbered no matter what I did.”

He drew a circle on the lid of his coffee cup and stared at it. “But teenaged me naively thought the doctors had no idea

what they were talking about. I firmly believed I could be one of those rare exceptions to the rules. A medical marvel. I elected to go ahead with the UCL repair so I could give myself every possible chance of playing again.”

“Do you regret it?”

“No.” He met her eyes. “I tried and I failed. I would’ve been upset with myself if I’d just given up. It made it much easier to be at peace with everything in the end.”

“I think that’s where my heart is too. As terrified as I am with the idea of having an operation, I’m more frightened that I’d never be able to skate again if the injury became worse. Like you, I want to give myself every possible chance to prolong my skating career.”

“It sounds like you’ve got your head wrapped around the treatment for your hip.”

“I guess I do.” She crossed her right leg over her left. “What do you think I should do about DOI? Do I tell them or not?”

Tim took another sip of coffee. “I think that you should be the one who tells the catcher which pitch to call.”

“Which means?”

“You should be the only one who gets to decide your future. If I were in your skates, I’d start by following up on that contract, then meditate and figure out what is going to make you most happy in the long run. I’d caution you not to ask too much advice from your friends or family. They’ll

always keep your best interest at heart by offering you their two cents, but in the end, *you* need to be the one who's happy with whatever the outcome is going to be. It's *your* happiness. *Your* livelihood. *Your* future. Not anyone else's. Having the words and opinions of others in your mind can emotionally influence you."

"That's a harsh assessment, don't you think?" She blinked in surprise.

"Yes, it is. It *is* harsh, but it's exactly what I would've wanted somebody to tell me if I were able to go back in time."

Her lips twitched. Tim was being his open and honest self with her. She understood that he said exactly what he thought out of a place of concern and care for her. He didn't want her to make a decision that she'd regret. He wanted to ensure that she'd be *happy* in the long-term. Everything he did was with her in mind.

*Hearing you say something like this makes me fall even harder for you.*

She finished her coffee, and aimed and tossed it into the rubbish bin.

"Nice shot." He applauded.

"Do you mind if I have a go on the swings? It's been ages since I played on a set."

"Anything the princess wishes." He linked his arm through hers, and they strolled over to the sandbox and swings. Tim bowed. "Milady."

Giggling, she kicked off her flip-flops, and walked over to the nearest swing. Her feet sunk into the ground as she did so. Tim copied her, removing his own dress shoes and socks, and rolling up the legs of his trousers.

Moving behind Gemma, he wrapped his arms around her waist, gently pulled the swing back, and pushed her forward. A rush of air tickled her face as she glided forward and back. The metal of the chains creaked.

“Would you like to go a little higher?”

“Yes, please!”

Tim’s hands touched her waist and propelled her to her heights. As she sat on the swing, everything felt so carefree. She was weightless and as close to being able to fly as a superhero. Her heart soared, and in that moment, Gemma knew she was developing feelings for Tim that were deeper than anything she’d felt or experienced before.



# Chapter 16



The week flew by, and on Saturday morning, Gemma was shocked when Tim announced with a gleeful grin that he was taking them to Fresno for the day. They'd gotten an extra early start on the road, and it was nearing seven forty-five in the morning.

“And what are we going to find in Fresno this weekend?” She'd only ever passed through the city as a passenger at the airport. There hadn't really been any reason to explore the city. Until now.

“There are two things—sloths and more sloths.” Tim glanced at her, and then his body shook with laughter. “You look so confused.”

“Where are we going to find sloths in Fresno?”

As the car turned the corner, a sign welcomed them to the Fresno Zoo. Everything suddenly clicked.

“Oh, of course! The zoo!”

They shared a laugh.

A few minutes later, Tim laced his fingers through hers and they strolled up to the ticket booth.

Leaning casually against the window, Tim said, “Hello. We're here to check in for the...” He lowered his voice so she

couldn't hear.

“Got it. What's the last name?”

“Lyons. Party of two.”

The worker in the booth pulled up the reservation and printed the tickets. “Here you go. Just wear the badge on the outside of your shirt. Your guide this morning is Judy.”

“Thanks,” he said.

Peeling the backing off the sticker, Gemma stuck it onto her blue jumper. After having their tickets scanned, they lingered near the entrance. She could smell the strong scent of something fishy and heard the barking of a group of excited, playful sea lions.

She tugged on Tim's hand. “Can we start with the sea lions?”

“After the behind-the-scenes tour, yes.”

Her heart pounded wildly. He had done it *again*. “Tim, you didn't. You've already spoiled me to death.”

“I did. The best way to see the zoo when we're on a tight schedule is with a tour. Plus, we won't have to deal with all the families that'll bombard the place once it opens. It *is* Saturday. The zoo is like the number-one place families with overly-energetic kids go.”

He had valid points. Rising up onto her toes, she leaned forward and pecked him on the cheek. “Thank you.”

He sighed contentedly and rubbed the spot she'd just kissed. "A guy could get used to this."

As they looked over a map of the zoo, Gemma made mental notes of everything she wanted to circle back to once their time with the tour guide was over—elephants, sea lions, giraffes, kangaroos, and of course, the sloth.

A woman in her mid-forties wearing a khaki-colored jacket, trousers, and button-up shirt approached. "Hi, guys. I'm Judy. You two must be my visitors this morning. If you follow me over to the golf cart, I'll take you around back to a couple places the public doesn't normally get to see. Since the sea lions are barking up a storm, we'll start with them."

"Is it just the two of us?" Gemma glanced around her, but there was no one else.

"It's weird; normally Saturdays have full groups, but today we don't." Judy shrugged. "It just must be your lucky day."

"Brilliant." Gemma grinned.

Looking at Tim, he didn't appear at all surprised by Judy's words. She wondered if he'd somehow arranged the tour this way, or if it really was by fate's own design that they were alone. Either way, she didn't question it and happily scooted in close to Tim on the back of the golf cart.

\* \* \*

Over the course of the morning, Gemma and Tim tossed fish to the herd of greedy sea lions, looked in at the baby tiger cubs

inside the zoo's nursery, and fed heads of lettuce to the Masai giraffes.

Inside the tropical forest enclosure, the humidity of the air rose sharply. The lens on her mobile's camera fogged up. It was like walking into a sauna room. Judy took them to the off-exhibit area, and Gemma was surprised to see that it was just as large as the public viewing area.

"We have two-toed sloths here at the zoo. This enclosure is home to a fella named Roger. He's about four years old."

Tim rubbed his hands together. "I'm dying to meet him."

Judy unlocked the enclosure and signaled for them to follow her in quickly. "I don't blame you; he's a special animal."

The room was filled with a waterfall and about ten different branches of varying heights. Birds and monkeys chirped inside the neighboring enclosures. Roger was easy to spot, hanging upside down near the far side of the room. Two legs hung onto different branches and his arms hugged a third. His long claws reminded Gemma of a dinosaur's.

"I thought I'd have you guys feed Roger, then have you help me with his training session." Judy brought out a cup and removed its top. The noise seemed to wake up Roger, who opened his eyes and studied them quizzically upside down. "They have nutrient-poor diets, but today he'll be getting some fruits, veggies, and hard-boiled eggs."

“I was about to ask what you used to supplement their protein.” Tim explained that he had experience working with rehabilitating wild sloths, and they also used eggs in Costa Rica.

“It seems a little unusual to feed them eggs. I thought they only eat leaves,” Gemma said.

Judy fed Roger a few berries. “Sloths will eat anything they find in the wild. If they find a bird’s nest, they will absolutely take advantage of it and eat the eggs. They’re a lot smarter than people give them credit for.”

Gemma nodded in understanding.

“Who wants to feed Roger first?”

Tim wasn’t shy about stepping forward. With confidence, he approached the sloth and placed a few nuts inside his mouth. His big expressive eyes reminded Gemma of a cartoon animal.

“May I touch him?” Tim asked.

“Knock yourself out.”

He scratched the top of Roger’s head with two fingers. “You like that, big guy, don’t you.”

When it was Gemma’s turn, she offered the sloth some berries. As she touched his fur, she inhaled sharply. “It’s like a hairbrush.”

Tim laughed. “Yup, it’s not soft. If it were, his fur wouldn’t be water repellent.”

Gemma's pulse increased as she realized that Roger had stopped moving. A hint of fear swelled in her chest. "Is he okay? Did I do something wrong?"

Judy took a couple steps closer. "Oh, Roger's fine. He just fell asleep."

"In the middle of eating?"

"Yeah, it happens all the time. He'll wake up in a couple minutes."

"Oh, is that all." She let out a sigh of relief. It was reassuring to know she hadn't done anything wrong with the sloth.

"Come on, I'll take you two over to see Esmeralda, our female sloth. She's out on exhibit right now."

"Is there a reason they're not together?"

Judy smiled. "She's recently become a mom. We wanted her and the baby to settle in before we let old Roger out."

Inside a room that resembled a rainforest, Judy pointed to her lips, then to a sloth a little smaller than Roger who was asleep sitting on a branch like a koala bear. Looking closely, Gemma could make out the zoo's newest addition. Esmeralda's bundle of joy rested its little head against her chest, a patch of fuzzy hair poking up. Slipping out her mobile phone, she took a few photos, then they left the room.

"The baby is adorable. Do they always stay attached to the mom like koalas?" she asked.

Judy explained that mum and baby usually stayed attached until the little one was strong enough to swing from the branches of the trees. “On average in the wild, it takes up to about nine months, but in captivity, it’s a little faster. We have a live feed you can follow online for updates too.”

Tim stroked his jaw. “I know what I’ll be streaming on my classroom’s computer during my downtime.”

After they asked a couple more questions about the sloths, Judy dropped them back at the zoo’s entrance and bid them farewell.

“That was amazing. I’ll never want to pass on a behind-the-scenes experience again. If you want to see the zoo, that’s definitely the way to do it.” Gemma wrapped her arms around Tim and hugged him tightly. “I had so much fun. Thank you for spoiling me.”

He kissed the top of her head. “The day is just getting started. I have one more surprise up my sleeve for you today.” His gaze traveled to a few families with strollers lined up outside the front gate, chatting excitedly. “But first, we should try and squeeze in a quick peek at the animals you want to see before the chaos starts.”

“Let’s do the elephants and kangaroos, then I’ll be good.”

\* \* \*

Tim’s second surprise also shocked her system. Arriving at the stadium where the Fresno Flying Squirrels minor league

baseball team played, Gemma spied a queue several hundred people long snaking around the side of the facility.

Adults and children alike chatted animatedly. Many of them wore neon-green shirts and yellow hats.

Gemma's eyes traveled to the man standing closest to the car, talking on his mobile. "Wait, the logo on the man's shirt. It looks exactly like the Sloths' logo." Tim turned off the ignition and waited. She glanced at the shirt again, then back to him. "It is the same. It says Scottsdale Sloths. Why would the Sloths be in Fresno? Isn't Scottsdale in Arizona?"

"Surprise! The Sloths are on a national tour holding open auditions for the team."

Gemma was slow on the uptake. "So you brought us here to watch the Sloths' tryouts?"

"Yes!" Tim's enthusiasm hit a twenty out of ten. "I'm so excited for you to see it all. It'll be just as much fun as *Cupid's Arrow*. There are three rounds before prospective players even get to show off their baseball skills. First, the Sloths ask to see someone's dancing ability, then it's all about karaoke, and finally, if a player does well enough to make it to round three, they progress to the trick showcase."

"And what does the trick round entail?"

"That's for me to know and you to find out." He winked.

Stepping out of the car, Gemma looked again at the line in dismay. They might have to wait several hours before they'd make it inside. Her shoulders hunched. "Where does the end



of the line even begin? It looks almost as long as the Wimbledon ticket queue.”

“Lines are for the rookies. I’m a former player. I have connections.”

They sauntered right up to the front entrance, where Tim had a short conversation with the security team, then was let inside. He gestured for them to turn right and walk down toward the field.

“What time do the main gates open to the public?” Gemma asked.

“At ten.”

“And how long will the auditions run?”

“Until six.”

She cocked her head to the side. “Is that enough time to see all the prospective players?”

“I hope so.” Tim scratched his forehead. “My friends were telling me that this is the first year the Sloths asked people to register online. Theoretically, all the basic info should be in the system. Each person auditioning has a ninety-second limit to show the three judges what they’re made of. Then they’re scored from one to ten. The people with the highest scores at the end of two rounds move on to the final round.”

“I think I get it.” Gemma pecked him on the cheek. “And at least I’ll have my own resident expert by my side to break things down for me.”

“Definitely.” He puffed out his chest. “Let’s see if we can grab seats near the front before the gates open.”

Gemma shaded her eyes as they walked out toward the pristine emerald-green field to the lowest level. Tents had been erected with stages out front in three different areas of the field. White banners labeled each tent. There was one for registration, one for costume pickup, two for dancing, and two for singing.

“Timmy!” shouted two men in green shirts and white baseball trousers as they vaulted over the barrier between the field and the spectator area. Gemma stepped to the side as they clapped him on the back and mobbed him in excitement.

“The Flaming Bat is back in the house! Why didn’t you tell us you were coming?” one of the players asked. “We could’ve had a mini team reunion at dinner last night.”

“Because, Brett...Timmy has an actual job.”

“I knew that!”

“Pfff, I doubt that.”

“Guys!” Tim exclaimed. “There’s someone I’d like to introduce you to.”

They froze, released him, and both turned to stare at Gemma. She held up her hand. “Hello.”

Both the guys immediately cleared their throats, their expressions sheepish.

“Hi, er... sorry, we didn’t see you there,” the taller of the two apologized. He stood about six feet tall, and had ash-blond hair and a beard.

“Yeah, we’re really sorry. Normally we’re better behaved than this.” The second guy had a shaved head and a scraggly red beard. He was about five-foot-eight, with a dad bod.

Tim shrugged. “Guys, this is Gemma. Gemma, meet Joe and Brett.”

“It’s nice to meet you blokes.”

“Likewise,” said Brett, the redhead. They all shook hands.

Joe cleared his throat. “We’ll catch up with you later.”

The guys hopped back over the fence, leaving Tim and Gemma alone.

“They’re nice,” she managed.

“I swear, Brett and Joe normally have better manners than cavemen.”

“Were they the blokes you were closest to on the team?”

Tim nodded. “Two of the three. The other guy, Eric, couldn’t be here today. He lives in Hawaii.”

They walked down the steps and took two seats in the middle of the second row. Tim explained that if they sat at the end, people might be asking them to get up every time they wanted to exit the row. He worried about her hip. Once again, Gemma was touched by his thoughtfulness.

About ten minutes before the gates were due to open, Brett jogged up the steps and removed his hat. “Er... Timmy, Gemma, sorry to barge in on you guys, but we have a big favor to ask you.”

Tim’s forehead wrinkled. “What’s up?”

“Mike was supposed to be our third judge today, but his flight was delayed, and he isn’t going to be able to make it until late afternoon. Would you be willing to fill in for him?”

Tim hesitated and glanced at her, then to Brett. “Sorry, but I can’t. It wouldn’t be fair to Gemma.”

“I told Joe it was a long shot. We understand.”

Gemma pulled on Tim’s forearm. He turned to look at her. “Tim, it’s okay. If you need to be a judge today, I get it.”

“Gemma, no. Today is supposed to be a date. If I go down to the field and judge, I’ll be there all day. I don’t want to leave you alone.”

“You’re such a sweet man, especially when you’re trying to be a hero. You always try to please too many people. Go. I’ll be fine. I’ll see you afterward. In the meantime, if I have questions, I’ll text you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive. Now go,” she urged.

“Thanks, Gemma. We’ll take good care of Timmy today. I promise,” Brett said.

She grinned. “He’s among Sloths. I’m not worried in the least.”

Tim collected his jacket and glanced one more time at Gemma before heading down to the field.

“You’re a lucky guy, Timmy. Why didn’t you tell us about your smoking-hot girlfriend before?” she heard Brett ask.

“I’m selfish. I don’t like to share.”

As he joined Joe and Brett inside the tent, he seemed to glow with excitement in the same way he had when decorating his classroom. A few other guys in green Sloth shirts came over to greet him. It was clear that he was a popular person—the man of the hour.

A few minutes later, as the gates to the public officially opened, Gemma heard a trio of women in the row ahead of her chatting about Tim, Joe, and Brett.

“I can’t believe our luck. Did you see who the judges are? We have the Blockbuster, the Maverick, and the Flaming Bat! Talk about an all-star lineup. Everybody is going to be flocking to this side once they find out.”

Curiosity got the better of Gemma. Leaning forward, she tapped the woman with long brown hair and a denim jacket on the shoulder. “Sorry, I couldn’t help but overhear you. If you don’t mind me asking, what’s so great about these three lads?”

“They’re legends! The Blockbuster used to have the most spectacular catches on the team. The Maverick would come up with the craziest skits and dance numbers, and the Flaming

Bat... well, he's the team's all-time home-run record holder and the only guy ever to take an at-bat with his bat on fire."

Tim had the home-run record? And could hit with a flaming bat? She made a mental note to look it up on SearchTube when she had a moment.

"I see, thanks for sharing." Gemma settled back in her seat.

"Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, welcome to this year's Fresno Sloth Ball Tryouts. We're thrilled that you've given up your Saturday to join us. Please direct your attention to the scoreboard in center field for a short video introduction to this year's judges."

As Gemma watched the video with clips from the Sloth's past seasons, with Joe, Brett, and Tim walking out onto the field imitating sloths, she realized just how little she knew about her boyfriend's time with the team. Just as she'd thought she was coming to know who Tim was, another mystery appeared.

# Chapter 17



Just when Gemma had sworn she'd seen everything—a guy performing with his trio of trained dancing puppies, a guy flipping on his mini trampoline, and a man riding into the tent on a unicycle—a bloke attempted to enter the dance tent on a pair of towering stilts. He wore a neon-green suit and top hat, and had painted his face to match.

As he bent his head, it was clear that he was too tall. Brett, Joe, and Tim got up out of their seats and walked outside to greet him.

“Welcome in...” Joe glanced at his tablet. “Sterling. I see you've put a lot of thought into today's audition.”

“I have.” Sterling nodded.

“Great. Then let's start the timer and show us what you've got.” Tim clicked a remote and a country tune began playing.

Sterling tapped his foot and started off with a line dance. A couple seconds later, the music changed to “I'm Too Sexy.” He stepped over the fence and paraded up and down the front row with his model walk.

Shrugging out of his green suit jacket, he swung it above his head and tossed it to the crowd. Underneath, his well-defined body was painted with the Sloths logo. The music changed one final time to “The Greatest Show.” To Gemma's

amazement, Sterling managed to breakdance in the stilts and ended in a split.

The crowd jumped to its feet. Gemma placed her fingers into her mouth and let out a shrill whistle. She clapped so hard that the palms of her hands felt numb.

*He'd better make the team with a performance like that!*

Sterling got to his feet, bowed, blew a few kisses, and climbed back over the fence so he was back on the field.

Brett, Joe, and Tim huddled together in a circle. A few moments later, Tim scribbled the word “Scottsdale” on the back of a piece of paper. “Sterling, that was something else. I speak for all the Sloths’ staff when I say, we’ll see you in Arizona.”

The crowd cheered again, attracting the attention of those sitting in other areas of the stadium. Sterling nodded his hand in gratitude to the judges and jogged over to a middle-aged man and woman, whom Gemma guessed might be his parents.

Overhead, a public address announcer came onto the speaker and said, “We’ll be taking a lunch break. Now is the time if you haven’t already visited the Sloth Shop—make your way up to section number ...”

Gemma tuned out the rest. All around her, people stood and stretched. Taking out her mobile from her handbag, she noticed she had a message from Tim. She glanced to the field but didn’t see him.

**Tim:** So are you enjoying it?



**Gemma:** Yes, I am. It's been thoroughly entertaining. I had no idea what to expect.

**Tim:** \*Grinning emoji\*

**Gemma:** \*One hundred percent emoji\*

**Tim:** Who's been your favorite so far?

**Gemma:** The stilts bloke!

**Tim:** This is top-secret classified information, but us too. I can't remember anyone ever getting sent directly to Scottsdale before.

**Gemma:** How hard has it been to score the people auditioning?

**Tim:** Not too bad. It's supposed to be out of ten, but what we don't tell people is that we also give bonus points that are only used for internal purposes. That gives us a little more leeway.

**Gemma:** Nice. I was wondering, do guys who have one area of talent that's better than the others and still have a shot at making it to the trick round?

**Tim:** Of course. The main qualities we're looking for are a positive attitude, and personalities that can really connect with the audience. Everything else, including their baseball skills, can be coached.

**Gemma:** Just like when you joined.

**Tim:** Exactly.

Three dots blinked—Tim was typing.

**Tim:** How would you like to come down to the field during the lunch break?

**Gemma:** Yes! Yes! Yes!

**Tim:** \*Laughing emoji\* Come down to the fence, I'll be waiting for you.

**Gemma:** \*Heart emoji\*

As if she were fighting a current to swim upstream, she turned her body sideways and stayed to the far right as she rushed past the fans making their way up the steps to the concession stands, heading down toward the field instead.

A few fans lingered near the railing, attempting to catch Tim's attention.

“Yo, Lyons, can we have your autograph?”

“Mr. Flaming Bat! Can we get a picture with you?”

“Of course.” Tim's cheeks flushed pink, and he shot a quick look of apology in Gemma's direction.

She watched as he reached over the railing and signed a hat, T-shirts, and a few programs, stopping to pose in between for some photos. She was struck by how attentive and engaging he was with the fans, treating them as if they were long-time friends.

When he'd finished with the last child, she heard Tim say, “The rest of the team and players will be signing out front after tryouts.”

“Thank you!”

Gemma covered her mouth with her hand, hiding a laugh. As the assembled group dispersed, she took her own spot on the railing, right in front of her boyfriend.

“You’re Mr. Popular today.”

“Sorry about that.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “It’s weird. I’ve been retired from the Sloths for a couple years, but I’m more popular now than I was back in the day with everyone watching our videos on SearchTube.”

Placing his hands on Gemma’s waist, he assisted her over the fence and kissed her on the cheek. The sensation sent a hum of electricity through her body.

“You were so good with those fans just now.”

“We wouldn’t be here if it weren’t for them. Sloth Ball was created to build lifelong fans, not just to play games and make money. Wherever we can, we try to give the people who come watch us a memorable experience.”

Lacing his hand through hers, Tim led her to the area near home plate. They walked in silence as she let the weight of what he had just said wash over her. She was beginning to understand just how much the Sloths meant to her boyfriend.

Stopping at the plate, Tim placed his arm on Gemma’s shoulder and spun her around. “Look behind you.”

“Wow, what a view.” From this vantage point, she could see just about everything in the stadium. There was a carpet of pristine green grass extending to the outfield, flags waving in the wind, and a few players in the bullpens playing catch. As

she looked up into the stands, she could see people moving up and down the rows of seats like ants, and members of the media perched inside a few of the suites.

“Does being out here make you miss it?”

“Yes.” He flashed her a sad smile. “There’s nothing like playing in front of a big, energetic crowd hyping you up when you’re about to take an at bat.”

Tim’s eyes glossed over as if he were reliving his past. She took his hand and squeezed it. Blinking slowly, he returned his gaze to her.

“What are you thinking about?”

“I was thinking about how we came up with the idea of setting a bat on fire. Looking back, it was so dangerous.”

“I’m afraid to ask.”

“Nobody in their right mind lights a piece of wood on fire when you play on a grass field. There were so many things that could’ve gone wrong.”

“Oh, I see what you mean. When you put it that way, I’m surprised your manager let you get away with it.”

“He was always more invested in the performance aspect of the game than safety.” He chuckled. “Our manager used to say, ‘The bigger the trick, the better.’ We operated on the mantra that it’s easier to ask for forgiveness after the fact.”

“Oh no.”

“Are you okay with eating catering from the truck the team ordered? It’s burgers and fries from BBQ Shack.”

“Sounds brilliant.” The intoxicating scent of barbecue was making her mouth water. They joined a short line of people queuing in front of a delivery truck parked on the edge of the warning track in the outfield. “So... how *did* you come up with the idea for the flaming bat?”

“Brett and I were in Vegas for one of our buddy’s birthdays. I don’t remember if it was day or night, but we were walking down the strip from a casino back to our hotel when we saw a street baton twirler light their batons on fire. I’d seen it on TV before, but when it’s in person, it’s even more impressive.”

Gemma nodded.

“That image stuck with me for a couple weeks. I wondered in the back of my mind if there was a way we could do something like that on the baseball field.”

“How exactly do you get the fire effect on the bat? Is it hollow, with some type of candle or mechanism on the inside?”

“No. Nothing that fancy.”

“The suspense is killing me.”

“Now remember, we were dumb, just-out-of-college kids.”

“Okay,” she said slowly.

“What we did was... uh...” Tim made a sheepish face.  
“Dump kerosene on the bat and let it go.”

Her eyes widened. “You what?”

“We soaked the bat in lighter fluid and lit it up to see what would happen. We thought the bat would stay lit for a few seconds. I never imagined I’d get an at bat out of it, but we did and it became my thing because none of the other guys were stupid enough to try it.”

“Wow,” she said. “I hope you at least wore fireproof gloves and had a fire extinguisher nearby.”

“Yes to both of those.”

They advanced up to the window and each ordered a burger and a side of chips. As they collected their food, Tim ran into a few more former players and introduced Gemma to more of his enormous extended Sloth family.

As they enjoyed their lunch inside the clubhouse, Gemma joked, “I wish everybody had name tags. It would be easier for me to keep them straight. So I’ve met Joe, Brett, Jorge, Casey, Dirk, Felipe, Greg, Will, Alex, and...” She wrinkled her nose, not quite able to put her finger on the last face.

“Al,” Tim added.

She face-palmed. “Al. How could I forget Big Al? He’s a literal giant.”

Big Al was the player who had first pioneered the use of stilts on the Sloths by pitching in them.

“Don’t worry, you’re doing great. I’m impressed you’ve managed to remember all those people.” Tim tucked all his rubbish onto his tray. “Are you all done?”

“Oh, um, yes.”

“Perfect, I’ll take those.”

Gemma added her rubbish to his.

As he stood, Brett called out, “Timmy! Look!”

He spun around, saw Brett holding up a plastic bag from a hardware store, and winced. “No.”

Brett’s face fell. “You don’t even know what’s in here.”

“I don’t, but I have a good guess.” Tim deposited the trash into the closest bin and wiped his hands on his trousers. “My answer is no.”

“Come on, Timmy... it would be an amazing way to engage the crowd and hype them up for the last part of the day.”

Gemma looked on in confusion.

“I’m not going to change my mind.” He crossed his arms.

“Not even for your girlfriend?” Brett nodded toward her. “I bet she’d love to see the Flaming Bat in the flesh.”

He rubbed his temples. “Look, Brett, even if I wanted to, I don’t have the gloves or the—”

The words died on his lips as his friend pulled a fire extinguisher and gloves from the bag.

“Come on, where’s your sense of adventure?”

Joe joined the group, coming to stand beside them with a goofy grin on his face. “Mike’s excited and so is the crowd. He just announced it to—”

“He said no,” Brett interrupted.

“Uh...” Joe’s cheeks reddened as he looked from Tim to Brett.

“Please don’t tell me Mike announced it to the stadium,” Tim said.

“Okay, I won’t,” Joe said slowly.

Tim threw his head back and groaned.

Gemma could sense his frustration. “Tim, I think you should just do it. It *would* be brilliant for the fans to see, *and* if I’m being honest...” She walked her fingers up his arm. “I would like to see the master at work.”

Tim took a deep breath. “There’s no way I can get out of this, is there?”

“No,” everyone said at the same time.

“Fine. I’ll do it, but if this goes sideways, it’s on you two.”

Joe and Brett high-fived one another.

Gemma rose up onto her toes and pecked him on the cheek. “I believe in you.”

\* \* \*



“Hey, Sloth fans! Do we have a real treat for you! He’s best known for being the Sloths’ record holder for hitting the most home runs with his fiery bat, and today, he’s agreed to give a demonstration of how it’s done just for you all. Let’s welcome the man, the myth, the legend . . . the one and only Flaming Bat himself . . . Tiiiiiiiiiiiiim Lyyyyyyyyyyyyyyons!”

The crowd roared so loudly that Gemma was tempted to poke her fingers inside of her eardrums. Standing near the visitors’ dugout, she looked on as Tim appeared at the lip of the home dugout. Giving a quick wave and tip of his cap to the crowd, he adjusted his gloves, then took a deep breath.

“Light her up,” he mouthed to Joe, who gleefully held a lighter to the bat.

Flames engulfed the wooden bat almost immediately as Tim approached home plate. Stepping into the batter’s box, he adjusted his stance and nodded to the player on the pitcher’s mound. The orange flame danced at the top of the bat.

As if it were occurring in slow motion, Gemma watched as Tim dug his feet into the ground and bent his knees. He lifted the flaming bat just above his head. Small drops of perspiration dripped down the side of his face. The larger muscles in his hands tensed, but his grip stayed soft.

Shifting his weight from side to side, he remained laser focused on his target. Just as the pitcher released the ball toward him, time resumed its normal speed. She heard the distinct smack of the bat making contact with the ball.

Her heart pounded with adrenaline as the people in the stands jumped to their feet in unison, their roar reaching a decibel equal to that of being at a rock concert. Every head in the stadium watched the ball sail high into the air and over the centerfield wall.

“It’s going... going... gone! Another home run for the Flaming Bat in the record books!”

Tim’s eyes widened, then a wide brimming smile crossed his face. Flipping the now-extinguished bat with a charred rim, he set off at a light jog around the bases and waved to the crowd, bowing as his foot made contact with each bag.

Gemma was beyond impressed as she slow clapped, shaking her head. As she watched the fans, staff, ex-team members, and everyone else in the stadium cheer for him, she realized how difficult it must have been for Tim to give something like this up.

*And to think that this is just a small taste of what it’s like to live in Tim’s world. Everybody loves him. Not just anybody would be on the receiving end of a reception like this. Whether it’s a friend or a fan, everybody we’ve seen today has wanted to stop and talk to him. Tim isn’t just a former player; he’s a legend. The Sloths are such a huge part of his life. Maybe even more than he let on.*

Taking one final bow, Tim waved his cap to the crowd, then walked up to Gemma.

“How did I do?” he asked with a cocky grin.

“I’d wager you knocked it out of the park with a trick like that.”

She wrapped her arms around Tim, and he pulled her in close to his hot body and kissed her. She smelled the scent of his spicy deodorant and smoky wood. The fabric of his shirt was damp against her skin, causing goosebumps to appear.

Butterflies fluttered in her stomach, demanding to be released. Around them, she heard the encouraging buzz of thousands of people cheering them on. If she’d ever won a major championship, she imagined that the euphoric high would be equal to this moment.

Tim broke the kiss. “With a reception like that, maybe I *should* consider coming out of retirement,” he whispered.

She whacked him on the butt. “Stick to the judging, old man.” She giggled.

“Old man? Ouch.”

“I’d miss you too much if you played on the road all the time.”

“Don’t worry, I’m pretty sure my playing days are over.” He rubbed his shoulder. “That took a lot out of me.”

Her expression softened. “Are you going to be okay?”

“Today, yes. Who knows about tomorrow.”

“We’ll just take things one day at a time.”

He kissed her forehead. “Sloth-zone style.”

“Promise you’ll let me know if you need anything?”

“I will.”

“I’ll just be in the stands if you need me.”

Tim arched an eyebrow. “You know, you’re welcome to stay on the field with me.”

She shook her head. “No. You need to focus on the players. Besides, I like experiencing being a part of Sloth Nation for myself.”

# Chapter 18



As the day's auditions came to a close, the remaining people in Gemma's section packed up their belongings and chatted excitedly about what they had seen. She stayed seated, uncertain of what to do next, and sent a text to Tim.

**Gemma:** Not sure if you need more time, but do you want me to wait for you in the stands, on the field, or at the car?

Setting her phone onto the seat's armrest, she slid her newly-acquired Sloth hoodie on and listened to the trio of women from earlier chat. They were an excellent source of gossip.

"I hope the Sloths do a national audition tour every year. That was so much fun! I can't wait until the team returns to play this summer," the woman with brown hair said.

The blonde woman grinned. "Totally. It makes me feel so connected to the team to know that we were here to witness the very beginning of some of the guys' Sloths' careers. Stilt-Walking Sterling is a shoo-in. It won't take him long to become a legend and gain a big fan following."

The redhead of the group checked the time on her mobile's lock screen, then slid it into the side pocket of her backpack. "Who do you think the team's next manager is going to be?"

The Sloths always promote internally, so it'll have to be a former player. My money is on the Maverick.”

“Haven't you heard? It was all over the Sloths' fan forum this morning. Someone leaked that the job has been offered to the Flaming Bat!” the blonde exclaimed.

Gemma froze. They couldn't be talking about Tim, could they? She preened her ears.

“What!? The Flaming Bat?” The redhead fanned herself. “I'm hot just thinking about him in that uniform again! If he manages the team, I may just have to move to Scottsdale.”

The brown-haired woman snorted. “Your husband would kill you.”

“A girl can dream.” The redhead sighed. “I just hope the rumors are true. I'd heard he'd retired from baseball for good.”

“That's what everyone on the fan forum thought too, but apparently the internal source seems to think it's pretty much a done deal. After seeing the fiery bat stunt today, I have to agree with them.”

As the trio stood to leave, they waved to Gemma, who could only offer them a weak smile. Her chest grew tight. Tim was seriously considering becoming the next team manager? What about his teaching? What about his life in Sequoia Valley? What about their relationship?

Her phone chimed—she had a text from Tim.

**Tim:** We have a meeting in the clubhouse that's going to be a half hour, then the team owner has also asked if I can

meet with him right after. I don't want to keep you waiting though, so I can tell them I'm not available if you'd rather get going.

**Gemma:** Take the meetings. I'll just be in the car.

**Tim:** If you want, you can take the car to the mall or go exploring while you wait. You still have my keys, right?

**Gemma:** I do have your keys, but unfortunately, I can't drive. I can't get used to cars being on the wrong side of the road.

**Tim:** I'm sorry, Gem. I'll try and be less than an hour.

**Gemma:** \*Thumbs-up emoji\*

She shuffled with the last couple of stragglers out of the stadium to the car park. It wasn't difficult to spot Tim's white minivan. There were few cars remaining. Outside, the sky had taken on a ghostly pale-blue hue. A thin layer of fog lingered near the lamps spotlighting the vehicle.

Pulling the door open, Gemma climbed inside and locked the door. Her pulse raced, still trying to process what she'd heard.

*Tim might very well be the next Sloths' manager, but it could also just be a rumor. Nothing is certain until I talk to him. Although it is a little strange that the team owner wants to touch base with him too.*

She heard the woman's voice from earlier echo inside her head. *"It's pretty much a done deal."*

No, she was not going to play the what-if game. She'd done that enough recently. Adjusting her mobile so the Pop Socket balanced on the car's dashboard, she opened her Hearts Connected Network app and scrolled through the list of shows until she located an unwatched episode of *Cupid's Arrow*.

A voice-over filled the car. "Previously on *Cupid's Arrow*... tempers flared as Jane and Liz realized that Lydia had attempted to seduce Bill."

Pulling her hood over her head, she reclined her seat, and allowed her body to relax.

\* \* \*

A tapping on the car window immediately caused Gemma to jump in her seat. She glanced to her left to see Tim with his head pressed to the glass, looking in. She reached for the unlock button.

"Thanks. Sorry to wake you, but you're the only person who could let me in." Rubbing his hands together, he jumped inside and quickly closed the door behind him. "I swear, I never ever thought I'd be *this* long. I promise I'll make it up to you. You must be starving!"

"I didn't realize I'd even fallen asleep." Gemma scrubbed her eyelids with her hands. "The fresh air must've taken a lot out of me. What time is it?"

"It's eight."

Gemma frowned. "Eight?"



Tim nodded. “So much for treating you to the Little Blue Caboose Bistro. We were going to have this romantic dinner inside this old, restored train car that’s down the road, but that plan’s shot.” The muscles in his forehead creased. “Dinner is probably going to have to be some type of fast food. What are you in the mood for?”

Gemma stretched. “Maybe some tacos? Or a burrito?”

“Got it. There are a couple little hole-in-the-wall places I know of down toward Fresno State.” Tim reached for his seat belt and buckled it. “You know... having the keys might help.”

“Oh, of course.” She fumbled for her purse, pulled out the Sloth keychain, and handed it to him.

Inserting the key into the ignition, he turned it. The lights and radio flickered on, but the engine remained silent.

“Aw, come on ... this can’t be happening. Not now.” He turned the key again. Resting his head on the steering wheel for a moment, he took a deep breath, then mumbled, “I think the battery is dead.”

“Oh.”

The wheels in her mind began to turn. How could they get out of this problem? If she were at home, she’d call her dad and have him drive down a new car battery. But as a visitor to America, that wasn’t really an option. She wondered if roadside service was a thing in America like it was in the UK. “Er, do you have any roadside towing?”

“No.” Tim grumbled. “I’ve been meaning to since my parents dropped me from their account, but I never got around to doing it.”

“If you rang them, do you think they’d let you use their account?”

“Normally yes, but today’s Saturday. Mom and Dad are probably out on their weekly dinner date. I doubt they’re home to pick up the landline.”

Gemma cocked her head to the side. “Do they not have mobile phones?”

Tim winced. “They have pay-as-you-go flip phones, but the service is spotty at best. I got them each a smartphone for Christmas last year, but they ended up returning them to the store!”

“Oh no.” She hid a smile.

Tim’s lips twisted. “I was so frustrated at the time, but they insisted they didn’t want anything fancy.”

“What did they get instead?”

“A smart TV.” He shook his head. “For Mom and Dad, it’s been a real game changer. They get a kick out of finding shows they used to watch as kids or when they were our age.”

“My parents are the same.”

A few moments of silence elapsed. “Dad will never let me live this down once he finds out. He kept bugging me to take

care of it and I didn't. Let this be a lesson to me not to procrastinate. I'm making my own roadside account now."

Gemma reached for her mobile and used the spare time to close out a couple unused apps and send Frankie a message.

**Gemma:** Tim has a dead battery. Be home later than we thought.

**Frankie:** Bummer. Do you need us to come and pick you guys up?

**Gemma:** I'll pass the offer along, but I think Tim's got it sorted out.

**Frankie:** Okay, let me know if you need anything. Charlie's half asleep, but I'm bingeing *Cupid's Arrow*.

**Gemma:** Brilliant, we'll catch up tomorrow.

**Frankie:** \*Winking emoji\* I can't wait to see Lydia get her just deserts. She's a horrid friend.

**Gemma:** I won't spoil it, but this week's episode is pure gold.

"Okay, I think I've got it. I just put in a service request through the app. It looks like it's going to be... at least an hour. Gah. I really screwed this up."

"It's outside of your control. These things happen," Gemma said empathetically.

"I just hate letting you down." Tim's fingers flew across the mobile phone screen. "While we wait, I'm gonna place a delivery order for food. How are tacos?"

“That’s perfect.”

“Do you like chips and guacamole? What type of salsa? Soft or crunchy tortillas?”

Her stomach growled. “I guess I’m hungrier than I thought. Um... yes, mild, and soft.”

“Okay, the delivery app says twenty minutes.”

Tim placed his phone on the dash. “I’m sorry again for the nightmare tonight is shaping up to be.”

More silence elapsed.

“It wasn’t too bad until now.” Gemma drew her hoodie tighter around her body. “So, uh... how did your wrap-up meeting with the lads go? Did you find enough people to invite to Scottsdale?”

Tim relaxed. “It went well. We have a short list of ten contenders, but it sounds like they’ll need a lot more than that. When I met with the team owner, he mentioned his plans to expand exhibition baseball to the East Coast.”

“Oh, that sounds exciting. Did the owner have anything else to say to you? I mean, it’s rather curious he wanted to meet with you alone.”

“Who, Mike? Nah, he’s already met with the rest of the guys, and he just wanted to touch base on a couple different ideas with me for the new team, the Bridgeport Banana Slugs, but we ended up spending most of the time talking about my teaching.”

*Does that mean he wants Tim for the expansion team? Or for the Scottsdale team?*

“He must really value you.”

“We’ve always had a good working relationship.” Tim stared out the window. “Mike is a good guy.”

Suddenly, a pair of headlights started to drive toward the car, temporarily blinding them as it slowed. They shaded their eyes.

Tim’s voice grew tense. “I’m just going to see who it is. Lock the doors just in case.”

Gemma nodded. Her pulse began to race as she touched the lock button with an audible click, wondering who it could be.

# Chapter 19



As the engine turned off and the lights dimmed, Gemma let out a sigh of relief as she watched Tim clap a guy in a neon-green satin bomber jacket on the back.

Tim circled back to the driver's side door and she clicked the unlock button. "It's my pal Frank. He offered to wait with us until the tow truck arrives. I don't want to cancel the request. I'd rather try and get a new battery now. The good news is that if there's a problem, Frank can give us a jump."

She exhaled. "What a relief. I'll get out and come meet him properly."

"No, it's freezing out there. He'll be fine if you just wave through the window. I'll introduce you to him for real after we're squared away."

"Are you sure?" She glanced out the window. "I don't want to be rude."

"Positive. Frank would say the same thing."

"Do you need a jacket?"

"I have one in the back seat." Tim slid open the back door and retrieved his own matching neon-green jacket. "If you need anything, just yell, or text me. I'll just be right over there. Is there anything else I can get you? Blanket? Water?"

“No, just keep Frank company.”

“Will do.” Pecking Gemma on the forehead, he slipped the garment on and closed the doors.

Alone, Gemma unlocked her mobile screen and noticed a red number one glowing under voicemails. She frowned, wondering why she hadn’t heard her mobile go off earlier. Tapping the mailbox, she clicked the speaker button and let the message play aloud.

“Hello, this message is for Gemma MacLeod. My name is Ryan Gilcrest. I’m one of the casting directors with the Connected Hearts Network and I was hoping that you might be able to give me a call back at this number as soon as you get this to discuss your *Cupid’s Arrow* application. It’s about eight-ten. I’ll be in my office until nine. If you don’t reach me tonight, leave a message and I’ll get back to you on Monday. Thanks!”

Grabbing her mobile, she looked at the time. It was eight forty. If she called Ryan back now, she might still be able to catch him! She clicked on the number in the voicemail.

*Ring. Ring. Ring.*

“Hello?” Ryan’s voice said.

“Hi, Ryan, this is Gemma MacLeod. So sorry. I just got your message.”

“Gemma, great to hear from you.” She heard the shuffling of a few papers in the background. “I’m sorry I’m reaching out

to you so late tonight. One of my kids got sick this week and now I'm playing catch up with my work."

She gave a nervous laugh. "Of course."

"The reason I'm calling is to let you know that we'd like to select you to move on to our third and final casting round of *Cupid's Arrow*! You're one of three women in the running to become the next bachelorette. Of course, applications are officially open through the end of the year, but if we find another candidate, they'll probably be shuffled into the pool for the following season."

"Wow. Just wow." Her breath hitched. "I never expected to make it this far."

"Your videos for the first two rounds have stood out heads and tails above most of what we've received."

*It's all thanks to you, Mr. T.*

"Thanks."

"We also loved your friend Frankie and her boyfriend Charlie. Are they the two people you were planning to have appear with you if you're selected? Or were you planning to use Suzanne, or someone else?"

"Uh, no, it would probably be Frankie and Charlie."

"It makes me glad to hear you say that." More papers rustled. "Frankie and Charlie had great chemistry on your audition video. The team and I think that in addition to falling in love with you, the millions of people who watch the show



will also fall in love with them. Charlie is going to be great for marketing the show to our targeted female demographic.”

“Marketing? Female demographic?” she repeated aloud.

Something about the way Ryan was wording things was putting her off. Charlie wasn’t a piece of meat the producers could just use to toss to a savage pack of hungry female viewers. He had only volunteered himself to help her out so she wouldn’t be taken advantage of. She shivered. The words Charlie had said to her weeks ago echoed in her mind. “*You can kiss your personal life goodbye.*”

“I can hear the hesitation in your voice. Trust me when I say that once you’ve been in front of the camera for a couple days, you’ll forget all about the world watching you.”

*I highly doubt that.*

“Anyway, here’s a quick rundown of how the next round works.” Ryan cleared his throat. “Sometime in the next few weeks, we’ll fly each of you ladies out to LA. You’ll do a few promo shoots, and then we’ll have you spend about three days living in the *Cupid’s Arrow* house with some of the prospective male love interests.”

“But I thought my friends would be the ones who got to choose the blokes.”

“They do. It’s just a little different than how it’s portrayed on the show. The ten guys who make it onto the show *are* picked by the friends of our bachelorette from our curated pool of twenty bachelors.”

“So there aren’t thousands of blokes?”

“No. We edit in a couple audition videos the guys send in to make it appear that way. We need to keep the show entertaining and make sure the guys who make it have the *right* type of personality. This isn’t just about finding love—it’s also a numbers game. If we want to keep the show running and our sponsors happy, we need to make sure we hit all the network’s ratings targets.”

*It’s all a giant lie. None of it was real. What does the network consider the right personality? Would it be somebody like Tim? Probably not. If it’s a matter of business, they’d pick people who’d start fights and drama. It may be great for the audience, but that’s not for me.*

Gemma looked through the foggy front windshield. Her eyes settled on the form of Tim chatting animatedly with his friend. She realized that her goals and what she wanted in a guy had changed. She didn’t just want any man in her life. She wanted one. She wanted Tim.

“You know what, you can withdraw my application. I’ve decided I’m not interested anymore. I value my privacy, but more importantly, I’ve met someone I deeply care about.”

*And there’s nothing Hollywood about our love story.*

Ryan sighed on the other end. “Are you sure? Once you decide to pull out, you won’t be eligible to apply for any of the other Connect Hearts Network family of shows for another year.”

“I understand.”

She heard Ryan muttering something on the other end. “I’ll tell you what, I’m going out on a limb here, but as a gesture of goodwill, I *could* pull a couple strings and sneak your boyfriend into the finalist pool just like we did for our first season’s bachelorette, Yvonne.”

*Doesn't this bloke get it? I'm not interested.*

“No.” Gemma’s tone was curt. “I’m one hundred percent positive.” She heard the car door opening. “I don’t want Tim to have anything to do with this.”

“All right, then. I’ll make a note and close your file.” Ryan’s tone suddenly turned cold and professional. “Thanks again for taking the time to chat with me tonight.”

*I can't say the same is true for you, but I'll be polite.*

“Likewise. I hope your kid feels better soon too.”

“Thanks.”

Feeling slightly sickened by the fact that the entire show was fake, she disconnected the call and let the mobile drop onto her lap. She rubbed her temples.

“Gemma?” Tim’s voice suddenly said. “Who was that?”

Her head snapped to her left. She hadn’t realized Tim had entered the car and heard part of her conversation. He held a brown paper bag in his hands. She could smell the enticing scent of meat and spices. As her gaze traveled up to his face,

she could see his jaw was clenched and his eyes shined dangerously.

She swallowed hard. “It was one of the casting directors for *Cupid’s Arrow*.”

His Adam’s apple bobbed up and down. His voice came out strained. “You applied to be on *Cupid’s Arrow*?”

“Yes.” She quickly added, “But it was before I met you.”

“Okay.” He shifted his gaze out the window. A few moments of silence passed before he asked, “And what did this guy want?”

“He... they... the casting team invited me to Los Angeles. They’d short-listed me as one of their three finalists for next season.”

“Then you’ve spoken to them a couple times?” His brow furrowed into a deep V. His gaze was boring a hole in the window. “How long have you known they were semi-interested in you to be the next bachelorette?”

Her voice grew quiet. “A few weeks.”

“And you didn’t think to tell me?”

“No. There wasn’t a point. I didn’t think I’d ever get this far,” she huffed.

“But you did.” His head slowly rose, and his eyes met Gemma’s. They reminded her of the unruly sea in the midst of an approaching storm. They were a mixture of anger and

sadness. “And now you’re going to dump me so you can go run off and fall for some guy from the show.”

“Tim, no, it’s not like that at all.” She started to get out of her seat, but her seat belt kept her firmly in place. She frantically scrambled to locate the release button.

“Was I only meant to be your fallback guy?” He chucked the food bag onto the seat. “You know what, don’t answer that. I don’t even want to know. I thought this time would be different, but clearly, I was wrong.” He started to walk away.

Gemma’s own level of frustration was growing. *How could he think such a thing? Doesn’t he put enough faith in me to know that I care about him too much to hurt him? He hasn’t even given me a chance to explain things to him.*

Finally freeing herself, she threw her door open and jumped down, ignoring the discomfort riding up her hip. She limped after him and put a hand on his shoulder. “Tim, I’d *never* do that to you. You’re supposed to know me better than that.”

“That’s the problem, Gemma.” He looked her up and down. “I don’t know you as well as I thought I did. I don’t know if I can trust you.”

“Then maybe I was wrong about you too. Instead of letting me rationally explain things to you, you’re choosing to assume the worst about me.” She took a step back. Anger beginning to flood her system. “Just for the record, I told the *Cupid’s Arrow* guy that I’d met someone special and that I *didn’t* want anything to do with them.” Her throat constricted. “Does that

sound like something a woman who saw you as a fallback guy would do?”

His eyes widened, yet he remained silent.

Gemma had her answer. He still didn't trust her. Her heart was breaking. Cupid's arrow had missed its mark, and its sharp tip had embedded itself in her body. She dropped her head. “Were you ever going to tell me that you'd been offered the Sloths' manager position?”

“What—where did you hear that?”

“It doesn't matter. Is it true?”

“Yes.”

“And are you going to accept it?”

“Yes. No. I don't know.” His voice was raw and strained. “I haven't had enough time to think about it.”

“But you didn't think that I deserved to know?” The corners of her eyes were moist. A few tears threatened to fall.

“No... I... I...”

She sniffled. “I'm not the only one who was keeping things hidden.”

“But this is completely different.”

“How is it different?”

“Mike only offered me the job as I was leaving the stadium. You've known for weeks.” Tim glared at her. “Unlike you, I would've discussed it with you soon.”

“Would you have?” The tears were now free-falling. She swallowed the thick, salty droplets. “Did you not tell me just last week that you didn’t ever involve your friends or family when you make important decisions?”

“Damn it, Gemma, what do you think?” Tim’s lips quivered. His brow furrowed again, and he threw his hands wildly into the air. “Of course I would’ve talked things over with you. You matter. We matter. I don’t make decisions that are going to affect both our lives lightly.”

“I don’t know what I think anymore!” she cried. “You know, our problem isn’t that we don’t understand one another. It’s that we’re too much alike.”

“What are you saying?”

“I’m saying that we’re the opposite of opposites attract.” Her vision was getting fuzzy, obscured by tears. Nothing made sense to her anymore. “That means we’ll never work out. We might as well save ourselves the effort and call it quits now. You were ready to just walk away from me earlier. Well, I’ll make it easy for you... go ahead. I can’t be with a person who doesn’t believe me or trust me.”

She turned and limped back toward the car, refusing to look back at Tim.

# Chapter 20



Gemma slid into the car and slammed the door shut. She covered her face with her hands, her body wracked with sobs. Her heart was shattered into a billion tiny shards. Why was the world such a horrid, cruel place? Everything she thought she knew was a lie.

*I never want to ever hear or see anything about Cupid's Arrow ever again. As far as I'm concerned, I don't ever want anything to do with men or dating ever again either. All it leads to is pain and heartbreak. I'm better off alone. I can't trust anyone.*

When she'd met Tim, she'd felt so giddy and full of hope. She'd thought that maybe he was the one. He'd treated her like a real-life princess. Memories of carving a pumpkin, seeing his haunted classroom, dinner at the Lucky Dog, and standing in his arms watching the thousands of butterflies take flight flooded her mind.

*Our first kiss inside the forest, I felt like I was floating, just like the end scene of Sleeping Beauty when Aurora and Prince Phillip are dancing in the clouds together. Where did it all go so wrong?*

She cried harder until there were no more tears remaining. Using the back of her hoodie's sleeve, she dried her eyes. Her



face felt like someone had taken a sheet of sandpaper and rubbed it raw. Everything was dry and swollen. She hugged herself.

*The last time my relationship failed, it was because I wasn't giving enough of myself to it. Have I made the same mistake? I've been trying so hard to do small things for Tim to show him how much I care.*

She sat taller in her seat. What had Tim said to her again? She closed her eyes and replayed their fight in her mind.

*"And now you're going to dump me..."*

*"I thought this time would be different..."*

*"Have I always been the fallback guy?"*

*"I don't know if I can trust you..."*

Tim was so angry and sad. It was almost as if he were haunted by something. What happened to make him react like that?

As she continued to relive their late-night conversations and video chats with one another, she was struck with a sudden realization—Tim had never once shared anything about his own past relationships.

Her thoughts were interrupted when the driver's side door opened, and a gust of chilly air filled the car. A paper bag crinkled, and she felt the weight of something warm sitting on her knees.

“Gemma, I know I’m probably the last person on Earth you want to see...” Tim’s voice came out as a hoarse whisper. “But I wanted to make sure that, one, you got something to eat; two, your hip was okay; and three, I needed you to know that I’ll give you as much space as you want, but I refuse to let you go without a fight. Giving up is not a word in my vocabulary.”

She glanced down at the bag, then slowly lifted her chin to meet his gaze. The look of fear from earlier was gone, replaced by the glint of stubbornness and determination. It was a look she knew well. It was one that she saw every day when she studied herself in the mirror.

“You were right about everything. I’m so sorry for the way I treated you and if I hurt you in any way. I’ve never been more ashamed of myself for losing control over my emotions like that.” He took a deep breath. “Anyway, the tow truck driver just texted to let me know he’s almost here. We’ll be able to get out of here soon.”

Gemma’s pulse increased. Her hands closed around the top of the bag, and she clutched it close to her chest as if it were a lifeline. She wasn’t ready to say anything more to him yet. Her emotions were still running high.

“Thanks,” she managed.

He nodded and closed the door.

*He needs some space too.*

Gemma opened the bag, pulled out a still-lukewarm taco, and began to eat. Food had never been more welcome or tasted so good. The spices washed over her taste buds. In an instant, it was gone, and she was on to the next taco.

*Maybe I was too quick to jump to conclusions. Maybe there is still hope for us to be together.*

\* \* \*

It was close to midnight when Gemma and Tim arrived back within the town limits of Sequoia Valley.

“Gemma, where do you want me to take you? Charlie’s cabin?”

She lifted her head from the window and scrubbed the sleepy sand from her eyes. “We’re back in town?”

“Yeah, we are.”

She’d been asleep for more than three hours. The last thing she remembered seeing was the sign leaving Fresno’s city limits.

“What other options do we have?”

Tim stopped the car at the red light and glanced to his right. “Um, that depends . . .”

“On?”

“If you’re too tired and want to get right to bed, or if you *might* be willing to talk.”

The light changed to green, but Tim didn’t move. There were no other cars around. The town was deserted and dark

except for the few gas lamps lining the downtown open-air farmer's market.

"I've napped the whole way back. I'm wide awake, but if you're too tired to talk, we can wait until morning."

Tim gripped the steering wheel tightly. "I am tired, but if we wait until morning, I probably won't get any sleep."

"Then we should find a place to talk."

He blinked slowly. "Are you in the mood for a milkshake?"

"Only if it's chocolate."

His lips twitched. "Then we'll head to the Lucky Dog."

"Is it still open this late?"

"Not to the public."

Returning his attention to the road, Tim waited for the light to turn green once more, then turned left onto the town's main road.

"I don't understand."

"I have keys to the place."

"And the owners don't mind?"

"No." He entered the car park and pulled into the closest spot by the doors. "I'm an investor."

"Oh."

When they arrived, Tim unlocked the building, then entered and tapped on the nearest light switch. The hum of

electricity filled the building. “Where would you like to sit? A booth? The counter? The kitchen?”

Gemma’s eyes swept the room. “The counter.”

“Good choice. That’s the closet spot to the milkshake machine.”

Sitting on the padded stool, she rested her head on her elbows and watched as Tim expertly turned on the machine and pulled a few different levers to mix the ice cream. She tried to keep the conversation neutral and flowing. “How did you end up becoming an investor? Isn’t this a family-run business?”

“A couple years ago, the roof on the building needed an emergency repair. Sequoia Valley is a small town. It didn’t take long for word to spread that the owners didn’t have enough cash to cover everything. So I jumped in and offered to foot the entire cost of the repair bill in exchange for a ten-percent stake.”

“They didn’t mind that you aren’t family?”

“Technically speaking, I *am* related to the owners through my mom. She’s a third or fourth cousin.”

“That was kind of you.”

Locating a glass, Tim held it under the spout and began to fill it. “This place is special to my family. I had the money, so why not help if I had the means to?” He placed the cup on the counter in front of her. “One chocolate milkshake.”

“Are you going to have a vanilla one?”

“I am.”

As Tim started crafting his own drink, Gemma took a sip of her beverage. She wasn't sure what to say next. Things felt awkward. She had no idea where they stood.

*Do I just jump right in and ask him things directly? Should I continue to make small talk? Or is it better to stay quiet and let Tim handle the conversation?*

Filling a glass with the thick vanilla ice malt, he walked around the counter and sat on the stool facing her. “Gemma...”

“Tim...”

A moment of silence passed.

“I—no, go ahead.” They both spoke at the same time.

Tim held out his hand and gestured for Gemma to speak. “I was going to say that this conversation is going to be awkward no matter what we do,” she said. “I’ve sat here for the past couple minutes trying to figure out how to start or where to start.”

“That’s how I’m feeling too.” He gripped the milkshake glass tightly. “So how about if I go first and offer you another apology. I’m sorry, Gemma. I wasn’t myself tonight. I lost control and I took it out on you. I never wanted to hurt your feelings or ruin our relationship.”

“Apology accepted. Emotions were running high for both of us. I made a mistake too, and for that I also owe you an

apology. I should have come clean with you about *Cupid's Arrow* from the beginning.”

“Why did you even apply for the show?”

“Because it was a bucket-list item? Because I was tired of not being able to find the right bloke to date? I wanted to have what all my friends around me have—a loving relationship.” Gemma drummed her fingers against the counter. “It seemed like the perfect solution at the time. I love—well, used to love the show.”

“What happened?” Tim frowned.

“Talking with the casting director today made me realize that the entire production is fabricated. The point of the program isn't for people on the show to find love. It's about entertaining the viewers and making money.”

“For what it's worth, I'm sorry, Gem.”

“It doesn't matter now. I told the casting director that I'd met someone special and wanted nothing to do with them, but the bloke didn't get it. He tried to change my mind by telling me that if I wanted you to be a contestant on the show, he'd pull some strings and make it happen.”

“What?”

Gemma took a sip of her milkshake and nodded. “I told him I didn't want you involved in it. That's when you found me in the car.”

“I can't believe how low these creeps can go.” Tim face-palmed. “If only I'd listened earlier, you could've told me all

this and we could've avoided the fireworks display." His shoulders sagged. "Instead, I assumed you wanted to go on the show because you hoped to replace me with a better guy."

"Tim, I need you to know that in the last few weeks, I've never been happier." Gemma reached out and placed a hand on his knee. "You make me feel so special. You're not just my boyfriend, but you're a true friend too... Don't tell Frankie I said this, but you've kind of replaced her as being my person."

"Your person?"

"Uh-huh. You're the one person I can depend on through thick and thin. Good times and bad. You're the first person I call if I need advice, to vent, or if I need comfort. Talking to you is my reward at the end of a hard day."

His throat constricted and he squeezed her hand back. "You know what? You're my person too."

"Tim, it hurts me to think that you believed I'd toss you aside. I've done my best these past couple of weeks to try and show you how much I care about you, but now I feel like a failure. I didn't do enough to—"

"Gemma, you're *not* a failure. The problem is me." He stood and placed his hands on top of his head, staring out the window.

She gave him a moment, then stood beside him, placing a hand on his shoulder. Through the thin fabric of his shirt, she could feel the tension he carried there. The muscles moved as he breathed deeply and placed a hand on top of hers.



“Since my last relationship, I’ve been afraid to let anything go too far. I didn’t want to risk falling in love ever again. Love is messy and painful.” He winced. “But then I met you and decided that maybe it was time I broke my own rules. I was so tired of being alone.”

She inhaled sharply. “What happened?”

“My last girlfriend was a kindergarten teacher. We met at a teaching conference and hit it off. At least I thought we did. We dated for a year. On the night I took her out to celebrate our anniversary, she dumped me.”

A look of anguish crossed his face. “That’s when I found out that the only reason she’d agreed to date me in the first place was to get back at her ex. She’d never meant to let the ruse go so far. She’d never held any feelings for me. Everything I enjoyed, like comics, was too childish and nerdy for her. She wanted a more mature man.”

Gently turning him so he faced her, Gemma wrapped her arms around him and hugged him. Speaking into his shirt, she said, “How could anyone be so cruel?”

Tim stood still for a moment, then slowly brought his own arms around Gemma. “I don’t know, but it hurt. I can handle physical pain fine, but emotional pain is ten times worse. I felt like my heart had been thrown into a paper shredder and ripped apart. For a long time, I wondered what was wrong with me.”

Gemma listened to the constant beating of Tim’s heart. She wanted to personally go and find his ex and show her what the

sharp edge of a toe pick felt like. Nobody deserved to be treated like rubbish. “How long ago was this?”

“Five years, give or take?”

Gemma did the mental math. “Is that right when you started teaching?”

He nodded.

*Tim must have thrown all his energy into teaching. It's no wonder he's the type of enthusiastic teacher he is.*

Breaking their hug, Gemma cupped his cheeks. “Tim, I promise you’ll never have to go through an experience like that ever again. You have me, and I have enough love in my heart to make up for five, ten, or maybe even a hundred of your rotten exes.”

“You mean you’re still willing to keep me as your boyfriend? If not, I understand. All that I ask is that you give me the chance to prove myself to you.”

“No, you don’t need to prove yourself to me. I already know you have a heart of gold.” She placed a hand on his lips. “I didn’t mean what I said when I told you to go ahead and leave. I didn’t want you to. I was mad.” She took a step closer to him. “You’re the man that I’ve fallen for. I love you.”

“You love me?”

“Uh-huh. I do.”

Tim pulled Gemma into his body and up against his chest. A smile tugged at the corner of his lips. “I love you too,

Gemma-rella.”

# Chapter 21



On Thanksgiving Day, Gemma removed the plastic skate guards protecting her blades and set them on the boards by the entry to the ice. Slowly gliding along, she tested her legs on the surface. Her toes felt as if they were on pins and needles. The arch of her foot was cramping.

As she bent her knees, the tongue of her skating boot rubbed against the tender skin of her shins and heels. She smiled widely as a blast of icy air numbed her face. Although her feet would ache later, she didn't care. She was back on the ice.

Warming up with some three turns, counters, brackets, and other footwork, Gemma was relieved that it felt as if she'd never taken any time off. Her blades let out ripping noises as they dug into the ice. Her knees rose and fell onto deep inside and outside edges.

"Looking good, Gem." Charlie grinned from the ice's door.

She came to a stop in front of him, breathing heavily. "I missed this so much."

"I can relate." He removed his own plastic guards and entered the ice. "When I started pairs again with Frankie, there were no words to express how happy it made me. It was like

I'd taken a trip to Disneyland. Everything just felt light and like my feet couldn't touch the ground."

"I missed being able to do the simple things. I'll never take a change of edge for granted again." She took a sip of water. "Thanks for agreeing to coach me today. I know how valuable your time off is. I really appreciate it."

"I'm happy to do it. You're family, and that's the theme of the day." He smiled. "What's your game plan for the session?"

"I don't want to push myself too hard, but I'd like to have a go at trying out some spins and some of the footwork from my Cinderella program. I want you to watch closely and let me know if I'm doing anything wonky."

"And by wonky, you mean..."

"I want you to call me out if it looks like I've changed anything in my spinning technique to compensate for the discomfort in my hip. I don't want my body to get another injury from modifying the way I've skated the last twenty-plus years."

His eyes widened in understanding. "Got it."

"If we have time after that, I thought that maybe we could practice some crossovers and other basic partnering skills. When I'm back on tour, DOI management will expect me to start skating with Fernando again as soon as I'm cleared."

"They don't give you time to settle in, do they?"

"Theoretically they're supposed to, but this time of year, everyone's body is beat up. They need every extra skater they

can get.” Gemma sighed. “If you ask Frankie about it, she’ll tell you a couple of crazy stories, like the time we had to learn one of the ensemble numbers between quick changes because management didn’t realize we were short three bodies.”

They skated side by side, chatting and circling the rink. “Eleven or twelve shows a week is so taxing on the body. You guys are like Broadway dancers.”

“We are. I skate and train almost as much as I did when I competed.”

“Have you had any updates on the contract yet?”

“No.” Gemma huffed. “I scheduled a meeting with management as soon as I get back. They don’t have any excuses to make me wait any longer.”

“Are you going to accept it, then? I thought you’d decided to retire.”

“I’m *leaning* toward retirement, but I don’t want to rule anything out until I’ve had time to have a good think over all the possible paths my future could follow.”

“Good for you, Gem. I’m proud of you.”

Changing the subject, she asked, “How’s your training for the International Prix Championship going? It’s only three weeks away.”

“Frankie and I are ready. It’s been helpful to have Fernando stepping up to coach us via video chat. We’re not making any changes or adjustments to the program. We’re just going to go into the competition like it’s business as usual.”

“Because you two killed it at Skate United States and the Maple Leaf Trophy.”

Charlie puffed out his chest. “We did.”

Gemma shot him a smile. “And what are your plans for afterward? Are you going to spend a little extra time in Japan? A little birdy mentioned there was a chance you two might be jumping across the pond for Christmas?”

“Originally, Frankie *thought* it might be possible to spend the end of December and first three weeks of January training in the UK in the lead-up to Worlds to spend time with her sister, but in all the excitement, she forgot that we have to skate at Nationals first to even make the team.”

Although it wasn't public knowledge, Frankie had discovered more than a year ago that she was the biological sister of Clara, the Duchess of Leeds. After being apart for more than twenty-six years, the two sisters were trying their best to make up for lost time. They'd met in person once yet were still in constant communication with one another.

They shared a laugh, coming to a stop. “Oh, Frankie.”

“I had to point out to her that with all the uncertainty about finding a rink and traveling back and forth, we'd be better off training on home ice.” Charlie retrieved his mobile from the front pocket of his black North Face jacket. “Anyway, enough about us. Let's focus on you. Why don't you warm up your forward and backward scratch spins? I want to see if I can get the slow-motion feature on this guy to work. It would make life a lot easier to be able to show you what I see.”

“Yes, Mr. C.” Gemma saluted him, then peeled off her outermost jacket, tossed it onto the boards, and adjusted her gloves. “I’ll do the forward scratch first.”

Performing a few back crossovers, Gemma held a long entry edge, then stepped into the spin on the ball of her left foot. Like most skaters, she performed all her jumps and spins counterclockwise. Finding the “sweet spot” of her blade, she pulled her arms and legs tightly into her body. The world blurred. A few seconds later, coming out on two feet lazily, she bent over at the waist, resting her hands on her knees.

“Ugh, I can’t breathe, and I’m dizzy.”

Charlie stopped recording and glided over to her, assisting her to an upright position. “Spins will do that to you.”

“Char... lie... not... helping.”

He chuckled. “Sorry.”

“No, you’re not.” She shot him a playful glare. “You’re just saying that to make me feel better.”

“Maybe I am, but that’s what all good coaches do.” She pushed his arm and he glided to the left. “Let’s see how the video turned out, then we can pick it apart.”

Gemma’s expression sobered. “I’m afraid to ask, but what did you see?”

Charlie tapped the screen and held it between them. “Nothing major.” He hit the Play button, and together they watched the video. “Right here, you’re a little wobbly on the



entry edge.” He paused it. “And right before you pull in, you’re holding your free leg lower than you used to.”

Gemma stared at the screen. “I am.”

“Gem, considering the time off and nature of your injury, I thought overall, it looked pretty solid. Did anything bother you on it?”

“No. Laybacks and sit spins are the positions that aggravate my hip the most. I had to limit how many I did before my layoff.” She grimaced. “I can get away without doing a layback, but not sit spins. I’ll just have to find the strength to power through them.”

“One of my students had a similar problem as you, but it was an injury to her growth plate. We ended up modifying her sit spins to a broken-leg position. It took a lot of stress off the hip area.” He ran a hand through his hair. “In your case, I think if we played around, we could find a variant of the sit-spin position that’s less painful than a traditional sit. You shouldn’t have to power through anything.”

“I’m willing to give it a go. Only, how does a person do a broken-leg spin?”

“It’s easy; you start like you’re doing a sit spin, but grab the back of your legs, and tilt sideways.”

Gemma was lost. “Can you show me?”

Charlie’s cheeks colored. “Uh... I’m not the best person for the job. Maybe I can see if Frankie is around.”

“Oh come on, Charlie. You said it was *easy*. So show me your broken-leg spin.”

He huffed. “If I show you, you can’t tell anyone how bad it looks.”

Gemma promised she wouldn’t, curiosity piqued.

Stowing his mobile into his jacket pocket, Charlie wound up for a sit spin, and grabbed the back of his calves. His bum stuck up too high, however. As he tried to initiate a sideways lean, he fell over and spun around on his bum like a breakdancer.

Gemma covered her mouth with her hand, giggling. “So *that’s* what it’s supposed to look like.”

“I told you I was lousy at it.” Charlie stood and brushed the ice off his trousers, muttering, “I have a video of Richelle doing it. You can watch her.”

They spent the next hour figuring out what her body was capable of doing. Gemma was surprised to find that she felt better than she had in weeks. The extended time off *was* working for her. Her spirits began to lift.

Gripping Charlie’s forearm, she locked eyes with him. He nodded to her. “On your count.”

“Push, cross. Push, cross,” Gemma said as they practiced a series of slow and fast back crossovers around the rink. “Change.” Charlie’s body moved in closer to hers. His hands moved to her hips. Bending her knees, she directed him, “Ready, go.” A moment later, she was up in the air, “sitting”

on Charlie's right hand, waving to an invisible audience. "Down." Extending her leg, toward the ice, they glided, then stopped.

"How did that feel?"

"So-so." Gemma took a mental inventory of her body. "It was a bit uncomfortable at first, but only when we left the ice. I'm not used to your grip. I think when I do it with Fernando, I'll be okay."

"That's good. It's always difficult to skate with a new partner, especially when you've learned different techniques. Is there anything else you wanted to run through or try out?"

Gemma shook her head. "No. I've kept you long enough today. Let's pick up our stuff and go meet your family."

Charlie grinned widely. "Wait until you try Nan's turkey and stuffing."

"I'm looking forward to it. I've never had any American Thanksgiving foods before."

"You haven't?"

"No. The last couple of years, DOI was in Asia or Europe in November. This is the first year we're in the States."

They slipped on their jackets and slid their rubber skate guards over the sharpened blades.

"I just have one favor to request of you," Gemma started. "If I'm asked to try some pumpkin pie, would you mind if it magically appeared on your plate?"

Charlie's body shook with laughter. "You can always say no, that you don't want any."

"I'd hate to be rude. I have a hard time saying no to Suzy."

"Nan wouldn't be offended. She'd just offer you an extra serving of cherry or peach cobbler. They're just as good. We always get them from this place called the Lucky Dog Diner. They make the best pies around."

\* \* \*

Gemma looked at all the warming dishes sitting on the sideboard. There were fluffy potatoes, marshmallow-topped candied yams, soft veggies, cornbread, jellied cranberries, stuffing, and a massive twenty-five-pound turkey. She scooped a small amount of everything onto her plate.

"I can see why you told me to wear stretchy trousers." She laughed.

Frankie was focused on lathering her potatoes, turkey, and stuffing with gravy. "Uh-huh. Suzy outdoes herself every year."

Leaving the serving line, Gemma sat down in the middle of the table that had been set for nine. The men—Mr. T, Tim, Charlie, Leslie's boyfriend, and their uncle Jack—lingered in the kitchen chatting over drinks as they waited for the space to clear up.

"Stop, Frankie, I can't take credit for everything. Your father and Charlie did a magnificent job with the turkey, potatoes, and dessert."

“Charlie did all the cooking. Dad only peeled the potatoes,” Frankie whispered as she sat beside Gemma.

They shared a giggle.

“Gem, what do you think of Thanksgiving so far?” Leslie asked.

She gestured to her plate. “I’m excited to try everything! Turkey is such a welcome change from the foods we eat for Christmas at home. Mum usually makes a roast or a ham.”

Leslie took a seat across from Gemma. “Roast sounds good. Maybe that’s what we should make for Christmas this year, Nan.”

“What do you normally have?” Gemma asked.

“The same spread as Thanksgiving. All this.”

She nodded.

“What are your plans for Christmas, Gem? I meant to ask you earlier. Are you going home?” Frankie poured herself a glass of sparkling apple cider.

“That’s the plan. It’s been too long since I’ve seen my mum and dad. I’m well overdue.” Frankie gestured to her glass. “I’ll take a half glass. Thanks.”

“Is Tim going with you?”

Her cheeks burned. “Yes.”

Excited chatter broke out between Leslie and Frankie.

Locking eyes with Gemma, Suzy cleared her throat. “Rich, Charlie, Tim, Ron, Jack—we’re waiting on you.”

Sheepishly, the lads entered the room, carrying on excitedly about fishing.

Tim walked around the table and took the empty seat next to Gemma.

“Are you sure your parents don’t mind you missing dinner with them tonight?” she whispered.

“No, they understand. We had lunch as our big meal. They’re more excited to meet you in person tomorrow!”

“You’ve already had turkey and all this food?”

“Yes, but that was hours ago.”

She chuckled, counting herself lucky to have a man like him in her life.

\* \* \*

“Does anyone have any room for dessert? Or should we wait an hour and digest?” Suzy asked.

Everyone around the table groaned.

“We don’t have any room left, Nan,” Charlie said.

Frankie poked him in the arm. “And whose fault is that? You didn’t have to eat three helpings!”

“Nan, I’ll go out on a limb and say we should wait.” Leslie stood and started collecting everyone’s plates and utensils. “Does anyone feel up for a nice walk by the lake?”

Frankie, Charlie, Ron, and Jack eagerly agreed.

“No for Rich and me. We want to get a head start on putting away all the leftovers,” Suzy remarked.

“Tim and I are staying behind to help with the washing up,” Gemma said.

“Gem, Tim, you guys are guests. You shouldn’t have to do the dishes,” Frankie told her.

“Oh, I don’t mind, especially since I didn’t cook anything,” Tim said.

“And I don’t want to overdo it after skating this morning.”

Frankie nodded in understanding. Getting up from around the table, everyone helped bring the remaining dishes into the kitchen, then the others left to grab their coats for their walk.

“Suzy, do you mind if I borrow Tim for a few minutes? I need his help with something in the den,” Mr. T said.

“Of course.”

“Come on kiddo.”

Tim and Mr. T exited the room.

“Where would you like me to start?” Gemma asked, staring with wide eyes at the sheer amount of leftovers. There was still so much of everything remaining. “If you wouldn’t mind pulling out some of the Tupperware containers off the top shelf of the cabinet on the right, that would be great.”

Gemma retrieved the requested items, then assisted Suzy with rinsing and loading the dishes and utensils into the dishwasher.

When they'd finished the first stack, Gemma said, "Mr. T and Tim have been gone a long time. Do you think they're okay?"

"Why don't you go check on them, dear."

After Suzy assured her she was indeed fine by herself, Gemma wandered out of the kitchen into the den. The Elvis song "Walks Like an Angel" was playing from the family jukebox. The lights had been dimmed and replaced by the soft glow of twenty candles. Rose petals had been sprinkled around them. The coffee table had been moved out of the center of the room to the side.

"Gemma, I've been waiting for you. I think you owe me a dance," Tim said as he stepped out of the shadows wearing a crisp white dress shirt, skinny tie, and fitted black trousers that reminded Gemma of a man straight out of the 1950s.

Her pulse began to race.

"I think this song was written for you." He winked.

Wordlessly, a grinning Mr. T snuck out of the room.

Closing the distance between them, Tim placed a hand on hers and led her out into the center of the room. Wrapping her arms around his neck, she gazed into his eyes and swayed side to side in a slow dance. "You've been holding out on me."

"I have?"

She poked him in the chest. "You're a brilliant dancer."



“Not really, but thanks for saying so.” He lifted his arm and twirled her. “I have a small confession to make.”

“Oh?” Gemma arched an eyebrow.

“Suzy and Charlie gave me a crash course on how to slow dance.”

Gemma giggled. “Don’t worry, I won’t tell anyone.”

“This is the best Thanksgiving I’ve had in a long time.”

“Me too.”

“Gem...”

“Mmm...” She lifted her head off his chest.

“I know you’re thinking about leaving Dreams on Ice. Would you be open to spending time with me in Scottsdale? Maybe even moving there?”

She stiffened. “You’ve made up your mind?”

“I’m about eighty percent of the way there.” Dropping his hands by his side, he shoved them into his pockets. “This once-in-a-lifetime opportunity is being dangled in front of me and I haven’t been able to stop thinking about it.”

Considering her next words carefully, she offered, “Only you know how badly you want that job.”

“Gemma, you’re avoiding the question. I know this is a lot to ask of you since we haven’t been together that long, but your answer is important to me.”

“If it would make you happy.”

“That’s exactly what I hoped you’d say.” Tim flashed her a million-watt grin. “I have a trip to Scottsdale lined up next weekend. I haven’t been back in a couple years. There’s a brand-new state-of-the-art facility Mike’s built, and a rehearsal hall, and . . . ”

Gemma, however, only half paid attention. Her heart wasn’t in Arizona. It was firmly planted in Sequoia Valley.

*Remember what Leslie told you all those weeks ago. Relationships are about compromise. You can’t have everything you want in life. If Tim is set on taking his dream job, I’ll support him. Above all else, he wants me to be happy. Now it’s my turn to repay the favor.*

# Chapter 22



“Good job, Gemma, give me two more,” Mel the PT called out.

Beads of perspiration dripped down Gemma’s forehead. Her quads quivered from exertion. She used every ounce of strength she could muster to give Mel two more reps with the leg press machine, then collapsed against the padded backing.

“Nice. That’s one more than yesterday.”

“Do you want me to work on the balance board today too?”

“No, we’ll end the session with this. After all, you’re planning to skate today, aren’t you?”

Gemma nodded. “Yeah, Fernando and I are going to skate in the intro, and in the finale. We’re close, but not quite ready to rejoin the princess melody segment yet.”

She’d been back with the company for five days, but it felt like a lot longer.

“Got it. From my perspective, I’d say that strength-wise, you’re much better off than you were a month ago.”

Gemma grinned. “You can thank Frankie for pushing me.”

“If we stick to the routine, and you’re careful if you experience any flare-ups, I don’t see why you wouldn’t be able

to make it through the remaining three weeks of the season. Dr. Zhang's report was favorable."

She fist pumped. "That's what I'd hoped you'd say."

"With any luck, when management receives my report on your injury, it'll help them see that there's no reason for them to have put you on probation. It's insulting. They've never done it with any other skaters before. What was the excuse they gave you again?"

Gemma suppressed a grimace. "The head of HR said DOI is looking to implement new policies to ensure that any skater returning from injury is fully fit. They'll pick a date to watch me skate in the show to assess if I can, as they said, 'do the job as stated in my contract.'"

"It's a load of legal nonsense, if you ask me."

"Oh, Mel, it was so frustrating. Management only gave me five minutes of their time. They were in the middle of some tense discussions when they called me in." Gemma sighed. "I don't care what the policy is or even that I'm on probation. All I want is for them to give me a direct answer on my next contract. It should be simple—yes or no. I can't make any decisions about the future until this is all sorted out."

"Did they give you any time frame on when they'd do the assessment?"

"It's supposed to be sometime this week."

"What a waste. Like I said earlier, the season is over in three weeks." She rolled her eyes. "Well, let me know if you

want me to light any fires under their butts. I have a couple friends I could call in favors with to try and speed things along,” Mel promised.

“Thanks, Mel. I appreciate you.” Gathering up her mobile, earbuds, and water bottle, Gemma waved goodbye to her and headed to Fernando’s dressing room to meet her skating partner.

The door was propped open a crack. As she peeked through it, she could see Fernando curled up, fast asleep on the couch. His snoring was loud, reminding her of a roaring bear. She giggled. He let out an even louder snore.

Discreetly taking out her mobile, she pushed the door open a little wider and angled the device so she was in the frame, and snapped a photo. She’d use it for something fun later on.

“Hola, Fernando. Time to wakey wakey,” Gemma gently shook his body.

He let out a loud groan. “Dos minutos más. Two more minutes.”

“No two more minutes.” He burrowed under the cover. Gemma giggled and tugged it away. “Up now. We’re on a schedule, Señor Fernando.”

“Fine,” he muttered. A puff of dark-brown hair appeared at the top of the blanket. “I’m up.”

“I’ll be in my dressing room getting a start on my makeup. When you’re ready to warm up our lifts, come find me.”

Fernando stood, yawned, and waved her off. The blanket remained draped around his shoulders like a cape. It reminded her of Tim. Her face fell.

“Gemma, what’s that look?”

She quickly glanced away from her skating partner. “Nothing.”

He frowned. “You’re thinking about him again.”

“Maybe?” She couldn’t hide it from him. Her shoulders hunched. “He’s in Scottsdale this week. I’ve gotten a couple photos and texts from him showing and telling me about the different parts of the city. He’s so excited.”

“Why don’t you tell him the truth—that you don’t want to move to Arizona.”

“I can’t do that.”

“Why not?”

“It’s complicated.”

“That’s not a valid answer.”

Gemma unlocked her mobile screen and swiped through her messages with Tim until she found an image of him posing next to the Sloth mascot with a flaming bat. “Look at the goofy grin on his face.”

“He reminds me of a cartoon character. You don’t want to spoil it for him, do you?”

“No.”

“You’re too nice, Gem.” Fernando folded the blanket and crossed his arms. “This is why I’m happy being a bachelor. All I have to worry about is me, myself, and I.”

“You can’t mean that.”

“I do.”

“Fernando, come on, you’ve got to admit that sometimes being single is lonely.”

“Nope.”

“What about when you and I have gone out to dinner, and I’ve caught you staring longingly at some of the attractive women sitting alone? Or the dating app I know you have on your mobile.”

“I don’t have any dating apps installed.”

Gemma snorted. “We’re friends on more than half of them. I can see when you’re online.”

“What are you doing on dating apps? Aren’t you in a relationship?”

“Fair point.”

She’d only logged on once recently, and it was to remove her credit cards from her profile before she deleted the apps.

“Do you want the honest truth? It’s difficult for a male skater to find a woman who understands our profession.” He shot her a sad expression and shook his head. “More than once, I’ve been out for a date and been laughed at when I told

them what I do for a living. *If* I end up going on a date, now I just tell women I'm a member of the mafia."

"Oh, Fernando." She face-palmed. "Does it work? Wait, you know what, don't tell me. What I should be telling you is that you just haven't found the right woman yet."

"Maybe. Maybe not." He shrugged. "Either way, I'm not in the market for a relationship. I'm more interested in enjoying life on the road and stepping in to coach Frankie and Charlie."

As she watched the body language of her skating partner, she knew that he was lying, but it wasn't her place to judge him. She promised herself that she'd find a way to help him. He was her partner, and partners helped one another out.

"Don't worry about me, Gem. Let's get to work."

\* \* \*

Fernando's hands gripped Gemma's hips firmly and rotated her around in a circle. The arena was dark, but still lit with soft pale-pink lighting. The neon glow-in-the-dark necklaces and bracelets the audience members wore pulsed with the beats of the music. She could see all the way up to the top of the bleachers. Although she couldn't make out any faces clearly, she could still see little hands clapping and eagerly waving to her.

As she changed positions and sat on top of Fernando's hand, she stretched her arms out and gave her best princess wave. That's when she heard the voices.



“Cinderella, you’re my favorite princess!”

“Cinderella, try not to lose your slipper and watch out for your sisters; they’re evil!”

“Mom, look, she waved to me! Mom, did you see that?!”

Hearing the high-pitched, excited tone of the children was why she was here. Seeing them light up with excitement was the reason she was pushing herself to skate as much as she could.

She remembered being five or six years old herself when her parents had taken her to her first ice show. It was the closest she could get to seeing her favorite princesses and heroes come to life. Her parents had never been able to afford a trip to a fancy theme park.

*I want all those children who are like me to be able to get the same experience I did out of seeing Dreams on Ice. I want them to walk out of here talking about one thing: how much fun they had at the show tonight. Who knows, maybe I’m even performing in front of a few future skaters.*

Fernando set her down on the ice. They skated one more lap, then disappeared backstage. “Somebody has a lot of extra energy today,” he laughed.

“I don’t know, I can’t explain it. I just feel so inspired. When we were out there just now, I had this flashback to when I was little, and Mum and Dad were with me, watching the mermaid princess battle the evil sea witch.”

Techs dressed in all black darted around the small back area, moving sets and props from one location to another and talking to one another on headsets.

“Aww, you sound like Frankie. She got her start in skating by watching a show, too,” Fernando said.

“I didn’t know that. Funny, I know pretty much everything about Frankie except that.”

As they stepped off the ice, a tech handed them their skate guards.

“I’m going to grab a snack. Can I get you anything?” Fernando asked.

“No, but thanks. I’m just going to stretch and take my time changing.”

“Great. Meet back here in an hour for the finale?”

“Yes, sir.” She mock saluted him. He laughed and disappeared down the hall.

Pulling open the door to her dressing room, Gemma removed the blond wig and patted her hair. The wig cap was still firmly in place. She zipped open her skate backpack to feel around for her tablet.

*Knock. Knock.*

“It’s open,” Gemma shouted.

The door handle turned, and a woman dressed in a white dress shirt and gray pencil skirt strode in. Her heels click-

clacked against the ground. From how she carried herself, there was no doubt that this woman exuded confidence.

Gemma angled her body toward the door. “Hello, can I help you?”

The woman tucked a clipboard under her arm. “Ms. MacLeod, I’m Annette Wilcox from HR. I’m the caseworker who’s been assigned to you.”

“Oh.” Gemma tapped her hair and pulled off the wig cap. Her curls cascaded toward her shoulders. Jumping to her feet, she extended her hand. “Nice to meet you.”

The woman’s hands remained in place. Her gaze, however, appraised Gemma from head to toe, as if she were being X-rayed. “Yes... well, let’s cut right to the chase, shall we?”

Gemma placed a hand on her hip. “Are you here to schedule the assessment?”

“No, I’ve just completed it. I just have a few nitty-gritty details to confirm with you.” The woman brought the clipboard up to her eye level. “It says here that you’ve been diagnosed with a partially-torn labrum in your right hip; is that correct?”

“Yes.”

“And your preferred course of treatment for the present is a combination of physical therapy and rest.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Ms. Wilcox nodded sharply and scribbled down a few notes.

“I don’t know if it’s been added, but I’ve been transferred to the care of Dr. Zhang. He’s an ortho—”

“Yes, I have it here.”

“Oh.”

The woman tucked the clipboard back under her elbow. “May I ask, who was it who directed you to go and see Dr. Zhang? Was it the physical therapist Melanie Rosewood?”

Gemma fidgeted. She didn’t like the sharp tone of the HR worker. Something about the way she was asking her questions raised a red flag.

*Technically, it was Mel who recommended I seek a second opinion. She didn’t seem to trust the company doctor. I don’t trust Ms. Wilcox. She’s acting like a robot.*

“I did it all on my own. Dr. Zhang is a friend of sorts.”

Ms. Wilcox pinched her lips together. “Were you aware that when you did so, you breached the terms of your contract?”

Gemma took a step back. “No, I wasn’t.”

“Section five, subsection four, paragraph one, line three, notes that all employees of Dreams on Ice and its subsidiary companies may only seek treatment from the preapproved list of medical practitioners.”

“I... I’m sorry, I didn’t know. It was an honest mistake.”

Ms. Wilcox cleared her throat. “When you signed your present contract, you stated that you understood that any breach of its terms would subject you to potential disciplinary action. Based on this, and the lackluster skating skills I witnessed today, it’s been decided that you’ll be released from the company effective immediately.”

Her breath hitched. “Excuse me?”

“You’ll receive the written confirmation of your termination following today’s performance.”

Gemma’s heart raced. She shook her head in disbelief. “You’re firing me? With less than three weeks remaining on my contract?”

“Indeed, we are. Unfortunately, you’re a liability. You’ve disregarded the company’s rules. Dreams on Ice takes the health and safety of its employees seriously. This is for your own good.”

She clenched her fists. “I’m sorry, but are you even qualified to judge how I skated today? Do you have any knowledge about skating?”

“It doesn’t matter.” Ms. Wilcox’s eyes narrowed. “It’s clear to anyone with eyes that you struggled today. I have video proof as my evidence. My decisions have *never* been questioned by my superiors.”

Gemma crossed her arms. “The only thing I didn’t do in the opening number is the throw double Salchow. How does that constitute struggling?”

“Paragraph eight of section nine, line seven, states that a figure skater employed by Dreams on Ice must perform the choreography as was intended. We can’t have our skaters alter the opening number as they see fit. We have certain standards, not to mention brand integrity, to maintain.”

*She has the contract lines and paragraph numbers memorized? Who does that? How does she even know what was supposed to be performed? She just admitted she doesn’t know a thing about skating. Has somebody put her up to this on purpose?*

Gemma’s nostrils flared. “This is all bullocks. I demand to file an inquiry into your findings.”

“I’m sorry, Ms. MacLeod. It doesn’t work that way. My decision is final. You are no longer able to do your job to the standards we require. Dreams on Ice doesn’t employ second-rate skaters past their prime.”

“I’ve been with Dreams on Ice for eight seasons. The least you could do is let me finish.”

“No. That would be too risky with your injury.” Ms. Wilcox walked to the door. “I’ll have your final paycheck cut for you as you leave the building. Your medical insurance, as of the end of the day, is also terminated.”

Gemma sank down into her makeup chair. “What about the hotel and transportation to the airport?”

Ms. Wilcox flashed her a greasy smile. “As a gesture of goodwill, we’ll allow you to stay at the hotel tonight on us.

However, you're responsible for providing your own transportation wherever it is you wish to go. Have a good day." The woman saw herself out.

Gemma slammed her fist against the makeup table, and the contents clattered to the ground. She held her head in her hands. "What a bloody mess." Scrubbing her forehead, she searched the ground for her wig cap and shoved it back on. "I don't want to work for this rotten company anyway. Good riddance."

Locating her mobile, she opened a text message and started to type to Tim.

**Gemma:** I know we agreed not to talk today since you're flying home and have work first thing tomorrow, but if you see this, can you ring me? Anytime is fine. If I don't pick up, I'll return your call as soon as I can. I need to hear your calming voice.

# Chapter 23



“They did what?!” Fernando and Mel exclaimed simultaneously.

Other skaters stared at the pair quizzically as they dashed to their rooms to change. Stage technicians rushed to pack sets, props, and other pieces of equipment away into their appropriate wooden crates. The next show would be in less than twenty-four hours in a different city.

“I was made redundant. Fired. Let go. Terminated. Whatever you want to call it,” Gemma covered her skate blade with a plastic skate guard. “I’m apparently too beat-up and too much of a liability to DOI. Plus, I also wasn’t supposed to see a doctor outside the company network.”

“That’s BS. The company has *never* actually enforced that rule. Not to mention, I wrote in the report that your body had made a better-than-expected recovery from the three weeks of rest you took. Did they even bother to read it?”

“I doubt it.”

“Gemma, you have to fight this,” Fernando urged. His face was covered in uneven red splotches. “I can’t lose you.”

Gemma’s shoulders sagged. “It’s too late. The HR worker already gave me this”—she held up a manila envelope—“the



moment I stepped backstage. She didn't even wait for me to return to my dressing room to change."

"May I see that?" Mel asked.

She passed it over to the PT. Fernando wrapped an arm protectively around her. "If you're going, I am too. I'm tired of skating the same crap anyway. Time to try to move to coaching full-time."

"Fernando, I appreciate you saying that, but you might as well finish your contract. Earn the money while you can. Besides, didn't you just book your parents on an around-the-world cruise for their Christmas gift?"

"I did."

Mel suddenly interjected, "Gemma, the date on this letter is from last week, before you were officially back with us."

"What?" She grabbed the paper from Mel's hands and skimmed its contents. "It is." She swallowed hard. "That means the company had already made its decision on me before our meeting. Maybe there *is* a way I can fight this."

Mel and Fernando nodded.

"It's worth a shot. I'll start looking up a couple different lawyers tonight when we get into the hotel," Mel said.

"Lawyers?"

"Yes. It's going to take a legal heavyweight to be able to fight a company like DOI," Mel emphasized.

Gemma could see dollar and pound signs floating in front of her eyes. It would be a long and drawn-out process. Taking a deep breath, she looked at Mel and Fernando. “No, I’m done with DOI. It’s not worth the time, energy, expense, or heartbreak. I doubt it’ll even make a difference. At this point, I’d rather cut my losses, make a clean break, and just figure out what comes next.”

Fernando hugged her tightly. “My little Gemma-rella has grown up. That’s the most adult thing I think I’ve ever heard you say.”

“Are you sure, Gem? You probably won’t be the first or the last person DOI decides to ruthlessly cut like this.” Mel lowered her voice. “There’s definitely something fishy going on behind the scenes. I don’t know what it is, but I don’t like this at all.” She pinched her lips together. “It’s my fault you went to see Dr. Zhang. I should go and set the record straight.”

“Mel, I appreciate it, but no. It’s like you said, nothing will change their mind. This is bigger than me.” Gemma took a moment to gather her thoughts. “If you catch word of any other skaters who are put through the same paces as me, let me know and I’ll consider taking legal action, but until we know more, I’d prefer not to do anything else.”

Fernando and Mel promised her that they would.

\* \* \*

Gemma should have been angry, but instead, she found that she was eerily calm. As she walked through the hotel lobby

later that evening, the sound of Burl Ives's classic rendition of "Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer" played over the sound system. White, green, and pink Christmas trees trimmed with colorful lights and baubles filled the space.

As she turned the corner to take the lift to her room, she stopped to admire the sight of families queuing to meet Father Christmas. Children bounced up and down on their toes, anxious for their turn. Seeing the excitement on their little faces instantly lifted her mood. There were at least still some places in the world where magic existed.

Suddenly, there was a gentle tug on one of her sleeves. "Cinderella?" a girl with wide blue eyes asked.

Gemma was still dressed in a light-blue dress with a black jacket thrown over it. She was so distracted, she forgot to change before leaving the arena. She'd have to have somebody sneak this back tomorrow. She couldn't leave the company any excuse to accuse her of stealing.

Gemma's heart melted and she knelt down on one knee. "Hi there. What's your name?"

"I'm Ava."

"Ava, that's a lovely name. It sounds like the perfect name for a princess like you."

The little girl giggled. "I told Mommy that I saw you, but she didn't believe me. I had to come and tell you that you're my favorite princess."

“Well, I’m so happy to hear that.” Noticing suddenly that Ava was alone, she said, “Where is your mum?”

Ava pointed to the end of the queue for Father Christmas. A woman with a rounded belly chatted with another woman with a double stroller ahead of her. She hadn’t noticed that her daughter, who Gemma guessed to be about five years old, had gone missing.

“How about we tell your mum you found me and then maybe we can take a photo together.”

“Yes, princess.”

Holding her hand, Gemma walked Ava over to her mother. “Do you really have glass slippers? Mommy said they’re only make believe.”

“I do, but can you keep a secret?”

Ava solemnly nodded.

“My fairy godmother keeps them for me.”

Her little eyes widened.

“Ava! Did you run off after I told you not to?”

“But Mommy, look, I found Cinderella!”

“I can see that, but it’s more important that you know better than to run off and talk to strangers,” Ava’s mother huffed. Her gaze turned to Gemma. “Thank you for finding her and bringing her back to me. I hope she wasn’t too much trouble.”

“She wasn’t,” Gemma promised. “I was just on my way up to my room.”

“We just saw you skate today. You were lovely.”

“Oh, thank you so much.”

“Mommy?”

“Yes, Ava?”

“Can we take our picture together now?”

Ava’s mother shot her a “would you mind” look. Gemma signaled for Ava to come stand next to her.

“On the count of three. One, two, and three.” Her mother took the photo. “What do we say?”

“Thank you!” Ava said, then launched her arms around Gemma’s legs. “Is your prince around here too?”

“Oh, um... I don’t know. I’ll have to send one of my mice to see if they can find him.”

Ava giggled again. “Or maybe you can send your fairy godmother.”

“That’s a brilliant idea too.” Gemma winked. “Don’t forget our secret.”

“I won’t.”

Gemma smiled, then turned to Ava’s mother and exchanged a few words with her as the clock in the lobby chimed seven times.

“Wow!” Ava suddenly exclaimed. “Cinderella, is that your carriage? I thought it was made of glass. Can I have a ride? Are the horses really mice?”

The adults both stopped talking. Looking out the front glass doors of the lobby, they noticed a horse-drawn carriage stopping in front. A bride in a flowing white ballgown stepped out, followed by a groom.

“Ava, that’s not hers. Do you see the woman in the wedding gown? She’s getting married.”

Gemma, however, didn’t hear the rest of what was being said. Her attention was focused on the tall man in a tan overcoat and brown hair pulling off a pair of gloves while entering the lobby. Under his other arm, he carried a large bouquet of flowers. He checked his mobile. She’d know him anywhere.

“Tim,” she called out, awkwardly half waving her hand.

His head shot up. Smiling, he returned her wave and walked toward her.

“Boyfriend?” Ava’s mom asked.

Gemma nodded, her eyes not leaving his person. She’d forgotten just how handsome he was. Had it only been a week and a half since she’d last seen him? The overcoat fit his body like a second skin, hugging him in all the right places.

“We won’t keep you, then. It looks like you two have plans. Come, Ava, it’s almost time to meet Santa. Say thank you and goodbye to Cinderella.”

“Bye, princess. And thank you again!” Ava and her mother moved up in line. “Mommy, did you bring the cookies and milk? And my letter?”

“I brought cookies and your letter, but remember, we aren’t giving Santa any milk in case he’s allergic. Don’t forget, last year he told you he was lactose intolerant.”

With each step Tim took, Gemma’s pulse increased. Butterflies fluttered their wings so quickly that it reminded her of performing a spin on the ice.

“Hi,” she managed as he stopped right in front of her. “You’re, er . . . here.”

“These are for you.” Fumbling with flowers, he shoved them in front of him.

Gemma accepted the flowers and sniffed them. “These are stunning. Thank you so much.” They were a bouquet of pink, red, and white roses. The smell reminded her of an expensive bottle of her favorite Jo Malone Red Roses perfume.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t see your text message until just now.”

“You just received it?”

He nodded.

“Then how did you know how badly I needed to see you?”

“I didn’t. It’s just a coincidence. I flew into Toledo this afternoon to surprise you.” Tim rubbed the back of his neck. “Watching you this afternoon was the first time I’ve ever seen you skate. What you can do on that tiny metal blade is just

amazing! You were hands down the best skater on that ice. I'd planned to meet you at the stage door at the arena, but you never came out."

"That's on me." Gemma's cheeks warmed. "I had one final treatment with Mel, our PT. I was one of the last skaters to leave. I must've just missed you."

"That's what I figured when I ran into Fernando. That's how I knew where to find you."

Her face fell. "Well, I'm glad you were able to see today's skate. It was my last."

"Huh?"

"It's kind of a long story." She glanced over her outfit. "Um, tell you what, let me put these flowers in my room and change. I'll meet you back down here in five minutes."

"Okay." Tim nodded. "What do you think about going for a walk? It looked like there were some charming festive lights on Main Street we can check out."

"I'd like that."

Rising up onto her toes, she kissed him, then left the room.



# Chapter 24



It wasn't cold enough to snow, but the air was still a brisk chill. Gemma pulled the zipper of her black puffer coat up higher. Despite being from Scotland, and a figure skater, she still would never be a fan of cold weather.

As she walked with Tim through Promenade Park, an area across the street from the hotel, the distant sounds of a brass band playing classic carols filled the air.

“The hotel concierge mentioned that the tree lighting is at nine,” Tim said. “If you can spare some the time, I thought maybe we could stroll past the market stalls, grab a bite to eat, then circle back here to watch it?”

“That sounds brilliant. I'm a free woman. I have all the time in the world.”

“Gemma?”

She rested her head on his shoulder. “Dreams on Ice terminated my contract this afternoon.”

He abruptly stopped walking. “What?”

She lowered her chin, staring at the sidewalk. The reality of the situation was beginning to take hold. “I'm a skater who is, in their words, ‘past their prime.’ They don't have a use for

a skater who ‘can’t meet the standards set by the company.’”  
Saying those words aloud left a bitter taste in her mouth.

“How is it that a person who is only twenty-eight can be past their prime? What cockamamie person told you that?”

“A caseworker from HR.” Gemma sighed. “In a way, she was right. Most skaters peak before they turn eighteen.”

Tim huffed. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard. What about people like Frankie and Charlie? They’re not teens. They’re both mature skaters in their early thirties.”

Gemma’s gaze traveled to Tim’s face. The lines around his eyes and brow made him appear more distinguished. *He’s kind of adorable when he’s angry on my behalf.*

“They’re both an exception to the rule.”

“I don’t understand. You were under a contract with them through the end of the year. It’s the second week in December. How does it make any sense to let you go now? What about giving you notice?”

Gemma explained how the situation had been exacerbated by her visits to Dr. Zhang and how the date on her termination letter had been preset.

“That doesn’t sound right.”

“My friends Mel and Fernando didn’t think so either.”

“Do you want me to phone one of the lawyers the Sloths use? Mike wouldn’t mind. He owes me a favor.”

Gemma shook her head. “Thank you, but no. I’d like to distance myself from DOI as much as possible. I’m angry and beyond frustrated, and it’ll just be easier for me to move on without opening Pandora’s box.”

Tim pinched his lips together and enveloped her in a hug. The scratchy fabric of his overcoat rubbed against her cheeks. “You’re too good of a person.”

As he released her and they continued their walk, the scent of evergreen trees and freshly-roasted nuts filled the air. The enticing smells from a cart selling mulled wine, hot chocolate, and popcorn caught her attention.

“Do you mind if we stop for a hot drink? I need something warm,” she said.

“Whatever my Gemma-rella wishes.”

They joined the queue.

“How did you get extra time off? I thought you had to be back on Monday?”

“I called in a favor from my school principal. He’s subbing for me through Wednesday. Let’s just say, I’ll be heading the event-planning committee for the foreseeable future.”

“The end of the school year will be here before you know it.” Gemma blinked a few times. “Then you’ll be packing everything up and moving to Scottsdale.”

“No, I won’t. I’ll be staying right where I belong... in Sequoia Valley.”

Gemma gasped. “But the manager’s job—that’s your dream job, isn’t it?”

“At one point it was.” He shoved his hands into his pocket. “But that ship has sailed. I was about eighty percent sure I didn’t want it. I needed to visit Scottsdale to be totally certain.”

“What tipped you over the edge?”

They advanced a few places in the queue.

“The vibe. It was like I’d entered a time warp. The current group of guys on the team are all young and eager. They wanted to go out every night and stay up into the early hours of the morning. That isn’t my idea of fun. I wanted to go back to the hotel and enjoy a night in. I’m a grandpa—I like to be in bed by ten. It put into perspective that I’m in a totally different place in life. It would never have worked out. I’d be miserable.”

“Hearing you say that makes me relieved.” Gemma looked away from him. “I wasn’t really a fan of moving to Scottsdale, but I would’ve done it for you.”

“Gemma,” Tim admonished. “Why didn’t you say anything?”

“I didn’t want to plant any seeds in your mind.”

He face-palmed. “I’m regretting that I ever told you I never take the words of my friends or family into consideration when making an important decision.”

“Huh?” She cocked her head to the side.

“That may have been true when I was young and dumb, but it isn’t anymore. The truth is that I *do* value their opinions. I only told you that when we were at the park so you would be able to make a decision about DOI and your hip that you were satisfied with. I wanted you to be happy.”

“We *really* need to work on our communication. We’re terrible at telling one another what we really mean.”

“There’ll be plenty of time for that in the future.”

“Yes, there will.” Gemma grinned as they moved to the front of the line.

“Hi there, folks; what can I get you tonight?” the cart vendor asked.

Gemma ordered a hot chocolate and Tim a mulled wine.

“So... you have another day off, and I also suddenly have a bunch of free time on my hands. Any ideas?” she asked.

“How do you feel about a visit to New York? It’s the perfect time of year to see the city all decorated and dressed for Christmas,” Tim said.

“I’d say that sounds brilliant. I’ve never been to New York.”

His eyes widened. “You, a world traveler, have never been to New York? I find that hard to believe.”

“It’s true. I was supposed to take my first trip to the city with DOI this year, but, uh, that plan’s been tossed into the rubbish bin.”

“Order up!” the vendor called out. “I have a mulled wine and a hot cocoa. Do you want whipped cream on top?”

“Yes please,” Gemma said.

Collecting their drinks, they stepped away from the cart, and continued along the pathway illuminated with life-sized candy canes. As they chatted about New York, Gemma’s heart swelled at the thought of spending an endless amount of time with Tim. The chapter of her life with Dreams on Ice might have come to an abrupt end, but there were still plenty of other things in life to pursue outside of skating.

“If we’re deciding between driving, flying, or taking the train to New York, I vote for the train. Do you think we’d have time to see the Rockettes at Radio City Music Hall?”

“Yes.” Tim stopped walking. A wide, brimming smile filled his face. “Do you see what I see?”

Following his line of sight, Gemma’s eyes traveled up. “Mistletoe.”

“You know what tradition calls for.”

“A kiss,” she whispered.

Carefully taking hold of Gemma’s drink, he placed it on the ground next to his. Their eyes locked. Her breathing quickened.

Wrapping one arm around her back, he pulled her in closer to his body. “Happy early Christmas, Gemma.” He moved a few stray hairs out from her face and cupped her cheeks. A smile tugged at the corner of his lips. “I love you.”

Gemma's eyelids fluttered and they kissed, sending shivers down her spine.

Around them, a light dusting of snow began to fall. It was as if she'd stepped into a scene straight out of *The Nutcracker*. They were transported to a dark, enchanted forest, surrounded by dozens of dancing snowflakes. She could smell the evergreen and the spices of the mulled wine. The holiday music playing in the background changed and she could hear the haunting echo of the celesta.

As they broke apart, Tim didn't let go. "I love you, too," she told him.

He traced the outline of her lips with his thumb, seeming to savor the moment before they kissed a second time.

As Gemma stood in Tim's arms, filled with deep emotions of love, she couldn't help but feel that they were headed down a path toward finding their own happy endings. It wasn't a path that needed to be traveled quickly, but one that could be taken at whatever pace they wanted. After all, everything about their relationship was done in their own way in the sloth zone.

# Epilogue



## Three Months Later

Tim pushed Gemma along in a wheelchair decorated to resemble a medieval spinning wheel. “This is hands down the craziest seventy-two hours of my life. I can’t believe we saw Frankie and Charlie medal at Worlds three days ago. Twenty-four hours ago, we had tea with the Duke and Duchess of—” He abruptly cleared his throat, “With David and Clara.”

“And now we’ve hopped across the pond and are back in sunny Los Angeles.” Gemma yawned. “This has indeed been one for the books. I’m exhausted thinking about it.”

“You’re the real star, Gem. How are you holding up? If it were anyone else, they’d be resting in bed.”

Gemma had elected to have her labrum repaired the Friday Tim’s spring break had begun. Being an early release day meant it worked out well for both of them. Since it was an outpatient procedure, Tim had dropped her off on his way to school and picked up her on the way home.

She blinked her eyes lazily. “Everything today is pretty sore.” Tim opened his mouth. “But before you say anything...” She glanced over her shoulder, “I’m *not* willing to spend the day in the hotel. I want us to keep sailing full



steam ahead. We need to put every spare moment of your spring break to good use.”

“I’ll say we’ve *more* than done that.” Tim stopped pushing the chair momentarily. “Do you need some meds? You didn’t take any when you woke up.”

“No.” She shook her head. “I’m tired of them playing games with my stomach. I’m an athlete; I can handle the discomfort.”

“If you change your mind, I have some ibuprofen in my bag. Dr. Zhang thought you might need some over-the-counter stuff just in case. I picked some up at the airport store.”

“You did?” She cocked her head to the side. Tim’s mask made it difficult to read his expression.

“Yup.”

*We got in so late that I didn’t even notice he’d gone out. He’s definitely a keeper.*

Her cheeks warmed. “I’ll, er, take one, then.”

Tim fumbled around under the chair. Gemma could hear the sound of him rummaging through her backpack. “Here’s a water bottle and the pills.”

“Thank you.” She popped the cap off and took two, downing it with some water, then handed the items back to him.

“What’s your pain on a scale of one to ten right now?” he asked in a hushed tone.

“A five. It’s a lot better than it was on the plane.”

He nodded. “If it gets worse, let me know immediately and we’ll head home.”

“Okay.”

He started pushing the chair again. As the pain started to dull to an ache, she relaxed and began to soak in more of the details of those around them. A Star Wars stormtrooper, a Sailor Moon, and a Captain America walked past them, each of their costumes more detailed and impressive than the last. How did these people have the time and resources to put outfits like this together?

“Sleeping Beauty, Batman, great costumes!”

“Thank you,” they called out in unison.

“Maybe next year, I’ll be able to get you to wear a costume that’s a little bolder, like a Catwoman suit, or maybe even Poison Ivy.”

“We’ll see. Just wearing this is a big step for me.”

“And aren’t you glad you did? It makes the experience even more fun.”

Gemma didn’t want to admit he was right, but he was. Changing the subject she asked, “Er... which multiverse is Poison Ivy from?”

“Batman. She’s one of his archenemies. Not as much as someone like the Joker, but Ivy is definitely up there.”

She frowned. “Wait a moment... Ivy... that’s the name of the cat that lives in the comic book store back in Sequoia Valley. Do you think the owner named her after Poison Ivy?”

“It wouldn’t surprise me. All cats are evil.”

She leaned back and looked at Tim’s masked face. “They are not.”

“Yes, they are. Every time I get within ten feet of a feline, they try and scratch me or hiss at me.”

She huffed. “I find that hard to believe.”

“Believe it or don’t.” He shrugged. “I’m a sloth person. Not that it matters—I’m not planning to get any pets unless it’s a Chia Pet.”

*We’ll see if you change your tune when we visit the animal shelter next week. I bet I can convince you to adopt a cat.* Gemma loved dogs, but she’d always grown up with cats. She needed one in her life again. If she adopted one, by default, he’d become a pet guardian too.

As they entered the main exhibitor’s hall, Gemma had to blink several times to soak in just how many different booths there were selling everything from comics and vintage toys to full-on life-sized garden statues of characters. It reminded her of the antique market she sometimes frequented with Suzy. “Wow, there is so much stuff here.”

“I know!” Tim’s voice jumped up an octave.

“Just remember, whatever you buy has to fit in the car.” She sniggered.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Tim suddenly slowed his pace, his head turning from side to side. Gemma could tell he was itching to stop and shop. This was his happy place.

She sighed. “Why don’t you drop me at the booth Hank is running and come find us in an hour.”

Tim hesitated. “Gemma, this is your first convention; I want you to get a little taste of everything. I can shop later.”

She pressed her lips together. “Tim, we have *all* day to poke around. It would be more *efficient* if you got your shopping out of the way now. Plus, I haven’t seen Hank in a few weeks; it would be nice to catch up with him.”

“Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

As if she were riding in the Batmobile itself, Tim flew down the aisles at lightning speed to one of the largest vendor booths. Hank waved to them. “Hey Tim, Gemma. If it isn’t two of my best customers,” he joked. “It’s good to see you guys.”

“Hey Hank. Right back at you. Looks like a good turnout this year,” Tim said.

“It definitely is.”

“Is your lovely wife around?” Gemma asked.

“She’ll be here later with our grandkids. They’re spending the morning at Universal Studios.”

“Sounds like fun.”

A customer called for Hank's attention. "I'll be right back," he said.

She brushed Tim's arm. "You can set me over there. Then go shop."

Tim set her next to a box of T-shirts with various telly show logos. After promising he wouldn't be more than an hour, her boyfriend pecked her on the cheek, then power walked down the aisle, his cape flying wildly behind him. She grinned. The shapely, formfitting costume was a good look on his powerful frame. Maybe she should ask him to model some of his costumes around his cabin.

She thought about just how quickly the last few months had flown by. So much had happened. She'd moved to a cabin in Sequoia Valley, had settled into life as a coach, and had fallen deeper in love with Tim. Although it hadn't always been easy, she was finally beginning to find her stride. Fernando would soon be moving to the area too.

At the start of the new year, Dreams on Ice had begun to find ways of getting rid of its more veteran skaters. Gemma had counted herself lucky to have escaped when she did. News eventually broke that DOI had been acquired by the tech company Wilde Enterprises. Their website announced that DOI was going to be rebranded to be more relevant and more in tune with current trends in the market.

Gemma, Frankie, Fernando, and Mel lamented that it was the end of the family-friendly company they'd once known. With all the large lawsuits being tossed at the company for

how they'd handled letting the skaters go, Gemma doubted it would survive the year.

“Sorry about that Gemma,” Hank said as he straightened a box of comics. “Did Tim rush off already?”

“He did. I could tell he was chomping at the bit to get out there and see what was for offer at different shops.”

“I hope the kid doesn't overspend.” Hank chuckled. “Last year, he dropped three grand on a collection of limited-edition Star Wars light sabers, and he doesn't even care for Star Wars. I ended up buying them from him for the shop. He gets it in his head that something is limited edition and suddenly he has to have it.”

“Oh no.” Gemma giggled. “He promised he wouldn't go too crazy.”

“If you think that's bad, you should hear about one of my customers who's crazy for dinosaurs.”

“Dinosaurs?”

“Oh yes. His name is Lucas and we met at a *Jurassic Park* convention a couple years back.”

\* \* \*

Later that afternoon, after enjoying a panel with some of the actors slated to be in a remake of a popular spy film, Gemma and Tim sat outside enjoying a snack.

“I meant to ask you earlier, did you have a good haul? You only came back to the booth with two bags.” She licked the

top of her strawberry soft serve.

“It was all right. I picked up a couple of comics and a Sloth bust of that character from *Zootopia* for the garden at your place.” His shoulders hunched. “The selection was a little disappointing this year.”

“Were you looking for anything in particular?”

“Not really. I mean, I’m always on the hunt for vintage Batman books, but most of the good ones are outside my price range. I try to keep my big-ticket purchases under five grand. I keep hoping that someday I’ll get lucky and find something that was produced early, like a number-ten comic, in lousy condition. I’d be happy just to have a rare book in my collection. I wouldn’t have to worry about treating it with kid gloves. I’d actually be able to read it and enjoy it.”

Gemma’s lips twitched. “And what would you say about number one or two?”

“Yeah, that’s not going to happen anytime soon.” Tim laughed sarcastically. “One of those costs as much as a house.”

Sitting taller in her seat, she gestured to her backpack. “I know your birthday isn’t until next week, but there’s something I want you to have.”

“Gem, you didn’t have to get me anything. Just you being here at the convention with me is plenty.”

“I didn’t buy it. Your gift kind of just fell into my hands.” She pointed to the big zip pocket. “Just make sure your hands are clean before you open it.”

Tim finished his ice cream, then excused himself to go wash his hands. Gemma sat giddy, excited for what was to come. She'd been waiting for just the right moment to surprise him, carrying around the comic in her bag for the last few months.

When he returned, he set his Batman mask on the table and retrieved a package wrapped in sparkly red Christmas paper. He raised an eyebrow.

“What? I had a lot of paper left over.” She had her hand behind her back with her fingers crossed.

Tim's hands made quick work ripping off the paper. As he peeled back the wrapping, he inhaled sharply and leaned forward. “No way! Batman number *two*?!” He turned it over in his hands, his fingers stroking the edges. “This has to be a grade seven! I mean this is . . . this is . . .”

“A good gift?”

“Better than good.” His head snapped up. “It's better than anything I've ever received. Where? How?” His voice came out strained.

Warmth spread throughout her body. “Thank Hank.” Gemma explained how she'd received it all those months ago after looking for a gift for him.

“I don't believe it.” He laughed.

“Gemma, you are amazing. I mean you could've sold this and made a huge profit, but you didn't.”



“A gut instinct told me that it was intended for you, and I knew you had to have it. I just didn’t know when that time would be.”

He leaned forward in his seat and kissed her. “I’m so lucky you’ve come into my life.”

“And I’m lucky you’re in mine, too.”

“I have something small for you, too.”

She wondered what exactly he could be carrying. His suit was formfitting. There were no pockets. Was the item in her backpack? As he reached down into his boot, she realized he had a small, zippered compartment.

*Oh, that’s where he keeps his ID, credit cards, and phone. I’d wondered about that.*

Pulling out a small black velvet box, he placed it on the table and slid it to her. “Open it.”

Her heart began to race. “Tim?”

“Open it,” he repeated.

Her hands closed around the velvet. Inside was a dainty gold necklace with a Celtic knot charm.

“Tim, it’s beautiful.” She carefully took it out of the case and placed it around her neck. “Thank you so much.”

His lips twitched. “Mom helped me do a little research about Celtic jewelry. This particular knot is supposed to signify growth. I thought it was perfect to symbolize just how far we’ve come as a couple.”

Gemma touched the knot and squeezed it in her hands.  
“This is perfect.”

“I love you, Gemma, and I hope that with time, I’ll continue to fall even deeper and more madly in love with you than I already am. Not that I need an occasion to give you gifts, but happy seven-month anniversary.”

“Happy seven-month anniversary to you, too. I love you,” she whispered.

As they kissed again under the golden sun, Gemma imagined a bright future for the pair of them built on love, laughter, and happiness. Oh, and maybe filled with a sloth or two, too. Life couldn’t get any more brilliant than this.

# Bonus Content



*If you'd like to receive additional scenes featuring Gemma and Tim, including their proposal, please visit one of the two links below.*

**For non-newsletter subscribers:**  
<https://dl.bookfunnel.com/7907gst46n>

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# Acknowledgments



Writing a book is by no means a singular process and there are many, many people working behind the scenes who have helped to bring Tim and Gemma's story to life that I'd like to extend my heartfelt gratitude towards.

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## About the Author

Tomi has been dreaming up stories since she was a little girl. Her first published novel, *Dancing With a Royal*, made its debut in 2020. She currently writes sweet, feel-good romance novels.

Outside of her day job and attending graduate school, Tomi enjoys figure skating, watching HGTV, and traveling. She also enjoys hunting year-round for new pumpkin flavored foods to sample. Her current favorite item are pumpkin spice flavored milano cookies.

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# Also by Tomi Tabb

Thank you so much for reading “The Sloth Zone.” You’ve made it to the end of the book.

If you enjoyed this story, you can become a part of her treasured community of readers by subscribing to her newsletter at [TomiTabb.com](http://TomiTabb.com).

She would also appreciate it if you would consider leaving a review on Amazon, Goodreads, Bookbub, or on whatever platform you may have picked up this book. It helps her connect with readers like you!

## **BOOKS BY TOMI:**

The Skaters of Sequoia Valley

-The Rules of the Rink

-The Sloth Zone

The Unexpected Royals

-Dancing With a Royal

-Jiving With a Royal

-Designing for a Royal

-More Than a Passing Shot

### Novellas Related to the Unexpected Royals

-Pointe Shoes and Sugar Plums

-A Game of Small Victories

### The Royals of Isola Nostrum

-The Great Austen Adventure

-For the Love of Dinosaurs

### Regency Novella

-The Mysterious Mr. Marcellus



### **Dancing With a Royal**

Clara is a soloist with the Los Angeles Ballet Theater who knows she has what it takes to become a principal dancer.

When one of the major stars slated to appear in the World Stars of Ballet gala suddenly bows out, Clara is invited as a last-minute fill-in. She's about to dance on the biggest stage of her life. Her dream is one step closer to becoming a reality.

Prince David is a royal who prefers working behind the scenes, away from the glare of the spotlight.

When he is summoned home to London to mend whatever royal mess his cousin has left behind this time, little does he know that this time, his journey will lead him down a path he never expected.

Neither Clara nor David is looking for a relationship, but their hearts have other ideas.

When love takes center stage, can a ballerina and a prince defy the odds and discover their own fairy tale ending?

Link: [books2read.com/u/bp6wD6](https://books2read.com/u/bp6wD6)



## **Living With a Royal**

Amanda is a flight attendant whose job is to ensure passenger comfort and safety while cruising at 30,000 feet.

Eddie is a prince who is working hard to reform his tarnished reputation and partying image before he joins the army.

Their two lives couldn't be more different.

When Amanda's best friend begins dating Eddie's cousin, she never imagined she might actually meet the man she's harbored a crush on since childhood—until a chance encounter changes everything.

As Eddie enters Amanda's life, they become friends. Both learn that there is much more to one another than meets the eye.

Will Eddie dance away with Amanda's heart and into a world of unexpected love?

Link: [books2read.com/u/4N7yLW](https://books2read.com/u/4N7yLW)



## Designing for a Royal

A year ago, Clarissa Lee was an unknown, struggling London based fashion designer. Then, a surprise phone call from the royal palace changed her life. Fast forward to the present where business is booming and she is creating *the* dress for the

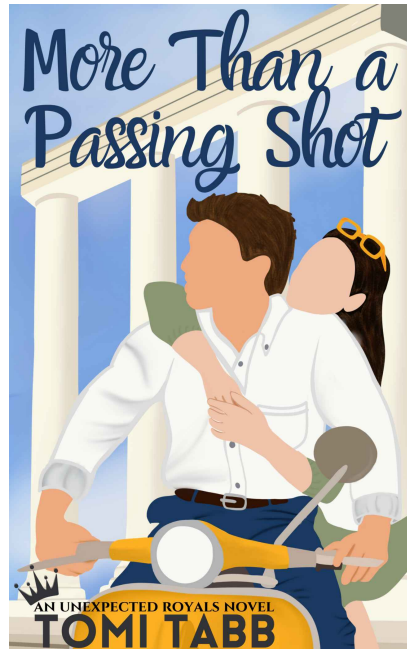
upcoming royal wedding of the Duke and Duchess of Leeds. Her work life is a fairy-tale.

Her personal life, however, is another story. After the scars of a past relationship, Clarissa closed her heart off to the world, afraid to trust again.

Patrick Nelson, the Earl of Renbrook, understands what it is like to be broken. It has been two years since his last relationship and his father's untimely death. When his mother announces she has remarried, Patrick seeks to escape the family estate. A meeting in London with his childhood friend, the Duke of Leeds, provides the perfect excuse.

When Clarissa and Patrick unexpectedly meet, sparks fly. Together can they learn to conquer the past and that love may be in the cards for them after all?

Link: [books2read.com/u/bW8QdM](https://books2read.com/u/bW8QdM)



## **More Than a Passing Shot**

Olive's arrival in Athens, Greece signals the beginning to a new chapter of her life. After three long years, she's finally ready to put the painful memories and heartache of the past behind her. However, things don't exactly get off to the best start.

First, Olive finds that many of the ancient sites are closed due to a national worker's strike. Then, she suffers an embarrassing coffee spill in front of the most handsome man she's ever met. A man named Alex.

However, just like an ancient Greek myth, chance meetings never happen by coincidence; they are an act of fate.

As Olive and Alex spend time together exploring the stunning architecture and rich history of Greece, she finds herself falling for him. He seems so familiar to her, but she just can't put her finger on why.

Will Olive take a risk and open herself up to Alex or will the secret he's been keeping from her ruin her chance at future happiness?

Link: [books2read.com/u/4jEPL2](https://books2read.com/u/4jEPL2)