

BOUNDLESS PLAYERS BOOK 1

ICEBOUND



MEREDITH TRAPP

PRAISE FOR ICEBOUND

“This is the fake dating, age gap, hockey romance of your dreams! Literal perfection!”

— SELENE, GOODREADS REVIEWER

“I came for the age gap, stayed for the spiciness, but fell head over heels in love with the hockey guys!”

— ALYSHA, GOODREADS REVIEWER

“I LOVED this book. The characters were so relatable, the banter was top tier, and the spice level was perfect.”

— NICOLE BELL, AUTHOR OF *WINGING IT*

“I love a sports romance and this one is done right!! Rhode was so swoon worthy.”

— MORGAN, GOODREADS REVIEWER

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Editing by Kat Wyeth (Kat’s Literary Services)
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Formatting by Summer Grove
Cover Design by Noemi Defeo

*For my parents, my blueprint.
For Emma, my spark.
For Casey, my happy ending.
And for you, dearest reader, my fuel.*

CONTENT GUIDANCE

This book holds a special place in my heart for many reasons, but I wanted to give you a little heads-up before you dive into the pages.

Some details of the professional hockey world have been adjusted for your reading enjoyment, and please be aware that there is cursing and explicit sexual content on page.

In addition, our main character lives with anxiety, there's a chapter on losing a sibling as part of the backstory, a brief mention of female infertility, and a few panic moments are depicted on the page.

I have tried my best to handle these themes with the care they deserve. Despite the heaviness of these topics, readers will be treated to laughs, spice, and a happy ending. Thanks a million for picking up my book. I hope it puts a smile on your face.

With love,
Meredith

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RHODE

“If you don’t tell me to stop, I’m going to kiss you in three seconds.”
“What the—” I start, but her mouth crashes into my face, teeth knocking against mine.

Three seconds?

Pretty sure that was two. I recoil, but the woman latches onto me like an overenthusiastic rookie.

“You taste so good,” she slurs with half-lidded eyes. “Like minty mint mojito leaves.”

I’ve been drinking nonalcoholic beer all night, so there’s no way that’s true. This stranger tastes like she took a bath in a gas-station Merlot. I gag.

If there’s one thing that gives me an awful hangover, it’s red wine, and I can’t let my performance suffer. The media’s already talking about my retirement, so I’m steering clear of alcohol this season.

Maybe forever.

Her fingers tangle in my hair. “I like your lips. So soft. You must use lots of ChapStick.”

I try to say something, but her tongue slithers into my mouth. What made her think she could march up and kiss me?

Yeah, sure, in my twenties, I would’ve been hauling her over my shoulder, but now I’m ready to get down on one knee for a woman.

Well, not any woman—the right one.

My fists tighten, but I'm not going to be a dick about this because the last thing I need is another media scandal. It took years to clean up my image after Quench pulled my sponsorship, thanks to the Tenerife Incident.

I haven't been able to find another sponsor since, and now, every sportscaster's calling me a fading legend at the ripe old age of thirty-three. Hell, Brodeur didn't hang up his skates until his forties.

"Alright, bold move." I force a grin, gently pushing her back. "How about we start with names, sweetheart?"

She stumbles, and I try to steady her, but she grabs onto the bar ledge in her stilettos. There's no doubt she's gorgeous with her full lips, but I care more about what comes out of that mouth.

"I'm so sorry," she slurs. "I'm drunk. So drunk. Not that it's an excuse. I really shouldn't have done that. I didn't mean, um..." Her brows pinch. "You look familiar. Do I know you?"

"Are you a member of the Nashville cross-stitch club?"

"Uh, no?"

"Then, no, I don't think we've met." I clench my poor excuse for a beer, wishing I'd worn a feather boa instead of a gray suit tonight, so I'd blend in with this crowd.

Cruz wanted to come to Wonderbar for his twenty-third birthday, and once our rookie gets an idea in his head, there's no changing his mind. Micah Cruz is more stubborn than my goalie coach, but at least his idea of fun isn't making me do butterfly slides on the ice.

This club looks like the Lucky Charms leprechaun fucked a unicorn and had a rainbow for a baby. It's full of sweaty bodies grinding on each other.

Men on men.

Women with women.

People kissing people.

It's a good time, but I'm done with the clubbing scene.

Three years ago, I would've been on the dance floor, chugging my eighth overpriced beer, but that was before my mother looked at me with that disappointed flash in her eyes after the Tenerife scandal resurfaced.

Now, I'm counting down the minutes until I can get home to my cat. Maybe I can bribe someone to turn down the thumping bass.

I should've brought earplugs.

"Wait, I do know you." The woman's green eyes scan my face, and her expression seems to spark to life as some light bulb goes off in her brain.

“You’re Rhode... Rhode something. Rhode Tremblay! I don’t watch hockey, but you were in that underwear commercial, right? My MBA class did a case study on it because it generated millions in revenue. People went feral over your thigh tattoo. Don’t listen to what everyone says. I like the turtle. It’s artsy... and hot.”

“Everyone loves talking about that turtle on my thigh,” I mutter, sipping my beer that tastes like watered-down oats.

That would be the visual seared into the media. *Rhode Tremblay: Nashville’s Naughtiest Bachelor*. The poster boy of sex appeal carved out of muscle—their words, not mine.

Yeah, I look good naked thanks to the decades of soul-crushing workouts, but the main reason I agreed to do the campaign is because the company donated twenty percent of the profit to charity. But the journalist was more interested in discussing the abstract turtle on my thigh.

They all are.

The woman blinks like she’s confused or dreaming. “Rhode, right?”

“You asked me that already.”

“You’re so hot.”

I sip my beer, glancing around the bar for the nearest exit. “Thanks, you should see my personality.”

“No, but you’ve got those blue eyes and dark waves that always look so shiny.” She tramples right over what I thought was a solid comeback. “What conditioner do you use? I want it, and you even have that dimple right here.”

She pokes her finger above my cheek.

I lurch back, rubbing my jaw. I’m not spending another night making small talk with a stranger at a club, especially one who feels like she has a right to shove her tongue down my throat. I’m not a twenty-two-year-old guy who needs sex to function.

At least, not anymore. Those days are so far behind me that I’d need a telescope to see them.

I slap the bar counter. “Alright, I better head out. Got to get home to feed my cat. He’s a menace when he’s hungry.”

I love the little asshole. If it weren’t for him, I’d come home to an apartment emptier than my fridge.

“We could leave together if you want?” she slurs the innuendo. “Cats love me.”

“Mine would hate you, but he hates everyone, including me. Stay away from him in a thunderstorm. He’d scratch up your pretty dress.”

Her eyes spark. “You think I’m pretty?”

“I think all women are beautiful.”

The light in her eyes dims, and a twinge of guilt nags at me, but if I wanted a one-night stand, I’d have one. My DMs are full of offers.

One woman sent me a two-paragraph message saying she was thinking about me while she had sex with her husband.

Reverse cowgirl. Not that I asked.

I hate knowing there’s someone out there imagining me while she has sex. That’s not an image I need in my head, and the last thing I want is to break up a marriage.

I’m not my father.

“Oh no.” The woman’s cheeks bulge like she’s about to gag.

My body goes rigid. “Oh. Shit.”

She begins a series of dry heaves that remind me of the time my cat puked up a hairball, but then she slaps a hand to her lips and bolts toward the bathroom. She drops her drink, splattering pink liquid all over my shirt.

Great, just the nightcap I need.

I’m tempted to go after her to make sure she’s okay, but she disappears into the hazy club.

I’m left standing in the aftermath, my button-down a sticky canvas of cherry sludge. Everyone scrambles to give me a wide berth.

Gritting my teeth, I wave down the bartender in the green cowboy hat. “Hey, man, can I pay my tab? Think I’m gonna head out now.”

The guy gives me a once-over, grimaces, and hands me a napkin. “On the house, my friend.”

He’s getting a big tip. I pick up the empty cocktail glass and hand it over. “Thanks, you might be my favorite person of the night.”

I dab my shirt while eyeing Cruz, sitting with the rest of our first line on a velvet couch that matches his blazer.

Micah Cruz looks like he just won the Stanley Cup with his arms dangling around two women, so I doubt he’ll miss me if I leave.

Patty fires off a text. I’d bet my entire collection of cross-stitches that our beauty of a winger’s checking on his seven-month-old daughter, Betty.

“The Golden Giant,” as the media calls Wyatt Patterson, can barely clock twenty minutes before texting his two moms for an update. He’s

lucky he's got live-in babysitters at his house.

I could barrel through the crowd to tell my teammates I'm going, but I smell like fermented candy, and my feet are sore as hell from these new Brioni loafers. I glance at my Rolex. 10:30 p.m.

If I leave now, I'll have time for a bath to relax my muscles before our string of away games. I should use the chamomile soap tonight. No, spearmint.

After leaving a hundred-dollar tip for the bartender, I push through the smoky club, step into the cold January air, and order a ride in a white Audi e-tron GT.

It may be high maintenance, but I only get premium rides. I didn't take a puck to the jaw, causing a laceration that required reconstructive surgery, only to share a pooled ride.

I send a message in our group chat, Puck Buddies.

ME

Some random woman just spilled her drink all over me so I'm out.

CRUZ

Ayyo the King of Irish exits strikes again. You gonna let a little splash action stop you from celebrating my birthday? Go change and get your ass back here you fucking degenerate.

PATTY

I'm out too then. I've actually got a kid at home.

CRUZ

And whose fault is that for not knowing how to use a condom at twenty-six?

PATTY

salutes

I'm out.

CRUZ

You guys are so fucking lame. It's my birthday. I thought we'd be having an orgy by now.

ME

Always here to throw a used condom on the night.

CRUZ

Do you even know what that is anymore? Fine. Have fun with your hand tonight old man.

ME

I'll make sure the left one doesn't get jealous.

A muscle twitches in my jaw. I like being called *old man* about as much as I like freezing my balls in an ice bath, but I'll never admit it makes me feel ancient to a rookie like Cruz. It's getting harder and harder to keep up, but my save percentage is still one of the best in the League.

Micah Cruz latched onto me when he signed with the Guardians, and our center annoys the living shit out of me, but he's one talented player.

There's a reason every announcer's talking about him winning the Calder Memorial Trophy. He's got everything it takes to be Rookie of the Year if he can rein in his attitude.

My phone vibrates with a notification that my driver's approaching. I scan the neon-lit street but get distracted by the family eating at Taj Kitchen across the road.

The dad looks younger than me, and he's feeding his son spoons of yellow curry in a highchair. The little boy claps his hands, squealing with each bite.

A corner of my mouth lifts as I watch the kid, but then the guy kisses his girl, and my lips fall back into a flat line.

That's what I thought my life would look like at thirty-three, but instead, I'm going home alone, covered in someone's nasty pink drink.

By the time the white Audi pulls up to the curb, my slacks are crusty, and I'm exhausted, irritated, and starving. I yank open the car door and sniff the fresh leather-scented air. Too bad I'm about to ruin the smell.

"Rhode?"

I stiffen at the woman's voice. It's smoother than these brown leather seats, nothing like the shrieks in the club. "Yeah, that's me."

"How's your night been?" she throws out. The question hits the air with forced casualness like she's checking a box.

I climb into the backseat and shut the door. "Not great. Some random woman just kissed me, almost puked, and then spilled her drink all over my shirt. So, sorry if I smell like ass. I'll pay extra for cleaning if you need it."

"Well, it could've been worse. At least she didn't actually puke and then kiss you." She pauses. "Unless she almost puked because you're a terrible

kisser. Then, the other way is worse.”

A laugh bursts through my lips. It’s my first one of the night. I glance at her from the backseat, and once I look up, I can’t turn away.

Holy fuck.

I would’ve shaved if I’d known this woman would be driving me around.

She’s got little tattoos all over her hands and neck. Her hair hangs down her overalls in curls, but I can’t tell whether it’s light brown or blonde in the dim light. Caramel, maybe?

Don’t know where the hell that thought came from.

There’s a piece caught in her small nose piercing, and I’m tempted to pull it out. I absorb every detail of her, from the line of earrings on the curve of her ear to the sunflower tattoo on her inner wrist, all the way up to the gold circular glasses covering the freckles on the bridge of her nose. She’s even got a four-leaf clover etched on her neck.

Maybe this is my lucky night.

The woman’s like one of those abstract paintings Cruz drunkenly bid on at a charity auction. There’s so much going on that I need to look closer to figure it out, but I’m intrigued.

Really intrigued.

On instinct, I check her left hand. No ring. What’s this woman doing driving Lyft? I’d never let my younger sister drive around with strangers at night. Hell, if I belonged to this woman, I’d use those overalls to clip her to the headboard.

She turns the volume knob, and some random flute album fills the car. Solid music taste. Her blue-green eyes meet mine in the rearview. “What are you looking at?”

I jerk, missing the click of my seatbelt. “Nothing. Sorry, so what’s your name, sweetheart?”

“Sweetheart? Oh no, I’m going to stop you right there,” she says, turning on a street lined with brownstones. “I’m not normally this prickly with strangers, but I’ve been having a really shitty week ever since... Never mind. I’m not about to tell some random my life story, but I don’t want to talk to any more grumpy ass—men,” she corrects.

Alright, she’s a straight shooter. I like that. I deal with enough media bullshit that honesty is as rare as a Gordie Howe hat trick. “Grumpy ass-men? That’s a big assumption. What if I’m an eye-man? I was raised by a

woman who taught me the only way to see a person's soul is to look them in the eye."

She scoffs. "Okay, fine. What color are my eyes?" She turns her head to the side. "Oh, and I already know yours are blue."

I grin like a first-round draft pick. "Yeah? You noticed my eyes?"

"They're very bright," she says with no shame. I can't tell if that's a compliment. "Now, go. What color are they?"

"I didn't get a good look because it's dark, but I think they're blue. Maybe green? They remind me of this mood ring my sister gave me. You've got the type of eyes a man needs to stare at a little longer to figure out the color, and I don't mind staring."

She rolls those stormy eyes of hers. "That's such an ass-man response."

I lean forward, getting a whiff of cinnamon and something delicate. It covers up my smell, so I breathe deeper. "Alright, what kind of woman are you?"

"An incredible one," she deadpans.

I try not to grin, but her answer's too good to resist. "There's no doubt, but are you an ass-woman or an eye-woman? Or, hell, maybe a shoulder-woman? And don't act like women don't notice those things because I know they do."

She slows to a stop light. "I'm a personality-woman."

"Well played." My smile widens. "What's your name, personality-woman?"

She sighs like I asked her to drive me across the country. "Fine, don't check the app. It's Nina. Well, technically, it's Philomena, thanks to my grandmother's dying wish, but I go by Nina because there's no way I'm going by Phil."

"Nina..." I swirl the name like it's a forty-year-old aged whiskey. "Nina, I like it. It fits you."

"Good. I was really on the edge of my seat, wondering if a stranger would like my name."

The corner of my mouth lifts higher. Her personality's got a bite, and it has me wanting more of a taste. "Is this your main job, or do you do something else?"

"You first, ass-man."

"I'm a plumber," I lie. No one asks more questions about plumbers, and I talk about my hockey career enough in media interviews since it's my

contract year. The constant questions about my potential retirement are grueling.

She makes some noise in her throat, switching lanes under the flickering streetlights. “Right. If you’re a plumber, then I’m a neurosurgical resident.”

My brows fly to my hairline. I can’t tell if she’s lying, but my sister says I’m so trustworthy that I border on gullible. I’m less naive now since it’s not a good trait for someone in the spotlight, but I like to believe the best in people, even if it bites me in the ass.

When I started my rookie year, the veterans on the team convinced me everyone went commando for home games because it was good luck. I spent that first year in the League rubbing my bare ballsack against a jockstrap. My skin’s still a darker shade from all the chafing.

I narrow my eyes. “Oh, yeah? Prove it. Tell me a fact about the brain.”

“Women’s brains are seven-point-nine-two percent larger than men’s brains.”

There’s no chance in hell I’m arguing *that*, and the fact is specific enough that I believe her. “Alright, that’s impressive. How old are you? You must’ve been in school for a while.”

It’s awkward, but I always have to ask because I can never tell a woman’s age, and I refuse to date someone under thirty. People in their twenties are still searching for themselves, and I need a woman who’s already found herself. I don’t play games unless I’m on the ice. Not anymore.

“I’m in my residency, so I guess that makes me thirty.”

My shoulders loosen. She looks younger, but I’m not going to call her on it when I know nothing about the medical field. I called a stethoscope a telescope until I was twelve.

She flicks on her turn signal. “So, a plumber and a neurosurgeon get into a car. Sounds like the start of a terrible joke. What do you think the punchline is?”

“I’m pretty sure the neurosurgeon gives the plumber her number.”

She laughs. The raspy sound fills the entire car. I smirk. Damn, do I smirk big. “I’m pretty sure that’s not the—”

A gunshot cuts her off.

She screams, swerving the Audi.

My head slams into the window, and pain bursts through my temple.

Shit, that hurts.

I'm stunned for less than a second before my reflexes kick in, and I lurch for the wheel.

Decades of playing hockey taught me how to perform under an adrenaline rush. There's no chance I'm letting a future doctor die tonight.

That's not the punchline of our joke.

NINA

I spend a completely normal amount of time contemplating my death—I checked with my therapist.

According to Dr. Ghosh, my musings on mortality aren't unusual, thankfully. I plan to live until I'm more wrinkled than one of those cute dogs, the Shar-Peis, but I do hope that when I go, my death will make a good story.

Dying in a car crash with burnt rubber charring my nostrils and America's sexiest plumber in the backseat is far from iconic.

In the brief moments when I lose control and we careen into oncoming traffic, that's exactly what I think is coming for me—death.

"Watch out for the car!"

Sexy Plumber lunges for the steering wheel and swerves us back into the right lane so we narrowly avoid hitting the black Tahoe. The sound of screeching brakes fills the starry night.

I punch the brake on instinct, and we jerk, slamming into a pile of trash cans on the sidewalk. That's going to leave a mark on the car.

An orange peel splatters on the windshield with a loud *thwap*.

The plumber pitches forward, hitting the back of my skull with his forehead. A sharp pain ripples through my temple, and I wince.

"Sorry, you alright?" he rushes out. "Easy on the brake. I think that noise was the other car's tire blowing out. Thank fuck we didn't hit anyone. Please tell me you're okay."

“I think so,” I pant, staring at my shaking hands on the wheel.

I’m okay. We’re okay. You’re okay, Nina.

He hovers over me from the backseat, close enough that his stubble brushes my cheek. Sexy Plumber puts the car in park and releases a heavy breath, making my skin prickle to life. I rub my arms to get rid of the little bumps.

“Okay, we’re good.” He slumps into the backseat. “We made it to the curb. We’re good.”

“Right,” I pant. “The curb.”

“That was too close. We’re lucky we didn’t hit anyone else with all these people around. Guess that four-leaf clover on your neck brought us some luck. I think the other car’s fine but let me go check on them.”

His calm words do nothing to suck the tension from my rigid shoulders. The panic’s building, rising like water in a glass box. My own personal cage that’s trapped me since childhood. Except, it’s nothing like that time I actually got stuck in an elevator as a kid.

Talk about traumatizing.

I’ll get light-headed, maybe, no definitely, nauseous, and then I’ll spiral into a mental tornado for anywhere from four to thirty minutes and emerge a sweaty mess.

Fabulous.

Dread fills me, and I grit my teeth like I’m walking into my pottery class to present one of my pieces.

“Nina?” he says. “Did you hear me?”

I jump at the sound of my name. He remembered. “No, can you shout it in my ear again? Louder this time.”

I regret the words as soon as they fly from my lips. Anxiety always sharpens my words, making them ready to strike the nearest opposing victim, but he hasn’t done anything wrong. In fact, this man’s doing everything right.

He deserves soft words, not sharp ones.

His firm hand squeezes my shoulder. I think he means for it to be comforting, but I flinch.

He instantly pulls back. “Hey, I know it’s scary, but we’re all going to be fine. It doesn’t look like they hit anyone, either. We’re good.”

My chest rises in short, shallow breaths as I try to keep my hands from shaking. “Okay, yeah. Thanks. Sorry for snapping and punching the brake

too hard.”

“It’s all good. You can snap if you need to, just don’t break on me.”

I get a lingering trace of his aftershave when he speaks. The aroma wafts through the car, and my eyes close involuntarily. It smells like the crackling fire at the tiny cabin my parents used to take us to in the Blue Ridge Mountains. Each inhalation is like hugging an old friend, but it does nothing to stop the onslaught of memories.

Beeping monitors. Doctors. Hospitals.

The images flicker like ghosts haunting my mind.

My heartbeat grows urgent, like my chest is a prison, and it’s demanding to be heard. Chills roll over my clammy skin while my thoughts spin in a dizzying storm, each one slipping through my grasp before I can make sense of it. I dart my eyes to the ridiculously attractive, but unfamiliar face before me.

The plumber’s gaze is calmer than the Caribbean, but his presence is like a space heater in an already stifling room. The man’s *massive*. He’s too much to handle right now.

I subtly pull back, not wanting some stranger to bear witness to my vulnerability. I’ve lived with anxiety long enough that panic attacks are more frequent than my period, and it’s easier to fall apart when no one’s watching.

“Hey, you alright, Nina?” His deep voice reverberates through my mind.

“I’m great,” I say, a little too brightly since I’m used to hiding beneath faux grins.

I can’t for the life of me remember his name, and now I feel guilty because he knows mine. Ronald, maybe? “You can go check on the other car. I’m fine. I’ll be right out.”

His dark brow furrows. “You sure you’re alright? I don’t feel good about leaving you alone.”

I force a smile, even though it feels like I’m running a marathon underwater. “Yes, I’m fine, really. You can go. I’m good. Great.”

His gaze scorches my cheek, but I focus on the flickering streetlights. On. Off. On. Off. Life would be so much easier if I could dim my emotions with a simple flip. I’d keep my anxiety turned off and my sarcastic quips turned on.

He gives my shoulder a gentle squeeze. “Sure, but you let me know if you need me. I’ll be close. Let me check the other car.”

My lips feel like they're stitched together, so I dip my head in a silent nod. His hand twitches up, but after a second, he clenches his fist and climbs out of my sister's Audi.

Every time I breathe, the seat belt pulls against my nipple piercing. That was a godawful decision, but I can't regret it when it was the last time I laughed with my sister. If we don't die tonight, she's going to murder me for crashing her car.

Now, that would make a good story—*Older Sister Bludgeons Rival Sibling with Curling Iron after Months of Feuding*.

As he walks away, my head thumps back against the seat. The air feels lighter now that he's gone, but black spots still flirt with the edges of my vision.

I suck in a long breath.

In for four.

Hold, Nina.

Out for four.

Gritting my teeth, I zone in on the mouse, scurrying on a telephone line. Wait, is that a mouse or a rat? Please be a mouse. *Breathe*. The crowd of pedestrians gathering around the plumber. *Breathe*. The smoke spiraling up to the twinkling stars. *Breathe*. A dog peeing on a fire hydrant.

"Breathe, Nina," I say to myself. "You aren't swimming in shark-infested waters. You aren't walking into a burning building to save a baby. It's just the adrenaline rush that makes your body feel like this. You're safe. Thanks to Sexy Plumber, you're okay."

I continue with my box breathing techniques, all while resenting the anxious monster in my chest, lurking, waiting in the dark.

Always waiting.

Sometimes it hibernates, and other days, it claws its way out to attack my thoughts. I never know what mood the devious creature will be in, so the only thing I can do is drag myself out of the mental ditch over and over again.

No one else can fight my battles. All I want is someone who sees the darkest corners of my soul and doesn't get scared off by the cobwebs.

Anxiety might suck me into the whirlpool of my life, but I always come up for air.



AFTER WHAT FEELS like a millennium of breathing techniques, my heart rate returns to normal. I glance at the time on my phone. “Hm. Not bad. That one was only six minutes.”

Those words are like calling a tornado a fall breeze, but I’m proud of all the work I put in while sitting on Dr. Ghosh’s lumpy green chair with that stain shaped like Italy. Therapy might not be a cure-all, but it does come with a decent side of coping mechanisms.

Now that I’m sufficiently sweaty and exhausted, I dig through the console and grab some tissues to dab the sweat under my arms. I refuse to step outside looking like chaos incarnate in front of the plumber who must bench press toilets when he’s not fixing them.

Wrapping my thrifted puffy jacket around my shoulders, I head out onto the packed residential street. The freezing Tennessee wind nips at my cheeks.

Pedestrians line the sidewalk, maintaining a respectful distance, but their eyes are fixed on the plumber. When I see him, I can’t blame them for staring.

This man looks like he was handcrafted with temptation.

He’s rolled up his sleeves, even though it’s frigid, revealing the thick veins lining his forearms like a map leading to a naughty destination. How’s he not freezing his ass off? He’s got that type of muscle definition that only comes from hours spent in the gym, and if anything, the dedication’s impressive.

The man’s got it all—broad shoulders, neck veins, sharp jawline. I wouldn’t be surprised if he had *fuckboy* tattooed on his dick.

I search his face for a flaw, any flaw, I’ll even take an oddly shaped mole. My shoulders loosen when I see the slight bump in his nose like it’s been broken.

As I navigate through the crowd, I notice several people with phones raised, but I’m more concerned with the man hunched over the black Tahoe.

“Is that the guy from that underwear commercial?”

“No, I think he’s from that yacht scandal.”

“I thought he was retiring from the League?”

My curiosity piques, but I have no idea what league they’re talking about, so I ignore them and nudge my way through the onlookers.

Sexy Plumber’s brow is pinched in concentration, and a sudden wave of gratitude washes over me. Without him, I’d probably be dead. Either that, or

I'd be sitting here, freezing my ass off while googling how to change a tire to help the other car.

As I get closer, I realize he's actually huddled over a little boy who looks like he's hyperventilating next to his terrified mom. It's probably how I looked moments ago, so without a second thought, I push through the last two people. "Is everything okay? What happened?"

He gives me a tight smile lined with worry. "Yeah, we're alright. This is Gabriel and his mom. They were in the other car when their tire popped, and Gabriel here has asthma. He got a little scared, and I can't blame him because I did too, but he's having an asthma attack. He doesn't have his inhaler, so we're waiting on an ambulance."

His tone is calm, but there's a deep crease between his brows. I wrack my brain, and this is one of the few times I'm actually grateful for my sleepless nights and the internet rabbit holes I spiral down. "Wait here."

I rush back to my car and dig through the console until I find my sister's leftover cold brew that could bring a corpse back to life. I avoid caffeine like I avoid alcohol, but she's a coffee addict.

Grabbing it, I sprint back to the mom and her son. The crowd parts for me in the way people normally part for my older sister.

I thrust out the drink to the boy's mom. "Here, I know it's not his medication, but I read that caffeine can help open up the airways in asthma patients."

The plumber balks. "I forgot. I should've just asked you from the beginning."

I don't know what he means by that comment, but the mom gives me a grateful smile and pulls me into a hug, thanking me profusely. "Thank you. Thank you so much. You're truly a lifesaver."

My eyes prickle as she releases me. Anxiety's never made me someone's hero. I better soak up this moment, so I can remember it the next time I can't sleep.

The woman huddles over her son, giving him sips of the coffee, and then sirens shriek through the cold night like the wrong note plucked in a symphony. Red and blue lights paint the street as the ambulance arrives.

The next thirty minutes are a jumbled mess.

People crowd around the cars. Cameras flash. A few people even ask to take pictures with the plumber, which is strange, but maybe he's got a home

renovation show. It must be a slow news night because a reporter shows up for some reason.

As we're checked for injuries, I message my sister to come to pick me up because her Audi needs to be fixed, and even though we're feuding, she always answers my texts in less than a minute.

By the time the first responders deem everyone fine, I'm exhausted, but Gabriel's okay, and that's what matters. People are still crowding around the plumber while he inspects the black Tahoe, but he keeps glancing my way. I tap my foot, scanning the street for my ride.

"So, I think they're going to need a tow too," he says, standing. "Either that, or we'll have to lift the car ourselves to change the tire."

I point over my shoulder. "Should I just head to the gym for the next fifty years, so I can pack on a thousand pounds of muscle?"

Chuckling, he gives me a lopsided smile that turns him from sexy to endearing in less than a heartbeat. The throaty sound sinks into every crevice of my body before I can stop it from happening.

That's one dangerous grin.

He needs to be careful flashing that smile around. Someone might accidentally end up naked on top of him.

"No weight-lifting necessary. We can use a car jack. Let me see if you've got one." A dimple pops on his right cheek because, of course, it does.

Thankfully, he doesn't have a matching set. It's like whoever created him started to give him two dimples and then realized one was lethal enough.

He digs around my trunk. The streetlight's glow casts a gleam in his dark hair, almost making it look wet. Now, I'm imagining water streaming down his bare back in the shower, but I don't want to objectify him just because his chiseled physique could rival the statues on campus.

I shake my head.

Hard.

Then again, so my brain gets the point.

He's got this intense look that whispers temptations of nights spent tangled in bedsheets, but I'm done with men who look like fallen angels. I'm done with men in general. The next person I sleep with better be obsessed with me, so I don't have a repeat of the Isaac fiasco.

He slams the trunk. “Alright, no car jack, but there are uh, ten boxes of condoms back there, which has me wondering what you get up to when you aren’t cutting into brains.”

“What?” I gasp. “Cutting into brains?”

He points his thumb at me, brows quirked. “Doctor, right?”

It takes me a moment to jump onto his train of thought. Then, I remember I told him I’m a resident because I’ve been on a medical drama kick recently. I was mostly joking because I’m still fifty-fifty on the plumber comment, but it’s utterly shocking he didn’t call me out since I look like I’m headed to a music festival.

He tosses the blue box back in the car, but I’m not going to admit there was a ten percent off sale if I bought ten boxes of condoms to a stranger. “We were doing a sex educational course at the hospital. The other resident brought cucumbers so we could roll on the condoms as a demonstration.”

“Not bananas?” he says wryly. “I feel like you’re setting some unrealistic expectations there with the cucumbers.”

He winks. I try not to frown, but men who wink at strangers should come with a warning label. I don’t say anything because what am I supposed to say? I’ve seen plenty of cucumber-sized dicks?

I haven’t.

Silence swells between us. It looks like his cheeks flush in the dim light, but it’s freezing out.

He coughs. “Alright, cucumbers aside... The tow company should be here soon to take your car to the shop to get rid of the dent. Do you need a ride? I should get home to feed Chicken, but I want to make sure you make it back safe.”

I quirk my head. “Is Chicken your... chicken?”

“No, he’s my cat,” he says like it’s obvious.

“You named your cat Chicken? Why? Does he eat chickens?”

He frowns. “Yeah, but I don’t know why it sounds so nasty when you say it like that. My sister chose the name because that’s all he’d eat when we brought him back from the shelter, but now I’m imagining him devouring a bloody chicken. He eats canned chicken like a normal cat.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah.” He shoves his hands into his pockets. “So, how about that ride?”

The question catches me off guard. It probably, no, definitely, makes me a bit judgmental, but I expected a man who looks as tempting as him to care more about my condom plans than whether I made it home safe.

I wave a hand. “No, thanks, but I’m fine. I already texted my sister to come get me. Do you need a ride?”

The corners of his lips turn down. “Oh, uh, no. I already texted one of my buddies to pick me up.”

There’s a hushed pause, a beat where our stares linger. His eyes are a bright shade of cerulean blue, more vivid than the colors in Frida Kahlo’s paintings.

He cocks his head like he’s waiting for me to say something. “So, I guess this is goodbye?”

“Yeah, I guess—”

The sudden flare of headlights cuts through the crowded, cold night, veering around the corner. The blinding glare forces me to squint through my glasses until I spot the familiar red Jeep that’s taken me to countless pottery lessons and office hours.

The door swings open with a creak, but instead of my sister’s familiar face, a completely unwelcome set of dimples steps out into the dim streetlight.

I used to find that confident strut charming, but now it reminds me of a waddle. I dig my nails into my palms. If I have to hear him ask me one more time in that patronizing tone if *I’m sure I’m okay with this*, or if *I’m hanging in there*, I might self-combust.

Red flags wave in the back of my mind, but bad choices are my forte. Exhibit A is walking toward me in his sweatshirt that reads *I might be N. Er. Dy. but only Periodically*. I can still see the stain on the shoulder where I spilled my decaf coffee that I wish Tide had washed out.

A few onlookers watch as I race over to the plumber, gripping his insanely muscular forearm. This man must live at the gym. He jolts at the contact, but at least he doesn’t pull away. That’s a good start. “Okay, this is going to sound crazy, but are you married?”

“What?” His brows nearly fly off his forehead.

“Are you married?” I repeat. “Or in a civil union? Maybe a domestic partnership?”

“No, I’m not married or any of the above. Why?”

I narrow my eyes on the gray sprinkling his temples. He looks like he's in his late twenties, maybe early thirties. I drop my gaze to his ring finger. It's bare, which means he must microwave puppies or something equally horrific because no one looks like him and stays single unless they're hiding some serious flaws.

“Are you dating anyone?”

He smirks. Of course, he smirks. “No. You interested?”

“In theory, yes...” I swallow. “Okay, here's the thing. I need you to do me one tiny favor. I realize I have no right to ask you this, and you probably have a lot of toilets to fix, so you can absolutely say no, and I won't be offended.”

“Alright, let's hear it. What's the favor?”

I draw in a lungful of air. “Can you please pretend like we were on a date, and I'm not your Lyft driver? Oh, and if you could act like you're completely obsessed with me, that'd be even better.”

RHODE

Staring at the feisty five-foot-something tatted-out blonde in front of me, I'm struggling to make sense of what she's asking.

For some reason, I thought she'd be this tiny little thing, but she's taller than I thought. I like tall women, though, because it makes doggie style a hell of a lot easier on my knees, since I don't have to bend as much.

I jerk my head, steering my thoughts away from sex positions when I've got this woman staring at me with her big, soulful eyes.

"You want me to pretend we're on a date?"

She nods like my vintage Cujo bobblehead. "Yes, we can spread some condoms on the pavement or something to make it believable. Actually, never mind, a bird could choke. That's a terrible idea."

I like that she's environmentally conscious, but I'm having a hard time keeping up with this whole conversation because I'm exhausted. I can't believe I haven't crashed on the sidewalk. The prospect of my spearmint bath is fading fast, which is a goddamn travesty.

"So, all I have to do is act like we're on a date?" I repeat.

"Yes, I know I have nothing to offer you, but that's my ex. It's a long story, and we're completely over, trust me, but I'd really appreciate it since he basically thinks he invented the female orgasm."

"Pretty sure that was a guy named Rhode Tremblay," I joke.

Instead of laughing, Nina blinks those hazels like she doesn't know my name.

Shit.

Shit. Shit. *Shit.*

My name's in the app, right?

Heat rushes to my face. What was I thinking? I know how to treat a woman in bed, but that wasn't funny. That was dumb as fuck. I glance around to find a few people watching us, but at least they didn't hear that comment.

A car door slams, saving me from having to awkwardly explain the horrible joke I just told. I'm still processing everything she said when a guy with shiny dark hair and black earrings climbs out of the Jeep Wrangler Rubicon, wearing a sweatshirt that reads... I squint at the boxes. *N. Er. Dy.* Is that a band shirt?

Nina stops him with a palm to his chest. "What the hell are you doing here, Isaac?"

The cold air thickens with more tension than a bad ref call. It's clear there's some history between them, but I'm not about to skate onto the ice uninvited and demand answers. I hate when reporters pry into my personal life.

The guy pinches the bridge of his nose. "Why are you always so intense? I'm sorry, okay? I just hauled ass to come get you."

"Would you like a gold medal or a silver one for that?" Nina crosses her arms. "Where's Gwendolyn? Why didn't she come? Why are you here?"

Forget being a neurosurgeon. This woman would make one hell of an interrogator, but people who speak their mind and cut right through the bullshit are my favorite type.

The guy shoves his hands into his hoodie pocket. "She passed out when she got home. I saw the message and figured I'd come, but I wasn't going to text you because I knew you'd tell me not to bother. You're welcome."

Nina scoffs, but what gets to me is the way she wraps her arms around her stomach like she's trying to hold herself together. She glances at me, and something passes between us that I can feel but can't see.

My sister says that I have a savior complex, courtesy of our damned father. Doesn't matter. If she needs a fake date for five minutes, I can be that for her.

What's the worst that could happen?

I stride over, draping my suit jacket around her shoulders from behind. She tenses but then lifts her chin, and I catch a glint of gratitude in her eyes.

I tug Nina closer until her back meets my chest. “You cold, babydoll?”
That slipped out.

“Babydoll?” She winces, brows climbing upward. “No. That’s even worse than sweetheart. We’re not doing the whole cringy nickname thing.”

I shrug, resting my chin on the top of her head. It’s awkward, but it’s happening. “I give everyone nicknames.”

“Well, not me. You can call me by my real name.”

I’ve got a whole arsenal of nicknames I’ve called women over the years, mostly because my younger asshole self couldn’t remember their names, but if Nina doesn’t want a pet name, I’ll respect that.

She’ll be the first that doesn’t get one.

“Alright, Nina it is, then.”

The guy’s gaze flickers between us, but they snag on my face a second longer, narrowing slightly, then widening in recognition. His jaw drops.

Dammit.

I don’t even get a second to mull over this decision before he strides past one of the first responders with an outstretched hand.

“Hold up, are you Rhode Tremblay?”

Nina snaps her fingers. “Rhode,” she says, like my name is an explanation.

“What?” I ask.

She flicks a hand. “Oh, nothing. It’s just an interesting name. Is that Rhode like a road?”

I tug the end of her hair so she remembers we’re pretending. “You know it was my mom’s maiden name. I told you that last week.”

“So, it is you?” the guy asks.

There’s no hiding from her now. With a shrug stiff enough to creak, I grip the guy’s hand. “Yeah, I am. Nice to meet you.”

He shakes my hand so vigorously, it’s like he’s jacking off. “Holy shit. Isaac James. I’m a big fan. Huge fan. That save you made during the playoffs last year against Seattle was unreal. I swear it defied the laws of physics, and I wrote my Ph.D. dissertation on Newton's laws of motion. Fucking legendary, man.”

Nice guy. “Thanks, that save was a beauty.”

Nina whips her head between us. “Okay, I’m confused now. How do you know Rhode?”

Isaac blinks like she asked if the Earth's square and that look instantly puts me on edge. "He's the goalie for the Guardians? The Wall of Steel? The man with a two-point-five-one GAA and a zero-point-nine-two save percentage. I swear, this guy never gets rattled on the ice."

Yeah, but he doesn't see all the ice baths I have to take to soothe my aching muscles. I'm going to need lower back surgery soon. I might've won the Vezina Trophy for my skills five years ago, but it's getting tough to keep my game sharp.

Sometimes, retirement sounds like a dream, but I'd never admit that out loud.

Nina quirks her head. "What are you saying? Rhode's a pl—"

"Player." I give her waist a light squeeze so she gets the point. "I'm a hockey player, but you know that, *remember?*"

She balks like I told her I'm a world-renowned serial killer. Not the reaction I expected. Most women toss their birth control pills out the window when I tell them I'm an NHL player.

Isaac's head bounces between us like a puck passed around on the ice. "So, how do you two know each other?"

Nina clears her throat. "Rhode and I were on a date when the tire exploded. He saved my life and that boy's, Gabriel."

I like that she remembered Gabriel's name, but what I don't like is how she pats my chest in the same way my sister does. If we're supposed to be dating, that's not going to work.

I interlace my fingers through hers, pressing my mouth to her cool knuckles. Her lips part, and I think her breath hitches, which has me fighting back a grin.

She really is one cute doctor.

And damn, that's impressive as hell.

"No, you're the real hero. That was some quick thinking with the cold brew. You were right," I whisper, scratching my stubble against her soft cheek. "Women's brains are bigger."

Isaac splutters, struggling to get his words out. "You're dating Rhode Tremblay? But you hate hockey?"

My thumbs freeze. I hadn't realized they'd been tracing slow circles on her waist. "You *hate* hockey? Do you also hate cats and sunshine?"

She jabs her elbow into my ribs, but I've taken worse hits on the ice. "You know I don't hate hockey. We talked about this. I'm not a big sports

person. That's why I wanted to go to that naked yoga studio for our first date instead of the ice rink."

Naked yoga?

My mind flashes to all the other tattoos she might have hidden on her body, but I shake off the thought. A woman's sneeze is enough to get me half-hard these days.

Pathetic, but true.

"How could I forget?" Maintaining a straight face requires every ounce of willpower, but I flash her a smirk. The same one that started the Tenerife Threesome Incident. "Remember what happened after?" I murmur, brushing my stubble against her cheek like I would if my head were buried between her thighs. "In the steam room? With the eucalyptus oil?"

She arches a brow. "Oh, I remember. I had no idea you could do that with your toes."

My smirk disappears. "My toes? No. I think you meant my hands. You had no idea what I could do with my *hands*."

Now, she's the one smirking as she looks up from below my chin. "I definitely meant your toes."

"What can you do with your toes? Does it help you on the ice?" Isaac asks, all eager like a fresh sports journalist right out of college.

"You wouldn't understand, but Rhode's pretty flexible," Nina straight-up deadpans. There's no barely contained laughter or sly tilt to her lips. That poker face must come in handy during brain surgery.

"I am, actually. I can do the splits," I whisper, lightly pinching her side for good measure. She gasps. Good. The little fox deserves it for that toe comment. "Goalies are very flexible, but you already know that, don't you?"

"Oh, I know. Your splits got us into some very interesting positions after the naked yoga class. It's a good thing I have ten boxes of condoms in my trunk."

I burst out laughing. She's entertaining, I'll give her that. I can't remember the last time a woman made me laugh this much. I'm not sure what's going on right now, but Nina feels damn good nestled against my side.

Maybe it's my dry spell.

I've had a lot of women over the years under me, on top of me, straddling me, wrapped around me, but never one tucked against me.

Isaac's eyes narrow. "Where'd you two even meet?"

Nina and I blurt out, "The naked yoga class." Our brows shoot up toward our hairlines, and we both give each other an impressed look.

"How interesting." Isaac stares at us like he's trying to determine if we're bluffing. "So, you're really dating Rhode Tremblay?"

Nina stiffens. "Yes, why are you saying it like that?"

"Because he's a professional hockey player, and you're well, you."

Nina shoots him a glare withering enough to make me shrivel. I have the urge to hit that tone out of his mouth, but we're playing four away games next week, and that'd mess up my knuckles.

I wrap my arm tighter around her shoulders. "I think the real question is, how did I end up dating Nina because she's the most amazing woman I've met."

She told me to act like I'm obsessed with her, but after the way she practically saved that boy's life, I mean every word.

Isaac's mouth purses like he doesn't believe me. "Okay, why don't we all go to dinner? We could double. There's this sushi restaurant that Gwen's been wanting to try. I think it'd be a great way to get to know your new... boyfriend."

"We really don't need to do that," Nina interjects, waving a hand. "I'm sure Rhode's busy being a Wall of Iron—"

"Steel," I correct.

"Right, that. I'm sure he doesn't have time, and we both know Gwendolyn would rather shove her hand in a blender than go on a double date with me."

Isaac faces me, ignoring Nina's comment, which pisses me off. "What do you say, Tremblay? Want to go out with us? I mean, unless Nina made up this entire situation, and she's really just your Lyft driver? Which, in that case, I'm sorry she put you through that, but I can't say I'm all that surprised," he says like he's giving me an out. "She can get carried away sometimes."

"Isaac," Nina cuts in. "I can't believe you just said that."

She pulls out of my grasp to hold herself. That gets to me more than anything. It's one double date. What's the harm? If it doesn't work out, at least I took a chance on a funny doctor.

I don't believe in karma or all that astrology garbage, but she's witty, cute, and smart. Good enough for me. My options are dwindling now that

everyone's getting married. The older guys on the team don't have babies—they have second graders.

"How's next Thursday work?" Isaac asks. "We can all meet at Nina's place before we leave because she hates surprises."

"Isaac," Nina grits out. "I don't hate surprises. I just like knowing where we're going so I can plan ahead and read the menu."

I glance at the hair whipping around Nina's pink cheeks. Being a goalie means I watch the puck and wait. I know my angles and make sure to take up as much of the net as possible, but when the puck comes my way, I strike.

"You know what? Sure. Sounds fun." I press a light kiss to her temple for good measure, and Nina's body hardens like an ice rink.

Is my mouth that repulsive? It's been a while since I've flirted with a woman, but I don't think I've lost my edge.

Her hazels widen. "That's sweet of you, but I know you're busy with the uh, season?"

"Yeah, but I want to," I whisper in her ear, pulling her closer. "You can tell me all about the brains you saved that day."

"Or we could talk about anything other than that," she says in that same tone I use when Coach demands we do bag skates after losing a game.

My lips drop into a frown. I thought she'd be happier about the date. With a glare at Isaac, she pulls out of my grasp and strides through the crowd to the tow truck driver.

"It's a date then," Isaac calls after her, and then sidles up next to me. "Sorry about Nina. She gets like that sometimes, which you'll learn. She can be a lot to handle."

I shove my hands deep into my pockets, so I'm not tempted to use them on this asshole. "She can handle me anytime she wants."

"No, of course. Didn't mean it like that, man. My bad." He blows out a breath. "Has she uh, told you about us?"

I roll up my cuffs. "You know, you haven't come up much, and I don't care about her past. Just her future."

If anyone judged me for my dating record, I'd never find someone.

He slaps my shoulder, chiefting me, and I glare at the prick. "Just be careful with her. It didn't work out between us, and we're both better off for that, but she's been through a lot. I still care about her even if we were terrible together, so I'm happy she has you."

Nina's waving her hands like a flight attendant hyped up on too much airplane coffee. Whatever argument she's having, she's winning.

Isaac sighs at her flailing arms. "I don't want to see her get hurt. She's a good girl."

A corner of my mouth tugs up as I watch her.

And here I was hoping the cute doctor would be a little bad.

NINA

“**Y**ou need a steadier hand to center the clay, Philomena.” Pierre peers over my shoulder, letting his long gray hair fall into my face.

I lift my foot off the pottery wheel pedal. “I know, I’m trying, but my fingers are a little shaky today.”

“Hmm, indeed,” he muses, clapping his hands speckled with dried paint to capture the students’ attention. “Let’s pause our creative toils for a moment. Today, we delve into the nuanced world of hand-building techniques, but first, I’m eager to hear about your progress with The Peaceful Mind Project.”

Our vivacious ceramics professor is in his seventies, but despite his white hair and wrinkled face, he’s one of the most youthful people I’ve met. He demands we call him Pierre—never Professor.

Pierre scans the cluttered art studio. It’s a mess of canvases, kilns, and half-finished paintings, but it’s one of my favorite places to visit on campus when I need to tune the world out.

“Consider this a pivotal moment in your artistic journey,” he announces. “You have precisely three months to secure a donation for the charity auction, which marks the culmination of our semester. Remember, pottery, painting, and art in all forms can be exceptionally therapeutic.”

Noah leans across the jars of paintbrushes to whisper in my ear. With his wild blond curls, gray Henley, and black-rimmed glasses, he’s Picasso’s wet dream.

We've been desk partners since we walked into Sculptural Ceramics at the beginning of the semester. "So, basically, Pierre wants us to do his dirty work and find the auction items for the charity event that he organized? Nice."

I wipe my clay-spattered hands on my apron. "At least it's for a good cause. I've been researching The Peaceful Mind Project, and they provide funding for art studios around the world. I mean, throwing a pot calms me down, so it's helpful..."

"True." Noah raises his hand. "Hey, Pierre. Can't we just donate one of the art pieces we've made in class instead of finding an auction item?"

Pierre lifts his nose, prim and proper. "Unfortunately, no one would bid on your piece, Noah."

A few people in class chuckle.

"I'd bid on his piece," I interject in his defense. "I find his spherical sculptures to be full of delicate nuances, with each subtlety carrying a certain ethereal grace."

I pulled that comment out of my ass.

Pierre flicks a finger in the air. "Ah, an astute observation, Philomena."

"Thanks. I'm glad you thought that was astute."

Noah nudges my shoulder. He was seeing someone earlier this semester, but he's been more touchy with me recently, so I'm not sure if they broke up. "I've told Pierre I just really like jellyfish since all my sculptures look like gigantic piles of shit."

"They're not *that* bad."

Pierre continues his lecture, and since we aren't working with our hands anymore, I shift my focus back to the fifty tabs open on my computer screen.

Rhode Tremblay should pay me rent for all the space he's taking up in my mind. I scan the articles.

Rhode Tremblay's Game Day Secret: Beet Smoothies. Rhode Tremblay's Philanthropic "Power Play" to Children's Hockey Programs. Rhode Tremblay Caught in Scandalous Act with Olivia Vervain in Tenerife. Rhode Tremblay and Micah Cruz's Pre-Game Ritual: Beanies & Jockstraps.

Micah Cruz?

That name rings through my memories. I squint at the screen, peering closer at the guy with a killer smile next to Rhode.

I remember that panty-melting grin from high school. Micah's gorgeous with locks of midnight hair and amber eyes glittering like topaz. That playful twinkle never seems to dull.

He's older now, but he was voted *Most Likely to End Up in A Dancing Competition*. Looks like he got his dream in the NHL and proved our Superlatives committee wrong.

Micah was always one of my favorite people in high school because he can make anyone smile, even when they're having a bad day, and I used to have a lot of terrible days.

I slam my laptop shut.

This fake date has been looming in my mind all week, and there's absolutely no way I can go out with Rhode Tremblay, who—based on the internet sinkhole I delved into—is not just a hockey player, he's Nashville's Naughtiest Bachelor.

There are a few articles that claim he's a revered veteran, but I was scrolling through some pretty scandalous pictures of him, chugging expensive tequila from between some girl's legs, so I have my doubts about his reputation.

I'm still trying to wrap my head around the fact that the same man who saved us from mutual destruction last week also tied up a woman on a yacht near the coast of Tenerife and accidentally set it on fire as she orgasmed.

He's a little wild, but maybe that's something all hockey goalies have in common. They do have to stand in front of a net, stopping flying pucks all day.

When class ends, I grab my messenger bag. "See you next week, Noah."

As I stroll through campus beneath the crisp winter sky, I mentally run through a list of excuses to call off this date. I can't admit I'm a twenty-two-year-old art student to a professional hockey player. He'd laugh in my face.

What do we even have in common? He's thirty-three. What if he still leaves voicemails?

My last semester of senior year is about me—my goals, my dreams, my ambitions. I'm done molding myself to fit someone else's needs. I'm leaving for Argentina in July for a three-month pottery fellowship I worked my ass off to get.

I don't need to be distracted by older men who may as well have *HEARTBREAK* written on their forehead in their ex-girlfriend's red lipstick.

I stride up the icy steps to my sister's brownstone and shut the door. I flip on the living room TV for some background noise because I can't stand silence, flicking through channels until Rhode's handsome face pops up on the screen.

"How're you feeling ahead of tonight's game, Rhode?" the interviewer's deep voice seeps through our TV.

His lips curve into a smile on the screen, unfurling with the stiffness of a robot. "I'm feeling good. Really good. I've had some solid practice sessions with my coach, so I'm ready for tonight's game. The team's ready."

"Good to see you're still confident," the interviewer says. "Especially since there have been rumors floating around about your retirement."

I keep my eyes on the water droplets speckling Rhode's damp hair while spritzing the succulents lining the windowsill. He looks ready for the Cannes Film Festival in his elegant charcoal suit, but he's wearing an olive green tie with little cacti all over the material. I bet he's left a trail of broken hearts all over the world, and mine will not be one of them.

"Shit," I mutter, realizing I accidentally watered the sheer-gray curtains.

My sister won't be happy about that since she meticulously crafted every piece of furniture in her apartment. The room's got this whole chic meets jungle vibe, courtesy of my potted plants transforming the place into a rustic brick rainforest. It's the kind of home I'd dream of living in forever if it didn't come with Gwen's irritating presence.

"So, what's next for you, Rhode?" the interviewer asks. "What does the *road* ahead, if you will, look like after the League?"

Rhode's grin looks carved on his face. There's no dimple like the warm smile he gave me last week.

He crosses one knee on the screen in that stereotypical I-give-no-shits way all fuckboys seem to master. "I'm feeling stronger than ever, so I hope you think my face is pretty because you'll be seeing a lot more of me next season. I won't be leaving the League anytime soon."

Grabbing my phone, I scan the lone message Rhode sent with his name. A hot rush of panic slices through me.

I need to cancel this date, and Rhode won't get this for a while if he's doing an interview, so I make my fingers move across the screen.

He's probably got thousands of women in his contacts, so he'll be in someone else's bed by midnight, moaning their name with mine forgotten.

ME

Hey! I've been thinking a lot about our date, and you don't need to pretend. Fake dating is a little ridiculous... no one ever believes it. I don't want to put you in an awkward situation. I know your schedule must be crazy, so you don't need to respond to this. Anyway, have a nice life (:

There. Sent.

"Since when do you watch hockey?"

I jump at the sound of *that* grating voice.

"What are you doing here, Gwendolyn?" I say to my sister, keeping my focus on Rhode's chiseled face.

"Really? You're still sticking with the whole Gwendolyn thing? You've called me Gwen since you were five."

"Yes, but that was before you betrayed me."

I dump the rest of my water into the fern that stands as a living—or rather dying—testament to her infamous black thumb.

Every plant my sister touches withers faster than our relationship, but I'm not giving up a free living arrangement just because she's a traitor. Our parents are teachers, and I'd never ask them to fund my pottery fellowship, so I have to save every penny from driving.

There's a melodramatic sigh and a rustling of cabinets behind me. "Do you want some coffee? I got those beans from the place you like near campus."

Gritting my teeth, I whip around to see her shoving a cup in my face. She's wearing an ice blue silk robe that looks like a dress, and her golden hair is a mess on top of her head, but she could make a garbage bag look beautiful.

Gwen's climbed her way up the corporate ladder by working for some consulting company called Enigma. She's a badass, except there isn't enough money in the world for me to admit that out loud.

I might've followed her like a duckling to college, but now, I wear my tattoos and corduroy overalls like a badge of honor.

"Is it decaf?" I eye the mossy green cup I made in Ceramics. I'm surprised she picked it out of the cabinet.

She shakes the mug. “No, but is one cup of regular coffee really going to hurt?”

I could tell her that caffeine tricks my body into thinking I’m being chased by a bear, but she’d never understand because the only anxiety she gets is over when her candle-of-the-month subscription arrives.

“Yes, I’ve told you this a thousand times,” I say. “It makes me shaky, and I don’t like the feeling.”

Spinning around, I turn up the volume on the screen that’s showing highlights from last week’s game. Rhode had a shutout, which, confusingly enough, is not about shutting anyone out of the room. It’s apparently a big deal since the announcers won’t stop talking about it post-game.

“Is that Rhode Tremblay?” Gwen sighs. “I could literally stare at him all day. Why did I have to find out from Isaac that you were dating him? That’s huge news. You should’ve told me. How’d you even meet?”

“I’m not telling you shit anymore now that you broke my trust,” I snap, hating that we have the same taste in men.

“So, you’re actually dating Rhode Tremblay? The Wall of Steel?”

“Can you stop referring to him by his first and last name?” I deflect.

The fridge opens. “I’m just surprised. You hate sports. You always complained about going to my soccer games growing up.”

“Why does everyone think I hate all sports?”

“I just feel like this is something you should’ve told me,” Gwen continues without acknowledging my question. “Also, isn’t he a little old for you?”

She’s right, and after the whole Isaac thing, I really shouldn’t be dating older guys, but like hell am I going to agree with my sister. “He’s thirty-three. That’s not that old. If he lives to be a hundred and five, he’s only lived thirty-one percent of his life. That’s nothing.”

“Yeah, but you’re twenty-two. I mean, you’re in completely different places in life.”

“I’m done talking about this with you.”

She lowers the cup, eyes glistening. “Nina, please, I’m trying here, okay? I’m sorry. I’m so so sorry for everything, but I don’t know what else to do. I’ve apologized a million times. Why can’t we at least try to be friends again?”

“You’re not my friend. You’re my sister.”

“I can be both.”

Silence wedges itself between us. The gap in our relationship is so wide that it has no trouble fitting.

“No, you can’t, Gwendolyn. You fucked the guy I lost my virginity to. Then I found out last week that you’ve been secretly dating him behind my back for an entire year. Do you want me to say that I’m fine with you sleeping with Isaac? Because that’d be a lie.”

She throws out her hands. Coffee spills from her mug. “Really, Nina? You ended things with Isaac over two and a half years ago. Two *years*. You’ve been with other people. It’s not like either of us cheated.”

“Yeah, except I just found out you were secretly dating him last *week*,” I parrot. “Give me a minute to process that, at least.”

“We waited six months before anything happened.”

“That doesn’t—”

She cuts me off. “And you never told me you lost your virginity to him because you don’t tell me anything. You said the only reason you dated him was because you liked guys in tweed vests. How was I supposed to know you were in love with him?”

Looking back, I can see what I thought was love was really infatuation, but sometimes, when I’m sucked into a particularly dark hole, I can’t help but wonder what Gwen has that made me not enough. That niggling thought pokes holes in my self-confidence, but I’m trying to put it behind me.

“That doesn’t matter.” I stand so fast I almost knock over my cup of water. “It’s not even about that. It’s about the fact that you went behind my back and tried to hide this from me. Do you know how awful that makes me feel? If you had told me you liked him, I probably would’ve been okay with it. Instead, I had to walk in on you sucking him off in the living room last week,” I shout. “It’s practically incest.”

She rolls her eyes. “It’s not incest.”

“It should be!”

Her green eyes spark with anger, giving them an eerie glow. “Please, you never would’ve been okay with us being together. That’s why we kept it a secret. You’ve spent your whole life hating me. This isn’t something new.”

I ignore that last comment because there isn’t a big enough suitcase to fit that emotional baggage. It’s not hatred I feel for Gwen. It’s a long-standing envy that’s the curse of a younger sister.

Confidence is woven into her DNA, while anxiety is embedded in mine. Gwen blinds everyone when she walks into a room. I don't want to be the type of woman who dims another girl's sparkle, but she shines so bright that no one can even see me. It's like she has glitter running through her veins.

"Why did it have to be Isaac?" I mumble. "You could've had literally anyone else. Why him?"

"I don't know, Nina." She rubs her hands over her face. "I don't want to make you uncomfortable by listing out all the things I like. We got to talking last year when he dropped off your stuff, but you're right. We should've talked to you first. It just sort of happened."

"Oh, really?" I sneer. "So, Isaac's dick just accidentally slipped inside your mouth? Nice. I'm so sorry your chemistry was just so explosive that you couldn't control yourselves."

"Nina, just listen—"

"No," I interrupt. "That's such bullshit. You don't 'accidentally' sleep with your sister's ex. That's something you think about, and you willingly chose to do this to me, so don't act like this was out of your control. You chose him over me, and I can't forgive you for that."

"You know it's not like that at all. I like him, but I love you, Nina." Her face falls, and guilt bubbles inside me because I love my sister. I really do, despite our tangled relationship, except I never tell her I love her.

"Look," I relent, grabbing my phone. "Let's not do this. I'm tired of fighting, and I need to work on securing a donation for my ceramics class project."

"How's that coming, by the way? Are you ready for your speech?"

"No. You know I hate public speaking, but I still have four months to prepare, so I'll be fine. I'm always fine."

I pull out my phone, needing a distraction, but then I see a text on the screen. My heart pounds relentlessly when I read the message.

RHODE

You must not know many hockey players, Dr. Nina... It's cute that you think I'm going to give up that easy (;

It's best to fade into the periphery of his life, so I turn off my phone and leave him on read.

RHODE

We hand Denver their asses on a silver platter fit for the King of England himself.

Two minutes into the game, Denver's goalie chokes, and Patty hits a slap shot right through the five-hole.

What a beauty.

In the second period, Denver starts racking up weak penalties—slashing, holding, even tripping.

The bastards.

In a dirty move, Forty trips Cruz with his stick, but our boy bounces back up like a goddamn gopher. His backhand rebounds off the boards, soaring right into their net while Forty gets time in the box.

We fucking chirp like crickets.

They send puck after puck flying my way, but I'm the Wall of Steel. Denver doesn't get a single shot past me, and the buzzer rings through the rink when we secure a shutout.

The locker room is electric after the game.

"Fuck yeah!" Cruz shouts, spitting water from his mouth. "I'm a goddamn legend. Who wants to suck my dick as a thank you?"

"Pass."

"Hell no."

"Suck your own dick."

Even though the rookie curses every other word, Micah Cruz has a good heart buried under his ego. The kid's an instigator, and while he's quick to drop gloves, he's even quicker to forgive.

The guy never forgets a teammate's birthday. Not to mention he's a warrior on the ice with some downright hilarious trash talk.

Everyone waves their jerseys in the air, but I'm frowning as I pull my phone from my stall. The smell of sweat, tape, and cleaning supplies permeates the locker room.

At least the pungent scent is a nice distraction from the funny doctor who's been dominating my thoughts. It's been ages since I've hit it off that easily with a woman, but I might be the only one feeling this because she still hasn't texted me back. Our date's supposed to be tomorrow, but crickets respond faster than Nina Alstyne.

Why didn't she text me back?

Did she look me up online?

I hope not. If she did, she's going to find those Tenerife pictures, but that past version of myself might as well be a stranger I don't want to meet.

"Alright, gentlemen, huddle up." Coach Watson sweeps her gaze across the team. Her piercing steel-gray eyes challenge every player as she launches into her post-game debrief.

At five-foot-four, Patricia Watson's gray head barely reaches the shoulders of most men here, but her raw intensity commands attention. As the daughter of a hockey legend and a former player herself, she's a well-respected head coach within the League.

"All in all, great work today," she says in a voice steadier than a Zamboni. "This is a testament to the hard work, dedication, and countless hours we've put in, so enjoy the celebration, but don't let it get to your heads. We've still got half the season left, and we're going for the Cup this year. Now, get some rest."

My teammates laugh, push, and shove each other out of the locker room. I slap the back of one of the fourth-line rookies. "Nice work out there, Jenkins. The way you found the back of the net was nothing short of artistry."

"Thanks, Tremblay. Means a lot coming from you."

He grins, showing the gap left by a puck that hit his jaw in our opening preseason game. I grimace in return. Been there. It's rough, but he's on the list to see the team dentist for some veneers, and Dr. Alder works magic.

I make it a point to give each one of my teammates a solid pat before pulling out my crossword from the locker, needing to decompress after the adrenaline rush.

It's a decent distraction from a word that starts with N and ends with A.

"Fuck, I hate that we have to go commando for every game," Cruz says, itching his crotch. "My balls are chafing against my jockstrap. You sure I can't wear one of those man girdles?"

Patty hides his laugh with a cough. "Hey, we're icebound... Bound by the rituals of the hockey gods, my man. You know it's bad luck if we don't go commando for every game. We win as a team, and we go commando as a team."

Patty and I exchange a glance, trying like hell to keep a straight face. We've kept this commando lie going with Cruz since our opening pre-season game. We've all got our superstitions, but I pulled one over on Cruz because the veterans did the same to me all those years ago, and I'm passing the torch.

Cruz tugs at his pants. "I fucking hate this tradition."

My phone buzzes, and I lurch forward like it's a puck flying at me, hoping to see Nina's name, but a muscle ticks in my jaw when I read the screen.

MORGAN

Great win tonight. I'm proud of you. I'm coming to Nashville in March, and I'd love to see you.

My jaw clenches as I shut off my phone, irritation rippling through my body like it does every time I see Morgan's name on my screen.

Cruz pokes his head over my shoulder, but I slap his hand away. "Don't touch my crossword."

He whips his hair, sending droplets of sweat flying onto my paper. "What the fuck crawled up your asshole? A wasp? Did you not see that saucer pass I intercepted? We slaughtered Denver."

Patty ties back his blond hair. It must be irritating as shit keeping it long. "He's mad that his doctor driver ghosted him."

I glare at the crossword like the words have a hidden message that will decode Nina's thoughts. I wasn't angry at first because I don't want to force someone to go out with me, but the more I thought about it, the more it annoyed me. Am I not good enough for a doctor?

Women tell me I'm an attractive guy, and no one's ever ghosted me before. I'm used to women jumping into my bed—headfirst.

I take off my jersey. “Technically, she didn't ghost me. She was pretty blunt about ending things.”

Cruz slaps my shoulder. “Look at you, actually knowing the definition of ghosting. Did your crossword teach you that, old man?”

I grit my teeth. His *old man* comments are getting on my last nerve. Yeah, my back might hurt in the mornings, and sure, I get knee pain if I don't take an ice bath once a week, and alright, my ideal Friday night includes getting nine hours of sleep, but your thirties are not old. Sixties aren't even old. Age is a mindset. Cruz just thinks he's invincible. But it's hard not to feel old when I'm surrounded by guys in their early twenties, and have to compare myself to all their stats.

“Old man? I'm thirty-three,” I cut out, fully aware that my piss mood has everything to do with a certain doctor.

“You're right. I should show some respect for my elders. I mean, you were born in the nineteen hundreds.”

I level him with a glare. “Is that really what we're calling the nineties now?”

“Hey, give it up to your elders,” Patty says. “I was born in the nineteen hundreds too.”

Cruz rubs a towel over his face. “Yeah. It's prehistoric. I bet you guys still look at magazines when you jerk off.”

I smack the kid with my crossword. “At least I don't get hard while watching goat videos.”

“For the last fucking time,” Cruz yells, going from zero to a hundred in a second. “I was thinking about something else. I already had a semi when Patty started playing that video.”

“What were you thinking about?” Patty interjects, snickering. “Horses?”

We bust out laughing.

Whenever tensions rise, Patty's the first to get everyone to simmer down. He's a man of few words at first, but he'll talk for hours once you get to know him.

Our right winger possesses a heart of iron, all while exuding a golden boy charm with his farm-boy drawl and that baby girl on his hip. I swear the guy's gilded in integrity. Wyatt Patterson's a true beauty with that rare ability to command respect on and off the ice.

Cruz unscrews an electrolyte drink. “Don’t fuck with me. I’ve got a lot of pent-up energy after that damn puck bunny edged me for like three hours, then fell asleep on me.”

“Stop calling your one-night stands puck bunnies,” I say. “You realize women are responsible for half our ticket sales, right? Do you really want to piss them off?”

Cruz scoffs. “They *like* being called puck bunnies.”

I squirt water in my mouth. “Not when you say it like that, they don’t.”

“You want to talk about pissing off women? What happened to all those stories I heard about you? Where’s Tenerife Threesome Tremblay? He sounds like a good-ass time. I want him back.”

Threesomes are a lot of work, and I only have one mouth. Yeah, I had a good time in my twenties, and so did the women I slept with, but I’m almost thirty-four. I’ve had pickles in my fridge last longer than my relationships.

“That was one time, and it happened years ago,” I say. “Stop bringing it up. Camille spent way too much time taking down those articles, and I still can’t get any sponsorships because of it, so I have manners now.”

“Manners?” Cruz snorts. “Is that what you call fucking two women at once? ‘Cause if that’s the case, my mom raised me wrong. Why the hell have I been opening doors?”

Patty groans. “That’s it. My daughter’s never dating. I’m going to buy a castle and lock Betty up when she turns thirteen.”

My shoulders sag like they do every time Patty brings up his baby girl. He has someone waiting for him, someone who relies on him. All I’m coming home to is a cat that scratches me as a greeting because I couldn’t bring myself to declaw him.

Wiping away the thought, I lift my leg on the bench, stretching my groin. “You won’t need to lock Betty up in a castle because you’re going to raise her right, so she’ll know exactly what kind of man she deserves. Her standards are going to be so damn high, thanks to you.”

Patty rakes a hand through his hair like he wants to pull out the strands. “How am I going to protect her from the assholes of the world? I think I’d shoot myself in the foot if she dated someone like Cruz. No, actually, I’d kill Cruz.”

The murder victim in question swats Patty’s leg with a towel. “Hey, she’d love me. I’m very generous in bed. Just ask Tremblay’s sister.”

“Nice try.” I throw an empty bottle at him. “Rowyn would never date you. She’s got standards.”

He shoves his tongue in his cheek. “Wanna bet?”

“I’m a terrible role model,” Patty continues, interrupting again like the peacekeeper. Good thing, too, because I was tempted to smack Cruz for that one. I’d break his lucky stick if he tried anything with Rowyn.

“Hell, I almost gave my daughter honey. How come no one told me you can’t give newborns honey? People should talk about that more, or at least put a warning label on the bottle.”

Cruz swipes a towel through his hair. “I think they do, man.”

“Nice. Even you know that,” Patty moans, throwing his water in the recycling bin. “I’m a shitty dad.”

“Hey, listen to me.” I pull Patty into a hug so Cruz can’t hear. “Only great parents feel like shitty ones. You’ve got one hell of a support system, and you know what Betty’s going to see when she grows up? She’s going to see her daddy chasing his wildest dream, and that’ll make her want to be just as wild as you.”

Patty wipes his eyes, but this is his norm now. He cried at a pet food commercial because Betty laughed at the mini dachshund eating dog food.

“Thanks, Tremblay. I needed that. My mom gave Betty a blueberry for the first time today, and I didn’t get to see her eat it, which sucks. She makes the funniest faces when she tries new things.”

Cruz grabs two foam rollers. “Why the fuck would you want to see her eat a blueberry? I’ll eat a blube for you.”

Patty scowls. “I don’t want to see *you* eat a blueberry.”

My phone rings, and I lurch for it, but my shoulders slump when I see Rowyn’s name and not Nina’s.

I put my phone to my ear. “Hey, Wyn, what’s up?”

Cruz moans. “Is that your sexy-as-fuck sister? Tell her I miss her, and I think about her all the time.”

I point at him. “Don’t go there.”

That’s all it takes for my twenty-two-year-old sister to launch into her monologue. “So, my professor failed literally everyone in the class yesterday, so we all went for drinks to drown our sorrows. Have you heard of a Sourtoe Cocktail? I shit you not, there’s actually a human toe that has been mummified in the salt, but that’s a whole other thing. So, I might have ended up in jail—”

“What? You ended up in jail? Why didn’t you call me?” I demand.
“What ha—”

“What the hell?” Cruz shouts, jumping from the bench. “Why’s she in jail? Put her on speaker right the fuck now.”

Patty slaps the side of his head. “Stop talking. We’re listening.”

“Calm down, Ro. I’m talking to you, aren’t I?” Wyn says on the line. “I’m fine. I got myself out. No record. Anyway, what were we talking about? Can I borrow your jersey for a Jocks in Socks frat party next weekend?”

My sister almost gives me three aneurysms by the time she finishes talking. Every time I chat with Rowyn, I swear I age a decade.

Her wild nights make my weekend naps look like a documentary on snails, which is why I need someone in the same life stage. I can’t imagine Nina calling me up to ask if she can borrow my jersey for a party.

“Tremblay!” Coach strides into the locker room with her mouth in a flat line. “Camille wants to see you in her office.”

Camille Bernard is one of the top sports agents in the industry, and after the way she handled the Tenerife Incident, I’d trust her to fly a plane blindfolded.

“I’ve got to go, Wyn,” I say. “Coach just walked in, so I’ll talk to you later. Love you.”

“Love you most!” she says before hanging up.

I stride over to Coach Watson. As I approach, she nods to my leg. “How’s the knee?”

“Good,” I lie. There’s a slight twinge, but there’s no chance I’m admitting that when it’ll only start more retirement rumors.

Coach purses her lips. “Go see one of the PTs before you talk to Camille. We need you to be playing in top shape since your contract’s up this season, and you’re hesitating a split second before dropping into butterfly. Stop pushing yourself to the limit, or I’ll pull you, so you’re forced to rest. We need you focused.”

The pressure of her words settles on my shoulders, but I’m used to the weight. Still, it’d be nice to have someone to lift it off every once in a while. “I’m always focused.”

“Good.” She slaps my back. “Stretch and then find Camille. She seemed excited to tell you about something.”

After stretching and showering, I'm ready for bed, but when I round the hallway with Cruz droning on about his latest hook-up, I find Camille walking up to me with her black curls bouncing. My agent could run for office in her navy suit, and she'd win.

"Tremblay. Come with me. Now."

"Someone's in trouble." Cruz winks. "Hey, Cami. Am I in trouble too? I feel like I've been a very bad boy. I could use a spanking. Make it a hard one."

"Keep flirting with me, and I'll file a sexual harassment claim to make you stop," she retorts in her typical no-nonsense tone. "Unless you have a vagina hidden under your jockstrap, I'm not interested. I'm taking Tremblay from you."

She nods her head, and I fall into step behind her as we pass the Hall of Fame jerseys. I glance over my shoulder to see Cruz dry humping the air before I roll my eyes and turn back around.

"Is he dry humping the air again?" Camille asks.

"Yeah."

She keeps walking forward. "Stop dry humping, Cruz, or we're circling back to that harassment claim!"

"Sorry, you know I'm only joking!" Cruz calls from behind. "You're my favorite, Cami."

"Excuses, excuses," she mumbles.

"What's going on?" I ask as we round another corner. "Please tell me it's good news and not another old scandal that's resurfaced on social media."

Her heels click on the tile. "Not here. We'll talk in my office. I've got a call scheduled that I want you on."

I hold open her office door, letting her stride inside. She takes a seat behind the giant glass desk. "What's going on?"

She taps her nail-colored nails on her keyboard. They've got frosted tips. "Here. Read this." She turns the computer screen to show me an article online. I scan the headline.

Rhode Tremblay and Mystery Girl Save ¡Vamos! CMO Andrea Peña's Son After Asthma Attack Post-Car Crash.

I stiffen as I read. ¡Vamos! is big time. They're famous for their all-natural protein bars and have commercials in the Super Bowl. The buñuelo flavor is addicting. I once ate six of them after a game.

There's a picture of me and Nina looking like a superhero duo, but there's no doubt I'm the sidekick. Damn, I forgot how cute she was with those glasses. Why the hell did she turn me down?

Nina's handing the boy a cold brew coffee with a warm smile, and I'm bent down beside him, rubbing his back.

Camille grins, kicking her black heels on her desk. "Guess who's interested in sponsoring you because of your good Samaritan act? Andrea Peña's calling me soon."

"No shit!" I jump out of the rolling chair, sending it flying back into the door.

If I can secure a sponsorship with one of the most prominent brands in the sports nutrition industry, that will settle these retirement rumors. No more talk about my contract year. "You better not be joking, Cam. You know I've been trying to find someone ever since Quench pulled out."

She threads her fingers behind her head like a corporate powerhouse. "When do I ever joke, Tremblay?"

"Good point."

Her phone rings on her glass desk. "Speak of the devil..." She swipes it open. "Andrea, it's Camille Bernard. Great to talk with you. I've got Rhode Tremblay on speaker with us, as promised."

"Mr. Tremblay, it's a pleasure to speak with you again," a smooth voice rings through the line. "I don't have much time, but first, I'd like to express our deepest apologies regarding the tire incident. I'm so glad you and your partner weren't injured. Rest assured, any damage caused will be compensated."

I keep my mouth shut. I'm not about to correct the energy bar industry's most prominent CMO on the partner thing. "Don't worry about it, Ms. Peña. I'm glad everyone was alright."

Camille gives me a thumbs up of approval. I give her one back, trying not to fuck this up.

"You and me both," she says. "But please, call me Andrea. Your assistance during my son's time of need was greatly appreciated, and for that, I'd like to personally thank you by inviting you to our sponsorship event next month, and please bring your partner. I'd like to extend my gratitude to her. Perhaps we could discuss some business opportunities over drinks."

“Thanks, Andrea. I’d be honored. We’ll be there,” I blurt without thinking.

Do I tell her Nina’s not mine? No. I don’t want to risk correcting her, and it’s not a big deal. If Nina can cut into brains, I bet she can make small talk. Plus, this gives me a reason to see the cute doctor again.

“Excellent,” she says. “My assistant, Matthew, will be in touch. I look forward to seeing you again.”

We talk for a couple more minutes about logistics, but I’m too keyed up with energy to focus, so Camille takes control.

After we hang up, Camille gives me one of her famous confident grins. “I’m guessing I don’t need to tell you what a big deal it is getting someone as big as ¡Vamos! to back you. I didn’t realize you were dating someone, though. *That* would’ve been nice to know.”

I blow out a sharp breath. The thought of seeing Nina again has my stomach churning with nerves, but they’re the good kind.

It’s been a while since a woman’s made me this nervous, and I want to impress her, especially since she seems so damn underwhelmed with me.

“Her name’s Nina, but we’re not dating. We’re not even together.”

Camille hums under her breath. “Well, you probably should’ve asked her first before committing her to an event, so you better see if she’s willing to pretend for one night.”

My mind’s working at warp speed, already concocting a plan. I type out a text, almost misspelling a few words thanks to my eagerness.

ME

Hey! Can we talk? I've got a proposition for you...

NINA

Intriguing...

But I'll pass.

I almost drop my phone. Holy shit. She actually responded. I re-read my text, grimacing as I type a new one.

ME

That sounded bad. A normal proposition.

NINA

That sounded worse. You're really not selling me on this proposition.

Well, damn. I slump toward the screen. Maybe I should let her go. After all the shit I pulled in my twenties, I'm not good enough for someone like her. Hell, she saves lives. What the fuck am I doing? Entertaining America?

ME

Alright. Thanks, anyway.

NINA

Really?

That's it?

I thought hockey players didn't give up easy?

ME

Yeah, but I'm not a dick. I won't force you to go out with me... even though you are missing out. I'm a good time (;

I stare at the screen, bouncing my knee. If this doesn't work, I'm out of ideas. There are dots, then nothing. Dots. Nothing. That happens ten more times before a text comes through.

NINA

What's the proposition?

ME

Can we talk in person? (:

NINA

Fine. I'm curious. You can stop by. This better be one good proposition.

ME

Great! I know you said you don't like surprises, so I'm warning you that I'll be showing up for our 'date' with sunflowers tomorrow.

NINA

You remembered I don't like surprises?

ME

I listened (:

NINA

Sunflowers aren't in season...

ME

I'll find a way. I can be pretty stubborn when I want to be (;

NINA

I'm realizing that. See you tomorrow

Even though she's texting me back like I'm a tax collector, I can't stop grinning on my way home.

NINA

A knock on the door ripples through the apartment, loud enough to shake the leaves on my snake plants.

“Don’t come out, Gwendolyn. I’m sending Rhode away after I talk to him,” I shout at her closed bedroom door.

Silence greets me from her room.

I glance at my reflection in the hallway mirror, smoothing out my caramel strands that look like a watered-down version of Gwen’s highlighted hair.

“You can do this, Nina,” I say to the girl in the mirror. “You’re just going to talk to him and then go your separate ways because there’s no way a professional hockey player is sticking around when he finds out you lied.”

I’m slightly regretting having agreed to this, but I was curious. I want to know what Nashville’s Naughtiest Bachelor needs from someone like me. I was also shocked Rhode actually listened to me over text that I ended up saying yes. Isaac never took my needs into consideration.

That’s one of the reasons I had to fake a lot of orgasms.

After sliding a piece of cinnamon gum onto my tongue, I dab on some concealer from my purse, hoping to camouflage the evidence of my sleepless night.

The nerves about seeing Rhode again kept me up tossing and turning. My thoughts started spinning about how I couldn’t sleep, and just when my eyelids started to flutter shut, my alarm shrieked, so I went for a five-mile

run to calm down. I'll glue my eyes closed to make myself sleep tonight. That or chug a bottle of melatonin.

I swing open my apartment door. True to his word, Rhode's holding a bundle of sunflowers under the crisp winter sun. Dressed in jeans, a hoodie, and a navy beanie, the laid-back vibe makes him look younger, but I still see the sprinkle of gray at his temples.

He really is the kind of sexy that crushes hearts.

He smiles, breath fogging up the chilly air. "Well, if it isn't my favorite doctor."

I wince at the reference. "You're early."

His grin falters. "What can I say? I was excited to see you, so I left straight from the rink. Traffic was easy too. How was your day? Busy at the hospital?"

He rattles off the words, making guilt gnaw through my intestines. I gesture to the sunflowers because I desperately need a distraction from his blinding teeth. Those have to be veneers. "You really brought me flowers?"

"Yeah, of course I did. I wouldn't lie to you, and my mom taught me well."

He holds them out with a tiny smile that makes him look a little nervous, but there's no way that's true. I saw the Tenerife photos, and this man is the embodiment of brazen arrogance.

I narrow my eyes on the petals. In my experience, only players who have an ego the size of Canada give women flowers. That, or men who have to apologize for something. "How'd you find sunflowers? They're out of season."

He rubs the back of his neck. "I uh, went to a few shops until I found some since I figured you like them with that tattoo on your wrist."

"You noticed my tattoo?"

His eyes meet mine, and he swallows. "I noticed a lot of things about you, Nina."

The gesture is so sweet that it makes my stomach hurt. He doesn't seem like Nashville's Naughtiest Bachelor, but who knows what he's got hiding under his dimple.

I pick at the petals. "So, why did you send me five texts last night about your completely normal proposition?"

He points over his shoulder. "Do you want to talk over a cup of coffee? My treat. There's a shop across the street called Roasted I thought we could

try, but it's up to you."

I'd rather spend the day fighting with Gwen than go back there. I had one of the worst panic attacks of my life in their bathroom two years ago, so I avoid that place like it's a horde of sweaty bodies.

Using my foot, I subtly scoot my backpack to the side. "Thanks, but I'm not a big coffee-in-the-afternoon person, and I prefer decaf, anyway. You can come inside if you want, and we can talk?"

Smiling, he leans closer, and I get a whiff of laundry detergent. I stop breathing, so I don't have to smell the fresh scent. "That sounds perfect, thanks."

I spin on my heel, leading him past a fern that's seen better days. I make a mental note to water it as we step into Gwen's kitchen, which looks straight out of the 1950s with the mint-green fridge that screams retro-chic.

I glance at the fridge, wondering what I've got in there other than cold brew since he probably caps off his nights with a glass of scotch.

Opening the fridge, I grab a half-empty bottle of white wine. It's one of Gwen's fancy ones. "Do you like..." I squint at the unreadable French label. "Uh, wine?"

"Thanks, but I don't drink during the season. Can't handle the hangovers anymore. I feel like once I hit my thirties, my body lost the ability to process alcohol. Think there's a medical reason for that?"

Tell him. Tell him now, Nina.

"I think it has to do with your enzymes," I say, grateful for that one biology class I took freshman year.

Being in college, I rarely meet anyone who's sober—like me. Last year, I found out that mixing alcohol with my meds is as good of a combination as laxatives and white pants. After only one cup of punch, I ended up unconscious outside the Sigma Phi Epsilon house.

I'm forever thankful to that pledge who stood guard over me and called Gwen, but it was still traumatizing. Since then, I've avoided alcohol. Sometimes, I miss all the fun, but waking up hangover-free every Saturday morning is pretty fantastic.

I set the wine back in the fridge. "I have tea if you want that instead?"

"That works great." When our eyes meet, he rips his gaze to the cabinets while I start the kettle. "Nice place, by the way. It's like a jungle in here. Reminds me of this time I went to Costa Rica with my buddies during the off-season."

Of all the things in this kitchen, I'm shocked he singles out the one thing that's mine and not Gwen's.

He opens cabinet after cabinet until he pulls out one of the turquoise vases I made in my pottery class. Rhode removes it, fills it with water, and puts the sunflowers inside.

I watch his long fingers arrange the bouquet before yanking my gaze away. I do *not* need to be imagining what else this man can do with those fingers.

"Alright, let's talk," he says. "Why's it so hard to get you to agree to go out with me? I normally don't have this issue with women."

A flare of jealousy sparks in my chest. Thankfully, it's easy to extinguish. I don't want to go there with a man whose bedpost is scratched up with notches.

I'm sure his exes are all lovely, flexible people, but based on what's said about him online, someone could write a dissertation on his dating history.

I dig through the boxes of tea, purposefully giving him my back. "Trust me, I know you don't. I saw the Tenerife pictures. You were right. You're very flexible."

There's a pause. "So you looked me up?"

I glance over my shoulder, flicking my eyes over his broad chest. "I was curious, and I did my research."

He readjusts the sunflowers in the vase so they don't droop, keeping his eyes on the petals like he doesn't want to see my reaction. "There's a lot of bullshit about me online, you know."

The way he's fiddling with the flowers adds a charming boyishness to his rugged demeanor, which has my guard lowering. "I know, and I can't imagine having my privacy invaded like that. It's not fair to have your personal life splashed across the internet for everyone to judge."

His blue eyes lift, and a layer of tension seems to melt from his features. "What else did you learn? Other than the fact that I'm a sexy hockey goalie that everyone wants?"

And there it is—that arrogance. "You're exceptionally humble."

He chuckles. "Keep going."

"You're six-three."

"What the hell?" he demands. "Which article said that? Was it Sports Illustrated? I'm six-four."

"You really need that extra inch?"

A corner of his mouth twitches. “Every inch counts.”

This man smiles in a way that makes me think he knows exactly what to do with that mouth. His glacial eyes flick down my body, and based on that look alone, there’s no doubt Rhode Tremblay knows how to treat a woman.

I can tell by the fluidness of his movements. It’s in the little ways he saunters instead of walks, grips a cup instead of clenches, leans instead of stands. I give him a once-over, noticing how he dangles the edge of his cup off his forearm like a little ledge made just for him.

Yeah, he knows *exactly* what to do in a bedroom—and a yacht, apparently.

“Anything else?” he asks. “Be honest. I like that about you. Most people aren’t.”

The sour knot winds tighter in my stomach, almost like my insides are curdling from my lie. Except, after listing all of his accomplishments, I don’t want to admit I’m an art student. That’d only highlight our power imbalance.

I tug at the cuff of my denim jacket. “You drink beet smoothies before every game. Disgusting, but fine. You like to cross-stitch, which is surprising, but I like that. You have one younger sister, Rowyn, and you grew up in Seattle, but your mom’s from Vancouver. You weigh two-hundred-and-twenty-five pounds of pure muscle. Oh, and you have one of the highest paying contracts of any goalie in the League.” I shrug. “Just throwing it out there.”

“Damn, you weren’t joking about doing your research.” He laughs. “But just so you know, I didn’t grow up with money, so I send a lot back to my family, and for the record, any woman I marry has to sign a prenup.” He mimics my shrug. “Just throwing it out there.”

I playfully snap my fingers. “There goes my plan to seduce a hockey player, get him to fall in love with me, and then divorce him for all his money.”

He points over his shoulder. “Should I go ahead and leave now?”

Leaning forward, I rest my elbows on the marble counter. “That’s probably for the best.”

“You’re not getting rid of me that easily.” Smiling, he copies my pose like we’re in a standoff. “But listen. There’s something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Yes, your totally normal proposition. What’s that?”

His eyes dart around, betraying a hint of nerves. “It’s clear you’ve done your research about me, so you’ve probably noticed I don’t have the best reputation online. That’s not who I am anymore, but it’s been tough getting sponsorships, and that’s where I could use your help.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

He sips his tea. “Remember the boy you gave the cold brew to?”

“Of course. Gabriel. He had the biggest brown eyes.”

That one lonely dimple pops on his cheek, but then something shifts in his expression. His warm smile blazes through me like I’m being burned alive.

“Yeah, him. Turns out, he’s the son of the CMO of ¡Vamos! Have you heard of them?”

“The protein bar company?” I ask. “Yeah, I love their tres leches flavor.”

“You should try the buñuelo ones too.” He takes another sip. “Their CMO, Andrea Peña, wants to invite us to one of their corporate events to thank us for helping her son. I could use the chance to talk to her about a sponsorship, and I was wondering if you’d come. Be my date. They’ll have dancing and free drinks. It’ll be fun.”

Small talk. New crowds. Open bar. That sounds like Satan crafted a seventh circle of hell custom-made for my anxiety. “I’m not really into parties. Could you take someone else?”

His face tightens in a subtle grimace. I narrow my eyes. “What?”

“I uh, might’ve already said you were going, and I hate going back on my word. Please?” he adds quickly. “It’s just one night, and it’ll help to have a gorgeous doctor on my arm. Show them I’m serious. I’ll owe you one. Anything.”

This man’s way too charming. That’s a red flag for heartbreak. “No. I can’t.”

His grin falls. “There’s got to be something I can offer you. I’ll do anything.”

Nothing’s worth making small talk for three hours, especially since he thinks I’m a doctor. Next time I lie about my career, I’m saying I’m a mortician, so no one asks questions. “I’m sorry, but no. Look, Rhode, I just don’t think this—”

A pounding cuts me off.

Rhode tilts his head. “What’s that?”

“I’m not sure.” I lift my ear to Gwen’s bedroom, and it sounds like she’s hammering something into the wall.

“That’s it, baby. Ugh, you’re so tight.”

A nauseating jolt surges through me at the sound of Isaac’s voice. I freeze, every muscle coiled tight as his sex noises seep from Gwen’s bedroom. She swore she wouldn’t do this here, but I should’ve known she’d shatter that promise.

“I take it you have a roommate?” Rhode says over the headboard banging.

“Yeah, that would be Isaac. The ex you met. We should probably leave them to it,” I mutter, crushing a sunflower petal between my fingertips as each wall thud reverberates through me like a bullet. “The woman he’s currently filming a Pornhub documentary with would be my older sister.”

“What the hell?” Rhode blurts. “Now I get why you wanted a fake boyfriend. You need a fake husband? I’ll sign a fake marriage contract.”

“Fuck yes!” Isaac shouts. “Just like that. Ride my cock. I’m so close.”

“Someone’s feeling lazy,” Rhode mumbles.

Angry tears well in my eyes, but I quickly blink them away. Isaac never sounded like that when we had sex. He held me like I was made of stained glass, colorful but breakable.

He’d whisper sweet everythings as he settled between my legs in the shimmering twilight, but when the morning rays broke the horizon, I realized those everythings were made of nothing.

I swallow around the massive lump in my throat. “Come on. Let’s go to the living room.”

Rhode’s hand flies up, stopping me. I drop my gaze to our connection as his calloused fingers graze the delicate skin of my wrist. A simmering heat radiates through my body, settling somewhere between my core and my heart.

“Hey, don’t listen to them. Look at me,” he commands.

A shiver flurries down my spine. I have a feeling that deep voice could get someone to do almost anything.

He drags my attention back, and I expect to find pity glimmering in his sapphire depths, but if it’s there, it’s buried deep in his eyes. All I find is a devious curve to his lips that pulls me up to the surface of something new.

“I’m probably going to regret this, but as your fake boyfriend, I feel like it’s my duty to offer. You want to make him jealous? I’ll help you out if you

help me by coming to the event.”

I throw the petal-less sunflower in the trash. “How? They can’t even see us.”

“No, but if we can hear them, they can sure as hell hear us, and I can be pretty damn loud when I want to be.”

His mouth twists into a smirk that looks handcrafted for his lips. “So, name any position that you want, because I bet I can fake fuck you better than he ever did for real.”

RHODE

I've said a lot of dumb shit over the years, but those have to be the most ridiculous words to have come out of my mouth.

Nina swallows hard, and I can't stop staring at the way her four-leaf clover tattoo shifts with the movement. I've never seen a doctor with so many tattoos.

What other ink does she have hiding under that jean jacket? I can't take my eyes off her, and this woman's clearly not impressed with me, so I need to keep it together.

"What do you mean you're going to fake fuck me?" She speaks steadily over the obnoxious sex noises, and I've got to give it up to her for keeping her composure. "How does that even work?"

"We can mess with them. They want to be loud? We'll be louder."

My offer is stupid as hell, but I'm a pro at turning risky decisions into solid choices, especially on the ice.

If this gets Nina to agree to the event, I'll do anything, and it gives me an excuse to see her again without having to beg for a date, but I would—I love getting on my knees for women.

The headboard banging shakes the dangling plants on the wall. I want to pound on the door and knock some emotional intelligence into them when her neck turns the color of a sunburnt tomato.

Everyone knows it's common courtesy to shove a tie in a person's mouth if you know they're a loud fuck and people are in the house.

She looks like Patty when he got sun-poisoning in Costa Rica, but a much cuter version.

What kind of man sleeps with their ex's sister? Pick another family.

"Keep going, just like that," the cheating bastard shouts. "Damn, baby, you feel so good."

I make a mental note never to call her *baby*, and glance at the knives. She's got serrated blades. Nice. Those could slice through dick skin like butter.

Nina throws a glare at the bedroom door. "Okay, fine. I'll go to the event with you. What do we do now?"

I'm tempted to kiss those pretty lips of hers, but I don't want to come off like an eager teenager about to get his first blow job, so instead, I turn over her hand, stroking the lines on her inner palm.

She shivers, so I take that as a good sign. "Let's start with limits. Is there anything you don't want me doing?"

She bites her bottom lip, and I zone in on the little indent her teeth leave. It feels stifling as hell in this kitchen all of a sudden.

"I don't know, don't suck my toes?" she says.

I snort, tugging at the collar of my sweatshirt, but I make sure to keep my other hand in hers. "That's random, and now I'm wondering if there's a story there, but alright. No toe-sucking."

"Good. Is there anything you don't want me doing?" she asks. "Anything off limits?"

I stiffen, surprised by the question. Most people don't ask about my boundaries. The League demands everything, so boundaries are nonexistent.

I flash her my best playful grin, wanting to throw her off since her flat expression is giving nothing away. "You can do anything you want to me."

"Including sucking your toes?" she deadpans.

Damn, what's it going to take to make this woman smile? Maybe I need to try a different tactic. I flick my eyes over her sexy little body. Well, she's not little, but I'm big. If we're going to be faking, I might as well set the mood.

I lower my voice like I'm about to whisper dirty things in her ear. "You can suck anything you want, Nina."

Her lips part.

Finally. A reaction.

“Yeah, right there, baby,” the guy yells again.

Her mouth snaps shut, but then she straightens in that same resilient way Patty does right before he goes in for a blistering slap shot.

She digs her fingers into the rim of my jeans and pulls me against her soft body. “Okay, let’s do this.”

My brows flick up in shock, but the way she takes control is hot as hell. I’m already half-hard. “Alright, then. Let’s go.”

She lifts her chin like she’s trying to reach my height, but all that does is bring her mouth closer to mine.

“I only have one rule,” she says like a challenge. “Don’t kiss me.”

“Why not?” I grip her hips, pulling her closer. “That’s the best part.”

Her breath hitches, but she strokes her hand down my arm, making heat prickle in my groin. “Because this doesn’t mean anything, and kissing means something to me.”

I’ve slept with a lot of women, but I haven’t kissed many, and I miss that intimacy. But if that’s what Nina wants, that’s what she gets.

No kissing.

I reach out to tuck a strand of golden hair behind her pierced ears. What I’m about to whisper is risky, but I want to knock her off balance like she’s done to me, so I’ll take my chances.

“Alright, no kissing, but let’s get one thing straight. When I kiss you, notice I said *when*, it’s not going to be because we’re trying to make someone jealous. It’ll be because you’re desperate to feel my lips on yours, and trust me, you will be.”

Her mouth hitches up, and that look’s enough to bring a man to his knees. “I’ve never been desperate for a boy.”

“Then you’ve never fucked a man.”

In a swift move, I take control and grip the back of her knees, lifting her easily on the marble counter thanks to decades of gym sessions.

She gasps. “What are you doing?”

I have no idea. All I know is she smells too damn good, and it’s been too damn long, but I’m not about to tell her I need her closer because I want to inhale her cinnamon scent. “Making this believable in case they come out. Now, wrap your legs around me. Arms around my neck too. Hold on to me.”

She clenches her legs around my waist, and the motion makes her denim jacket slide down, revealing a star tattoo on her bare shoulder. I don’t

fix it.

“Are you really going to dry hump me on the kitchen counter?” she asks. “How’s that going to help? They can’t see us.”

I unbuckle my belt with one hand. “No, I haven’t dry humped since I was fourteen, but we’re pretending. You ready to put on a show for them?”

When she doesn’t respond, I look up. Her eyes are locked on my fingers as I unfasten my belt, and there’s this glint that looks a lot like anticipation in her hazels.

The edge of my lip curls up, and I slow my movements so each one is deliberate. Nina tracks every motion with heat in her eyes. The click of the buckle cuts through the space between us, and I think she stops breathing.

Hell, I think I do too.

“What are you doing there, Tremblay?”

I groan, fumbling my belt. “Please don’t call me by my last name. Makes me feel like you’re my coach or something. It’s Rhode or sex god,” I joke. “You choose, but to answer your question, I’m trying to get their attention, but if you keep looking at me like that, we’re not going to be pretending anymore.”

She widens her legs dangling off the counter. “Okay, Rhode. Fake fuck me.”

Damn, hearing her say that makes my cock jump in my jeans, but I do my best to play it off. “I’ll try not to be offended that you didn’t choose ‘sex god.’”

I whip off my belt, gather it in one hand, and then hit it against the counter with enough force to produce a loud smack.

She jumps, clutching her legs around my waist, and my dick gets all kinds of brilliant ideas—ideas that involve her, spread out naked in front of me, with her pussy ready to be devoured.

Alright, don’t get ahead of yourself, Tremblay. You’ll scare her off.

“You like that?” I shout, slapping the counter again with my belt. The headboard banging stops. Good, we have their attention. “Does my girl like it a little rough? I knew you were a wild one.”

Her eyes bulge.

I grimace. So much for scaring her off. “Too much?”

She blinks, but after a moment, a slow grin drags across her lips. “No, actually, I think we can do better. Let me see the belt.”

I tense in surprise, handing over the leather. “You want to take the reins? Go for it. It’s all yours.”

She snatches my belt with a mischievous tilt to her mouth before attempting to snap it against the marble counter, but Nina misjudges the force, and the buckle smacks against my ass with a hard sting.

Fuck me, I want her to do *that* again.

I lurch forward into her heaving chest. “Damn, you’ve got an arm on you, don’t you?”

She clamps a hand over her mouth. The belt slips from her fingers, and a guilty expression washes over her face as it clatters to the floor. “Shit, sorry. I thought I had to whip it back, but that just whipped it forward. Are you okay?”

“Yeah, all good.” I rub my ass cheek. “Don’t worry about it.”

I’m standing so close that when she widens her legs, my dick accidentally hits her center, and goddamn, that feels good.

I wonder what she’d be like in bed. She’s got long nails, so I hope she’d scratch up my back. It’s been so long since I’ve been with someone that I forgot why I even started my self-inflicted celibacy.

Her brows shoot up when she feels me hard against her. “I didn’t realize you liked being whipped so much, Rhode.”

Is she flirting? I can’t tell based off her flat mouth, but I’m not passing up an opportunity to flirt back. “This tends to happen when I’ve got a beautiful woman grinding all over me.”

She laughs all bright and airy. Finally. I get a laugh from her. “Beautiful? Aren’t you charming.”

“Just you wait. My mom raised me well.”

This is moving at light speed, and yeah, back in my twenties, I would’ve already ripped off her panties and shoved my fingers inside her, rubbing her wet clit with the pad of my thumb, but I don’t want Nina to think I expect sex like the rest of the world. I force myself to lean back.

It’s difficult, but I manage.

I gesture to my rock-hard dick. “Just ignore it. It’ll go away in a decade or so.”

Her hazels bounce between mine, and then she sucks in this little breath that’s only for me. “What if I don’t want to ignore it?”

The breathiness in her voice has me moving closer. Does that mean she wants this? I rest my hands on either side, trapping her against the counter.

I drop my eyes to her lips. Her very wet lips. “Careful what you ask for, because I want to see you again, Nina, so this isn’t going to be a one time thing.”

Her eyes pop in surprise, but I don’t have time to beat around the bush. Over the years, I’ve learned it’d best to be direct and tell women exactly what I want. It used to be one night. Now, it’s forever.

Leaning forward, I shoot my shot and press my lips to the star tattoo on her bare shoulder. She snaps her head up, and suddenly, we’re quiet, caught in each other’s gaze.

I take in the details of her face—the freckles scattered across her skin like stars, the specks of gold glinting behind her glasses like a beacon. She digs her nails into my back, pulling me forward until my cock presses against her. Fuck. She feels incredible, and I’m not even inside her.

I brush my nose along her warm cheek because I need to know I’m not the only one feeling something here. “Do you like me grinding against you, Nina?”

She nods.

I grip her chin. Not hard, but firm. “Give me your words.”

She swipes her tongue along her bottom lip. “Yes. It feels good.”

I roll my hips against her, and damn, that feels more than good. Why’d I ever stop dry humping? I circle my groin right over her clit, moving exactly how I would if I were fucking her slowly. I’m so hard it’s painful.

She must like what I’m doing because she starts grinding all over me like she’s trying to give me a lap dance. I’ll be thinking about this moment when I get myself off in the shower, replaying her raspy breaths.

I bet she’d take me so good.

She seems like the type who could give it right back. I’m tempted to lean down and pinch her nipple, bite her neck until I leave a mark, but I want more than sex. I need to slow the hell down no matter how hard she makes me, but it’s difficult to think straight with her fingers digging into my ass.

Part of me is worried I’m coming on too strong because I have a tendency to go all in, but she seems like she’s enjoying this just as much as me, so I roll my hips again, and again, and again until we’re both dry humping like horny goddamn teenagers.

Nina throws her head back, her caramel hair spilling on the counter, and the world blurs like I’m playing a game. Where we are, why we’re here—it

evaporates.

She steals all my focus.

It's just Nina and the contours of her body. I'm having trouble thinking straight. I don't know what's happening, but I want to rip off her jeans and shove my fingers inside her to feel if she's wet.

I hope she's drenched.

She squeezes her eyes shut, but when my hips instinctively roll against her again, she moans. I didn't think I could get any harder, but she proves me wrong when her legs tighten around my waist.

"You like me rubbing my cock all over you?" I whisper in her ear, needing confirmation. "Does that feel good, Nina?"

She jerks me forward by the rim of my jeans, looking as lost in the moment as me, and now, I want to hear whatever noises she makes when she comes. "Yes, please. That feels so good, Rhode. You're so good at that. Whatever you do, don't stop."

Holy fuck.

No one's ever praised me like that before, and now it's all I can think about.

She's making these breathy little sounds that aren't loud, but that's even sexier because they're real.

No pretending.

I imagine sliding into her, filling her, stretching her, fucking her hard, then slow. Dammit. I'm at risk of coming in my pants, which would be a travesty for a grown man, but the way Nina's moving all over me has me close.

So close.

"Fuck." I tug her forward by her hips, needing her closer even though her tits are already pressed to my chest. "You're driving me insane. I can't think right now."

Her lips part at my words, and I stiffen. For a second, I'm worried that was too much, but then she inches forward. Her warm puffs of cinnamon breath blow against my mouth.

Call me desperate, but I want a taste of her, and from the way she's staring, I think she wants that too.

Fuck it to hell, I'm kissing her.

A door slams.

"Oh my god! Nina?" a girl shouts. "What are you doing here?"

She lurches back, stumbling off the counter. I try to catch her, but it feels like I got off that roller coaster Cruz made me try when we had that team bonding weekend at Disney World. That made the blood rush to my head, but right now, it's all flowing south.

I forgot there were people in the house.

I forgot I was in a house.

Don't even ask me to describe a house because I'd probably describe Nina's freckles.

I squint at the people, trying to piece together what's happening. The cheating bastard's standing in black boxers and a white T-shirt with his arms wrapped around a woman in a sweatshirt. Her long blonde hair and green eyes look familiar, but I can't place her.

"Oh, sorry," Nina says, all sarcasm. "Were we being a little too loud? How inappropriate."

"I didn't think you were home." The woman stomps her foot, and a vivid image of a horse cuts through my dry humping haze.

They start firing off insults. The vein in Nina's temple is throbbing more than my dick. I need a distraction, so I wrack my brain, trying to figure out if I know the woman. Blonde hair. Green eyes.

The realization hits.

That's the woman who shoved her tongue down my throat in the bar.

Is she Nina's sister? Our eyes meet, and her brows come together, but there's no sign of recognition. Does she really not remember that night? How drunk was she?

I stand behind Nina, positioning her in front of my erection while pulling her against my chest. I can't keep my hands off her. The sister looks between us, and her gaze lands on me, narrowing slightly. I glare right back because she's the reason my Hugo Boss shirt needed two trips to the dry cleaner.

"I'm sorry, okay, Nina?" the sister says. "I didn't realize you were home, or we wouldn't have done... that. I thought you were still in class."

Nina tenses against me.

"Class? What class?" I ask, brushing the hair off her shoulder. "Is that a brain surgery thing?"

"Brain surgery?" the sister asks. "Where'd you get that?"

The crease between my brows deepens. "Because Nina's a medical resident?"

The guy booms out a laugh, and I glare at him. His laughter dies in an instant, but this uncomfortable ball of irritation forms in my chest at the thought of him laughing at Nina. I tug her closer to me, feeling this protective urge to show this asshole exactly what he's missing.

His loss.

I've got her in my arms now.

Nina tries to pull me away. "Rhode, can we talk? Now?"

"What?" the sister says. "I don't get it. Nina's in art—"

"I'm not a doctor. I'm in art school," Nina blurts over her sister like she's trying to beat her to speak.

Art school? Nina?

I glance down at her. "What's going on?"

She lifts her eyes, guilt all over her face, and the impact hits me harder than a body check to the boards. "Sorry, I was going to tell you..."

"Going to tell me what?" I demand, whispering low so our audience can't hear.

She coughs. "That I'm in college. Art school, specifically."

I drop my hands like her shoulders are made of fire. "How old are you?"

"Twenty-two," she admits, cheeks turning pink.

It takes every ounce of self-control to keep my face neutral, especially in front of her ex because I don't want to embarrass her. I take a hard look at Nina. The nose piercing, the backpack by the door—it all makes sense now.

How did I not see this? Damn, I really am gullible. I must be denser than Cruz after six tequila shots.

I can't believe I'd been thinking about sucking her nipples into my mouth. I rake a hand through my hair, wishing I had on my helmet, so I could bang my idiotic head against the wall. Of course I'd be attracted to a younger woman.

It must be the curse of my DNA.

Sure, I joked about being a plumber when we first met, but I didn't keep it going for two weeks. Is this all some game to her? She owes me an explanation for everything hidden in those stormy hazels. Eleven years might not be a big deal for some people, but it's a big fucking deal for me. That's an entire decade between us. I don't want people thinking I'm some older asshole taking advantage of a younger woman.

Nina gulps. "Can we talk for a second?"

I cross my arms, looking down at her. “I think that’d be a wise decision.”

Great. Now I sound like I’m about to bend her over my knee and spank her. Not the visual I need when I’m still hard.

“Okay...” Nina sucks her bottom lip between her teeth. “Do you want me to get your belt?”

My lips twitch. Dammit. This woman.

No.

Not woman—girl.

NINA

I see why people call Rhode Tremblay the Wall of Steel. On quivering legs, I follow him out to the front porch.

Rhode slams the metal door to Gwen's brownstone, irritation ricocheting off his muscular frame. The force is strong enough to shake the icicles dangling precariously from the ledge. It's such a drastic difference that I shiver.

The biting wind nips at my cheeks, but it's soothing after the intensity in the kitchen burned me to my core. I have to squeeze my legs together every time I think about him circling me with his hips to stop the arousal pooling in my body.

Normally, it takes me a while to relax in the bedroom if I don't know someone, but Rhode's playfully dominant demeanor put me at ease. He took control, which allowed me to let go.

That never happens.

Now, I'm imagining him on top of me, pinning me down with his massive body as he thrusts into me with that lazy smile, but I doubt Rhode will touch me again based on the way he's dramatically dry heaving on the steps.

"You're twenty-two?" He whirls around so fast he nearly slips on the ice but catches himself with quick reflexes. "Twenty-two? I take it you're not a doctor unless you're some child genius?"

I cross my arms. "How do you know I'm not a child genius?"

“Answer the question, Nina.”

His intimidating glare is strong enough to shrink someone, but my shoulders are iron. “No. I’m not a doctor, but the genius part’s debatable. I’m a very dedicated art student who’s pursuing a pottery fellowship in Argentina, and yes, I’m twenty-two, which is why I turned you down because I figured this”—I wave an arm at him—“would be the reaction.”

His hands clench into fists, which pulls my focus to the veins bulging in his forearms. “Why didn’t you tell me? Were you trying to get me to sleep with you or something?”

I yank my eyes up to Rhode’s scowl, standing tall under his brooding gaze. “Yes, Rhode. I spent that first day we met stalking you from my car... No. I don’t even watch hockey. You’re the one who pursued me, remember? I tried to end things.”

He relaxes. “Good point, but you still should’ve told me.”

I don’t care if he’s some famous hockey player, I won’t make myself smaller for anyone again. “Do you realize how hard it is to admit that I’m just a college student to a successful hockey player? I drive Lyft to earn what you probably make in two seconds, and I was embarrassed by the whole Gwen and Isaac thing, but I shouldn’t have lied. I’m sorry for that.”

He grunts. “You don’t need to be embarrassed about any of that. They’re the assholes.”

“Don’t call my sister an asshole,” I snap.

His brows soar to his hairline. “That’s a strong reaction. You’re really defending her after what just happened?”

“Of course.” I puff a foggy breath. “She’s my sister. Only I’m allowed to call her an asshole, and believe me, I do. Hourly.”

While I want to kill Gwen, if anyone else tried to hurt her, they’d end up with their eyes gouged from their sockets. Not really, but even when I hate her, I’d still go to war for my sister because she’s my sister.

“Alright, sorry, I won’t.” He holds up his hands. “But for the record, I still think that guy’s a dick for what he did to you.”

The warmth of his support wraps around me, but I try not to let his comfort sink into my bones. “You and me both, but Isaac doesn’t matter. He’s like a fly buzzing around my life that I can’t swat away.”

Rhode releases a strangled groan like he’s being tortured. “Why didn’t you just lead with the age thing, though? It would’ve stopped this in a second. Look, I’m sorry for everything that happened in there because I’m

way too old for you.” He runs his hands through his dark hair. “Is this illegal? It feels illegal.”

I ball my fists like that’ll stop me from wanting to tug his hair. “Stop, Rhode. This isn’t illegal, and don’t act like you’re so much older. You’re only thirty-three. Have you seen yourself on the ice? I watched one quarter, or wait, period, and you’re just as good as all the other guys.”

A flicker of emotion passes over his face, but he shutter his expression. “Thanks, but it still doesn’t change the fact that when I was twenty-one, you were... Holy shit, you were nine. I’m going to be sick.”

“I was *ten*.”

He gags.

The gorgeous Wall of Steel actually gags.

I roll my eyes. “Okay, you don’t need to be so overdramatic about this.”

“Overdramatic?” He puts his hands on his hips like he’s scolding me. “I’m being reasonable. You’re my sister’s age, Nina. I shouldn’t have let what happened in the kitchen happen. Sorry. I’ll take full responsibility.”

“What if I want to take all the responsibility?” I swipe my tongue along my bottom lip, and he looks away, taking in a long breath.

“It doesn’t matter. It was still a mistake.”

A mistake.

I bristle in the cool air. That’s what Isaac would murmur in my ear during our late-night meetings in his office when he was my TA. As an Art major, physics was my downfall, but Isaac and I used to huddle over textbooks, with our noses almost touching.

Every lingering glance had me yearning for lasting stares. The recklessness of it all made it addicting, but our secret rendezvous was painted in toxic mistakes.

I mistakenly trusted him.

He mistakenly thought I was fragile.

Secrets are fun, but they’re destined to be kept, never shared, and I refuse to be caged by a relationship. I want someone who loves me so much that they shout about my successes in the grocery store checkout line while ringing up avocados.

“Don’t call what happened a mistake,” I say, releasing my bottom lip. “I liked it... a lot. You sure know what you’re doing.”

He clasps his hands behind his neck, looking up at the sky like he’s begging the blue to swallow him. “That’s it. I’m going to hell for dry

humping a teenager.”

He moans, and the rumble brings an entirely new wave of memories to the surface. Yes, I’m angry with Gwen. That seems to be my permanent state. Except those feelings pale in comparison to the electricity of Rhode’s solid muscles pressed against mine.

I see why so many women talk about him online, and honestly, being chained to his headboard doesn’t sound so bad. Now, I’m rethinking my *No Distractions* rule this semester. It’s been a while since I’ve had a good, toe-curling orgasm. For me, orgasms are about as common as a coin flip.

I twist a strand of hair around my finger like the movement will wind up my growing feelings. “Okay, first of all, I’m not a teenager, I’m legal, so don’t call me that. Secondly, it didn’t seem like you were going to be sick when you had me spread out on the kitchen counter looking at me like you wanted to rip my clothes off. It seemed like you liked *that* just as much as I did.”

A million different thoughts seem to flicker through Rhode’s expression. His eyes travel down my body, but his jaw clenches. “I’m not going to lie because that wouldn’t be fair to either of us. I did like that, obviously.”

He gestures to his crotch, but neither of us looks down. I don’t need to because the woman walking that toy poodle across the street can probably see he’s still hard.

“But we’re in different places in life. I’m not looking for something casual, Nina.”

I rear back. “You’re not? But what about all the articles?”

He looks at his feet, and something about the motion has guilt tingling up my spine. Maybe I shouldn’t have believed everything online.

“Those were from years ago,” he admits. “That’s not what I want anymore. I want something real. Kids. A family. I’m ready to propose to someone, and you should be out getting drunk, sleeping with strangers, and partying through your twenties.”

“It’s kind of narrow-minded that you think that’s what all twenty-two-year-olds do. Not everyone sets a yacht on fire while having a threesome in their twenties, Rhode. In fact, I’d say that’s the minority.”

He waves a hand. “Alright, fine, do yoga, drink iced coffee, study. I don’t care, but I can’t date you for real. The guys will give me so much shit.”

“Maybe you shouldn’t care about what other people think.”

“Maybe you should call me in ten years.” He flinches, backtracking. “I shouldn’t have said that.”

“Why do you care so much about my age?”

He glances away like he doesn’t want me seeing whatever’s on his face. “I just do, but it’s mostly that we’re in different places. Are you ready to get married and have kids?”

“No. I’m only twenty-two.”

He flicks a hand. “See? That’s why.”

His words pierce through me, but I don’t budge even though Rhode’s right. We’re in different life stages, and it doesn’t matter that dry humping him on the kitchen counter was better than eighty percent of the sex I’ve experienced.

Okay, ninety.

I don’t want to be tethered to a professional athlete in the spotlight, spending all my weekends in a crowded stadium. I need at least four hours of alone time to function in public.

He needs someone who can drop their plans to fly across the country, and I didn’t spend three years working on myself to be tied down by someone else’s life.

A chill shivers down my spine. Rhode’s gaze drops to my chattering teeth. The frost in his eyes seems to melt, and he removes his beanie with a heavy sigh before handing it to me. “Here. Wear this.”

Taking it, I peer at the stitching inside that looks like handwriting. *May all of your dreams be as wild as you.* Smiling, I run my finger over the letters. The warmth from his skin still clings to the fabric, but all that does is remind me of the heat of his body.

He scrapes a hand over his stubbled jaw. “Look, I like you, Nina. You’re a great uh, girl, but this isn’t going to work. We’ll do the ¡Vamos! event—”

“What?” My jaw drops. “You still want me to go to that event with you? That’s a bold ask. Am I going to have to pretend to be a neurosurgeon?”

“No. I’d never ask you to pretend to be someone you’re not.”

“I thought you said everyone would give you ‘so much shit’ for being with a twenty-two-year-old?”

“Yeah, but it’s not like anyone there knows how old you are.”

“What do I get out of it?”

“I don’t know...” He presses the heels of his palms to his eyes. “I can pretend to date you to make your ex jealous or something?”

“Hell no,” I scoff. “I was fine pretending for a second, but keeping it going gives Isaac way too much power over my life. I’m *happy* I don’t have to fake-laugh at his periodic element table jokes anymore.”

“Yeah. As soon as I offered that I regretted it anyway. Alright, what do you want? Because I told the CMO you’d be there, and I hate going back on my word. I don’t want to do anything to fuck this up. It’s important to me, and Andrea specifically asked about you, so I need you.”

I’ve never been someone’s necessity, only their burden, and the fact that Rhode needs me has me wanting to swap my no for a yes.

I’m tempted to take back my offer, but during my self-sabotage days, I became so good at flaking on people that I could’ve taught a masterclass on ghosting.

It’s easy for me to make friends, but keeping them is hard. Every time I slip into a dark phase, I go into hibernation mode and start ignoring texts. I lose a lot of friends in those shadows, and when I finally resurface, Gwen’s the only one there.

That’s not who I want to be anymore.

I pull his beanie over my head, trying not to inhale his smoky scent. “Fine. I’ll go, but I have one condition...”

“What’s that?”

I nibble my thumbnail. “I have to donate an auction item for a charity event called The Peaceful Mind Project. I’ll go to your event, but I want some box seats for a Guardians game to donate.”

His brow lifts, highlighting the tiny white scar on his forehead. “You need box tickets to a game? That’s all?”

A thought tugs at the corner of my lips, pulling them into a pout. Gwen claims I need to advocate for myself, so maybe I should ask for more. “Box tickets and a favor of my choosing to be owed at any point in my life.”

He casts me a flat look. “So, I’m just going to be indebted to you forever?”

“Pretty much.” I wave like a queen. “Feel free to bow down and get on your knees.”

The blue in his eyes heats like the hottest flame. “I’m not getting on my knees for you, Nina.”

His voice turns husky. That, plus the fact that he thinks I'm too young makes me want to prove him wrong. I flick my eyes over his chest. "Oh, but I think you'd look so good begging for me."

His expression turns to stone, but the veins in his neck thicken as his fists tighten at his sides.

He grunt-coughs. "Fine. Tickets and one favor, but that's all."

"Going with a subject change then? I see, but fine. You have yourself a fake date."

I hold out my hand, but he doesn't take it. Instead, his gaze locks onto mine, heavy with some expression.

Closing the distance between us in one step, he moves so the subtle rise and fall of his chest grazes my nipple piercing. The warmth emanating from him has my thoughts turning dirty.

"Let's be clear about one thing," he murmurs, eyes dropping to my lips. "I don't want you to get the wrong impression, so I'm going to be a little blunt. I'm too old for you, so I'm not touching you unless we have to at the event, and even then, I'm going to keep it friendly, alright? Nothing's happening between us."

I lift up on my toes to be closer to him. "If you want people to believe I'm your date, you're going to have to touch me, Rhode."

He mutters a curse, pinching his eyes closed. "You're not going to make this easy on me, are you?"

"Welcome to life. It's not easy."

His blue eyes bounce between mine before he drops the lightest of kisses to the top of my hair. He spins around faster than my next heartbeat like he's running away.

The imprint of his featherlight lips weighs heavy on my head for the rest of the night.

NINA

Yes, Rhode, don't stop. Please don't ever stop.

My eyes fly open, but instead of seeing Rhode's head buried between my thighs, the only thing greeting me is the morning sunlight slanting across the hardwood floor.

Panting, I jolt up from bed, right on the brink of orgasm, only to realize I'm completely alone in my bedroom.

"Dammit," I growl into my pillow.

This has been happening all too frequently over the past two weeks. The man's edging me in my dreams. I can still feel the ghost of his fingers as I twist in bed each night.

When I slip my hands beneath the sheets to ease the ache between my legs, it's always Rhode's handsome face that pops into my mind—uninvited. I know he's too old for me, but ever since the kitchen, he's all I can think about.

With a huff, I throw off the covers and get ready for class. It's infuriating because I don't have the mental capacity to pine after a thirty-three-year-old man who's probably forgotten my last name. I have classes, a speech to write, and I still haven't booked my flight to Argentina.

I don't even make the footnotes of Rhode's love life, but nothing helps erase the visual of his body moving against mine. Not even my art history class—which I typically find fascinating—can delete the memory.

“Can anyone discuss how the Inca and Columbian civilizations’ artistic expressions differ in countries like Brazil, Argentina, and Peru?”

Professor Bennett scans the crowded lecture hall. Papers rustle. Everyone in class shifts, looking around the room. “Anyone at all? We went over this last week. How about...” He scans his computer screen, and my heart rate kicks up. “Rowyn?”

I slump in relief.

Someone in the back row clears her throat. I let my gaze drift, and it lands on a striking girl—her long, raven-black hair contrasts vividly with piercing blue eyes. “Um, no. Sorry, but I don’t think that’s something I can discuss.”

I chuckle along with a few other people. Professor Bennett peers down the bridge of his nose. “We went over this in class last week, Rowyn.”

She twirls her ponytail. “Yes, but unfortunately, I wasn’t here because my older brother had a game I had to be at, and he’s been in a bad mood for over a week now. Not to mention he was hungry, which makes him really grumpy, so it was this whole thing, and then our dad—”

“Okay,” our professor interjects, holding up a hand, which is good because Rowyn seems like she could talk to a goldfish. “Can anyone else in class provide an answer?”

My heart’s been pounding relentlessly because someone took my regular aisle seat by the exit sign, my preferred spot in case I need to run out, but I still raise my hand. “The Incas excelled in geometric architecture, which is evident in places like Machu Picchu while Colombian cultures are more known for pottery.”

Professor Bennett nods. “Excellent. Well done...?”

“Nina,” I finish.

Rowyn meets my stare and mouths, *Thank you*. I smile back at her. Something about the gesture gives me déjà vu, but I shift my focus back to my notes.

The rest of the class blurs in a haze. When our professor finishes the lecture, I grab my backpack and bolt outside into the frosty February air as students flurry around like snowflakes.

I saunter down the brick steps but almost slip on an icy spot when I see Gwen huddled on a bench with her nose stuck between the pages of *The Philosophical Ethics of Money*.

Their sex noises reverberate in my head like an annoying gong, and I can't help but flinch. Now, every time I see her, all I can hear are those ridiculous sounds. I thought I'd be crying tears of sadness, but all I feel is secondhand embarrassment when I look at her.

I glance over my shoulder. Maybe I can make a run for it before she sees me.

"Nina! Wait!"

There goes that plan.

She parts the sea of students like a runway model in her chic cream petticoat that matches the snow. She looks gorgeous, and only Gwen could manage to keep it stain-free all day. The arctic wind prickles my cheeks, so I tug Rhode's extraordinarily soft beanie over my hair.

I scan her coat. "What are you wearing? You look like a snowball."

She smooths her hands over her cream coat. "It's cashmere."

"Hm. Why are you here? I need to go to my next class."

"I wanted to stop by because I haven't seen you since—"

"Since I heard you having terribly lackluster sex in the kitchen two weeks ago?"

A blush stains her cheeks as she scans the icicles on the benches. "Can we talk, Nina? Please? I swear, I really thought you were gone when that happened."

"I don't care." I hitch my backpack over my shoulder. "Let's just agree to never speak about that again. I have to go."

"Where are you going? I'll drive you if you need a ride," she offers.

"Thanks, but I'd rather watch a slow-motion video of grass growing than sit in a car with you."

I start to spin around, but she shoves a brown paper bag in my face. "Wait, please? I overheard you saying you had to pick up your prescriptions, so I figured I'd do it for you. I know you have class on Thursdays, so here."

I exhale a deep breath, feeling weightless for a second. The looming thought of running out of my medication always adds to my stress, even if I don't take them every day. Gwen knows this because she knows me, but sometimes, I wish she would stop doing nice things, so I could hate her in peace.

"You didn't have to do that." I reluctantly snatch the bag from her grasp. "But thanks, that was nice."

Awkward silence grows between us.

“So, how’re things with Rhode?” she blurts.

I wave a hand, keeping it vague. I’m never talking to my sister about my love life again. “We’re kind of fighting right now, but he’s completely obsessed with me, so we’ll be fine.”

She doesn’t need to know the sexy-as-sin hockey player is currently treating me like radioactive waste. Gwen extends her arm like she’s going to touch my shoulder.

I cringe back. “Stop. What’re you doing?”

“I was going to hug you.” She lets her hand fall.

I nearly gag. “No. We don’t hug. Ever.”

Her smile wilts. “Fine. Do you want to talk about it? I know I said he was too old for you, but I still want you to be happy. What happened?”

There’s no way I’m telling her the truth, so I make a sarcastic comment instead. “I said his dick was only nine inches instead of ten. He didn’t like that.”

She snorts, then slaps a hand to her lips like she’s embarrassed by the noise. “A ten inch dick? That sounds painful.”

“No. It’s amazing,” I drawl. “He actually hits my G-spot, unlike *other* romantic partners.”

She rolls her eyes but smiles. “Really? Because I’m convinced the G-spot doesn’t actually exist. There’s no scientific evidence.”

Gasping, I grab her shoulder on instinct. “Did I tell you about the time I slept with this guy, don’t worry, a rebound, and he said it was all about the curve of the finger. He fingered me for like an hour, an *hour*, Gwen, and then I got in my own head about it because I felt like it was taking too long, but he kept saying I had to push through to have some earth-shattering orgasm, which I never did. I just felt like I had to pee.”

“Holy shit. That’s happened to me too.”

We blink, then burst into a fit of giggles. Our laughter echoes in the courtyard until we notice every eye on us. The weight of those stares drags me back down to the moment, reminding me that I’m laughing with my sister.

That’s forbidden.

I clamp my lips together. “We’re not supposed to be laughing.”

“Why? Because you hate me?” She arches a microbladed brow. We both share the brow-arch gene, and I started doing it to match Gwen until it

became a habit, and now I can't stop.

"Exactly."

"Hate me all you want. I'll still love you." A soft smile spreads across her lips. "And don't think I didn't notice that you called me Gwen and not Gwendolyn."

I stare at my nails. "Did I? You must've heard wrong."

"I heard what I heard."

I want to ask why, if she loves me so much, she slept with Isaac, but maybe love has nothing to do with her choice. Maybe it was all based on lust. After all, they're completely separate emotions.

Only the luckiest of people find both in one person. Isaac had neither. Rhode is all lust. In the corners of my heart, I know Isaac and I were never built to last.

He loves sushi. I can't stand raw fish.

He coasts in the slow lane. I'm an aggressive driver.

Isaac's always ten minutes late, and I'm always ten minutes early.

Love is built with little moments, and we didn't have enough of those, so our relationship crumbled. I've seen the way Isaac kisses Gwen like a reflex, but he always kissed me like an afterthought—if he ever kissed me at all.

"Do you want to talk more over drinks, maybe?" Gwen asks. "There's this new rooftop bar that opened on Eighth that has a whole mocktail menu. Rhode's playing a game tonight. Maybe we can watch?"

The thought of watching Rhode brings up all kinds of images I need to push away, so I want to tell her no, but I stare at her genuine grin, trying to remember the last time she smiled at me like that.

I can't.

"Okay, fine. Let's go."

I loop my arm through hers and start telling her about my day. We leisurely amble to the bar, and despite the frigid air, neither one of us picks up the pace.

RHODE

“Hey, old man! Did you forget how to block in your eighty years playing hockey or what?”

Cruz yells over the roaring stadium. He makes a cawing noise while waving his arms like a pigeon.

“Why don’t you keep fucking yelling ‘cause I play better when you yell at me!” I shout around my mouthguard.

“Watch me.” He skates past the crease. “Nineteen keeps dangling the puck in front of me, clever fucker.”

The opposing player, Nineteen, skates up to Cruz and winks like a jackass before crossing the blue line back to the defending zone.

Cruz cups his gloves around his mouth, calling after him. “You got the skinniest legs in the League or what?”

“Why don’t you stop fucking chirping and focus,” I shout.

“Why don’t you take your stick out of your ass and use it to block?” he yells before skating off.

I’m annoyed as hell with Cruz. We’re already on a penalty kill, and he keeps losing his damn temper.

Straight to the sin bin every time.

Cruz throws his stick at Nineteen, so we get another two-minute penalty. Just what we fucking need when we’re already getting slaughtered. Let’s hope Cujo’s not watching from his Canadian throne because this is a damn mockery.

Passes are off. We're missing the net. Not blocking the shots.

Apparently, we forgot how to play hockey because when we change lines, we get another penalty for having too many men on the ice. Who's counting? Not us, clearly. The ref can fuck right off even though he called it right.

We're clawing for every inch. Cincinnati's hustling hard, making all kinds of strong attacking plays. There's a lot of traffic since they're swarming the net.

They came to win.

Simple as that.

My gaze bounces between players as they skate and slam into each other. I dart my eyes across the ice, tracking the puck as it moves between sticks.

Nineteen's picking up speed like he's about to make a breakaway, but at the last second, he winds back for a blistering slap shot.

The puck zips toward me, a black blur against the white ice.

I calculate the trajectory in milliseconds, and before the crowd can even gasp, I drop down into butterfly. A sharp pain ignites in my groin. Damn, that hurts. My knee pads hit the ice—a nanosecond too late.

The puck goes right in my net.

“Fuck!”

The buzzer howls in the arena, and the stadium erupts in cheers because we're in Cincinnati's barn.

Cruz skates up to Nineteen and shouts in his face. “Hey, fucksie, you been in the minors for how long? Huh? You a pretender or what? *What?*”

“Aw, don't be mad, you big dumb animal,” Nineteen sneers.

“Hey, I have a question,” Cruz yells, shoving him. “Why do you suck at hockey?”

“Look who's talking,” Nineteen shouts. “Better get home to those roller hockey championships, Twelve.”

Cruz pushes him again. “You think you're the only guy that can hit? Let's-fucking-go! You can't even stand out here!”

“I ain't scared of you, Twelve. Not scared at all.” Nineteen pulls back his clenched fist and slams it into Cruz's jaw, which gives him the excuse he needs to tackle him to the ice. They attack each other like savage wrestlers.

In a rush, I skate over, ice chips flying past my shins, and lift Cruz off him. “Hey, simmer down. Save it for the third.”

“He’s a fucking motherfucker!”

He spits on the ice and gives the guy a face wash, rubbing his nasty-ass glove in Nineteen’s nose before I yank him away to the locker room. His chest pads heave in short gasps, but Cruz skates off the ice with me. Our heavy steps thump down the hall like a funeral procession.

No one says it, but we all feel it.

We’re off today, every last one of us, and we have been ever since I ended things with a certain woman, no—girl.

The girl I can’t get out of my head.

But none of that matters because I’m too old for her. Sure, I might be attracted to a twenty-two-year-old, but I’m not going to be a dick and act on those feelings when I know it won’t go anywhere. It doesn’t matter how good she made me feel.

There’s no chance I’ll touch her again.

“Fucking hell!” Cruz bangs his fist against the wall as we settle on the benches. The state-of-the-art space smells like a mix of sweat, deodorant, and ass. Tension reeks in the air as we tape our sticks. I sit down on the wooden bench. Cruz follows suit, then Patty.

“What the fuck happened out there?” Cruz says. “You hesitated, and it’s gonna cost us the game. Coach should pull you and get some more offense on the ice.”

I grind my teeth so I don’t yell at the kid. Not a lot of people grasp the mental strength it takes to be a goalie. I have to bear the brunt of everyone’s disappointment because my mistakes draw the most attention. I’m the only player on the ice for the entire game, which takes a toll on my mind and body, and my patience is thinning.

“What about your bad timing on those pinches that led to Forty getting a breakaway in the first period, huh?” I say. “Yeah, I fucked up, but this isn’t all on me. We’re a team.”

“Save it for the ice,” Patty interjects. “But he’s right. We win as a team, and we lose as one.”

We sit in silence, hunched over in our sweat-soaked gear. Normally, we’re blasting some obscure country album everyone hates that Patty always picks, but today, the atmosphere is deader than a cemetery.

Coach Watson strides into the locker room with a menacing frown on her lined face.

She gives each one of us a look, and I swear my balls shrivel. “I don’t think I need to say much. We’re better than this. I know it, you know it, and the fans know it. Right now, we’re not playing to our potential. We’re making mistakes we shouldn’t be making. Our passing needs to be sharper, and...”

Everyone listens intently to Coach, but when she’s done with her pep talk and walks out, Cruz throws his visor on the ground. “What the hell is happening? This is a massacre. Who wants to tell me why I signed with the shittiest team in the League?”

“Fuck off!” someone yells.

“Hey, enough of that.” I grip Cruz’s shoulder, pushing my irritation with him aside. “Listen to me. You’re a hell of a player, but you’ve got a tendency to get in your head when you’re pissed. Just because we’re playing like shit doesn’t mean we’ll keep playing like shit. We can turn it around.”

“How? They’ve got three goals on us,” Cruz shouts. “You gonna fart out a damn miracle?”

Patty throws his protein drink in the trash. “All our luck’s run out ever since your girl ended things, Tremblay. She messing with your head?”

“She’s not my girl,” I grit out, ripping my phone from my locker to find a string of texts.

MORGAN

You didn’t answer my call last night.

MORGAN

I’m coming to your game against Seattle in March.

MORGAN

I want to see you, please.

MORGAN

Call me. I miss you.

I jerk toward the screen at the last message.

NINA

I forgot to tell you that you left your beanie at my place. Need me to bring it to you?

I drop my phone, snatching my navy beanie in the stall. I always pack it for away games. Otherwise, it's bad luck. Yeah, it's ridiculous, but it's more of a comfort thing.

I was wearing it the day I got my first shutout, so I always carry it now. I quickly flip the fabric inside out, searching for that signature stitch from my mom. *May all of your dreams be as wild as you.* It's not there.

"Shit," I mutter, tossing the useless beanie in the stall. "How'd I forget?"

"What is it?" Patty asks.

"I left my lucky beanie at Nina's place."

The moment the words leave my mouth, the atmosphere in the locker room shifts. The air thickens with tension as everyone exchanges uneasy glances. No one dares to challenge me, but they all move uncomfortably in their gear like one wrong word will tip the scales of luck.

Cruz looks me dead in the eyes. "You're talking about that navy beanie your mom stitched? The one you almost punched me for touching? The one you pack for every away game because it's good luck? That beanie?"

"Yeah. I gave it to Nina because she was cold and left it there."

Cruz grabs me by my jersey, getting all up in my face. "You need to call her and see if she can bring you your beanie. That's why you're playing like shit."

"Tone it down. I'm not playing like shit because I don't have my beanie. I'm just off today." I push him back, but he's got a strong hold. "I'm not calling her. We'll be fine."

"Call her." His grip tightens on me. "Call her right the fuck now or I will."

"No," I grit out. "I'm not doing that."

"Why not?" he asks. "Who cares if she's not a doctor? Yeah, she's way too young for an old man like you, but it's cool as shit that she does pottery. Call her."

I flinch at Cruz's comment. "I know I'm too old for her. You don't need to tell me."

Nina's probably out partying and sleeping with strangers—as she should be doing in her twenties. I was the same. There are plenty of women in this world.

I'll find someone else after the ¡Vamos! event. I'm committed to Nina until then, but I'm not talking to her more than necessary. I already can't

stop thinking about the way she was grinding all over my dick, but every time I remember her age, I wince a bit.

Patty and Cruz exchange a glance like they're plotting something. In an instant, Cruz lunges at me. I jolt, but Patty grabs my elbows, holding me in check.

"What the hell?" I shout, struggling against Patty's vice-like grip. Damn, he's still got it, and here I thought having a kid would nudge him into dad bod territory.

"Sorry, Tremblay, but this is too important. You know not to mess with the rituals," Patty says, lowering his voice. "Also, I want to meet this girl you can't stop talking about."

"I don't talk about her," I cut out, struggling in his grasp.

Patty rolls his eyes. "You spent three hours in the hotel last night researching her pottery fellowship, and then telling me all the details, but sure, you don't talk about her."

"I was just curious about it."

I'm sure all this is lust, and she might not be a doctor, but that fellowship is damn impressive. I know how hard it is to work toward a dream, and I admire her for going after what she wants, even if I am too old for her. Yeah, she lied, but she owned up to the fact, and didn't try to cover it up, which takes courage.

"Okay, same. I want to meet this girl." Cruz picks up my phone and types in my passcode. How does he know my birthday? Nosy fucker.

"Give me my phone, Cruz. Now."

He scrolls through my texts. "Don't worry, I won't look at your nudes. I've already seen your mutant cock, anyway. I don't need a repeat."

"What's wrong with your cock, Tremblay?" someone shouts in the locker room.

"You haven't seen it?" Cruz scrolls my phone. "It's girthy as fuck."

I struggle in Patty's firm hold, ignoring their comments. "Don't call her, Cruz. I'm serious."

"I won't. What do you think I am? A grandfather like you?" I go limp with relief in Patty's grip, but then, Cruz smirks. "I'm FaceTiming her, obviously."

I lurch forward, but Patty holds me back. "Sorry about this, Tremblay, but you know it's important. This is high stakes. Do or die. Cruz is right.

We need you to have your lucky beanie or the hockey gods will curse us forever.”

Patty can't stop laughing to himself, so I know he's only doing this because he wants to meet Nina.

“You realize she'll think you're insane, right, Cruz?”

“I don't give a shit what anyone thinks. I'll be a perfect gentleman,” Cruz says as the phone pings. “In fact, I'll be so gentlemanly, she might want to climb on top and ride my horse.”

Patty grimaces. “That's a really weird analogy, man.”

I look down at my white knuckles balled into fists. With a forced effort, I slowly uncurl my fingers, but the urge to put my fist through a wall is hard to shake off. Cruz sleeps with anyone, and I don't want him going there with Nina.

“Listen to me, Cruz. Do not fuck around with Nina. I mean it.”

Patty hisses in a breath. “Damn, look at Tremblay's face. You probably shouldn't have said that.”

“I'm not scared of Gramps over there. What's he gonna do? Throw his dentures at me?”

The phone stops pinging.

“Rhode?”

All of us go rigid. My chest tightens at the sound of Nina's throaty voice. Cruz's eyes widen when he looks at the screen. “Hot damn. Phil? Is that you? What the hell are you doing answering Tremblay's call?”

Every muscle in my body locks. Does Cruz know her?

“Micah Cruz?” Nina says, and dammit, it sounds like she's smiling, but I can't see her. “Why are you calling me from Rhode's phone? Also, how many times did I tell you in high school not to call me Phil? You know I hate it.”

High school?

“No, you don't,” Cruz says. “You secretly love that we have our inside joke.”

They have inside jokes?

“Okay, fine. Maybe a little.”

“Atta girl, Phil.”

“You two know each other?” I demand.

“Hell yeah.” Cruz grins, and I want to wipe the smile off his face. “Phil and I were both Crimson Valley Vipers. Stay Violent!” he whoops.

“It’s stay *violet*,” Nina interjects.

“My way’s better. I even asked her to homecoming,” he continues. “Phil turned me down to go with Damon fucking theatre boy, even though I told her she’d have more fun with me, but listen, as much as I want to play catch up, we’ve got a real serious question for you, pretty girl.”

That’s it—I can’t listen to this.

“Sorry, Patty.” I jam my elbow back into his ribs.

He grunts, loosening his grip, and I slide out from beneath his arms. Springing forward, I rip the phone from Cruz’s hands and look at Nina’s cute face. I shake my head. No, not cute.

Young.

Her hazels widen on the screen. I zone in on her, perched on a bar stool like a queen with some pink drink in her hand. She’s probably drowning in shots.

Good for her.

I clench my phone.

Her glasses are lopsided, and her hair’s a mess. She looks every bit the student in her university crewneck, and I hate that I find a twenty-two-year-old so fucking pretty.

It makes me worse than my father.

I stare at Nina’s freckles over her nose, gritting my jaw when I realize she doesn’t have any wrinkles around the corners of her eyes like me. But there it is—she’s wearing my lucky beanie. The sight of her in my clothing tugs me closer to the screen, so I jerk myself back.

“Hey,” I mumble.

Brilliant, Tremblay.

She takes a long sip of her drink before answering. “Why is my old high school friend FaceTiming me from your phone, Rhode?”

Cruz pops his head into the screen, knocking against my temple. “Aw, come on, we were more than friends. You kissed me under that arch thing.”

What the hell? She kissed him? Something hot and grating slithers under my skin. I shove him, but Cruz doesn’t budge because our center’s made of bricks.

Patty sticks his head on the other side so all our sweaty cheeks are squished together. His beard is real damn itchy.

“No,” Nina counters. “*You* kissed me, with too much tongue, I might add.”

I grind my jaw hard enough to crush my molars as a white-hot shot of jealousy bursts through me. Cruz knows what she tastes like, and I'll never find out.

"We both know it was the best kiss of your life, Phil. Anyway, we gotta go. Can you bring Tremblay's beanie to our next game or mail it or some shit? It's the one on your head. We're losing 'cause he packed the wrong one, and he needs it for every game."

She blinks like she's trying to translate another language. "What? That makes no sense."

"We're hockey players," Cruz says. "We don't fuck with the rituals. Trust me, if I didn't have to go commando for every game, I wouldn't."

"I'm not even going to ask about that," she says.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, taking a deep breath as I watch the timer tick down on the locker room clock. "She's right, Cruz. I'm not asking her to do this. We'll be fine."

"I can drop it off at your apartment when you get back on Friday?" Nina offers.

The question has me straightening. Nina doesn't owe me a damn thing, but here she is, willing to give me something. In a world where coaches, fans, journalists, pretty much everyone demands things from me, her question feels like a gift.

"Yeah, have her bring it to family dinner," Patty adds, wiggling his brows. He's worse than Rowyn, meddling in my life.

"Alright, fine," I say, watching the clock. We've only got five minutes. "That'd be great, thanks."

"Fucking hell," Cruz mutters, grabbing his stick. "We're gonna lose this game now, aren't we? Come on, let's go get railed."

My teammates start filing out of the locker room, and Nina shifts her focus to me, softening. "Don't let Micah get to you. I've seen you play. You don't need a good luck charm to win. You got this, Rhode."

And with that piece of encouragement, she clicks off the phone. I stare at my screen, waiting for it to light up with her name again. Now that I know she'll be watching, my senses sharpen, each nerve buzzing as I channel the adrenaline thrumming through my veins.

"I like her already." Patty slaps my back. "You're in so much trouble with that one."

I grab my helmet, feeling the familiar weight in my hands. “Yeah. Don’t I fucking know it.”

NINA

“**A**nd with three goals scored in the last period, the Guardians manage to pull off one of the biggest comebacks in NHL history, which is nothing short of a hockey miracle!” the announcer screams on the TV. “No one’s talking about Tremblay’s retirement now.”

“Holy shit, they did it!” I leap up from the bar stool, careful not to spill my virgin mojito. “Did you not see that, Gwen?”

My heart’s racing more than the time we went skydiving for my eighteenth birthday, which I did mostly to prove to myself I could. Never again. “Rhode’s not just the Wall of Steel. He’s the Great Wall of Steel.”

Gwen sips her martini. “Sorry, but that was an atrocious joke.”

“Really? I thought it was hilarious.”

After the game ends, Micah FaceTimes me again. Despite the celebration in the locker room, Rhode gives Micah the saltiest glare I’ve ever seen before he swiftly exits the screen. I have no idea what he’s so mad about because he played amazing.

“Hey, Phil,” Micah says. “Guess what? We played our best period this season with you watching, so you’re our good luck charm now. You know what that means, right?”

“No, what?”

He wiggles his dark brows. “You’re icebound.”

“What? Icebound?”

“Yeah. Means you’re bound by the rituals of the hockey gods like us, so you have to watch all our games. We need our good luck charm to keep winning.”

“You don’t need me. That was all you guys.”

I laugh at his over-the-top antics, but I can’t stop grinning. I don’t actually believe I’m their good luck charm, but who cares? Let people believe what they want.

After saying goodbye, Gwen and I leave the bar together. I don’t consider myself a die-hard Guardians fan by any means, but over the course of the next week, I start watching their games.

And I’m not alone.

Surprisingly, Gwen grabs the fancy wine from the fridge, and I boil some peppermint tea, and then we cheer from the living room. There’s still some resentment lingering between us, but every game, we drift closer and closer to each other on the couch.

By the time Friday rolls around, I’m actually excited to see the guys despite having trudged to Rhode’s luxury downtown high-rise in the dreary late February rain.

I normally don’t like being in new places because it’s overstimulating, but knowing an old familiar face will be there calms some of my nerves. Well, that and my anti-anxiety medication.

I knock on his apartment door. With a jolt, the gilded 72 suddenly swings open, and there’s Rhode, glaring down at me while gripping the doorframe like some brooding hockey god that just rolled out of bed. He’s wearing gray sweatpants hanging low, precariously low, on his hips, and he’s shirtless.

My jaw falls.

I blink to see if he disappears, but no, he’s still standing there with all those glorious muscles, a V on his hips that definitely leads to a naughty destination, and a dusting of silver speckled stubble across his thick pecs.

He’s got a hard body custom-made for dirty fantasies, and even though I run every morning, I can’t imagine the grueling workouts they go through daily to get that type of muscle definition.

He mutters a curse, lurching for a sweatshirt hanging on a rack and tugging it over his head. “Sorry. Thought it was the guys. I didn’t realize it was you.”

I watch him struggle to get it over his shoulders like he's worried I'll be offended by his nudity. "No need to put on a shirt for me. That six-pack is better than anything I've had to drink."

He coughs, glancing away. "You shouldn't be saying things like that to me, Nina. I'm too old for you."

"No, you're not."

"Yeah, I am."

He keeps shoving this age difference in my face like a red light, and all it does is make me want to prove him wrong. I've spent so much time letting people talk over me. *Nina doesn't want to go because she doesn't like crowds. Nina would never do this.* I want to speak my mind, be bold, and try my damn hardest not to let anxiety, or anyone, control me.

Rhode Tremblay, included.

With his body covered, he glares down at my soggy clothes like the fabric just told some offensive joke. "Why're you wet?"

"Have you been outside yet?" I wring out my damp hair, trying to seem unaffected even though my heart's sizzling. "We got that early heat wave, so it's storming."

His Caribbean eyes rake down my wet hoodie, lingering for three of my heartbeats before he yanks his gaze to the coat rack, swallowing. I want to believe his thoughts flicker to the kitchen, but his constant references to my age are enough to kill anything between us.

I doubt he's still thinking about that moment even though it's constantly popping up in my dirtiest dreams. He's probably moved on with someone his age. My chest tightens.

"Why didn't you drive here?" he says through clenched teeth.

"Because Gwen has the car today, so I walked here after my last class. It wasn't raining then, but halfway here, it started pouring. Oh, and here, I brought your beanie."

"Thanks." He takes the hat. "I would've picked you up if you asked."

"I'm not going to do that to you. You just got back from a week of away games, so I figured you'd be exhausted. It's not a big deal. Can I please come in? I'm freezing, and I brought cat treats for Chicken since you said he hates people, and I want him to like me."

A divot forms between his brows. "You remembered my cat's name?"

"Yes. I listen to you." Rhode's blue eyes linger on my face, so I dangle the bag of treats. "Are you just going to stand there staring, or will you let

me inside?”

He gives his head a hard shake, then moves so I can pass. “Sure, Patty and Cruz will be here soon. Sorry that he made you come to dinner tonight. You didn’t have to, but Cruz can be pushy.”

“I wouldn’t have come if I didn’t want to, Rhode.” His eyes seem to soften, melting the guardrails around my heart, so I quickly add, “And I liked Micah in high school. He was funny. He made Spanish class a lot more fun.”

He grunts. “Yeah, Cruz is a damn comedian.”

“Exactly. I used to tell him he needed to do stand-up or something.”

I try not to inhale his smoky scent as I stride into the industrial open floor plan. Rhode’s apartment is every bit the bachelor pad I imagined it would be—brick walls, wooden floors, leather couches.

I’m used to college guys with beer-stained couches and beds without headboards. Not men with curtains hanging on their windows. Standing here, I feel like a puzzle piece being forced into the wrong hole.

I spot a few empty wrappers of ¡Vamos! protein bars across the leather couch. The mess makes me feel a little less out of place but doesn’t completely squash my simmering nerves. I glance around the living room, searching for a distraction as I try not to let the anxiety consume me.

He’s got all his gear hanging on a rack like some hockey tree, but I can’t find a cat. “Where’s Chicken?”

Rhode shuts the door with a thud. “Probably off hiding somewhere on top of the cabinets. He hates thunderstorms because of the loud noises, so I’d steer clear. They scare the hell out of him.”

I drop the bag of treats on the marble counter. “Well, these are for him when he wants to come out of hiding.”

Rhode scoops up an empty Gatorade bottle and throws it in the recycling bin. “Sorry for the mess. I should’ve cleaned, but I was exhausted after being on the road, and my cleaning person’s on paternity leave.”

I wave a hand. “You’re fine. It’s not even that messy. You should see my room.”

“I really shouldn’t.”

Our gazes snap to each other, and my mind drifts to that moment before I can stop the thought. He rips his eyes away first, scraping a hand over his stubbled jaw. “Let me get you a change of clothes. I’ll be right back.”

He saunters down the hallway before I have a chance to thank him, so I meander to a wall of pictures. I'm curious to see what Rhode looked like in his twenties, but it's actually a collection of the most horrendous cross-stitches I've seen. I smile at all the terrible designs.

"Don't be a..." I squint at the cross-stitch, reading the words out loud stitched above what looks like a skyscraper or a log. "Is that a... Oh, I get it. Don't be a dick. That's funny."

"What's funny?" Rhode snaps from behind me, warm breath coasting over my neck.

I jolt, and my back hits his broad chest. "Sorry, I was just looking at these cross-stitches. Did you buy them?"

He reaches over and points to a cross-stitch. Rhode's bicep brushes my ear, and I shiver, but all he does is keep his unaffected gaze on the wall.

"No, I made these, except for the only good one of the ballsack that says *I'm Nuts About You*. My mom did that. She's got the sense of humor of a twelve-year-old boy."

"I think your mom might be my favorite person."

"Mine too." His lips turn up in the same way mine always do when I think of my mom. "It's something she used to do, and I picked it up from her. It takes my mind off all the retirement bullshit, but since you're an artist, you probably think I'm terrible."

"Yeah, these really are horrific, but that's my favorite kind of art because it's unique," I agree, examining the tragic cross-stitch collection. "Can you make me one?"

His laugh rumbles against my back.

"I'm serious, Rhode. I want one."

There's a pause. "You really want one of my shitty cross-stitches to hang up at your place?"

"Absolutely. I'd ask for two, but I'm sure you don't have a lot of extra time to cross-stitch during the season." Glancing over my shoulder, I find a deep divot between his brows. "What is it?"

"Nothing." He shrugs. "It's just that you're the first person besides my mom and sister to ask me to make a cross-stitch for them." He drops his eyes to the dry clothes folded in his hands. His Adam's apple bobs.

With a sigh, he shakes off whatever was on his mind and thrusts the clothes out to me, still avoiding my gaze. "Here. Bathroom's down the hall

on the right, so you can change there. Sorry if that sweatshirt smells, by the way, it's the only one I have."

"Thanks."

I hold the clothing at arm's length. The Guardians logo is peeling off the front. Nice to know he's giving me one of his dirty old sweatshirts, but at least it's dry.

I head into the marble bathroom, but before I close the door, I shout down the hall. "Don't think I didn't notice that you avoided the cross-stitch topic. I'm serious. Your good luck charm wants one!"

I can't be sure, but I think his low chuckle echoes through the closed door. The bathroom is massive, of course, with a black marble countertop and golden sconces on the walls.

A brown and white furry tail dangles off one of the top cabinets, and I grin. "You don't look so mean."

He hisses.

"Okay, then." I jerk back. "It's fine. We've all got our sassy sides."

I peel off my crewneck until I'm topless in the bathroom. Bras are mini-torture chambers for my small boobs, so I never wear them. I lift the Guardians sweatshirt to my nose, carefully sniffing to see how bad it smells.

It's a little musty due to that masculine smell of sweat, but there's also the woody scent of his cologne. I sniff again, deeper this time.

It smells warm, if smells can be warm, or maybe it's that the soft material feels like it's been worn for ages. I start tugging it over my head right as an earsplitting crack of thunder shatters the silence.

With a jump, I clutch the sweatshirt to my chest.

Lights flicker.

The bathroom turns pitch-black.

There's a loud screech, and a sharp pain erupts across my bare back like searing hot blades slicing through my skin. I can't help but let out an agonized scream that reverberates across the marble. It feels like there's something clawing its way onto my back.

"Stop!" I shriek.

"Nina!" Rhode's voice echoes through the door, and there's a pounding on the other side. "What's wrong? Open the door!"

The lights flick back on, and in the mirror, I see Chicken clinging to me, scraping his claws down my back.

The relentless pain intensifies, and I let out another piercing scream until, at last, the cat relinquishes its hold and patters away, leaving little droplets of my blood on the marble tile.

“Open the damn door!”

Rhode sounds murderous, and I’d be terrified if my skin didn’t feel like it was on fire. I try to respond, but all that comes through is a quiet sob. He bangs again.

Once.

Twice.

The door handle jiggles. “Fuck it. I’m coming inside.”

NINA

“**W**atch out, Nina!” In a burst of frantic energy, Rhode barrels through the door, breaking the lock.

The metal pings against the wall as he rushes into the bathroom. I clutch his sweatshirt tight against my bare chest. He's panting heavily, his face etched with concern as he attempts to process the chaotic scene.

Rhode's eyes go wide in the mirror. “What happened? You're bleeding.”

“Your cat,” I gasp, wincing as my skin throbs like someone scraped a cheese grater down me. “I think the thunder scared him, and he jumped off the cabinet and clawed me.”

“Fuck.” He rushes to me as I hunch over the sink.

An expression that rivals the storm raging outside settles over his face. “Yeah, he does that. I'm sorry. It's like he forgets he has claws.”

“It's okay.” I wince. “You did warn me he doesn't like thunderstorms.”

“Do you always stand up for the little guy?” He squeezes my bare shoulder, and his gentle touch is so warm, so inviting, that I lean back, seeking more of his comfort.

He drops his hand.

Goosebumps prickle on my drafty skin like an invisible handprint. “You're not little, and I stand up for you. You should hear my trash talk when I watch your games. I'm getting good.”

His lips twitch, but his frown remains in place. “Let me get the first aid kit. He really got you bad.”

Rhode digs through the cabinets until he pulls out a heavy-duty medical-grade kit, laying the materials out on the counter while I cling to the sweatshirt.

He doesn't seem to notice I'm topless as he treats me with the care of a pediatrician. I really need to stop imagining him at night, and in the morning, and okay, that one time at lunch.

He brushes my hair to the side with the lightest of caresses, and goosebumps spring back to life under his soothing touch.

"Charlie," he whispers.

I go rigid at the name etched on my shoulder. His callused fingertips scratch the mark that feels more like a scar than a tattoo.

"Who's Charlie?" he repeats with a dark edge to his voice I've never heard before.

Our eyes connect in the mirror, and there's no more thunder to cover our heavy breathing. His gaze travels down my wet hair, lingering on my collarbone, and dips to the swell of my breasts, then stops. The blue in his eyes darkens, raging like the Atlantic, but a second later, his expression calms. I tug his sweatshirt higher.

Using one hand, I grip the marble counter hard enough to break the ledge. "Charlie's our sister. Charlotte."

I'm surprised the admission slips from my lips so easily, but there's a steadiness in him that I think my chaotic soul craves.

"You have another sister?"

"No. I had a sister. She died when I was five because of a heart condition, so I barely remember her. Most of my early childhood was spent in hospitals because of it," I say in a robotic voice.

Time's not an excuse for grief, but I never got to know Charlie since she left the world so young. It feels like I'm telling someone else's story.

The only thing her memory haunts me with is a curse of anxiety because my child brain couldn't process death. At least, according to Dr. Ghosh and her love of all things diagnoses. That woman would put me in every box if she could, but I don't want my personality to fit inside the confines of someone else's lines.

"I'm sorry," Rhode whispers, and even though it's two light words, I feel the weight of them.

"It's really fine." I shrug, giving him my real smile. "It was a long time ago. The only thing I remember is that every night, no matter how sick she

was, Charlie would always come in and flutter her eyelashes against my cheek to say goodnight, but that stopped when she died.”

His thumb brushes my bare shoulder, stroking once, twice, three times. “I’m still sorry. Losing someone is hard no matter when it happens.”

I bulldoze right through the moment. “Thanks, it is, but I’m really fine. I’ve been in therapy for years, so that helps.”

“I bet.” He squeezes me gently. “Alright, but if you ever need someone else to listen, I’ve got big ears. We’ve all been through a little bit of hell.”

“True, except you’ve actually got really normal ears.”

With a short chuckle, he brushes away the hair on the curve of my neck, and I go rigid at his warm fingertips. “Can I ask about the four-leaf clover right here?”

“Oh. Yeah, that one’s easy. I felt like my life was a mess and I needed some more permanent luck. It hasn’t worked out that way.”

“Not sure about that. I feel pretty lucky that I met you,” he blurts. The words hang heavy in the air, steaming up our conversation.

He quickly shifts his focus and starts rummaging through the first aid kit. “Anyway, why do you have so many tattoos? Are they for fun, or do they all mean something?”

“Some are ridiculous, like the barcode on my ass, but some of them mean things. I like that tattoos are an outward sign of a person’s soul. I can’t change my appearance, but I feel like tattoos are a way to show people the parts of me that I want to be seen.”

A corner of his mouth lifts but falls just as quickly. “I like that.”

“Do you have any tattoos?”

“None that you’ll see,” he mutters, shifting on his feet. He abruptly changes the subject before I can ask where the hell he has a tattoo. “Alright, let’s see the damage.”

He examines my back, hissing in a breath. “Chicken got you good. How’re you not pissed at my cat right now? I love him, but I’m furious with the menace.”

“He was just scared.” Rhode brushes an alcohol swab against a scratch. He’s gentle, but it still stings. “People do stupid things when they’re scared. Animals aren’t any different. I’m not going to hold it against him. I wouldn’t want someone judging me at my worst.”

“I bet your worst is still better than ninety percent of people’s best.”

I scoff. He hasn't seen me curled up in a ball and sweating on the floor. He'd probably sprint away like Isaac. "You barely know anything about me."

He frowns in the mirror. "I know things about you."

"Oh really? Like my first name?"

"I know more than that." He rips another alcohol swab with his teeth. The sound ignites a flicker of heat in my core. Now, I'm imagining him doing that with a condom. "I know you like peppermint tea and plants. You're an artist. You're doing a pottery fellowship in Argentina—"

"You remembered that?"

"No. I listened," he repeats my words from earlier, hitching up a corner of his mouth. "You have a complicated relationship with your sister, but I can tell you love her. You chew cinnamon gum. I know you stand up for people and that you have eight piercings on your right ear and four on your left. Maybe I don't know the big things, but I've noticed a few little things about you."

He snaps his mouth shut as soon as he finishes talking like he doesn't want any more words to slip out.

I blink. He got my eight piercings right. One of those earrings is a tiny stud. "You noticed all that?"

His shrug is stiff enough to creak. "I pay attention, but I'm a goalie. It's my job to watch and observe people. Alright, you ready? This'll burn."

I'm reeling from Rhode's admission, but he's got a good point. Watching people is ingrained in his goalie psyche.

I give my head a hard jerk, steering my thoughts back to the moment because I do *not* need to be fantasizing about a man who wants nothing to do with me. "Do it. I can handle pain."

"I figured. You're a strong one." He dabs it on my back, and I hiss. It really burns, but at least physical torture ends faster than emotional pain.

"Sorry. I know it stings," Rhode whispers. "What can I do to make it better?"

For some reason, I don't think asking him to give me an orgasm would go over well, but that'd be a nice distraction at the moment.

I pinch my eyes closed to combat the warmth burning on my skin that rivals the heat in my body. "Distract me. Tell me something. Anything."

Rhode launches into a story about the season Wyatt bet him they wouldn't make it to the playoffs, so he had to shave his head when they did.

His eyes never stray from my back, but his jaw is tight as he speaks like he's the one in pain. There's a tiny muscle that won't stop twitching in his cheek.

As he rubs slow circles on the scrapes, covering every inch with antibiotic ointment, my mind drifts to some dirty places, wondering if he'd use his fingers to circle my clit in that same motion. I sigh at the pointless thought.

He wants to give someone a ring, and I want to give someone a condom.

As he meticulously patches me up, my grip on his sweatshirt goes lax, slipping down to reveal the swell of my breasts. I catch Rhode's gaze drifting down, lingering for a split second before darting up.

As he places a Band-Aid on my wound, the sharp, sudden sensation pulls me back from the brink of my fantasies.

"There." He coughs. "Our good luck charm's good as new."

I grip his sweatshirt. "I'm not your good luck charm. That was all you. You guys were amazing out there. Have you not seen all the post-game highlights?"

He tosses the antibiotic tube back into the first aid kit, crossing one leg over the other as he leans against the sink like he's casually talking to one of his teammates. "Yeah, but they still won't stop bringing up my retirement because it's my contract year."

"What does that mean?"

"Means I have to decide if I'm going to renew for another season, be a free agent with another team, or retire from the League. If I want to stay, I have to play my hardest so our general manager thinks I'm worth keeping."

I let the sweatshirt slip a fraction, only to see if his eyes drop again. They stay on my face. "That sounds like a huge decision. Have you thought about retiring?"

He rubs his jaw like he's got the weight of his team on his shoulders, and I wish I could say something to ease the pressure, but the only thing I know about hockey is that there are three periods. Though, I'm learning. "Yeah, but I don't know what I'd do without hockey."

"Anything. You could do anything. You still have your whole life ahead of you."

He sighs loudly. "It doesn't feel that way. I feel so old compared to the younger guys, and I swear it's the only thing the media's been asking me,

even with our wins.”

I study his reflection in the mirror, but he keeps his focus on my scratched back. “You’re not old, and age doesn’t matter. You can be ninety and have the youngest soul, and you can be eighteen and be a crotchety curmudgeon. Stop worrying so much about what you can’t control, like your age, and show them how talented you are on the ice, because you are.”

His gaze latches onto mine in the mirror. He needs to be careful with those baby blues because a woman could drown in that look and never come up for air.

I clutch the sweatshirt to my chest. “What?”

His eyes never wander from my face. “Nothing. It’s just nice to talk to someone about all this. I have to be strong for my team, but I don’t have to fake it with you.”

“You can talk to me whenever you want. I’ve got big ears, too.”

“You’ve actually got really small ears.” He leans forward with a tender smile, tugging my earlobe like I’m a kid, which has me wanting to drop this sweatshirt on the floor.

The warm whisper of his breath caresses my skin like a summer breeze, smelling of mint and smoke. The scent of him is subtle, nothing like the overpowering fragrances of other boys.

Rhode Tremblay is all man. But he’s not a man because he’s assertive or strong—no, anyone can be those things. He’s all man because he’s kind and thoughtful.

A door slams.

We jump.

“Tremblay, where you at?” a deep, familiar voice shouts. “Is Phil here yet? We brought shit for fish tacos, and Patty-Daddy brought a fuckton of blubes for Betty!”

“Stop cursing in front of my daughter. She’s about to say her first words any day.”

Loud footsteps thump down the hall, and we jerk apart, but not before two massive men fill the bathroom doorway. The blond guy with an adorable baby strapped to his chest slaps one hand over his eyes, and the other over the baby’s.

Micah Cruz does the opposite, letting his gaze rake over my body. Apparently, Micah still flirts with anyone that has a brain.

His black hair is shorter now, and he's clearly been lifting a lot of weights. Rhode moves to stand in front of me like a bodyguard, shielding me from Micah.

“Well, hot damn, Phil. Look at you. I like the new tats. What's going on in here, and how do I get an invite?”

RHODE

“Get out,” I demand, pointing to the broken door. I’ll have to go to the hardware store to fix it later. “Actually? No. We’re all leaving.”

I shove Cruz and Patty out of the bathroom, leaving Nina to finish changing in private. I need to get out of there because being that close to her is making it hard to breathe.

The conversation we had in the bathroom is deeper than any conversation I’ve had on a date. I had no idea she’s been through so much. It took everything in me not to let my eyes drop to her tits while she was talking, and I feel like a jackass for that.

I’m still angry with my cat for scratching her back, but a twisted part of me likes that I was the one to patch her up.

What kind of man does that make me?

I’m not going to think about that because then I’m going to have to think about why I dug through my closet until I found my old, favorite sweatshirt to give to her, even though I did laundry yesterday.

It definitely smells like my sweat, but I don’t want Nina to smell like Ocean Breeze laundry detergent—I want her to smell like me. I’m worse than an animal, apparently, marking her with my scent like I’ve got some claim on her when I don’t.

She’s eleven years younger than me. I’ve got no business looking at her, but I can’t seem to stop.

Chicken scurries across my floor, and I scoop him into my arms, nuzzling him for a second. I'm tempted to squeeze the hell out of him, but I still love the little guy even when he's being a dick. He jumps out of my arms and heads to his cat castle.

Cruz rifles through the grocery bags on my kitchen counter. "Damn, and here I thought Phil would be the one scratching up your back, not the other way around."

"Stop talking about Nina, and she told you to stop calling her Phil," I grit out. "Respect that."

"Have you not taken a shit today or what?" He looks up from a plastic bag. "And what's going on with you two? I thought you said you weren't into her."

"Nothing's going on. My cat scratched up her back, so I was helping her out. I'm taking her to a sponsorship event. That's all."

I need a distraction from Nina, so I tickle Betty's tiny belly until she giggles. "Hi, baby girl, look at you getting so big. What's your daddy been feeding you?"

Patty kisses her fuzzy blond head. "Smashed chickpeas and blueberries. They're her favorite. She's so strange, but she's mine, and she's in the ninety-fifth percentile for height, so I don't care."

I slap his shoulder. "That's great, Pat—"

Cruz cracks open a bag of tortilla chips. "Did I tell you about the suction on this girl's mouth from the other night? Unreal. I clogged up her vocal cords, but she kept on going like a fucking plunger."

Glaring at Cruz, Patty drops Betty into the highchair I bought for when he visits. "You know, sometimes, you should think about the things you're going to say before you say them."

"But then I'd never say them." Cruz tosses up a chip and opens his mouth.

"That's the point." I snatch it out of the air and eat it myself. "You better be getting on your knees for these women and thanking them."

He grabs another chip. "Trust me. I returned the favor. Three fucking times. Eating pussy's hard work. My tongue's still sore."

"Stop cursing," Patty says. "My daughter's first word is not going to be f-u-c-k."

Cruz puts away the groceries we got for fish tacos because he gets an eye twitch if someone so much as sets a drink down without a coaster.

“Look, I’ll try to control myself, but I can’t make any promises. Asking me not to curse is like asking me not to jack off.” Cruz wiggles his dark brows at me. “Maybe Phil can help me out next time. I’m sure we’d have fun playing together.”

I pick up a foam football and hurl it at him. “She’s not a fucking toy, Cruz.”

Patty groans. “Language!”

Cruz snatches it out of the air. “I know she’s not a toy, but that doesn’t mean I can’t play with her, unless... you want her?”

“I don’t want her,” I lie, like that will convince my brain.

“I deep-throatedly disagree with that comment,” Cruz says.

“What’s that even mean?” Patty smashes a blueberry, letting Betty eat it off his finger.

“Whole-heartedly didn’t feel like a strong enough word choice.” Cruz shrugs. “Does this mean Phil’s fair game?”

My hands ball into fists. Cruz doesn’t take anything but hockey seriously, and they clearly get along great because they’re the same age. Nina can make her own decisions, but I don’t want those choices shoved in my face like a win from our biggest rival.

I dart my eyes to the closed bathroom door before striding over to Cruz. He’s tall, but I’ve got an inch on him, so I make sure to look down. “I’m only going to say this once. I know you’re friends, so I’m asking you to do this for me. Find someone else.”

He flashes me a wicked grin. “Damn, look at your face. This is gonna be a hell of a lot of fun, isn’t it?”

A door shuts, and we snap our heads to find Nina striding out of the bathroom in my massive sweatshirt that goes to her thighs. Some feral part of me purrs like my cat at the sight of her wearing my clothes.

I like that image a little too much.

Cruz spots Nina, and with a quick wink in my direction, he wraps her in a bear hug and swings her around my living room. A sharp stab slams through me, so I focus on Betty slapping her highchair table.

“Phil! It’s so good to see you, pretty girl. I’m a little offended you didn’t keep tabs on me after high school, but whatever. I’ll let it go this time.”

If he calls her pretty girl all night, I’m shoving that entire bag of chips down his throat.

Nina's small grunt of surprise is muffled against his chest, and in a move that makes me want to bodycheck Cruz into the boards, she jumps up, wrapping her legs around his waist.

“Micah Cruz, look at you, you got huge! And fine, you can call me Phil. That’s better than pretty girl.”

Nina sucks in a breath when he pulls her closer, and I have to look away because that has me thinking about the breathy noises she made in the kitchen.

I scrub a hand over my jaw, but nothing’s going to erase that moment. I’m not even sure I want it to leave my head, until I remember she’s a year younger than Cruz, and then I want to punch my brain for having the thought.

Cruz finally sets her back down, and smirks at me over her head. “You know, in brighter lighting, you kind of look old enough to be her dad, Tremblay. I think it’s the gray that does it.”

Patty throws the foam football at the back of his head. “Don’t be a d-i-c-k.”

“Yeah, don’t be an asshole. Rhode’s still young.” Nina drops onto the wooden barstool next to me, squeezing my shoulder. I lurch away like her touch is an open flame. Her hands might as well be with the way fire rushes to my dick.

“You know who’s younger?” Cruz smiles down at her with a glint in his eyes.

Glaring at him, I grip the leg of the stool and pull her closer to my side, so Cruz gets the point. The loud, slow scrape echoes through my apartment. Chicken scatters across the rug. Even Betty quirks her little head at the noise.

Nina pushes her gold glasses up her nose. “Was that really necessary?”

“It was very necessary.” I keep my eyes on Cruz, whose lips curve in a dare.

She tightens her ponytail. “Okay, anyway. I think me and Chicken are friends. My back’s stopped throbbing, but he let me pet him before running off, so I feel like that was an apology. Oh, and who’s this cutie?” She squeezes Betty’s tiny feet, but she may as well be squeezing my heart.

Patty smiles, lifting one of Betty’s hands to wave. “Nina, meet my daughter, Elizabeth, but we call her Betty because Patty and Betty is the stuff daddy-daughter dance competitions are made of. She’s eight months,

twelve days, and fourteen hours old, loves blueberries, and she finally smiles when you make eye contact with her. Watch.” He plays peek-a-boo, and Betty starts giggling.

“She also does more than cry and shit now, so that’s fun,” Cruz adds.

Nina keeps her grin on Betty, but smacks Cruz’s arm. “Okay, she’s adorable. She looks just like you, Wyatt. Can I hold her?”

I try not to frown at the fact that she sort of called Patty adorable. He is, but fuck, I don’t want Nina thinking that about my friends.

“You can try, but fair warning, she’s kind of going through a stranger danger phase, where she doesn’t like anyone she doesn’t know holding her, but go for it... Maybe you’ll be the exception.”

Patty hands Betty over, and Nina holds her like a football. The girl’s not a natural, but she gets points for trying. Betty’s cute smile twists into a scowl, and she starts wailing.

Cruz covers his ears. “Fuck, make it stop.”

“Language!” Patty shouts, pointing a finger at Cruz.

Nina coos in her ear and tries to bounce Betty, but when that does shit-all for the crying, she hands her back to Patty. The girl instantly calms in his arms, nuzzling into his chest.

“Well,” Nina chuckles. “That could’ve gone better. I guess she doesn’t like me.”

“I would’ve been jealous if she liked you instantly. Took her months to warm up to me.” I nudge her shoulder and regret it a second later when I brush the side of her tits. Is she not wearing a bra? This dinner is going to be brutal.

“I warned you.” Patty snorts. “She’s probably not used to your smell. It’s not like we like everyone when we first meet them. I hated Cruz at first —”

“Dick.”

“Language,” Patty shouts. “But Cruz writes everyone on the team handwritten cards for their birthdays, so now he’s alright. Why should Betty have to be all friendly? My girl’s allowed to be a little mean.”

Patty grins at Betty in a way that makes me think if the world were to go up in flames, he wouldn’t notice. I frown, wishing I had someone to look at like that, and pull my gaze away to find Cruz staring at Nina’s chest.

I slap a hand on the counter to get his attention, and his eyes snap to mine. “What’s up, old man?”

“You did *not* just call Rhode that,” Nina interjects. “That’s so rude.”

I’m speechless for a second. No one’s ever come to my defense that fast besides Patty. Cruz rubs the back of his neck, looking a little sheepish. “Sorry, it’s just an old habit.”

“Called out.” Patty gives her a high five. “I like you, Nina. I’m glad you’re our good luck charm.”

“I’m not your good luck charm, but you can believe whatever you want. That was all you guys.”

Cruz stuffs another chip in his mouth. “Yeah, you are, and now you’ve got to come to our next home game and watch us play live.”

“No, I hate crowds,” she says.

I file that fact away under my mental cabinet with the name Nina Alstyne.

“Please, Phil?” Cruz begs.

She nudges him, and I scowl at where she touched his arm. “We’re not doing this again, you big flirt. I’m not going. You don’t need me to win. You’re fine.”

“Come on, please? No one ever comes to my games,” he says, getting on his knees and clasping his hands in front of her. “I’ll do anything. *Anything.*”

“She said no,” I interject in a hard voice, hating seeing Cruz on his knees for Nina.

She smiles at me, but then turns back to Cruz, giving him an exasperated look. “Can I think about it?”

“Sure, as long as you come.” Cruz winks in my direction. “To the game, I mean.”

I ball my hands into fists. If I have to listen to him make sexual innuendos all night, I’m going to lose my shit.

Cruz makes his way to the living room and drops down onto the couch, patting the cushion. “Now, come sit down, Phil. We’re gonna teach you some hockey terms, starting with the fact that it’s called the penalty box or the sin bin, not boy jail.”

She drops down next to him. Cruz says something low in Nina’s ear that makes her laugh. I turn my back, yanking open the fridge to stare at the fish taco ingredients for fuck knows how long.

I try to remind myself that it doesn’t matter that I’ll never find out if Nina tastes like cinnamon, or that every time she tucks her hair behind her

ear, I get jealous of her fingers.

That's lust.

Those are physical feelings that will go away when I find the right woman—someone who wants the same things as me. This isn't anything deep. After the event, I need to get Nina out of my head because I can't live feeling like I'm about to snap at any moment.

We spend the next hour cooking, and Nina keeps laughing at every fucking thing Cruz says, even though none of it's funny. By the time dinner's almost ready, I'm so wound up that I've burned at least five tortillas for the tacos.

"What a fucking pigeon!" Cruz shouts at the TV. He's bouncing Betty on his knee, so they look damn near perfect together. She's still got on my sweatshirt, though. "Toronto just scored. Wesley's got a killer slap shot, so you better block 'em when we play."

"Language," Patty groans. "My girl's gonna have the dirtiest mouth if she keeps hanging around you."

Nina catches my eye. "There's nothing wrong with a girl who's got a dirty mouth. Isn't that right, Rhode?"

That teasing edge to her voice is going to be my undoing, and I want nothing more than to flirt back, but that's not fair to either of us.

My traitor cock twitches in my sweats, and this material is way too thin to let that happen, so I subtly adjust myself. "Mm-hm."

That cute, playful half-smile turns into a frown, and I hate myself a bit for pushing her away, but we'd never work long term.

Cruz gives her a high-five. "Oh shit, I forgot how much I like you, Phil. Don't you like her, Tremblay?"

I give him my best withering glare, but all that does is make the kid's grin widen. I'm acting like a grumpy fucker, but I have to stick to one-word answers, so I don't lose it in front of Cruz.

I don't know why Nina's affecting me so much, but this can't be normal. I'm starting to think it has everything to do with the fact that I need to get laid.

It's been over a year since I've been with a woman, which is the only explanation for why I feel like my chest is about to burst when I look at Nina in my sweatshirt. I'm not going to mistake lust for some deeper emotion. That's what got my father in trouble.

“Speaking of dirty things.” Cruz gags, lifting Betty in the air. “I think something died in your girl’s diaper, Patty-Daddy. Here. Take her. This stench is offensive.”

Patty holds up his red hands sprinkled with paprika. “Can you help me out? I’ve got seasoning all over me, and I want to make sure the fish doesn’t burn.”

He dangles Betty in the air. “You made her. You change her.”

“I’ll change her. Come here, baby girl.” I’ll take any distraction from Nina at this point, so I grab Betty from Cruz’s lap and sniff her tiny butt, grimacing. “What the hell are you feeding her, Patty? Straight cabbage?”

“It’s the chickpeas. Her digestive system can’t handle them, but she loves them, so I don’t want to deny my girl.” Patty rubs paprika on the mahi-mahi. “Thanks. I think I’ve changed seven, no, maybe eight, diapers today. Can you tell me what color it is too? Actually, just take a picture.”

The things parents do for their children. “Sorry, but I’m not taking a picture of your daughter’s shit.”

Nina stands from my leather couch. “I’ll do it. I’ve never changed a diaper in my life, but I can take a picture. Sounds like it might be a two-person job.”

“You know what else is a two-person job?” Cruz says. “Three people if you’re lucky?”

“Stop talking,” I say to him, facing Nina. “And you don’t have to come. I got this.”

She peers at me with those big, beautiful eyes. “I want to help.”

“Alright, then. Your call.” I hitch Patty’s orange diaper bag over my shoulder, prop Betty on my hip, and head to the guest room with Nina following. Her gaze feels like it’s singeing my back, but I don’t turn around.

I lay out the pink diaper mat with giraffes and set Betty on the soft padding, tickling her belly. She squeals. “Yeah, I’d be smiling too if I were you right now. I bet you feel a million pounds lighter.”

Nina’s laugh fills the room. “You’re a lot nicer to her than you have been to me tonight. I’d be jealous if she weren’t so cute.”

I grunt in response, unclipping Betty’s yellow onesie, but I can’t help myself. I glance up to see Nina watching me with a small smile. “What?”

She shrugs, and the motion makes her blonde hair shimmer in the light. Shimmer? Look at me turning into a poet. “Nothing. You just look like a natural. You’re going to make someone very happy one day, Rhode.”

Swallowing, I shift my gaze back to Betty. Yeah, I want mini versions of me skating around, but I also want them with the right person.

Betty's got drool dribbling from her mouth, so I lift her onesie and wipe it away. "Do you want kids?"

"Honestly?" Nina plops down on my guest bed. "I haven't thought much about kids. Right now? No, but I can't decide what I want for dinner, much less how I'll feel in ten years, so probably one day. I just want to focus on myself for now. Save money for my living expenses in Argentina."

"What are you going to do after that?" I ask, needing to know more about her life.

"My dream's to start my own studio one day, but I'll need to save for that, so for now, I want to sell mugs and plates online. Teach classes on the side. I want time to figure out the rest of my life."

That's what I need—more time.

I'm impressed with her direction, but a pang of envy hits me. Once I latched onto my NHL dream, I never let go. Never got the chance to explore other options outside of the League.

Part of me always wonders who I would've been without hockey, but those days are behind me. It's funny how sometimes dreams turn into jobs. I'm in my thirties, so it's time to settle down.

"What about you?" She hands me another packet of Wet Wipes from the diaper bag. "Do you want kids?"

I pinch Betty's tiny feet. "Yeah, I do."

"Well, that shouldn't be too hard since you could probably get someone pregnant by sneezing on them."

I almost laugh, but I rein it in.

Nina hands me some rash cream. She's quiet for a moment, but it feels like her thoughts are screaming at me. "Is everything okay, Rhode? You've barely looked at me all night, and you're only giving me one-word answers. I'm not mad at your cat if that's what this is about. My back feels fine now."

"That's not it."

"Then what's wrong?" She pauses, twisting her hands in my comforter. "You don't have to push me away if that's what this is about... I know you don't think about me like that anymore."

She doesn't have a clue how much I'm thinking about her, but I only want her because I can't have her.

That's all.

She needs to find someone her own age that enjoys doing goat yoga or some shit, but I'm not about to tell Nina that every time she touches Cruz, I want to tackle the kid. "I'm good."

She hands me a clean diaper, and our fingers brush. Her touch feels like a shock, so I flex my hand.

"Are you sure?" she asks. "You can talk to me. I have big ears too."

I battle the urge to grin at our inside joke. "I'm fine. Just tired."

At least that's not a lie. My body's always aching. Gritting my jaw, I focus on changing Betty's diaper, but Nina's gaze burns my cheek.

"If you didn't want me to come tonight, you could've said something. I'm not great at being in new places, so if you don't want me here, I'll go because it seems like I'm making you really uncomfortable. Do you want me here or not?"

Her words hit like a flying puck. I can't concentrate when she's in the room, and that's on me, but I've got a headache from clenching my jaw so hard. I don't want to be the one to tell her to leave, so I end up staring at her with an open mouth while Betty kicks her tiny legs.

Nina's neck turns splotchy, and her breathing becomes ragged like she's just finished a tough workout.

She reaches for her bag and grabs a piece of cinnamon gum, stuffing it into her mouth. She chews like her life depends on it and suddenly leaps from the bed. "You know what? I'll go. I'll see you at the event next weekend. Good luck with your games."

I mutter a curse. "Nina, wait."

She pauses with her hand on the doorknob. "What?"

I don't know what to say. All I wanted was for her not to leave, but she should go. I'll be able to breathe again once this girl's gone, but I don't want her thinking I'm mad at her.

"Thank you, Nina. For coming to the sponsorship event with me. I know you didn't have to, and these past couple of years have been rough, so it means a lot."

Part of me wants to tell her not to come to the event, but I don't want to risk screwing anything up with Andrea. It's not that big of a deal if I'm not on her arm, but I can't bring myself to take back my invitation—even if people are judging the hell out of me for bringing a college student as my date.

“You’re welcome, but I’m going to head out. See you there.” She smiles, but it doesn’t make those cute half-moons appear under her eyes. Nina strides out the door like I just set the room on fire, leaving me in the ashes.

I stare down at Betty sucking her thumb. “You don’t think I’m an asshole, do you, baby girl?”

She starts crying, and by the time she stops three hours later, it feels like my ears are bleeding. Parenting might be tougher than I thought.

I blame that for the reason it took me so long to notice Nina left my favorite sweatshirt folded neatly by the door.

NINA

“You’re not wearing that to the event. It’s fancy.”

Gwen sits up on my mustard velvet comforter. Her fingers dance across her laptop so fast she risks chipping her beige nail polish. “You look like a seventies flower child, and you need to seem like an Upper East Side socialite if you’re going to be on Rhode Tremblay’s arm.”

“First of all,” I say, sharper than intended. “Rhode’s going to be on my arm.”

She shifts on my bed. “Why are you snapping at me? I didn’t mean it like that. I’m trying to help.”

“I’m not mad,” I counter, pacing my bedroom in my habitual pattern. Curtains. Desk. Closet. Curtains. Desk. Closet. “I’m just nervous. I want this to go well because the sponsorship’s important to him, and I don’t want to fuck it up by embarrassing a professional athlete.”

“How would you even do that?”

By losing control, fainting on the person Rhode’s trying to impress, making him hate me, and then I’ll be stuck thinking about that for the rest of my life.

Gwen wouldn’t understand since she never has to worry about passing out in crowded rooms. Instead of answering, I dig through my closet and pull out a vintage plaid skirt that screams, I-love-the-taste-of-oysters-and-caviar. “What about this? Does this make me look rich?”

Her emerald eyes flicker over the pale pink material. “Yes, but you aren’t meeting the princess of Morocco for tea. You need something sophisticated, but you also want to be a little sexy.”

“Sophisticated? I bought my overalls from a fortune teller who lived at a commune in some Utonian desert.”

“That’s not what you call a desert in Utah.”

I toss the skirt on my bed. “I don’t care. It’s what I call a desert in Utah.”

Gwen shuts her laptop, eyeing my trembling hands. “Okay, clearly, you’re nervous, but you don’t have time for this. He’s picking you up in twenty minutes, and you still need to do your hair.”

“I already did my hair, Gwendolyn,” I huff.

“Oh.” She scans the strands. “Well, it’s too late for highlights, so add some more curls, and put on some lipstick. Burgundy, not rose. That’s better with your skin tone, and fix your eyeliner. It looks like you did it in the middle of an earthquake.”

“That’s because my hands won’t stop shaking.”

“You’ll be fine. I think I have something in my closet for you.”

She strides out of my room like royalty, leaving me alone with my spinning thoughts. The idea of telling Rhode I’m sick crosses my mind, but it matters to me that he thinks I’m dependable because I’m finally in a place to be that for people.

Crowds might make me frazzled, but I refuse to hole up in a dark bedroom. So, I’m going, even though I couldn’t fall asleep last night. I stayed up researching Rhode’s hockey stats over the last half-decade, preparing myself for any career-related questions.

“Calm down, Nina,” I say to the girl in the mirror, watching a flush climb up her neck. “You’re not trapped at the bottom of the ocean in a submarine. It’s one night. You can talk to people.”

Digging through my cabinet, I pull out an orange bottle. *Alprazolam Tablets, USP. 1 mg. Rx only.* I stare at the label, debating.

I’m always hesitant to pop one since I don’t want to rely on my medication to function. If I take it, my mind will feel foggy for the event, and I don’t want to risk a worse rebound. I need to be *on* tonight, so I think I’m fine. I shove the bottle back in the drawer.

Gwen floats back into my room, dangling a silk dress on the tip of her finger. “Okay, what do we think of this?”

The ice-blue fabric glimmers like morning light dancing on fresh snow. With a lace V-neck and a slit up the thigh, the dress has the understated elegance of a French slip.

I balk. “Okay, I can’t remember the last time I put on a dress, but *that* is gorgeous. Look at the details. How much was that? Actually, I don’t want to know. I bet it cost more than my arm.”

She drapes it across my bed. “It did. I ordered it from a boutique in Paris, but you should wear it because it’d make you look beautiful and less like you’re headed to live in the desert for two months.”

“You’re the queen of the backhanded compliment.”

“I’m nothing if not consistent.”

I nibble my thumbnail, my eyes fixated on the gentle shine. That fabric is going to show so much sweat if I spiral out of control, but the dress really is gorgeous.

I could use a boost of confidence if I’m going to be stuck in a room making small talk about stocks and yachts all evening. “Okay, it’s perfect. Thanks, Gwen.”

She smiles. “Of course. Now, let’s fix your hair, so you don’t look like you’ve been electrocuted.”

Gwen spends the next twenty minutes re-curling my hair while I focus on not sweating through this dress. It’s been two weeks since I walked out of Rhode’s apartment, and other than me sending him a text to thank him for the box seats for The Peaceful Mind Project, we haven’t talked much.

He’s the opposite of Micah, who sends random memes almost daily to try and convince me to come to their hockey games. He’s the clingiest guy I’ve met, but I don’t mind it because it makes me feel needed when all I’ve ever felt like is someone’s accessory.

Micah’s also been teaching me Spanish slang words since that’s all he knows. Thanks to him, I know exactly how to ask an Argentinian for a one-night stand.

I’m trying not to let Rhode’s silence bother me, but I’m second guessing everything I said at his apartment. I have no idea what I did to piss him off, but if we’re going to be at this event tonight, he better flip on his charming switch because he can’t be his new brooding self.

The doorbell rings. “Okay, we’re leaving. Bye, Gwen!”

“Don’t eat any shellfish,” she calls back. “You got that weird rash last time you tried them and used all the aloe vera!”

“I told you never to bring that up again!”

I catch my reflection in the hallway mirror, and the woman staring back looks ready to walk a red carpet. The only sign of the battle raging beneath her made-up face is the flush on her cheeks.

I swing open the door to find Rhode leaning against the porch step railing, bathing in the sunset glow of the early March chill.

My breath stutters.

Damn him for looking like the definition of seductive in his classic black tux and tousled dark curls. The fabric barely fits over the span of his shoulders. I’m shocked his biceps aren’t splitting the sleeves.

He’s wearing a tie with tiny cats all over it, and that one little quirk that’s so undeniably him has my lips lifting to the tangerine sky. I’ve never seen him do an interview without one of those patterned ties, and it makes him feel less like Nashville’s Naughtiest Bachelor and more like a normal man.

Looking at him, I’m tempted to squint.

His eyes travel down my body, pausing on where my nipple piercing is poking out through the delicate silk, and his fists ball up at his sides before he rips his gaze away. A muscle quivers in his jaw.

Okay, he’s still pissed then.

I wait, but when he doesn’t say anything, I hold out my arms. “How’s this for tonight?”

The slowest swallow in the history of swallows makes its way down his throat. “It’s fine.”

My arms drop. “I didn’t spend two hours getting ready for *fine*.”

Rhode dives a hand through his hair and then seems to remember it’s styled in messy perfection, so he shoves it into his suit pocket.

He pinches his eyes closed. “You look good, but we better head out so we’re late, but not asshole late,” he says, changing the subject with a sharp turn.

Annoyance flickers through me at his flaccid compliment. The least he could do is tell me I look nice after dragging me to this event, but I’m not going to start a fight over my clothing, so I go with his subject change. “I like being asshole late, though. The later we arrive, the less time I have to spend making small talk.”

“Yeah, same here, but not for this. It’s important. I really want to secure a sponsorship so everyone stops bringing up my retirement.”

“I know it’s important. You’ll be great.”

“Thanks,” he grunts. He doesn’t add anything else.

This is going to be a *long* night.

He leads us to his Range Rover and opens the door for me. As I climb inside, he picks up the hem of my dress, so it doesn’t drag on the asphalt, and it almost looks like his fingers tighten around the material for a second.

It’s at that moment that I realize I’ve never dated a gentleman, and Rhode might be the blueprint, but I’m not going to mistake it for something deeper. I refuse to be the foolish, naive college student who fantasizes about the hockey player falling for her.

I want to be someone’s exception, not their cliché.

He puts the car in drive and turns on a classical music station. I grin when I recognize the melody. “I didn’t realize other people still listened to the radio.”

“You were playing it when you first picked me up in your car.”

The admission feels like a secret, so I keep my voice to a whisper. “I didn’t know you were paying attention.”

“Like I said, it’s my job.” His grip tightens on the steering wheel as he navigates the downtown streets.

Despite the gentle tune drifting through the air, we drive in stifling silence. The closer we get to the hotel, the more suffocating it grows.

He keeps his focus on the blurring street lights until suddenly, he blurts, “Thanks for coming. I know you didn’t have to, and it means a lot. I thought you might back out, so I’m glad you didn’t, but I want to make sure you know this is only for tonight.”

It’s like he’s worried I’m going to fall madly in love with him during this car ride. “Oh, really? I thought you were driving me to our surprise engagement party right now.”

That lonesome dimple flickers on his right cheek. “Guess I ruined that surprise then.”

I give him a flat look. “Yes, Rhode. I know this is fake. You don’t need to keep reminding me. Did you change your mind about me lying? Should I look up some brain facts to prepare for small talk?”

“Of course not. No one at the event thinks you’re a neurosurgeon. I didn’t want to put you in the position of having to lie about yourself, so you don’t have to hide. You should tell them about your fellowship.”

A tightness grips my throat. More often than not, it feels like I'm putting on masks to cover fragments of myself. Relentless authenticity is difficult for anyone to achieve, but I like that Rhode doesn't expect me to hide behind some white lie.

We pull up to the downtown hotel. He hands the car keys to the valet, along with a twenty, and I'm shocked he still carries cash, but it's also kind of hot.

We stride through golden doors into a ballroom twinkling with chandeliers. The soft melodies of a string quartet weave through the chatter, and waiters dance around the elegant bodies, precariously balancing trays of champagne flutes.

Rhode hands me a glass. "Thanks," I say, clutching the stem. I'll dump this in a nearby plant later. They're all fake, anyway. I checked.

His warm touch brands my lower back, and I pretend to take a sip, glancing around the ballroom.

Rhode's so magnetic he doesn't part the crowd. He absorbs their attention.

Every eye gravitates toward us, making it feel like I'm under a heat lamp. People drift closer as if tugged by some invisible pull. I take a deep breath, trying to stop my quivering heart.

Rhode looks young, thanks to all the workouts, so I've never thought much about our age difference, but tonight, I feel every bit the college student. The salt-and-pepper dusting his jawline makes him look distinguished, so I push my glasses up the bridge of my nose as if that will make me feel less like I'm playing dress up.

I trace a pattern around the room, counting the exits just in case I need to make a getaway.

Calm down, Nina. You're fine. There's not an assassin lurking in the crowd who's going to shoot you, and even if there was, Rhode's biceps are big enough to block a bullet.

"Hey, look at me. Are you alright, Nina?" Rhode whispers in my ear like he can feel the nerves humming beneath my skin.

"I'm fine." I suck in a thick breath of perfumed air. "Just... don't leave me alone, please? Crowds are a little overwhelming for me."

He presses the softest kiss to my temple, and if he hadn't been adamant about this night meaning nothing, I'd think that meant something. "I'm not going anywhere. It's you and me tonight."

Some guy in a tux with slicked back hair struts up to us. His gaze roams over my dress, and he whispers something in Rhode's ear. His jaw hardens in an instant, and he gives the guy a menacing scowl before leading me away.

I clutch my champagne stem. "You look pissed. What'd he say to you?"

"Nothing," Rhode grits out, and he seems to force his jaw to visibly relax. "It doesn't matter."

Curiosity fizzles through me, but I don't have much time to contemplate that interaction as more people crowd us. For the next thirty minutes, Rhode never once looks my way again, but his hands don't leave my waist.

My heart rate throbs behind my ribcage. Rhode's fingers tighten in the silk on my lower back, tethering me to reality. Even when a pretty redhead saunters up to him, he keeps his firm hand around me, but his eyes on her.

I try not to let that bother me, except it does.

As he makes polite small talk, I get sucked into my own little world, trying to calm the frantic pounding in my chest through futile breathing techniques.

Anytime we drift to a nearby faux fern, I stealthily dump the champagne in the soil, but it's like the waiter's got a radar for empty glasses. He keeps handing me refills. At this rate, that fern's getting wasted tonight.

"Nina." Rhode's deep voice punctures my mental cloud, pulling me back to the present.

He gestures toward a woman in a red silk dress that looks tailor-made for boardrooms. "This is Andrea Peña, the CMO of ¡Vamos! energy bars. I was just telling everyone they're releasing a new Oaxacan Cocoa flavor in the fall."

"I see you've done your research." Andrea grins broadly. "But yes, it'll be right in time for Día de los Muertos, but I can't thank you enough for what you did for my son. We're so relieved everything turned out okay, and I wanted to express my sincere apologies for your car."

I grasp her hand, trying to push past the knot of pressure in my chest to find my voice. "It was the least I could do. I'm just glad Gabriel's okay. It's so nice to meet you."

Rhode's gaze finds mine, and he pulls me closer into his warmth. "Nina was the real hero of the night."

Andrea nods. "Absolutely. If there's anything I can do to extend my gratitude, you let me know."

They dive into a discussion about sponsorships while I count the exits. One. Two. Three. Four. I thought there were five.

“Let’s talk about you, Tremblay,” Andrea says. “With all those whispers about retirement, I wasn’t sure you’d still be interested in sponsorships. You know, we do take on retired players.”

It’s an innocent comment, but Rhode tenses, every line of his body drawing tight. His easy confidence seems to waver momentarily like he’s at a loss for words.

It’s something I’m familiar with, so I interlace my fingers through his, noticing his palm’s a little sweaty like mine. Rhode jolts, looking down at where our hands are intertwined.

“Rhode can’t retire,” I say, drawing Andrea’s attention off him. “The Guardians wouldn’t survive. Did you not see him in last week’s game? He saved thirty-four of thirty-five shots, so he’s got a zero-point-nine-seven save percentage, and in the third, did you see when he stopped that point-blank one-timer? I thought that was going in the net for sure, and—” I stop when I realize Rhode’s staring at me with an open mouth.

“What?” I say.

His brows climb toward the chandeliers. “I thought you didn’t like hockey?”

“I don’t. I just do my research.”

“Uh-huh.” He salutes me with his full champagne glass. I guess he’s not drinking either. “Clearly.”

We stare at each other for another second, but Andrea booms out a laugh, shattering our reverie. “Looks like I better study up, and what do you do, Nina?”

I wave a hand. “Oh, I’m just in art school.”

A crease forms between Rhode’s brows. “Nina’s not just in art school. She’s doing a pottery fellowship in Argentina after she graduates. They only accept five percent of the applicants, so it’s one of the most competitive fellowships in the world.”

Something molten floods my body, heating me up and ruining me all at once. “How’d you know that?”

Rhode flashes that lethal dimple. “You’re not the only one who does their research.”

My throat tightens, and when the waiter comes by and hands me yet another champagne glass, I’m tempted to take a sip to stop the burning.

Isaac never talked about me to his friends, and living in Gwen's eternal shadow has dimmed a lot of my successes. Rhode's the first one to celebrate my dreams.

"Um, excuse me?" a woman's voice interjects. "I don't mean to bother you, but are you Rhode Tremblay?"

A gorgeous brunette in an emerald gown with a deep V sidles up to Rhode, and an uncomfortable pang hits my heart when his eyes drift over her red lips.

I try to shift out of his grasp, but his hand clenches around my lower back. "Yes, I am, and this is my uh, gi-my Nina." He winces, but the way he says *my Nina* is enough to make me glow.

She reaches out to grip Rhode's forearm, and I glare at her hand. "Sorry, I don't mean to bother you, but I'm a big fan. I grew up going to Guardians games with my mom, and I've been following your career for a while. I'd love to get a picture."

He catches my eye. "Do you mind?"

I shrug, feeling anything but nonchalant as I watch the way she's practically foaming at the mouth over Rhode.

I hold out my hand, smiling tightly, like if I'm nice enough, that'll make the jealousy disappear. "I can take the picture if you want."

Rhode shakes his head. "You don't need to do th—"

"That'd be amazing." The woman shoves her phone into my hands. "Thank you so much."

She all but glues herself to Rhode's side. He casually drapes his arm around her, a practiced smile lighting up his face for the camera. The dimple doesn't make an appearance, though, and he keeps his hand on her shoulder.

She snuggles into his chest, and my lips press into a thin line as I take the pictures. This is the type of woman who belongs in Rhode's life. Not a girl who's been dumping champagne in ferns all night.

I hand her phone back. "There you go, I took a million for you. Hopefully, there are a few good ones."

"Thank you!" She scrolls through them with a grin. "I love them. My mom's going to be so jealous that I got a picture with the Wall of Steel. I'm so glad I got one before you retired."

"He's not retiring," I blurt. "The Guardians wouldn't survive without him."

If I have to repeat that phrase all night to keep Rhode smiling, then I will. He flinches, reaching for my hand. On instinct, I interlace my fingers through his. It's a little moment that feels big.

He leans closer, scratching his stubble against my cheek. "Thanks for standing up for me. I'm not used to people doing that."

"You're an easy person to defend."

He scoffs. "Tell that to my agent, because I bet you're the only one who thinks that after all the shit I did in my twenties."

"Well, they should focus on everything you're doing now instead of the mistakes you made ten years ago. People change."

He peers at me with such intensity, it feels like he's dissecting my every thought under a microscope. "You're kind of smart, you know that?"

"Kind of smart *and* my dress looks fine?" I playfully nudge his shoulder. "If you're looking for a life partner, we need to work on your compliments."

He mumbles something under his breath, running a hand through his hair, but he doesn't get the chance to respond because the photo draws the attention of another woman in a gown that looks like it's made of peacock feathers. Her eyes widen when she takes in Rhode's massive form. Beside her, a man in a pink bow tie freezes, his whiskey paused halfway to his lips.

One by one, heads turn like Rhode's a captivating force. The ballroom condenses until a bigger crowd forms around us, and my vision narrows like I'm squinting through a keyhole.

Shit.

It's happening again.

Digging through my purse, I shove a piece of cinnamon gum into my mouth, focusing on the flavor.

You're okay, Nina. You're not getting chased by a bear.

A sneaky bead of sweat snakes its way down my neck. I clamp my arms to my sides, hoping to shield any potential pit stains. Inhaling, I nearly choke on the scent of vanilla perfume. The sea of glittering gowns tightens around us, trapping me in a circle of overpowering fragrances.

You're not dying. You're fine, Nina. You can't die from perfume asphyxiation.

"You're Rhode Tremblay, right?"

"That save you made was amazing!"

"Did you really set a yacht on fire?"

I dart my eyes around the ballroom, searching for the red glow of an exit sign, but I can't see over the crowd. Black spots dot my vision as the ground crumbles beneath my feet, but it's not the floor that's vibrating. I look down at shaking hands.

My hands.

My hands are shaking.

Someone keeps saying my name, but it sounds like it's being shouted at the end of a tunnel. "Nina, look at me."

A gentle touch settles at the nape of my neck, breaking through my whirring thoughts. Rhode's deep blue gaze ensnares mine, anchoring me to their depths. The rhythmic circles of his thumb moving beneath my hair soothes me, but I can't trust his touch since this means nothing.

"Nina. Are you alright?" he asks. "Talk to me."

I focus on Rhode's face, memorizing the contours of him. Navy eyes like glittering sapphires. Curly lashes framing them like little tendrils. Full lips that look inviting even when turned in a pout.

"I'm alright," I pant, more to convince myself. "I'm okay. I just need to breathe."

His thick brows pinch. Maybe he's worried. Maybe he's not. He lifts his arm, and then he does something that stuns me—he slides his thumb right between my lips, just far enough that the wet tip touches my tongue. It shocks me enough that I forget about my racing heart for a second.

"If you want to breathe, you have to open your mouth for me," he murmurs in my ear.

I suck in a breath of his crisp campfire scent, and my teeth accidentally graze his fingers. The sensation gives me something to focus on, so I swirl my tongue around him to distract myself from my thrumming heart. The thick veins in his neck pulse as Rhode's throat moves in a silent bob.

"Good gi—" He pauses. "Good, Nina. Just like that. Keep breathing."

He slides his thumb from between my lips, trailing a slippery pathway across my cheek to tuck a strand of hair behind my ear, and I'm tempted, so tempted, to wrap myself in his solid embrace.

We stand in the middle of the ballroom, breathing in sync for what could be ten seconds or ten hours, but despite the comfort of his protective cocoon, the nausea still swells because no one can control my body—not even me.

Without warning, chaos erupts inside me. The familiar feeling of impending doom overtakes my mind, and a rush of heat surges over my skin, but it feels like this isn't really my skin.

The chandeliers grow fuzzy.

The ballroom tilts on its axis.

I can't let Rhode witness my shattering, not here, not in front of all these people. Not when he's trying to impress his sponsor. My fingers tighten into fists at my sides, nails digging into my palms as if the pain will stop my body from spiraling.

I'm used to relying on myself, so I'll be fine because I always am, but I fucking hate my brain sometimes.

I whirl around, desperate to find an escape route through the sea of faces, but crash into a waiter balancing a tray of champagne. The flutes tip over, and glass cascades down on the marble, shattering like a spray of diamonds.

A chorus of gasps fills the ballroom.

"Shit!"

"Oh my," someone whispers.

Every eye in the room locks on me.

My chest feels like a prison for my pounding heart. I'm paralyzed, trapped by mortification. For a split second, I imagine throwing myself off a skyscraper, but even when I want to die of embarrassment, I want to live even more.

I bolt to the closest of the five exits.

"Nina, wait!"

I don't wait—I run.

RHODE

“Nina!”
I pound my fist against the private bathroom door she sprinted inside a minute ago. There’s nothing but silence, so I knock again, resting my forehead against the cool metal.

“Nina, are you alright? Can you please answer me? I’m worried about you.”

My stomach lurches when I picture Nina’s pale face, eyes wide like she was about to pass out. The thought sends a shot of intense energy through me that rivals an adrenaline rush on the ice.

I wish I could see through the door to know she’s not lying unconscious on the tile in that goddamn dress that’s driving me wild. What was I thinking telling her she looked fine when she looks fucking breathtaking?

I couldn’t keep my eyes, or my hands, off her all night, but I only let myself look when I knew Nina wasn’t watching. I wasn’t the only one staring, either. I’m used to heads turning when I walk in the room, but every eye seemed to zero in on Nina in that dress.

She captivated everyone in the room. It’s like the girl’s made of sunlight.

I wanted to cover her with my suit jacket just as much as I wanted to show her off, but then, some asshole whispered in my ear about how lucky I was to be with a younger woman, and it took everything in me not to drag the guy out of the party.

Now, I can't stop thinking about Nina's wrinkle-free face and wondering if every person at this event is judging us for being together.

I shake my head hard enough to crack my neck. I'm an ass for thinking about that right now when she's sick.

What was that?

Is she drunk?

She doesn't seem like it, but I wouldn't be surprised with all the champagne she's been chugging all night. That's exactly what I would've done in my twenties at some stuffy event, so I don't blame her.

My grip tightens on the handle because I want to do something. No, I *need* to do something. I'm the man Rowyn always calls for help—even if it's two in the morning and she needs someone to fix her leaking sink.

The silence on the other side fuels my frustration. I shake the knob hard enough to break, but the lock won't budge.

"Nina," I grunt. "Please say something."

"Go away, Rhode. I'm fine."

I bump my forehead hard against the door. "Please, Nina. I'm worried about you."

"Just go."

"Just tell me if you're okay," I press, bordering on begging.

"Would you just leave me alone?" she shouts through the closed door. "I'm having a panic attack, and I need a fucking minute!"

I flinch at the anger lacing her voice. Her admission hits like a savage slap shot to the glove.

A panic attack?

I've only had one, and it was one of the worst experiences of my life—a lot scarier than I thought because my body actually kicked itself into fight or flight mode. The panic, the adrenaline, I never knew it was all so real.

I hate the idea of leaving her alone to deal with that, so I stand frozen by the bathroom door, torn. I want to be there for her, but if Nina needs space, I want to respect that more.

Trying to shake off the weight of concern, I make my way back to the ballroom and help the waitstaff clean up, but I'm thinking of Nina. I can't stop picturing her in there, worrying, wondering if she needs anything. As I bend down to collect the pieces of glass, Andrea's pointy black heels come into view.

"Tremblay," she says. "How's Nina? I was worried there."

Standing, I dump the shards in the trash. “She’s alright. She’s been feeling sick all night, so she needed a moment. Sorry for the mess.”

“Don’t worry about it. This is nothing compared to our last event, where the puppy we were auctioning off bit our biggest donor’s leg. I wanted to check up on her, but listen, I’d like to sit down with you and discuss that sponsorship opportunity in more depth sometime.”

Any other night, I’d be jumping at her offer, but with Nina on my mind, all I can manage is a nod of appreciation. “That sounds great, Andrea. I’m looking forward to talking.”

“Perfect. I’ll ask my assistant, Matthew, to schedule some time. You take care. Tell Nina it was great meeting her, and I hope she feels better.” She grips my hand before striding away through the dwindling crowd.

I pull out my phone, opening our Puck Buddies group text to see a couple messages in the chain.

CRUZ

What the fuq is an albatross?

PATTY

Idk a dinosaur???

CRUZ

So Tremblay then?

PATTY

Stop with the jokes

ME

If I’m a dinosaur, you’re an embryo.

PATTY

How’s the event going with your girl?

ME

Not my girl, and some jackass called me out on being a creepy older fucker with Nina.

CRUZ

Has she started calling you daddy yet?

ME

middle finger

CRUZ

I'll take that as a yes

PATTY

I wish I could smack Cruz through the phone

PATTY

No wait it's a bird

ME

What's a bird??

PATTY

An albatross

CRUZ

Say less

PATTY

I'm gonna say more. Did you know they have the longest wingspan of any bird?

CRUZ

Damn that bird must have a huge dick too



THIRTY MINUTES and one lengthy debate about birds later, we've cleaned up all the glass. So, I go back to the bathroom door, my fist hanging in the air for a moment.

With a tentative touch, I tap the wood. "Nina? You still in there?"

I'm shocked when the door swings open. Strands of hair are plastered to her flushed cheeks, black makeup's smeared under her eyes, and she's got a sheen of sweat on her forehead, but I don't care what she looks when she's got that frown on her face.

All I care about is her.

"Are you alright?" I grimace as soon as the words leave my mouth. Is that really the best I could come up with? She's clearly not, but I don't know what else to say.

She won't look me in the eye. "It feels like I ran a marathon underwater, but yeah, I'm fine." She heads straight for the sink, turning the faucet on

full blast.

“Can I come in?” I ask.

“Sure,” she mutters.

I pull the bathroom door shut to give us some privacy. I don't know what to do, so I end up staring at her as she washes her hands. I want to pull her into my arms so bad, but I have a feeling she'd push me away. When she's done, she holds onto the black sink like a lifeline. Her stormy eyes meet mine in the mirror.

“Okay, let me just get this out... I'm so sorry, Rhode. For the champagne, for screaming at you. I knew this was important, and I embarrassed you and fucked everything up,” she says in a voice that sounds like it's breaking, but not broken.

There's only one person in my life that I can't forgive, and it's sure as hell not Nina. I cross my arms, leaning against the bathroom wall, even though I'm tempted to hug her.

The fact that this girl thinks she could ever embarrass me is downright laughable. “You'll have to try harder than that to embarrass me. I set a yacht on fire in my twenties, spent the night in jail, and had it splashed all over the internet, so you've got to top that.”

She snaps her head up, and the corners of our lips lift like they're connected by strings.

“I didn't ruin the sponsorship for you?”

“No. You didn't ruin the sponsorship for me. In fact, Andrea wants to meet up to discuss it. Things like this happen, and it was an accident. None of the waitstaff got hurt, and everyone's fine. There's nothing you could do to embarrass me, Nina. Anyone would be proud to belong to someone like you,” I cut myself off.

The thought of her with another man has my muscles tightening, but I force my stance to loosen. It doesn't matter that I want her more than any other woman.

She isn't looking to get married, and I'm not going to force her into a life she doesn't want. I'm not letting her change for me when she's perfect as herself.

The ridge between her shoulder blades eases, but she doesn't break eye contact in the mirror. “I'm still sorry for yelling. I shouldn't have taken it out on you, but sometimes when I get overwhelmed, I snap at the nearest person.”

I'm starting to realize one of the best things about Nina is the way she speaks her mind. I'm used to people making excuses that she's like a Zambonied rink—refreshing.

“Remember what I said in the car that first night? You can snap if you need to, just don't break on me.” I think she tries to grin, but it doesn't form. I need to see her smile. “Hey, I'm serious. I've been there. I've had one panic attack, and I made Cruz drive me to the hospital for it because I thought I was dying.”

Her pretty hazels go wide. “What? Really?”

“Yeah. It was pretty recent after one of my interviews when they bombarded me with contract questions.”

“But you always look so put together on TV?”

“It's all an act. After the interview, I swore I was having a heart attack, and I threw my stick at Cruz and then yelled at him to take me to the hospital. It was the first time he actually listened, and he stayed until they discharged me. The kid annoys the shit out of me, but he's one of the good ones. When the doctor said what it was, I felt like an idiot because it felt like my heart was failing, so I've been there. It sucks.”

She blinks like she's processing my words. After a few beats, she blows out a breath. “I'm sorry that happened to you, but yeah, it's awful. I've been dealing with it my whole life, though, so I'm used to it.”

I tilt my head, surprised. “What do you mean your whole life?”

She shrugs, and the thin strap of her dress falls off her shoulder. I zone in on the tiny strand, aching to pull it back up. I ball my hands into fists.

“I mean that I've been getting them ever since I was a kid. After my sister, Charlie, died...” She sighs, leaning against the sink. “It took me forever to realize what they were. I always thought I was sick. I mostly have it under control now, but it's still unpredictable.”

Her words hit like a fist to the jaw. That one panic attack almost broke me, and the idea of facing that hell over and over again?

I can't wrap my head around it. “Damn, I couldn't even handle one. It was hell for me. You've got to be the strongest person I know.”

Her eyes trace the contours of my face. Once. Twice. Again.

“What?” I ask, rubbing my jaw to make sure I don't have leftover crab cake in my stubble or something.

“I don't feel strong,” she mutters. “Most of the time it feels like I'm constantly climbing out of this mental ditch while everyone around me is

walking up mountains of success, but I'm still stuck, always ending up in the same place no matter how hard I try. I hate it."

I stuff my hands in my pockets, so I don't do something stupid like pull her into my chest and never let her go. "Not everyone can climb up a mountain. That takes a hell of a lot more strength if you ask me."

She glances at the hand dryer, and her mouth pulls down at the edges. The back of my neck starts sweating the longer she stays silent, but then, she leaps into my arms and wraps her hands around my neck, pulling me against her soft body. Her glasses fly off her face from the force of her hug, clattering to the tile.

I'm frozen, hands dangling at my sides because she feels too good against me, but I snap out of it quickly. I wrap my arms around the curve of her waist and pull her as close as possible, telling myself that this is how I would hug any woman.

Except, I don't rest my cheek and breathe in the scent of every woman's hair when I hug them while imagining what's under her dress.

Nothing, I bet, because I don't see any panty lines, and I've been trying to figure that out all night.

Nina doesn't say anything as I hold her, or maybe she's holding me. Who the hell cares? We're holding each other. Every time she breathes, that nipple piercing that's going to be the death of my resolve brushes against my chest. It makes me a jackass for noticing, but I do. Her hair also smells like citrus. I notice that too.

I trace my fingers over the curve of her spine. "Don't," she mumbles against my suit, but her grip stays tight. "I'm all sweaty and flushed."

I lift her chin, bringing her mouth closer to mine. Dammit, I want to kiss her. "Good. I like you all sweaty and flushed."

Fucking hell.

I shouldn't have said that.

She stiffens in my grasp, her tits brushing me with each heavy breath. She's making those same noises she made in the kitchen, and heat rushes to my dick at the memory. I force myself to step out of her embrace even though I'm imagining her bouncing naked on top of me.

"You know..." She bites her bottom lip. "If you like me all sweaty and flushed, you could see me that way tonight."

Tempting.

She's too damn tempting.

I groan into my hands, lying straight through my teeth. “Sorry, I shouldn’t have said that. I’m too old for you, Nina, and I don’t think of you like that anymore... I just meant that you look fine sweaty or not.”

Her face turns even more red, and now I feel shitty. “Fine? The compliments just keep coming.”

I wince at her sarcasm. “Sorry. Want me to take you home?”

She looks down at her dress, fisting the silk in her hands like she doesn’t want to look at me, and I feel terrible for lying, but this is better than leading her on and pretending like we have a future when our reality is a hard stop.

She pauses, and I wait to see if she’s going to call me out for changing the subject, but I’m relieved when she doesn’t.

“Yes, let’s go. I’m exhausted. I shouldn’t have offered anyway.” She laughs, but it sounds like it’s filled with something broken. “You’re so far out of my league that we may as well be in different solar systems.”

Regret fills me, and I catch her wrist, gently stroking her soft skin. “Hey, don’t talk about yourself like that. You should be proud of the dreams you’re chasing, and trust me, I never could’ve gotten a girl like you in my twenties. I was a shithead you wouldn’t have looked twice at.”

“I definitely would’ve looked twice at you. Maybe even three times.”

Her smile steals my next breath, so I let her hand go because I shouldn’t be flirting with her, but it’s hard when I’m always wondering what’s going to come out of those beautiful lips.

Bending down, I pick up her glasses, pretending to examine them to give myself an extra minute to collect myself. “Come on. Let’s head out.”

We exit the hotel, and I pull out my phone to text the valet. My jaw goes tight when I read the messages on the screen.

MORGAN

I’ll be at your game next week.

Can’t wait to see you!

Rhode did you get this?

“Is everything okay?” Nina asks.

I click off my phone, choosing to focus on Nina. “Yeah, why?”

“You look like you want to crush your phone.”

There’s no chance I’m telling her about Morgan because I don’t talk about that with anyone. “No. Just ready to get home. That was a lot of

talking.”

“I know. I’m going to need at least twelve hours of alone time to recover.”

She shivers, so I drape my jacket over her shoulders to shield her from the cold night air.

People gather around us, and remembering her words from earlier about crowds, I turn to her. “You sure about coming to our game next weekend? Don’t feel like you have to just because Cruz keeps asking. No pressure.”

She tugs my jacket tighter. “No, I really do want to come. I can tell Micah wants me there and I want to be there for him, but it’s hard dealing with crowds. I’ll be okay, though. You don’t have to worry about me. Just focus on the game.”

I fight the urge to ask if she’s only going to support Cruz or if I play a factor. He already won’t stop talking about how amazing Nina is every second.

I have to leave the room anytime he brings her up. Otherwise, I’m tempted to smack the kid, and we need him on the ice to make it to the playoffs.

“Is there anything that makes it better?” I ask, trying to keep my voice level since I have no right to be this irritated over her friendship with Cruz.

She hesitates. “I don’t want to be an inconvenience.”

“You’re not an inconvenience. You’re a priority. If you want to be there, just tell me how I can help. If you don’t, that’s fine too.”

She hugs herself. “Maybe an aisle seat? Somewhere with fewer people around and close to an exit or bathroom? Just in case I need to leave for a little bit.”

“Done,” I reply, making a mental note to buy out a few extra seats around her so she’s got more space.

She blinks in surprise. “Just like that?”

I nod, firmly. “Just like that.”

Her lips curl into what looks like relief. “Thank you, Rhode. For everything. I guess you don’t owe me anything else. That can be my favor.”

“That’s not your favor. Whatever you need, I’m here.”

We stare at each other for a second. I can’t be honest with her about everything, but I can be honest with her about this next thing. “And Nina?”

“What?”

I pull my jacket tighter around her, so she's all warm and covered up. "When I said you looked fine earlier..." I swallow. "What I meant was that you looked absolutely breathtaking tonight, and the person you end up with is going to be one lucky bastard."

Her lips tilt to the starry sky. "Now, that's a compliment worth spending two hours getting ready for."

"Should've just lead with that."

The valet pulls up with my Range Rover, and as soon as we slide into the car, Nina rests her head on the window and passes out for the whole ride back to her place.

As I drive, I can't stop thinking about the way she stood up for me. Her solid strength. I'm not used to having someone standing tall by my side.

Pulling up to her apartment, I put the car in park. Nina doesn't even stir when I open the door to get out. I squeeze her bare shoulder, trying to wake her up, but her eyes stay shut. She must be exhausted. After pulling out the key from Nina's purse, I scoop her into my arms.

"Come on, let's get you to bed," I whisper, cradling her against my chest.

I carry her into her sister's brownstone bridal style, and it takes me five minutes to find her bedroom, but based on the amount of pottery and plants, I'm pretty sure it's Nina's room.

I lay her on the bed and grab a crocheted blanket from the armchair, peering at the stitching. That's some good handiwork. I place the blanket on top of her, but she doesn't budge.

This girl could sleep through a buzzer.

She might have a killer headache when she wakes up, so I head back into the kitchen for some pain medicine, jerking to a stop when I see Gwen standing in a pink robe. She lifts her head from the green fridge, eyes widening in surprise.

"Rhode? What are you doing here?"

Annoyance blasts through me as I grab a glass from the cabinet and fill it with water. "Nina wasn't feeling too well after the event, so I brought her home."

"Is she okay?"

I keep my eyes on the water running from the sink. I'm not the biggest fan of Gwen, but I don't want to be an asshole to Nina's sister. "She's fine. Just sleeping."

“That was nice of you.” She shuts the fridge so there’s no more light in the kitchen except for the moon. “How are things going with you two?”

I shut off the water, grabbing the bottle of painkillers. “Look, I know Nina doesn’t like talking to you about us, so I’m not going to either. You can ask her.”

She tucks a blonde strand behind her ear. “Of course, I get it, but um, listen... I never apologized for the bar incident, and I wanted to talk to you about that.”

“So you remember kissing me then?” I try not to sneer, but it’s hard.

She clutches the robe tighter, and her cheeks turn red in the moonlight. “Yeah, I’m sorry. I was pretty drunk that night and dealing with my own issues. It’s not an excuse, but I wanted to thank you for keeping our secret.”

“Hold on, let’s get one thing straight,” I interject, irritation rippling through me. “It’s not *our* secret. It’s your secret. I don’t mean to sound like a dick, but I haven’t thought about that night once, and I probably wouldn’t have remembered it if I hadn’t seen you again. The only reason I’m not saying anything is because it’s not important to me, alright?”

She glances at the orchid on the windowsill. “Well, thanks anyway for not saying anything. Nina and I are finally in a good place, and I don’t want to mess anything up again. I’m still figuring things out with Isaac too, but I never should’ve done that.”

“Yeah, you shouldn’t have, and you should probably spend less time talking to me about that and more time talking to your boyfriend and your sister.” I grab the glass of water. “I’m going to check on Nina.”

Turning, I head back to Nina’s room.

She’s still in the same position, passed out on the bed. A grin spreads across my lips as I watch her sleep. She looks so peaceful that I almost want to curl up beside her.

I place the water on her nightstand and write out a note. *Drink Me*. Then do the same for the pills. *Eat Me*. I think I saw that in a movie or something. I glance at the box of cinnamon gum by her bed, and my eyes drift to her lips. Without a second thought, I pocket the gum, stashing it in my jeans. I’ll chew this just to know what she tastes like.

Being around Nina is harder than I thought. I’m impressed at how she keeps finding new treats for Chicken and mails them to my apartment like that’ll make my cat like her. She’s got all my stats memorized and has my back, even though she swears she can’t stand hockey.

Everyone always calls out the big things about my life, like my wins and successes, but people rarely notice the small stuff like she does. The hardest part of all of this is that I like Nina's strong personality the most, which makes it hard to stay away.

I crouch down beside her, pushing away the dark blonde strand of hair that's caught in her nose piercing before leaning closer. I brush my lashes against her warm cheek like she said her sister used to do.

This is the closest I'll let myself come to kissing her.

After tonight, I need to keep my distance so I don't drag her into my hectic life. I'm not going to be the man who forces her to change her priorities. It doesn't matter how big or small her dreams are, the last thing I want is to hold her back.

"Goodnight, beautiful," I whisper, stroking her hair. She shifts a little, but her eyes stay closed. "Don't have sweet dreams. Have wild ones."

NINA

“Nina,” Gwen shouts from down the hall. “Are you almost ready for the game?”

“Five minutes, Gwendolyn!”

“Well, hurry up, Philomena!”

It’s been over a week since I’ve seen Rhode, and there’s been zero communication since he left me in my bedroom. The distance between us isn’t melting away nearly as fast as the icicles in the March air.

The way he reacted at the event meant more to me than he’ll ever know. There was no fixing, just the acknowledgment and acceptance of a friend, which is exactly how he looks at me.

There’s no longer heat in his eyes. He might have said I looked breathtaking, but last week, I saw a photo posted of Rhode at some club with his arm draped around a woman, so I’m not going to overanalyze his compliment no matter how much it fills my heart.

There aren’t a lot of men like Rhode Tremblay on this planet. In fact, there’s only one, and every time I picture him at night with my hand dipping beneath the sheets, I try to remind myself that I don’t want to date someone when I’m leaving for Argentina.

Digging through my cabinet, I pull out an orange pill bottle. Twisting open the cap, I pop one into my mouth because I don’t want what happened at the event to happen during the game.

Sometimes I need them, sometimes I don't, and today's just one of those days.

I slip into Micah's blue and white Guardians jersey, gathering my hair into a high ponytail. I thought about wearing Rhode's number, but based on how he's cut off all communication other than one text to make sure I was feeling okay after the event, I opted for Micah's.

It's a big departure from my usual overalls, but the jersey makes me feel like a part of their inner circle, and I've never felt that way before. I keep my group of friends small so I can give more to the people who matter the most.

With a bounce in my step, I pull out my phone and snap a picture before sending it to Micah—who changed his name to *Your Favorite* in my phone.

ME

What do we think? How's the jersey?

YOUR FAVORITE

HOT DAMN PHIL

YOUR FAVORITE

Fuqing hell you look good in my number

YOUR FAVORITE

Hold on

There are dots, and then a text comes through. Except, this time, Rhode's on the chain. Micah resends my picture to the group, so Rhode sees the image. My heart rate kicks up as I stare at the screen.

YOUR FAVORITE

What do you think old man? She looks good with my number on her back, right? *angel face*

RHODE

thumbs up

My shoulders slump toward the screen as I read his lackluster response. I have no idea what Micah's trying to accomplish, but based on the way Rhode rarely looked at my dress during the event, he doesn't give a shit about my clothing, which is fine by me. I don't want to distract them before a game, so I shove my phone in my leggings pocket.

"Come on, Nina!" Gwen shouts. "Let's go."

We slide into her sleek Audi, and the engine purrs to life as we navigate the downtown streets toward the stadium. She drives while I scroll through sports articles on my phone, excitement heating my veins.

The buzz around the Guardians' winning streak has been electric. Their game nights have turned into my own little ritual that's slowly stitching Gwen's and my relationship back together.

As we approach the hockey stadium, the energy rippling through the crowd is palpable, but I'm feeling calmer than a serene lake as we scan our tickets and navigate to our seats.

Relief washes over me when I notice we're right on the aisle and a few steps from the bathroom. Gwen times it perfectly, so we sit down right as the Guardians skate onto the ice in their blue and white jerseys for the pregame warm-up.

The air is thick with the unmistakable scent of nacho cheese that's sticky enough to glue two foam fingers together.

Gwen looks at the people a few seats over. "Why's no one sitting around us, or behind us, for that matter?"

"Maybe they're still coming since they're just warming up? I don't know. I hope no one shows, though. It'd be nice to have some extra space."

I straighten when I remember what I said to Rhode, wondering if he had something to do with the seats. Warmth kindles in my chest.

Colorful lights blink in the stadium as music blasts, and Micah's doing this goofy little dance that makes me laugh, but then, he says something to Rhode, and they start shouting in each other's faces until Wyatt breaks them apart.

Gwen leans over. "Why are they yelling at each other?"

I peer through the glass wall. "I have no idea, but knowing Micah, he probably said something to piss off Rhode."

My eyes instantly lock onto Rhode in all his gear, and I clench my legs together. I've caught glimpses of him on screen but seeing him live in action is completely different.

He's not just a professional athlete—he's the embodiment of a guardian, dominating the rink. The way he glides effortlessly across the ice has my mind drifting to that moment in the kitchen.

As I watch him move, all I can think about is having him inside me, pinning me down as his hands grip my hips, but the only way that's happening is in my dirty daydreams, so I fling away the thought.

Rhode's focus shifts to me, and his gaze feels hot enough to melt the glass wall. His head tilts down to my jersey. I can't see his expression through his mask, but he rips his head away and then never turns my way again. He seems to skate around the rink with a fury that wasn't there before.

Meanwhile, Micah keeps tossing playfully platonic winks in my direction, but once he lines up for the opening face-off, he morphs into a stoic warrior. It's honestly a little intimidating to witness the transformation.

"Go, Guardians!" I scream, pumping my fist in the air along with the crowd.

The cheers crescendo, and then, they're off.

Fans scream in excitement, but as I watch them skate, all I feel is this overwhelming admiration mixed with deep-seated apprehension. It's a little awful witnessing a hockey game now that I know the timbre of all their laughter.

My attention is drawn to Rhode wherever he goes like his skates are tied to a thread unraveling in my chest. When someone almost slams into him, I wince. Every time he drops down to block a shot, I gasp.

My heart pounds a frantic rhythm throughout the game, but this time, I know it has nothing to do with my anxiety. While I'm impressed by Rhode's talent, there's also this fiber of worry throbbing beneath my skin.

In the second period, one of the opposing players slams into him with enough force to shake the plexiglass. The stadium roars in anger, but all I see is a red haze across my vision despite the sparkling lights.

"That was a penalty, ref!" I scream at the top of my lungs. "Open your eyes!"

"That looked painful." Gwen grimaces. "Is there always this much fighting in hockey?"

"More so in the minors, and it looked more than painful." I flinch, watching Rhode shake it off on the ice. "That was brutal. Goalies rarely get bodychecked like that. What the hell was Eighteen thinking? Asshole!"

She gives me a quizzical look that's all eyebrows. "How do you know that?"

"Know what?"

"That goalies don't get bodychecked?"

I turn back to the blue crease. "Because I've been spending way too much time watching hockey when I can't sleep at night. I've picked up on a

few things.”

I shift my focus to where Micah’s shouting in Rhode’s face. “Why are they yelling at each other? They should be fighting the other team.”

“Things are heating up on the ice, folks!” the announcer’s voice blasts through the stadium’s speakers, blending with the crowd’s roar. “It seems we’ve got ourselves some friendly fire here between two teammates.”

“What’s happening?” Gwen waves a foam finger in my face. “Why’s Rhode arguing with him? Aren’t they on the same side?”

“Yeah, they’re being ridiculous. Watch the puck!” I shout over the screaming hockey fans. “The ref’s making some bad calls, so I bet he’s pissed about that. I mean, come on, Thirty-Nine clearly hit his stick above Micah’s shoulders, and the ref didn’t even give him a high-sticking penalty.”

I cup my hands around my mouth, shouting, “Dick!”

Gwen stares at me like I started speaking Spanish, which reminds me I need to start learning more than just the curse words for my fellowship. “Since when do you know penalty calls in hockey?”

“I’ve been watching every game. I was bound to pick up on something.” Rhode blocks another goal, and the stadium’s roar turns deafening. “Woo! Go Thirty!”

I know he can’t hear me, but it looks like he tilts his ear as if he feels me watching. Gwen stares at him with a twinkle in her eyes, but every woman in this crowd is looking at Rhode that way. My stomach knots.

“And Forty-Nine makes a breakaway!” the announcer shouts.

The stadium sucks in a collective gasp of air, but I feel like mine’s the loudest.

The puck shoots across the ice, and Rhode drops to his knees, blocking the shot. I jump from my chair, cheering along with everyone.

“Trem-blai! Trem-blai! Trem-blai!”

As I chant, I can’t stop my eyes from drifting over Rhode’s tall frame. There are no blood or injuries in sight, and even though he’s fine, my shoulders still remain rigid with worry.

Gwen leans over to me, clapping her hands. “Okay, be honest, have you slept with him, and if you have, how good is he in bed? I don’t know if it’s all the gear, but he looks like he’d be amazing. I hear goalies have really good stamina.”

I snap my lips together so an insult doesn't fly out of my mouth. I don't think Gwen would do anything with him, but I can't be sure after everything that happened with Isaac.

I'd never forgive her if she did anything with Rhode. "Stop lusting after my... Never mind, I'm not talking about this with you."

"I'm not lusting, I'm commenting, and I have Isaac, anyway, but you better get used to everyone wanting him. He's Rhode Tremblay. The girls in the concession line couldn't stop talking about his underwear commercial."

Irritation bursts through me at the thought of all those women flocking to him, but I tamp it down with a forced breath. "They should talk about how he donated to charities last year instead of whether he's a boxers or briefs guy."

"You know, it's cute how you always stand up for him." Gwen keeps her eyes on the rink, squinting. "Look. They're fighting again."

I swing my gaze to the ice. Rhode's in a full-on shouting match with Micah, who's waving his arms faster than the ref. Wyatt rushes over and breaks them apart again, holding them both back by the shoulders as they scream in each other's faces.

Well, Micah looks like he's yelling while Rhode seems to be trying really hard not to lose control. I swear I can see the veins straining in his neck from here.

Micah keeps pointing in my direction, but Rhode refuses to look my way. I can't see much behind his mask, but it seems like he's fuming.

It's a good thing they're in the middle of a stoppage because Wyatt starts ranting like he's giving an angry motivational speech, and points straight at us.

Micah shoves Rhode, and then he pushes him right back, getting in his face before Wyatt forces Rhode back toward the net. I see why they call him the Golden Giant. Wyatt's a teddy bear, but on the ice, he turns into a grizzly.

I'm imagining Wyatt in full-out Patty-Daddy mode, shouting something like, "You better get back to the net, young man!"

Rhode skates across the rink, never once looking in my direction. Micah waits until Rhode is in the crease before he takes a roundabout way to get into position. Then, he skates past me and Gwen.

He looks like a sweaty warrior in all his gear, but it's nothing compared to Rhode. Micah stops in front of me, and I quirk my head.

“Um. Hi?” I shout over the glass. “What the hell are you doing?”

He glances over his shoulder with a smirk, then taps the glass with his glove. Before he can open his mouth, Rhode skates over, swoops in like some avenger, and furiously drags Micah away from the plexiglass with so much force that they slam into an opposing player.

The guy tries to punch them, and that turns into a jumble of bodies, resembling a dog pile on the ice. Micah and Rhode roll around, and I can't believe they're actually fighting.

Every eye in the stadium is immediately drawn to the collision. The gasps and cheers of the crowd become a thunderous roar, and even the announcer on the Jumbotron can't help but highlight the fight breaking out.

These men are acting like boys. I cup my hands over my mouth. “Stop fighting and get back on the ice!”

Gwen sips her Diet Coke. “I guess they really do like fighting in hockey.”

RHODE

“How many times you gonna get run over, Twelve?”

“Blue line’s over there, bud.”

“Nice penalty, Thirty. Attaboy!”

“You gotta hit me harder than that!”

Someone slams into Cruz, and we crumple on the ice. I’m instantly on top, pinning him on accident. This is a goddamn shit show. I can barely think straight with all the jealousy and adrenaline rattling my veins.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing?” I shout in Cruz’s face. “I told you to focus and stop fucking around with Nina!”

“The jersey was a damn joke!”

“I don’t give a shit! I told you not to mess with her.”

“You know I’d never go after her, man,” Cruz shouts, struggling beneath me since I’ve got an extra fifty pounds of gear. “You’re leaving the net open! Get off me!”

Jolting back, I scan the rink. Cruz scrambles out from beneath me, grabs his stick, and skates back to the slot, giving me the finger. I push off some Seattle asshole and jump up. Patty crashes into an opposing player, trips him, and sticks go flying.

What the hell is he doing?

He never gets penalties for tripping. The piercing sound of the whistle reaches my ears, and that’s when I realize Patty is a goddamn mastermind, stopping play so Seattle can’t score.

The ref's voice cuts through the chaos as he shouts in Patty's face. I get up on my skates, mentally scolding myself for the stupid move I pulled.

I'm acting like a rookie, not a veteran who's been skating for over two decades.

"Tremblay!" Coach's voice shakes with barely contained rage as she barks, "You're done for the night. Get your ass to the locker room. I hope I can trust you to keep your damn head straight in there because right now, you're acting like a kid."

I flinch as I skate up to the boards. She's right, but that still lands like a blow. "I know. Sorry, Coach. Won't happen again."

Coach Watson's death glare shifts to Cruz. "Sit on the bench. Now. I can't believe I have to babysit my own skaters like they're children because I can't trust them not to fight each other on the ice. You're lucky we're up, and we've got less than five minutes left in the period."

As I skate out of the rink, head hanging low, Nina's eyes weigh heavier on me than the weight of the crowd. I dodge her gaze because every time I see her standing there in Cruz's number, it pisses me off.

Ever since he sent that picture of Nina in his jersey, it's all I can think about. Those comments he made about how good she looked don't help.

He's been throwing out innuendos that hit me like knives. I have no reason to care, but I do, and I can't stop thinking about what she would look like with my number on her back—better, that's for damn sure.

With clenched fists, I stride into our locker room, careful to sidestep the Guardian sword logo out of respect, and I'm assaulted by the leather-scented air mixed with the faint undertone of sweat.

I yank off my helmet and go through the routine of removing my gear before slumping against my mahogany stall. My last name glints on the plaque like fool's gold, teasing me as if I don't belong.

I normally dominate the net, but tonight, I let my control slip. It's downright embarrassing, especially at my age. I should be the one setting an example, keeping my composure.

Instead, I'm getting distracted by a girl who I have no right getting jealous over, but I can't stop myself from imagining them together.

Nina doesn't belong to me, and I'm not hers. I know this, don't I know it, but all I can see is her smile directed at Cruz.

It was her real one, too, which hurts.

That's the type of guy she belongs with—not a man who wakes up with lower back pain every morning. I run my hand through my damp hair, trying not to rip out the strands. I've never lost it this much over a girl.

It's got to be the adrenaline.

Yeah, it's the adrenaline.

A door slams.

My jaw locks up. That better not be Cruz. I don't want to deal with the kid right now.

Patty thunders into the humid locker room, and my back muscles relax until I realize his usual golden-boy demeanor has been replaced by a storm of fury. In a flash, he grips my jersey and shoves me against the wooden stalls.

"Are you out of your goddamn mind?" he screams inches from my face. "What the fuck were you thinking fighting Cruz in the middle of a game? This isn't the fucking minors!"

Holy shit. The man never curses.

His fist shakes, so I keep my voice steady. "I wasn't thinking. Simple as that. I'm not making excuses. Sorry, man, I know I fucked up, and it won't happen again."

"Damn right, you did." He slams his fist against the wood. I've never seen Patty lose it like this. "What's Cruz been saying to you, huh? Better have been something about fucking your sister since I got thrown out of the game for starting shit to save your ass. Thirty-Eight knew not to fight back too, so you're lucky this is a blowout."

"He made some comments about Nina that I didn't like, so I'm not repeating them. I lost it for a second, but I'm good now."

Patty grunts, releasing his grip on me. Without warning, he spins around and hammers a fist against the wood. The noise vibrates the skates dangling in my stall.

"That's what this is about?" he shouts. "A *girl*? You're shitting me, right?"

I throw off my pads, needing something to focus on so I don't have to look at the scowl on his face. He's right to judge me, but it doesn't mean I like it.

Patty squeezes his eyes shut like he's trying to calm himself down. "I got thrown out of the game after my daughter said her first word, which

wasn't 'daddy,' and you're worrying about a girl? Do you hear yourself right now, Tremblay?"

"Aw, shit." All the tension drains from my shoulders. "I'm sorry, man."

He runs his fingers through his disheveled blond hair, chest heaving as he collapses onto the bench. Nina, Cruz, and the game are still on my mind, but Patty's defeated slump feels more important right now.

Gripping his shoulder, I take a seat beside him. "Was it 'fuck?'"

Patty scoffs. "No. I wish. It'd be better than what she said. At least that'd be a good story."

"What was it?"

He rests his elbows on his knees, hanging his head. "It was Nanna. She looked my mom dead in the eye, giggled, and said, 'Nanna,' while I was standing right there mashing some potatoes for her."

He looks so beaten down that sympathy hits me like a puck to the glove. "I mean, you do have two moms, so it's two against one for the Nanna versus Daddy battle."

He focuses on the ground, not acknowledging my comment. "Yeah, I guess. I got in Betty's face and started saying Dadda, and she cried, and then I had to leave for the game."

He kicks a helmet on the ground. "Sorry, I lost it on you, but I've been in a shit mood. It feels like I'm missing half of my daughter's life being in the League. I'm lucky I've got my moms for support, but they're practically the ones raising her. I'm a shitty dad. Sometimes—" he stops.

"What?"

His knuckles whiten. "I can't say it."

"You can. No judgment. I know I'm not a father, but I'm a good listener."

"Sometimes... *Fuck*. Sometimes I wish I wasn't a dad. She deserves someone better," he says like he's shoving the words from his mouth. "I can't believe I just said that out loud. I love Betty, more than anything in this world, but this isn't what I thought my life would look like at twenty-six, and it's so damn hard being a single parent. I thought it would be easy because I love her so much, but it's not."

His voice cracks, so I tighten my grip on his shoulder. "I'm not a father, so I can't offer much advice, but I know that little girl is lucky to have you as a dad. I thought my life would look more like yours at thirty-three. Want to trade?"

That gets me a genuine laugh, but then he sighs. “No. I’d never trade lives, even when it’s hard. But when I’m on the ice, I feel like I should be with her. Then, when I’m with her, I miss being on the ice because it’s where I feel the most like myself. It’s like the only thing I’m good at is fucking up.”

“Hey, that’s not true.”

“All I can say is don’t have kids unless you’re sure about the person you want to raise them with because parenting sucks. Don’t tell anyone I said that though because I have to act like I love everything about it.”

Patty goes off on a tangent, talking about all the parts of fatherhood he normally keeps hidden.

Yeah, I’ve changed a few diapers, and I drove Wyn to golf lessons growing up, but I haven’t seen the gritty parts of being a father—the struggles with giving up your identity as a man. I don’t know my identity without hockey, so I’m not sure how I can be a dad to someone when I barely know myself.

Patty looks up with green eyes rimmed with red. “Anyway, enough of that. Distract me with something else, so I don’t start bawling like Betty before the team comes back. What’s going on with your girl? Every time she walks into a room, you track her like a puck.”

I rub my face like that’ll scrub her from my brain. “She’s in my head, but it makes me feel like an ass because I know this won’t go anywhere.”

“Why not?”

“She’s leaving for Argentina in July. I might want her, but it doesn’t mean I can have her, and I’m way too old for her. Cruz points it out all the damn time. We’d never work long-term. We’re too different.”

Patty shrugs. “Then fuck her out of your system.”

“What? No. There’s no chance I’m doing that.”

“Look, I know this’ll make me sound like a dick, but in my experience, if you can’t get someone out of your head, it’s best to get them out of your system.”

I keep my voice low in case someone hears, whispering my deepest thought. “What if that doesn’t work?”

“Then, you’re fucked because it’ll just make you want more of what you can’t have.”

“I’ll be honest, that’s some really shitty advice, man.”

He tosses me a glower. “What? Am I supposed to be perfect all the time ‘cause I’m a parent? Fuck that. I’m allowed to make mistakes. I’ve got years before I have to give Betty dating advice. I’ll figure out something more poetic by that point.”

“I’d listen to you wax poetic with that country twang any day.” I slap his shoulder, pulling him closer. “All jokes aside, though... I’m not a dad, but you know I’m always here for you, alright? You need a babysitter? I got you. You need someone to listen? I’ve got big ears. League or not, I’m here.”

We sniff, wiping our eyes like real men.

“Why you gotta say shit like that, Tremblay? You know I cry all the damn time now. Come on, there’s gonna be a stampede in here soon, and I don’t want to deal with Cruz seeing me all weepy. We’ve still got media interviews, and they’re gonna give me shit for that tripping penalty.”

My molars grind together. The mention of Cruz brings Nina back to the forefront of my mind. That feisty, sarcastic girl gnaws at the edges of my thoughts for the next hour as I go through my postgame routine.

Patty’s wrong. I shouldn’t fuck her into the mattress just to get her out of my system—no matter how hard I get at the thought.

I’m at a stage where I need to settle down, not go off globetrotting to Argentina, even though it’d be nice to travel for fun instead of going from city to city and never stepping foot outside an arena. She’s in her twenties. She should be living it up, but that’s not who I am anymore.

I shower, answer bullshit media questions, and get reamed by Coach, who’s rightfully angry. Monday morning practice is going to be hell on steroids.

After the reporters bombard me with retirement questions, I slap Patty’s shoulder. “Alright, I’m heading out. Watch out for that new reporter in the bowtie. He’s a jackass.”

“You figure out what you’re doing with your girl?”

“She’s not mine, and I’m not listening to your advice, that’s for sure,” I call over my shoulder.

Grabbing my gym bag, I stride out of the locker room in my navy game-day suit and the flower tie Wyn gave me, set on avoiding Nina, but then, I see her in the hallway, laughing, smiling right next to Cruz.

My entire body heats, and this intense shot of possession jolts through me. I’ve never felt anything like it before.

What's she still doing here?

She's leaning against the concrete talking to Cruz, but when I finally pull my gaze up, I realize she's not looking at him.

No.

Those pretty hazels are locked on me.

Her eyes draw me in like I'm under her spell, but when Cruz grips the part of her jersey hanging off Nina's shoulder, irritation ignites, blazing right through my self-control. My resolve snaps at the sight of his hands on her.

I don't want him touching her.

I don't want anyone touching her, but me.

"Fuck it," I mutter to myself. "Patty's right."

Every filthy thought I've tried to smother floods my mind. Those breathy little noises she made when I rubbed my cock all over her in the kitchen. I picture those full lips wrapped around me, sucking me off like I'm her favorite meal.

I imagine shoving my tongue so deep inside her that I'll never get rid of her taste, licking every inch of her wet pussy, pushing Nina up against the wall, and burying myself to the hilt, fucking her hard like that'll push her from my head.

She could take all of me. I know it.

I'll probably come in two seconds once I'm inside her, but that means I'll get to go down on my knees for this girl. I don't care that she's too young or that we're all wrong for each other.

I want her.

I want her bad.

And if she'll have me, I'll make her feel so fucking good.

Striding past the Hall of Fame jerseys, I walk right up to her, nudging Cruz out of the way like he's nothing more than a speck of dust. I'm not going to fight the kid.

It wouldn't be fair for him.

"Come with me?" I murmur in her ear, hoping like hell she doesn't say no, but it's her call. I lean against the wall, trying not to look too feral.

She arches one brow. "You're going to have to ask me nicer than that."

Reaching out, I use my thumb to stroke the curve of her inner wrist, right where her pulse quickens.

Her breath catches, so I squeeze, just a little. “I’m not in the mood to be *nice.*”

NINA

That husky rasp in Rhode's voice sends a shiver trickling down my spine. He seems completely relaxed, but there's something different about him, something darker—something that might suck me under.

Rhode struts down the hall like he's ambling through Centennial Park, looking nothing like the brutal player I witnessed during the game. His dark hair glistens under the fluorescent lights, calling out to my aching fingertips.

To touch him.

To know he's okay.

My throat tightens every time I picture him crashing on the ice, but the rational part of me realizes he's been playing for years, decades, even.

He doesn't need me worrying about him, so I shove thoughts of his painful winces away, choosing to focus on his suit that's a little too tight for his broad shoulders.

Rhode twists a knob, lets a door swing open, and gestures inside like he's leaning over my shoulder at a French patisserie, his voice a soft murmur in my ear as he asks which decadent pastry I'd like to savor.

I'm not sure if that's an invitation or a command, but either way, I'm sure of my decision—I want a taste of him.

I float into the moonlit office on autopilot, not bothering to turn on the lights. There's a fern, some jerseys, and a desk. I'm proud I even noticed the plant with the man towering by the wall of trophies like sin reincarnate.

The slatted shadows from the blinds cast a lattice over his rigid jaw. Rhode shuts the door with a gentle click, sealing us inside.

Together.

Alone.

He flicks the lock.

Sliding his hands in his pockets, he leans against the door, regarding me. His casual posture does nothing to hide the tension in his body. I fold my arms, drinking in each of his subtle movements.

He moves with the slow elegance of a predator, but I've never been prey. His blue eyes roam over my body, darkening to navy pools.

Something's swirling in his gaze that I can't see, but I want to know what's in his depths. "What's wrong? I was worried about you after the game, so I stayed. I hope that's okay. Micah said it'd be fine."

"I don't want to talk about Cruz right now." He loosens his patterned tie with tiny purple flowers and undoes a button on his collar. One. Two. He misses the third. "Everything's fine."

I narrow my gaze on the muscle fluttering in his jaw. "Are you sure you're okay? You seem mad."

He jerks his head. "Not angry."

"Jealous then?" I tease.

That's the only other emotion that would explain the hard look on his face, but I regret the words instantly when he doesn't laugh. If anything, his scowl turns murderous.

His loafers click on the tile as he steps toward me. Another step. I move back until my ass hits the glass desk, making me jump.

He saunters forward until the gap between our bodies shrinks to a sliver. Rhode anchors his hands on either side of my hips, caging me against the desk.

With slow fingers, he lifts my glasses from the bridge of my nose, and places them on the desk. His gaze drifts over my face. Eyes, nose, lips.

Always coming back to my lips.

For a moment, I want him to capture my mouth in a brutal kiss, but he doesn't. His eyes clamp shut like he's thinking hard about some answer. "Yeah, I'm jealous as fuck. I don't like seeing you in Cruz's jersey, and I'm struggling not to rip it off you right now."

His words steal all of mine, so the only thing left is a gasp.

Using his knuckle, he coaxes my chin up, and up. “I can’t get you out of my head, Nina. I’ve been lying to you, and to myself. Sorry, but I’m tired of pretending like I don’t want you. I can’t do it anymore, but I need you to tell me what you want because if it’s not me, I need to leave. Right the fuck now.”

He wants me.

Rhode Tremblay wants *me*.

“You really want me?”

“No.” His fingers tighten on the desk, but he doesn’t move to touch me. “I fucking *need* you.”

I won’t get his mornings and vows, but that’s okay because I don’t want a ring. It’s reckless, and he’s all wrong for me, but I never cared much about being right. I’m not sure I care about anything other than the feel of his lips right now.

“Nina? Talk to me. Tell me what you want.”

His tie dangles between our chests. Leaning forward, I wrap the floral fabric between my fingers and tug him closer.

The tip of his nose skims mine, and only then do I drop my hold. “I know we want different things, but I don’t care about any of that. I don’t even care that we’re in someone else’s office. I want you, even if it’s only once.”

“Thank fuck,” he moans, squeezing my hips. “Alright, here’s how this is gonna go. I know you don’t like surprises, so I’m telling you right now what I want. First, I want to bend you over this desk and slap your fine ass for wearing another man’s jersey. Next, I want to lick your pussy until your voice is hoarse from screaming my name, and then, I want to shove my cock so deep inside you that you’re all I feel.”

His filthy demands sink into every crevice of my body, making it pulse with each wicked word. Everyone handles me with extra care, but not Rhode.

I tangle my fingers in his hair, relishing in the soft strands. “Okay, but I have one condition.”

A corner of his mouth lifts, revealing that one taunting dimple I’m tempted to flick my tongue against. “What’s that?”

I reach into my purse, pull out a condom I shoved in there, and flick it between my fingers like a coin. “You better be screaming my name too.”

He plucks the wrapper from my hands. “I have a feeling I’ll forget all other words besides your name once I’m inside you.”

He shudders out a breath, and then his hands move up my waist, fisting the jersey like he’s trying not to yank it off my body. With a swift motion, he raises the hem, lifts it over my head, and tosses it onto the vinyl flooring.

I stand there in black leggings, my bare breasts exposed, and suddenly, I feel like more than my body is being laid bare. His gaze sweeps over my chest, fixating on the glint of my nipple piercing in the moonlight.

He squeezes his eyes shut like *I’m* the one making *him* suffer, but then, they fly open. The blue in his gaze burns like a searing flame about to consume us both.

Rhode bends down and sucks my nipple into his hot mouth before gently tugging on my piercing so a hint of pain mixes with the pleasure. He releases a low, sexy groan, then flicks the metal.

Every swipe makes my body pulse until he releases me with a wet pop. “I’ve thought about this piercing so much, I could probably cross-stitch your tits from imagination.”

“Let’s be honest, no, you couldn’t.”

“Yeah, you’re right,” he says before drawing the moisture around my sensitive skin with the rough pad of his thumb. “There’s no recreating you.”

Something swells in my chest, but I can’t tell whether it’s anticipation or another emotion. It’s making it hard to breathe. I moan when his teeth graze my skin, and whatever sound I make seems to detonate something inside Rhode.

In an instant, he starts fumbling with his belt. The click of the buckle cracks through the silence, and then he throws it across the office. It lands somewhere with a loud clang. The sight of his hard erection jutting out in his pants sends a rush of desire through me. I reach out, aching to touch him, but he captures my hand, stopping me.

“Not yet,” he breathes out in a gravelly voice. “I’m a man, not a god. I can only handle so much when it comes to you, and right now, I need to make sure you’re nice and ready for me.”

His voice is velvet-laced with temptation, like how I imagine Satan greets someone through the fiery gates of hell.

With a smooth pull, he lifts me by my hips, sets me on the desk, and slides my leggings down. His lips part as he stares at my open legs with my pussy exposed to him.

The longer he looks, staying silent, the more nerves fester inside me. His unreadable expression casts a shadow of uncertainty over my racing thoughts.

I snap my thighs closed.

He yanks them back open. “Don’t you dare go shy on me when your pussy’s the prettiest fucking sight I’ve seen. Why’d you do that?”

Blood rushes to my face. “I know you’ve um, been with a lot of people, and it’s fine. You can’t control your past...”

He presses his lips to my inner thigh. “I’ve never wanted anyone more than I want you right now, Nina.”

A gentle warmth radiates through my body, dousing some of my nerves. “I want you too, but I have a hard time um, coming that way, so you don’t have to do that. It takes a while because it’s hard for me to relax sometimes. I get in my own head.”

He gives me the most lazy, arrogant smirk I’ve ever seen on a man, but something about seeing that dimple puts me at ease. “I don’t care if it takes five minutes or five years to make you come on my tongue because every second I get to spend with my head buried between your thighs is pure fucking bliss.”

Well, that’ll make a girl feel better.

Slowly, he flicks his tongue out and, in one fluid motion, licks all the way up my slit. The warmth from his mouth has my head falling back. Rhode moans against my clit like he’s enjoying this just as much as me, and for the first time, I let myself relax.

He slips a finger inside me, and my body responds on instinct. I arch my back, seeking more.

I want him deeper.

All of him.

The cool hardness of the desk is a pleasant contrast to the way his fingers draw deliberate, slippery circles around my clit, and I focus all my attention on that motion, letting myself feel the rough pad of his tongue as a simmering ache builds inside my core. A raw moan scrapes through my throat.

“That’s it. Take as long as you need,” he murmurs, hot breath warming my center. “You’re such a good girl.”

“Don’t call me that,” I snap, breathless.

“What?” he challenges, looking up from between my thighs. “Girl?”

“No.” I lick my bottom lip. “Good.”

He nips at my inner thigh. “You’re my naughty girl, then. I like you a little mean, anyway.” He continues licking me, winding up my orgasm, but he’s relaxed. Unhurried. The man’s taking his damn time. Gritting my teeth, I dig my fingers into his hair and yank his head up.

“Rhode,” I command. “Stop teasing me.”

He flattens his tongue right over my clit. I jerk.

“What? Told you I could spend eternity with my tongue in your pussy. You’ve got to be patient, Nina.”

He chuckles darkly at the hint of frustration lacing my voice. “I think teasing you is my new favorite thing. Tell me what you like,” he says as his thumb starts moving against my clit in a different rhythm, faster. “Is this what you need?”

“No, I need more.” I lift my hips for him. “Please. You’re so good at this.”

“Fuck, that’s hot.”

My words seem to set something free in Rhode, and he starts devouring me. I don’t know what I’m begging for, but he figures it out.

A stream of incoherent noises escapes both our mouths. His teeth graze my swollen clit, making me jolt beneath him, but he captures my hips with his firm hands. He curls a finger inside me as he sucks. Beads of sweat prickle on my skin as he moves faster, studying my body.

He takes note of every gasp.

Marks when my legs tighten around his head.

Tracks each ragged moan that falls from my lips until sparks explode through my body, and I’m crying out his name.

Rhode Tremblay is one dedicated student.

I’m loud, and I just can’t find it in me to care as he looks up at me with wet lips. “Do you like me eating your pussy like it’s my fucking career? ‘Cause I do. You taste so damn good.”

Panting, I come off that ledge of pleasure and shift my gaze down to where his head’s nestled between my thighs. “Do I really taste good, though? Be honest.”

His mouth tugs into a wicked smile, and his tongue darts out. He languidly licks me in one smooth stroke, but Rhode doesn’t stop there—no, he doesn’t.

With deliberate slowness, his tongue traces a wet path up my stomach, circling my nipples, all the way up the column of my throat. A vein pulses in his neck the closer he gets to my lips, and then, he licks right over them. He only stops when his nose brushes mine, hovering over me in the glow of the moonlight as he traps me under his massive body.

“No, you’re right,” he murmurs against my mouth, a moment before his teeth catch my bottom lip in a sharp bite that makes my clit throb. “You taste like the worst kind of temptation, and every comeback out of that pretty mouth is draining my willpower.”

Lifting his palm, he playfully slaps my ass. The sting blooms into a delicious heat that ricochets through my body.

“You spanked me,” I gasp, a little shocked, but also surprised by how much I liked that.

“I warned you I’d smack that fine ass of yours.” He massages me, soothing the pink skin. “And you deserved it for thinking you taste anything other than mouthwatering. Now, wrap your legs around me because I’m about to fuck you like how you deserve to be fucked, so you’ll need to hold on for this one.”

“How do I deserve to be fucked?”

“Good and thoroughly.”

He undoes his zipper, pushing down his pants. His midnight eyes lock onto mine like he’s gauging my reaction, and I give him a firm nod. I’m not about to stop this from happening. In one fluid motion, he lowers his briefs, releasing himself—hard and ready. My mouth waters.

Using his teeth, he tears open the condom and rolls it onto himself. Rhode grips my knees, lifts me, and swings us around, slamming us into the office door. The blunt head of his cock nudges my entrance, and I clutch my legs around his waist, clinging to his solid shoulders. I’m struck by how needy I feel, how desperate I am to have him inside me.

“Are you ready for me, Nina?” he asks, gripping his cock as he rolls the head over my clit.

“Stop talking and fuck me already.”

He groans, and in one smooth movement, he pushes into me, each delicious inch by inch, and connects us. Our breath mingles as we both exhale in relief.

He fills me completely.

He's big, but we fit better together than I thought. We're not quite puzzle pieces, but we're pieces in the same puzzle. Rhode hasn't even started moving, and he's already too much.

He digs his fingers into my ass as he holds me up. "*Fuck*, you're tight."

My eyes almost roll back into my head. "Move, I need more."

His chest heaves against mine like he's trying to hold himself together. "Just... Give me a second."

Rhode's grip's almost bruising, but I love the feeling. He sucks in a deep breath, then he pulls back out. Then in again, then out. His ass clenches with the movement, and the wet slide of him has me whimpering.

His lips graze my ear. "You feel so good around my cock, Nina. Too good, if I'm honest."

"Good because you feel incredible inside me."

"It's 'cause I'm big, right?"

"I've had bigger," I lie, nipping his earlobe.

"You little liar." He slaps my ass again. Harder this time, but I like that he's not gentle with me. "No, you haven't, but we all know skill's more important."

"Oh, yeah?" I lick the shell of his ear. "Prove it, Tremblay."

He thrusts into me, deep and rough, while using his grip to pull me down so he's buried to the hilt. Then he really starts moving.

Slowly at first.

Then faster, and faster.

Circling me in that delicious motion. He slides in and out at a rhythmic pace that has me trembling around his cock.

I dig my nails into his firm ass. Every thrust pushes me harder against the door. He's relentless. My breasts bounce against his chest, and I can feel his heartbeat pulse inside me as we glide together on a current I've been trying to catch my whole life.

Throughout it all, Rhode holds me up, never letting go. Each thrust is more punishing than the last, but I love his roughness, the wet feeling of his cock moving inside me.

We fuse ourselves together until there's not an inch of space between us, and every upward jerk of his muscular hips hits my clit in savage strokes. We're a filthy symphony of breaths and gasps, and the noises we make will play on repeat in my dirtiest dreams.

I tug his hair, a lot. He bites my neck, a lot.

Our lips never touch, but his heart beats against mine.

“Harder, Rhode,” I moan. “Please.”

He growls into my neck, pumping his hips faster. “Dammit, Nina,” he says my name like a curse.

Good. I’m cursing him for becoming the blueprint for all my future sexual encounters.

He presses my wrists over my head, imprisoning them between his palms. It’s a testament to his brutal strength that he’s able to keep holding me with one hand.

He asks if I like that too. Another yes.

No one’s ever done this to me before, and now, no one will be able to do it again without me thinking of Rhode. He touches me like it’s the start of an ending. Maybe he doesn’t see this going anywhere past this room, and the idea stings, but I keep it to myself because I don’t want to ruin the moment.

He picks up his pace, and his thrusts become urgent as my thighs grow wet with need. The heavy, frantic slapping of skin drowns out our cries.

Our noises are indecently erotic.

He’s able to reach places inside me I never knew existed. He pushes into me so deep that I don’t know if I’ll ever get rid of him.

“I can’t, it’s too much, Nina. I want you there with me. Please, tell me you’re close. If not, I’m so fucking sorry ‘cause I’m about to lose it with you.”

“I’m there,” I pant. “I’m right there with you.”

Knowing Rhode is just as out of control as I am detonates a second explosion of ecstasy inside me. Everything in me tightens and coils, then loosens all at once.

I bite my lip in a futile attempt to keep my cries from escaping as pleasure courses through my body. Rhode doesn’t even try to quiet his groans as he pours himself into me. I’m lost in him, questioning whether I’ll find my way out.

He collapses against the door in a heavy heap, still holding me up, but I’m grateful for the weight, otherwise, I might float away. His cock twitches inside me, riding out the last spasms of his orgasm.

A light sheen of sweat coats both our bodies, but we stay connected as the blazing wildfire from before softens to glowing embers.

“That was...” I wander off into silence. Words float between us, invisible in the space we share. “What was that?”

He releases a gravelly chuckle and then kisses my cheek, not my lips. Throughout it all, he never once kissed my mouth. “Hell, if I know, but I liked it. I liked it a lot.”

“Yeah, I liked it too.”

Like is an understatement, but with his past, I’m sure Rhode’s used to things like this, but not me. He’s my exception.

Rhode slowly lifts me off his cock and sets me back down on Earth. It’s only then that I realize the office is a mess with books strewn around the floor.

He strips off the condom and, with a flick of his wrist, flings it past the trash can. It soars through the air, landing with a heavy thud on Micah’s jersey—streams of his release splatter over the navy fabric, painting it white.

My mouth drops. “Nice to see chivalry is alive and well. You ruined my jersey.”

“I might act like a gentleman, but I won’t fuck you like one.” His lips curl into a smirk that’s all roguish mischief. “And I think that’s only fair now that you’ve ruined me.”

Our lips pull up at the corners, and something passes between us. It’s not made of love, but it’s still worth keeping. Except, it feels like a wisp of smoke.

Soon I’ll be another person on his list of exes, and he’ll be the hockey player I had sex with in an office. This moment—our moment—will be reduced to a short story we tell to new loves. I’ll leave for Argentina, and he’ll build his perfect family. A lump forms in my throat.

If I can’t have Rhode, I’m glad I left my mark on him because I think he’s ruined a little piece of me too, and suddenly, I don’t know if one time is going to be enough.

There’s a knock on the office door.

“Get dressed and wait here. Let me check who it is.” Tugging up his pants, Rhode opens the door so a sliver of light slashes through our moonlit haven.

“What do you want, Cruz?”

“Hey, old man, what have you been up to? Cross-stitching?” Micah’s teasing lilt comes through the door. “Nice to see my evil plan to get you to

pull your head out of your ass worked. Morgan's asking for you, so tuck your tiny dick back in your pants. Party's over."

"Morgan?" I wrap my arms around my exposed chest, a knot swelling in my stomach. "Who's Morgan?"

RHODE

What the hell just happened? I shut the door with a click, panting. My brain's all scrambled like I got slammed into the boards. I'm still thinking of Nina as I reach into my gym bag. I pull out a clean jersey for her—my jersey.

“Here. You can wear this.” I press my lips to her forehead, not wanting her to worry about Morgan. That's my issue. “Get dressed. I'll explain in a second.”

She takes the fabric. “You want me to wear your jersey?”

“Yeah, I just fucked you against a door, so if you're going to wear someone's jersey, it'll be mine.”

She rolls those beautiful eyes. “How thoughtful after you ruined Micah's.”

Nina pulls the heavy fabric over herself, and pride swells in my chest at the sight of her in my number Thirty, but it's not because she looks like mine.

I'll never belong to her.

It's because she's willing to support our team, even when she claims she's not a fan. I never thought a woman who could rock a pair of corduroy overalls could look like she was born to wear navy and white.

She pulls out a compact mirror, pursing her lipstick-smearred mouth in the reflection. “You made a mess of me, Rhode Tremblay.”

My cock twitches at the thought of those full, red-stained lips wrapped around me, but we agreed we'd only do this once.

I drag my eyes away from her, pushing away the thought, and pull a tissue from the box on the desk. "You might be a mess, but you're my mess. Here, let me help."

Her eyes widen when I tug her bottom lip down and swipe the tissue over her cherry mouth. That beautiful, witty mouth. The one I'm desperate to kiss, but I won't take anything else from her. When I've wiped away all the red, I stuff the tissue into my pocket without a second thought.

We put on our clothes in silence. It's not awkward, but it's thick. I'm having a hard time thinking about anything other than the taste of her.

It's probably because I haven't had sex in over a year, but that orgasm felt like it pulsed through my entire body, or I don't know, maybe it had everything to do with Nina. I'm already getting hard again just thinking of her breathy moans in my ear.

I can't bring myself to regret what happened when that might've been the best sex of my life. I have no idea if it's because of Nina or my dry spell, but damn, that was incredible.

What the hell am I supposed to do?

I'm not going to use her for sex. I barely have a chance to process everything before there's another knock.

I crack the door open and slide into the hallway so no one gets a view of her, slamming right into my little sister, decked out in Cruz's jersey. "Wyn? What are you doing back here? I thought we were meeting tomorrow for lunch."

Rowyn's got her black hair pulled into a braid, and her gray eyes narrow at my disheveled suit. "Really, Ro? An *office*? I thought you were done with all this ever since you lost that sponsorship."

I grimace, glancing over my shoulder to make sure the office door's closed. "It's not like that."

I've never felt anything like what happened in there, but I'd rather puke from three hours of skating butterfly slides than discuss my sex life with my little sister. "I'm not talking about this with you, and that's not what that was. That was..." I'm not sure what's at the end of that sentence, so I trail off.

My sister flicks her braid over her shoulder in the same way she's been doing since she was a cocky five-year-old.

Mom and I always said she'd either end up in prison or the Oval Office, and based on the judging look she's giving me, I'd say the Oval Office is more likely. "Fine, I just came to find you because—"

The door opens, and Nina strides up to us, glasses askew and her dirty blonde hair a mess. I want to smooth out the strands, but that'll give Wyn the wrong impression, and then she'll fire off a million questions at Nina.

My sister's eyes go wide. "Hold on. I know you. Aren't you in my art history class? You saved me from answering that question, right?"

I tense.

Nina tilts her head. "Wait, yeah, you're... Rowyn, right?"

My sister squeals, throwing her arms around Nina, who freezes. "Yes, thank you for that! I'm Rowyn Tremblay." She pulls back, eyes bouncing between me and Nina. "How do you know my brother?"

Nina's mouth falls. "Rhode's your brother?"

"Hold on, you two are in the same class?" I interject, dizzy all of a sudden.

They nod in unison.

I try not to cringe, but it's hard. Did I really just have sex with a girl in my sister's class? Someone put me in the sin bin.

I clear the thought, trying to calm the hell down. Alright, it's fine. I can handle this. I made my decision, and now I have to own the fact. Nina and I might be a one-time thing, but I'm not going to keep her like a secret.

I can't keep her at all.

Nina's cheeks turn pink under the fluorescent lights, and she waves a casual hand. "We're just friends. I didn't realize Rhode was your brother. I gave him a ride once." She winces, then backtracks. "I mean, in a car. Wait, that's not better. I didn't ride him in a car. What I meant was—"

I squeeze her shoulder. "We met a few months ago. We're friends now."

Wyn's eyes narrow on me and yeah, here it comes, the lecture on how Nina's too young for me. "I didn't realize you were friends with people I went to school with, Ro. It seems like you two are the friendliest of friends."

A smile lights up my sister's face. "Which is great! It'll be nice to have another girl around because it's always testosterone overload over here. Speaking of which, I came to find you after the game and tell you what an idiot you are for fighting Cruz. Delay of game penalties at your age? Really, Ro? You know better."

Nina gasps, grabbing Wyn's shoulder. "I was thinking the same thing!"

Great, now they're bonding. Though, I'm a little surprised Wyn's not lecturing me, and, come to think of it, that Nina knows the meaning of a delay of game penalty. Maybe I'm the only one overthinking the age difference.

"Rhode, there you are!"

My spine goes rigid at that familiar voice.

Glancing over my shoulder, I see Morgan striding down the hallway wearing my Guardians jersey. The man won't stop showing up to my games, no matter how hard I push him away.

The bright number Thirty is plastered to the navy front. His hair is thick like mine, but while I've got a speckle of silver at my temples, he's gray throughout. I grit my jaw every time I'm forced to look at him because we've got the same blue eyes, dimple, and jawline.

I'm the spitting image of Morgan Tremblay—just nineteen years younger.

My father shoves his hands in his jeans pockets and rocks back on his heels the same way I do. "Hey, son. Great game today, though, that fight on the ice looked a bit rough. Are you alright?"

"I'm fine," I say with clenched fists, gesturing to Nina. "Morgan, this is Nina, my friend. Nina, this is Morgan Tremblay. My father."

Their eyes stretch wide, matching each other's shock, but instead of judgment on my father's face, there's a big, genuine smile. Nina looks at me with a question in her eyes, so I nod. I've never introduced my family to any of the women I've dated, but I don't mind them meeting Nina.

My father takes her hand, shaking it enthusiastically like he's greeting our general manager. "It's wonderful to meet you, Nina."

Her lips curve. "It's really nice to meet you, too, Mr. Tremblay."

"Please, call me Morgan. My own son does," he adds, sounding bitter.

He squeezes her hand, revealing his dimpled grin. While I've got one, he has two on each side. That slight difference always puts a smug smile on my face.

"It's nice to meet someone in my son's life since he normally doesn't introduce me to his friends. Wyn and I were heading out to get dinner, but we wanted to stop by after the game to see if you'd like to come. You can join us too, Nina."

“Sorry, we can’t,” I interject before she can say anything. “I have to take Nina home, and I’ve got a string of away games to prepare for next week.”

“Are you sure?” Nina asks. “I can find a ride home. I don’t mind.”

“No, I want to take you home.” I peer into her hazels behind her glasses, and she nods. Somehow, we’re able to communicate without words.

I’m not sure that’s a good thing.

“Oh. Alright, sure. Maybe next time.” A hint of sadness appears in my father’s eyes, but it’s a reaction I’ve come to expect whenever I turn him away. Every time he flies to Nashville, I’ve got an armory of excuses at the ready. He musters a grin, and I respond with a grimace, a reflex as ingrained in me as dropping down into butterfly.

Morgan nods. “Right. Well, maybe we’ll see you tomorrow for lunch with Wyn? I’m flying back home to Seattle to see your mom on Friday.”

I hitch my gym bag over my shoulder. “Can’t. I’ve got to pack.”

My sister gives me her big, sad eyes that I’ve grown immune to. “Please, Ro? Come with us? It’ll be fun.”

I pull Wyn into a hug, whispering in her ear. “I’ll get lunch with you when I get back, but I’m not going with him. It’s awkward.”

Wyn’s shoulders sink. “Fine, but you know I hate this. I just want all of us to get along.”

I kiss the top of her head. “We’ll do lunch another time. We better head out. It was nice seeing you, Morgan.”

He winces like he always does when I call him Morgan instead of Dad but plasters on a fake smile. Another ritual.

My father leans in, hugging me to his chest. “It was good to see you play today, Rhode. You’re a beauty on the ice. Whenever you want to get lunch, all you have to do is call, and I’ll be there.”

I pull away, give Wyn a goodbye hug, and stride out into the parking lot with Nina at my side. We get in my Range Rover, and I blast the air conditioning since we’re in the middle of a heat wave. The engine roars to life.

Nina shifts in the passenger seat. “Do you want to talk about that?”

“What? The sex?”

The sex I can’t stop thinking about.

From the passenger seat, she twists her thumbs in my periphery. “No, I mean, we should, but I meant what happened with your dad after the game.

Seems like there's some drama there, and you know..." She points to her head. "Big ears and all."

My mouth curls up. "You've actually got really small ears."

"You know what I mean. You can talk to me. I'll listen."

I blow out a breath, saying the words like a rehearsed media speech. "My dad's a sports broadcaster, and he left my mom for a younger woman a while back. Just packed a bag and walked out on us. My sister doesn't remember it because she was so young, but I never forgot hearing my mom begging him to stay when she caught him leaving in the middle of the night. Never even said goodbye."

She reaches out to grip my thigh, and the heat of her hand sears through my pants like a burn that'll take weeks to heal. "I'm so sorry, Rhode. That's really hard."

My fingers tighten on the leather wheel. "Yeah, it was. I didn't get to be a teenager after that since I was too busy with hockey and helping out with Wyn, which I guess is why I went a little wild in my twenties when I got into the League."

"That's understandable, but it seems like your dad's trying to make an effort now?"

Irritation sparks in my body, but I push away the feeling. Nina doesn't know much about my past, and she always stands up for the underdog, so I won't hold that against her.

"Yeah, he's been trying for a while now." Flicking on my blinker, I turn onto a side street and slow to fifteen under the limit because I'm not ready to say goodbye. "Even though he left, he always supported us. Paid for my hockey gear. Sent birthday cards, but it wasn't the same as having a dad around, you know? Wyn barely remembers, it, but I do."

She squeezes my thigh. "At least he tried to stay connected. That counts for something, right?"

That flare of annoyance grows into a flame. No father should walk out on their family, and Morgan doesn't deserve Nina's sympathy.

"Yeah, I guess." I shift on the leather seat. "He came back and begged my mom for another chance, and she gave it to him. He hasn't left her side since. Makes her breakfast every Sunday and never forgets flowers for an anniversary. Mom got him back, Wyn got a dad, and I got fucked. They forgive him, but someone needs to hold him accountable for his mistakes, and that's on me. He's the one who ruined our relationship when he left."

She's quiet for a while. We're pulling up to her brownstone when she finally speaks. "Have you ever thought about forgiving him?"

My teeth grind. "Why would I ever forgive him for leaving?"

"I don't know." She twists her thumbs in her lap. "Because he came back? Because he's trying? People deserve second chances if they're trying to make things right."

Years of pent-up resentment make anger spike in my blood. I jerk the car to the curb. "I don't mean for this to sound harsh, but you weren't there when I held my mom as she cried over the sink. You didn't see all the hockey practices I almost missed because I had to pick up Wyn from school. My dad left and forced me to step into his shoes because he was a selfish prick." I scoff. "Maybe you're just too young to understand."

Fuck. I shouldn't have said that.

She lets out a derisive snort, and her fingers fumble with the seat belt to free herself. "Trust me, I understand everything you're saying, but all I saw in that hallway was a father who wanted to hug his son and a son who refused to hug him back. People should be allowed to change. Do you know who I'd be if everyone still treated me like the girl I was? I'd be this depressed shell of a person, but—"

"You're not a shell of a person. Who said that?" I almost shout, suddenly pissed off for a whole different reason. "You're the most vibrant person I know."

That stumps her for a second, and I'm somewhat stunned I just blurted those words.

She jerks her head. "That's because I worked hard to be better, and it's not fair to hold someone accountable to a past version of themselves when they're trying, but you're right." She mimics my scoff, getting out of the car. "Maybe I'm just 'too young to understand.'"

She slams the car door hard enough to rattle the glass.

Guilt strikes me like a swift punch, almost making me lightheaded. This can't be our last conversation. Swinging open the door, I bolt from the car, closing the distance between us with determined steps.

She doesn't even make it to the front door before I'm reaching for her arm. "Nina, wait! I'm sorry. Please, don't walk away from me. I didn't mean that. I was just pissed. I'm sorry."

I catch her right as she whirls around. Tears carve her mascara-streaked face. Dammit, I made her cry. Regret tightens my chest. I gently tip her chin

upward. With my calloused thumb, I brush the black trails from beneath her eyes.

“Hey, I’m sorry. You’re right. I’m mad at my father, and I took it out on you. I always get like this around him. You’re not too young, I’m just an asshole.”

She lets me pull her into a hug, and her body molds into my chest like a perfect glove fit.

“You’re not an asshole,” she mumbles into my shirt. “But that was an asshole thing to say.”

I gently sway her in my arms. “Called out, like always.”

“Maybe I overreacted. I kind of do that when anything minorly inconvenient happens.”

“You didn’t. You just reacted to my shitty comment.”

She rubs her face against my button-down, but I don’t care if she gets makeup on me when I’ve got her in my arms.

After a moment, she stands on her toes and kisses my jaw, right on the edge of my mouth, and I’m tempted, so damn tempted, to turn my head and capture her mouth with mine, but this needs to end. I need to find someone who wants the same things I do.

She lets her lips stay there for a second before sinking back down to her heels. My skin feels like it’s burning where her mouth touched.

“So, I guess this is goodbye? You sure you don’t want to come up to my room for round two? We could have shower sex? Keep it casual,” she teases. At least, I think she’s joking. I can’t tell because her voice is all high-pitched.

Fire rushes to my dick at the idea, but my brain’s in charge tonight. As much as it hurts to say goodbye, I need to let this girl go so I don’t tie her down with the life of a hockey player. I stroke her cheeks because I want her to know she means something, but I’m not going to be the asshole who strings her along until I meet the woman I marry.

“As much as I want to do that again, and believe me, I want to... I can’t do casual, Nina. I’ve been there, and that’s not what I want. So, unless you’re ready for marriage, or something long-term, I don’t know if I can do this.”

She steps back to wrap her arms around herself. “No, you’re right. That’s not what I want. I’m not ready for that yet, and I knew this was a one time thing.”

I kiss her forehead, breathing in her cinnamon scent, and commit it to memory. “I need you to know something, though... If you were older, or I were younger, I'd never let a girl like you go.”

Her eyes look like they're welling up, but it could be the streetlight reflection. “The person you end up with is going to be one lucky bastard too, Rhode Tremblay...” She steps back. “But can I, uh, ask you something? Before I go?”

“Always.”

She nibbles her thumbnail, rocking on her heels. “Did you buy out the extra seats around us at the hockey game so I'd have space?”

My back stiffens, and I debate lying because I don't want her to feel like an inconvenience, but I'm tired of lying to her, and myself. “Yeah, but no one was using them anyway. Why?”

“Nothing, just... Thank you. No one's ever done something like that for me before. It means a lot.”

That pisses me off for no reason. She deserves more. “The person you end up with should do things like that for you, Nina. That was the bare minimum.”

“Maybe for you.” Her lips twitch into a smile. “Well, thanks for being my blueprint.”

I don't like knowing she's going to compare me to other men, but I give her a two-fingered salute. “Anytime.”

When neither one of us attempts to bridge the distance between us, I force myself to let her go. “Goodnight, Nina.”

A corner of her mouth lifts. “Don't have sweet dreams. Have wild ones.”

I go rigid. “You heard that?”

“I listened.” She lifts a casual shoulder, making an air circle with her finger. “Big ears, remember?”

She walks backward into her apartment, never taking her eyes off me. I don't leave until the light flicks on in her bedroom window, and even then, I still stand there for a few moments, looking up at her window and watching her shake out her ponytail.

“Goodbye, beautiful girl,” I whisper into the night.

Nina's not naive, but there's an idealistic way that she views people. She stands up for those who need it because I think, maybe, she's always

had to fight her own battles. I've always stood up for people who earned it on the team but never the ones who didn't.

I want to be a little more like Nina Alstynne.

So, on the way home, I do something I haven't done in years—I pick up the phone and dial my dad's number. But on the second ring, I lose my courage and hang up.

I don't answer when he calls back a minute later, and when he calls again, I put my phone on silent.

RHODE

“Well, look at that, ladies and gentlepeople,” the announcer says on the hotel bar TV. “After many speculations and rumors of retirement, the indomitable Rhode Tremblay is back on the ice, stronger, more focused, and hungrier than ever before. Just look at the way he took that hit today and still secured a shutout. The Guardians really are on a lucky streak!”

Flinching, I take a swig of my nonalcoholic beer. I rarely get checked on the ice, and I’ve got this nagging twinge in my groin. An injury down there is pretty much a death sentence for a goalie.

I nod to the bartender behind the wooden counter. “Hey, would you mind turning that off for me?”

“You got it, my man.” He changes the channel, shaking a cocktail mixer in front of the colorful liquor bottles. I release a breath and glance down at the string of texts glowing on the phone screen.

CAMILLE

You’re meeting Andrea Peña to discuss that sponsorship opportunity with ¡Vamos! on Friday. Her assistant booked lunch at Rêveries de la Mer.

It’s fancy, so wear the charcoal suit. No random patterned ties.

MORGAN

I'll be back in town in a month or so for work. Want to get lunch?

I'm still not sure what to say to him, so I switch over to our Puck Buddies group chat.

CRUZ

This club's fucking fire

Get your asses over here

I got bottle service

Dom Pigeon assholes

ME

It's Dom Pérignon

CRUZ

I can't believe you actually added the accent on that... come out old man

ME

Pass. I'd rather drink my piss beer alone

CRUZ

Stop being a whiny ass dick. Yeah, Phil's badass, but she's leaving for Argentina. Build a fucking bridge and get over it

PATTY

I actually agree with him on this one. Shocking, I know. If it's not going anywhere, find someone else.

CRUZ

HE'S ALIVEEEEE!!!

PATTY

eye roll I was FaceTiming my baby girl

CRUZ

Funny. My face is about to be spending time in a girl

Rolling my eyes, I shut off my phone. There's only one person I'm desperate to hear from, and it's not Cruz, but I dug myself into this hole. It's been over two weeks since I've seen Nina's face or heard her voice, but she texts Cruz all the damn time.

They're building a whole arsenal of inside jokes, and even though Cruz and I talked it out, I'm jealous of their friendship. He got me a burger, so

we're even. I'm not going to hold a grudge against the kid now that I know he's not trying to sleep with her.

Nina's stopped leaving me messages after my games, and every time my phone buzzes, I lurch for it, hoping to see her name on the screen.

I can't stop thinking about the sex—the taste of her, the noises she made, the way her sexy body gripped my cock.

I should've known once wouldn't be enough. I'm never listening to Patty again because getting over this girl might be impossible, but I'm trying to let her go so we can both chase our dreams.

I need to find someone my own age.

Grunting, I shove a piece of her cinnamon gum into my mouth that I stole.

"Is this seat taken?"

Looking up, I find a woman with black curls, wearing a green dress that matches her eyes. She's holding a pair of heels in one hand and a bouquet of flowers in the other.

I scoot to the side. "It's all yours."

"Thanks, my feet are killing me." She pulls out the barstool. I get a whiff of citrus, and it smells good, but it doesn't come close to Nina's cinnamon scent.

"I've been dancing all night," she says. "I think my blisters have blisters. My brother just married his childhood best friend, Nathan. It's all disgustingly sweet. They're absolutely perfect together, and I'm feeling very single at the moment, so my plan is to drown myself in alcohol. Can I get you anything? Scotch? Whiskey?"

I hold up my piss beer. "I'm good. Thanks, though."

Her eyes drop to my left hand, and she grins at my bare finger. Dammit. I know that look. "So, what brings you to Los Angeles?"

I check my phone, but there's nothing from Nina. I don't know why I thought there would be, so we make idle small talk for the next half hour.

She's from San Francisco, and I keep it vague, telling her that I'm here for work. She's a medical resident, which makes me think of Nina again, has two rescue pit bulls, only drinks wine from Chianti, and is a fan of the Bruins, but she didn't recognize me. I'll let that slide because they've got one hell of a roster.

She's exactly my type. I bet I could have her up in my hotel room in the next ten minutes, but instead, I'm gulping my beer like that'll drown my

thoughts of a certain girl.

The conversation fizzles out when I scoot back from my stool. “Well, it was nice talking to you, but I better go.”

She frowns but gives me a good-natured salute with her Cosmo. “Nice chatting with you too.”

My phone vibrates on the counter. I glance at the screen. *Nina*.

Holy shit. She’s calling me.

I lurch for it like it’s the last life jacket on the Titanic, which I realize is not a great look. Holding the phone to my ear, I stride through the lingering perfume in the hotel lobby up to the elevators.

I take a breath before answering, so I don’t sound too eager. “Nina?”

“Hey, how’s it go—”

“Bro, your girlfriend’s hot as fuck!” some guy shouts on the line.

What the hell? Is she at a party? I clutch my phone hard enough to snap it in half. “What’s going on? Where are you, Nina?”

“Sorry, you’re on speaker,” she says, a hell of a lot calmer than I feel. “Thanks for picking up because, as I’m sure you can hear from all the screaming, I’m driving some very drunk *children*,” she spits out like she’s chastising them, “home tonight.”

“We’re not drunk,” the guy slurs.

Yeah, he’s wasted.

“Yeah, you’re wasted,” she says, and pride fills me that we had the same thought. “Your friend literally peed himself before he got in the car. I’m charging you extra for that.”

“Assholes,” we both say.

The golden elevator door slides open, and I jam my finger on the twenty-fourth button, trying to hold onto my self-control. If any of those guys touch her... I don’t know what I’ll do, but it won’t be pretty.

“Are you alright?” I rub my temples. “Please tell me before I lose it.”

“Thanks. I’m okay. Don’t freak out or anything. I tried calling Gwen and Micah, but they didn’t answer, and I just wanted someone to talk to right now.”

Of course she tried calling Cruz. It shouldn’t bother me, but it does.

“You know what I want to do with you?” one of the assholes shouts.

I loosen my tie, lowering my voice. “Listen up. You better not—”

“If you finish that sentence, I’m throwing you out of my car,” Nina interjects, cutting me off. “Not you, Rhode, obviously. These boys.”

She's got this handled, but I'll always back her up. "If any of you so much as blow one hair out of place on that girl's head, I'm calling the cops," I say, stepping out of the elevator and into the hallway.

"Whoa, dude, where'd that voice come from?" one of them says.

I shove my key card into my room, slamming the door behind me hard enough that a hanger falls in the closet. No one's in here since we never share rooms. We're seasoned players, not rookies crammed in a dorm at training camp.

I stride inside the marble bathroom, shoving off my pink tie with lemons all over it while imagining Nina out partying with these degenerates. I can't let myself go there, or I'll want to do something insane like fly back to Nashville and drag her away with me.

I'm acting jealous, greedy, and possessive over a girl who's not even mine, but these emotions make me feel like I'm hers.

"Okay, boys, get out of my car. We're here," Nina says through the phone. "Go straight to bed. Don't talk to any people, oh, and make sure to take some painkillers, but nothing with acetaminophen, and don't be assholes. Now get out."

On the line, they shuffle out of the car. "You alright? Are they gone?"

She sighs, sounding exhausted, and I imagine wrapping her up in my arms. "Yeah, they're out. Thanks for answering. I know we're not really talking, but I didn't want to be completely alone with those guys. I think they were harmless assholes, but still, you can't be too careful."

"I don't care if they're harmless, I just care if they're assholes," I grit out.

"True." She pauses. "You sound mad. Are you mad?"

I take five breaths before answering. My jealousy isn't her problem, so I sink onto the edge of the bathtub, gripping the rim. "I'm fine."

"Well, thanks for backing me up."

"It's nice to know I'm good for something other than blocking pucks all day," I mutter, more to myself because that's all I feel good for lately. "And I'll always back you up."

I wait for her to say more, but when she doesn't, I turn on the cold water and fill up the hotel bathtub because I'm more wound up than before a playoff game. "What are you up to now?" I ask, wanting to keep her talking.

"Just pulling up to my apartment. You?"

I wedge my phone between my cheek and shoulder, undoing the buttons on my shirt. “Taking a cold bath to reduce some of my inflammation, but I doubt it’ll work all that well. It’s a watered-down version of an ice bath.”

She hisses. “That game today looked rough. After you got hit, I felt a little nauseous. I kind of hate watching you play hockey. How’re you feeling?” she asks in a soft voice that makes me go hard.

It takes me a second to remember what she asked because I’m too focused on the fact that she’s still watching our games.

I clear my throat. “Yeah, it hurt like hell, but I’m alright.”

“Are you sure? You don’t have to pretend. I don’t even like hockey, remember?” she laughs. “You can be honest with me.”

If this were my mom asking, I’d fake a smile and tell her I’m fine because she’s my biggest supporter. If it were my coach, I’d be blunt and brush the pain under the rug, but because it’s Nina, and she has no stake in the game, I guess she’s right. I don’t have to fake anything with her.

I slump on the bathtub ledge. “You want the truth? I’m exhausted. My body feels like it’s falling apart, and there’s this one twinge in my groin that won’t go away no matter how much I stretch. I’m too old for this.”

“No, you’re not,” she says in my favorite fiery voice. “You know more about hockey than anyone else on the team, so if you call yourself old one more time, I’m going to start calling you Daddy, which I know you’d hate.”

She’s right. I’d rather we be equals than have some weird power dynamic between us.

I didn't realize having someone outside of the hockey world was a breath of fresh air until I met Nina. My throat goes tight with emotion, so I can only manage to get out a few words. “Thanks, and yeah, please don’t call me Daddy.”

“Don’t worry. I would never. Are you foam rolling your adductors?”

My brow furrows. “Huh?”

“Your adductors? Are you stretching? Rolling? All of the above?”

“How’d you know that’s what I should do?”

I can practically hear her eyes roll from hundreds of miles away. “Because I know how to type on a computer, and I told you, I do my research.”

“You’re researching groin stretches? Shouldn’t you be working on that speech for that art event? Or doing more important things? Like studying?”

She hesitates. “Your groin is very important to me.”

My cock twitches at the innuendo. Did she really say that? I could take the bait and flirt back, start talking dirty, which would probably lead to some sexy as hell phone sex with me watching her play with herself. Fuck. That's a hot visual. I wonder if she'd take commands. Probably not, so I'd have to spank her to get her to listen. Maybe tie her up.

Except, tonight, I'd rather have a conversation that doesn't involve bondage or dirty talk.

"Rhode?"

I shift on the tub, trying to ignore my rock-hard erection that popped up out of nowhere. "Why were you looking up stretches?"

"Because I wanted to learn more so I could ask the right questions. I went down a research rabbit hole, looking up training for goalies, and got a little carried away. I do that with movies too. I'll start watching, and then I'll recognize one side character and end up missing the entire movie because I have to look up all their previous roles to figure out where I know them from."

I smile bigger than normal. "That's perfect because I always get sucked into watching movies, so you do the research, and I'll debrief you when it's over."

"Look at us, we're the perfect match. I mean, besides the fact that you want to get married, and I want to travel the world."

"Yeah, other than that big hurdle. We're perfect together," I grunt.

Nina and I might have little things in common, but I need someone who matches me on the big things. Part of me wishes we wanted the same things. Then, maybe we'd have a shot.

I step out of my pants, shoving them to the side, so I'm standing in my briefs. I twist in the bathroom mirror and get distracted when I spot the dark blue marks on my side. "That player really got me good. My ribs are bruised."

"What?" she gasps. "Really?"

"No, not actually bruised, but the skin's all dark and inflamed."

The line goes dead. I hold out the phone, squinting at the screen. Did I lose service? No. I still have five bars. I set my phone on the counter and frown at myself in the mirror.

My skin is splotched in marks. Cruz also took a bad hit, but he got up almost immediately after being knocked down. I did too, when I was twenty-three. I trace my fingers over the skin, wincing at my reflection.

Sure, my body is ripped from all the workouts, but it doesn't look great covered in bruises.

My list of injuries is so long that it could be a book. I can't feel my index finger in my right hand any time the temperature drops below fifty degrees, and I'll probably need reconstructive shoulder surgery in my forties from all the blocking.

My hips are so abused, I wouldn't be surprised if my bones were black and blue, and don't get me started on what all the years of dropping into butterfly have done to my knees.

My phone starts ringing again, but this time, Nina's FaceTiming me. I drop my phone on the counter, lurching for a towel to wrap around my waist.

I swipe and then her cute face appears on the screen. She's lying on her bed. Safe at home. My shoulders relax. I stare at the freckles on her nose. I prefer calling, but maybe I can get used to FaceTiming.

"Let me see," she demands.

I blink, somewhat distracted by her glasses. Why are they lopsided? Those guys better not have touched her. "See what?"

"Your ribs. Let me see them. I want to see the bruises."

I don't want her to see me all beaten when she doesn't have a wrinkle in sight. "No. It's not that bad. I'm fine."

"Please?" Her shoulders slump as she leans back into her pillows, and I'd give anything to sleep somewhere other than a hotel mattress tonight. "I'm just worried about you, and I'll feel better if I see it for myself. I don't like imagining you being hurt. Please?"

"Alright, but it's not pretty. You've been warned."

"I don't care if you look pretty, I just care about you."

Her cheeks turn pink after she says that, and the color matches the burning feeling in my chest. I ate a ton of oranges today, though, and that always gives me heartburn.

I adjust the camera, ensuring the towel is secured around my waist, and then show her my reflection in the mirror. I keep my eyes on her as she watches, trying to gauge her reaction. She winces, tilts her head, and her cheeks flush darker.

"That bad?" I ask.

"Yeah, it looks pretty painful, and you should definitely sit in the bath when we hang up, but..." She catches her bottom lip between her teeth.

“But what?”

“I have to admit, it’s kind of sexy,” she says in a breathy voice. “Really sexy, actually. I probably shouldn’t say that, but oh well. You’ve licked my entire body, so you already know I think you’re sexy. I’m going to be thinking about this visual a *lot*.”

“Nina…”

She smirks. “At night.”

My cock jumps beneath the towel. “Don’t.”

“In bed, naked, all alone. Poor little me.”

Fucking hell.

Now, I’m picturing her screaming my name as she circles her clit. She’s biting her lip in a challenge.

We really shouldn’t be doing this, but I have a hard time saying no to this girl, so with a groan, I reach down to stroke myself. “Do you wish I was there to make you feel better? Do you need my tongue or do you want my cock?”

She peers through the screen and into my soul. “I just want whatever I can get. I kind of miss talking to you, but I didn’t want to bother you since I know you’re busy, and we’re, I don’t know, friends who’ve slept together? It’s awkward.”

My hand stops moving around my dick. “Yeah, we’ve slept together, but it’s not awkward. We both know this isn’t going anywhere, so you can bother me anytime you want. It can get pretty lonely in hotel rooms, so it’s nice to have someone to talk to.”

Her smile fades, and even though I’m still hard as concrete, we don’t have phone sex. Instead, I prop the phone on the ledge and jump into the cold water to calm down.

That doesn’t work.

We talk for hours until my balls are blue and my fingers are wrinkled. She practices her speech with me for The Peaceful Mind Project, and I tell her about the ¡Vamos! sponsorship meeting. We end up talking about everything and nothing and all the things in between.

I fall asleep with a rock-hard dick, a smile on my face, and my phone over my heart.

NINA

“**Y**ou know I’m proud of you, right? I can’t believe you’re actually coming with me when you wouldn’t have left the house two years ago.” Gwen’s voice cuts through the hum of Atlanta’s vibrant downtown as she navigates her Audi, veering onto a quieter side street.

The quick maneuver sends me tumbling toward the door. “Can you not jerk the car so hard? I’m already regretting this whole thing. You know what? Maybe we should just head back to Nashville. I have an exam on Monday, anyway. This was a terrible idea.”

“No,” she retorts without missing a beat.

Gwen’s voice is as unyielding as Atlanta’s skyscrapers. She still hasn’t taken off her powder-blue blazer from her conference call, and we’ve been sitting in the car for over four hours. But she’s wearing *my* thrifted Grateful Dead T-shirt underneath—that she stole.

She huffs out a breath, blowing a strand of platinum hair loose from her bun. “You’re the one who asked to come, and I have a conference tomorrow that I can’t miss. Micah said you could see them after their game. It’ll be fine.”

“Yeah, you’re probably right.”

I’ve come a long way from the girl who rarely ventured out of her dorm room during freshman year. That girl who canceled on her friends at the last minute. Who holed up under the covers and made promises she knew she’d

break. Who constantly spewed hatred because she hated that version of herself.

I'm not that girl, and I never want to be her again.

I retreat into my ritual of breathing techniques, inhaling deeply for a count of four, holding, and then slowly exhaling. I repeat the cycle until my frantic heartbeat slows.

If I'm going to spend three months in Argentina, I need to get used to stepping out of my comfort zone and not relying on anyone to push me.

"You'll be fine, Nina," she repeats.

"Okay, I know I'll be fine. You don't need to keep saying it. I'm just going to say 'hi' to them tonight since they're flying out tomorrow, and then I'll meet you back at the hotel."

When I mentioned to Micah that Gwen had a conference in Atlanta that coincided with their away game, he invited me to come, and because I'm the naive college student who apparently likes torturing herself with older men who are all wrong for her, here I am, driving four hours to Atlanta to see Micah in the hopes that I'll actually see Rhode.

Maybe I can convince him to treat me like another notch on his bedpost. I'm not marriage material, and I'm well aware that a man like Rhode Tremblay would never fall for an art student. He's not my happy ending, but we can have fun for now.

We pull up to a fancy hotel that's all gleaming glass beneath the night sky. They must pay someone a fortune to keep those windows bug-free.

"What should I do tonight? I'm thinking of going to this new wine bar," Gwen muses as valets flutter around the high-end sports cars. "I could use a night to myself, but I'll leave a hotel key for you in case you want to come back."

"Why could you use a night to yourself? Is everything okay with Isaac?"

She flicks her hand, steeling her expression. Gwen buries her emotions deep so they're never on her face. "Yes. It's fine. We don't need to talk about him."

"You sure?" I narrow my eyes. "He hasn't been around the house as much. Actually, now that I think about it, I haven't seen him since the kitchen thing."

"We've both just been busy. How're things with Rhode?" she deflects.

Despite the bridge we've been rebuilding, there's still this niggling twinge of doubt that refuses to go away. I know it's ridiculous for me to think, but sometimes, Gwen gets this look in her eye when she asks about Rhode, but I'm pretty sure that's my imagination.

"Things are amazing," I say, too bright. "That's why I made you drive me four hours to see him. We stayed up last night debating the greatest hockey players. He lost it when I said Orr was better than Gretzky."

He actually called *me* for once, and we talked until my phone ran out of battery. That's what gave me the delusional confidence to come see him today.

"It's honestly so weird to hear you talk about hockey and not random artists."

"I've gone over to the dark side," I say in an ominously low voice.

The valet swings the door open, and Gwen leans over to peck me on the cheek. I cringe a little, but I don't pull away. "Tell Rhode I say hi."

"Yeah, I'm not doing that. Have fun at the bar. Bye." I hop out of the car, grab my bag, and make my way into the glittery hotel lobby, but at the last second, I run back to Gwen.

She rolls down the window. "What did you forget?"

"Nothing. Just... thanks for driving me. I had fun scream-singing in the car with you for four hours."

The grin that lights up my sister's face is so wide that you'd think I told her I found a way to keep her avocados eternally fresh. "You're welcome. Love you."

"See you," I say, avoiding those three little words like a bad habit.

I stride through the glass doors into the gleaming lobby. There's a group of women crowded around a table full of hydrangea bouquets, dressed in Guardians blue and white. As I head to the front desk to pick up the key card Micah left, I catch a piece of their conversation.

"Oh, definitely Rhode Tremblay. Have you not heard all those stories about him? He absolutely knows what he's doing."

"What about Micah Cruz? He seems like he'd be a fun time in bed."

"All I know is whoever got to make babies with Wyatt Patterson is the luckiest woman on the planet."

My hands ball into tight knots at the idea of other women going after Rhode. After the Isaac fiasco, I want someone all to myself. It's too late to

back out now, though, since I'm already at this hotel, and there's also this tiny kernel of satisfaction that I know Rhode in a way they never will.

Unless he told those women to meet him here. A swell of queasiness rocks through my stomach.

I go straight to room forty-three, trying to ignore the wild beating of my heart as I debate turning around. No. I'll go and say hi. Keep it casual. I get off the elevator, shove my key card in the door, and walk inside, only to be greeted by a shadowy tangle of limbs.

There's moaning.

Heavy panting.

Clothes are flying off.

My thoughts move in slow motion. I barely have time to register the scene unfolding in front of me before the girl slams the guy into the dresser. "Please. I need you, *now*."

I lurch back like I've been stabbed, and something withers in my heart at the sight of Rhode with another woman. I'm not going to have a repeat of the Isaac situation, so I swing around to walk out of the hotel room, but my bag knocks over a glass of water on the entryway table, and it crashes to the floor.

The woman shrieks.

"What was that?" a man shouts.

The lights flick on in the hotel room. The glow from the lamp illuminates Micah's chiseled features in soft light.

Micah.

Not Rhode.

I blink, just to be sure. Micah's still standing there in a rumpled suit. My shoulders sink with relief. Too much relief, if I'm being honest with myself. The fact that it's not Rhode shouldn't affect me this much when he's allowed to date other people.

I expect to see irritation lacing Micah's features for interrupting, but when our gazes meet, there's nothing but gratitude in his small smile. I shoot him a questioning look, but he brushes me off with a sweep of his arm.

The woman, on the other hand, is glaring furiously at Micah. She begins moving around the room like a vanilla-scented tornado. "Shit, you're his girlfriend, aren't you? I should've known. Ugh, I'm a horrible person." She glowers at Micah. "And you're a cheating asshole."

I rush to defend him. “I’m not his—”

“Yeah, that’s me,” Micah interjects. “The cheating asshole. You better go, Giselle.”

She hurls a pillow at him. “*Catalina.*”

Micah winces, catching the pillow. “Sorry about that.”

Catalina yanks the champagne from the icy bucket and vigorously shakes the bottle. She flicks off the cork, pointing it at Micah. “This is for being a liar. I should’ve known better than to go out with the NHL’s latest fuckboy.”

The champagne erupts, a fizzy volcano directed at Micah's face. I’m caught in the crossfire, droplets showering over my shirt. He coughs, swiping away the liquid. “Shit, you got it in my nose!”

“Sorry,” she says to me, sounding genuine. “I was aiming for him, not you, and I feel really terrible about all this. I had no idea you were his girlfriend, or I never would’ve agreed to come to his room.”

“I’m really not—”

“More like you demanded to come to my room,” Micah mutters, using a tissue to dab the champagne from his face.

Her apology hangs in the air as damp as our soaked attire. With one last glare at him, the woman slams the door, leaving us alone in the minimalistic chic room with one king bed.

“Okay, what just happened?” I ask. “And where’s Rhode?”

“He’s trying to get another room since they only had one left for us, and he doesn’t like to share.”

Micah undoes the buttons on his wet shirt, peeling away the fabric to reveal a torso sculpted in bronze perfection. He’s got women sliding into his DMs hourly, but I feel absolutely nothing when I look at his eight-pack. Never have. Though, I do like having someone to text in Spanish to practice.

He plops down onto the foam mattress, shirtless, and spreads out his arms like a snow angel. “Thanks for that, Phil. I owe you one. I didn’t really want to sleep with her, and I was trying to think of excuses and couldn’t. Things just started moving so fast, and I didn’t know how to tell her no, so your timing was great.”

I sit on the cloud mattress. “What do you mean too fast? Last week you sent a picture of you, Wyatt, and Rhode at that go-cart arcade in Los Angeles, and the text literally said *vivir la vida en el carril rápido.*”

“Yeah, I’m still not sure if that’s how you say ‘living life in the fast lane,’ but whatever. That’s what I get for only using my Spanish to order enchiladas. Also, we need to work on your pronunciation. It sucks.”

“Sorry, we can’t all have bilingual grandparents. So, what happened tonight?”

He runs his hands along his clean-shaven jaw before exhaling a deep sigh. “I just wasn’t feeling it. She wanted, uh... more, and I didn’t want to go there with her because I’ve never done that.”

“You’ve never done what before? Had hotel room sex?”

“No.” He chews on his bottom lip until there’s a sharp indent on his skin. “I’ve uh, never done that at all.”

I tense, trying not to show my surprise. “Oh.”

His face is too tan to blush, but there’s a softness in his features I haven’t seen before. “I didn’t want to do it tonight. She wanted to, which is why your timing was perfect, so thanks.”

My eyes widen involuntarily, but Micah peers at me like he’s watching my reaction, so I mask my expression.

He waves a hand. “Go ahead and laugh. It’s hilarious. The NHL’s rookie fuckboy is actually a virgin.”

His voice wavers a little, so I reach for his hand, giving him a gentle squeeze. “You don’t know me very well if you think I’d laugh at you for that.”

He fists the sheets, avoiding my eyes. “Really? So, you don’t think it’s fucking lame that I’m a twenty-three-year-old virgin?”

“No. Not at all. Who gives a shit? It’s your body. Do whatever the hell you want. But why does everyone talk about how much you sleep around?”

He rests his cheek on my shoulder, relaxing. “It all started when I first joined the League. This one video of me skating shirtless went viral online. So many people slid into my DMs with the dirtiest comments. It was hot at first, but it got weird fast. Tremblay’s the only one who could relate, so I talked to the old man—”

“Stop calling him that. It’s rude.”

“Never. It’s our thing. He calls me kid, and I call him old man. Anyway, he told me to ignore it, but now I feel like I’m lying to everyone. Don’t get me wrong, I fuck around and do other things, but not as much as people think. I just talk a good game to keep up the image.”

“You don’t have to act like that just because that’s what people expect. There’s nothing funny about being forced to be someone you’re not. Wearing masks is exhausting.”

“People like sex. It sells.” Micah shrugs. “I started getting all this attention online because of the shirtless videos, and it got me a lot of followers, so I kept playing into the image. It’s my fault, but I don’t really give a shit. I mean, I do, but I don’t, you know? It’ll be awkward when I fuck someone and only last two seconds, though.” He claps his hands together. “Surprise! No orgasm for you.”

“If someone gets mad at you for that, then they deserve for it to only last two seconds. You can always go again. It takes time to figure out the whole sex thing, anyway. Most people’s first times are awful.”

Micah’s eight-pack clenches as he leans up off the mattress, but he’s got nothing on Rhode’s body. He smiles at me, big and contagious. “Thanks for that, Phil. I needed to talk to someone about all of this, and Tremblay’s always talking about how you’re a great listener.”

I perk up. “He talks about me?”

“Yeah, all the time. It’s annoying as shit. If I have to hear one more time about your speech, or all the pottery you make, or that fellowship, I’m going to shove my head in a toilet.”

“That’s disgusting.” Laughing, I rest my head on his shoulder, and he puts his smooth cheek on the top of mine.

“Yeah, but really, I’m glad you came tonight, Phil. Now, come on. Let’s head out. Tremblay’s gonna flip his shit if he sees us like this.”

“He won’t care.”

“Trust me. He will. He always—”

The door swings open.

Rhode strides into the room in a disheveled gray suit with a banana-print lime green tie. It’s been weeks since I’ve laid eyes on him, and from the way my breath stutters when I see him, I should start digging a grave for my heartbreak.

“Alright, Cruz, they don’t have any more rooms available, so we’re throwing it back to training camp. You’re stuck with me, and we’re building a pillow wall. I swear if you spoon me again with your morning wood, I’ll —” He stops when he sees us sitting on the bed.

His gaze narrows on our intertwined hands, and his eyes flare. I jerk away from Micah. Rhode cocks his head, slow and predatory.

There's heat in his expression, and I know from that look alone that I'm about to make some gloriously stupid decisions that will probably turn into mistakes. I'll exchange one magical night for a miserable morning, but it's the hope of it all that has me swapping out rationality for recklessness.

Rhode's eyes bore into mine like he's trying to set my body on fire with his stare. "Cruz?"

"Yeah, roomie?"

"I love you, man, but get out."

RHODE

“Fine, okay. I’m leaving. You don’t have to give me murder eyes, old man. We were just talking.” Cruz backs out of the room. “I’ll snuggle with Patty-Daddy tonight. He actually likes me, unlike you.”

I’m more tense than a shootout at the end of a tied game. Cruz picks up his clothes, grabs his bag, and strides out into the hall.

What’s Nina doing here? With him?

She’s wearing a paint-splattered crewneck, and she looks so damn cute, but she’d look even cuter in my clothes. Seeing her on the bed next to him makes me want to throw Cruz out of the room—again.

How many other men has she been with since I last saw her? One? Two? Fuck, I don’t want to know. It’s been over two weeks since I saw her last, so it can’t be that many, right? I rub my face. I’m turning into a jealous prick.

“What’re you doing here, Nina?”

The question comes out more biting than I meant, since I’m still looking at Cruz’s ass print on the mattress.

Her shoulders fall, and she twists her thumbs on the bed. “My sister had a conference, so Micah invited me to come to see you guys play, but we hit really bad traffic, and I missed the game, so now I’m here. I can uh, go if you’re busy.”

She stands, but I grab her hand, panicked at the thought of her leaving. I always seem to say the wrong thing around this girl. “No, don’t get me

wrong, I'm happy to see you, just surprised."

The corners of her lips turn up. "You are?"

"Yeah, I am."

I sniff the air, getting a whiff of champagne, which has me wondering what the hell her and Cruz were doing. I check to see if her eyes are hazy. "Are you drunk? Because you smell like a wedding reception."

"No, that was just a whole thing with Cruz. You can ask him about it. I don't drink."

I pinch my brows. "What do you mean you don't drink?"

"That I don't drink. I don't like how it makes me feel."

I tilt my head, somewhat shocked. "Ever?"

"Yeah."

"But you're twenty-two?"

She gives me a big eye roll. "Not all college students like getting wasted every weekend. I don't care if people do, but that's not me."

"So, you don't drink at all?"

"Nope. I mean, I won't say that I'll never have a drop of alcohol again, but for now, I like being sober."

"What about at the ¡Vamos! event?"

"I was faking because people can be awkward about it. I ended up dumping most of the champagne in those plants all night."

She's not anything like how I was in my twenties. Now, I really feel like an asshole for judging her for so long, but there's a sting of hurt because she didn't say anything. It's another commonality we share. There's still so much I don't know about her, and I want to be able to ace a class on Philomena Alstyne.

"How come you never told me?" I ask.

"Because it's not that big of a deal, and I don't want to make it into a whole thing, so let's not talk about it."

If she doesn't want to make a big deal about this, I don't want to make her uncomfortable, so I go along with her. This girl could ask me to drive her back four hours to Nashville tonight, and I'd do it even though we've got a game this weekend.

She twirls her thumbs like she always does when she's thinking hard about something, and then stands. The bed squeaks.

She stalks toward me with her hips swaying, and blood rushes to my dick because it feels like Nina breathes and I get hard. I start to pull back,

but her fingers dig into my waistband. It takes everything in me not to shove her onto the bed and yank off her panties.

I should tell her to leave but seeing her makes this room feel less like a hotel and more like a home. She's looking up at me with those big, mesmerizing eyes, making me feel weak in the best way. I don't have to be strong for her like I do everyone else.

"Okay, I'm just going to come out and say it." She sucks her lip into her mouth. "Have you thought about what happened in the office at all?"

Only every time I shower.

"Yeah, a bit." She frowns at the words, and I backtrack. "Alright, a lot... A lot more than I should, but we want different things, and I'm trying not to lead you on, Nina. I don't want to use you for sex."

"I know exactly where you stand, so why don't you let me decide what I want to be used for? Once might have been enough for you, but it wasn't enough for me."

My eyes widen. Is that really what she thinks? "You think once was enough for me?"

Fuck. My voice sounds like crushed gravel.

"Wasn't it?" she whispers.

I don't want something casual, but she's cracking my resolve. I've done casual before, maybe I can do it again. I have a feeling I'd do anything for this girl right now. This is only going to complicate things, but I don't want to lie about how I'm feeling anymore.

I guide a strand of hair behind her pierced ears. "I could have you every day, and it still wouldn't be enough."

That seems to light up something inside her, and she sinks to the floor in front of me. Damn, she looks sexy as hell on her knees.

"Nina..." I groan.

"Rhode," she breathes in front of my dick.

She slides her hands up my thighs, and my eyes almost roll back into my head. This is such a bad idea, but I'm exhausted after the game today. My body hurts, and she feels so good, and she came here for me. No one's ever done something like that before.

I stare down at her glasses. "What're you doing, Nina?"

She uses her teeth to tug the rim of my shirt up from my pants. "I think it's pretty obvious, but tell me to stop, and I will."

"Yeah, I'm not telling you to stop."

“Good. Because I’ve been thinking about sucking you off ever since our phone call a few weeks ago. I want to taste you.”

“Holy fuck, hearing you say that is so damn hot.”

She unbuckles my belt, and that’s it, I’m done fighting this. I don’t think I’ve ever been this hard in my life. Nina pulls down my briefs and frees my cock so it springs in her face, but then her eyes drop to my thigh tattoo.

“Looks like you were wrong,” she says, all smug. “I do get to see this tattoo. I like the turtle. Very eclectic. Why a turtle?”

I’m finding it hard to focus on anything but her mouth. “It’s not anything deep. I had a pet turtle growing up. He died. Let’s not talk about Edgar when I’ve got my cock slapping your cheek.”

“Okay, we’re coming back to the Edgar name, but you’re right. There are other things I’d rather do with my mouth.”

She strokes me, and I’m at risk of coming before she even gets started. The image of her on her knees drains every other thought from my head. Fuck, I wish she weren’t leaving in two months.

Her lips form a perfect little O as she leans down, and right when I think she’s going to suck me, she swirls her tongue around the tip, licking off my pre-cum. She blows, and my body jerks. “Oh, fuck. Keep doing that and this is going to be the shortest blow job of my life.”

“How’s that feel?” she says, licking the tip. “I want to make this good for you, so tell me what you like.”

“Anything you do will feel good,” I groan. “Bite it off for all I care.”

Her teeth graze my skin, playfully squeezing. “I would never, then I’d have nothing to play with.”

She chuckles around my cock, and the vibration makes my balls tingle. She licks me from my base all the way up my shaft, swirls her tongue around the tip, and sucks.

Hard.

Her cheeks hollow out. This girl’s mouth is something else. I feel like I just won the Cup with Nina on her knees for me.

“Where’d you learn to do that?” I clutch onto the desk to steady myself because I’m at risk of blacking out. “Actually, I don’t want to know. Don’t tell me. I’m just gonna imagine that you’ve been deep-throating cucumbers your whole life.”

She looks up at me from behind her glasses with watery hazel eyes as I fuck her mouth, thrusting my hips. Her nails dig into my ass cheeks, like

she can't get enough of my dick. I hit the back of her throat, and she gags.

Goddamn.

"I fucking love the sound of you choking on my cock, but tell me if it's too much."

She pulls back, swirling her hot tongue around the tip. "I can handle you."

Nina's wet mouth wraps around me again, and holy hell, she's right. "Yeah, you can handle me anytime you want."

My entire body is numb, and the only thing I feel is Nina's warmth sucking me off like I'm her favorite flavor, and when she starts playing with my balls, I almost black out for real.

She moans when my dick hits the back of her throat, and like a champion, she takes it all. Sucks me as deep as she can until her mouth is full of my cock. Our eyes meet as her head bobs.

It's sexy as sin and intimate as hell.

I twist my hands in her caramel hair, lifting it away from her face while thrusting between her wet lips. "You're so good at that, Nina. So fucking good. I think that mouth is my favorite thing about you. You're destroying me. Sucking my cock like it was made for your mouth."

She groans, and her eyes start watering as I thrust deeper, but she pulls me closer. I swipe my thumbs under her eyes, wiping away the water as she digs her nails into my ass. I hope she leaves her mark. There's no fucking way I can last.

She continues swirling and licking with that devilish mouth until my balls tighten, and vibrations travel down my spine. I knew I couldn't last. "I can't, Nina. I'm gonna..."

She makes this needy moan like she's enjoying this more than me, taking me deeper, and yeah, this is over.

Heat shoots up my spine, and my body spasms as relief pours out of me. Nina captures everything, and I think she takes something from me too, but I don't know what.

My chest is heaving when she pulls back, wipes her lips, and smiles at me like a proud student who just got an A on an exam. She deserves it too.

My dick is spent.

I'm lightheaded and can't catch my breath, but I know one thing, I'm returning the favor.

I stalk toward her as she leans back on the bed. “Lay down and spread your legs for me. I want to see how wet sucking me off made you.” I kneel on the ground and hook my fingers around her shorts. “Hips up. Now.”

Her lips part. “So demanding.”

“When it comes to you? Yeah, I want it all, even if I can’t have you.”

“You can have all of me tonight.”

She arches her back, and I yank her underwear down to get a perfect view of her legs splayed open and then toss her red panties into outer space for all I care. This girl’s pussy drives me wild.

I press a quick kiss to her inner thigh, then lift my head to grab the hem of her shirt with my teeth. I could use my hands, but my way’s more fun. Biting the fabric, I tug it up over her head until she’s naked beneath me.

We were so rushed last time that I didn’t get to appreciate her, so I take my sweet time absorbing every detail, from the four-leaf clover on her neck to the freckles dotting the bridge of her nose.

“Have I told you I think you’re beautiful?” I climb over her, forcing her to lean back into the sheets with her hair splayed out. “Because you are. You’re beautiful because of the jokes that come out of your mouth and the thoughts in your head. I’m gonna be jealous as hell of whoever you end up with.”

Her eyes turn shiny, and she starts blinking, but then, every emotion on her face seems to shut down, like I said the wrong thing. “Let’s not talk about being with other people tonight.”

“Good call because the idea of you with another man makes me want to fuck you so hard that you’ll never forget what it feels like when I’m inside you.” I grip her throat, gently tightening my hands. Her eyes flare with need. “For tonight, you’re mine.”

“And you’re mine.”

She reaches for my Hugo Boss dress shirt, rips it open, and buttons ping on the walls like rain.

Holy shit.

Her eyes drink in my bare chest, but she doesn’t balk at the scars and cuts. If anything, she looks turned on, and that look alone is enough to stroke a man’s ego. With a smirk, I reach for the bucket of ice on the nightstand.

“What are you doing?” she whispers.

Instead of answering, I suck an ice cube into my mouth. Holding it between my lips, I lean down and press it over her peaked nipple while clasping her wrists above her in a tight grip because I could tell she liked that last time.

Her hips buck beneath me, so I take that as a good sign and draw it lower. I put the ice cube right over her swollen clit, letting it melt.

Her skin's so flushed that it turns into a puddle in seconds. "Look at you. You're so wet, and I've barely touched you. Is this all for me?"

"You look like a fallen angel on a protein-only diet. Who else do you think it's for? Stop asking stupid questions and put that dirty mouth to work."

I fight a laugh. This girl. I flick my tongue over her center again, and she writhes beneath me. "How's that feel?"

Goosebumps pebble her skin. "So good."

"Just good?" I bite down, just hard enough to hear her moan my name, and damn if that isn't the best sound in the world. "That's not good enough for me. I need a better adjective."

"Fine," she huffs, pulling on my hair. "I'll never look at an ice cube the same way again. Happy?"

"No. I'll be happy when you come all over my face."

I suck another ice cube between my lips and drag it down her stomach, leaving a wet pathway in its wake. I stop when I reach the spot right over her clit and swirl the ice over it a couple of times. Teasing her. Edging her closer. She whips her head down, fire igniting the gold flecks in her eyes.

"Rhode. Stop teasing me. I came here because I wanted you."

"Look at you. So needy. I knew you'd only been fucked by boys, not men."

I place the ice cube right over her sensitive skin, pressing down to add pressure as I circle her with my tongue. She holds the headboard behind her in a vice when I slide two fingers inside her, pumping. She keeps getting wetter and wetter.

She's deep and warm and so wet. I'm already getting hard again.

The ice cube melts on the mattress as she thrusts against my face. Nina reaches back and tugs the headboard so hard I wouldn't be surprised if she ripped the damn thing off the wall.

"I'm so close," she moans, legs clenching my face so my stubble leaves a red mark on her thighs. "I think I'm in love with your tongue."

I love eating her out, but something about how she says the word *love* has me slowing my strokes. I groan, and her legs tighten around my head. Every sound that escapes her mouth makes me feel like a smug bastard. Curling my fingers inside her, I suck her clit harder.

Once. Twice. Three times.

She's loud. Louder. Screaming my name.

Leaning back, I rub my thumb over her as she rides out the remnants of her orgasm. "That's it. Be as loud as you want. I want this entire hotel to hear what I do to you."

A thunderous split cracks through the room.

I snap my head up to see the headboard about to fall on top of Nina's head. Shit. Adrenaline jolts through my body.

"Watch out!" I yell, pitching forward to catch the flimsy wood. I slam it back against the wall, panting over her body as I lift it to keep it from falling on her. This hotel really skimped on the headboards. What did they use? Plywood?

She blinks up at me, sated and dazed. "What just happened?"

A laugh falls out of my mouth, and I can't help but kiss the tip of her nose. "I just made you come so hard that you ripped the headboard off the wall."

"How the hell did I do that?"

"Looks like this hotel just glued a piece of cardboard to the wall."

Realization dawns on her face, slowly, then all at once. She gasps, jerking her head up. "No, I didn't. Wait, I did. I'm so sorry. You're going to have to pay for that."

Using my free hand, I grip her chin. "If you apologize for ripping off the headboard because you came so hard on my tongue, I'm spanking you again, and this time, I won't be gentle about it."

Her brow lifts in a challenge. "Is that a promise?"

I kiss the tip of her nose again, getting closer to her lips. "It's more than a promise, it's a vow."

There's a beat of silence, but then, she giggles. Her laugh makes me laugh, and the sound grows until we're gasping for air. When we finally catch our breath, she wiggles her way out from under me. Damn, I was kind of hoping she'd let me spank her again.

"Okay, but I actually don't feel like getting spanked tonight because I have to sit in a car for four hours tomorrow, so I should really go."

I wince at the words because they're exactly what I said to every woman in my twenties, and I don't want to hear them coming out of Nina's mouth, directed at me.

"Don't," I blurt without thinking, or maybe I'm finally thinking clearly. She drove all the way here, and I don't want to wake up alone in an empty hotel bed like I've been doing for the past decade.

"What?" she says.

"Don't go. Stay with me tonight." I slide off the bed, and the flimsy headboard falls to the mattress. "We can move the mattress and pillows to the floor. Just don't go yet. Please?"

"You want to make a pillow fort with me?"

"I'd build you a pillow castle."

She rocks back on her heels, debating, but then she grabs the sheets. "Okay, you scoot the mattress off, and I'll look for extra blankets and pillows. I bet they have some in the closet. Maybe we can steal some from Wyatt's room too."

"Doubt it. Patty needs at least ten pillows to sleep."

We gather supplies, rearrange the furniture, and thirty minutes later, we're spooning naked under a pillow fortress. I'm trying not to think about how good she feels in my arms and just enjoy how free I feel, for once.

There's no lower back pain, no sponsorship meetings, no League breathing down my neck. It's just me and her in our own little kingdom.

If only we could stay like this forever.

I kiss her temple. "Thank you for coming tonight. No one's ever surprised me like this before, and it means a lot to me, especially since I know you don't like being in new places."

"Really? No one?"

"You're the first." I hold her tighter. "You're making me break all my rules."

She pauses, her fingers moving back and forth over my forearms as she seems to think hard about something. "I don't want to change you, Rhode, or hold you back from your future, no matter how much fun we have giving each other orgasms. I know you want to get married, so if you meet someone else, just be honest and tell me if things change. I can't promise that feelings won't get involved, but let's agree to talk."

She's right, and I don't want to hold her back from her dreams in Argentina. The life as a partner of an NHL player is intense, but the thought

of sleeping with anyone who's not Nina makes me nauseous.

"I know I said I don't want something casual, but how about we do this until you leave? Because I like you, Nina, and I want to spend more time with you." I force out my next question. "Are you seeing other people?"

She hesitates. "Not right now, but I'll tell you if that changes... Is that okay?"

A surge of jealousy rushes through me at the thought of another man's hands on her. Is this what people in their twenties do now?

I'm not going to demand more than she's willing to give. The next time we sleep together, I'll make sure she gets at least five orgasms if I'm competing with other men.

No, ten. Twenty. We'll go all night.

I force a neutral tone. "I won't lie, I hate the idea of you with another man. I don't fucking share, but for now, I'm happy right here, so I'll take what I can get from you even though I'm supposed to be married with kids by now."

"What? Says who, Rhode? Who says you *need* to be married with kids by now?"

"I don't know. People. My mom, who keeps asking me for grandkids. Pretty much everyone."

"Well, you don't," she says in that passionate voice of hers. "You don't need to have the perfect family just because everyone says so. If that's really what you want, amazing. Go for it. But if you're only doing it because you think that's what your life should look like, those aren't the right reasons."

She's got a point, but if I don't have a family, and I don't have hockey, then I have nothing. Yeah, the League is draining, and it's getting more difficult to bounce back, but I'd rather have that than nothing.

I kiss her bare shoulder, letting my lips stay on her warm skin. I can't seem to stop kissing her. "Sometimes, I think about retiring and not renewing my contract because all of this is exhausting, but if I'm not playing, and I don't have a family, my life's just empty. What would I do? Coach? I'm a skater."

"Rhode Tremblay, look at me," she commands, twisting in the bedsheets to face me. She takes my cheeks in her hands, and I feel small all of a sudden. "You're a cross-stitching fiend who loves unloveable cats, cares about his friends, is a little overprotective, but we'll overlook that because

it's cute sometimes, has an excellent sense of humor since you laugh at all my jokes, and loves his family. Your career is important, but you can build whatever life you want when it's over."

Her words tug at something deep inside me, something I didn't know was buried there.

I've never given much thought to what I want outside of hockey. The League stole all the integral parts of my twenties—the exploring, growing, failing—leaving a watered-down version thanks to all the partying.

I knew what I wanted but didn't know who I was, I still don't, and now, I'm like an arrow that's hit its mark.

Stuck.

I've only thought about what I should have. I should have a family because it's what everyone else has, but the thought of going from chasing around rookies to chasing around toddlers sounds exhausting. It'd be nice to meet a woman and spend some time building a life—just the two of us.

I kiss her cheek, not her lips because of her rule I'm starting to hate, but part of me is grateful for that one boundary. "I wish I'd been as smart as you when I was in my twenties. Maybe then I would've found someone by now."

Her smile disappears, and she's looking at me like I might've said the wrong thing again. "But then you never would've met me."

I stare at her, wondering about how this funny, smart, strong girl went from my driver to my fake date to sending me voice memos after every game, and now, to a woman I know has a birthmark shaped like Texas on her right shoulder. But when she gets on that plane to Argentina, all she'll be is a memory.

I stroke my thumb over her bottom lip, gently tugging at the soft skin. "You're right, and that would've been a damn shame."

She climbs back on top of me like the little fox she is, and because I'm greedy for her, we go for round two, then three, then four.

I lose track after the fifth.

NINA

“**W**hat about that woman?” I ask Rhode as his fingers twirl in my hair, the sound of children’s laughter drifting from the castle moon bounce. “She’s already got kids, so you’d be jumping right into a family. Problem solved.”

Snuggling closer to him on the Adirondack chair, I watch him squint at the woman through the bright sunlight, noting each minor shift in his expression. Everyone at Wyatt’s barbecue—or is it Patty? I never know what to call him—looks like a model.

His head tilts. “She doesn’t have blonde hair.”

“What, you only date blondes? Since when?”

He flips his cap backward, giving me a flat look. “Nina.”

“What?” I zone in on the backward hat. “Okay, you’re always a twelve out of ten solely based on your personality, but with the hat turned around? I want to drag you to the nearest bedroom.”

“You’re really over-inflating my ego right now. Keep talking.” He smirks, somehow managing to look both innocent and arrogant at the same time.

I stroke his stubble. “So, is that a yes to the bedroom? Because it’s been two weeks since we’ve had sex, and my dirty fantasies are not doing it for me anymore. You’re gone all the time. I’m tired of staring at you on a screen.”

He releases a tortured groan. “I want to hear about these fantasies later, but you’re going to make me hard at a one-year-old’s birthday party, and then I’m going to get arrested because that’s creepy as fuck. I’m barely keeping it together with your big fine ass on my lap.”

I wiggle my *big fine ass* right over his hardening dick. “Oh, but it’d be so fun.”

He kisses the crook of my neck. “I’ll fuck you nice and good later, pretty girl, but not here. Let’s go home so you can scream my name as loud as you want.”

I mock gasp. “My neighbors are ninety. We’ll traumatize them.”

“Ninety-year-olds can still get up to some kinky shit. I plan to.”

“Fine. I’ll be extra loud for the kinky ninety-year-olds.”

“That’s my girl.”

I blink, mentally replaying the words. He’s never called me his girl before, and it feels like someone set a thousand fireflies loose in my stomach, which is not ideal, considering I finally booked my flight to Argentina.

He continues twirling my hair, which is a nice distraction from the anxiety thrumming under my skin like an electrical current. The six-mile run I went on this morning didn’t help, unfortunately. I’ve already chewed through an entire box of cinnamon gum.

Ever since I stepped into Wyatt’s quintessential country home for Betty’s birthday party—complete with cows, a private lake, and an outdoor pool area—I’ve been coiled tight at the thought of making small talk for hours with strangers.

My sleepless spiral last night didn’t help.

I thought about canceling at least fifty times, but this was my only option if I wanted to see Rhode since he’s leaving for another week of games, and things will only get busier if they make it to the playoffs.

All my worst qualities are coming out of hiding because of it—self-consciousness, jealousy, racing thoughts, overanalyzing every woman eyeing Rhode.

They’re all staring at him.

I’m second-guessing each word that comes out of my mouth, and I’m still cringing about the cow joke I made earlier to some random person. I’m going to be thinking about *that* for the next ten years.

I scan the backyard party, nodding to a blonde in leggings and a high ponytail who looks like she pronounces croissant with a French accent. “What about dating someone like her after I leave? She looks like she could chase kids around all day and then go rule over a boardroom.”

Rhode turns, frowns, and directs his attention back to me. “She doesn’t have a nose piercing.”

“How can you tell from this far away? Okay...” I scan the sleek infinity pool, my attention settling on a woman blowing bubbles in a floral sundress. “What about her? She looks nice.”

“Stop, Nina.” He hooks a finger under my chin and coaxes my head up with his knuckle. “I’m not doing this with you. She doesn’t have a star tattoo on her right shoulder, or a Texas-shaped birthmark, or gold glasses, or freckles I can’t stop staring at, alright? Stop asking me about other women I could date when I’ve got you in my arms. You’re the only one I’m thinking about.”

I try not to let those words sink into my heart, but it’s hard when he’s the only man on my mind.

I brush my nose against his, lips tingling, aching to touch his mouth. “You’re right. No more talking about other people. Let’s talk about something else. Does all this make you excited to have a family one day?”

He scowls at the two-year-old with tears streaming down his face. The little one’s wails pierce the air as he stomps his tiny feet against the ground. His mother deserves a medal for watching in patient silence.

His nose crinkles. “You know. I might’ve underestimated how hard parenting actually is. I always imagined the perfect family, but I think you need the right teammate.”

“There’s no such thing as a perfect family. We’re all a little frayed around the edges, but I agree with the teammate thing. That’s why whoever I end up with needs to be steady and calm because my kids can’t have two shitshow parents.”

His fingers latch around my waist. “You’re not a shitshow, Nina. You’re amazing. It takes a lot of bravery to go after what you want.”

He says the words with so much intensity, so much fervor, that I think he actually believes them, but I’m not sure I do.

“Rhode, there you are!”

I stiffen at the posh British accent. A woman with light brown eyes that match her complexion glides toward us, parting the backyard barbecue with

effortless grace.

Her raven-black hair cascades around her shoulders like it's been tousled by a sea breeze. She's wearing a cotton-white dress that flutters to her knees, so each step makes her look like a floating angel. My eyes drop to the massive diamond ring on her left hand, and I exhale in relief.

Rhode kisses my neck. "Alright, I'm warning you. This is one of my exes. Anjali's really nice, though. Promise. She's a family law attorney and helped Patty with some custody issues, but she's engaged now. We're friends."

"Oh. Great," I say, sounding the opposite of great.

I smile tightly, my heart pounding at the idea of talking with one of Rhode's pristine exes. It feels like I'm the only one he's dated that isn't a model, an heiress, or C-level executive, but when insecurity bubbles, I try to remind myself that even though they sparkle, we all shine for someone.

"Rhode Tremblay, you tosser!" Anjali's tinkling laugh drifts on the crisp breeze. "Don't you look dashing. Giving every woman those fanny flutters, as always." She elegantly perches on the arm of the Adirondack chair next to us, cradling her chin. "And hello, lovely to meet you. I'm Anjali Patel, and you are..."

I hold out a shaky hand, trying my best not to compare her stain-free dress to my overalls. "I'm Nina, Rhode's friend. It's so nice to meet you."

She gives me a warm, genuine smile. "Ah, what a lovely name for a lovely girl." She turns to Rhode. "And how are you, doll? It's been ages! I think the last time I saw you was when you called me after that yacht incident. I had a right laugh about that. I can't believe you called a family lawyer for a misdemeanor offense."

Rhode's cheeks turn a little red in the sunlight. "Yeah, not my finest moment."

"You were always a wild one. Bloody good time, though." Anjali taps Rhode's arm. "But look at you now, doing underwear commercials and making single mums around the world fall in love with that turtle on your thigh. What did you name it again? Edwin?"

"Edgar," we both say.

"Ah, yes! That's it. Edgar."

Rhode smiles, but his eyes don't scrunch around the corners like normal. If anything, he looks embarrassed.

Those creases are one of my favorite things, so I interlace our hands. “You know, I read that commercial actually generated a ton of money in donations for nonprofits, so it helped a lot of people.”

Anjali gasps, lightly slapping his arm. I try not to scowl at the motion because I know she’s being nothing but friendly. “Did it really? I had no idea. That’s unbelievable!”

Rhode brushes the hair from behind my ear, and I shiver despite the warm sunlight. “Thank you for that,” he whispers. “You’re always standing up for me.”

He smiles against my neck, tugging me tighter against him, and even though I should pull away, I don’t because his hugs calm me down more than a long run.

They continue talking, but Rhode’s thumb distracts me as it climbs higher and higher up my waist, slipping beneath my overalls to brush the underside of my breast.

I can’t stop thinking about the way he kept his comforting hand on my lower back while introducing me to his friends. How he never once balked when someone’s mouth dropped after they asked my age. The way he proudly tells people about my pottery fellowship.

As a hockey player with enough trophies to fill a mansion, I thought he would treat me like a secret, but he’s shouting my successes to anyone who will listen, the same way I tell everyone about his hockey wins.

All those meaningful little things are adding up to a big problem for my heart.

“Betty did it!” Wyatt suddenly screams across the pool. “She said ‘Dada’! Mom, Mama, y’all, she said it! Come over here!”

“No shit! Let me hear!” Rhode lifts me off his lap and leaps off the chair. He races around the pool over to Wyatt, pulling him into one of those manly slap hugs.

He’s bursting with so much excitement that I’m not even irritated with him for leaving me alone with Anjali. I smile, contemplating whether to go over there, but with the enormous crowd cooing over Wyatt holding Betty, I’d rather have some breathing room, even if it is next to Rhode’s ex.

Anjali chuckles. “Well, that man sure is infatuated with you.”

My stomach does a little flip. “What makes you say that?”

“Because he can’t stop staring at you. That man looks at you like you’re sparkling under the sun.”

“No, he doesn’t.”

“Oh, but he does, doll. He never once looked at me like that.”

I lift a shoulder, trying not to appear like my heart’s doubling in size. “Maybe, but it doesn’t matter. I’m leaving for Argentina in a couple of months, so this ends soon, and I can’t live a life in the spotlight. The NHL’s too intense for me.”

“Yes, their life is rather demanding.” She waves her diamond ring. “That’s why I’m so happy I found my partner. I needed someone willing to give up everything for my career. He’s absolutely incredible...”

“Look at her!” Rhode shouts across the backyard. “She said it again for you, man. Your baby girl’s on a roll!”

As I watch Rhode prop Betty on his hip, looking like he was designed to be a father, something twists in my chest. My thoughts fracture, splintering off in a million different directions.

What am I doing with him?

I’m not ready for that. I’m stealing away his chance to meet someone who actually wants the same things. Someone who wants a family and doesn’t start sweating at the thought of being in a crowded stadium.

The air turns thick like I’m inhaling water.

No.

Not here.

Not again.

I’m on my feet in an instant, the chair clattering behind me. I don’t want to be a burden, so I put on my chronic smile and mutter an excuse to Anjali before barreling onto the back porch.

She probably thinks I’m rude, so this is another thing I’ll be stressing about five years from now when I can’t sleep. Swinging open the front door, I place my hands on my knees, sucking in the crisp farm breeze.

You’re not cliff diving, Nina. You’re fine. You’re just at a birthday party.

My mind’s on that precipice of spiraling, but I can’t risk breaking down in public again, so with trembling fingers, I pull out my phone and text Gwen.

ME

Can you come pick me up? Not feeling great, and I don’t want to make Rhode drive me home.

GWEN

Sure, I’ll be there in ten!

I release a heavy breath, and an overwhelming wave of gratitude for my sister washes over me. I really need to tell her I love her more because no matter how much I distance myself, she always comes for me. I think I'd be devastated if she ever let me push her away.

Tucking my phone in my jeans pocket, I resort to my habitual breathing exercises, resenting every second I'm forced to deal with this mess. Dr. Ghosh swears they work, but sometimes, I think it's all a placebo effect. In the back of my head, Rhode's words play on repeat.

It takes a hell of a lot more strength to climb up something.

I don't want to have to be strong—I just want to *be* strong. I hate that I can't go to a one-year-old's birthday party without losing control, or maybe I won't, I don't know. My heart rate's returning to normal, so these breathing exercises might actually be working.

Shocking.

A door clicks open behind me, and steps echo down the porch. I glance over my shoulder to find Rhode sauntering down the stairs with a wide grin. "Hey, I've been looking for you everywhere. Sorry I left you like that. I got excited." His eyes scan my flushed face, and the grin drops from his lips. "Is everything alright?"

"I'm fine," I snap, too focused on keeping myself from losing control to elaborate.

He reaches for my shoulders, but I jerk back, not wanting him to feel how sweaty I am beneath my overalls. "Hey, talk to me. What's wrong? Did Anjali say something?"

"No, she's wonderful, but it's..." I pinch the bridge of my nose like that will stop my anger from exploding.

My phone buzzes.

I look down to see a message from Gwen letting me know she's parked out front, and the tension drains from my shoulders. "Can we do this later? I need some space, and I'm just going to yell at you again, and say something I regret if we keep talking, so I should go."

His frown deepens. "You're leaving? Why? The party's not over, and I've barely seen you."

"I just need to go," I grit out.

He reaches for my shoulders, but I move away from him because I don't want him to feel how sweaty I am.

He shoves his hands deep in his pockets instead. “I want to help, Nina. That’s all. Anjali said you ran out, and she was worried. I wanted to check on you.”

The softness in his voice makes guilt grow inside me, which festers into anger because I can’t even manage to have a fucking conversation when I’m trying to hold onto that shred of control.

I hate it, but I snap.

“I don’t need anyone’s help, but I especially don’t need *your* help. We’re barely even together. All you do is give me orgasms. Yeah, they might be amazing, legendary even, but that’s all you are to me, so no, I don’t need your help, Rhode.”

I regret the words before they leave my mouth. A muscle jumps in his cheek, but instead of seeming angry, he looks upset. My eyes burn with tears.

“Really? All I do is give you orgasms?” He scoffs, backing away, but he won’t look at me, so I can tell my words hit their hurtful mark. “Alright, then, I guess you’ll have no problem finding them somewhere else.”

RHODE

“After much consideration,” Andrea says on speaker in Camille’s office. “We’d like to offer you a sponsorship contract. We’d love for you to be one of the faces of ¡Vamos!, Mr. Tremblay.”

The words take a second to register because I’m staring at the glass desk. The last time I was in this office, I was devouring Nina’s pussy the same way Camille’s devouring her kale salad. Camille would stab me with that fork if she knew.

“Rhode?” Camille chomps on a dark green leaf.

I rip my gaze away. She’s silently twirling her finger at me, urging me to say something. “Sorry, yes. Thank you for the opportunity, Andrea. I really appreciate it, and I look forward to discussing the terms of our agreement.”

Camille launches into making plans for contract negotiations while I slump back in the seat, exhausted after our morning skate.

I thought I’d be relieved about finally securing a sponsorship, but I know what this means—more money means more pressure. I’ll have to make sure I’m at my peak performance because now I have another contract to uphold, and my body’s hanging on by a thread.

Tack on the fact that the media vultures are still asking about my retirement in interviews, and I’m tempted to prove them right and retire from the League once my contract’s up. That’d be a relief from the constant pressure and physical demands, but I need to get us to the playoffs.

The only person I want to talk to is Nina because she's not immersed in the hockey world, but every time I try to call and apologize, it goes to voicemail, and she's not answering my texts.

It's beyond frustrating.

Mostly because I miss her, and not just the sex. Her jokes, her smiles, her stories.

Just her.

Our string of away games was a solid distraction, but it's been over a week, and my regret is getting worse. I feel like shit for what I said. I don't want her fucking another man, or whispering her secrets in his ear, or sleeping in the same damn bed. That sounds like a worse idea than the Dallas Stars choosing that alien as their mascot.

That's it.

I pull out my phone and text Nina for the millionth damn time, while Camille irons out the details of my contract terms like a pro.

ME

Got off practice early. I'm coming by the studio even if you don't respond. I miss you, and I know it's Wednesday, so you're there.

NINA

You stalking me?

ME

Holy shit you actually responded. What can I say? You drive me crazy. I'm stopping by. I have a surprise for you.

NINA

You better not say your cock

ME

That wouldn't be a very good surprise since you've already seen it (;

NINA

Fine. What's the surprise?

ME

A dick piercing. I got it for your pleasure *salutes*

NINA

How thoughtful

ME

Get excited. I'm about to level up our sex life

NINA

A thigh tattoo and a dick piercing? I'm one lucky woman

ME

The luckiest

NINA

I'm going back to throwing this pot now

ME

Try not to get too wet when you think of my dick piercing

NINA

It'll be hard, but I think I'll manage... and Rhode?

ME

Yeah?

NINA

I've missed you too



AN HOUR LATER, I'm standing in front of the door to the university's art studio. The electricity on the college campus is something I never got to experience because I went straight into the League. An odd sense of nostalgia tweaks in my chest while watching students walk around.

Their lives still undecided, wide open.

Despite the pungent paint scent in the studio, I smell as fresh as an Irish Spring after my shower. I've also turned my baseball cap backward because every time Nina glanced at it during the party, she'd bite her lower lip, and that look always makes me want to take a bite of her. I hitch my gym bag on my shoulder and poke my head in the art studio.

Nina's hunched over a spinning wheel in an apron, glasses sliding down the bridge of her nose while molding her hands to the clay. Her tongue's poking out between her teeth, and she looks so immersed in her art that I lean against the door frame, watching for a minute.

I'm somewhat jealous of the way she's staring at her clay. She's looking at her sculpture like how I used to look at a puck.

I lift my hand, raising it in a knock, when some blond guy in a flannel shirt walks out of the fire room. Kilm room? Kiln?

I can't remember what it's called, but that doesn't matter when the guy's looking down Nina's gaping T-shirt. I clench my fists like that'll stop this possessive feeling from spreading.

I cough to announce my presence because, apparently, all six-foot-four of me is invisible. "Hey, am I interrupting?"

Let's hope so.

Nina snaps her head up so fast her glasses almost fly off. "Rhode? What are you doing here?"

"Not sure why you sound shocked. I told you I was coming over," I say, ignoring the flannel guy.

I stride into the art studio, bypassing a massive mirror and some painting of a headless doll. I shiver. Creepy. The guy scans my face and smirks like he's hot shit, but I invented that look in my twenties.

He shoves his tongue in his cheek, eyes flicking over me. "This your dad, Nina?"

I tighten my clenched fists.

These old man jokes are really grating on me.

She shoots him a glare. "Really, Noah? Stop."

Noah can take the scenic route straight to hell. If he thinks he can one-up me, he's dead wrong. I force a light chuckle like he's a bug I'm about to wipe off my windshield. "Yeah, I'm definitely not her dad, man, but she does like to call me daddy in bed sometimes."

"Rhode," she cuts out, turning to the guy. "He's joking."

My brows fly up. "Am I? Because no one's laughing."

We look at each other like we're silently communicating this guy's a dick. At least, that's what I'm trying to say with my eyes, but she shifts her focus back to her pottery. "We're working on some pieces for the Peaceful Mind Project. Can we talk later?"

I sit down on an art stool and cross my ankle over my knee. "All good. I can wait."

Her eyes narrow. "So, you're just going to sit there and watch us throw pots?"

I roll my eyes like the idea's ridiculous when that's exactly what I'll be doing. "No, I'm not going to watch you. I've got emails to respond to."

I've got all of one email in my inbox, and I think it's a Cross-Stitch of the Month subscription. I'll do a crossword on my phone or something.

With a shrug, Nina goes back to her pottery, and I spend the next twenty minutes trying to figure out what ingredient in baba ghanoush could fit in eight boxes.

Eggplant? Yeah, that's it.

I try to hide my glances at Nina, but it's tough when I can't stop watching her work. She's so talented, and now I'm worrying about what I made her. What if she hates it?

Nina dips her fingers into the small bowl of water by the wheel before gently sculpting the clay. The water shines on her fingertips, reminding me of what my fingers look like when I shove them inside her.

Damn, she's hot when she's working all intense like that.

Heat races down my spine, and I shift on my stool, thinking of that nasty joke Cruz told this morning to stop it from spreading.

All of a sudden, Nina lifts her foot from the pedal and huffs, blowing a strand of hair off her forehead. "You know what? Can we finish this later, Noah? I should probably talk to Rhode."

I clap my hands together. "That sounds like a brilliant idea."

Noah wipes his hands on his apron, giving me a sideways glance. "Sure, but maybe we could get coffee after class on Thursday?"

"Bold move," I almost growl.

His cheeks turn red. Good. Whatever expression he sees on my face has him backtracking. "Or, uh, maybe some other time. I'll see you in class, Nina."

He sprints out of the studio, and I watch the door swing shut with a smug grin, but it falls when Nina pierces me with a look. This girl could rival Coach Watson's death stare. But unlike Coach, Nina's glare gets me a little hard.

"So, you and Noah, huh?" I try to keep my voice calm, but it's difficult when I'm still thinking about Nina and Noah-fucking-potter-boy together, hunched over a wheel.

They're a better match because they're the same age, but I'm not sweating the age gap anymore. So what if I'm older? Big deal. She's got a way of making me feel like a rookie again.

“We’re in the same sculptural ceramics class.” She presses the pedal, spinning the wheel faster. “That’s all.”

“You fucking him?”

“Every night,” she deadpans, molding the clay.

My girl’s such a bad liar. “Do you scream my name when he makes you come?”

She scowls.

I give her my best smirk. “Actually, on second thought, there’s no way that *boy* is making you come.”

“I thought you told me to find someone else?” she challenges.

“That’s what I wanted to talk to you about.” I narrow my eyes. “Turns out, I’m not very good at sharing. In fact, I’d say it’s one of my worst qualities.”

“You’re the only one I want, Rhode.”

Hearing her admit that douses some of the fire in my chest. “Good, because I want you all to myself.”

I stalk toward her and straddle the pottery bench behind her, kneading my thumb over the back of her neck since her shoulders look a little tense. She sucks in a sharp breath, scooting her ass backward so it hits my dick.

I tug her ponytail so she’s forced to look back. “Careful, there. Watching you work is a big turn-on, so keep doing that and I’m going to have a massive problem in my jeans.”

“Oh, massive, is it?” The little fox shoves her ass back right against me, wiggling so my cock stiffens in my pants.

I rub my hands up her bare arms, making goosebumps pebble on her skin. “Gigantic.”

“I think your ego’s bigger than your dick. Please tell me you didn’t actually get a piercing because I like your cock just the way it is. No need to change anything for me.”

“Say that again,” I murmur, scratching my stubble against her cheek. “How much do you like my cock?”

She rests her head back against my shoulder. “You already know how much I like it.”

“Yeah? Is that the only thing you like about me?”

“It’s one of many.”

I dip my hand under her apron, checking the door to make sure no one’s walking past the room. At least the apron hides my hand, and I’ll be quick

about this since I know exactly how to get my girl off.

I brush my hands over the zipper of her jeans, pressing my middle finger over her center. “Do you want me to stop, or do you want to be a greedy girl and come all over my fingers? Your call.”

I pinch the fabric over her clit, and she releases a moan that makes me even harder. “The second one,” she pants. “Definitely, the second one.”

She’s going to hate me for what I’m about to do to her. “You’re gonna have to say it for me.”

“I want to come all over your fingers.”

My lips curl against the softness of her neck. That’s exactly what’s *not* going to happen.

I pull down the zipper of her jeans and dip my hand into the bowl of water by the spinning wheel. Sliding my fingers beneath her panties, I start tracing circles around her clit, all while eyeing the door. No one else is seeing her like this, only me.

She moans. “You didn’t have to use the water, Rhode.”

“I know. You’re always so wet for me, but I wanted to.”

I tug her closer because I need her closer. Using my other hand, I roll her nipple between my thumb and index finger, and her whole body vibrates under my touch.

She moans when I bite her neck, sucking until I leave a red mark for everyone to see. My hard dick digs into her ass, and as she arches back against my shoulder, she forgets about the pottery. The clay’s starting to look like a lump, and I wouldn’t be surprised if it flew off the wheel.

I lick the shell of her ear, tugging on one of her piercings while I pick up the pace of my hand, pinching her sensitive skin. “Do any of those other boys make you feel this fucking good?”

I bite her neck, a bit harder than normal, but she can handle me.

Her knees widen, inviting my fingers to dive deeper into her tight pussy. “No. No one makes me feel like this but you.”

“I do hear I give pretty legendary orgasms.” I nip at her neck as I circle her with my middle finger. Harder, then slower.

She lets out a throaty whimper as she soaks my hand, and I wouldn’t have it any other way. “Is this what you want from me?” I ask. “Just to give you orgasms? That’s all?”

I move my fingers in smooth circles, flicking her clit for the hell of it. She jumps.

“Yes, that’s what I want.” Her fingers dig into my thighs like she’s trying not to lose control, but I want her to feel safe enough to let go with me.

“Then open those pretty eyes and watch me fuck your pussy with my fingers. Look in the mirror,” I demand, struggling to keep my voice even as her words stir a wave of irritation in me.

I want to be more than the man who gives her orgasms because this girl’s going to stay with me long after she gets on that plane. “Look at how good you look with my hand inside you. So naughty, letting me finger fuck you in a pottery studio when anyone could walk inside, but I bet you like it, don’t you?”

The wheel’s stopped spinning so there’s nothing to hide our heavy breathing as our gazes connect in the reflection. She’s needy and glowing, and it’s all for me.

Her eyes dip to the way my arm’s pumping into her beneath her paint-splattered apron as I rock my dick against her ass, needing my own release. She’s drenched, and satisfaction fills me because I’m the man who made her this way.

It’s so intimate that I’m tempted to look away from our reflection, but I can’t. She’s caught me.

We look good together.

I don’t seem too old for her. If anything, Nina makes me feel younger, like I’ve still got something to look forward to after hockey, even if I don’t have a family.

I scrape my stubble against her cheek and continue pumping my fingers until her breathless gasps turn to whimpers. I rub faster, then slower, bringing her to that edge while playing with her nipple. She bucks wildly against my hands, and all the blood rushes down my body.

This ending is going to be hell for me too.

“Are you close?” I say in a rough voice.

“Yes, so close,” she groans, throwing her head back into my shoulder. “I’m right there. Don’t stop.”

I can feel her orgasm starting when her inner muscles spasm around my hand, and that’s when I slide my fingers out, leaving her wanting. “Sorry, but that’s exactly what I’m going to do.”

She blinks at me in the mirror, slow and confused, like she didn’t hear me. I lift my fingers to my lips. She watches our reflection with rapt

attention, and I stare at her as I suck every last drop of her off my hands. I could eat her out for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, and never get enough of her taste.

“Why?” She blinks again, brows coming together. “Why did you stop?”

“Because I’m proving to you that I’m not just the man who gives you orgasms. I’m the man you stay up until midnight talking to, so if you want one, you have to admit that.”

Planting a loud kiss on her cheek, I stand from the bench, adjusting my painful erection. I’ve never been this turned on in my life.

Nina’s expression goes from confused to shocked to furious in less than a second. I want to laugh, but I know I’m about to be on the receiving end of that anger.

She lurches for a paintbrush and throws it across the studio at me. “Rhode Augustus Tremblay, you’re such an asshole!”

I duck, but the paintbrush misses me by a long shot. Blue paint splatters all over the doll painting. Personally, I think it’s an improvement. “Has anyone ever told you that you’ve got the aim of a blindfolded elephant?”

“Well, you’ve got the aim of an arrogant asshole.”

I fight a laugh. Not her best comeback, but I’ll cut her some slack since she’s probably having a hard time focusing. “Go ahead. Keep insulting me. It makes me so hard for you.”

She pins me with a venomous stare. “So, you’re just going to torture me?”

I shoot her a dry look, nodding to my erection bulging in my jeans. “This is torture for me too. Trust me. There’s nothing I want more than to bury myself inside you until you’re scratching my back, but I’d rather prove my point.”

She crosses her arms, shifting on the bench like she’s trying to get some relief. “Okay, point proven. You do more than give me orgasms. Can you please finish what you started?”

“No. Not yet. I came here because I wanted to give you something. Not because I wanted to finger fuck you in an art studio.”

“Rhode, please,” she whines. “This is so unfair.”

The way she begs my name has me reconsidering, but I’ll take care of her later. My willpower’s steel. “Welcome to life.”

“You can’t use my own comebacks on me.”

“But they’re so good they deserve to be used twice.”

After adjusting myself, I dig through my gym bag, pulling out the cross-stitch I've spent the past month making. My heart's pounding almost as much as my dick as I hand it to her. Now, I'm thinking one of the stitches looks a little off-center.

I gulp, handing it over. "Here, I made this for you. I wanted to apologize for what I said at the party. I didn't mean it. If someone's making you come, it better be me, and only me, but I want you to think of me as more than a man who gets you off."

She looks down at the cross-stitch, and I watch her reaction. I want to see that smile spread across her lips because this pattern took me a million tries to get right. I've got so much extra thread in my garbage. She frowns.

Shit. It's not that bad, is it? I thought this one turned out better than normal.

She reaches out and strokes the design like it's made of glass. "It's a turtle."

Alright, that's a good sign. I told Cruz it didn't look like a rock. "Yeah, but not just any turtle. It's a snapping turtle."

Her eyes trace the threaded words I sewed into the pattern. "You can snap if you need to, just don't break on me." Her voice goes quiet. "Did your mom make this one?"

I smile big, damn proud of my handiwork. If she thinks my mom made that, it must be good. "No, that was all me. Took me forever too. What do you think?"

I try not to sound too eager, but it's hard when I'm noting every change in her expression. She doesn't say anything for a while. A long time, so long that I'm second-guessing every stitch.

Finally, she smiles, but it's smaller than I want. "Thank you. This is one of the nicest things anyone has ever given me."

"You like it?"

"Yeah, I love it." Her throat moves as she eyes the stitched turtle. "I'm sorry too, about what I said. I didn't mean it, but I was feeling a little anxious at the party, and I took it out on you when I shouldn't have. Then, I was embarrassed with how I treated you, so I avoided you all week. It's a bad habit I slip into sometimes, and most people let me push them away. You and Gwen are the only ones who've stayed."

"I didn't know that," I say, pressing my lips to the top of her hair. I'm really starting to despise her no-kissing rule, but I'm trying to respect what

she wants. “Next time, talk to me. If you’re feeling anxious, tell me what you need, and I’ll give it to you, but don’t pull away. I’ve missed our late-night phone calls.”

I rub the back of my neck, heat prickling in my cheeks. “You’ve uh, kind of become the first person I want to tell everything to. When I got the ¡Vamos! sponsorship, you were the one I wanted to call.”

How can I tell her that I want to lick every inch of her body, but I fucking blush when I say that I like talking to her?

Her eyes widen behind her glasses. “You got the sponsorship?”

“Yeah, I did. I’m not sure if I’m going to take it, but they finally offered me one.”

She leaps from the stool and launches herself at me. Nina wraps her arms around my waist with so much force that I stumble back into some painting. “I’m so happy for you, Rhode. That’s amazing!”

One of my favorite things about her is the way she throws her whole body into a hug. I squeeze her tight against my chest, twisting her in my arms. I think she’s more excited about this sponsorship than I am.

After a moment, she pulls back, but all the happiness seems to have drained from her face. “So that means you’re renewing your contract next year?”

I grimace at the thought of entering my sixteenth hockey season. Sixteen. Yeah, the top players stay in the League for more than twelve years, but the average NHL career only lasts five or six seasons.

I can’t admit this to anyone, but I can say this to her. “I don’t know. I’m not sure hockey’s what I want anymore. I’m thinking about retiring, but I don’t want to let my team down. They need me.”

“It’s a big decision, and I can’t tell you what to do, but I think you really need to think about what *you* need. Talk to one of your sports therapists or something. You’ve still got a whole life outside of hockey.”

I brush my thumbs around her waist, staring into those stormy eyes of hers. “Yeah, I’m starting to realize that, but I still think I need to renew my contract. I’d feel lost if I didn’t play hockey. What would I do with my life?”

“You could go to the national cross-stitch convention.”

There’s an idea. “Huh, maybe you’re right. It’s always during the season, so I never get the chance.”

“See? You’ve got options.”

“Yeah, but I still feel like my team needs me, so I’ll probably renew if they give me a shot. I hate letting people down.”

“That makes sense...” She lets out a big sigh, like she’s about to face off with whatever she’s about to say. “What are we doing, then? Because I’m leaving in two months, and I don’t want to hold you back from your career when it’s important to you.”

If I were a stronger man, I’d call this off, but I’m weak when it comes to her. We only have two months, so I want to spend them together.

I cradle her cheeks in my hands. “You want to fuck? I’ll fuck you good. You want to eat? I’ll take you out. You want to stay up all night talking? I’ll listen to every word. I’ll do whatever you want as long as I get to be yours until you get on that plane.”

The gold seems to flare in her hazels, but she bites her lip like she’s trying not to speak. Her teeth leave an indent on her skin, and I want to be the one to leave that mark.

Damn her rule.

I’ve waited so long to kiss her that the back of my neck starts sweating every time I think about it now. It’s got to be the best kiss of her life, but I don’t know how much longer I can wait.

I swipe my thumb along her bottom lip, tugging at the soft skin. “I’m starting to hate your rule.”

She gazes up from beneath her eyelashes. “It’s really more of a guideline.”

My back goes rigid. Holy shit. Does that mean I can kiss her now? Her lips part, and I slide my thumb deeper into her warm mouth. She swirls her tongue around my thumb the same way she sucked my dick, and now I’m so hard it hurts.

I need to fucking kiss her.

Leaning closer, I brush my stubble against her cheek. “How hard is this guideline? Think I could break it?”

She releases my thumb with a wet pop. “You could definitely break it. It’s pretty flimsy.”

My pulse quickens at the thought of pressing my lips to hers. It’s like I’m back in high school, and I’m as nervous as hell, but I do my best to cover it up with a stiff smirk. I grip her chin, tilting her head up to mine.

She cocks her head like she’s waiting for me to get my shit together, but I’m worried this will only make me want more of her. Except, I can’t go

another second not knowing what it's like to kiss her, so with a hammering heart, I swipe my tongue along her bottom lip, teasing her. Tasting her. Nina moans against my mouth.

That's all it takes for me to lose every shred of my self-control.

"Fuck me," I growl against her lips. "Why'd I wait this long?"

I grip her waist, pushing us back into a table, and a jar of paintbrushes clatters to the floor. She sucks in a gasp, and I take the opportunity to slide my tongue deeper into her hot mouth.

I cup my hand around the back of her neck, pulling her against my body so I feel her warmth pressed against me. She digs her hands into the rim of my jeans like she needs me as close as I need her. Nina wraps her legs around my waist, and our teeth knock together as I suck her tongue.

I'm normally more controlled than this, but all I can focus on is how I'm hungry for more, and she's the only thing that can satisfy this craving.

She tangles her fingers in my hair, and we start exploring like we're on a mission to learn everything about each other's mouths. Nina kisses me back with a ferocity that would be intimidating if I weren't already unhinged.

We can't seem to stop.

It's like neither of us wants this moment to end, but we know it will. Her leg trembles. So does mine. I love that I'm the reason she's shaking, so I start trying new things to make it happen again.

Pulling.

Sucking.

Biting.

I do that last one a lot.

I've never kissed anyone this wildly before. We're messy and dirty and hell, even a little sloppy, but all of that makes it the best goddamn kiss of my life. I can't get enough of this girl, and that scares the shit out of me because I have to let her go.

I bet she's going to fuck me up forever.

We eventually run out of air.

I pull back, panting as I press my forehead to hers. "I'm glad I waited so long to kiss you."

She frowns. "Why's that?"

I kiss her again and again and again. "Because I knew once I did, I wouldn't be able to stop."

And dammit, I have to stop.

NINA

The days melt into weeks, and the weeks blossom into April.

With finals around the corner, students on campus exchange their parkas for short sleeves, and the Guardians are right on the cusp of making it to the playoffs, which fuels the intensity of the entire team.

I'm lucky to catch glimpses of Rhode in person rather than on a screen with his hectic schedule, but I do have a drawer at his apartment, and he keeps a toothbrush in my bathroom. Our relationship is quickly spiraling from casual to serious, and the thought of saying goodbye is terrifying.

I can feel myself falling into the abyss of love.

The distance does nothing to dampen my feelings for him. If anything, it makes me yearn for more nights spent cuddling in bedsheets.

Rhode's a secret snuggler.

I call his massive body my personal space heater, and he rolls his eyes, but I can tell he's trying not to smile because I've memorized all the nuances of him.

Nights aren't all I crave, though. I want Rhode's Saturday mornings and all the mundane moments in between, but the only thing I get most days is his sleepy smile on a screen.

I stare at him enough that I can draw his chiseled features with my eyes closed, but he's gone so much that the sound of his laughter is fading from my memories. I desperately want to remember the smoky timbre for when our lives veer in opposite directions.

I lurch up from the bar stool, screaming at the giant TV on the brick wall. “Come on, that was a penalty, ref! Are you sleeping? Open your eyes!”

“Hey!” the bartender shouts, flicking a towel over his shoulder. “No yelling in my bar. How many times do I have to warn you, Alstyne? I’m kicking you out if it happens again.”

“If you want me out, you’ll have to throw me out, Bart,” I say to the gray-haired bartender, who only ever smiles at his seven-year-old son. “This game decides if they’re going to the playoffs. It’s a big deal for my boys.”

My boys.

He grumbles to himself behind the counter, pulling one of the sixty beer taps for a customer. The man’s harmless. He’s all threats and no follow-through.

I settle onto the wooden stool. Ever since Gwen and I stumbled into this place, Blue Line Brews has become our go-to spot to watch Guardian's games when I can't be there in person, which is what happened today since I had an exam.

The old-time bar has five exits, wide open picnic tables, and an array of nonalcoholic beers, so I can actually relax. I’ve been wanting to bring Rhode here, but he’s been busy training, which is good.

Every kiss from him is charting a pathway to my heart, and it’s scaring me how attached I’m growing.

I’ve been spending every hour cramming for finals that I may as well live in the library. On top of that, I still have to finish my speech for The Peaceful Mind Project, which I’m dreading. Honestly, just thinking about standing up there, trying to sound intelligent and inspiring, has me chewing my nails.

On the screen, Rhode drops down into butterfly, making another save. I clap my hands, whooping. “Hell yeah, that’s my man!”

Gwen leans over my shoulder, sipping her grass-green beer that’s a leftover flavor from St. Patrick’s Day. She’s always trying random things to be different, but it must not have sold very well since St. Paddy’s Day was weeks ago.

“So, how have things been going with you two?” she asks. “I feel like you’ve turned into his biggest fan.”

I've been trying to cover my feelings with jokes or sarcastic comments, but there's one thing I realized after tossing in bed all night since Rhode wasn't there—I'm falling hopelessly in love with Rhode Tremblay.

It's horrible, really, but I can't stop. All these little moments have piled up. Every smile, every late-night phone call, every time he won or lost a game and wanted to talk with me, each hug, the laughter, all the times he didn't walk away when I pushed.

Love is made with little moments, and we have enough to build a castle.

I'm not going to have some deep over-the-top confession in the middle of a brewery that smells like malty hops, so I make a flippant comment. "Oh, you know, I'm completely in love with him, and there's nothing I can do about it, so that's great."

Gwen splutters out her green beer. A droplet lands on her cashmere sweater. "I'm sorry, what? You're joking, right? I can't tell. Or are you actually in love with him? Wait..." She peers closer, and her smile turns sympathetic. "Oh no, you are in love with him. It's all over your face."

"Yeah, I know." I take a swig of my alcohol-free beer. It tastes like oats, but it's what Rhode always drinks, so I'm giving it a shot. "It was naive to think I wouldn't fall for him. How could I not, Gwen? He's this sweet, funny, insanely talented hockey player who makes me cross-stitches. Of course I was going to fall in love with him."

"Yeah, I know. You were doomed the moment he stepped into your car."

"Oh, and last week, when I had that issue with my passport, Rhode helped me call the office and stayed on hold for hours, Gwen, *hours*. He's the first person I want to tell every good and bad thing to and all the little things in between." I groan. "I even got a tattoo for him. How pathetic is that?"

She hisses a breath. "Please tell me you didn't get his name tattooed on you. I'll look up removal places if you did."

"Don't worry, it's not his name, but I'm not telling you. It's private."

I'm hoarding that mistake like a secret. It's something I can make up a meaning for, but that's what I get for walking into a tattoo parlor all blissed out on an orgasm after Rhode blindfolded me, tied me to his headboard, and made me come so hard I forgot my middle name.

Now, he'll be imprinted forever on my body.

Gwen peers at me in my periphery, but I keep my eyes on the hockey game. "You sound... oddly okay with all of this?"

My throat burns, so I take another sip of beer. It doesn't quench the ache. "No, I'm not okay, but I have to be because there's no alternative. There's nothing I can do about the fact that I'm in love with him. The only person I have to blame is myself because he's never once led me on. He's always been upfront about what he wants."

"What's that?"

"Marriage. A family. Kids. I could be that person if I were older, but I'm not in a place to sacrifice my dreams. I'd never ask him to give up what he wants either, and he's going to renew his contract, so this ends when I leave."

We aren't destined, but that's okay.

The idea of fate bringing two strangers together is a pretty one, but love is stronger when it's a choice. Rhode will find his perfect match and get the perfect house with the perfect life, and it will all be so *perfect*. My scoff blows a piece of hair off my forehead.

I hope the woman he ends up with is absolutely nothing like me. Maybe I'll meet some Argentinian *Alfarero*—a potter who can only communicate through kisses since we don't speak the same language. Nausea churns at the thought of someone who isn't Rhode, but this way, even if my heart breaks, I won't.

"You realize how many women would kill to be in your position right?" Gwen asks. "I'd give up my career for that man. Let him fund your life."

"Well, he's not your man, he's my man." I bristle in annoyance because that doesn't even come close to Rhode's depth.

"I didn't fall in love with Rhode Tremblay, Nashville's Naughtiest Bachelor. I fell in love with the man who makes me cross-stitches, and always makes sure I have an aisle seat. The man who drives forty-five minutes to buy decaf beans from my favorite roaster. The man I spend more time staring at on a screen than I do in person because he's gone so much," I mutter, sipping my beer. "I hate being in love with a professional athlete. I never see him."

"Okay, you're right. I'm sorry." She wraps her arm around me, and instead of pulling away, I rest my cheek on her slender shoulder. "What are you going to do about it?"

I swallow around the giant lump that's taken permanent residence in my throat. "It's getting to be too much, so I'll probably end things soon, and then fuck my way through Argentina."

“That sounds really unhealthy.”

“Yeah, it’s a horrible coping mechanism, but it’s the only one I’ve got. It’s going to hurt no matter what, but I need to break my own heart before he does.”

The idea of ending things makes it feel like something’s dying in my chest, but I’ll survive. I always do.

I shift my gaze back to the TV. Eighty-Eight looks like he’s getting ready for a breakaway, but at the last second, Micah intercepts the puck. I cheer and then sink back down onto the wobbly stool.

Gwen twists the napkin on the bar counter, spinning it around like a whirling thought. The Guardians almost score another goal before she says anything. “If I tell you something, will you promise not to get mad?”

I keep my focus locked on the screen so I don’t miss anything. “No, I can’t promise that until I know what you’re going to say, but if it’s bothering you, you should tell me anyway.”

“You’re going to hate me again,” she mumbles.

That comment has me glancing her way. She’s staring into the depths of her green beer like she wants the murky liquid to swallow her. “What is it?”

“What a rocket!” the announcer shouts. “Look at that puck fly!”

I whip my gaze to the screen right in time to see Rhode block the shot. The bar erupts into raucous cheers. I cup my hands around my mouth. “Woo! Go, Tremblay! Did you see that, Gwen? Okay, sorry. Got distracted. What were you saying?”

She squeezes her eyes closed, inhaling the hoppy-scented air, and my stomach coils tight. The only time I’ve seen her this nervous was when she kept hiding her relationship with Isaac.

“Okay, I’m just going to come out and say it because you love him, and this has been eating me alive... I might’ve kissed Rhode once when I was wasted, but it was before you met him,” she blurts. “It meant absolutely nothing, I swear. He pushed me away and didn’t even kiss me back, but I asked him not to tell you because we’d been doing so well, and I didn’t want to make you upset.”

I blink, trying to process her confession. “You... kissed him?”

She looks at her beige nails. “Yeah, it was the night that tire popped. Isaac and I had a massive fight about... Never mind. It doesn’t matter. I was mad, so I walked up to the first hot stranger I saw and kissed him.”

I crumple a napkin in my hand as I imagine them in some smoky bar, shoving their tongues down each other's throats. Anger tinged with jealousy bolts through me like nothing I've ever felt. It's a hundred times worse than when I walked in on her with Isaac.

"Please tell me this is a fucking joke, Gwendolyn."

She has the audacity to look guilty but quickly reaches for my arm. I yank my hand away before she can touch me. "It's not, but I swear he never kissed me back, and I don't feel anything for Rhode. Nothing, and honestly, Nina, even if I did, that man looks at you like you're the only star in the sky. I would never *ever* do anything to jeopardize our relationship again. I promise."

"Obviously you feel something if you kissed him." I throw a hand out and accidentally knock over my glass of beer onto the wooden floor. "Can you not let me have one thing?"

I scramble down to pick it up. "Why are you always like this? You take everything. If it's not Isaac, it's Rhode. If it's not my nail polish, it's my shirt. You're even wearing my earrings right now."

"Alstyne!" Bart yells. "Tone it down."

"Sorry, Bart. We're in the middle of a very heated argument."

"Well, un-heat it."

Gwen's green eyes blur with tears. "Nina, it's not like that at all."

"Right. Of course you don't think it's like that because you get everything. The perfect life. The perfect job. The guy. Fucking everything," I spit out. "Do you get some vindictive satisfaction out of this? Is that it?"

"Nina, please," she pleads, gripping my arm. I snatch it away. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. It didn't mean anything, and I would never want you to feel that way."

"That's what you said last time, Gwendolyn. I can't keep giving you second, no third, chances."

"Ladies and gentlepeople," the announcer says, cutting through my crimson haze. "We've got a concerning turn of events here. It appears that Rhode Tremblay, the backbone of the Guardian's defense, has been injured on the ice. Play has come to a halt, and the medical staff is rushing to his aid. Let's hope it's nothing serious, and he'll be back on his feet soon."

A chill cracks through my body like ice splintering on a frozen lake, submerging me in dread. Whipping my head to the screen, I watch as a team of medics run onto the ice. The view turns blurry.

Why can't I see?

I swipe at my eyes, and water glistens on my fingers. The play's stopped, so no one's skating.

Even the crowd in the bar is quiet.

I cover my hands over my mouth in a silent scream as the medical team hovers over Rhode, but I can't see him beneath the bodies.

No. No. *No.*

I can't see him.

I need to see him.

My heart throbs in my ears, and I can feel the panic rising as gut-wrenching terror swells. A wave of dizziness rolls over me, and I grip the table so I don't faint.

The anxiety is always there, lurking, but I can't afford to lose my shit if he's hurt. I'm barreling through the door out of the bar before they've even carried him off the ice.

"Nina, wait!"

"I'm not staying here, Gwendolyn." My voice shatters. "I need to be with him."

"I know, but you ran out so fast that you forgot your backpack. Come on, I'll drive you."

RHODE

“Do you want the good news or the bad news first, Tremblay?” Dr. Hutch crosses her arms over her scrubs.

Medical staff rush around the on-site facility. I sit up from the navy table with a wince. “Hit me with the bad news. Let’s hear it.”

A sharp pain slices through my shoulder. The acute sensation shoots up my arm and knocks the wind out of me for a second.

I should’ve taken the high-dose meds they offered, but painkillers are an easy slope to slip down for athletes, so it’s a do-or-die situation for me. I took the low-grade ones because I don’t want to be knocked out.

Dr. Hutch grins sympathetically, crinkling her brown eyes. Her bedside manner is top-tier because I can never tell whether it’s real or fake, and she’s been our team doctor for over three years.

She nods to my arm. “I’m sorry, Tremblay, but with an AC joint tear like that you’re out for the rest of the season. No playoffs.”

“But you said it was only a minor one. Grade two, right?”

“Right, but it could still take up to a couple of months to heal.”

Anger rages through me, and I ball my functioning hand into a fist, feeling the tension pulsating through my knuckles. We’ve put in so much work, and now I won’t get to help my team win the Cup. Yeah, I’ve already won two Stanley Cups over my hockey career, but still, I wanted another one.

I'm not going to get pissed at Dr. Hutch for delivering the news, so I match her straightforward tone. "Alright. What's the good news?"

She hooks her stethoscope around her neck. "The good news is this isn't career-ending. You can easily rehab an injury like this during the off-season and come back ready to play. You'll be good as new if you follow your physical therapist's plan."

I breathe deeply until the fury dies down, but once it does, there's a kernel of... something. Disappointment, maybe? I'm not sure. It would've been nice to have been forced into retirement due to an injury.

No, that's not right. I shake my head.

I want to go out on my own terms. I'd never want to be forced into the decision. What the hell am I thinking? I'm here to play. I've got fifteen seasons under my belt. What's one more?

I blow out a breath, nodding slowly. "Alright, well, that's good to know. Thanks, Dr. Hutch."

"You've been through worse. You'll be fine. Rest up tonight and get some sleep. Your body needs it. Stay here, and we'll get you in a brace."

Dr. Hutch reviews my prescriptions before exiting our team's on-site medical facility, leaving me in the care of Dane, one of the nurses. I slump back on the table, careful not to nudge my swollen shoulder.

All I want is to sleep next to Nina after being scanned and x-rayed. Poked and prodded. But she's not going to show up when she's busy studying for finals. No one but my family and teammates ever does.

This isn't my first injury by a long shot, so I know what to expect. Rehab is going to be a bad time. The thought of sitting on the bench watching my team win without me makes me want to jet off to Argentina and kick back with one of those umbrella drinks.

My body's probably somewhere in the forties as far as wear and tear goes. I've put in fifteen seasons of pro mileage, and if it weren't for my teammates, I might be done. Fifteen seasons in the League are catching up to me.

Nina's words come back to me. *Frayed around the edges*. That's exactly how I feel. I'm not broken, but I'm cracking. I trace my good hand on the table, inhaling the smell of disinfectant. There's a scratch with cotton stuffing popping out, so I push it back inside like my negative thoughts. My team needs me, and I can't let them down.

Simple as that.

Rumbling footsteps pound down the hallway. For a second, I hope it's Nina, but they're too heavy compared to her light steps. She's spent so much time at my place that I know how her walk sounds, and I wouldn't have it any other way.

"Tremblay!"

Cruz and Patty charge through the glass doors, still sweaty in their gear. They grind to a halt as they spot me seated on the table, awake and unharmed.

"See?" Patty heaves a loud sigh. "Told you he was fine, Cruz. You didn't need to piss yourself and scream at the ref. Tremblay's a professional."

Cruz sniffs, using his elbow to wipe his red eyes. "I knew the old man would be fine, but that was a rough hit."

"Aw, you worried about me, kid?" I joke.

Cruz looks down at his feet. "Nah, now that I see you're alive, I'm leaving."

"No, you're not," I counter, crooking a finger at Cruz. "Come here."

They stride past the hydrotherapy tubs until they're right beside me. Both of their expressions are shuttered, so I can't tell what they're thinking. Cruz squeezes my good arm, and I pat his hand.

Patty nods to my shoulder, his jaw set. "How bad is it? You out for the rest of the season, or can you play through it?"

One thing I've learned after fifteen seasons is that bluntness is always better when it comes to sports injuries. "I'm out, so no playoffs. Looks like I'll be watching you win the Cup from the bench."

Cruz slams his fist against the treatment table. "That dirty fucker! Ninety shouldn't have been crowding the net. I knew it was getting out of control. I can't believe he slashed you, and all he got was a two-minute minor."

"Yeah, but we know he plays dirty." I attempt a shrug, but it morphs into a grimace when a sharp pain zips through my shoulder.

Patty grips my good arm. "I'm pissed right now too, but you'll renew your contract, and we'll go for the Cup again with you by our side. This isn't the end."

"Hell yeah, we will." Cruz widens his stance with determination. "You'll rehab during the off-season. No more golfing Pebble Beach, and

then you'll be good as new. This isn't the fucking minors. We need you on the ice."

The pressure of their words settles on my shoulders, dragging me down. Everyone needs something from me. Camille needs me to sign the sponsorship contract. My mom needs me to call her back. Coach needs me to perform. My teammates need me to block.

The only person who doesn't need anything from me is Nina, and that has me tempted to give her everything.

But I chose this career. No, I worked my ass off to get here. Hockey's in my blood, but the performance expectations for the NHL are insane. We're held to the highest standards because we're the best players in the world.

It's exhausting but addicting.

It would be nice to skate once just for the hell of it, though. I can't remember the last time I skated for fun. I think it might've been on that frozen pond when I was a kid, the icy wind turning my face red.

"Get off me! Let me through," a familiar voice shouts. "I need to see him!"

I jerk up from the medical table at Nina's panicked shouting, and damn if her concern isn't the first thing to make me smile all day.

Cruz flicks his eyes up. "By the way, I called Phil to let her know you're fine, but she's freaking the fuck out, so have fun with that."

I smack the back of his head with my good hand. "I don't care if she's freaking out as long as I get to be the one to calm her down."

"Ow." He rubs his sweat-soaked hair. "You've got it so bad for her."

"Yeah, and I wouldn't have it any other way."

"What are you going to do when she leaves?" Patty asks.

"Hell if I know." My chest constricts. I can't talk about that. I can't even think about it.

Nina sprints through the glass doors with her glasses lopsided and blonde hair a mess. She's wearing my jersey, and the sight of her instantly loosens the knot in my chest. Her eyes meet mine, and she stops. I think the planet stops spinning.

She scans my body in a clinical way like she's checking for injuries, but I don't want her to worry, so I hold out my good arm. "Come here. I'm fine. Just stay on my left side."

Her hand flies to her mouth, eyes creasing with concern. "Are you sure? I don't want to hurt you."

“The only way you’re going to hurt me is by not being in my arms right now.”

“Fucking lame,” Cruz coughs under his breath.

Patty smacks his face.

“Thanks for that,” I say.

“Anytime.”

A sob breaks from Nina’s mouth, and then she’s running through the medical facility, barreling right between Patty and Cruz until she’s in my arms.

She buries her head in the crook of my neck, and I pull her into my chest. I probably smell disgusting after the game since I never showered, but she doesn’t seem to mind, and now I’ve got the whole world in my arms.

“Where’s my hug, Phil?” Cruz says. “Did you even notice I was in the room?”

“No, I didn’t,” she mutters into my neck.

Cruz snorts. Patty tugs him by his jersey, ushering him out of the medical facility. “Come on. Let’s give these two some privacy. We’ll be back in a few.”

They walk out the sliding glass doors, leaving me alone with Nina, which is exactly what I want. Leaning back, she places her warm hands on my cheeks and kisses every inch of my face.

“I saw what happened on TV, but I was so worried,” she says. “Cruz got me back here, but you’re okay? Right? You’re fine?”

I kiss her lips. “Don’t worry about me. I’m fine. It’s just a shoulder sprain. Nothing rehab won’t fix.”

She kisses me harder, like she doesn’t want to stop. “Is that what they said? All you have to do is rehab, and you’ll be back on the ice?”

“Yeah, it’s my dominant arm, so I’ll be out for a few months, but then I’ll be back next season. Ready to play.”

Her eyes narrow on my rigid expression. “Why are you smiling all stiff like that? You don’t sound happy. Isn’t this good news? You’re not out for good, right? You can go for the Cup again next year?”

I want to grin at the way she shortened the Stanley Cup like we all do, but I can’t get my lips to move. “No, you’re right. I hate that I’m being taken out of the playoffs, but it could’ve been a lot worse, so I guess it’s a good thing.”

“You sound like you’re convincing yourself.” Her eyes scan my face, catching on the little cuts I know are there. She pulls me closer, and I can’t help but lean into her chest as she cradles my head, stroking my hair. The pain ebbs. I could fall asleep in her arms.

“You don’t have to pretend with me, Rhode. I want you to be real. No bullshit.”

I sigh into the crook of her neck and press a quick, grateful kiss to the skin below her ear. “I’m so tired. Everything hurts, but I can’t retire. I can’t let my team down, and it needs to be on my terms. There are some players that go well into their forties. Gretzky didn’t retire until thirty-eight.”

She gives me a flat look, pulling back. “He was a center. You’re a goalie. That’s a lot harder on your body, Rhode. You’ve got pucks flying at you and all that extra gear, and you’re on the ice for the entire game.”

My brows soar, and I grin a bit. My girl’s picked up on a few things. “Alright, Brodeur played twenty-two seasons before he retired.”

“Nice try.” She taps my nose. “He’d been demoted to the Blues number three goalie. Do you really want to go out of the League as a backup? Because my guess is you don’t. If you play into your forties, that’s what will happen.”

Well, damn.

All that research is paying off. She knows her shit. But if I retire, I’ll be standing at the starting line of a journey to find myself, and that’s terrifying. I let out a gruff laugh at the thought.

It’s hard to believe Nina and I are in the same place in life, but there’s over a decade between us.

I loop my fingers through hers. “You’re right, but I can’t quit, Nina. I’ll rehab, and I’ll be back next season because my team needs me. I don’t let people down.”

Decision made.

She bites her bottom lip. I might be in pain, but it doesn’t stop me from wanting to dig my teeth into her soft skin. “Have you tried talking to Micah or Wyatt about this? I’m sure they’d understand.”

“No, I can’t. They wouldn’t get it. They’re at the beginning of their hockey career. The only person I can be honest with is you because you don’t care about hockey.”

“I think I might care a little now.”

I tug a strand of her hair. “Just a little?”

“Okay, a lot.” She kisses my cheek. “I might’ve become your biggest fan somehow over these past four months.”

Talking to her feels like taking off fifty pounds of extra gear. Nina listens to me rant about hockey. Goes to my games even though she doesn’t like crowds. Researches groin stretches.

Nina Alstyne’s climbing higher and higher on the list of most important people in my life. I should make this girl a bucket of cross-stitches, but that still wouldn’t be enough.

She steps back, studying my face. Her mouth opens and closes a few times, but she settles on a small grin that doesn’t reach her hazel eyes. “That’s what you’ll do. You’ll rehab and come back. They need you, and you’ll be there for them next season.”

I’m not sure what I expected her to say, so I don’t know why I feel crushed by that response. I should’ve known my girl doesn’t need me. Nina’s strong all on her own. She’s never once asked for more, and always takes my dreams into consideration.

She climbs onto the medical table and nuzzles into my chest. I wrap my good arm around her pulling her as close as possible to me, and we stay in this peaceful bubble as we watch medical staff run around.

I miss this girl even when she’s in my arms.

Nina stays until they put my shoulder in a brace, order my prescriptions, and give me the all clear to leave. She drives me back to my place and stops at the store to get some ice packs, but she’s quieter than normal on the ride home, which has me shifting in my seat.

We walk through my apartment door, and Chicken nuzzles her calves this time. She puts her shoes by my coat rack, like always. I drop my bag next to them, like always.

I settle onto my leather couch. All of this feels so normal, so comfortable, that it takes me a minute to realize Nina hasn’t said a word since we left the medical facility.

I pat the couch. “Come lay down with me. I’m cold, and I want you to warm me up.”

She leans back against the marble counter, putting more distance between us. “I can’t stay. I should probably go. I have to prep for my speech, and you should sleep.”

“How’s that coming, by the way?” I ask to keep her talking. “Still nervous?”

“Of course. The anxiety never goes away.”

“We can practice some more if you stay tonight.”

She looks down at her feet. “I can’t, Rhode. I’ve got an early class in the morning.”

My head tilts. She never fights me about staying over, and I know for a fact she doesn’t have class because I know her schedule. “I thought you didn’t have class on Fridays. I’ve missed you, and we barely get any time together. Just stay. Please?”

Her hazels look shinier than normal as she scans my face in the same way I watch an opponent trying to figure out their next move. My heart starts racing like it knows something my brain doesn’t.

“I’m so, so glad you’re okay, Rhode. You have no idea, but...” She sucks in a big breath like she’s about to deliver a punch. “Okay, I’m just going to say it. I can’t do this anymore. It’s too much.”

I sit up. “Do what? Stay here? Is it because Chicken sheds all the time? I know it’s annoying as shit, but I’ll vacuum.”

She snorts, but it sounds like a sniff. “Really? *You’ll* vacuum? Not your cleaning guy? You don’t even know where your vacuum is.”

“I know where my vacuum is. It’s...” Where do I keep my vacuum? Wait, why the fuck am I thinking about a vacuum right now? “Never mind. Doesn’t matter. What are you talking about?”

I think she tries to smile, but it looks like she ate something that tastes bad. “This. Us. It’s becoming too much for me, and seeing you hurt on the ice...” Her voice shakes. “I was so worried, and it really scared me. It just made me realize that I need to go before things get too deep. I’m leaving for Argentina, and you need to focus on rehab, so I don’t want to hold you back. Your team needs you to get better.”

She might as well slam me into the boards. That’d be less painful. “So, you’re stopping this?”

“Yes.” She swallows thickly. “You should focus on rehab, and I need to finish school and get ready for my fellowship. I know you want a family and marriage and all that, but I’m just not there yet. I’d have to give up everything to be with you, and I’m not in a place to do that for someone.”

My heartbeat quickens, pounding through my bloodstream. The feeling is so overwhelming that I forget about the throbbing in my shoulder. I’m trying to understand what she’s saying, but it’s not making sense.

“But you’ve got a drawer at my place?”

That was a dumbass response.

“It’s just a couple of T-shirts. You can keep them.”

I sit up, grasping for anything. She can’t leave. “What about the charity auction? Do you still want me to go with you? We can go as friends.”

I flinch. There’s no way those words came out of my mouth. I can’t be her goddamn *friend* after knowing what she tastes like. What it feels like to be inside her. What makes her smile and laugh.

She shakes her head. “No, I can’t be platonic with you. We both knew this was never going to last.”

“Don’t do this,” I beg. “Don’t end this earlier than it needs to. What’s the point? You’re leaving anyway, and I want to spend every moment I can with you.”

“I know, but I need to try and protect myself, and I need you to respect that. You’re amazing, Rhode, but this is too hard for me.” She swipes at the tears under her eyes. “Focus on rehab. I need you to get better, so I can watch you win the Cup next year.”

She’s right. I know she is, but it feels like I’ve been bodychecked. I can’t even fight for her because what would I be fighting for?

Nothing.

I’d have to ask her to give up her dreams in exchange for mine, and like hell am I going to be the man who stops her from dreaming.

The best thing about dreams is that no one can control them, and I want hers to run wild. I can’t form a single sentence because I’m afraid if I speak, I’ll beg her to stay. I nod instead, swallowing around the burning in my throat.

She waits for me to say something, but when I don’t, she walks forward, hesitant, and I go still when she lightly presses her mouth to mine in the quickest peck, but something detonates inside me.

It takes everything in me not to open my mouth, slide my tongue between her lips, and demand more like a greedy bastard.

“Goodbye, Rhode,” she whispers against my lips. “In another life, I think you would’ve been my forever.”

Yeah, but I want her in *this* life.

And fuck, maybe it’s on me to figure out how to make that happen.

She walks out without looking back. I watch my apartment door close, and I can’t help but feel like this girl stole something from me that I’ll never find again.

RHODE

“Gross, you have a beard.” Wyn kicks my apartment door closed with her golf shoes, striding past the skates I tossed by the coat rack that’s empty due to the warm late April breeze.

It opens a second later, and Cruz struts through with a scowl. “Did you really just slam the door in my face, Wyn?”

“That’s what you get for not listening to me when I said to take I-40. It took us an extra twenty minutes to get here.”

I ignore their bickering and focus on the bland chicken breast spinning in the microwave. Wyn nudges me out of the way, pressing the stop button. “What are you doing? We’re getting lunch with Dad in thirty minutes. Go change and shave that beard. It’s not a good look for you. It’s giving seventies dad and not the hot kind.”

“It’s hard to shave with my left hand,” I say.

Thankfully, the sling comes off in a few days.

“Yeah, and it’s a playoff beard.” Cruz gestures to his stubble. “We all have one.”

“You call that patchy carpet on your face a beard?” Wyn huffs. “And no, it’s a breakup beard because he’s still wallowing about Nina, and he can’t play with his shoulder.”

Her name is like a slap.

It feels like I’ve been through the seven stages of grief over the past three weeks since she called things off. I went through this angry phase

where I convinced myself Nina would've never fit into my life, but then I found one of her old T-shirts on the ground and smelled it for over an hour.

Chicken judged from his cat castle.

The throb she left in my chest is a constant ache, so I've been distracting myself with rehab and meeting with my sports therapist to discuss my potential retirement.

I've been pouring over my contract for the past few weeks, imagining a life without hockey, and I'm getting closer and closer to signing on that dotted line, but I can't bring myself to do the deed.

I've tried looking at other women, but I feel sick anytime I so much as glance at someone else because they don't have her beautiful eyes or sense of humor.

They don't call me on my bullshit.

They don't stand up for me.

They don't make me feel invincible, even without hockey.

I've spent so much time focusing on all the ways we're wrong for each other, I didn't realize how right we are together, but none of that matters because Nina doesn't want me, or this life, and I'm not going to ask her to change.

Wyn hops up on my marble counter, smoothing her white golf skirt. "Don't worry, Ro. I'm a little sad about Nina too. I really liked her."

Cruz nods. "Yeah, Phil was good for you."

I shove my hands in my hoodie pocket, wincing at his nickname for her. "You didn't think I was too old for her?"

Wyn waves a hand. "Please, not at all. Stop that. You're the only one worried about the age difference. She made you smile all the time, and you were lighter around her. Less hockey, more Rhode, if that makes sense. I don't care who you end up with as long as they make you happy."

I miss her so damn much, and I didn't realize how ingrained she'd become in my life until she left.

I swallow around the lump that got stuck in my throat a month ago, changing the subject because it's hard to talk about her. "What are you two doing here? I thought we were meeting at the restaurant."

"I didn't trust you not to cancel on me and Dad, so I came over to drag you there," Wyn says. "Cruz came with me for literally no reason other than the fact that he saw me at the arena looking for you."

Cruz stares at my sister, or maybe he's glaring, I can't tell. "I wanted to check on Tremblay to make sure the old man's okay. That's why I came because I'm *nice*."

Wyn sighs dramatically, looking down at her nails. "Get ready, Ro. No more sulking. You've never acted like this before, so pull yourself together. Even Nina looks more put together every time I see her in class."

A rush of questions floods me. How's she doing? Is she happy? Is she sleeping? The urge to bombard Wyn with them is hard to combat, but I grit my jaw.

With a grunt, I push open the door to my bedroom, leaving Wyn and Cruz bickering over who knows what in the kitchen.

My room's a mess of clothing and gear, so I grab the first pair of sweats I can find. It's a hassle with the sling. I put on a navy Guardians cap to hide my unwashed hair before walking into the kitchen without shaving. I'm not trying to impress anyone.

My beard's fine.

Wyn and Cruz are nose to nose, shouting in each other's faces. Well, Wyn's yelling. Cruz is staring her down with a tight jaw. At the sound of my footsteps, they jump back.

Wyn huffs a breath and scans my clothing. "Really, Ro? This is a fancy restaurant. You can't wear sweats. I told you to change."

"Let them throw me out if they want. It's not like I'm itching to spend time with Morgan."

"Do you ever go to restaurants that aren't fancy?" Cruz interrupts.

"No, because I have excellent, albeit expensive, taste," she quips. "Something you're probably unfamiliar with."

"You know your insults bounce right off me, right?"

She flicks her ponytail. "Good thing I have a lot of them."

"Can you two stop arguing for one second?" I pinch the bridge of my nose. With my injury and Nina leaving, my temper's been simmering below the surface. "I'm not changing, so if they want to throw me out of the restaurant, fine."

Wyn grabs her purse from the counter, swinging it around so it hits Cruz's shoulder. "Fine. Let's go. I'm starving, and Dad's waiting."

We leave the apartment and head down into the parking garage. Cruz trails behind Wyn like a lost kitten until we climb into my Range Rover.

She slams the door in Cruz's face before he can say goodbye, so I give him a sympathetic salute in the window.

Pressing the start button, I pull the car out of the parking lot, and Wyn goes off about Cruz. She talks at me for the entire fifteen-minute drive, never once taking a breath. With those lungs, my sister should've been an Olympic swimmer, not a golfer. Though, it's a solid distraction from thoughts of Nina, so I'm glad she's talking.

We pull up to the valet at the restaurant, and Wyn hops out of the car. She looks me over in my sweats, eyes lingering on some stain, and pulls me into a tight hug. "You're going to be fine, Ro. Thanks for driving and for coming. It means a lot to me that you're trying with Dad."

"I'm only doing this for you."

Tossing my keys to the valet, I hold open the restaurant's door for Wyn. Chandeliers dangle from the wooden ceiling above the waiters carrying trays of steaming food. Every eye turns to me in my joggers, and I immediately feel out of place in the crowd of button-downs.

My father's sitting in the corner by some fiddle leaf fig, staring at the menu through his reading glasses. I only know the name of the plant because Nina's got one in her room that she loves. I wince.

Great. There's that ache in my chest again. I scan the restaurant, jerking to a stop when I see the girl by the hostess.

No.

Sweat beads on my neck.

Nina's by the counter with that art guy. Brandon? Can't remember his name. Not that I care. At least she's frowning at him like she doesn't want him standing so close to her.

She's wearing her overalls without a shirt underneath, so all her bare tattooed skin is exposed. She looks beautiful, but she's not smiling, and I need her to be happy even if we aren't together.

The asshole throws an arm around her shoulders, but she dodges the attempt. I swear the red I see is blood-colored. I'm going to break his hands for touching her if that's not what she wants. No, I can't because I'm in a shoulder brace, but I'm tempted.

Really tempted.

Maybe I'll break a finger.

I sweep my good hand through my hair, trying not to act like an immature jackass. "What the hell is Nina doing here, Wyn?"

She twists her ponytail. “Oh, did I forget to mention that I asked her to meet me here to drop off some notes for my art history final? My mistake. I thought I told you. Didn’t I tell you?”

“You know you didn’t tell me,” I cut out, pulling at the back of my neck. “I would’ve shaved.”

“I specifically remember telling you to shave before we left.”

This restaurant feels like a sauna. I pull on the collar of my sweatshirt. “Is it hot in here? Feels hot.”

“No, I’m really cold.”

“Really? I’m sweating.” I tug at the material, airing it out. “You should’ve told me she was meeting you here.”

“But then you wouldn’t have come,” she says with zero shame.

Nina glances over her shoulder, and her eyes pop when she sees me. Her gaze drifts down my sweats, and great, I think she winces at the stain on my clothes. I scramble to take my cap off, fix my hair, and flip it backward since she likes it that way, and now Nina’s walking over here, and I miss her and want to hug her and fuck this, I’m hugging her.

I crush her against my chest.

My throat ignites now that I’ve got her in my arms again. I glare over her head at the flannel guy and press a hard kiss to her forehead. He rolls his eyes.

Nina pulls back, glancing up at me behind her glasses, and I paste on a stiff grin. “Hey.”

Smooth, Tremblay.

“Rhode...” She tries to step back, but I tighten my arm. I’m not letting her go. “You shouldn’t be hugging me like this.”

“Like what?” I smirk, trying to look arrogant even though it feels like someone pulled a ripcord in my throat. “Like I still want you? Like I want to know if you decided to walk the stage at graduation? Like you’re the only thing that’s been on my mind for the past few weeks?”

Wyn groans. “This is like watching a car crash. I’ll take the notes so you can go, Nina. I’m sorry about my pathetic brother.”

“He’s not pathetic.” Nina leans back, but not before I see the dark circles under her eyes.

I want to kiss her for that comment. This girl’s always got my back.

“Are you sleeping?” I ask, reaching out to brush her face, but she lurches away from me, and damn, that hurt more than tearing my shoulder.

Guess she really is over us.

“I’m fine.” She digs through her messenger bag and pulls out her notes, handing them to Wyn.

“We need to go or we’ll miss our reservation,” flannel guy says, reaching for Nina’s arm.

“Reservation for what?” Fury heats my spine as I imagine them huddled over some candlelit table, but then Nina steps away from him.

“We’re fine, Noah. We’re not meeting the event coordinator for another thirty minutes.” She faces me, fidgeting with her bag. “We’re just going to check out the space for the charity auction. Nothing else.”

The rage in my chest settles when she gives me a sad grin like maybe she misses me too, and that look hits me right in the heart. It’s not the sex I miss most with her.

It’s these moments.

The silent conversations only we understand. The times we laugh at the same jokes. The smiles she gives that are only for me.

Nina’s eyes zone in on my shoulder brace, and she leans in, stroking a finger over the black fabric, seeming to get lost for a second before yanking her hand away. “Is everything okay? How’s rehab?”

“The sling comes off in a few days.” I cough, giving the art guy my best scowl. “My shoulder’s healing fine, so I should be cleared for fighting soon.”

Nina laughs, a real one, and dammit, if I weren’t thinking about throttling the guy, I’d want to make her laugh again. She squeezes my good arm, eyes rebounding between mine like she can’t figure out what to say.

“What?” I ask.

She stands up on her toes, kissing my beard, and I hate that I can’t feel her lips. “I’m glad you’re doing better, but we really need to go. Bye, Rhode.”

The asshole tries to put an arm around her waist, but she dodges out of the way again. Nina strides into the sunlight like an angel, and I jerk forward, fully intent on going after her and demanding she take my pathetic ass back, but Wyn yanks me by my sweatshirt.

“Stop, Ro. You’re not doing this right now. You need to get your shit together, and you need to figure out exactly what you want first. If that’s the League, you need to let Nina go, but if it’s her, you need to figure out what you’re doing with your contract.”

“You’re not going to think less of me if I don’t play hockey?”

Her blue eyes turn gentle. “No, Rhode. You’re my big brother.” She lightly punches my good shoulder, snickering. “I’ll always think less of you.”

I hook my arm around her neck. “I love you, Wyn, you know that? Even when you meddle in my life.”

“Yeah, yeah. I love you too. Now, go figure out what you want.”

“I know what I want. Nina. I just don’t think she wants me.”

Wyn pulls my arm tighter around her neck. “Oh, please. She showed up here, which means she wanted to see you because she misses you. So, you know what you’re going to do? You’re going to shave, wear a suit, and show up at her big event. Now come on, I’m hungry. Let her go for now.”

That’s the last thing I want, but she’s right. I’ve got to figure out my own life before I can be a part of Nina’s.

“I was always going to show up for her,” I say, staring out the restaurant until Nina gets in the car with the asshole.

I can’t think about her with him or I’m going to break my other shoulder by doing something stupid, so I force myself to focus on the lunch from hell.



“WHY ARE you staring at your beet salad like you want to kill it?” Wyn’s voice breaks me out of my jealous thoughts. I can’t stop imagining Nina with that guy.

Kissing him. I stab a beet on my plate. *Laughing with him.* I spear another one. *Fucking him.*

“Ro?”

I snap my neck up. “What?”

She twirls her fork in the air. “You’re giving your beets murder eyes. Why? I thought you liked beets.” She glances at her phone and drops her fork. It clatters to her plate. “Oh, I forgot!”

She scoots back from the chair, grabbing her purse. I launch out of my seat. “What is it? What’s wrong?”

She gulps down her water and then slams the glass on the tablecloth. “I totally forgot that I have to teach a golf lesson. I have to go. You should

stay and talk, though. Finish lunch with Dad.”

First Nina and now this?

I narrow my eyes. “Did you really forget you had a golf lesson?”

It would be just like her to meddle and force my father and me into spending time together. She hooks her purse over her shoulder. “No, I really do have a golf lesson that I forgot about. You two have fun. I’ll get a ride. Stay.” She kisses our father’s cheek. “Bye, Dad.”

“I can drive you,” I offer, standing.

“No. Sit back down. I said *stay*,” she commands. “Talk. Be together. Enjoy.”

Yeah, she planned this and the Nina thing. Wyn dodges through waiters until she’s outside, leaving a big pile of awkwardness for me to clean up. My father stuffs a beet into his mouth. I do the same. We finish chewing and then dab our lips with napkins.

He nods to my arm. “So, how’s the shoulder?”

“Fine.”

“That’s great.”

“Thanks.”

As I slip into my default one-word answers, Nina’s advice rings in my head. Maybe she’s right. Morgan’s going to be in my life, so I should try harder with him. Another jab shoots through me at the thought of her with that asshole, but I clear my throat, adding to our conversation.

“Well, my shoulder isn’t good, but it’s healing. I’ve been going to practices, and our backup goalie’s playing pretty well. Really well, actually. Feels like I’m passing on the torch in a way.”

Smithy won’t stop smiling now that he’s been handed the opportunity to prove himself as our goalie, and I can’t blame him. He practically came in his pants when Coach told him he’d be taking over the net.

My father sips his water. “Do you think you’ll be back next season, or are you still thinking of retiring when your contract’s up?”

I give my father the one-liner I tell everyone except Nina. “I’ve thought about it, but the team’s counting on me, so I have to come back next season.”

I flex my arm, gauging the pain. Not too bad today. I’ve been watching all their practices from the bench, and we won the last game with Smithy in the net. It was a blow to realize they don’t need me as much as I thought,

but it's also somewhat of a relief. To be honest, it's nice to know Smithy can carry the team once I'm gone.

Less pressure on me.

"Have you talked to anyone about this decision?" Morgan asks.

"Yeah, last week I spoke with one of our sports therapists."

"What did they say?"

"He said my pride's holding me back from leaving the League because all the media bullshit made me want to prove everyone wrong. Classic athlete stuff."

He might be right. I don't want some journalist forcing my hand, and deep down, I'm nervous about what life without the League means, but the therapist made a good point.

So many players find fulfillment outside hockey. Mueller went on to become a world-famous poker player. Not that I want that life, but I'd finally have time to explore other passions.

My father peers across the table. His stare feels intense since the glasses make his eyes look bigger.

After a moment, he takes them off and folds them by his plate. "You've given your entire life to the League. You need to do right by you, Rhode. Not anyone else. You've always put everyone before yourself, and it's time to be selfish. You've earned it."

Irritation flares in me at his parental advice. It's a little too late for that. My hands ball into fists beneath the white tablecloth. "And how would you know what's right for me? Or do you want me to be selfish like you so you feel less guilty for leaving?"

He swallows but holds my fuming stare. "Leaving you, your sister, and your mom was the biggest mistake of my life. It's the kind of choice that turns into a lifelong regret. I'll never stop feeling guilty for that. Never."

I pound my fist on the table, rattling the glasses. "Then why did you do it? And don't give me any of your bullshit answers."

My father takes his time folding his napkin and setting it down. In the time he's been back, he's never once raised his voice. "Because I was an idiot who didn't realize what he had. I wish I had a better reason, but I don't, and I'm done making excuses. Not everyone's born to be a parent, and I had a lot of growing up to do. You've got to give everything to your family once you have one, but..."

He reaches across the table, gripping my good hand in a vice. I'm so shocked that I don't pull away. "I need you to know something. It took me losing everything to realize that you, Wyn, your mom are *everything* to me. Coming back for my family was the best decision I ever made."

My mind drifts to Nina, and the hole she left in my life. "Really?"

"Without a doubt. I didn't realize what I had until I lost it, and I'm so grateful your mother gave me another chance. If I have to spend the rest of my life proving that I'm sticking around, I'll do it. I know our relationship is tough, but you're my son, and I love you no matter what."

He squeezes me before letting go, and my hands feel cold when he releases them. I don't know what to say, so we sit in heavy silence.

Maybe Nina's right.

I would never want someone to hold my past version of myself over my head now, and that's what I've been doing to my father. Holding grudges takes a lot of energy, and I don't have much left. The League's drained me. I've always thought about building my own family, but maybe I need to repair the one I already have first. We've got a long way to go, so this feels like the right place to start.

I meet my dad's shining blue eyes, a reflection of my own, and release a breath that I've been holding onto for years. "Hey, Dad?"

He jerks. It takes him a second to respond. "Yes, son?"

"I know I've given you a hard time all these years, and you're not off the hook, but I'm glad you came back for us."

His grin widens into the most genuine smile I've seen on his face, and I can't help but mirror it with my own. We both clear our throats, and my dad shifts in his chair. "Me too. Though, your mom wasn't too happy. You know what she did when I came back?"

"What?"

He laughs at the memory. "Threw a butter knife at me."

I chuckle, settling back into my chair with no intention of leaving. "Good for her."

NINA

“Gwendolyn!” I shout, ripping the cushions from the leather couch. “Have you seen my notecards? I can’t find them anywhere!”

“For the last time, I didn’t touch your notecards,” she shrieks from her room. “Look in the trash!”

I rub my ears at her high-pitched voice. Gwen’s mood has been darker than a gothic architecture painting for the past month, and she won’t talk to me about why, not that I’ve been trying all that hard since I found out about the kiss.

Isaac hasn’t been around the apartment, so I’m guessing her foul temper has something to do with him. My stormy mood has everything to do with missing Rhode, but I’m doing my best not to think about him.

Unfortunately, my best is atrocious.

I’ve scoured every article online to see how his rehab is progressing and picked up the phone, letting my thumb hover over his name more times than I can count. I’m getting closer and closer to calling him because I already regret ending things.

Seeing him looking broken at the restaurant was torture. I never should’ve tried to protect myself. I’m this close to saying *go ahead and break my heart, Rhode Tremblay*. It’s different this time. Before, my heart felt vacant, unoccupied, but now, it’s empty with the loss of him.

“I wrote my entire speech on those,” I shout back. “If you threw my notecards away, I’m going to kill you!”

“Please, you don’t even wipe the bugs off your windshield!”

Grumbling, I yank off another couch cushion. I haven’t told her what happened with Rhode, but I miss talking to her in the way only sisters can—no minced words, no second thoughts, just brutal honesty, sometimes, to a fault. Except my stubbornness is stronger than my desperation.

The rational part of me realizes the kiss was before I met Rhode. I’m not even mad at him. It wasn’t deliberate, and Gwen didn’t do it maliciously, but it goes back to the petty jealousy that stems from living in her eternal shadow.

All I want is someone who belongs completely to me, but now, she’ll have a piece of Rhode.

Gwen drags herself into the living room with pieces of blonde hair falling out of her bun. “This is why I told you to write the speech on your phone.”

“That’s a really unhelpful comment, Gwendolyn.”

“Can you stop calling me that?”

“Only when you start acting like my sister and not my nemesis.”

I scan her grungy attire. It’s like we’ve gone through a complete role reversal because she’s the one wearing a hoodie like a second skin while I’m in a calf-length floral sundress. The attire for the event said *smart casual*, which is the most unhelpful description, but I figured this sundress Gwen lent me would work.

She snatches her car keys from the kitchen counter. “Come on, let’s go, or you’re going to be late for your speech.”

I bite my thumbnail at the reminder. “You really haven’t seen my notecards? Are you sure? Think hard.”

Her spring green eyes bloom with warmth. “No. I’m sorry. I haven’t, but I really don’t think you need them. You’ve been practicing all month. You’ll be fine. Have you asked Rhode? Maybe he has them?”

I flinch at the sound of his name like I do anytime she asks about him. “No, I haven’t. Let’s just go. I’ll rewrite it on my phone on the way there.”

We hop into Gwen’s car, and she presses the start button. As we drive, I gaze out at the blurring skyline. A mesmerizing palette of roses, corals, and aquamarines streak across nature’s largest canvas.

I could see this sunset every day and never grow tired of watching the colors change, just like how I never got tired of memorizing the variations

of Rhode's smile, noting when that dimple would appear and when it wouldn't. I wish he could be here with me tonight.

Fifteen minutes later, Gwen pulls up to a brick building with ivy climbing up the walls and pink bougainvilleas dangling from the archway.

The studio's name, Pierre's Hideaway, is etched in elegant gold lettering above the entrance. "Okay, we're here."

She reaches for my hand, gently prying the thumbnail I've been gnawing at from my lips. "You're going to be fine, Nina. You've been working on this speech for months. You don't need the notecards. All you have to do is talk about why you like art, which you can talk about for days."

"You're right." I nod to convince myself. "Thanks for driving me. I'll see you at home."

"Wow? A thank you?" she teases, pressing a hand to her chest. "Does that mean I'm forgiven?"

"Absolutely not," I quip, though I'm tempted to say yes because I miss her.

"Are you sure you don't want me to come in?"

"No, I'll be fine. I got this. They didn't have any extra tickets, anyway."

Smoothing my dress, I step out of the car and peer closer at the gallery's mosaic archway, where intricate patterns of glass capture my attention.

Beautiful.

The artist must've used a marvering technique to shape the sculpture in those bubbles.

I stride into the gallery beneath a banner that reads The Peaceful Mind Project. The charity auction's in full swing, and a bead of sweat forms on my upper lip, but I give my head a hard shake.

If I can attend hockey games and go to sponsor events with Rhode, I can handle one three-minute introduction speech. Pushing open the glass door, I accidentally bump into a man in a fedora. "Excuse me."

"Not a problem."

The crowd in the art studio is more eclectic than the paintings on the wall. There's everyone from wealthy benefactors donning tuxedos to artists huddled around pottery wheels, lost in their work. I spot a few familiar faces from class, but it's one person who causes me to freeze in my tracks.

Rhode.

My heart starts beating. At least, that's what it feels like.

He's wearing a perfectly tailored navy suit that hugs every muscle, completely oblivious to everyone staring at him rather than the artwork. The sling's gone. He's done a complete transformation from the broken boy at the restaurant. I try to see what patterned tie he's wearing, but I can't. Heads turn, captured by his smile.

He's by the bar, talking closely to a brunette in a green dress as she murmurs something in his ear. Pain shoots like lightning to my heart.

Rhode responds with a carefree laugh that ripples through the room. I think I'd rather watch them kiss than listen to his laughter that's slicing through me.

"Hey, Nina. How's it going?"

I jump at the sound of Noah's voice. My classmate stands beside me, his leather apron splattered with clay, so he's clearly been working at one of the studio's kilns. "You ready for your speech? I can't believe how many people showed up. Everyone likes all the pottery demonstrations, so that was a great idea on your part."

His compliment is sweet, but it doesn't make my toes curl like Rhode's. "Thanks. Yeah, I'm ready. Nervous, but I'll be fine. It's just the introduction speech."

My gaze fixates on Rhode, who's still immersed in a discussion with the woman across the room. They look like the epitome of a sophisticated couple, laughing together. My teeth grind. Noah launches into a conversation about pottery slip casting techniques, but I barely register his words.

All my senses are tuned into Rhode.

His eyes roam the art gallery, scanning everyone's face before moving on to the next. He pauses when he sees a blonde woman, but when she turns her face, he moves on to the next person. I glare at his rigid back when suddenly, he straightens and spins around.

Our eyes meet like they're connected by steel cables, unbreakable.

The murmurs and laughter fade as we stare, the weight of unspoken words bridging the gap between us. I glance at his tie. Clovers. His tie has little four-leaf clovers all over the fabric, and I wonder if he chose it because of my tattoo.

His gaze dips to the hem of my dress and climbs up the curves of my silhouette like ivy. I silently thank Gwen for letting me borrow this floral

sundress that clings to every inch. Rhode's gaze shifts to Noah, and his jaw snaps shut.

A look of intense fury flares across his face, and a second later, he's strutting through the crowd, parting it like everyone's a mere ripple in his wake. He stops in front of me, and without sparing a glance at Noah, he wraps an arm around my waist in a move that has my heart short-circuiting.

His lips meet my cheek, soft, light. Crushing. "Hello, beautiful."

He barely spares Noah a glance, so I gesture to him, slightly flustered. "Rhode, you remember Noah from my art class."

"There are other people here?" he asks, gaze searing mine. "All I see is you."

Noah mutters a goodbye and leaves, but I wouldn't notice if a runaway truck were to crash into this studio. Rhode's presence is a vacuum, sucking every thought from my mind.

"What are you doing here?" My eyes flick to the woman gazing at Rhode's back. "Shouldn't you be with your date?"

The venom seeping into my voice only makes that lonely dimple glint in Rhode's cheek. "She's not my date. She's a fan. We were just talking, but you sound a little jealous, Nina. Are you?"

"No," I snap. "It's fine. You can talk to whoever you want."

The dimple in his cheek deepens. "You're such a bad liar."

"I'm not lying," I lie.

His hot tongue brushes the shell of my ear, murmuring like we've spent every morning for the past few weeks waking up together and not apart. "You forget that I know what it looks like when you lie because I know *you*, but go ahead and keep lying through those pretty red lips. All it does is make me want to shove my cock in your mouth to stop you. You already know I won't fuck you like a gentleman."

Lifting my hand, he presses his lips to my knuckles. The gesture's completely at odds with his filthy words. Heat ripples over my skin, blazing right through my good intentions.

I try to step out of his smothering aura, but his hands tighten around the curve of my waist. "You shouldn't be saying things like that to me, Rhode. Not anymore."

A lazy smirk curls his mouth that I want to kiss off his lips. "Why not? Because it turns you on? Hate to break it to you, but that's the point."

"You and that dirty mouth."

“You like it.” He shrugs, seemingly unfazed, but the noticeable bulge in his pants that he’s trying to cover with a pamphlet shows he’s as affected me. “But enough dirty talk. Tonight, I’m being a gentleman because this is your night. Here. I have something for you.”

Flipping the switch from sexy to sweet, he delves into his suit pocket, retrieving a stack of notecards—the very ones I spent the entire day scouring our apartment for.

“Where’d you find those?” With a gasp, I try to snatch them, but he holds the cards behind his back.

“You left them at my place, so I figured I’d bring them here. Now, admit you miss me, and I’ll give them back.”

“I don’t miss you,” I lie to protect myself.

“You’re such a pretty liar that I want to believe it’s the truth, but I bet if I dipped my fingers beneath that dress that I can’t stop staring at, I’d find your panties wet for me, and only me.”

“Or you’d find me drier than the Sahara in July, but I guess you’ll never know.”

“Now, that’s a bet I’d take.” He kisses my cheek. “You already know how much I like burying my head between your thighs.”

“That’s not happening,” I say to put distance between us, but his words already have that familiar need building.

“But it is,” he counters.

“You’re too cocky.”

“No. Just hopeful.” He waves the notecards. “Do you want these or not?”

Heat sinks into my body, so I squeeze my legs together, arching a brow. “We both know you’re going to give me the notecards, anyway. You forget that I know you too, and you’d never sabotage my speech.”

His teasing expression fades faster than a shooting star. “You’re right. I wouldn’t because this is important to you. So, why don’t you admit that you miss me as much as I miss you? Because I’m trying here, but this has been hell for me. I know we want different things, Nina, but I just want you. We can figure this out together.”

I draw in a sharp breath. His charming, genuine words make irritation scratch down my spine. Why does he have to make it so difficult for me not to fall for him?

I'm already imagining myself making sacrifices. Leaving my fellowship. Starting a family in my early twenties. Convincing myself that I can be the girlfriend of a pro hockey player even though I hate crowds. I'd have to give up everything to love him.

I throw out a hand. "What do you want me to do, Rhode? Quit my fellowship to be the partner of a hockey player?"

A frown mars his face. "No, I'd never ask you for that, but I've been thinking a lot about my contract, and—"

"You're not giving up hockey for me, either. I won't let you."

His brows rise. "You won't *let* me? It's my life."

"I know, and I care about your life." I snatch the notecards from his grasp, using them as a shield. "I can't do this right now. I have a speech to prepare for, but..." I soften. "Thank you. I'm really glad you came."

He moves closer, his hand gliding down my spine, caressing the curve of my lower back before lingering above my ass. "I was always going to come for you, Nina. This is important to you, but we're talking about this later because I'm not giving you up." His eyes drop to the cards shaking in my hands. "You nervous?"

"No," I say too quickly because all I feel are his words burning into my heart.

Rhode has flaws, I know he does, but the worst part is that I like his flaws. Like the way he pronounces espresso as *expresso*, or how he's a little overprotective because he cares, or that he sometimes eats a jar of pickles in bed.

I perk up.

Actually, that's disgusting. I latch onto that flaw. It's exactly the visual I need to stop this desire from rising in my body.

He reaches out to hold my sweaty palm. "You're going to do amazing, Nina. You've been working on this for months, and I've heard you practicing in the shower. You'll be great."

The shower visual brings back memories of Rhode's body. The way it felt as he pushed into me, fucked me against a door, filled me up with something I didn't know I needed. He's the only man who could make me breathless from both moaning and laughing. Rhode's gaze drifts down, lingering on the curve of my lips with a smoldering intensity.

Pickles. Think pickles, Nina.

"Hello, everyone!"

I jump, ripping my gaze to my pottery professor in his burgundy corduroy jacket, standing in front of the crowd.

He taps the mic. "I'm Pierre Michaels, the owner of this gallery and your humble host for the evening. Thank you for coming out to support this wonderful association of artists for The Peaceful Mind Project."

He claps, and everyone joins in the applause. Pierre says a few more words about his talented students while I mentally replay my speech. Rhode's hand moves in soothing circles on my lower back, steadying me like he was handcrafted for my personality.

"Now, I'd like to welcome one of our radiant ambassadors to talk about The Peaceful Mind Project in our welcome speech," Pierre says. "Without further ado, please put your hands together for Philomena Alstyne!"

The sound of applause crackles through the air, mingling with the earthy scent of clay. Rhode squeezes my shoulder. "You got this, Nina. I'll be out in the audience cheering you on. Now go blow them away."

And with that, he saunters through the crowd while I approach the microphone. The audience gathers, clutching their drinks. My thoughts are jumbled, but I lock eyes with Rhode and take a deep, calming breath.

I can handle this.

You're not jumping out of a plane or getting chased by a bear, Nina. You're fine. You're always going to be fine.

I adjust the mic. "Hi, everyone. I'm Nina."

I look down at my notecards, but glance back up to find Rhode. His dirty whispers were distracting enough to melt my nerves over the speech, and I'm not sure if that was intentional on his part, but either way, I'm grateful. "Thank you for coming out and supporting The Peaceful Mind Project. You have no idea how much it means to have everyone here. Art therapy is something that has helped me over the years, and..."

I hold Rhode's shining blue gaze and continue speaking in a steady voice, watching him watch me. There's a peacefulness in him that the chaos in my soul craves. Maybe it's because he's a little older, a little wiser, and I hope that whoever created his soul also made mine.

"So, thank you all for being here," I finish into the mic. "Your support means the world to me and The Peaceful Mind Project."

The room erupts in applause, and I can't help but bask in the moment. I did it without fainting.

No anxiety. No panic attack. Everything turned out fine.

My smile stretches like a sunrise across my face. Anxiety might be unpredictable, but it doesn't rule over me anymore. I used to think of it as this thing that lived inside me, but it always passes, never stays. Maybe it was never really a part of me at all.

Rhode claps the loudest of anyone, blue eyes fixed on me. They never once drifted throughout my entire speech. I step away from the mic, and people pull me in different directions, expressing their gratitude.

All night, Rhode watches from a quiet corner, letting me have my moment, but pride fills the small grin playing across his lips.

By the end of the evening, my throat is parched from all the conversations, so I make my way to the two bartenders in leather aprons. "A virgin mojito, please?"

"You got it." The other bartender whispers something in his ear that makes him laugh, and he nods.

Rhode struts through the dwindling crowd, hands in pockets, a tilt to his lips. He stops in front of me, resting an elbow on the sleek metal counter. "You barely looked at the notecards during your speech."

I glance down at the stack, still on the first one, and my lips twitch in a grin. "I guess you were right. I didn't need them, but it was just an introduction speech."

"So what?" Rhode counters. "It was important to you, which makes it important to me, and you captivated the entire room."

I brush off the compliment because it means too much to me. "Captivated? That's a strong word choice."

"It's the truth."

Rhode's eyes drop to my lips and stay there. His throat bobs, which reminds me of the way he stared at me in the office. My mouth goes drier, if that's possible. When the bartender slides the mojito over, I take a huge swig.

Rhode watches me swallow, and his knuckles whiten as he grips the bar. I drink and drink and drink, but as soon as I finish, I notice it—the burn of alcohol.

I whip my head around to the bartender. "Was there alcohol in this?"

He nods. "Mojito, right?"

"No, I said a *virgin* mojito."

"What the hell?" Rhode snaps in my defense. "She doesn't drink. That's a big mistake to make, man."

His eyes bulge. “Oh shit, sorry. You pregnant?”

I glare at the bartender. “No, I’m not. I’ll be fine, but I just need to leave before the room starts spinning because this is going to hit me hard.”

My breathing quickens. I can’t afford a repeat of the disaster from my freshman year. I blacked out after one drink, thanks to my medication. It was a strong one, but still. I refuse to end up passed out in the bushes like that again, especially in front of Rhode.

I grab a bottle of water and chug it like that’ll counteract the effects of the alcohol. “I have to go. I’ll see you later.”

“No, you won’t,” Rhode counters, wrapping an arm around my waist. “I’m not going anywhere.”

All of a sudden, dizziness hits, and the world tilts off-balance. Rhode’s face blurs into a fuzzy blob. I feel myself swaying, the room spinning faster, but then his arms are around me. “Come on, I’ve got you. I’m taking you home.”

“You’re going to stay with me?” My words come out in a slur, feeling thick in my mouth. There’s no telling what’s going to fly past my lips tonight. From that feeling alone, I know I’m going to wake up covered in regrets.

Rhode’s voice sounds distant like he’s calling from the end of a tunnel. “I’d stay forever for you.”

RHODE

“I ’m so glad you’re here,” Nina slurs from the passenger seat as we drive back to her apartment. “I’m so glad you came. Really, I am. I miss coming. I miss you. Do you miss me?”

“I think we’ve established that I definitely miss you.”

“You know what we should do?” she rambles. “Have sex. I miss you. I miss the sex. The sex was so good. It was the best I’ve ever had.”

“I know. Me too.” I tighten my fingers around the steering wheel as blood rushes to my dick at the idea of her lying naked beneath me, but I want more. “The only thing you’re getting tonight is a goodnight kiss. On the forehead.”

The street light glints off her nose piercing as I stare at her the same way everyone else was during her speech. She drew everyone in with her passionate words.

I’ve been around a lot of confident and intelligent women, but sometimes, it can feel like they’re saying things because they’re trying to be someone they think I want and not the person they actually are, but it’s never felt that way with Nina.

“Rhode!” she shouts.

The light turns red, and on instinct, I punch the brake, reaching out to push her chest back into the seat so she doesn’t slam forward. We come to a stop at the light, both panting.

“Sorry,” I say. “That turned red fast.”

“You shouldn’t be looking at me while you drive.”

Nina grins. That smile hits me in my soul, waking me up and knocking me out all at once. It happens then, in this quiet moment that should be insignificant over the span of my life, but it’s not. It’s a big moment.

A really big moment.

I think I might love her.

No, I don’t think—I know.

I thought love would be this big moment, but it stacked up from all these little things.

The way she always buys Chicken treats. Every time she stood up for me. All the moments we made each other laugh, whether it was from a broken headboard or a joke about a naked yoga class. Our late-night deep conversations about having kids.

There are so many ways to have a family now, and yeah, age plays a factor, but I don’t want to have kids just because people around me are popping them out. I want to have them because I’m so madly in love with someone that I want to create a life with them. When I used to imagine that future, that person used to be faceless.

Now, all I see is Nina.

She snuck up on me, this girl who I thought was all wrong, but maybe that’s the fun part of falling in love, not knowing where you’re going to find it or when it’s right around the corner. Finding someone who makes the dull moments spectacular, who turns grocery shopping into an adventure, and then, you choose to spend all your boring moments together because they don’t feel that way around them.

We stare at each other until the light turns green. That red light was too damn short. I rip my eyes away, looking back to the road because it’s hard to look at her.

I don’t want to say goodbye when she leaves for Argentina. I want more of her smiles, her laughs, her thoughts—more of her. I grip the steering wheel hard enough to break it, wincing when pain lances through my shoulder.

“Rhode? You okay?” she asks.

“Yeah, fine.”

“You sound mad. Are you mad? Don’t be mad at me.”

“I’m not mad at you, Nina.”

“But you sound really mad.”

“I’m not. Promise. Just thinking.”

What do I do? I didn’t think I’d realize I loved this girl while I was driving home. I can’t tell her tonight. Not when I still have my own shit to figure out with the League.

I’m still reeling when I park the car and walk into Nina’s apartment. Gwen’s pacing the living room, and her eyes pop when she spots us walking through the door.

“Nina?” She rushes over. “How’d the speech go?”

“It went amazing. I’m amazing.” Nina spins around the living room, almost knocking into a fern. I steady her and then the plant.

Gwen’s brows pinch. “What’s wrong with you?”

“The bartender gave me the wrong mojito, and I’m a wee bit tipsy. This is what I get for not drinking for over a year.” Nina spins around again, catching herself on the wall before I get to her. “But the good thing is I’m not mad at you for kissing Rhode anymore. No, I’m not.”

I tense, snapping my head to Gwen. “You told her?”

“I had to.”

Is this why she ended things? No. Nina might pull away sometimes, but she would’ve talked to me if it bothered her.

My breathing quickens, and I grip Nina’s hands, looking into her half-lidded eyes. “Nina, listen to me. You know that meant nothing, right? It was before I met you. Please tell me that’s not why you ended things.”

She gives me a sleepy smile, patting my cheek. “No, I’m not mad at you, well, I mean a teeny bit because I want you to kiss me, but I ended things because I didn’t want to be a WAG. No wagging for me. I’d tell you if I was mad. I’ll tell you lots of things. Like I want your dick in my mouth tonight.”

A laugh bursts out of me. My girl’s such a mess, but she’s mine. “Not tonight. We’re sleeping tonight.”

She taps my nose. “Yes, tonight.”

Gwen points over her shoulder. “Think I’ll go to bed. You got this?”

“Yeah, I’ll always take care of her.” I keep my eyes on Nina’s lopsided smile, tracing the corners of her lips with my thumb.

“Come on. Let’s go.” Nina leads me into her bedroom down the hall. The cross-stitch I made hangs on the wall, and pride flares in my chest. It’s right there in the center above her bed. She takes off her shoes, throws them across the room, and looks me dead in the eye.

“Okay, I lied. I might be a little mad about the kiss because Gwen always sparkles and gets everything. I want to sparkle, but no one sees me. I’m like... a glimmer. You have to look hard to find me.”

“I found you, and now, you’re the only thing I see.”

Her mouth falls open in shock, and a second later, my girl launches herself across her bedroom to attack my face. Her fingers tangle in my hair and her soft lips meet mine.

There’s nothing I want more than to coax her mouth open with my tongue, but I muster all my restraint and gently push her back. “Wait. Not like this, Nina.”

Her neck turns splotchy, but she lifts her chin, which I’ve learned is her signature move when she’s trying to challenge someone or hide her feelings. “Do you not want me anymore? Because if you don’t, just tell me. I can handle it.”

I scoff. Ridiculous question.

She’s getting a ridiculous answer for that one. “I want you on your knees, ass up, with your pussy gripping my cock as I take you from behind, and then, I want to wake up next to you every morning, but we don’t always get what we want, now, do we?”

Her chest heaves in short, shallow huffs as she seems to debate something. With a deep breath, and a devious look in her eyes, she strips her bra right off.

I go rigid. “What’re you doing?” I might be in love with her, but the only thing she’s getting is tucked into bed.

She shrugs. “Fine, don’t kiss me, but I want to have sex, and you’re here.”

Alright, that *really* pisses me off.

“Nina,” I warn. “I’m not having sex with you just because I’m here. Get in bed. We’ll talk in the morning.”

“Or we could not talk now.” She cups her breasts, circling her nipples, but I lock my gaze on her face. “In fact, I could think of a lot of things we could do that don’t involve talking.”

Crossing my arms, I lean against her door frame. “Me too. Like sleeping.”

“What?” She lifts her chin. “Are you worried I can’t handle this? Because trust me, I can handle you, Rhode.”

“I know you can.” I let my eyes drop to her perfect tits. “You take me so good.”

Her lips part at that, but she stares me down with fire in her eyes. I’m not worried about getting burned by her because I’d gladly walk into the flames for this woman. I can’t tell if she’s trying to prove a point or if something else is going on in her head, but either way, nothing’s happening because I’m *here*.

“I’m not touching you tonight, Nina. Don’t push me on this. I’m not letting you treat me like any other man when I know this means more to both of us.”

The fire in her eyes extinguishes a bit, but her jaw grits. “Okay, fine.”

“Good girl. Now, get in bed.”

“Don’t call me that.”

“I’m tempted to call you a good girl for the rest of my life just so you’ll keep snapping at me like that.”

We hold each other’s gazes in a standoff, but then, a look of determination crosses her face. My brows come together.

What’s she thinking?

She stumbles to her nightstand, yanks open the drawer, and pulls out a goddamn vibrator. Heat races to my groin.

No. She won’t do it.

“Nina,” I say in my most commanding voice. “Don’t. Not like this.”

“What? I’m getting in bed,” she says, innocently. “Stay or leave. I don’t care.”

The little devil.

I love her so much.

She flicks her golden hair over her shoulder, yanks down her panties, and spreads her legs out on the bed, showcasing herself like she’s on display in a museum built only for me. I gulp down the dryness in my throat.

This girl’s going to kill me.

She turns on the vibrator, letting the soft hum fill the room, and places it right over her clit.

I actually fall to my knees. “Fuck, you’re going to make me pass out from watching you play with yourself, aren’t you?”

“Well, you’re not playing with me, so that’s your fault.”

She throws her head back into the pillows and starts moaning loudly. Her tits bounce with the movement, and it's the best sound in the world, but then she gets louder.

Really loud.

A little obnoxious, if I'm honest. My eyes turn to slits when I realize that she's putting on a show for me.

It's laughable that she thinks I can't tell the difference between her fake noises and real ones. I know exactly what she sounds like when she comes because I've been replaying those sounds in my head right alongside her laughter.

Standing, I cross the room until I'm towering over her writhing on the mattress, trying to look unaffected even though my dick is pointing right at her mouth.

I imagine jerking off and coming all over her pretty face as punishment for faking these noises. "Does that feel good, or are you wishing it was my cock?"

She moans louder. Presses harder. "This feels amazing. So good. I don't need you."

"You're going to be in so much trouble for this," I growl, loosening my tie.

"Told you I wasn't a good girl."

I grip the edge of the mattress, arms shaking from trying to hold onto my last fragment of self-control when all I want is to be inside her. "I bet it'd feel even better if I were filling you up. You could have my cock and your little toy. You know what? We'll play with that next time because I don't care how you come as long as you're thinking of me when you do."

Her breaths quicken, and I know the second her moans turn from fake to real when her back arches. It takes less than a minute before she's screaming my name.

I'm sweating as I watch her cheeks flush, and even though I'm irritated with her for trying to fake this, it takes trust to be this vulnerable with someone, and that's something real.

We're something real.

I know it.

My eyes drift over her naked body as she comes down from her high, smug and satisfied. Damn, she's glowing. I lift up the sheets to tuck her into bed, but then, everything stops.

Blood rushes to my ears at the sight of the small outline of a turtle etched on her hip bone. That's new.

When did she get that?

I stroke my thumb over the mark. "You got a tattoo of a turtle?"

She yanks up the covers to hide herself, letting the vibrator clatter to the floor. "No."

"Liar. Why did you get a tattoo of a turtle?" I ask, needing her answer more than oxygen.

Her face turns the color of her flushed body. "It doesn't matter."

"It does to me." I swallow, something burning in my chest as I stare at the turtle that's the same shape as mine. "Did you get this for me?"

That sassy tilt to her lips falls away, and her hazels shine. She pulls up the blankets as high as they'll go, so she's covered up. "Fine. Yes. I got a turtle tattoo for you, but we don't need to talk about it because it's embarrassing."

All the heat from moments ago evaporates, and a new one takes over. It feels like I'm under the stadium lights with thousands of people screaming my name. I think she's looking at me like I'm the lucky bastard she's in love with, and I hope I'm not imagining that glint in her eyes.

She's got me wrapped around her tattooed finger, and I don't know how to unravel myself. I don't want to, but I need to figure out what I want after the League. I'm starting to think I don't care what my future looks like as long as it includes Nina.

I undo the buttons on my shirt, revealing the four-leaf clover that matches the one on her neck—the one that's now etched into the skin right over my heart. Her eyes pop when she sees my new ink.

"That looks like mine," she whispers.

"I know. It looks exactly like yours."

"Why did you get that?" She reaches out to stroke my skin like she needs to be closer. Goosebumps pop up under her touch.

I brush her hair back from her face. "Because the day I met you was the luckiest day of my life."

NINA

My eyes flutter open in the golden morning glow. Dust glitters in the streams of light beaming through my window, illuminating the man sleeping on my pillow like an illusion woven from dreams.

He's too good to be true, smiling that charming smile in his sleep. I can't stay away from him anymore, not after he came to support me last night.

Not after the tattoo.

That has to mean something.

Memories flood my fuzzy mind, but the embarrassment and panic I anticipated are nowhere to be found. I've learned to always expect the worst, so I'm prepared.

My life could implode at any moment, and when it doesn't, the relief is overwhelming, and that's exactly what I feel when I look at Rhode—overwhelmed that out of the billions of people on this planet, I was lucky enough to find him.

I'm not a good fit for his life, but I'm glad I got the chance to love him, if only for a brief moment. I'd rather jump into love than never fall at all.

He sprawls across my tiny double like it's his king bed. He's lying shirtless on his stomach with one arm under the pillow, and my fingers ache to brush away the hair tumbling across his forehead, so I do.

The muscles in his back ripple with every breath, and he looks so peaceful, so young, that I'm tempted to take a picture.

I soak up his essence in the morning light, memorizing all the little nuances strangers can't see. They get his dimpled smile and hear that rugged laugh, but only I know that he always smiles at the grocery store checkout person and laughs even when jokes aren't funny. I trace my fingers over his lips, wanting more than anything to press my mouth to his.

He blinks his eyes open, then squints.

"Morning," I whisper.

My voice seems to wake him up, and he stretches, pulling me to his solid chest. It's like hugging a statue, but I still snuggle into him, careful of his shoulder. His fingers brush the curve of my spine.

"How're you feeling?" he asks, voice rough with sleep. "Do you need anything?"

You.

I need you.

"I feel fine. Surprisingly, fine. Thanks for taking care of me last night, and for coming, and for well, everything."

His hands pause their movements. "I think you took care of yourself just fine."

I instantly get sucked in by the smolder in his eyes. The memory has a sudden flush warming my face. I can't believe I did that, but I was feeling a little bold, a bit daring. Partially because of the alcohol but mostly because Rhode makes it safe enough for me to let go.

Brushing my hand down the ridges of his abs, I toy with the rim of his briefs.

Rhode's hand flies to my wrist, stopping me. "What are you doing, Nina?"

The softness in his voice is gone. His tone is hard. Dark. I meet the hunger in his eyes, hoping mine look just as wild.

"You know exactly what I'm doing." I scrape my nails against the solid ridges of his stomach. "Just one more time. I'll be careful. We can go slow, but I want to make you feel good. I know this ends when I leave for Argentina, so it doesn't have to mean anything."

A muscle quivers in his cheek, on the edge of exploding. Slowly, he grips my leg and hitches it over his hip, forcing me to straddle him.

He presses his erection up against my center, and that slight position shift has me desperate for him. "See, I don't know if I can agree with that because your body means something to me."

He sucks his thumb into his mouth and uses the wetness to circle my peaked nipple. I tighten my legs around him, fire pooling between my thighs as I start riding him.

He groans out a curse. "I'm trying to focus here, and tell you how much you mean to me, Nina, but I can't when you're riding me like that."

I stop moving on top of him. My hair hangs down, caressing his shoulders.

"Listen to me." Leaning up, he presses his lips to the skin over my pounding heartbeat. "This, right here, means something to me."

Gripping my chin with his good arm, he tilts my face down and kisses my forehead. "Your thoughts mean something to me."

He's breathing hard, but I'm gasping. Waiting. Wanting. Rhode swipes a thumb over my lips, and his hand trembles slightly as he looks up at me. "Don't lie and say this means nothing when you mean everything to me."

His lips, warm and soft, brush against mine with a hint of hesitation. I thread my fingers in his hair, pulling him closer. It's everything I've ever wanted. The kiss is so excruciatingly tender, and it's over far too quickly.

He leans back, resting his head on my pillow, breathing heavily like we just spent the past hour with our mouths fused together and not two seconds.

I run my hands up his corded arms, nerves twisting in my stomach. "Why did you stop? Is everything okay?"

His Adam's apple bobs, slow and steady, like everything I love most about him. "I'm fine, I'm just..." He inhales deeply, muttering a curse. "I'm nervous. That's all."

That makes me want to kiss him for the rest of my life. I place my hand over his rapid heartbeat that matches my own rhythm. "That's okay. Me too."

I suck in a breath, and he takes the opportunity to slide his tongue along the seam of my bottom lip, diving into the kiss, but it's not deep enough. I need it to be endless. And that's exactly how Rhode kisses me, like this moment is endless.

He's not rushed or hurried. No, he traces a tortuously slow path over my lips, and I can already tell this kiss will linger for long after it's over. I weave my fingers into the silky threads of his hair, and a throaty moan ripples through his chest.

That sound triggers matching explosions in our bodies, setting something feral loose inside us. The tenderness evaporates, leaving nothing but an all-consuming need.

“What are you doing to me?” he growls against my mouth. “And whatever it is, don’t ever stop.”

Rhode sucks my tongue, stopping me from answering. I straddle his hips, grinding against the delicious hardness of him. All of our kisses seem more wild than the last. Our teeth knock together. Tongues explore every inch. It’s the first time I’ve ever loved spiraling out of control.

Rhode’s the only thing anchoring me to this world.

There seems to be a sea of thoughts in those deep blue eyes, but we don’t talk. I slide down his briefs and take him in my hands, sliding my finger over his slick head.

His hips jerk at my touch, and his voice shakes almost as much as his body. “I’ve missed you. I’ve missed us.”

His legs tremble, so I swirl my thumb over his wet tip before lining him up with my center. “I need you. Now. Please. I’ll be careful.”

“You don’t have to beg for me. I’ll give you whatever you want.”

He dives back into our kiss the same moment I sink down onto him. He fills me in one powerful thrust until he’s completely buried inside me.

I expect the frantic urgency to translate to our bodies, but it doesn’t. Rhode slows his movements to a languid rhythm. The wet slide of him, combined with the groaning headboard, makes obscene sounds in my quiet bedroom, but I love the noises we make together.

I love everything about this moment—except how I can’t stop thinking the word *love*.

Rhode's hand finds my ankle. He lifts my leg, hitching it up higher. The angle allows him to go deeper than anyone’s ventured. I whimper when the base of him nudges my center, creating an exquisite friction that’s addicting.

His thrusts turn from slow and steady to primal and feral. “How does my cock feel inside you. Does it feel like *nothing*? Does this...” He thrusts up hard. “Feel like nothing to you?”

I try to answer, but the only thing that comes out of my mouth is a breathless moan.

Rhode grips my throat, gently squeezing as he strokes the column of my neck. “I need you to answer me because I’m telling you right now, I’ll never get enough of you.” He loosens his hold. “Now, look at me and say it.”

Panting, I meet his eyes. “This isn’t nothing.”

He stops moving inside me, but I’m still on top, riding him. “Now, what is this, love?”

Love.

He called me love. That stops me.

My eyes begin to burn, so I tangle my fingers in his hair, wrenching open my heart for him to see every feeling I’ve tried to bury. “This is everything. You’re everything to me because you somehow became my best friend, and I don’t want to say goodbye to you.”

I kiss him before he has a chance to respond because I’m too scared to hear whatever words come out of his mouth. With a groan, he kisses me with more fervor than before.

Our lips tumble into a dance, swaying and breaking apart and coming together. His tongue slides into my mouth at the same time he moves deeper into my body. I get lost in the feeling of his lips and never want to be found.

Never want to know the ending. But that’s the thing about kisses—they always do.

End, that is.

I dig my nails into his waist, but his thrusts slow. We fuse ourselves together until there’s not an inch of space between us, and through it all, Rhode keeps his lips on mine until we’re shaking, tumbling over that edge together.

His body trembles beneath mine. “You’re so fucking perfect for me, Nina. You’re everything I didn’t know I needed, and I wish I would’ve met you sooner.”

“You have me now.”

“I don’t want to let you go.”

He spills himself into me and warmth spreads through my body, heating me like his words. Our sweaty chests move as one as we come down off that ledge.

I collapse in a heap on top of him, careful to stay on his good side, and he wraps me up in his warm embrace. A light sheen of sweat coats our bodies, but we stay connected.

It’s only when it’s over that I realize what we just did. “You didn’t wear —”

His chest heaves. “I know, sorry, I wasn’t thinking, but there’s no one else. I promise. There hasn’t been anyone else for over a year. Just you.”

I wrap him in my arms, kissing his cheek as he softens inside me.
“There’s no one else for me either. Just you.”

“Good because I think I’ve had enough years of fighting in the League, and I want you all to myself. I’m yours now.”

We stay like that, bodies a mess of arms and legs. Our heartbeats tick against each other as we linger in a moment that could be a long one or a short one.

A second or a millennium.

I can feel our end looming like a heartbreak harbinger, but this is worth the goodbye.

RHODE

“Are you sure about this, Tremblay?”

Coach Watson peers at me across her office desk while Camille scans her phone.

I take a deep breath, struggling with the weight of my decision even though I know it’s the right path. “I always knew this could be my last season. I’ve put a lot of thought into this, Coach.”

Coach Watson nods her Guardians cap. “You’re right. I’m sure you have. It couldn’t have been an easy choice.”

That’s like saying it’s easy to decide who to marry or when to have a child. “It wasn’t.”

Camille furrows her brows, and based on that look, I’m about to get a subtle guilt trip. “You know, I spent over two hours on the phone with the ¡Vamos! lawyers yesterday discussing the sponsorship for you, and nowhere did it say you have to be an active player. So, if you want, that’s still an option. Maybe for less money. I *have* put in a lot of time negotiating the terms for you.”

Called it. I lean back in my chair, considering. Camille gets a certain percentage of the total deal if I sign with ¡Vamos!, so if anything, I’ll do it for her.

“Thanks, Camille. I appreciate you negotiating that. Tell Andrea I’m in.”

Her shoulders slump in relief beneath her navy blazer, and she gives me a grateful smile. She pulls out her phone and starts firing off a message while I spend the next thirty minutes reviewing the terms of my contract with Coach Watson.

After shaking hands, I step out of Coach's office and into the locker room, being careful not to tread on the Guardians logo etched into the floor. The clean scent of fresh jerseys mingles with the hint of hard-earned sweat. I inhale a deep breath, surveying the locker room. My eyes well up as I stare at the logo.

The weight of my decision to retire from the NHL finally sinks in, but it's not dragging me down anymore. The memories of all those years on the ice flood my mind.

That second shower on the right is where I convinced Cruz we all went commando for home games. That bench in the middle is where Patty cried happy tears and told us he was a father. The exhilarating victories, the crushing defeats, the team, it's all embedded in my DNA. I might be leaving the League, but hockey's carved into my bones.

I glance up at the retired jerseys hanging from the rafters, and soon, my number Thirty will be dangling for everyone to see.

I can't help but smile.

Sure, this is a tough decision, but as I stand here, surrounded by the echoes of my hockey career, I know that I've made the right choice. Now, all I have to do is tell the guys, and Nina. My palms start sweating.

"I fucking hate this!" Cruz shouts from somewhere in the locker room. "I think my balls have shriveled into raisins. Patty, can you check?"

I sniff, wiping at my eyes, and follow Cruz's voice around the corner.

"I'm not inspecting your ballsack," Patty says. "I already did that once when you had that yeast infection, and it was disgusting. Never again."

I walk down the hallway to find Patty and Cruz sitting in the aluminum hydrotherapy tubs. Coach Watson recommends it a couple of times a week to soothe our aching muscles, but sitting in a fifty-degree tub is one of my least favorite recovery methods. That's something I won't miss.

"Hey, Tremblay! There you are," Cruz shouts through chattering teeth. "We've been looking for you. Where you been? And why are your eyes all red?"

I shove my hands in my sweatpants pockets. "Just talking to Coach, and it's allergies."

Cruz scoots forward in the tub. “What did Coach say? You’re still good to play next season, right? We need you back in the net, old man.”

“Stop with the ‘old man’ shit,” Patty says.

“Never.”

I clear my throat, trying to keep it together and not lose it in front of them. The guys will be fine without me. “Yeah. All good. I’ll be good.”

Patty’s eyes narrow like he’s trying to decide if I’m bluffing, but I’ve got a plan for telling them and it’s not happening while they’re soaking in an ice bath. “Want to come in this torture chamber with us, Tremblay? One last time?”

I’m not sure if that phrasing was intentional, so I wave a hand. “I better head home. Got to get back to my girl.”

Cruz laughs. “Oh, so Phil’s your girl now, huh? I fucking called it day one.”

“Yeah, she always has been. Just took me a while to see it.” Snatching my bag, I leave the locker room behind, my heart set on one destination—wherever Nina is, my home.



I OPEN the door to my apartment, almost tripping on Nina’s running shoes by the door. I spot my skates right next to hers, and warmth bursts through my chest.

Her jean jacket hangs off the couch, a couple of dishes wait in the sink, and one of her vases is on the kitchen table next to some treats for Chicken. My apartment might be messier than normal, but it doesn’t feel like a hockey museum anymore.

It’s got all the clutter of a home.

Coming back to her sleeping in my bed every night has made these past few weeks bearable. It’s hard to hide things from Nina because she can sense something’s wrong, but instead of bombarding me with questions like the media, she simply holds me in her arms every night.

That’s all I want.

Knowing she’s there to listen if I need her is enough. This decision needs to be mine, and I don’t want her to think I’m making this choice for her. That’s too much pressure for anyone.

I scratch Chicken's ear as I head into my bedroom. Steam billows out from my bathroom, and I bet Nina's in there. Ever since she discovered I have jets that shoot water from the walls, she refuses to shower anywhere else.

I knock on the bathroom door. "Nina, you in there?"

"Are you expecting some other woman to be in your shower?" she calls out. "Because if that's the case, we're about to have a big fight, so I'd put on your helmet."

Laughing, I step into the bathroom. "I love y—that you always say what's on your mind."

My back tenses. Shit. I almost did it again.

I snap my jaw shut before I do something crazy, like tell her I love her while she's showering. I'm so close to blurting it out all the time.

I almost said it the other day when she made me a smoothie, but I've never said it to a woman other than my mom or sister, so I want it to be the right moment.

I stride up to my black tile walk-in shower. She's a soapy, naked mess, standing under the stream of hot water. Nina's rubbing her hands all over her wet body, and I get hard in an instant. "There's no one else. It's only you for me."

Her mouth spreads into that beautiful smile I love, but it falls a second later. She's been doing that a lot, smiling, then frowning, smiling, then frowning.

With a shake of her head, she pulls me forward by the rim of my joggers. "Take off your clothes and come in with me. I want you wet and naked."

"Okay, but I'm kissing you first." Bracing my good arm on the black tile behind her, I step under the stream of water, clothes and all, dip my chin, and kiss the hell out of my girl.

Hot water falls down around us, making my lips slide over hers with ease. Now that I know what it's like to kiss her, I always want more. I push her back against the wall, cradling the back of her head so she doesn't hit the hard tile.

Her tongue slips into my mouth, and she lets out one of her breathy moans that I love. I love that noise. I love her.

Fuck, I hope she loves me too.

I soak up the sound, gripping her ass to pull her closer, so she's rubbing up against my dick. I can't get enough of this girl, but I have to talk to her, so with a heavy breath, I pry my lips from hers and step back.

Nina pouts. "I wasn't done kissing you."

That makes me want to kiss her again. "I know, but there's something I want to talk to you about, but first, can you help me take off these clothes?"

"I will *gladly* get you naked. You don't have to ask me twice."

Nina helps me strip out of my wet clothes, and I forget that I have to talk to her when she starts stroking my hard dick with her soapy hand, but I force myself to focus.

Leaning back, I pump some shampoo into my good hand and start washing her hair, but then she pulls forward out of my grasp.

"No, Rhode, you shouldn't be doing that with your shoulder. You're supposed to be resting."

"My shoulder is fine. I can wash your hair."

She leans her head against my chest, and it's these small moments that are my favorite thing about us. The moments no one else gets to witness.

I massage her hair with my good arm. "So, I was talking to my coach today."

"About what?" She grins up at me from under my chin. "Is your shoulder getting better?"

She sounds hopeful, and that makes me fall for her a little harder. I kiss the top of her wet hair. "Yes, but that's not what I wanted to talk about. It was about something else..."

"That sounds ominous. What is it?"

I take a deep breath, struggling to gather the courage to tell her. I stare at the black-tiled wall, unable to meet her questioning gaze. "I don't think I'm going to renew my contract, or be a free agent with another team, so this would be the end for me."

"The end of what?"

I blow out a heavy breath. "My hockey career."

She doesn't say anything, so I tug her damp hair back, forcing her to look up at me. "Nina?"

She blinks slowly as she takes in my words and then lurches forward out of my grasp, the water splashing off her skin as she strides out of my shower.

She grabs a towel and wraps it around herself like a shield. “You’re not retiring, Rhode. I’m not letting you give up your dream. You’re going to rehab and play next season. That’s what you wanted. This isn’t the end for you.”

I follow her out of the shower, reaching for my own towel, but Nina hands me one. “That’s what I *thought* I wanted.”

“What do you mean?”

“This isn’t my dream anymore, Nina. It’s not what I want. My body’s falling apart, and I’m exhausted. I don’t want to be chasing around my kids in my forties with knee braces. Hell, I don’t even think I want kids right now. I want more time to figure out my next move. You’re the one who showed me that.”

“What about the sponsorship?” She throws out her hands, raising her voice. “You’re giving up everything you said you wanted. A family. Hockey. Everything!”

There’s an intensity in her gaze that has me second-guessing what she’s feeling. I thought she’d be happy we have time now. I’m not doing this for her, but I hoped she’d be in my life even after hockey.

“¡Vamos! is still willing to sponsor me even if I’m retired, and I just want some peace. There’s still time for a family. I can’t remember the last time I skated for fun.”

She paces back and forth, leaving a trail of water on the tiled floor as she thinks. She walks and walks and walks until finally, she stops. She flings herself across the room and wraps her arms around my neck. I catch her wet body in the embrace.

“You can’t retire because I love watching you play hockey,” she says into my chest. She fits so well there. “I don’t want you to give up your dream for me, so promise you won’t. Please? We can figure something else out together when I come back from Argentina. Don’t do this for me.”

I love her unwavering support, but this isn’t her decision. It’s mine, and no matter what, I know it’s the right one. “Okay, I promise I won’t retire for you.”

I’ll do it for me.

RHODE

“**W**hy the hell did you make us drive to the middle of fucking nowhere to fish at a lake? You know what we should be doing right now? Watching film.” Cruz throws a line into the water, shifting on the pebbles. “I’ve never fished a day in my life.”

“That’s not all that surprising, considering you haven’t caught anything.” Patty squirts some lighter fluid on a log, looking more like a rugged cowboy than a winger in his Stetson and flannel.

Cruz reels in an empty line. “That’s because there aren’t any damn fish in this lake.”

Fireflies blink to life in the sunset, glowing around Patty as the campfire sparks. The May air is just cool enough for a fire. I zip up my Guardians windbreaker, inhaling the crisp mountain breeze as I sort through my jumbled thoughts like I’ve been doing all week.

I spent the afternoon mumbling to myself, trying to figure out what to say to Patty and Cruz, but there aren’t any words that feel sufficient.

Thank you. I love you. I’ll miss you.

None of them are enough. I wrote down a whole-ass speech and threw the napkin away.

Cruz tosses out another line. “So, why did you drag us out here, old man? Someone better be dying, dead, or proposing since it took over an hour to get here with traffic.”

“I wanted to talk to you both about something.”

I dig through my gym bag until I find the bottle of whiskey I packed. With a deep breath, I pull it out, holding the glass like it's the Cup.

There are only two people I'd share this bottle with, and they're the guys who've stayed late with me after every practice, picking up trash and wiping sweat off benches.

They eye the whiskey, mouths falling open as they register which bottle I'm holding. Cruz whips his head back and forth. "No. No fucking way. You're not opening that bottle. Put it away."

Reaching into my bag, I pull out the expensive Waterford glasses still in the original packaging. "Yeah, I am Cruz. This is the only bottle I'd break my sober streak for, and you know why."

"Like hell you are," Cruz shouts. A few birds scatter from the pine trees. "No, I'm not drinking that. We're not opening that bottle, you know why? 'Cause we promised each other that we'd only open the Hibiki Anniversary Edition if one of us were leaving or retiring from the League, and no one's leaving, so put the Japanese whiskey away."

He faces the lake, giving me the back of his sweatshirt with *Cruz* scrawled across the fabric. Patty stays silent, frowning at the bottle.

"Micah," I whisper his name like that'll soften the news. "We're opening the bottle tonight."

Cruz glances over his shoulder, brown eyes shining brighter than the whiskey. He starts blinking fast, then yanks his gaze away before throwing his fishing pole on the ground. "Fuck this. I'm leaving."

Patty grips his shoulder, stopping him. "No, you're staying. We're all staying. Sit down." He settles into the camp chair with a rigid jaw. "Alright, Tremblay. Talk. You dragged us all the way out to the woods, and I'm sure this couldn't have been an easy choice."

I sit in my chair. "That's an understatement."

This has been the hardest three weeks of my life. But no matter how difficult the day is, my midnights always end in Nina's arms.

"Let's hear it." Patty twists open the whiskey, breaking the seal and sealing my fate. He pours each of us a glass. I bring the crystal to my lips, savoring the rich flavor.

After taking a few sips of liquid courage, I talk as the flames grow and the stars poke out in the sky, laying it all out.

I tell them about the countless late nights in Coach Watson's office, dissecting the terms of my contract. The meeting with our unflinching

general manager as she expressed her appreciation for all the hard work I've put in over the years.

Every early morning with Camille, ironing out the details of my press announcement. I admit I've been seeing our sports therapist and by the time I finish talking, I'm two glasses in, and the buzz of the alcohol is warming my veins more than the fire.

With a deep breath, I say the words that have weighed heavy on my shoulders since the beginning of the season. "I'm not renewing my contract. I'm retiring from the League."

I brace myself, preparing for their shouts.

Chirping crickets fill the air.

I wait and wait, and then, I lift my eyes from my almost-empty whiskey. Patty's staring at a duck floating on the lake the same way Cruz is looking into his glass, like it's got a hidden meaning.

"Patty? Cruz?"

The chirping grows louder than their silence.

Patty sniffs, then downs the rest of his whiskey and pours himself another glass. His cowboy hat casts a shadow on his face, so I can't see his expression. "Why this season? You could come back and play with us one more time."

I gaze into the crackling flames because the heat of the fire burns less than their stares. "We had one hell of a season. I got you to the playoffs, Smithy can take it from here. Everyone knows I can come back from this injury, but this way, it's my choice."

Patty nods a few times. "Don't you want to go out on top? Win the Cup again?"

"Nah. My ego's not that big. I care more about the team, and I want to make sure you guys are in good hands, which you are. I trust you two to take it from here."

He sips his whiskey. "Makes sense."

"That's all you have to say?"

Patty won't look me in the eye and Cruz tosses back his whiskey, pouring another, but this time, he fills up half the glass.

"Look," I continue. "I've thought long and hard about this, but I haven't wanted to admit this because it's tough, but my body's falling apart, and I'm exhausted. As much as it hurts my pride to say this, I've been watching the

games. You don't need me like I thought. Smithy's save percentage is right up there with mine, and—"

"I don't give a fuck about save percentages," Cruz interjects, throwing back his whiskey. "You think that's why we need you?"

I dig my heel into the dirt. "Why else would you need me?"

His glare pierces me across the campfire, the flames flickering over his scowl. "We need you because you're the first one to show up to practice and the last to leave. Because you treat the fourth line the same as the first line. You're the one we come to for advice on plays and the guy we ask what we should buy our moms for their birthdays. We don't need you for your save percentage or what you can do in the net. We just need you."

Cruz downs the last of his whiskey in one gulp. He surges to his feet so fast that the camp chair tips over, and heads toward the edge of the lake. He chucks a stone in the water.

My throat's too tight to speak, so I don't.

Patty exhales, causing the flames to crackle. "Let him relax, but he's right. You're not like other goalies I've played with where you stick to yourself or go off with your coach. You've actually made an effort to integrate yourself into this team. You're our backbone, Tremblay." He sighs. "But as much as I hate to say it, I get why you want to retire from the League."

I lean forward, my shoulders relaxing. "You do?"

"Yeah, I do." He pours another finger of whiskey, then does the same for me. "I love this game, but it takes everything from you because it needs your all. It's hard to have a life outside of the League, especially during the season, so whatever you need, whatever you want, I'll support you."

I try to clear the boulder in my throat with a cough, but that doesn't work, so I take another swig. "You know I'll always be here for you, Wyatt. No matter where I go or what I do. I'll always—" My voice cracks, so I stop.

"I know, Tremblay. I know." He salutes me with his glass, eyes shining in the flames. He clears his throat and opens his mouth, but nothing comes out. That's fine by me. The tears catching on his stubble say more than words.

I stand from the chair, gripping his shoulder and squeezing as much gratitude as possible into my hold. He lifts his hand, patting mine.

It's easy to let go of his grasp because I know I'm not really saying goodbye. With one last squeeze, I head over to Cruz.

My footsteps crunch on the pebbles. Cruz glances over his shoulder when he hears me but then whips back around to wipe his eyes. I hand him the bottle of whiskey, gazing out at the moon over the lake. "Take a sip. It helps with the burn."

He yanks the bottle from my grasp and gulps but then splutters. "That shit's strong." He takes another swig. Coughs again.

I thump his back. "Alright, get it out. You want to yell at me? Let's go."

He wipes his mouth with the back of his hand. "There's nothing to say. I won't let you retire, so you better find a way to renew your contract. We need you. There. Done."

A grin forms on my lips despite the anger radiating off his rigid body. "The team doesn't need me, Cruz. You'll be alright."

"Fuck the team. I need you." He snatches up a rock and, with a grunt, hurls it into the lake. The stone smashes into the water, shattering the dark surface. He watches the ripples grow until eventually, he sighs. "You know why I call you 'old man'?"

"Because I hate it?"

"No. That's not why." He downs the rest of his whiskey and tosses the glass on the pebbles. "It's because it's what I used to call my dad before he died. Sorry it made you feel shitty, but I used to joke around with him like that before he..."

He presses his palms to his eyes. "Dammit. This sucks. I don't talk about him because it fucking hurts, but it slipped out one day with you, and it felt like it was this small way to keep his memory alive, so I kept calling you old man, but you're not old. You're the best guy I know, Tremblay."

"Shit, Cruz. I didn't know that." My voice cracks, imagining Cruz, huddled over a casket.

We all know he lost his dad, but no one ever brings it up because he walks out of the room anytime someone tries to offer their condolences. Looking at his red eyes now, it makes me want to repair the bridge with my own father a little faster.

"Yeah, well, now you know, but I can't talk about this because it's too hard so we're moving on, old man."

"Alright, but you know I'm here for you, kid. Always."

He throws another rock as he seems to think hard about his next words. “Everyone always brings up the stupid shit you did in your twenties, but you know what I always saw? I saw a beauty of a player.”

“You did?”

“Yeah. There are so many goalies who get pissed when they lose, and I get it, I do. You’ve got the weight of the crowd on your shoulders, but attitudes like that drag the whole team down and make for a losing season.”

“Trust me, I know.”

“Exactly. You get that, and that’s why I wanted to sign with the Guardians.” With a grunt, he throws another stone. “I admire the hell out of you, but not for your skills. It’s because of how you handle the losses. You never let a loss follow you off the ice, and you never let it drag the team down. I know I’ve got a temper, but ever since my dad died...” He chucks another rock. “I’ve always tried to be more like you, Rhode.”

I swipe my burning eyes, glancing at Cruz to see him turned away like he’s hiding. That won’t work for me. “Come here.” I crush the kid against my chest in a fierce hug.

He stands there for a moment, but then Cruz grips me back, wrapping his arms around me just as tight.

“Listen to me, Micah,” I say in his ear. “I might not be on the ice with you next season, but I’ll always answer your call on the first ring. I’ll always give you advice on your slap shots and tell you not to get your mom a shake weight for her birthday. You need something? I’m there. You’re stuck with me forever because you’re my brother, and I love you.”

He sniffs against my shoulder. “I love you, too, Tremblay. Goddammit, I’m crying now. The last time I cried was at my dad’s funeral. I hate you.”

“Don’t worry, Patty’s sobbing by the campfire.”

“Look at us.” Cruz thumps his chest, pulling back. “Men being men.”

I lower my voice, making it overly deep. “We’re the manliest of men.”

“The definition of masculinity.” He hugs me again as his laughter fades. “I’m really gonna miss you, Tremblay. It won’t be the same without you.”

I pull back, gripping his shoulder with mock seriousness because we need to lighten this mood. “Alright, Cruz. It’s time I told you...”

He stares at me, expectant. Patty looks up from the campfire, and I wink at him. “None of us go commando for games for good luck. We’ve been lying to you all season because the veterans pulled that same shit on me.”

Patty bursts out laughing, clutching his stomach. Cruz's mouth falls open, and he hooks his arm around my neck, wrestling me. "You're such a dick! My ballsack's all disgusting from the chafing!"

I fight him off, straight-up chortling. "Sorry, but we had to. You were too damn cocky when you joined the team."

We make our way back to the campfire with our arms around each other, laughter binding us together. The hours slip away like our bottle of whiskey as we reminisce over stories.

By the time the moon's high in the sky, my cheeks ache from grinning, and I've got a side stitch from laughing.

We're silly drunk by the end of the night, so I leave my Range Rover and call Nina to pick us up. I feel like I'm floating, and I can't tell if that's because of the whiskey, or my decision, or my brothers, or Nina. From here on out, I want all her mornings and midnights.

She drives us all home, and I end the day exactly how I wanted—with her in my arms. Alright, fine, she's straddling me on the couch.

Gripping the back of her thighs, I pull her forward until she's grinding on my cock. Chicken's watching from his cat castle, but I don't care if he wants to be a voyeur.

I brush my fingers up her waist as I kiss the hell out of her. "I love the way you taste. I'll never get enough. If I could glue my mouth to yours, I would."

She laughs against me, running her fingers through my hair. "I take it you had fun with the guys because you taste like a distillery. How much whiskey did you drink?"

I swipe my tongue along her bottom lip, seeking more of her taste. "Too much."

She moans against my mouth but then pulls away from me. I don't like that. I don't like that one bit. "Rhode, you're drunk."

"Off you." I tug her closer.

She rolls those pretty hazels. "I'm not taking advantage of you."

"Please take advantage of me," I beg. "Take all the advantage you want. Take everything. I'm yours."

She laughs again, and I try to capture the sound with my mouth. I think I like making her laugh even more than I like making her come.

No. Yes. Wait, it's a tie.

My tongue swipes into her mouth, and she welcomes me with a soft sigh. My heart pounds in my chest because I still get a little nervous every time I kiss her, and just like every time, we get carried away.

Her fingers find their way to the back of my neck, tangling in my hair. I tighten my grip on her waist, pulling her closer to my chest, but it won't be close enough until I'm inside her, but for now, all I want is a kiss.

I love her so damn much. I don't know how it happened, or when it happened, or why it happened, but I'm just glad it happened—that we happened—and great, now I'm repeating myself, and all my whiskey-soaked brain can think about is how much I love her.

She rests her forehead against mine. I struggle to catch my breath as she peers into my eyes with a frown. That's not the look I want tonight. I want her smiles.

“Was the whiskey for a special occasion?” she asks. “Because if there's something you want to talk about, you know I've got big ears.”

I love that we have our inside jokes. I love *her*. I tuck a strand of hair behind her perfectly-sized ears. “I love your ears, and your face, and your laugh, and your brain, and your smile, and you. I love everything you.”

She goes rigid in my arms. “What did you just say?”

I stiffen. What did I say? Tilting my head, I replay the words and then freeze.

Shit. Fuck. Double fuck.

That's not how I wanted to tell her. I wanted to buy her flowers or something, not drunkenly word vomit *I love everything you* for the first time with Chicken judging from his cat castle.

Dammit. I can't tell what expression's on her face, and great, now I'm sweating, but I'm not taking it back because it's the truest thing I've ever felt.

Alright, sober up. You can do this, Tremblay.

“I said, I love you.”

NINA

“You what?”

My entire body stiffens while I replay the words over and over in my head like my favorite song.

I love you. I love you. I love you.

I don't care if it's an alcohol-induced confession, it's everything I've wanted to hear, and I need to make sure I'm not imagining this moment.

The goofy smile falls from his face like what he's about to say is of the utmost importance. “I said, I love you, and I want to keep you forever. Shit, that sounds bad, but you know what I mean.”

“Rhode...” I tangle my hands in his hair. “What about a family? What about everything you want? I don't want to hold you back.”

“You're not holding me back. You're setting me free.” His fingers tighten around my waist. “I only want those things if I get to have them with you. If it means waiting, then I will.” His glassy eyes bouncing between mine like he's nervous. “Do you want them with me or not?”

“Yes, of course I want them with you. I'm just not ready for them yet. I still want all those things, but it doesn't change that I'm leaving.”

“What if I came with you?” he slurs. “To Argentina? I'm shit at pottery, but I'll make a vase for you. I want to be with you for always.”

A laugh bubbles out of me at his blurry words. He's painting a pretty picture with his idealistic dreams, but I'm not going to latch onto an alcohol-laden promise.

“Okay, Rhode. You can come with me.”

“No. I’m serious,” he mumbles, pulling back to frown at me with half-lidded eyes. “I’m coming with you.”

“Okay, okay,” I say to soothe his drunken rambling. “You can come with me to Argentina, and we’ll build a life together there.”

He buries his head in my neck, his shoulders loosening. “Good, because I know I’m a little drunk, alright, a lot drunk, but I love you so damn much. I think you’re honest, even though you lied about being a doctor, but pottery’s better, and I love that you stand up for me, and you make me feel like my life isn’t over. This isn’t how I wanted to tell you, so you don’t have to say it back, and right now, your head’s spinning, or maybe it’s my head, and I think I’ll forget if you say it, and I don’t want to forget hearing you say you love me.”

He hiccups.

I laugh.

The man’s so drunk and so silly and so *mine*.

As I stroke his hair, I realize Rhode Tremblay could’ve so easily stayed a stranger. If I hadn’t walked in on Gwen and Isaac that night, if she’d never been with him in the first place, I wouldn’t have met this incredible man.

Our lives would’ve been orbiting around each other, maybe crossing, but probably not. My throat tightens as I stare at his smoky lashes fanning across his cheeks.

Rhode blurts out those three little words like they’re too big to be contained while I’ve locked my love for him in a treasure box. I thought if I never said the words, I could take them back, but I don’t want to be the type that hoards love for no one to see.

I want to love loud.

I run my fingers through his hair, pulling at the strands in that way that always makes his cerulean eyes darken. “I know the punchline.”

His brows come together. “What punchline?”

“To our terrible joke.” I press my smile to his warm whiskey lips. “The doctor falls in love with the plumber.”

Rhode blinks like he’s trying to process my words, but when his brain seems to make the connection, a huge grin cracks across his face, lighting him up with contagious happiness. “You love me?”

“Of course I love you, Rhode Tremblay, and when you wake up tomorrow with a pounding headache, I’ll say it again to remind you.”

His lips slam into mine with so much force, we nearly tumble off the couch.

The kiss is demanding. Raw. *Real*.

Our tongues tangle in what's becoming a familiar dance. We eventually run out of air and pull back to catch our breath. He presses his forehead to mine, thumbs brushing my cheeks.

Nose to nose. Chest to chest. Heart to heart.

Rhode looks how I feel, a bit stunned. A little hungry for more.

After we kiss and love each other thoroughly, *very* thoroughly, we drift off to sleep, naked in each other's arms.

We wake up the next morning the same way, and the day after that, and the day after that, until one morning, Rhode's gone. There's a note on his nightstand, scrawled in his surprisingly romantic handwriting.

Sorry to leave you, beautiful girl. I would've rather stayed in your arms, but I have a press conference at the arena later today. It's at five and I want you there. It's important to me. I've got news. Good news :)

A press conference? He's been working his ass off in rehab every day this week, and I hope this means he's announcing his comeback next season.

Grabbing my purse, I head back to my place to get more clothes since I can't live in Rhode's sweats, no matter how good they smell. I text Gwen to let her know I'm on my way, but she doesn't respond.

She's barely talked to me over the past three weeks, and for the first time, thanks to Rhode's constant pestering, I've been trying—calling, texting. I get nothing back.

When I get to our apartment, I jiggle my keys in the lock, swing open the apartment door, and step into a smoky haze. A cough erupts from my chest. The shrill wail of the fire alarm pierces through the smoke cloud, drowning out every other noise.

"Gwen!" I shout, running into the kitchen. She's bent over the oven, and thick, pitch-black smoke billows out from its opening. "Holy shit. What happened?"

“There’s a flood,” she screams, opening cabinet after cabinet. “What do you think happened? My food burned. Get the extinguisher!”

At least she’s making jokes. I plug my ears. “Where’s the fire extinguisher?”

“I don’t know!” she screams over the alarm. “Check under the sink!”

Wincing at the high-pitched wails, I rummage through our cabinets, pulling out everything but the kitchen sink until, finally, my hands close around the red tube. “Got it!”

“Open it!”

“How?”

“Read the instructions!”

I scan the label. *P.A.S.S. Pull. Aim. Squeeze. Sweep.* Pulling the safety pin, I follow the instructions. White foam bursts from the extinguisher, dousing Gwen and smothering the flames. I spray until she looks like a snowman, the fire’s gone, and the alarm stops blaring.

With a huff, she swipes the foam from her face. “You were supposed to aim at the flames!”

“You were supposed to know how to cook!” I retort.

“I didn’t know the plastic from the meal container was flammable!”

We stand in the kitchen-turned-foam battleground with heaving chests, glaring at each other in a standoff. Gwen’s covered from head to toe. It’s the first time I’ve seen her look like an utter mess.

A giggle bubbles out of my mouth, and once it starts, laughter spews from my lips like a geyser. The relief from the situation hits me in full force.

She’s fine. Everyone’s fine.

Gwen’s laughter joins mine, and we quickly escalate into uncontrollable snort-fits. It’s the type of laughter that keeps rolling, getting bigger the longer it lasts.

We’re laughing until we can’t remember why we started laughing.

We’re laughing until we’re wiping tears.

We’re laughing until we can’t breathe.

We’re laughing at each other the way only sisters do—ugly and loud and a little mean because it’s at each other—but it’s okay because underneath all that is an unshakeable love.

When we finally catch our breath and wipe the tears from our eyes, the smoke has faded in the kitchen. We stand there, a foamy mess, until Gwen

sinks to the tile, resting her back against the counter. I take a seat next to her.

Gwen stares at the cardinal by the kitchen sink window like it's the most interesting lecture in the world.

My lips curl up at the gentle serenade, but then she yanks off her shoe and launches it like a frisbee at the glass, scaring the poor bird so it flies off.

"Gwen!" I gasp. "The bird didn't do anything to you. Don't be mean."

"It was annoying me," she mutters, squeezing her eyes shut, and then, another giggle bursts from her lips.

I bump her. "I've missed laughing with you."

She picks at her nails. "Me too, but I haven't felt like laughing much lately."

I peer at the dark circles under her eyes like she's been tossing every night for the past three weeks. To my absolute shock, her stare turns glassy. She swipes at her eyes but remembers she has foam on her hands and uses her shirt to wipe it away instead.

"What happened?" I interlace my fingers through hers. "Do I need to go buy some eggs from the store so we can throw them at Isaac's house? Maybe toilet paper the trees like we're in an old movie? Because I'll do it. I'll go to toilet paper war for you, Gwen."

She sniffs. "No, we're not doing that. That's ridiculous."

I clasp her hand like she could drift away. "Okay, then talk to me. You never even told me what happened."

She stares at our hands. "You never asked what happened."

My guilt grows claws, gnawing through my stomach. Gwen's the one who always pushes when I pull, and I think, sometimes, I take it for granted. I thought it was her duty as the oldest, but I hope she pushes because she wants me in her life as much as I want her in mine.

"Yeah, I know, but I'm asking now." After a minute of silence, I nudge her again. "Come on, talk to me."

"Fine, but it's not a big deal, so don't scream in my ear like you always do." She heaves a sigh. "Isaac ended things a while ago. I never told you this, but when I went to the doctor to look at freezing my eggs—"

"You did *what*?"

"Yeah, that's another story. Anyway, I found out it's going to be really difficult for me to have kids. That led to a whole thing. I told Isaac that, and

he broke up with me because I guess I'm not enough. Anyway, that's what happened. Are you hungry? We can get takeout since I burned the kitchen."

Only Gwen could make that confession sound like a weather report. Her face is expressionless, but I know she only turns to stone when she feels the most. "I'm so sorry, Gwen, for all of it. Are you okay? You always said you weren't sure about having kids."

She's quiet for a long time, twirling her thumbs. "You know, it took me having the option taken away to realize how badly I want that, but it's probably for the best. I'd make a shitty mom."

She spits the bitter words, and my heart overflows with sympathy. "No, you wouldn't, and if that's something you really want, you still have options. You can adopt or freeze your eggs. I don't know the details, but I'll help you."

"It's fine," she sighs. "I mean, it's not fine, but I can't talk about this..."

"Okay, but if you ever need someone to listen, I've got big ears."

She gives me a look. "What? I don't get that."

"Oh, um... Never mind. It's a thing with me and Rhode."

She smiles at that. "I'm happy you're happy, by the way. For what it's worth, I'm sorry about everything with Isaac. Sometimes, I kind of hate myself for what I did to you. I really did think I was in love with him, but looking back, I never should've betrayed you like that."

"So, why did you?" I whisper.

She twirls her thumbs. "I don't know. You're so much better than me. I guess I just wanted something you had because I've always been jealous of you."

"What?" I jolt forward, brows soaring. "Why would you be jealous of me?"

She shoots me a wry glance. "Really, Nina? You're funny, smart, and so brave for going against everyone and doing what you love with your fellowship. I've always been ambitious for the sake of being ambitious, trying to please everyone because I thought that would please me, but you're so authentically yourself. You don't care what people think."

"I *definitely* care what other people think. I just pretend like I don't."

"It doesn't seem that way." She interlaces her fingers through mine, resting her foamy cheek on my head.

"Well, I've been comparing myself to you because you're perfect and you don't have to deal with a mess living inside your brain."

“I’m not perfect, and you’re not a mess.” Gwen chuckles dryly. “So, we’ve both been spending our entire lives comparing ourselves to each other?”

“Yeah, I guess so.” I stare down at our feet which are exactly the same size. “What a waste of fucking time.”

My entire life, I’ve watched her climb these mountains of success while I’ve been dragging myself out of a ditch, and people only clap at life’s summits even though they both take the same amount of strength.

Gwen has her flaws, but we’ve both made mistakes. She might’ve stolen Isaac and lied to me, but three years ago, I told her that I hated her daily. Neither one of us was a sister worth fighting for. I never realized how far I’ve come from the pits of my own demons.

I clench her hand in a vice. “Isaac’s such a dick. What’d we ever see in him?”

“I don’t know...” She chews her bottom lip. “He had a nice ass.”

I scoff. “Have you felt Rhode’s? It’s like squeezing a rock. I love his ass.”

“No, and I would never.” The cardinal lands on the branch outside the window again, chirping softly. We’re quiet for a while as we both listen. “So you’re not mad at me anymore?”

“I’m not.”

“You promise?”

“Yes, Gwen. I promise, but I’ll probably be mad at you again tomorrow because that’s what we do.”

“That’s fine as long as you promise that I’ll never lose you. You’re all I have left.”

I squeeze her hand. “You won’t lose me. No matter what. You’re my infinity.”

“That makes literally no sense,” Gwen blurts.

“What are you talking about?” I snap back. “It makes total sense.”

“No, it doesn’t make sense at all.”

I lift my head from her shoulder, glaring into her green eyes. “You’re ruining this.”

“I think you did that all by yourself. Infinity? What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Well, I don’t want to explain it now because it’s not going to sound as good.”

“Would you just tell me?” she barks.

“Fine, okay,” I say through gritted teeth. “What I mean is that you were there the day I was born, and when our parents are gone, you’ll still be here. Our parents don’t get the end, and our partners won’t get the beginning, but you get it all. You’re my infinity.”

I clear my throat because it’s a little tight. “But now that I’m saying it out loud, I’m kind of regretting it because I sound like a card, so go ahead. Make fun of me.”

She quirks a smile, tightly looping her arm through mine. “I’m not making fun of you. I love you.”

Happiness fizzles in my chest, bright and bubbly, and I finally say the words I’ve held back for so long. “I love you, too.”

She snorts. “*Infinitely.*”

I shoot her a lackluster glare. “Never mind. You’re the worst. I hate you,” I say, smiling through the hollow words.

We get up and clean the kitchen, picking up right where we left off, and I know that no matter what happens, no matter where we go in life, and no matter how much I hate her sometimes, I’ll always have Gwen, for better or for worse. Sisterhood is wonderfully horrible and terribly messy, and we might never see eye to eye, but we’ll always stand shoulder to shoulder.

We laugh and talk for over an hour until the kitchen is as fresh as our new start. My phone buzzes in my lap, and I glance at Micah’s text.

YOUR FAVORITE

Where the fuq are you?

ME

I’m at home. Why?

YOUR FAVORITE

Get your ass over here, Phil.

ME

Where???

YOUR FAVORITE

Fore real? The old man’s press conference?

He’s asking where the hell you are, but he can’t find his phone. Hurry the fuq up it’s starting soon.

A second later, Micah sends a link to an article. *Rhode Tremblay Announces Retirement Following Storied Career with Guardians in Press Conference: Wish I Could Play Forever.*

My stomach drops as I speed-read the headline. I completely forgot about the press conference with the fire incident, but I didn't realize it was about his retirement. He left out *that* one little detail, which would've been nice to know. Irritation prickles as I read the article.

"Gwen?"

"Yeah?"

I show her my phone screen, and her eyes bulge. "Can you drive me to the arena? I need to go yell at the man I love."

RHODE

“First off, I want to say thank you. I couldn’t be more grateful for being here and arriving in the League as an eighteen-year-old. It’s truly been the honor of my life.”

A camera flashes, blinding me for a second as I scan the crowd, searching for Nina. Where is she? Maybe I should’ve left more than a note, but I was trying to be all romantic with a grand gesture.

I’m never making that mistake again.

Anticipation fills the conference room. The sea of suited-up journalists stares back at me behind the black table. It’s normally me up here with my team, but now, it’s just me and nine extra chairs. My teammates are in the back, standing next to my family. Some are smiling, others are crying, but they’re all here. Only one person is missing, and she’s the person I need most in this room.

“So, Rhode,” one of the journalists in the front asks, scratching his mustache. “How did you know it was time to retire from the League?”

I sip my Smart Water like I always do before answering. “It was a combination of things. When I signed this past summer, I knew it was only for one year, so I always had it in the back of my mind, but I think the main thing is the body. It takes a toll, and I wanted to play the game at the highest level...” I continue speaking, giving the journalists the spiel I practiced for three days with Camille.

Everyone looks down, typing on their phones. Another hand raises, then another. Journalists bombard me with questions.

What would your message be to the Nashville fans? Is there anything you would've done differently? Why not come back next season? I answer each one, mentally thanking Camille and all her relentless preparation.

A journalist with blonde hair raises a hand. I nod in their direction. "I'm sure this decision involved a lot of counseling, but what's next? Is there a framework for what Rhode Tremblay's future looks like?"

The door in the back creaks open.

Glancing up, I lock eyes with Nina across the sea of suits, and relief jolts through my body.

She's here.

A smile splits across my face so fast that it takes me a minute to realize she's glaring at me with the heat of a wildfire, and damn, she looks *pissed*. I tug at my collar.

Nina sits in the back next to Micah, her penetrating stare cutting through me. I track her like a puck. Arching a brow, she crosses her arms at the same time as her legs.

"Rhode?" a journalist asks.

I shake my head, forcing myself to focus on the journalist. "Sorry, what was the question?"

"What does the future look like? What's life after the League?"

I clear my throat into the mic. "I'm not sure what life after the League will look like, but thanks to someone very very important to me," I add to soften Nina up. "I now realize that I've got time to figure it out, and that's all I can ask for. Who knows? Maybe I'll travel. Sail a boat. Lie on a beach. Go to... Argentina?"

Her jaw clenches.

Alright, wrong thing to say.

A few people in the crowd chuckle, but there's only one laugh I want to hear. Another journalist raises a hand, and I nod in their direction. "I'm sure you've seen all the messages from your teammates on social media, but one that stuck out was from Wyatt Patterson, who said, 'What you've built here is something that can't be broken. We'll take care of your legacy.' When you hear that, what does that mean to you, Rhode? What's your legacy?"

Across the room, Patty's rubbing his eyes with the heels of his palms. I yank my gaze away. Patty and Cruz got the team to film messages for me

and compiled them into a video they played before the press conference.

Terrible timing.

I only had ten minutes to pull myself together before I had to get in front of the cameras. They better cry when I give them the *Puck Buddy* cross-stitches I made.

“My teammates are my legacy,” I say to the crowd. “People always talk about my stats, but I hope I’m remembered for more than just my save percentage or the games we won. I hope people remember all the moments off the ice just as much as the ones in the rink. These guys are everything to me.”

Cruz and Patty look down at their feet, but Nina reaches out to hold both of their hands. My eyes start to burn because she might’ve come for me, but she’s also here for my boys.

Another journalist raises a hand. I field questions for the next thirty minutes until my water is as drained as my body. Nina’s stare never leaves my face, and when it’s all done, there’s nothing but relief. The conference ends, but I still have a lot of hands to shake.

I push back from the table, take photos, make dinner plans with my family, and thank everyone in the room, all while trying to get to one girl in the back.

My girl.

Nina watches from the corner, waiting patiently like I’ve been waiting for her my whole life, and my lips tilt up because I know when the room clears out and the lights turn off, Nina will still be there—scowling, chuckling, grinning—I’ll take her every way.

After hugging nearly everyone on the team, I weave my way through journalists and meet her in the back. She lifts her chin, eyes zoning in on my grin.

I grip the curve of her waist, pulling her against me. “I’m really glad you’re here. I was worried you weren’t going to make it.”

She lightly slaps my chest. “I’m very mad at you. You should’ve told me this was a press conference for your retirement. I kind of want to yell at you for this.”

“You’re right. I should’ve.” I tug her closer. “You can yell at me all you want as long as I’ve got you in my arms.”

“I’m serious.”

“Me too.”

“This isn’t funny. Why the hell didn’t you tell me, Rhode?”

“I was trying to be all romantic with a surprise, and it didn’t work out that way...”

“That’s sweet, but if we’re going to be together, I don’t want you keeping things like this from me. From here on out, you tell me everything. I want to know the big things and the small things and everything in between. I never wanted you to give up your dream for me.”

I cradle her cheeks, forcing her to look me in the eye so she knows how much these words mean. “This was my choice, and I didn’t want you to feel the pressure. I didn’t give up my dream. I just found a new one. You.”

Her eyes fill with water, and I lift her glasses, swiping away the mascara smudge. “Hey, this is a good thing, Nina. I’m happier than I ever thought I’d be. This wasn’t just a snap choice. I’ve been thinking about this all season, and I didn’t want to burden you because I’m doing this for me.”

She wraps her arms around my waist. “Okay, then I can be happy for you because I’m sure this couldn’t have been easy. I’m proud of you, for what it’s worth. Making this type of decision is really brave.”

This girl.

She’s bodychecked my damn soul.

She smiles. “I guess you’re not icebound anymore. You’re free.”

I’m free.

“You’re right. I’m Argentina-bound.” I kiss her forehead. “This is the last thing I’m doing for me because now I’m yours. From here on out, I’ll help you catch whatever dream you’re chasing. It doesn’t matter if you’re climbing a mountain or dragging yourself out of a ditch, because I belong with every version of you. So, go chase those dreams of yours. Let’s be wild together.”

She smiles, slow and bright. It’s breathtaking. She’s breathtaking. “Okay, but no more secrets.”

I’m *not* going to tell her that I already have a ring picked out for her, but she’ll know one day when I get down on one knee. Whenever she’s ready. That’s the last secret I’ll keep.

“Alright, no more secrets.” I press my lips to the tip of her nose. “Can I please kiss that gorgeous mouth I can’t stop thinking about and show everyone in this room who I belong to?”

Lifting onto her toes, she hooks her arms around my neck. “I belong to you as much as you belong to me. You’re mine, and I’m yours.”

“Good. Because I already booked my flight to Argentina. I upgraded us to first class.”

“You didn’t have to do that. I’m fine with coach.”

“You’re mine now, which means you fly first class.”

I kiss her good—with tongue—not giving a damn that everyone’s in the room, watching us, taking pictures. Gripping her waist, I lift her off the tile and swing her around the room.

I might be a little too old for her, and yeah, maybe we don’t fit together from the outside, but our souls are a perfect match. For the first time in a while, I’m excited for the future. We’ll have a family and kids and all the stress that comes with that, but for now, I want her all to myself.

I don’t bother putting her back down on the ground, I just hold her, dangling feet and all. “I love you,” I whisper, only for her.

“I love you too,” she whispers, only for me.

“Thanks for giving me a life outside of hockey. I had no idea my entire life would change when I got into your car. If I’d known you were waiting for me, I would’ve left that bar a hell of a lot sooner.”

She peppers my face with kisses. “Why’s that?”

“Because then I could’ve had one more moment with you, since I don’t know if forever is going to be enough.”



COMING SOON

Thanks for reading! If you enjoyed this book, I would appreciate you leaving a review on Amazon, Goodreads, or wherever else! I have so many fun stories planned for my favorite hockey boys. For more updates on the Boundless Players series, and an epilogue for Rhode and Nina, follow me on social media @authormeredithtrapp

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First off, thank you, dearest reader, for taking a chance on my book baby. I hope you loved Rhode and Nina's story as much as I loved writing them.

If you did, I would be so forever grateful if you left a review on Amazon and Goodreads. Positive reviews work magic for authors!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Meredith is a professional daydreamer who writes romance stories full of spice, smooches, and swoons. She lives in Texas with her favorite person and one lazy poodle. When she's not writing, you can usually find her walking beneath the Texas sun or spending time with her family at the lake. To stay up to date on Meredith's upcoming projects, connect with her on social media, @authormeredithtrapp



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