



DALVEGAN
DRAGONS



The OWNER

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
XAVIER NEAL

The OWNER



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OceanofPDF.com

The Owner (Dalvegan Dragons #1)
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To the Universe...Thank you for letting me OWN my writing career.

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WARNING

This novel contains EXTREMELY foul language (from both men and women), EXTREMELY graphic sexual content (including some that may differ from your own), adult situations and an abundance of hockey references. Some readers may find the content triggering or disagree with it entirely.

It also contains a combination of factual information regarding the game, players, and the league(s)/organization(s) (from research done with online sources as well as direct now retired players) however, there have been creative liberties taken that are entirely fictional to fit the fictitious world I have created.

Please keep all these things in mind and proceed at your own risk.

Thank you.

—Xavier

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PLAYLIST SELECTS

Here are five songs from the *The Owner* playlist!

Feel free to follow the playlist on Spotify to find more songs I felt related to the book.

1. Jealous (Remix)—Nick Jonas, Tinashe (R&B)

2.p B.I.G.—X Ambassadors (Rock)

3. Bad At Love—Halsey (Pop)

4. if I could I would feel nothing—blackbear (Rap/Hip-hop)

5. Starstruck—Years & Years (Electro Pop)

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CHAPTER 1



Harlow

This is how normal people mourn the death of their favorite person on the planet, right?

They hop on their private plane with their anal-retentive assistant best friend less than four hours after the funeral of their father—the only *real* parent to give a fuck about them—send one of their best friends since childhood money for a plane ticket—since he couldn't make it for the funeral because of a tight cash situation—and tell him to meet them in Vegas where they've rented the penthouse suite of The Frost Luxury Hotel for their get royally fucked up adventures.

All of that is...totally...run of the mill...*ordinary*.

Just like having a Wilcox and coke—or six—during the aforementioned jet setting from Texas to Nevada prior to pounding back shot after shot after shot the instant their best friend and his hot tagalong walk through the door is quite *reasonable*.

And it's probably safe to assume that the average grieving individual would also throw cash around the casino like they just won The Cup versus sucking so fucking hard that they're dead last in the league.

The. Whole. Fucking. League.

Our team sucks so much fucking ass that it gave my dad a stroke.

Okay.

That's a lie.

The preference for high dollar steaks, fried cheese curds, and refusal to even look at salad contributed to the attack as well as the excessive drinking, smoking, and inconsistency in bringing down his high blood pressure.

But like...owning and having a hand in operating the *worst* team in the league was probably a factor too.

And while all the shit that I've previously listed is *obviously* acceptable bereavement behavior for a rational, reasonable, emotionally balanced person, I know without a doubt blacking out and waking up with a goddamn mood ring on their left hand is *not*.

I slowly rotate my warm, honey brown skinned palm from one side to other, glaring at the piece of tacky jewelry.

Black probably isn't the best sign.

Maybe it means I'm dehydrated?

That I'm malnourished?

Fuck, maybe that I need to take a shit?

Both hands promptly fly over my face on a heavy sigh.

Forfuckssake, it's not the latest Fitbit. Its job probably isn't to help regulate my life or remind me how *unregulated* my life is. Clearly, its sole purpose is to...well, to be honest, I don't know what the fuck the point of these things are or why on Earth I fucking have one.

And whose idea was it to get one?!

And why would I *agree* to wear it?

What part of me—skates with the boys, drinks with boys, titty bar hops with the boys—suddenly screams trashy middle school accessories?!

I didn't even wear those things *in* middle school!

I would've been the laughingstock of the whole fucking barn.

It was hard enough getting them to take me seriously as the *only* girl on the whole fucking team; however, that shit did change when they realized I was a sniper.

In and out of the uniform.

Audible grumbles suddenly appear next to me not only fanning the dull throbbing I was hoping would be gone by now but drawing my burning gaze over to the stirring movement beside me.

Please let that be a person.

Please let that be a person.

Please let that be a person and not some random baby farm animals Geoffrey Winslow—my childhood best friend from my mother's home country, Doctenn—convinced me to adopt again.

Ugh.

I can't believe I have to say the word *again*.

Although, I'll admit it.

Life wouldn't be the same without Cookies and Cream, my Nigerian dwarf goats. Getting those two cuddle bugs not only made turning thirty-five a lot more fun, but they also gave Dad a reason to finally get me out of my downtown condo and into a huge house he had built for me right on the outskirts of Dalvegan. Of course, said house came with obnoxious conversations about me settling down. Getting away from the league—the only thing I fucking live and breathe for. And of course, starting a life with someone who—if it were up to Dad—had very little knowledge about our shared beloved sport.

Sometimes I think he wanted the same type of makeup and cocktails daughter that my socialite, money hungry, ass kissing mother did instead of the sweater—also known as a jersey—wearing and brewskies guzzling one he got stuck raising.

Other times, I *know* without a doubt, he was grateful for the fearless, athlete obsessed, business savvy beauty he bragged about whenever asked about his personal life.

God, it used to drive her insane to hear him gush about me or our trips around the world together. Without fail, she'd use the press coverage like a debit card to extract more cash from him that she didn't deserve.

I don't know why I expected her to say *anything* remotely kind to me at the event after the funeral. It wasn't like the individual who had the biggest hand in raising me, guiding me, *inspiring me* to be the very person I've become had basically just fucking died. Of course, that was absolutely the most *acceptable* time to tell me that the Tuna Tartare on crackers—which I personally picked to be served—was a bit of a faux pas considering most of the attendees were low-class athletes and even lower-class wives.

Yeah.

Birtherd by a total fucking winner.

The MVP of twat waffles.

Cautiously, I watch as a head full of messy dark brown hair emerges from beneath the stark white sheets right before a rather well sculpted face, I *vaguely* remember meeting, does the same. My stare stays planted on him, bracing myself for the inevitable eye-opening sequence of events that will start with showing me what color his are and end with an awkward fumbling regarding sex I can't remember from the previous night, yet it doesn't happen.

In fact...*nothing* happens.

He merely continues to heavily breathe still knocked out by whatever properly took him down.

It's probably wrong to hope it was me and not the tequila, huh?

Shit.

Did we have tequila?

The throbbing increases in severity causing me to release a low groan.

Yup. It was probably tequila. Tequila has this way of making sure I never remember anything.

Ugh. *Fuck. Me.*

Do I really *want* to remember anything?

My gaze sweeps the golden, sand skinned stranger once more noting first the pierced right eyebrow and next the impressively light scruff littered along his cut jawline. His lips, which are thinner than I typically like—I mean who doesn't want a thick pair pressed between their thighs—are for some reason impossible to look away from. Almost...*irresistible*. Almost like my subconscious is registering or remembering sensations my conscious can't. Temptation to gently touch the rather pale pair is unexpectedly scared away by what has to be banging on a door.

The first important question is *which* door.

There are like fifty in this fucking suite.

And the next—and probably more *important*—question is *who* is doing that banging?

It better not be fucking housekeeping.

They're not supposed knock like we're on fucking *Cops*.

Sliding out of the king-size bed is carefully done to prevent waking the man beside me as well as to keep from heaving all over where I was previously sleeping due to moving too fast. My new standing status, however, immediately reveals what isn't any sort of actual shock.

I'm naked.

And the cover I've accidentally dragged down to right above dick level informs me that so is he.

You know what?

Sloppy, drunken, Vegas sex is probably another absolutely normal thing for a grief-stricken, thirty-seven-year-old woman to do.

Uh-huh.

That's right.

This is the playbook I'm going to keep using until it gets me a fucking win.

My own series of head coach mantras, if you will.

Like "we'll get 'em next season, boys" or "you're a good fucking team, they're just a little better".

That bullshit.

If everyone is *always* better than you then that means you fucking suck as a team.

Grow a pair, McTeer!

Tell them what useless fucks they are and make some goddamn line changes!

Forfuckssake, I can't wait to fire him.

Pretty much had a couple shots cheering to that last night.

Okay.

I *assume* I did.

The knocking—if we're really not going to call that shit bongo banging—suddenly gets more aggressive with each passing second pushing me to scramble out of the room, wrapping the comforter around my toned frame like a towel in the process.

It's an unexpected long trek down the adjacent hallway and passing closed doors where undergarments are hanging from the doorknobs has me cringing in shame.

Okay, so, only that thong is mine.

Whose bra was that?

Did Margot finally let loose, and allow her titties to fly?!

Did my bestie *finally* live a little, and I wasn't even sober enough to fucking remember it?!

Stumbling through the wrecked living room to the front door includes tripping over the long bed piece and maneuvering around oddly rearranged

furniture that I feel tells a story about our adventures last night that I don't want to hear.

Mainly because we're much too old to be playing the Floor is Lava.

But I do fucking *dominate* at those games.

I'm graceful as fuck.

Being raised in the rink is definitely the reason for that shit.

Unhooking the top lock, meant to be the extra security measure to keep people out, is swiftly followed by me swinging the door open to unveil the Dave Grohl tribute drummer to be none other than the very assistant who I was hoping was the owner of the red, lacy bra I passed.

Should've known better.

She's definitely more of an all undergarments are best in beige type of person.

Margot's round, taupe colored face tilts disapprovingly to one side.

"Where are your clothes?"

Unable to lie to her because I've *never* been able to lie to her, I merely answer on an innocent shrug. "No fucking clue."

"Where's your phone?"

Tossing my left hand in the air accompanies the uncertain response.

"Probably wherever my clothes are?"

Her stoic expression—to no surprise whatsoever—remains unchanged.

"Why are you wearing a mood ring?"

"No fucking idea."

The flicker of irritation in her hazel glare would be missed by someone who has not been as groomed as I have to read her nonverbal cues. "Who put the 'do not disturb lock' in place?"

I prepare to repeat myself when her pointed finger lifts to stop me.

"You know what? It doesn't matter. That shit was probably for the best. Being forced to get my own room allowed me to *finally* get the sleep you think I don't need."

Her teasing tone receives an equally playful smirk. "You don't need sleep. You run on caffeine and Lysol."

"You should really *thank me* for the amount of cold and flu seasons I've saved you from."

Not to mention the amount of other bullshit she's *actually* had my back for. She may be *paid* to do most of that shit; however, over the past five years she's undeniably become more than just my assistant.

She's one of my best friends.

Who...just so happens to hate one of my other best friends.

And not in the "when will they bone and get it over with" sort of way, but the "there can only be one Highlander" type.

Shit got so ugly between them three years ago that there had to be a *literal clause* written into her contract about professionalism in his presence. I mean she fucking ignores it, but like, it's still *there*.

Margot shoves the coffee cup in her possession my direction at the same time she announces, "We're leaving."

One hand accepts the hot offering while the other tugs the comforter into a more secure position. "Was I *that* out-of-control last night?"

"Yes," my best friend effortlessly replies as she enters the suite, door shutting behind her, "or I *assume* yes because anytime you're left to your own devices with that *Doctor Who* could never be, you naturally end up wasted, naked, or in need of legal assistance." Her frame spins my direction to hand me the clothes I didn't realize she was holding. "And since you're wearing a *comforter* like a prom dress, the assumption stands."

"I wouldn't know." Retreating backwards a few steps allows me to put down the cup to properly receive the folded items waiting for me. "I didn't go to prom."

"Or homecomings. Or your winter formals. Or the sweet sixteen party your mom threw in your honor at some uppity gallery in Doctenn." She releases custody of the sweats into my possession. "*I know*." Once they're in my hands, she adds, "But what I *don't know* is exactly what you were up to last night because I declined my invitation to Drunkageddon to review the paperwork regarding player contracts and negotiations per the event of the general manager's death. You wanted to know how much power you have and where, and you know I am more than happy to read mountains of legal documents while drinking my Tulsi peppermint chai and listening to Enya."

"Every word of that sentence makes my stomach churn."

"It's a good thing I did since your first media coverage as the acting GM was moved to today at two."

"What?!"

"There's some dead air they're looking to fill-"

"*How fucking sweet.*"

“-and with the death of your dad and The Cup on the horizon they wanna know not only who your *personal* predictions for the season taker will be, but how you plan to deliver differently for next season, so that maybe your team has a chance to get somewhere they haven’t been since Sid the Kid was drafted.”

“You’re fucking quoting the cunt correspondent Florence Ramirez from STN, aren’t you?”

“Verbatim.”

“*I. Hate. Her.*”

“The feeling is mutual.” Margot nonchalantly reminds. “And I imagine now that you’re the owner and acting GM of the Dragons, she’s going to capitalize on every opportunity given to embarrass you and/or the team whether that be about matters regarding career choices or personal ones.”

God, you Kristi Yamaguchi some twat *one time* in front of the fuck boy you’re both interested in and that warrants a life-long hatred both behind the camera as well as in front of it?

Seriously?

Like is it my fault I can skate better than you?

Okay, probably.

I mean I spent almost every waking moment I could underneath my dad and being “uncled” by some of the greatest players the league has ever seen—even once they were transferred to better teams.

But that was my choice.

Sort of.

And hers was to talk a bunch of shit in her cotton candy onesie to try to impress the redhead bender that I was personally only interested in because he had an amazing hockey ass.

I never thought I’d *still* be paying for that seemingly innocent stunt twenty. Years. Later.

I also never thought she’d still be putting the “ho” in hockey.

Yet here we are.

On both accounts.

“She will *personally* be leading the interview,” Margot informs and rolls her hand around, “so let’s get you dressed, on a plane, conversationally prepped and into wardrobe to give her the least amount of wins possible in this haranguing.”

An unhappy grunt is all she's offered prior to the bedding being dropped.

"And since you're already in a good mood..."

The glare she's given is easily disregarded considering her main focus seems to be searching the couch cushions for something.

Most likely my phone.

"You should know that you have three player negotiation meetings tomorrow starting at seven."

"We talkin' pre bacon and eggs seven or post happy hour shots seven?"

"Pre."

"Fuck. Me," I mutter under my breath at the same time I slip on my gray sports bra.

"You also have three more who want to schedule a time."

Perfect.

I lost my head coach in life and now I'm losing an entire chunk of the fucking team he built.

Yanking the long sleeve cropped sweatshirt occurs on a contemplative hum.

Then again, maybe ditching the players with egos twice the size of their dicks isn't a bad thing. Maybe...maybe...starting completely fresh would be for the best.

Not in my personal life of course.

Not that I really *have* a personal life.

I barely even have an offseason when it comes to this sport.

The loose fitted maroon sweatpants I was brought have just finished being tied when the door to the suite opens a second time. "Morning, Hennington!"

Groaning at his volume is thoughtlessly done. "You're so fucking loud, Winslow. Could you bring it down to a pre-warmies level?"

Chuckles are delivered around a half-eaten donut. "How are you so bloody hungover?"

"Maybe because I have an *American* liver?" Reaching into the box to grab a chocolate treat occurs between additional teasing. "Or maybe because I don't literally *live* behind the bar of my nightclub?"

"It's a *pub*, and you bloody know it," he playfully scolds.

I *do* know it.

And I invested in it.

And he didn't actually ask me to.

I...just...wrote a large check when he finalized his location and made sure to show up in Ann Arbor for their opening weekend. Luckily for me it was a road game, so I wasn't missing a live in person loss. Being in a brand-new pub with great beer and even better deep-fried food was rather on brand for the way I deal with *most* away game losses. Only difference was that Winslow was by my side watching the epic failures those two days instead of my dad.

One of the best parts of my friendship with Winslow is that it was father approved.

Almost a little *too* approved.

We're talking, if arranged marriages were still a thing, he would've given up my hand for an aged bottle of Wilcox and box of Twix—fun sized or regular.

See, the thing is...Winslow isn't my type.

At. All.

I mean, yeah. I love and adore him as a friend. I get why chicks go ga-ga over the foreign accent, the slimmer, swimmer build, the dark hair and emo worthy pouts, but personally?

Pass.

Hard. Pass.

What I want is the one thing I've always wanted and the one thing I've always been told *not* to want.

The prince on skates.

Perhaps one that has both impressive dangles on and *off* the ice.

Or at the very least one that can keep his stick in his pants and not in every busted ass bunny that blinks his direction too long.

Dad adored Winslow because he was a "safe" choice. And a "smart" bet. And one that would've taken me away from the rink to live happy miserable after with my heart intact because I wouldn't have had to worry about who he's possibly fucking during the forty-one road games. Or wonder if he's really with the boys working on his slapshot in the barn instead of in the strip club making it snow Benjamins. Or coddle a crying toddler who misses their daddy because for most of the fucking year they rarely see him around practice, interviews, photoshoots, endorsements, and charity events.

I *absolutely get* where my father was coming from.

It's probably why I'm still single and am going to die this way.

However, the solution isn't turning my best friend—who I've never wanted to fuck—into the husband I feel obligated to have.

That would not be a winning play, which is why I will never make it.

After finishing a bite of the treat, I retrieve my coffee to properly wash it down. "Appreciate you buying us donuts, Winslow. It's a nice morning assist."

"Oh...I did not buy these," he swiftly insists on a confused head tilt. "The hotel did. They are complimentary for us being guests."

"Yeah, you're supposed to take *one*, James Fraud," Margot snips from where she's digging between the couch cushions. "Not *one box*."

"It did not specify such a thing. Therefore, I took them all. There was not a bloody sign or security guard to stop me."

"You *need* to come with a fucking sign."

"And you need to come from a good bloody fucking."

"Something no woman will ever call *you* for."

"How would you know? Your android operating system doesn't allow you to experience actual human emotions."

"Whistle blown," I playfully inject before having another sip of my drink. "Matching penalties on the play."

Both gag at the hockey reference which successfully prevents their squabbling from momentarily continuing.

Which is ideal considering how hard my brain is twerking against my skull.

I can't get this fucked up again.

Ever.

And I know I say this shit every time I party a little too hard, but I really mean it this time.

"Found it!" Margot victoriously announces upon the discovery of my cell. She tucks the device into her back pocket and motions a hand towards the door. "We can go now."

"What about my-"

"Your wallet has been with me since we boarded the flight here. Gonna guess you used your name or your phone to pay for shit last night."

"You guess correctly, demon from the Black Lagoon." Winslow's reassurance precedes his follow up interrogation my direction. "However, where exactly are you going now?"

“Home.” I unbecomingly shove the last of the treat in my mouth. “TV interview at two.”

“Surprise?”

“*Ambush.*”

“Channel?”

“STN.”

“Shit. Is it with Florence?”

“Unfortunately.”

“I’ll make sure we watch. Do everything possible to support you from here.” Winslow mischievously grins. “Afterall, the suite is still ours for one more night, yes?”

“Yes.” Grabbing another donut enroute to exiting is done in tandem with me snickering. “And yes, you can continue to order room service and whatever else. Just charge it to the room.”

“You know,” Margot bitterly grins on her way to the door, “like the parasite you are.”

His eyes narrow to hard slits as his mouth lowers to unleash a shot back; however, I quickly intervene, not needing another verbal brawl to bruise my brain before takeoff. “Tell,” my pastry wielding hand gestures the direction of the bedroom, “*him* that I’m sorry I had to bail but last night was fun.”

“Was it?”

I don’t know.

Probably?

Most...likely?

Shit, I really gotta figure out what happened.

“And tell him thanks again for the mood ring. I’m assuming he bought it since I would never buy something this godawful for myself.”

“I have seen your collection of hockey themed tank tops, so I know that’s not true.”

Flashing him my middle finger receives a small chuckle.

“And just to be clear...” Winslow arrogantly smirks once more. “Who is *him*?”

“You know who him is.”

“Yes, *I do*; however, I do not think *you do*.”

“It’s a good thing no one cares what you think,” my assistant bites prior to pushing me out the door. “Move it, Hennington. We have a shit ton of information to review and not enough time to get through the subpoints that

would make me feel more comfortable about having a microphone shoved in your face.”

“Makes sense considering you already have a microphone shoved up your-” the end of Winslow’s snide comment is cut off by the door shutting behind us.

Jamming more of the pastry into my face on our way to the elevator at the end of the hall is accompanied by what has to be one of my least favorite sounds on the entire fucking planet. The increments of my life broken down by the hour and delivered in what can only be described as a Mary Poppins tune naturally floods my veins with new rivers of irritation and increases the throbbing in my head that can fuck off whenever it’s ready. Our journey from the penthouse suite to the sidewalk where I expect to wait for a car passes in a dreadfully slow fashion yet, our arrival outside where there’s already a vehicle waiting prompts my brow to furrow in confusion.

I shoot my perplexed stare her direction. “How is there already an SUV waiting for us?”

“Same way there were clothes and coffee waiting for you when I woke you up.” Margot extends an open palm my direction to present me with two tablets to help with the pain. “*I’m amazing.*”

Procuring the medication is instantly followed by plunking it in my mouth. “Was that ever up for negotiation?”

She happily hums and motions her hand the direction of the man opening the backseat door. I swallow the pills with a sip of coffee, thank him for the action, and slide inside all the way over to allow room for her to sit beside me.

Once the door is shut and my beverage is wedged nicely between my legs, my cell is finally delivered back into my custody on a crooked grin. “I’ve already done a social media check from my end and discovered no incredulous photos have been shared from *your* accounts; however, that doesn’t mean they don’t exist or don’t need deleting.”

Seeing her point inspires a quick unlocking of my device which reveals a new background photo I don’t remember taking.

“Why are you *both* wearing mood rings?” Margot inquires, body thoughtlessly invading my personal space as the vehicle pulls away from the curb into traffic. “And why are they both pink? What does pink mean?” She looks over at my left hand prior to adding another question. “What does

black mean? Are you sick? Does that mean you have the flu? You don't have strep throat, do you?" Her hazel gaze transposes into a glare. "Does your throat hurt?"

Probably not from an illness.

I can get...pretty fucking loud when the sex is...well...worth a damn.

"I don't know what the colors mean, Margot. I only woke up with the stupid thing, not the stupid thing *and* its stupid fucking instructions."

"I'm Googling it," she swiftly proclaims as she pulls out her own device.

My phone chimes from an incoming text, although the noise sounds more like an agreement with her idea.

Winslow: Is this your red bra??

Huh.

Is it?

I swore mine was black, like everything else I wore yesterday, but considering I can hardly remember anything post getting on the plane, maybe I changed and forgot?

"Margot, did I wear a red bra yesterday?"

"You only own two, and both are only worn under Letty's constant insistence, so no."

Gotta love having a detail oriented assistant.

Me: Nope.

Winslow: Then who...??

I send a shrug emoji and exit out of the message box.

Much like the mood ring, that is another mystery I feel the stranger I woke up next to might be able to help solve.

Being brought back to my home screen puts me face to face with the male in question and twists my uneasy stomach into tighter knots.

On one hand...he's even more attractive awake than he is asleep. His build is a little smaller than those I typically go for but by no means unappealing. The fact I can see his biceps trying to break free from underneath his black tee is enough to get my bottom lip trapped between my teeth, yet when you add in being able to see a hint of tattoos being hidden—tattoos I probably should've gotten a better look at pre-sneaking

out of bed this morning—I'm left with no choice but to chomp down harder to prevent from moaning.

What can I say?

Toned bod *and* tattoos?

That's two ginos.

And if he plays hockey—in any shape or form—that's a fucking hat trick.

Spotting his arm tangled around my waist so protectively spurs me to mumble my ignorance under my breath. “What in the fuck was your name?”

“Happy!”

“I fucked a dude named Happy?!” My head sharply cuts Margot's direction. “Who the fuck am I? Snow White?”

“First off, Snow White didn't *fuck* the dwarves in the Disney rendition. She basically mothered them.” A finger point to her phone happens next. “And second, pink—the color of your ring in the photo—supposedly means you were happy. Gonna guess all the booze in your system contributed to that.”

She's probably right.

She's almost always fucking right.

“Lastly, *his name* is Bricks.”

“That's not much better than Happy, Margot.”

“No, but better is better, isn't it? Like your favorite sports saying goes ‘nobody asks how, they just ask how many.’”

The only thing I hate more than her being right is when she's right *and* correctly uses the words I live by to reiterate it.

“Bricks,” I mutter to myself, name sounding wrong. Feeling wrong. “Bricks just...doesn't...feel right.” Staring into his bright brown gaze calls to a part of my memory I don't have full access to quite yet. “Maybe he... he told me something different? Like...his first name?”

“Black means you're stressed.” my best friend states at the same time she points to her phone once more, clearly not listening to me. “Which makes sense when you take into consideration everything that's expected to happen in the next twenty-four hours.”

Yes, because the *last* twenty-four hours were so kind to me?

Or...maybe they really were?

I mean...I do look *happy* in this photo.

Like legitimately happy.

Okay, like twenty two percent liquor happy and seventy eight percent regular people happy, which are outstanding stats for me, especially when you factor in the post funeral nightmare I fled from.

Wonder what lifted my mood. Ya know, besides the booze.

Is he really funny?

Is he overly sweet?

Is his dick just that huge?

God, I hope his dick really is just that huge.

“You find any more photos?” Margot inquires while analyzing the kindergarten style color pallet of emotions.

Clicking the camera roll unveils a series of drunken, blurry selfies I’m glad I never posted. All include Bricks and *none* include Winslow prompting me to make a mental note to text him about where his ass was during whatever happened between his guest and me. My swift swiping of things that need to be deleted—basically all the warmup shots to the screensaver—is unexpectedly halted by a video in the mix.

Oh...no.

This can’t be good.

Reluctantly, I hit play and silently brace myself for something horrendous.

“Woooo, this one’s for you, Margot!” drunk me, screeches.

My best friend leans over to see yesterday’s wasted version wobbling in the frame. “Why are you giving me a shout out?”

“No clue.”

“There’s no way I would let you miss me finally getting married!”

“Married?!” The two of us shriek in tandem.

“Because like we never thought this day would come.”

“That day damn sure should not have come!” I squawk to the camera version of myself.

“Is that a fucking magician?!” Margot bites back in outrage. “Did you really let a fucking Vegas magician of all people marry you?!”

“No.”

“Meet The Great Magical Mike!”

“Maybe.”

“We saw him working outside the costume shop and knew he had to perform the ceremony.”

“Likely?”

Further scoffs of disgust seep from the woman beside me. “You did not *seriously* get married in Vegas!” Her headshaking becomes frantic. “You couldn’t have! There are...fucking...*laws* in effect that prevent that type of shit from being valid.”

“Ma’am,” the magician uncomfortably sighs, “I cannot perform a ceremony if the two of you are dr-”

“I will pay you double-”

“Double,” Bricks unnecessarily echoes from beside me.

“In cash-”

“Cash.”

“To consider us sober enough to do this.”

Magical Mike doesn’t hesitate to wave his wand at us. “You two got rings?”

“And that’s how you get around *that*,” Margot grumbles to herself at the same time one hand flies over my heated face.

Hey, at least Bricks is a good hype man?

Through my spread digits, I nervously watch what has to be the worst decision of my life in progress with no way to stop it.

Bricks and I whip out the round accessories—that I now know really are fucking mood rings—turn towards each other—eagerly—and continue to stare adoringly into one another’s drunk gaze as though it’s impossible to look elsewhere. Horror settles deeper and deeper into my present expression during the repeating of vows. The proclamations that we’re soulmates. The exchanged agreements that we’re absolutely meant to be. Twisting and turning and gagging in my seat like I’m overdramatically acting out the injecting of poison in front of an audience that doesn’t seem to understand what’s happening doesn’t cease the terror from continuing.

Or erase the actions of our holding hands.

Our face cuppings.

Our first married kiss, which has way too much fucking tongue—even for me.

One minute I’m watching a shirtless, roided out idiot in a top hat wave a wand around our hands and the next we’re using said wand to sign paperwork that I have no idea where he was hiding before the moment arrived.

Margot pounds the screen with her recently manicured index finger and disapprovingly snarls, “*Harlow. Emery. Hennington.*”

The mixture of guilt and shame shifts my still shielded stare from the screen to her.

“*What...in the actual...fuck...did you. Just. Do?*”

Good question.

What in the actual fuck did I just do?

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CHAPTER 2



Brendan

Waking up to the sound of chick choking on my cock?

Acceptable.

Waking up to the sound of her choking on something else?

Not so much.

Popping open one eye grants me access to an unexpected view that prompts me to grouse, “You’re not who I went to bed with.”

Geoffrey Winslow, my boss as well as one of my friends, successfully hacks up a piece of whatever got caught in his throat and playfully pokes, “And you are not who I went to breakfast with.”

The retort receives a small smirk and the closing of my eyes again.

Fuck, is it really breakfast time already?

We basically just went to bed.

Huh.

Where is the other part of we?

The long legged, warm, honey brown skinned babe who was screaming my name at the top of her lungs until her voice was literally hoarse.

We’re talking sounded like she smoked a pack and a half a day type of scratchy.

God, that was the sexiest shit I had ever heard.

The type of shit I can't wait to hear again. And again. And again...

"Donut?"

Geoffrey's offer not only receives my full attention but an action too. Reaching over to grab a pastry is lazily executed; however, in doing so, the two of us are exposed to a small, almost unbelievable sight.

"Why on bloody earth are you wearing a goddamn mood ring like Hennington?"

The fingers of my left hand curl around one of the chocolate-glazed circles. "Pretty sure I got married last night."

"As in primary school married?" Geoffrey taunts, tossing the box on the edge of the mattress. "As in here is half of my peanut butter and jam sandwich in exchange for your small hand in first grade marriage, hence the cereal box accessory?"

"Tate's right. Your accent really does have a way of making insulting shit sound way more fucking insulting."

"It is a gift that never stops giving."

Light chuckles are accompanied by a bite of the sugary breakfast treat.

"Now," he angles himself to face me better, "back to your k-i-s-s-i-ng in a tree nonsense. Given that you are *so bloody young*, you getting married with a mood ring actually adds up. That is *if* you indeed did get married."

"Which I did."

"To whom?"

"Harlow."

"Who?"

Crumbs fall down my chest prompting me to brush them off prior to answering. "Your best friend? The chick who we came to party with."

"*Hennington*."

"Pretty sure the stripper who married us called her Harlow."

"Is that who's red bra I passed in the hallway?"

"Nah, the stripper who married us was a dude."

"Surely, you understand that you are supposed to *marry* a stripper, not get married *by* a stripper in Vegas, Bricks. Those are among the prominent, easy to follow Sin City decrees."

"Yeah, but we both know I'm not much for rules."

"We *do* both, unfortunately, know this, and if you weren't so bloody charming behind the bar, I would've fired you ages ago for that very reason."

“Just like we both know that Tate would just rehire me.”

Geoffrey doesn't resist the instinct to frown.

Tate O'Clery—his business partner and my other boss—is definitely the more laid back of the two but not by much. In the bigger picture of shit, they really are both very easy going, it's just that when it comes to the harder moments or having to take disciplinary actions Geoffrey is the one to do it.

Probably because he's older than us.

Or because he feels obligated to be the more responsible one *because* he's got years on us.

“All right,” Geoffrey begins again, “so that's what you two did after you lost spectacularly at The Floor is Lava with that group of bachelorette beauties?”

“I bet you that red bra belonged to one of them.”

“I bet you're right.”

“And I came in second! That's not losing spectacularly, asshole.”

“Second is first place loser. Just ask Hennington.”

“Where *is* Harlow?”

“*Hennington.*”

He's tossed another teasing glare on a second chomp of the donut.

“And my dear hot mess of a best mate fled.”

“Fled?!” I damn near choke on the hunk I was in the process of swallowing. “What the fuck do you mean she fled?! Is she wanted by the cops or feds or mob or some shit?”

His face twitches in minor bewilderment before clarifying, “No, not fled, like she was on the lam, you simple minded glue eater. Fled as in *left*. As in she hopped on her plane, and had it return her and her bobbed hair bogeywoman back to where they belong.”

It's my turn to showcase bafflement. “*Her plane?*”

“Technically, it is the *team's plane*; however, she now *owns* the aforementioned team, therefore it is still *her plane* by legal definition since they are in her possession...which means...,” his verbal algebra is accompanied by a more confident headshake, “the answer to your question is yes.”

Additional befuddlement propels itself through my expression at the same time I toss my hands in the air, accidentally releasing my hold on the pastry, “What?!”

It thumps into the nearby lamp, yet the sound doesn't deter my boss from retorting, "What are you whating exactly?"

"She owns a team?!"

"Yes."

"Like...an *actual* team?!"

"Yes."

"In a league?!"

"Yes."

"Professional?!"

"Stop shouting," Geoffrey commands on an annoyed grimace. "And yes, it's a professional major league ice hockey team, which I know, you Americans do not feel the need to specify the ice part; however, there *are* other places to play the beloved sport such as *the field*, a place I grew up playing it."

Ignoring all the opportunities to poke fun at him is only done due to the desperation to know more about the woman I married in front of a golden statue person while a group of KISS street performers sang "Rock and Roll All Nite" in the background. "What. Team?!"

"The Dalvegan Dragons." His white t-shirt covered shoulders release a small bounce. "They were great in the era of *Beverly Hills, 90210* and obnoxious Neutrogena commercials, at least according to Hennington, who I've heard—through various sources including my brother—is practically hockey royalty. A one-of-a-kind princess with keys to an ice kingdom."

The dazed expression I'm bearing exponentially deepens.

"Old man Hennington who died a little over a week ago—may he rest in peace—not only *owned* the team, he served as the general manager, something practically unheard of nowadays. *Most teams*—to my understanding—have the owner—the money head whose involvement doesn't exist besides making more than what they invested—and a separate general manager—the individual in charge of team structure, negotiations, and things of that nature. Old man Hennington did both and from what Hennington was saying, she plans to follow in his footsteps."

No matter how hard I move my mouth to try to say something no sound escapes encouraging Geoffrey to continue informing me on all the shit I *know* we didn't discuss last night.

No.

We talked about the snowbird shots we were tossing back.

And how visually horrifying both of us find Hugo Weaving.

And the difference between turtles and tortoises—which evidently both freak her out since they’re mini dinosaurs that can attack her in the water or on land making the ice rink the place she feels safest fleeing to.

I thought that shit was fucking weird but didn’t judge.

No.

I simply smirked, tucked her thick, dark, wavy locks behind her ear, brushing her industrial piercing, and promised to Superman her from that shit in the future. She kissed me and about four minutes later we were in a magic shop looking for wedding rings.

Not the dumbest shit I’ve ever done...but it’s kind of hard to beat drunkenly challenging a moose to a swimming competition.

I could’ve fucking died doing that.

Then again, I feel everyone almost dies during their twenty first birthday stunts, so it wasn’t *that* stupid.

Geoffrey retrieves his phone from his shorts pocket at the same time he declares, “I believe Hennington is now the youngest owner in the league’s history; however, do not quote me on that.”

“She’s like thirty! She’s definitely gotta be the youngest!”

“*Thirty-seven.*”

The correction catches me completely off guard. “Seriously?”

“Yes. She just celebrated her birthday not too long ago.”

She doesn’t look anywhere *near* that old.

Not that it’s “old”.

Just a bit older than me.

Okay.

A lot fucking older than me since I’m only twenty-five but whatever.

That doesn’t mean the shit between us can’t work out.

“Hennington was born on Valentine’s Day, so the damn thing is impossible to forget.” His fingers fly across his screen, although I don’t know if he’s absentmindedly talking to me or texting whoever. “It is also part of the reason the woman hates roses—of all colors—and boxes of chocolate—particularly in heart shapes—and big fancy balls.” He cuts his gaze up to mine. “The parties, not the ones that dangle between your legs.”

“Figured.” Snatching a new donut happens alongside my continued interrogation. “How long have you two been braiding each other’s pigtails and talking about boys in bands you like?”

Geoffrey offers me his middle finger as a retort and resumes his texting. “We’ve been best mates since we were kids. We often ended up at the same parties or charity events—both sticking out like a pint at a wine tasting—and naturally took a liking to one another.” After hitting send, his stare finds mine yet again. “I saw her quite frequently in our early primary school days. Once Old Man Hennington and the Nutcracker—her mother—officially split, she typically only came back to Doctenn for holiday during Christmas or during the summer when the players were on holiday as well and the Nutcracker guilted her ex into it.” The slightest bit of sadness slips into his stare. “Honestly? I hated that shit. I used to wish she would just change her mind and opt to live with her mother instead, but that woman is a bloody monster, so I never blamed her for choosing to live with her father.” My boss tries to smile through the obvious sorrow. “He was a pretty good man—minus the whole begging me to marry his daughter thing.”

Jealousy latches onto my tone. “Why the fuck would he beg *you* for that shit?”

There’s no denying the fact he senses the displeasure in my voice considering the way he begins to grin. “Old Man Hennington hoped she’d fall for me to get her *away* from the puck life. The thing is...I have not been, nor will I ever be her type.”

“Which is?” I over eagerly investigate, wanting it to be me.

Needing it to be.

Geoffrey quirks an eyebrow prompting me to lean over to grab another donut while attempting to play off the desperation. “Just fucking curious about the sexy, older woman I’m now married to.”

“You know you’re probably not *actually* married, yes?”

“Pretty sure that magician stripper, Magical Mike-”

“That has to be bloody copyright infringement.”

“-was the real deal. And if he wasn’t,” sinking my teeth into the chocolate éclair is proceeded by a small, bare shoulder shrug, “then what the fuck ever. It’s just another wild brick to the Bricks pile.”

“Oh, just what you need. Another piece to the *Jenga* game you have the bollocks to call your existence.”

“Let the pieces fall where they will, bro.”

He rolls his eyes on a slow headshake. “Unbelievable.”

“Pretty sure that’s what your best friend was screaming at the top of her lungs last night as she came on my cock.”

Geoffrey's irritation increases, soothing a few nerves that had managed to get crinkled.

It's not that I want him pissed off.

I just want him to remember that the most incredible woman he's ever met *chose me*.

She could've had him, done that whole best friend to boyfriend bullshit or best friend who you fuck until you're over whatever emotional shit you need to get over thing, but she *didn't*. She picked being with me—the fun, carefree type—over the boring, got it all together asshole, I know he is. And maybe...maybe a little part of me likes that shit. I've always been the one sneaking out of a woman's house before the sun rises like some sort of fucked up vampire, yet he's the one that's encouraged to come over in the daylight. Stay awhile. Or forever. Maybe...maybe I like knowing that *just once* it feels good to be the one chosen for more than a fuck.

Afterall, we did get hitched.

I've got the jewelry to prove it.

And a copy of the license in my wallet I think.

"So," I suck the bit of frosting off my thumb, "best-friend-in-law—"

"That's not a real thing."

"What exactly is my wife's type?" The increased stickiness has me wiping my hands off on the sheet. "Evidently, it's not the main character in a remake of *The Craft* featuring an all-male leading cast."

"Athletes, arse hat," he announces on a bitter smirk. "Particularly those that wear ice skates and are missing more than their fair share of teeth from brutally pounding another human being into a pulp on sharp metal blades."

Wouldn't call me an athlete.

Athletic build?

For sure. For sure.

An athlete?

Not so fucking much.

I prefer to occasionally pop into Gym Life not *live* the gym life.

What can I say?

I have more fun doing other shit like cannonballing into the lake off a rope swing. That's a helluva lot better than doing bench presses.

"When those Neanderthals are unavailable for her—as they often are—she'll take whatever jock cock she can ride next. Swimmers. Divers.

Lacrosse members. Football players. I think one summer she even banged a pair of badminton teammates in a three-way.”

Didn’t need to know that.

And now part of me hates him for telling me that.

“And when Hennington can’t land an athlete, she goes for the close cousin.”

My eyebrows lift in question.

“Fuckboys.”

Yeah, not gonna openly admit how close to that shit I really am.

“However, it’s not because she’s too bloody stupid to know that’s what she’s getting. No. It’s actually quite the contrary. She prefers fuckboys because she herself has no interest in long term commitment or responsibility with regards to the opposite sex. Those behaviors pretty much go completely against her hockey first, hockey last mentality.”

I don’t think I’ve ever been this impressed and this irritated in the same fucking breath.

“Which is why she fled for Texas first thing this morning to prepare for an impromptu interview rather than telling the media to bugger off and give her more time to properly grieve the death of her bloody father.”

Geoffrey had mentioned she lost her dad on our flight over and how bummed he was he couldn’t afford the ticket to fly in for the funeral but didn’t give a lot of details besides those. And I would’ve asked for more last night, but Harlow didn’t seem interested in that topic, so I didn’t exactly pry. Besides, digging up her family shit would pop the top of my own family champagne of shit, and I am *never* interested in pouring from that bottle.

“The suite is ours to do with what we please for another night; however, we do have to watch her on the tele in a few hours.” Geoffrey’s smile is almost bashful. “I swore when she took over ownership, I’d do whatever I could to support her in her new role.”

Twinges of unpredicted jealousy push me to shove the rest of the donut into my mouth to prevent from being an unnecessary dick to my boss twice in one sitting.

“What do you think? Gamble for a bit and invite a couple of lovely ladies to lounge by our rooftop pool with us while we watch?”

Rather than express that I have no interest in anyone except the woman that just left, I merely nod my compliance.

Just because they're invited up doesn't mean we're gonna fuck.

And more importantly, it doesn't mean I want to.

In fact, the only person I'm interested in boning, bounced without so much as a goodbye, thanks for last night, or leaving me her fucking phone number.

Gonna change the latter.

Few drinks, few right words, and the dude I came to play wingman for will be handing over that shit like free drinks at a bachelorette party.

I'm gonna get my new wife's contact info before I leave this place.

I guarantee it.

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CHAPTER 3



Harlow

I can't be pregnant.

This has to be the flu.

Or food poisoning.

Or spring fever making a terribly late comeback in the season.

This cannot—and I repeat for those sitting in the nosebleed section—*cannot* be the beginning stages of me growing a human. Fucking. Life.

Nope.

I am not built for that.

Fuck, I am not *responsible* enough for that.

I'm thirty-seven and still think having strawberry frosted Pop-Tarts for breakfast counts as a fruit serving.

Another harsh squeeze occurs in my stomach forcing one more round of magical vomit to join what's already in the toilet. After the nonexistent food has finished being expelled, I close the lid, press my face against the cool white object, shut my eyes, and lazily reach over to make the contents inside disappear.

Medical better say that my bloodwork is fine.

That even though I missed the last round of my birth control shot that it's impossible for me to be knocked up.

That this is all just some unusual result from having ingested too much tequila at a young age.

God knows I haven't had a sip since I got back from Vegas.

Hell, I've instantly been dry heaving over just the idea, which has Vegas putting points on the board and me sporting a big fat goose egg.

The subtle tap to the closed door has me groaning in unhappiness. "*Hennington...*"

She's not here right now, so it would best if you left a message after the flush.

"Letty called the office." Her pause is given to reiterate what a huge deal it is. "*The. Office.*"

Nicolette "Letty" Odom is the last member of my best friends team. Rightfully loved and adored by Hollywood for being everyone's favorite, gorgeous, girl next door sweetheart actress but to me...to my dad...to the others in my circle...she'll always be that little taste of trouble you're glad you have. No, she's not robbing banks or knocking over liquor stores or streaking through the Costco parking lot on Christmas Eve—I lost a very bad bet which is why I refuse to ever play Trivial Pursuit again—but she's definitely the one behind the wheel of the car that skids out of the aforementioned parking lot with Lindsey Stirling's version of "Carol of the Bells" blaring hard enough to blow the speakers. She's also the one who orders fifteen pizzas to spell out "Fuck You Asshole!" in pepperonis—one letter per pizza—to the bat bitch you were banging for six weeks after finding out not only was he lying about being faithful to you, he was also trying to get you to send him nudes not for his spank bank but to sell to a trashy magazine to tank your reputation while building his own. Letty's that friend I can text at two a.m. or two p.m. and say let's get some Chinese and we'll go get it. Well, if she's in town. If not, she finds the closet spot to her, and we video chat while we eat. Her calling is a huge deal because the woman *loathes* phone calls. Like I kind of think she has a phobia. Like a real one. If it can't be said in a text, covered in an email, or tossed out in a DM she's typically not interested unless it's face to face or if it's a video chat, which is face to face adjacent. Sort of like accepting mustard instead of mayo on a burger because that's all they have available. Her calling means she's really fucking worried. And honestly? I am too a little bit. I can't remember ever being away from my phone this much. It's just...hard

to read articles and stats and plays while vomiting my brains out. I'm not a magician!

The shirtless man with the wand who evidently had the legal rights to perform an actual ceremony briefly pops back into my mind.

Ugh.

I can't believe I actually got married six weeks ago.

I mean I've done some dumb shit in my life, but at some point...you would think...I would *stop* doing dumb shit, or at the very least do *cheaper* dumb shit. Getting a divorce attorney and having papers prepared for filing and organizing a hush settlement has all been very fucking expensive. Much more expensive than having footage of me underage drinking at a strip club erased.

"Hennington..." Margot cautiously calls out again. "I have ginger ale and crackers."

For the first time in days my stomach doesn't object with a forceful squeeze.

"And if you come out now, I'll let you get an early look at the new team jerseys for next season..."

Dragging myself up onto my bare feet requires energy I don't have yet pushing myself the way I will be pushing our players in the coming months is naturally done, the same way it's always been done.

I won't ask of them shit I wouldn't ask of myself.

I won't expect more from them for this team than I'm willing to give.

It's how I was raised.

And one thing I always believed Dad did right when it came to hockey.

My arrival at the closed ensuite door is quickly followed by me opening it to present my displeased expression. "*You know they're called sweaters, Margot.*"

"I do," she victoriously smirks, "just like I know calling them jerseys will get your ass from wherever you are to wherever the crime was committed in an impressively timely fashion." The scowl on my face deepens encouraging her grin to momentarily grow wider until her eyes dip down at the lacy orange top, I'm wearing. "Where's your shirt?"

"This is it."

"That's a bra."

"It's a *bralette*." Commandeering the box of crackers from her possession occurs on my own snarky beam. "You can thank the lords of

fashion for basically granting me an appropriate way to wear a fancy sports bra to the office.” I pull out a single saltine. “And the charcoal, oversized ‘dad blazer’ waiting for me to throw on over this is so loose it’s basically a business sweatshirt.”

Her small squeak of irritation receives another sardonic smile.

“Blame high fashion.”

“I blame *you* for finding a loophole around wearing a pantsuit.”

“Still a pantsuit,” I insist prior to chomping on the cracker and waving the hand wielding it down the front of my high waisted, wide leg pants. “Still wearing it.” Another bite is taken of the tasty object. “Still following the rules.”

And fuck me, are there so many damn rules to follow when you’re the owner.

If I didn’t love hockey like it’s the best fuck I’ve ever known, I don’t know that I could do this shit.

It’s been six weeks of interviews—most of which I flounder through—and media blitzes and contract negotiations and meeting lawyers from every walk of life it seems. Corporate, Estate, Real-Estate, Entertainment, Tax, and Divorce, although the latter is a direct result of my own fuckup. Between that bullshit and gracing the porcelain princess with every bit of bile my body has ever been able to conjure I’ve barely slept.

Or ate.

Or done anything other than clean out Dad’s house in tears and cuddle Cookies and Cream on the back patio while listening to Think Rink, Talk Clink podcasts in hopes of maybe learning something useful that I don’t already fucking know.

Life as the *daughter* of an owner/GM was a lot to manage.

Life as the actual fucking owner/GM is border lining impossible to handle.

I definitely understand some of Dad’s bad habits a bit better.

Maybe I’ll take up cheesecake eating instead of eating fried cheese.

Afterall, it is what I ate on my wedding night.

You know.

According to the album of photos I have no recollection of taking.

Strangely, Winslow never said or asked me anything regarding the very real marrying of his employee. In fact, the most we discussed about those

couple of days is the charge I was billed for them deciding to take home pillows like they were goodie bags at an award's ceremony.

I've got no clue if Brendan "Bricks" Brickley even remembers who I am.

Or what we did.

Which is another reason I cannot be fucking pregnant.

It's one thing to stupidly marry a stranger in Vegas.

It's visit the wizard for the other half of your brain stupid to get married *and* knocked up by one.

Margot's mumbles of objection fall on deaf ears during the transition over to my disorganized desk. Flopping into my dark leather seat occurs at the same a new cracker is shoved into my mouth, yet before I can ask about the promised bubbly aid, it magically appears in the small, cleared space in front of me alongside a tablet that reveals something almost too horrendous to even look at.

"*What. The. Fuck. Are. Those?*" I growl, around a mouth full of mush.

"The new sweaters."

"For who?!"

"The team."

"Tell me you mean our *youth* team."

My assistant pops the lid on my soda for me and defends the monstrosity I'm sneering at. "They're not that bad, Hennington."

"They're fucking terrible."

"They're...a loose fit."

"They're fucking tents."

"They're...simple."

"They look like Kermit the frog was harmed in the making of them."

"They're-"

"*Not. Fucking. Happening.*" Shoving the device away from me precedes a demand. "Take that shit back to whoever the fuck brought it to you and tell them to do better."

"Hennington-"

"Look, I know there's only so much say we can personally get in the design room since 3P is contracted to do everything for the entire goddamn league, but we do get *some* sort of say. And I say, I don't want our boys looking like they're gearing up to be in an orgy, wet dream for Miss Piggy."

“Fine.” Margot poorly hides her amusement, snatches up the device, and replaces it with my cell. “Your latest head coach interview is already in the waiting room.”

“Excellent.”

Her head tilts to one side causing her dirty blonde hair to brush her powder pink blazer covered shoulder. “Is it?”

“Yeah.”

“Is it...*really*?”

“Yeah.” Uncertain of what she’s trying to imply, I curl my fingers around the beverage while cautiously inquiring, “Why would it not be?”

“Maybe because excellent would be if this was the *last* position you had to fill instead of one of many?”

Sensing I’m in for another round of unraveling—this is like the tenth in three days—I simply indulge in a sip of the cold beverage.

“Maybe because excellent would be only needing a head coach rather than that and a goalie coach, assistant coach, an AHL head coach, and like *half* of three teams?!”

I don’t retort.

I merely have a second sip.

Let it soothe my raw, achy throat in the best ways.

“Hennington,” she huffs, shoulders plummeting to her pumps, “how are you this damn *calm*? Shouldn’t you be at *least* a little more, I don’t know, *concerned* with these issues?! If things don’t get in order, you won’t have any teams. Ohmygod, your first season as owner and you might not even fucking play?! This can’t be happening. This can’t happen. This-”

“*Won’t. Happen. Margot.*”

My swift reassurance is met by a glower of disbelief.

“Look,” I gingerly place the can down next to the coaster waiting for it, “I know—generally speaking—that my life is a clusterfuck stuffed inside a shitshow stuffed inside dumpster fire like a motherfucking turducken, but when it comes to *hockey shit—real hockey shit—*” my shoulders deliver the smallest bounce, “I’m always ready. Pads are on. Skates are laced. Sweater ready to be worn.” Abandoning the box of crackers on the other side of my phone happens at the same time I softly smile. “The world of hockey is like being at home, Margot. I’m comfortable here, and I know *exactly* where mama hides the cookies.”

To no surprise, my shot reference noticeably eases her worries regarding my job and allows her to resume doing hers. She leans over to relocate the can onto the coaster as she instructs, “Put on your jacket, your shoes, and reapply your lip stain. I’ll go grab Mr. Blanc.”

She’s given a nod of comprehension that’s followed by me executing her orders the instant my office door is shut.

While it won’t be impossible to hide the fact that I’m nervous about this interview once he’s in here, sitting in the seat across from me, listening to my unrehearsed, fly by the seat of my sweats, please take this job speech, I do need a moment *now* to panic.

What I said to Margot wasn’t a lie.

Hockey is my domain.

My life.

Carved into the very fiber of my DNA.

I don’t doubt my capabilities or my knowledge or the balls I have to do the things people are constantly telling me someone like me can’t do, but sometimes...sometimes the shit gets under my skin.

Yeah, I smile in their faces, present my middle finger, and say something that makes pearl clutchers wanna wash my mouth out with soap; however, it doesn’t mean the shit doesn’t hurt. That it doesn’t gnaw on my insecurities. That I don’t stay up at night and wonder *can* I really do this?

Will I be able to do this?

Am I really *meant* to do this?

How long does that whole “make it” part of “faking it” take to kick in?

And what happens if it never does?

Reapplying my lip stain is barely finished before there’s a knock to alert me of their return.

Margot enters the room first to professionally hold the door open for Milano Blanc, a 5’11, two-hundred-pound, almond brown skinned, retired NHL defenseman, who politely thanks her for the gesture. She gracefully nods in acknowledgement, shoots me a scolding point to *actually* put on my shoes under the desk, and soundlessly slips out.

The wiggling of my feet into their respective heels secretly occurs during my greeting, “Good morning, Blanc.”

“Hennington,” he warmly states in return, open palm extended my direction for shaking. “You look well.”

“I look like I’ve been doing dryland two a days for six weeks,” I playfully argue and let my hands fold in my lap, “but I do appreciate a man who knows how to sell a lie to the cameras with a charming smile.”

Blanc lightly chuckles as he lowers himself into the seat on the other side of the desk. “We’re on camera?”

“You’re an NHL player. You’re *always* on camera.”

“*Retired*,” he corrects on a respectful nod.

“*Barely*.”

Blanc doesn’t hesitate to airily laugh again.

“Wanna know what I’ve learned in my years and years and years of being around hockey players, Blanc, besides how hard they bitch when you beat them at Skee-Ball?”

He casually motions a hand my direction.

“You *hate* to retire.”

His eyebrows lift in question.

“You’re all the same in that aspect. You go until you *have* to hang ‘em up. It’s rarely about *want* and typically about *must*.”

Blanc doesn’t dispute the claim.

“And then once you do, you’re fucking stoked. You’re wondering why you waited so long to do the shit. You enjoy sleeping late and not hitting the gym unless you’re in the mood. You enjoy your long overdue vacations and waking up to your wife on your sac before she’s gotta go get the kids ready for school. You settle into a cushy fantasy in which you convince yourself you’ve made an amazing call and are the happiest you’ve been in what feels like years.” My fingers fold together on top of my churning stomach I’m trying to ignore. “But that shit typically only lasts for a season. Maybe two. And then you’re missing the barn. Wondering how can you get back in. What can you do to get back to it. Is there any part of you left that can be of use. The truth is for most retirees...no. You transition out of The Show and the best you can hope for is killing it in a lower club league that *barely* fulfills anything inside or bite the bullet and coach in that same minor club bullshit. *However*,” the smirk on my face transposes to one of enticement, “some of you...some of you are destined for a new round of greatness as coaches. And *you*, Blanc, are undeniably one that is destined for that shit.”

An almost grateful hum is released.

“*Most* GMs in my position would use this to their advantage. They would let you slip into that cycle, so that when you’re ready to come back,

they could toss you into an assistant coach position for a fraction of your worth. The thing is...I'm *not* most GMs." My expression and tone deepen in firmness. "I have no interest in playing bullshit games. I know exactly who you are, what you've done, what your stats are, and what sort of background you have. Point blank? I want you. And I want you now."

"What exactly are you looking for, Hennington?"

"Exactly what I said I was when you agreed to an interview."

"Coach."

"*Head coach.*"

"Of the development team I assume."

"You assume incorrectly."

There's no hesitation in his jaw going slack.

"I want you as head coach for the Dalvegan Dragons."

"Fuckin'...*why?!?*" His disbelief darts him to the edge of his seat. "Yeah, I played in The Show. And yeah, I played on some great teams--"

"Every team you played on went to fight for The Cup *every year* you were on it. That's not a coincidence."

"They all had great coaches."

"*Half* of them were great coaches."

"They were all great teams."

"Some of them had great players."

"They all had great leadership."

"Because they all had *you*, Blanc."

"I was never Cap."

"And a real leader doesn't need a fucking title to take charge or be there for the boys."

My counter has him throwing himself back into his seat.

"Just like a real leader doesn't need the credit or the glory or his name in the first paragraph of every article about his team." Ignoring the twitching of my stomach muscles unexpectedly grows in difficulty. "That's what I'm after, Blanc. I not only understand what my dad struggled to see and believe and think about this team, I am prepared to face it. I'm here, not looking to win a battle or a blitz or a campaign. I'm here to win the whole fucking war."

His chocolate brown eyes widen in surprise.

"In order to do that, it starts with the *general*," the hand gesture he receives his direction is welcomed by a small grin, "and is followed by

warriors who wanna fucking fight. Now, name your price, so we can sign the papers and move onto our portion of the day that consists of reviewing the haves, the have-nots, the has-beens, and the will haves with the right leader at the helm.”

He grunts a laugh of astonishment. “Just like that?”

“*Just. Like. That.*”

Bewilderment lingers in Blanc’s expression as he leans to one side of his seat, contemplation doing its best to begin.

Hoping to settle my still squeamish stomach leads me to retrieving the ginger ale.

To my surprise, he speaks up during sip number two. “How much control in shaping am I allotted?”

“*Most.*” I catch the drop that escaped on the corner of mouth with my thumb. “However, I’m not gonna be like Dad was. I plan to be front and center and hands-on. I have no plans to undermine you—especially in front of the boys—but I’m not gonna just lean back on my skates and assume every call you make is the right fucking call. It’s a checks and balance system. Offense *and* defense. We do this united or we don’t do it at all.”

He presents me with a slow nod that’s accompanied by a pleased grin and extended palm. “Marigold is gonna be excited we’re moving back to Texas.”

Thrill pierces my gaze, yet I do my best to prevent it from being revealed elsewhere in my demeanor during our shake. “She doesn’t like the cold?”

“*Hates it.*” He chuckles at the same time our hands fall apart to their respective places. “Plus, she’ll love the idea of taking our kids to the beaches for long weekends, which is how she grew up.”

The mention of children causes a new, more powerful contraction to occur in my stomach.

Nope.

That’s not my gut telling me I’m next.

That those are thoughts *I’m* gonna be having or plans *I’m* going to be making.

That’s just...gas.

Clearly, I need to slip back into the bathroom to let one rip.

All the carbonation is just settling like a bitch.

“Should we discuss salary and my second in command next?” Blanc enthusiastically inquires. “I’m—admittedly—intrigued to see who you think should be my number two.”

Hundred bucks says he’s not expecting me to say I have no idea.

My mouth lowers to retort, yet the sound is cut short by the knocking on my office door. Margot doesn’t wait for acknowledgement to pop her face in. “Sorry to interrupt, Hennington; however, medical is on line one, and I know they are an automatic bypass to everything.”

Blanc instantly offers me a moment of privacy. “Why don’t I step in the hall and call Mari? I’ll tell her about the good news in progress, and we can reconvene once you’ve wrapped up? I know how important talks with med can be.”

“See,” I playfully state, doing my best to keep panic out of my voice, “another reason why you’re destined to be a head coach.”

He good-naturedly laughs, shakes his head, and exits out of the room past Margot who insists on showing him where he can have his call in private as well.

The instant the door is shut, I aggressively yank up my office phone, damn near spilling my soda in the process. “This is Hennington.”

“Hello, Miss Hennington, this is Dr. Richards, the new medical team lead.”

I remember him.

I fucking *hired* him.

Right after I fired the man who used to hold his position for half assing physical exams if the amount he was being bribed was adequate.

“Yes, Dr. Richards. You wanted to speak with me?”

“Yes.”

“In regard to my players, my staff, or me?”

“You, Miss Hennington.”

“Just Hennington is fine.”

His gruff voice stumbles over whatever he was initially going to say to state, “Understood.” There’s a small shuffling of the phone caused most likely by a readjustment. “I have the results regarding the bloodwork we ran.”

“And?”

“It seems to be the reason for your continued digestive issues of diarrhea and vomiting is due to your pregnancy.”

No.

This can't be happening.

That test has to be wrong.

I'm sure I took it wrong.

I mean...I don't know how, but I'm sure that's what happened, after all it's *me*.

Oh!

Maybe it was *given* wrong!!!

I'm sure that cute, little perky blonde with the dick sucking lips probably just screwed something up.

That has to be the case.

That has to be the case because I can't be married and pregnant and expected to pull a pro team out of the pits just *weeks* after I was forcefully handed the keys to the Hennington legacy.

There has to be another answer.

There just has to.

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CHAPTER 4



Brendan

I know why I'm here.

Fuck, I knew why I was coming here the minute Harlow texted to tell me she needed to see me.

But I also know that I need to see *her*.

I thought about just going balls to the wall the instant I heard from her yet refrained myself. Reeled that printed ticket in. Decided to save my speech for our face-to-face last call, which I'm honestly hoping *isn't* our last call.

It's been a little over six weeks and as insane as this shit is, I haven't been able to stop thinking about her or the fun we had in Vegas. Geoffrey thinks my playful telling of women at the pub that I can't go home with them because I'm a married man and then flashing the mood ring I still haven't taken off outside of showers was my way of fending off chicks I thought might pull a Kathy Bates on me—God is my mother a fan of everything that lady's ever been in—but the truth is I don't *want* to go back to their place.

Or invite them back to mine.

Despite how hot some of them are—and *fuck me* have we had a huge wave of top shelf college grads wandering into the pub this year—I still

have no real interest in them.

At first, I thought my dick was broken.

I mean...great tits in my face and the damn thing doesn't even lift its head to say hello?

Broken.

But then I showed the picture of my wife to some chick at the bar who didn't believe me, and the shit rose from the dead like we were in that fucking *World War Z* movie, and it had recently been bit.

Totally mind fucked by the situation led me to asking my boss—the other one whose best friend I'm not still attached to—what he thought that shit meant. He suggested that maybe there was more between us than just tequila. That maybe I should think on that shit a little bit. That maybe in spite of whatever paperwork I would inevitably be signing to correct the porn star magician's mistake I may actually still wanna see Harlow.

Date her.

Be...*with* her.

He said that shit, and it just all clicked like that moment you put a maraschino cherry on a Wilcox and diet coke for the chick you know isn't getting enough attention from the dude she's out with.

The denied truth I had been struggling with finally felt seen.

And heard.

And acknowledged.

I'm not into other females because I'm into Harlow.

Now, I just have to figure out how to get Harlow to be into *me*.

Can't be *too* hard, right?

Kind of already her type...at least according to Winslow who offered to throw me a "Congratulations on your Divorce" party at the pub when I get back.

"*Julian,*" Amaryllis Wu, the receptionist I met upon my arrival on this floor, giggles a little too loudly, pulling my attention away from the bouquet of flowers I'm clutching onto.

The dark-skinned male she's flirting with drops a hand flirtatiously on top of her sandy beige one.

Hundo says he's gonna gently stroke it next and compliment her hair or makeup or some shit.

"I mean it," his fingers lightly caress hers, "you look extra beautiful with your hair like that."

What can I say?

When you've spent as much time behind the bar as I have, you pick up on a few things.

And you learn a few things *not* to ever fucking do.

"Don't you have an office to be working in, Julian?" Margot states on a huff, catching them both off guard given the way they scramble apart. "The nice one with the big window and private bathroom at the *opposite* end of this floor?" Her snarky grin is given at the same time she folds her arms in a motherly fashion. "The one given to you when you became the CFO because you finally got the credit you deserve for the work you were doing, work that it seems you're not doing now because you're too busy trying to build a sexual harassment case for the new hire."

He clears his throat, innocently surrenders his hands, and speed walks past me, heading for what I presume is his office.

Harlow's assistant—and Geoffrey's apparent nemesis—tosses Amaryllis a look of disapproval. "Interoffice fraternization is a fireable offense. You wanna play Russian Roulette with your career? That's fine. You're off to a fantastic start. You wanna last longer than the fling you just thought about having?" Her chin tips to the now ringing phone. "I suggest you answer that."

Fuck man.

It's like if a rottweiler could speak and wear heels.

Amaryllis drops her attention to her desk and immediately takes the call while the terrifying woman I've heard more about than actually ever encountered relocates her glare to me. She simply points her index finger my direction, turns it to face upward, and motions it twice to summon me from the odd shaped chair I've been waiting in over to where she's standing.

Doing my best to get to her in a timely nature results in me tripping over the only nice pair of shoes I own—aka my least beat up pair of Chucks—and almost face planting into the edge of Amaryllis's desk.

The receptionist cringes.

The human guard dog cringes.

Even the janitor getting off the nearby elevator cringes.

And he's wearing a goddamn green jumpsuit!

I swear to God this shit better not be a pre-game shot of what's coming next.

I can't win over Harlow Hennington, the NHL's ice princess, like this!

I couldn't even win over a hot and needy down to clown with anything that doesn't frown just turned twenty-one sorority chick in this condition.

Collecting my composure includes a small rearrangement to my open white-collar button up shirt and a minor adjustment to my cuffed khakis that I haven't worn since my first interview at the pub. Once I'm certain I look more put together, I use my flower wielding hand to gesture towards the hallway I assume we're headed down. "This way?"

"Mmhm," Margot hums and sharply turns to resume leading the journey.

A few steps away from the desk, I casually ask, "You're Margot, right? One of her best friends?"

"I'm the one responsible for keeping her *alive*," she answers in a matter-of-fact tone, stride swift, in spite of the stilettos she's strutting in. "Letty is responsible for keeping her out of jail—even if she is often the reason Hennington gets close to ending up there." A small bottle is removed from her pocket, but the action doesn't break her pace. "And the crumpet eating Krampus you call your boss is the one responsible for keeping her choices in...*companionship*," her eyes cut me a judgmental glance, "good and plenty and disgusting just like the candy."

Did she just basically say Geoffrey was a pimp?

Is she calling me a ho?

Wait.

Did she just call me fucking gross?

Her abrupt halting at the end of the hall not only prevents me from being able to ask any follow up questions, it has me damn near tripping over my own feet again. Another glare of disapproval is delivered prior to two knocks on the door. Afterward, she pushes the brown block cade open, waves a hand for me to enter, and cleans her hand with the antibacterial gel she just fished out of her pocket.

I swallow my nervousness and step inside to come face to face with my wife for the first time in weeks. While I expect her to look good, I don't expect her to surpass the beauty I've been repeatedly staring at on my cell.

And yet she does.

She somehow looks even more stunning.

Damn near fucking perfect.

Her long dark locks are pinned up as high as they can go on top of her head. Her baby blue jacket has its sleeves rolled up and is unbuttoned so that the world can see her stomach in the white crop top undershirt. Her pants appear high waisted however much more casual than the attack mutt who escorted me in here. She looks professional, yeah, but she also looks like one high heel ditch away from dominating whatever indoor sport she's been challenged to compete in.

It's fun and sexy and intimidating.

Which makes sense to me.

That's pretty much exactly how I'd sum up the one and only Harlow Hennington.

"Afternoon, Harlow," I warmly greet during my slow stroll her direction.

The woman who will hopefully give me a real shot at dating her despite the pending divorce shifts her focus from her laptop over to me on an equally warm welcoming. "Brendan."

"You know, I like that you don't call me Bricks."

"And I like that you have the balls to call me Harlow."

"I like impressing you."

She lets the corners of her slightly closed lips curl towards the ceiling. "I like *being* impressed."

"Then let me continue to do so." Extending the slightly squished arrangement, I sheepishly apologize, "They were uh...a little less damaged about five minutes ago before I almost ate pavement."

There's no resistance to snicker at my expense. "I'll help myself to the waiting room footage later to review your bender moment."

"We could review it together?" I playfully suggest on a crooked smile. "You know like the *married couple* we are."

Harlow's face flashes an uncomfortable cringe that pushes me to get back in her good graces.

Or at least her *better* graces.

"Boss mentioned you were born on Valentine's Day, so you hate roses--"

"With a fiery fucking passion."

"But I still wanted to get you flowers...But like I don't know a lot of other kinds? I pretty much know roses and tulips and I really only know about that one because of Jimmy the Tulip from *The Whole Nine Yards*, which is one of my mom's favorite fucking movies of all time because in

another life she swears Bruce Willis would be my father. And what's worse is I don't really know if she means *him*—the actor—or if she means *his character*."

Harlow presses the tips of her fingers against her lips to contain her giggles.

The sound is so distracting, I momentarily forget to speak.

And think.

And do anything other than stare at how beautiful her smile is.

Fuck, man, I wanna be the one to keep her looking exactly like this.

"Uh..." my voice stumbles in steadiness, "what...what uh...what was my point?"

She tosses her hand in the air in cluelessness, laughter slowly fading.

I cut the object in my hand a quick glance and grunt, "Right! About the flowers..."

"Which are wisely *not* roses, one of the only two you previously knew how to identify."

"Yeah," redness creeps into my cheeks even though I wish it wouldn't, "um, I went to a local florist after breakfast and spent like an hour getting lectured while building this for you. The focal flower—a sentence I never pictured myself saying—is a blue orchid. It's supposed to symbolize rarity, uniqueness, and beauty." Gently tipping the bouquet towards her is followed by an embarrassingly bashful grin. "Everything you are."

The sweetest sigh slips free as she slides the flowers from my grip to hers. "That's...that's like the sweetest shit anyone's ever said to me."

"Meant it."

Harlow beams brightly and buries her face in the bouquet while I park myself in the nearest seat. Post a deep inhale that leads to a secondary soft sigh, she asks, "How was your flight?"

"Fucking tits," I thoughtlessly exclaim. Not even ten seconds passes by before I'm trying to yank my chuck out of my mouth for the millionth time. "I mean—"

"Nah, flying private is fucking tits," Harlow promptly agrees and places the bunch on the stack of paperwork to her left. "I hated flying commercial to go see my mom growing up—even though we either flew business or 1st. And yeah, I can hear how spoiled little rich bitch that sounds and don't give a shit. Flying private is *infinitely* better and fuck those that pretend any different."

And this is what makes this woman one of a kind.
This shit.

This honest, laidback, be whoever the fuck you are shit she not only exudes but commands other people have.

Why would I wanna give this shit up?

Why has anyone?

“How’s your suite at The Frost?”

“Fucking sweet,” I playfully reply, terrible pun attached to a wink. “Not nearly as nice as our one in Vegas but still at least ten times nicer than the house I rent with three other dudes.”

“Own room?”

“Own futon?”

She cringes again, this time in obvious disgust.

“It’s not ideal, but the shit’s not forever, either.”

Harlow slowly nods and allows the statement to be her segue. “About shit not being forever...”

“Our marriage was actually legal, but you wanna end it quietly and quickly and preferably out of the view of the media?”

The nodding occurs once more, although this time a helluva lot faster.

“DNA?”

“NDA and I’ll provide you with a settlement package for pain and suffering.”

“*Nothing* about being married to you was a pain, Harlow.” Toying with the mood ring still making itself at home on my ring finger begins at the same time I grin. “And the suffering? I liked it. Never had a woman smack *my ass* during sex before. That shit was pretty good.”

She smiles wide and leans back cockily in her seat. “Wasn’t my first time at the rink. I’ve got a few years on you, *Baby Einstein*.”

“Calm down, *Golden Curls*.”

“We both know I’m shaved as fuck down there.”

Arrogance doesn’t hesitate to appear in my smirk. “We *do* both know that.”

The realization she walked right into the remark has her nose scrunching in both irritation and amusement.

What can I say?

When I’m not so fucking nervous, I can pour with the best of ‘em.

“Look, Harlow, I’m not gonna put up a fight about the paperwork.” An innocent shrug fills the short stretch of silence. “I get it. That was some fun shit that turned into went a little too far shit. It happens. *Especially* in fucking Vegas. I’ll sign whatever divorce papers and the DNA-

“NDA.”

“-you need me to. Plus, you can keep the settlement cash. I don’t need it.”

“I think you do. You still sleep on a futon like the frat child you clearly are.”

Laughing at her jab naturally occurs and hearing the sound seems to get her smiling wider and wider until she can’t help but join in. And it’s the sight of Harlow’s head tossed all the way back and full lips carelessly parted as the rest of her arches into the humor that convinces me to do what I came here to do.

Persuade her to give this shit a real shot.

“While I don’t want your money, *Cougar Town*,” the reference receives another tickled snicker, “I *do* wanna have dinner with you. You know. *Sober* this time.”

“Yeah, when we met, I was—truthfully—on my Billy Bob shit.”

Perplexity pumps through my expression as much as my tone. “Billy Bob shit?”

“You’ve never seen the movie *Varsity Blues*?”

“No.”

“Ugh,” she sneers in what feels like actual disgust, “there’s this whole scene where Billy Bob pukes in a washing machine and then resumes drinking. That was me that night except I didn’t puke in a washing machine but the kitchen sink. And I wasn’t drinking in victory but in dejection. However, regardless of whatever my reasoning was for irresponsibly going twelve rounds with my liver, there is *no excuse* for you not having seen one of my favorite football films of all times.”

The unsuspected scolding causes new rounds of chuckles from both of us to begin.

“What are you gonna say next? That you’ve never seen *The Mighty Ducks*?”

“I haven’t.”

“Get out of my office,” she points, still laughing.

“How about I sign the papers now, and we go to dinner tonight instead? Maybe watch *The Mighty Ducks* for dessert?”

Mirth in Harlow’s demeanor is noticeably replaced by apprehension. “Brendan-”

“I like you,” I bluntly state at the same time I scoot to the edge of the seat to rest my elbows on her desk. “I think you’re fun. And know that we have fun together—even if you can’t remember how much. And I get it. I’m a lot younger than you. I probably don’t have as much to offer as other dudes that are closer to your age than mine. And I’m sure you have all your shit together-”

“All my shit together?” Humor hops its way back into her gaze as her body physically mirrors mine. “Are you fucking kidding? I’m thirty-seven, still don’t understand the difference between pots and pans, religiously live in sports bras, and got knocked up by a stranger during a bender that was supposed to help me cope with the death of the one person on this fucking planet I knew without a doubt loved me while avoiding the one person I know is going to try to weasel her way into more money than she was left in the will.” She offers me a slightly off-center smile. “Don’t get it twisted, Tommy Pickles. Just because I sleep in a grown-up bed doesn’t mean I have all my skates laced up.”

Blowing past the reference I don’t understand is insanely easy thanks to the leak of information I misheard.

Or...at least *think* I misheard.

“Wait, did you say that you’re knocked up?”

The question unsuspectingly paralyzes her in place.

Which means she *did* say it.

Which means I need more information.

Fucking.

Now.

“Were you...” my index finger rolls around in the air to mark where the words I can’t form should go, “when we...” the action is more frantically done the second time, “in Vegas?”

Harlow folds her fingers together, drops her head forward on a heavy sigh, and shakes it left to right.

Left to right.

Left to fucking right.

“H-h-h-have you um-” There’s no stopping myself from being cut off courtesy of my hand lightly slapping the side of my face in hopes of waking up from what can only be labeled a jet lag induced daymare. “Anyone... else...since...?”

She doesn’t bother meeting my gaze.

She simply allows her dipped head to duplicate the previous actions.

“So, uh...” the volume of my voice lowers, “what um...what *you’re* saying...is...” it morphs into a tone made mainly of air, “it’s-”

Harlow finally lifts her face to meet mine and nods in an agonizingly slow nature.

What?

What the...?

What the actual fuck?!

What the actual fuck is going on here?!

One minute I’m convincing my roommate and coworker, Zao, to cover my shift so I can come here and do something semi romantic—it would be hella romantic if I hadn’t been summoned here to begin with like fucking Harry Potter to Hogwarts—and the next I’m being told our little Vegas adventure was not so little after all?!

Holy. Hell.

What?

Just...what?!

Before I can responsibly respond—not that I was going to—a knock at the door breaks the tension.

“*Ohthankfuck*,” Harlow murmurs not so quietly.

We both redirect our attention to the door where Margot has entered despite not being told to do so. “Finished?”

No.

No, we’re fucking not!

We’re not anywhere close!

This is a huge fucking subject that just *accidentally* crept into the conversation.

Wait.

Was she really gonna have me sign the papers and *not* tell me she’s carrying my child?

Fuck...

I’m gonna be father?

Ugh.

I knew I shouldn't have had that screwdriver at breakfast this morning. I can feel that shit boiling back up now.

"Not...exactly," Harlow poorly stumbles to say.

"Okay, well, then you may wanna send Tickle Me Elmo there to recesses for a bit. We've got an escalating crisis in the locker room."

"Blanc needs an apple?"

"An apple?" I thoughtlessly toss her way.

"It's an assist in hockey," she offhandedly explains, attention still focused on the female at the door. "He's the head fucking coach. He should *not* need my help managing players in there. That's literally his fucking job."

"It's between a player and an employee."

"Shit," Harlow grumps and hastily rushes towards the door.

"Shoes," Margot and I remind in tandem, exchanging curious gazes right after the word leaves our separate mouth.

"*Forfuckssake* I don't need two of you," the mother of my future child snips while retreating to jam her feet into the abandoned flats beside her desk.

Maybe she doesn't.

But maybe having two of us around is something she could use?

Wants?

Hell, maybe it's something I want?

Following Harlow out of the room is done without invitation.

And against her volition.

And against my better judgment.

Not that my judgment should be trusted anymore.

Again, I thought I was coming here to flex my top shelf Romeo skills and now I have to figure out if I leave on some Maury Povich shit.

Is there any chance this shit is staged?

Publicity stunt in the making?

Margot glares at me over her shoulder upon our arrival at the elevator.

Nah.

Something tells me *she* of all people would never let something like that fly.

"You are not needed in this process," Margot snips, tablet cradled tightly to her chest.

“Do you really think it’s a good idea to leave a complete stranger unsupervised in *the owner’s* office?” I poke in return.

“You’d wait in the lobby.”

“You *think* I’d wait in the lobby but considering how easily distracted that front desk girl is, there’s no telling where I might stumble into.”

Margot viciously smirks. “*Literally.*”

Okay.

I *did* just pour myself that shot, but you know what?

Boss is right.

This woman is horror movie horrifying.

The elevator dings open to grant them access inside yet rather than bum rush the space, I stay on the outside and wait to be invited in like the soul sucking vampire I’m beginning to feel I might be considering Harlow paid for my flight, my driver, my hotel, and evidently my kid’s earliest needs—whatever those are.

Vitamins?

I think it’s vitamins.

This is definitely one of those times not being an only child probably would come in handy.

Margot prepares to hit the button, wordlessly declaring her stance, yet the instant Harlow’s bright brown eyes find mine, they stay planted there as though searching for the shit I’m not saying. Silently challenging me to back down. Retreat. To fuck off because I’m only pretending to give a shit versus actually giving one. And when I don’t, her hand swiftly slides into the space to stop the doors from shutting me out.

Maybe even to stop *her* from completely shutting me out.

“In,” she motions on a small head tilt to the empty space beside her.

I hastily step inside and open my mouth to express gratitude.

“Silent.”

Pressing my lips together is immediately done while nodding.

“Explain,” Harlow commands to her assistant as the elevator begins its descent.

“I don’t completely understand myself,” Margot grumbles during an annoyed headshake. “Partially because Page’s Canadian riddles don’t make any goddamn sense-”

“Ugh, fucking Page.”

“-and partially because every time Blanc *tried* to explain to me Page would chime in with some condescending shit that needlessly escalated the entire thing.”

Harlow grunts her displeasure over the situation or the player which prompts me into doing something more useful than standing around, eavesdropping like I’m stuck in an episode of fucking *Vampire Diaries*.

I pull out my phone and Google the current roster to get the information no one is going to just hand over. It doesn’t take long to discover the basics about Joel Page—height, weight, position and how long he’s been on the team—and to my surprise, finding his less appealing traits—fines, suspensions, court mandated community service—doesn’t require any additional effort.

My interjection is thoughtlessly and poorly timed given that it cuts off Margot mid-sentence, “Page is a veteran.”

Harlow shifts her attention to me as we exit from the elevator to head for the set of double glass doors that will lead to the attached building. “He is the *oldest* veteran on this team, which is why he’s so fucking expensive.”

“And complacent.”

The word choice receives the smallest grin of acknowledgement.

“That’s the real issue here, right? He’s setting a bad example for those coming in under his guidance. He’s not Captain, but he’s an older member of the team, so they’re gonna look to him for cues just like they will any of the other veterans that are still here. His...unchanged ways fuck up the whole entering a new era shit.”

“*Precisely.*”

“Cut him.”

“Can’t,” Margot huffs upon our entering the secured indoor area that bridges the gap between the offices and the arena. “His contract keeps us chained to him-”

“And his salary is fucking outrageous considering how *little* he played last season.”

“-unless he receives another blemish on his record. I.E. a DWI or a harassment charge or physical altercation.” Margot leans around Harlow during our speedy trek to give me a mirth-filled expression. “The guy’s a fuck up. He *will* fuck up again. It’s just about minimizing the damage until the inevitable.”

Huh.

Is that what she thinks of me?

Fuck, is that what *Harlow* thinks of me?

Inside the locker room where the standoff is occurring, I do my best not to get starstruck by the sight or feeling of where I am.

I mean...people typically have to fucking *pay* to be behind the scenes like this or be getting paid for this level of access to the space where professionals prep for the shit we see on TV, for the shit they're contracted *millions* to fucking do. I should be fucking gawking and taking pictures of the mottos on their walls and bragging to everyone on Tok and Snap how amazing this shit is; however, I won't.

Because that's not why I'm here.

I'm here because Harlow needs me.

Er...she *may* need me.

For what, I don't fucking know, but I do know I wanna be here for it.

Her.

Our child.

That realization hits me in the back of a head like a cheap vodka bottle.

Of course, I wanna fucking be here for my kid.

I grew up without a father.

I'll be damned if my son or daughter—please let it be a son—does the same.

"Well, well, well, boys, looks like our Disney princess came down from her diamond studded tower to mingle with us simple peasants," Page arrogantly chortles at the same time he folds his arms across his wide chest.

Harlow positions herself on the opposite side of the man I'm guessing is Blanc, tilts her head sarcastically at the problem player, and softly coos, "Aw, Page. Peasant is what *you* of all people should *aspire* to be."

"That means to aim, in case that didn't translate into your native Newfoundland tongue," Margot adds from where she's waiting at my side.

Oh good.

Someone she likes even less than me.

I'll put that on the win tab.

"What's the problem here?" Harlow inquires Blanc's direction.

The short hair male opposite of her is robbed of his opportunity to answer by the older, paler, outraged scraggly bearded man who appears out of what feels like thin air, "*He* is the fucking problem here, Hennington!

He's *been* the problem here! He'll always *be* the problem here! I'm just over having to be the one who fucking takes it! I quit!"

"You can't quit, Hank," she instantly denies.

"I *have* quit, Hennington."

"Oh me nerves, ya got me drove, old man," Page grunts the older, exhausted employee's direction. "Plus, you're too ancient for this shit."

"So are you, but you're still here," I jab back without hesitation.

All eyes cut to me, yet it's seeing the impressed smirk on Harlow's expression that keeps me from apologizing.

Page kicks his rectangular chin my way. "Who the fuck are you?"

"What's wrong, Page?" the woman who might very well be the one of my dreams intervenes, face swerving into the path to block his direct line of sight. "Can't handle being chirped in your own barn?"

"He peed in the basket of towels," Hank announces, recollecting everyone's attention. "*Again.*"

"The fact that he has to add again, Hennington, is a problem in itself," Blanc states to his boss.

She lifts a hand to hush the head coach and maintains her focus on the person it's clear she wants to stay. "How do you know it was Page, Hank? We both know there are plenty of shit weasels on this team that don't know the difference between a good-natured prank and bad natured harassment claim."

"He stared at me while he did it."

"Yeah, that's pretty fucking guilty," I quietly murmur.

Harlow shoots the player a deep glare. "*Fucking seriously, Page?*"

He simply tosses a smug hand in the air on a shoulder shrug.

What a fucking prick.

It'd be nice if a stunt like this could finally end his career but based on the way her body is melting in minor defeat, I'm guessing it won't.

"Hennington, I love this team," Hank begins again, tone passionate yet pained. "You know I love this team. I loved it long before that fucking Newfie was signed-"

"Fuck you, old man."

"-and I'll love it long after I no longer have to deal with him."

"*Hank-*"

"There's an athletic educator position open at my grandson's school," he continues on, a genuine smile finding its way to his face, "and I'm gonna

accept the offer they made. I'm gonna take the rest of the summer off, spend time with my family, and enjoy whatever time I have left on this big blue marble as far away from fuckheads like him as I possibly can."

Harlow's body begins to sink once more causing a noticeable ache to begin in my chest. "*But Hank-*"

"You're gonna be a good GM, Hennington," Hank states with a heavy-hearted sigh. "And *despite* assholes like him, which I know you can't get rid of, you're gonna do great things for this team. You're gonna make your old man proud." He steps closer to give her a sweet pat on the shoulder. "Just don't put up with the same bullshit he did. *Have. Higher. Standards.*"

Rather than try to convince him to stay, she simply nods in agreement.

"I'll be back tomorrow to clear out my things."

She understandingly nods again and allows Hank to exit the room in the dignified silence I'm sure he deserves.

Once the door audibly shuts, an ugly, inhuman roar of frustration rips free from Harlow on a stomp of her flat covered feet. "*Fuck!*"

"Gonna be hard to handle a season without enough ice bitches, Hennington." Page smugly smirks.

"Good thing she has enough then," I taunt back, arms folding firmly across my chest. "She just hired me."

Oh shit.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

What did I just say?

Fuck. Me.

What did I just *do*?!

"It's almost like I *knew* you were gonna pull a stunt like this," Harlow snips his direction, willingly playing along—at least for the moment. "Either I'm getting smarter or you're getting more predictable."

"It's probably both," Margot smoothly contributes to the chiding.

Page's jaw tightens at the same time he tosses me an unhappy grunt. "Where ya longs to?"

"Doesn't matter where he's from. What matters, Page, is that he's the new assistant equipment manager." Margot drops one hand on her hip on a condescending cocking of her head. "Does the GM need to sing it to you in rhymes for you to understand?"

He narrows his gaze at her yet doesn't bite back.

“Milano Blanc, head coach,” he informs and steps across the space to shake hands.

“Brendan Brickley, but everyone calls me Bricks.”

“Look forward to working with you, Bricks.”

“Speaking of work,” Harlow nonchalantly segues, “Blanc, please shut down the barn for the rest of the day.”

“You got it, Hennington.”

“Uh...if you shut that shit down then what the fuck am I supposed to do for training?” Page gripes in obvious annoyance.

“Maybe play in traffic?” The owner of the team sasses back on a shoulder shrug. “Make us both winners?”

“You’re definitely getting smarter, Hennington, because that’s a *brilliant* idea,” Margot chimes in, pushing the troll known as Page to storm out of the space.

Blanc poorly hides his chuckles before he asks, “Is shit like that what you meant by me having my work cut out for me?”

“Tip of the skate, Blanc. Tip. Of. The. Fucking. Skate.”

He expels a hard sigh and shakes his head. “I’ll go lock up. Call Craig. Have him come in early. Tell him he’s been promoted then maybe spitball some ideas on restructuring the equipment team not only for efficiency but to be better prepared for shit like this.”

“Great idea,” she immediately agrees.

“We’ll be speaking again soon I’m sure,” Blanc points my direction prior to exiting the room.

Maybe?

Possibly?

“I’ll go pull your new hire paperwork,” Margot volunteers, turning back the direction we came. “Good thing we already did your background check. Saves us all some time.”

“You did what now?” I mumble over my shoulder at her only to be met by silence.

This time when the sound of the door shutting echoes around the empty locker room Harlow smacks her lips, “First off? Great gino against Page.”

A smile slides into place at the same time I shift my attention to her.

Gino means goal.

I already know this one.

Feels like I should get another because I do.

She extends her balled fist for me to bump, so I do. “That was good.” Her hand falls back to her side. “*Real good*. Winslow is too chicken shit to step to players, Margot isn’t typically listening when they chirp, and Letty has a face that most people think is too sweet to say mean shit to let alone believe mean shit that comes from it.”

Can I just say I’m flattered to already be in the same circle of people who matter so much to her?

Can I say that shit out loud?

Too much?

Too much too soon?

“Second?” Harlow continues without waiting to hear from me. “*Huge. Fucking. Whistle. On the play!*”

“So, hockey metaphors are just...your shit?”

“It’s how I was raised.” She lets her shoulders innocently bounce. “Dad found it easiest to talk to me about life shit in hockey terms, relating pretty much fucking everything to the game, which led to me processing pretty much everything the same way. Hockey is life and life is hockey.”

Huh.

I mean I think about life as a bar or a party, but I wasn’t *raised* that way.

That’s an adult choice.

Can’t imagine not having the freedom to simply think about shit in other terms.

Or being judged by others because I can’t.

“Harlow, I gotta fucking ask. Do you even really *love* hockey, or is it just the only thing you know?”

Caught off guard by the question she stumbles her body two steps backward. “*Excuse me?*”

“Fuck it. Give me two more minutes in the box for asking, but I wanna know. Do you really love hockey because *you* love it, or do you love it because it’s the only shit you’ve ever been *allowed* to love?”

Her defense stance fills my stomach with dread. “Believe it or not, I really do love hockey. And it *was* a choice. It’s always *been* a choice. I could’ve left this shit or this life behind at any point. I probably should’ve—which would’ve had Dad sleep easier some nights—but I couldn’t. I *can’t*. Yes, hockey has been tattooed on my soul since I came screaming into this world; however, I fell in love with it over and over and over again throughout the years. I’m here because I *choose* to be. Because this is where

I *wanna* be. And as much as I hate that you fucking asked, I'm glad you did."

My eyebrows shoot to the ceiling.

"No one ever asks. They just assume."

"Fuck assumptions."

"Okay," she casually concedes, arms crossing, framing her small handful of tits perfectly, "then I won't assume I know *why* you pretended that I gave you a job that I very much didn't fucking give and am *not* going to give simply because you're my unborn child's baby daddy."

"Then I'll fucking interview for it."

"*Brendan-*"

"Look, Harlow, I need that job *because* I'm gonna be a baby daddy."

Her slender nose scrunches in amusement over hearing the term used again.

"Give me ninety days." Shoving my hands in my pocket occurs as I cautiously close the gap between us. "That's about the end of pre-reason, right?"

"Right."

"Give me ninety days to prove myself. To prove I can handle that job. That what we had in Vegas was more than just a booze induced one-night stand. That the ring I still wear on my finger can fucking mean *something*." When she instantly doesn't object, I suck in a shaky breath and push onward with the most random yet smartest plan I've ever concocted. "Give me ninety days, and if this shit doesn't work out between us or the job, fine. I'll quit so you can give the gig to someone more qualified and sign the divorce papers and go back to A2 freeing you from me all before that first official puck drop."

"And what about the kid?"

"I'm not abandoning it," I blatantly refuse, tone firm and unyielding. "Even if I have to go back to A2, we'll figure out some sort of custody shit. When I can come visit. When I can send clothes and shit. When we can video chat. I grew up without a fucking pops, Harlow. I *refuse* to let that happen to him or her."

"Fuck, I'm hoping that it's a him," she quietly whines.

"Hey, me too!"

We exchange a couple of snickers before she curiously questions, "Why do you wanna work so hard to win me over?"

My answer is senseless yet honest. “I don’t know.”

Her brow pulls together in confusion.

“I really don’t. Maybe it’s because I like to see you smile or because I like the way you laugh or fucking love the fact that out of all the people in your life, *I’m* the only one you let call you Harlow.”

She flashes a slightly coy grin. “Dad was the only other person who could get away with it.”

“And see...,” my head tips her direction, “maybe the fact you let me means something. Maybe I mean more to you for some fucking reason too.”

Her brown gaze I look forward to seeing more and more in the future softens just a smidgen. “*Maybe.*”

“Then maybe my ninety-day idea will make us *both* winners. I know you’re a fan of that shit.”

My reference to her pissing off Page earlier receives an airy laugh that’s followed by a body shaking sigh. “Fine. But I’m not paying for you to stay at that hotel for three months. You can move into my guesthouse.” She slowly saunters away towards the direction we entered. “Can’t suck any worse than sleeping on a fucking futon.”

She’s absolutely right about that.

I just hope I’m fucking right about my shit, too.

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CHAPTER 5



Harlow

What the fuck am I doing?

Really.

I can't just let some stranger who knocked me up just uproot his entire life and move into my guesthouse, can I?

I mean I'm a huge fucking risk taker, but this feels more like someone should be asking me to try on this white jacket to see how the arms fit type of shit.

Resting my open palms flat on my slate gray marble island, I continue to glare at the empty hockey themed mugs waiting to be filled.

Am I really about to make him a cup of coffee in the morning before work?

Have I really already gone all Susan Homemaker in less than twenty-four hours?!

Wait.

Is it Susan or Susie?

I think it's Susan.

Or...it could be Susie.

You know what.

It doesn't fucking matter!

My name is Harlow, and I barely make coffee for my goddamn self.

The flashing light on my phone reminding me that I have unacknowledged messages finally convinces me to check them rather than ignore them any longer.

First order of business on the docket is deleting the three post-sport sessions' greetings threads, each wondering when I'll be making my way around the globe to them for our annual vacation fucks since hockey season is now over.

Yeah...that don't fuck around lesson is one I learned the hard fucking way.

And one I'm glad I did in the states versus out.

Plus, I feel like *none of them* would've made even remotely acceptable dads even just on paper.

One is a part time DJ who's still trying to be an Olympic skier despite being past his "prime" for it—he's in Switzerland—one is a "fitness expert" who's obsessed with getting "discovered" on IG—he's in Sweden—and the last is a d-man—originally from Chili but now in Canada—who only takes two things dead serious in his life, which are fighting—on the ice—and fucking.

Again...thank fuck none of those "winners" managed to put a baby in me.

I damn sure don't think this situation would've gone nearly as smooth.

Next up are the missed late-night texts from my best friends.

Winslow: Are you REALLY moving Bricks in?! That's a joke right? A VERY VERY VERY BAD JOKE HENNINGTON!

Not a joke.

Just like the thing growing inside me isn't a prank.

Haven't mentioned that part yet.

Kind of waiting 'til post this morning's doctor visit to tell the rest of my inner circle. Margot already knows because, well, Margot knows everything, *and* she was the one who had to make the appointment for me. I was too busy puking or panicking or pretending that I'm totally okay with my dad *not* being around to hold my hand through this.

To tell me it's gonna be okay.

That I'm still his little girl even when I have my own little girl.

Or boy.

Fuck, I hope it's a boy.

I decided to delay replying to Winslow a bit longer and check the message from Letty.

Letty: How's the new roomie?? Seen him naked yet?

Of course, I've seen him naked.

That's how I got fucking pregnant to begin with!

Letty: And are we gonna talk about wtf the Cheetahs think they're doing with Tye Gray???

It's impossible not to smile at the very subject I actually *want to* discuss with someone.

Perks of having a best friend that's totally into hockey almost as much as you are.

My fingers fly across to the keys to deliver a set of emojis to convey my feelings on the situation prior to exiting the area to check who in the hell left me a voicemail. Just the sight of her name instantly narrows my vision, but I decide to bite the biscuit anyway and listen to the pending message from the one person I typically don't hear from unless it's Christmas—because they don't really celebrate Thanksgiving in Doctenn—my birthday—preholiday ball of course—or Mother's Day—which considering Dad did most of the fathering *and the mothering* seems like an overstretch for her to receive any kind of attention that day yet she does. Considering the fact that it's nowhere near any of those prescheduled phone visitation days means she can only be calling for one thing.

And it's one thing I'm not going to give her.

After hitting the icon and the speaker phone button, I cross over to the space behind me to deal with the actual coffeemaker rather than what the morning brew will inevitably be going in.

"*Princess*," my mother's accented tone floods the open space, immediately receiving a sneer of disgust.

Penalty one.

I don't like being called princess.

I never have nor will I ever.

She loathes my first name yet refuses to just call me by my last out of protest that as my "parent" she should have different rights than the others in my life. Had she given me more than the shading to my skin, long legs that won't quit, and all of her retired ballerina grace perhaps she would.

“We need to discuss what your father left me in his will.”

I shake my head at the same time I turn on the machine.

By discuss she means bitch.

And by bitch, I mean demand.

We already talked about this shit too many times. She bombarded me at his fucking burial site. She ambushed me at the reading of the will in between her theatrical fainting. And then she sucker punched me one more time by putting herself on my work schedule for an appearance where I thought I was meeting a player for contract negotiations.

I get it.

She wants *more* money from the man who kept her in a cushy lifestyle much *much* too fucking long all because she gave him me.

Full custody of *me*.

I was a meal ticket then and even after he’s cold in the ground she expects me to still be her nonstop ride to the high life.

Ugh.

She would be the *worst* grandma in the world if I let her.

Fuck. Me.

I don’t even wanna think about *that* dumpster fire right now.

Or how much I hate Dad won’t be around to hold his first grandchild.

“This is quite the urgent matter as the yearly fees for my downtown condo are due.”

“You should probably pay those,” I casually state at the same time I plunk up one of the flavored k-cups from their stand.

“I understand you are quite busy nowadays as the owner of a sporty thing-”

“Wow, can’t even recall the *type* of sport that keeps you visiting Tiffany’s?” Shoving the pod into the hole is done a bit harder than necessary. “Why wouldn’t I be champing at the bit to give you more money?”

Wait.

Is it champing or chomping?

Fuck, why are idioms so damn complicated? Doesn’t that defeat the purpose of them!?

“-if it is easier or more convenient for you, princess, you can simply have your financial advisor or accountant wire the money directly into my

account. I assume you are using your father's same team; therefore, they already have all the information they need to complete the transaction."

She is correct.

I *am* using Dad's team primarily because it's *my team, too!*

While Dad's death left me completely abandoned and ill-prepared for running a multi-million-dollar franchise, having a marriage, and raising a family, I wasn't left entirely clueless. Working with him and at his side for years came with being financially setup. Understanding how taxes and investments operate. Charity benefits. What to buy, what not to buy, and when.

Teaching me how to live that Kenny Rogers life was something Dad was really good about *except* when it came to the boys.

They were his blind spot.

I refuse to let them be mine.

"And Princess, if you feel obliged, could you add a few extra for me? There are these incredible boots that-"

Ending the message is swift as is swiping up the "Puck Off" mug that has a curved hockey stick handle.

She wants me to pay for her condo fees *and* shopping sprees?!

Is she that fucking mental?

Delusional?

Has she even worked *once* since her career ending injury?

Fueled by irritation is what pushes me to march back to the machine in a huff yet seeing the too young man I moved into my guesthouse last night frantically banging in horror on my glass back patio door sporting nothing but an out of season Christmas pillow to block his package has me putting the cup back down and walking his direction instead.

Welp.

If I wasn't awake before, I damn sure am now.

Unlocking and opening it grants Brendan the opportunity to shout in my face, "Demons!"

"Oh, no, baby bear. Did you have a nightmare at your first slumber party away from home?"

He twitches me a small, unamused glare prior to plowing past me in tangible fear. "Demons! I'm being chased by. Actual. Fucking. Demons, Harlow!"

Bewilderment hops onto my expression as I fold my long sleeve covered arms across the very bottom of my crop top. “What?”

“They’ve got fucking glowy eyes!” His frame whips around before I can get in a good glimpse of his ass. “And huge fucking horns!” He lets his free hand whirl wildly around his head. “And keep making these like demon sounds, trying to summon Satan or sasquatch! I don’t know what shit they’re saying, bro, but I do know that that shit,” Brendan stabs his index finger the direction of the guesthouse, “is fucking. *Terrifying!*”

Not laughing at his expense is impossible.

Between his bugged-out eyes and labored breathing—most likely from running all the way over here—there’s no way not to be amused by his response to my innocent pets.

“You think this shit is funny?” Brendan squawks, clearly still scared shitless. “You think you needing to have an exorcism on your bonus house is hilarious?!”

“Guesthouse,” I casually correct backing up towards the porch where Cookies and Cream have finally arrived, jumping around, proving that they thought they were playing not attacking. “Also, not demons,” my fingers hit the porch light to reveal the adorable creatures who now expect treats, “*Nigeran dwarf goats.*”

“You’ve got fucking goats?!”

“Two of them.”

“Why didn’t I see them last night?!”

“They were sleeping.” Grabbing a couple of carrots from the bucket I keep out of their reach is followed by handing each of them one and clicking my jaw for the pair to run off to their play area. “However, I *did* warn you to make sure you locked the door behind me for this very reason. They’re cute as fuck but obnoxiously clever, especially when they work as a team, which I’m sure is some sort of fucking metaphor the big ref in the sky would like me to pick up on that I refuse to.”

Another round of squawks spring from him seconds prior to me shutting and locking the glass block cade. “I thought you were being flirty!”

“I was being literal.”

“I thought you were saying lock the door, so you don’t get tempted to sneak into my bed and blow me or something.”

“How many summer camp themed porns do you watch?”

Brendan’s mouth cracks to answer yet wisely doesn’t.

Huh.

Good to know he's not as dumb as he looks right now.

Dumb and unfortunately for me, really sexy.

Toned legs.

Even more toned, tribal tatted arms.

Abs that look like they would be in all *my* favorite porns if I just spritzed him with a bit of water.

"Why do you have goats?" He asks, readjusting the pillow covering his dick, to stay from being visible during my brief stroll by. "Is this an ego thing? Like you think you're the goat, so you gotta have goats?"

"No, this is a lack of impulse control while drinking thing." Sassily spinning on my heels to maintain our face-to-face positions, I point to my mid drift area. "Exhibit A." The smallest pause is taken on a tiny head bounce. "Okay, *technically* Exhibit B."

"For baby?"

"Because I got the goats first, boy genius."

"I know." Brendan mischievously smirks on a head tilt. "I'm just trying to sharpen up my dad joke game."

Mirth floods my face, and I resume my trek to the machine, mumbling under my breath, "Runs from miniature goats, but thinks he's ready for a miniature person."

"I am ready."

Snatching up the mug for a second time is halted to shoot him a sarcastic scowl.

"Okay, I'm not ready," he bobbles his head around, "*ready*, but I'm ready to be ready. And to do all the prep work so that we *both* are."

Awe and befuddlement battle for the right to be heard in my voice. "How are you...just...so...okay with this? *All of this?*" Collecting the cup is attached to a heavy sigh. "My mind hasn't stopped skating in circles about this shit since I found out. I don't even think I've slept since I got the call."

"Real shit?"

I anxiously nod, in desperate need to know how he's processing everything without what appears to be a hiccup.

"I've always just been a roll with it kinda guy." Both hands fall to cradle the pillow. "I had to be. We um...we moved around a lot when I was

growing up. I don't think we ever lived any place longer than a couple years until I hit junior year of high school."

"Military?"

"Single mom."

"Right...." The response paralyzes me in place. "What exactly happened to your dad?"

"Bailed *the day* she told him she was pregnant."

There's no catching my jaw from hitting the ground.

"Growing up never knowing if today was the day you were gonna have heat or something to eat or have to fucking move because your mom lost her job again or rent spiked to a point she couldn't afford it, kinda just instilled this mentality in me to not get attached to much and *more importantly*, to just have the balls to face shit dead on like my mom always has." His bare shoulders slightly loosen. "Avoiding shit never fixes it. It just delays your progress on getting *through* it."

An unexpected feeling of relief braces itself on my shoulders.

Fuck.

He's...right.

He's absolutely right.

How is he this fucking right?

And why am I okay with him being this right?

And this calm to my chaotic?

Is that why this shit *may* actually work between us?

Is he gonna be the A to my C?

Backing up slowly for my Keurig is done in tandem with me teasing, "You know, you're kind of wise to be so young."

"I'm not *that* young."

"Have you ever seen *Space Jam*?"

"With LeBron James?"

"See. Too young." I slide the cup in place prior to using a finger on that hand to point to the door. "And get out of my kitchen."

Brendan releases a loud, spritely laugh that uninvitedly curls around my ribs and my heart and nestles itself in every chest crevice it can find. "Can I please get a cup of coffee first?"

There's no stopping myself from nodding. Or from wanting to nod. Or from wanting to begin my morning or maybe every morning with him.

“How do you like beans roasted?” My playful taunting nature is forcefully yanked back into place. “Over an open fire?”

He laughs again, shakes his head, and grumbles, “These were the only extra pillows I could fucking find last night.”

“I’ll show you where I keep the spares.” I hit the button and rest my ass against the edge of the counter while facing him. “You got clothes for work?”

A short cringe precedes a guilty retort, “No.”

“I’ll show you where I keep the spare sweats.” Sounds of brewing coffee echo behind me. “I’m sure I’ve got at least a pair or two in your size to get you started.”

Brendan’s typically cheerful demeanor doesn’t hesitate to diminish. “I don’t wanna wear some ex-fuckboy’s leftover shit, Harlow. I’d rather freeze my nuts off for eight hours.”

Intrigued by his unexpected jealousy plants a crooked grin on my face and comfort in my voice. “It’s actually leftover merch from a few seasons ago. Shit they couldn’t move or was too damaged to sell that they give to us to give away to friends, family, youth who can’t afford for their parents to buy it. That type of thing.”

Embarrassment slightly tints his cheeks on a whispered, “Oh.”

“Yeah,” I casually collect the mug and head for the fridge. “You’ll be the first fuckboy who wears them, just like you’re the first fuckboy who’s stayed in the guesthouse.” The teasing smirk he’s thrown is greeted by a small chuckle. “Now, do you want milk or cream or Baileys in your shit?”

“However, you make it, I’ll drink it.”

Busying myself with making the drink as though I’m making it’s for me is attached to a very important announcement. “I’m gonna show you where to find the sweats and then we leave in fifteen.” All my actions are focused on the beverage, yet all my words his direction. “If you’re ready at sixteen, you’re gonna be chasing my taillights for at least a block before I pull over.”

Light chuckles escape indicating he doesn’t believe me.

He will.

Time discipline was some shit Dad took very seriously.

It’s why getting up for school was never a bitch to me.

I’d been living that fucking schedule since I learned my shapes and colors.

“Is that um...Is that what you’re wearing to the office today?” he cautiously asks as he accepts the toasty offering.

“No, I’ve got a few personal matters to tend to, including my first OBGYN appointment.”

“Can I come?”

His lack of reluctance in asking causes flutters to flounce around the pit of my stomach. “Next time.” Nervously tugging on the ends of my navy sleeves happens in unison with confessing, “I...I kind of wanna do this part alone.”

“Okay,” Brendan quietly concedes, “but I wanna be there for everything you’ll let me be there for.”

I bashfully nod, tuck a loose piece of hair behind my industrial pierced ear, and encourage him to give me some much-needed space. “Why don’t you head back to your place? Put on some boxers?” We both airily snicker. “I’ll pop by after I’ve made my own cup.”

It’s his turn to nod his comprehension. “Thanks for the coffee, Harlow. Making tomorrow’s batch is on me.”

Softly smiling is mindlessly done alongside looking away to give him a bit of privacy to slink back out of my house.

Once the door is shut, I cross over, lock it, and let my back hit it on a heavy sigh.

Okay.

Maybe this is a little insane.

But maybe for the first time in my life it’s the *right* type of insane.

I’ve got ninety days to figure it out and something tells me I’m going to need every last one of them.

CHAPTER 6



Brendan

How does a person lose just *one* shoe?

In their own fucking room!

Alright, so it's not "my room" but it *is* my room. I mean...at least for the next few months during what feels like a fucking *Mission Impossible* task to convince the most incredible woman I've ever met that I am good enough not only to have around in her life but our son or daughter's, too.

How I'm going to do this I have no goddamn clue.

Just like I have no clue where the fuck my other kick went.

"*Brendan*," my mom's voice booms through the room's Bluetooth speaker, pulling me away from where I've been digging underneath the bed, back onto my feet so she can see me in the camera. "Tell me you're listening to me."

"I hear you," I mutter, eyes scouting the scene for the missing culprit.

I can't go to work wearing only one shoe.

And calling in sick because I only have one shoe sounds equally as crazy as being *late* because I couldn't find the damn thing.

Seriously.

How does something like that vanish into thin air?

"Do I need to fly down to Texas?"

Only if she's coming to help me find my fucking shoe.

"I'm worried."

Abandoning her at the start of what I know is going to be another argument is easy.

And I know it's going to be another argument because every time we've talked for the past week that's what it's been.

A battle.

A loud, I wish I could hang up in her face instead of making an excuse to take a shit to end the call, battle.

"Don't walk away from me, Brendan Anders Brickley!"

"Mom, I gotta find my fucking shoe!" I shout in return and lower myself back to the ground to resume my hunt.

"And I gotta know why you're still there!"

"Because I wanna be here!" Tossing around the Christmas throw pillows I've grown to like, I add, "And I can't like," sliding the Frosty accessory under the bed makes room for me to crawl over to the nearby corner breakfast table, "completely explain it because it doesn't actually make fucking sense to me, either, but like I *want* to be here, Mom. And I've never wanted to be anywhere like this. Not even A2." I banish a jingle bell pillow next. "And it's not *just* because she's pregnant. I...like *her*. I like hanging out with her. I like this city. I like the number of sports bars there are. I—" my sentence is cut short due to the shoelace string I spot underneath the corner chair. "Fucking found it!"

Hastily crawling over is followed by aggressively grabbing the culprit at the same time Mom asks, "Found what?!"

"My—" trying to get up too soon has me bumping my head on the edge of the small wooden table and releasing a painful groan into the air. "*Fuck*, that hurt."

Despite the fact, she can't see me or do anything about the agony, she sweetly asks, "You okay, B?"

I rub the back of my head, drop down on the edge of the mattress beside the device, and sigh, "I will be." Leaning over is done to allow her another glimpse of my face as well as my sweet smile. "*With everything, Mom.*"

"B, I know you're totally fine with just uprooting your entire life—"

"Done it for most of it."

"But at some point you really should at least *try* to put down real roots, or if that's too much pressure—which I get it, it can be—then at least *try* to

move from place to place with a little more warning than leaving, for what should've been a two day trip, only to text your friends and boss and roommates at the end of day one to basically say you're staying indefinitely."

Strangely enough, not my sloppiest move.

Oh, it's definitely fucking up there.

Beat only by that time I decided to try to live in South Haven and work at Spike's Shack, catching and throwing fish. One wasn't quite dead when I caught it, and that was the end of that shit for me. I jumped on a bus the very next day and got off in the first town that sounded better. Camelot was decent enough for a biker town. Great bar culture, better bar babes, and some of the *best* booze I've ever had access to.

"This *could* finally be my indefinitely, Mom. Maybe Dalvegan is..." shoving my socked covered foot into the shoe is done at the same I optimistically sigh, "where I'll finally put down roots or some shit. Maybe in a way I already am."

"Do you mean because the young lady you're having a baby with already has a place to raise the unborn child?"

"*That*," I promptly begin while tying my lace, "and because for the first time in my life the instinct to just bail when I'm bored isn't here. For the first—in like fucking forever—I'm thinking about what I gotta do to *stay* versus about where do I wanna go *next*."

"Okay," she quietly concedes, "I hear you."

"Doesn't mean you're listening."

Mom lightly chortles yet doesn't completely give up. "What about your place back in A2?"

"I had a futon."

"Your car?"

"Doesn't start."

"Your job?"

Leaning over the device again, I announce, "This one has insurance."

The woman I got most of brunette features from lets a hand of shock touch her chest. "Really?"

"Medical *and* Dental."

"You haven't had that shit since you were a kid."

"And now that I'm having one, it seems like a good time to maybe have it again?"

Her laughter suddenly becomes cut short by my bedroom door opening and Harlow grouching, “How are you not ready to go? How have you not learned your fucking lesson, brah? You’ve had to run after my SUV *three* times, and yesterday it was for four fucking blocks.”

“I-” my hand gestures her direction in preparation of explaining that I am ready, that I was just getting off the phone, that I don’t wanna run *five* blocks today, when my 3P fitness watch flies across the room, out the door, right past her.

For fucks sake, what is *wrong* with my wardrobe today?!

Why the fucking mutiny!

She shoves both hands into the pockets of the cropped evergreen workout jacket she’s wearing over her sports bra at the same time she declares, “I’m not buying you a new one, Baby Yoda.”

More snickers escape my mom convincing me to lift and face the device Harlow’s direction. “Mom meet my-” the sentence pitfall is poorly stumbled through causing me to arrive at a garbled, “guesthouse owner, Harlow.”

“And your boss. And the mother of your future child. And your wife-”

“Wife?!” My mother squawks in surprise.

Fuck!

Harlow instantly cringes and cuts her gaze to me. “You didn’t tell her about the marriage thing?”

“Wife?!” she shrieks for a second time.

The displeased sound spurs me to shake my head. “Yeah, I uh...I haven’t quite gotten around to *that* part yet.”

“You don’t think maybe you should’ve started there, you Teledummy.”

“When did you get married?!” Mom’s yelling reaches megaphone level. “*Brendan Anders-*”

“Hey, Mom,” I casually state, turning the phone to face me once more, “remember how I was saying I can’t be late for work? I meant it. I gotta go.”

“But-”

“I swear I’ll call you when I get off.”

“*Brendan.*”

“I’m good for it.”

“If you don’t, I’m gonna start looking at plane tickets to Texas.”

“You can borrow the plane!” Harlow needlessly volunteers, prompting panic to spur in my stare.

Mom victoriously smirks at the same time she states, “Don’t make me take her up on that offer.”

That would so *not* be a good idea right now.

“Love you, B.”

“Love you, too.”

Ending the video chat is immediately followed by me meeting Harlow’s amused grin. “She’s gonna ground you.”

“She can’t ground me, remember?” I rise to my feet and snatch my wallet off the nearby nightstand. “I’m a fucking grown ass man.”

“A grown ass man who needs to take that piercing out of his brow before work.”

I grunt in both irritation and gratitude over the reminder.

Like I get the fucking rule.

It makes sense.

It’s just...a pain in the ass to constantly take out and put in.

“And she *should* fucking ground you.” Harlow’s attention remains on me during the removal, the gentle toss of the jewelry onto the nightstand, and my walk over to her. “How could you not tell your mom?”

“Have you told *your* mom yet?”

“No,” she answers as I retrieve my runaway watch, “but nowadays I try not to talk to her without my lawyer present.” We share a small round of chuckles enroute to the front door prior to Harlow inquiring, “Seriously, though. Is there a reason you haven’t told her?” She noticeably fidgets with her zipper while I lock up the structure from the outside. “Are you...worried she’s...gonna hate me?”

“No.”

“Not like me?”

“No.”

“Disgusted by me?”

“Still no.”

“She probably will be,” the woman I can’t get enough of confidently declares. “Most moms can’t stand me. Own included.”

Joining her side again, we resume our strolling for the driveway, taking the path that’ll have us passing the outdoor cooking area versus the acres set up for her goats. “What? Why?”

“Why my own birth host hates me or others?”

Not sure I wanna have her shutdown and have to endure a long stretch of silent treatment on the way *in* to work, I reply, “Others.”

“The *three* that I’ve met in a ‘hey I’m fucking your son’ capacity all thought I was too loud, too brash, too abrasive, and totally lacked any sort of ‘home training’. But like is it my fault that I can never remember which fork is the shrimp fork?”

“Isn’t it the longer, narrower one?”

“That you know yet had never heard of the movie *Slap Shot*.”

That shit was a crime against hockey evidently. A crime that she punished me for by making me pay for the delivery pizza she only had one slice of—pregnancy sickness is a bitch it seems—as we watched the classic film.

Did I like it?

Not really. A bit uh...before my time.

Did I like watching her love it?

Fuck yeah.

Between her laughs and the playful arm punching that led to a little bit of wrestling, that shit definitely goes in the rewatch category.

“My mom’s not like that,” I casually insist, steering the conversation back on point. “She’ll probably fucking love you right after she gets over the fact that I didn’t tell her immediately, that she wasn’t invited, and that I didn’t propose so much as *agreed* that the situation was the right call.”

“What kind of man doesn’t even propose?” Harlow playfully pokes as we pass by the section of the pool that houses a swim up bar.

“What kind of woman can’t even remember the first time she fucked her husband?”

The counter jab causes her to shoot me an impressed, mirth-filled smirk along with a set of low moans.

And that’s the thing about sparring with Harlow.

She doesn’t just wanna dish out the shit.

She wants to *take it* too.

I watch her amused expression shift to a sexier one. “Promise I won’t forget the next time.”

There’s no ignoring the way her words stir my dick nor is there any denying the joy she gets in being a fucking cock tease.

It's hard enough to concentrate on *actual* conversations about shit with her bouncing around in nothing but sports bras and booty shorts but add that to the way she shamelessly flirts with me every night during dinner or air hockey—even when Margot's buzzing around—and let's just say my dick is working out twice as much as I am at work.

The thought of Margot has me investigating her absence. "Where's your Dobermann this morning?" Needing to adjust my official Dalvegan Dragons polo momentarily distracts me from staring at her tits which are pouring out of her top. "Why isn't she barking at me about the usual shit? You know, the wrinkles in my shirt, the way my collar is tucked in," I move my fingers to fix that, "or the way one set of shoelaces is tied too loosely."

"She's shopping."

"Needs a new leash?"

"I apparently need a whole new wardrobe for this pregnancy season thing and cannot be trusted not to find or invent a loophole that will allow me to continue to work in my preferred attire."

"Crop tops and sports bra?"

"Yeah," she sighs in an exasperated fashion, "and just the idea of having to abandon all I've ever known is why I didn't get any sleep last night. That and...missing my dad."

"You know it's okay to miss him, right?"

She doesn't nod.

Or look over.

Or even acknowledge she heard what I said.

"Don't let anyone give you shit about that, Harlow. Missing him doesn't make you weak or feeble minded or mean you need to check your pocket for a tampon. It makes you *human*. And I know how much you hate to be human, Superwoman, but you are."

The sound of the gate shutting behind us precedes her shooting me a good-natured grin. "Well, this spawn growing inside of me reminds me of that shit every time I go to the bathroom. Evidently it believes that vomiting is a great way to keep my abs tight as fuck during this pregnancy thing."

"You hydrating?"

Her head tilts in curiosity of the question.

"Hydration is key shit on and off the ice."

"Someone's been reading their work manual."

“Someone’s also been using their time alone while you’re off at business dinners or employee functions or charity ice cream eating contests to Google healthy pregnancy tips like stretchmark remedies, best stomach pillows, and great recipes for each trimester to ensure you and the baby are both getting enough nutrients.”

“*Trimester*,” she sweetly corrects, “and your search history better not include prego porn to go with all that.”

“What about most comfortable sex positions for pregnant women?”

“Videos?”

“Photos.”

“I’ll allow it,” she states in an impish tone.

Light laughter leaks free from both of us as we arrive at her SUV. “Seriously, Harlow. The last thing I want is you not getting enough water or electrolytes back in your system and ending up in the hospital over some shit we could’ve avoided. So, I’ll pick up some specific alkaline water when I hit the store for dinner shit after work.”

She shoots me another teasing smirk. “What are you gonna do? Uber to the grocery store?”

“If you don’t wanna let me borrow one of your vehicles, then yeah.” My refusal to back down is emphasized by a slightly cocked head. “I’m getting you what you need *and* shit to make you a dinner that hopefully has something with a little more sustenance than the fake cheese dip, saltines, and ginger ale you’ve been sucking back rather than actual meals.”

Harlow tries not to swoon at the protectiveness being flexed yet fails, forcing her to cover up the sound with a stuttered question. “You can cook?”

“Didn’t have a choice if I wanted to eat when I was growing up.” Letting my demeanor resume its normal loose state happens absentmindedly. “There were times where Mom worked a job that she wouldn’t be home until right around when I was going to bed and other times when she was working two jobs, which meant I’d be lucky to see her at all, so I learned pretty early on how to use the microwave and the stove and studying how my friend’s moms did shit. And when I got older, I just took over the responsibility completely.” An intrigued hum wedges itself between thoughts. “Come to think of it. Anytime I’ve lived with someone I’ve always done the cooking.”

“And you may continue that pattern with my blessing because I can’t cook for shit.”

“Really?”

“Really.”

“Like at all?”

“Like you should just be grateful I know how to make fucking coffee.”

Our shared laughing is interrupted by a yawn leaving her prompting me to state, “Why don’t you let me drive and just rest for a little longer?”

She playfully wags the remote my direction. “You need more hours with an adult to finally get your license, huh?”

The eyeroll delivered during my stroll around to her is as lighthearted as the jab back, “Relax, Geriatric Jones. I promise to obey all of the still relevant traffic laws.”

Harlow smirks and offers me the object. “You sure you know how to handle something this big?”

“Remind me to send you a dick pic on my first break.”

More laughter fills the air and continuously does while we get settled inside.

It isn’t the first time I’ve driven an SUV; however, it has been a fresh minute, which has me much more tense and alert than normal.

Probably doesn’t help that the damn thing costs more than I made last year.

Harlow’s easy settling in her seat encourages me to slightly relax and the way she proceeds to text someone like this is an everyday occurrence, like this could *become* an everyday occurrence brushes away the lingering worry.

Curiosity collides with jealousy over the growing grin on her face pushing me to ask, “Margot?”

“Blanc.”

Relief immediately reclaims my disposition on a casual nod.

On one side of the bar, I know I *technically* have no fucking right to be jealous or angry if she were texting other guys because we haven’t declared this shit as anything other than willing to give dating a taste test, which means she could date whoever or—Patron forbid—fuck whoever she wanted since we’re still in the early stages, but on the other side of the bar, I feel I have every fucking right to be pissed off if she were hooking up with other dudes. We’re married—albeit not seriously—we’re having a kid, and

we practically fucking live together. We have all the ingredients to make us a couple and to *be* couple, yet we're not one. We're basically just one obnoxious sitcom storyline gunning for most cliché situation of the season.

I don't fucking love it.

But I am fucking dealing with it.

"We've got six players coming to the rink today, from both our major *and* minor teams." She sends her attention my direction around the time I arrive at the first stoplight. "We may get to witness a little funsky three on three action."

I meet her gaze on a quirked eyebrow. "We?"

"Yeah, I'll be down in the rink *most* of the day talking with your boss about the equipment budget then Blanc about the players, the plays, the season, conditioning expectations, and his ideas for team building events." The corners of her lips curl upward. "Which *you* will be attending."

"Why? I'm the *assistant* equipment manager to home games *only*. I barely register on the fucking radar."

"Every member of this team is important, Brendan. Whether you're the ones washing sweaters or wearing the C on your chest. Every. Person. Matters."

Her spoken passion pushes me down in my seat.

"Dad let that mentality slip for too long, and it cost us great players as well as great employees. We're *not* doing that anymore. *I'm* not doing it anymore. We're now on our Musketeers shit, and we're going to make sure everyone knows it."

"Do you mean *Mouseketeers* shit? That old show that Gosling was on as a kid?"

A deep glower is immediately presented. "Why do you do that? Why do you have to remind me that *you're* practically still a kid?"

My snickers slip free at the same time our light turns green.

"You'll be going to the team building adventures just like the other nonplayers. And you know what? Five hundo says you're gonna fit right in with everyone."

I should take that bet.

Especially since I know I won't.

Because I already don't.

And because Page has used every chance he can fucking find to remind me of that.

The remainder of our drive to work is filled with Nick Jonas tunes, player updates, playoff upsets, and next season predictions, all of which have her doing basically the exact opposite of the resting I encouraged her to do. However, rather than remind her the reason *why* I'm driving, I merely relish in the fact that she's yanking me *into* her world versus leaving me on the outside like she's been doing. And while I get I can't and have no right to go to all these functions simply because I'm the dude whose dick she's interested in riding, it does suck to be excluded from so much.

Like I anticipated earlier, the instant the two of us are in the rink she's welcomed.

Worshipped.

Wanted by anyone and everyone she crosses, all desperate to have her approval in some aspect.

Me?

Ignored until someone demands "the new dude" to get something because Craig is busy.

Finding tasks to occupy my attention during their time bullshitting around in the weight room is fairly fucking easy. There's a lot that goes into the job that most people don't know or understand. Everything from repairing equipment to doing inventory to anticipating a player's needs, which I'm told becomes easier the longer you're around the guys and a helluva lot easier once your team has better roots than the none that we basically have now. Luckily for me, today's servant boy status is inventory shit, something that having lived the bar life for *most* of my working existence equipped me with the skills to handle.

Checking helmets one by one for cracks, dents, and other damage should be monotonous but being granted permission to listen to my choice of music in an ear bud helps the shit move along much more smoothly. By the time the players transition from the workout space to the actual ice, I've not only finished up that objective, I've moved on to reviewing which players will need mouthguards for the coming season and which have opted out.

Didn't realize wearing a tooth blocker *was* optional in a game where an object could potentially cause you to swallow your own fucking molar.

Wonder why that is.

Huh.

Wonder what my *wife* thinks about that shit.

I'll bring that up at dinner tonight.

Show her I've really been learning and making an effort to learn about the ins and outs of all things hockey.

"Bricks," James Craig calls to me from the doorway, pulling my attention over to him, away from the tablet I'm working on, "grab the pusher and a bucket. You're on ice clearing duty."

And of course, the task is about as much fun as it sounds like it's gonna be.

Watching a game of three on three where Page and two of his henchmen purposely kick up extra shavings *just* to have me do more bitch work while they taunt me is a fucking blast.

Just like skating around the rink, sweating balls during the process, so that they can shamelessly hit on my woman is a fucking party.

Erm.

Uh.

Our boss.

The GM.

The owner.

So that they can shamelessly flirt with the owner.

That's what I probably should've said.

That's what I'm gonna *pretend* I actually did say.

Dumping the last big ass shovel full of ice—unfortunately for me—occurs within eavesdropping distance of Page trying to impress the very person who wants to cut him. "Your rookie is pathetic, Hennington."

"Wise to remember that *you* were once a rookie, Page."

"He acts like he's fresh out."

"He *is* fresh out, you second coming Neanderthal. He like *just* graduated from Vlasta."

Page leans cockily against the railing. "And?"

"And for the two years he was Captain they won the championship."

"So?"

"So, when's the last time *you* won a championship for something other than being an asshole?"

"You must have a wall full of trophies for that, Page," I cleverly mumble in passing, dragging the bucket along with me.

The chirp—aka trash talk—receives a giggle from Harlow, a grunted laugh from Blanc, and sneer from everyone's least favorite player.

Person.

Species.

Whichever fits.

Craig blows a whistle from mid ice to indicate it's time for me to get off and Page to resume the scrimmage. Skating away the same direction isn't a problem until his knee finds its way into the back of mine prior to his elbow finding my front. The combination sends me completely backwards to where my body aggressively skids across the ice and into the boards, making me silently grateful that wearing padding and a helmet for this shit isn't a recommendation but requirement.

Hisses echo around the arena, yet it's seeing Harlow's face peering over the edge, showcasing genuine concern that steals my attention. "You hurt?"

Maybe it's because I can physically see worry in her wide-eyed gaze or maybe it's because tending to me is more important than chewing his ass out, inevitably giving him the attention from her he craves, but either way, all pain momentarily vanishes allowing me to answer, "I'm good."

"Fucking slew footing, Page!?" Blanc yells, appearing at Harlow's side. "That's some of the dirtiest shit in hockey!"

I rise to my skates at the same time he calls back, "It was an *accident*, Coach."

"My ass!" Blanc barks back. "Get the fuck off my ice."

"But—"

"You're gonna learn to respect it *and* every member of this fucking team or you won't play a goddamn minute of next season."

"You'll be the most expensive fucking duster in NHL history at this rate," our boss naturally goads.

"Don't step a fucking skate on it for a week," Blanc instructs.

Page growls, breaks his stick in half over his knee, and tosses it my direction on a glare.

"*Two*," his head coach immediately adds.

The tantrum immediately has Tyler McVie, a player they've had for two seasons, and Colin Somerfield, one of the affiliate team goalies, anxiously skating after him like the enablers they are.

Hard to blame 'em.

You're supposed to respect the veteran's presence, but I do feel like there should be an exception to the rule when your veteran is a world class fucking douche canoe.

“Uh...Coach?” Patrick Peck, the dark-haired, blue-eyed rookie Page was talking shit about, cautiously croaks upon his arrival beside me where I’m dusting ice off my ass. “The other tendie’s gonna bail too, but mind if me and Kondelik keep running speed drills for another hour?”

Blanc’s compliment is attached to nods of approval. “Like the commitment, Peck.”

He kicks his chin a little higher. “Thanks, Coach.”

“Craig’s outta here in twenty, but if Bricks is willing to stay or you wanna clean the ice yourselves-”

“I’ll stay,” I casually volunteer and pick up the shovel. “Team needs a hand, it’s my job to be here.”

“Appreciate the dedication, Bricks,” Harlow praises, teeth stealing a small, noticeable bite to her bottom lip.

Despite how much I hate that she has to call me that during work hours, I allow myself to grin. “Appreciate the acknowledgement, boss.”

Her beam brightens over my willingness to respect the boundaries in place prompting my own to widen in return.

Blanc lightly chortles under his breath prior to poking, “You two want me to fuck off for a few or...?”

The faintest hint of red hits her cheeks on a headshake. “How about we talk about your team building activity ideas that need to fuck off for a bit more? Like a long ass hike? You tryin’ to give the boys a fucking heat stroke? It’s Texas!”

Blanc laughs a little louder and drops back onto the bench in tandem with Harlow.

I prepare to wheel the shit out of the way when Peck extends his glove covered fist my direction for a bump that he receives without hesitation. “Thanks, Bricks.”

“No prob, Peck.”

Another hour or so of me cleaning up shavings passes in what feels like a flash. Unlike Page who’s slow and spends more time running his fucking mouth than doing shit on his skates, Peck and Kondelik fucking push themselves to their limits. Breaking doesn’t seem to be a notion Peck’s willing to entertain and something about his relentlessness inspires the other player to match his intensity.

Fuck, it even has me more devoted to anticipating their needs versus him vocalizing them.

Towards the end of my clean up duty, Harlow instructs for me to meet her back out here, most likely on the bench where she probably won't have moved considering she's still studying draft predictions as though her life depends on it.

It doesn't.

But her first season as GM just might.

Post my closing procedures, I return to the home team area where she's still clearly lost in a bottle of her own thoughts and lean my frame against the edge rather than plop down beside her. "You wanna talk about what's stressing you out?"

Harlow doesn't tear her stare away from the space between her feet. "Nope."

I respectfully nod prior to trying another route for conversation. "The draft?"

"Fuck no."

"World War Wardrobe?"

The title successfully receives a grin and her gaze. *"Absolutely. Fucking. Not."*

"At least I got you smiling."

She tries to push the expression away at the same time she diverts her eyes to the opposite end of where she's sitting. "Believe it or not this is where I first learned to walk."

"Oh, I believe that hundo p."

"According to Dad," her smirk loses the battle of being seen as she points, "he parked me *right there*. Popped me down and expected me to stay while he was chewing out a player—Nikola Diggs, a mouthy right wing—*right here*." Harlow jabs her finger towards the space between her feet she had previously been staring at before looking up at me. "Mom was at rehearsal—"

"For?"

"She used to be a glamorous, world-famous ballerina."

"And now?"

"Now, she merely just *talks* about when she used to be one while sucking money from men who are unafraid to help her remain in her cushioned lifestyle."

The disdain she describes her mother with keeps me from asking any further questions.

“*Any fucking way...*,” her cheerfulness resumes, “she who would suck a bag of dicks for a new Prada bag was at rehearsal, my nanny Imogen was sick with the flu, and since both my grandparents were dead and both my parents were only children, Dad had no choice but to bring me to work that day. Why he thought sitting me *way the fuck over there* while he worked *way the fuck over here* was a top cheddar idea I’ll never know.”

Lightly chuckling gets her doing the same.

“I dropped down to my little chubby legs-”

“You were a chubby baby?”

“I was a chubby *one year old*.”

“Still pretty much a baby.”

“Me and my chubby little *one year old legs* used the edge of this bench—okay not this bench because it’s been replaced since then—and waddled my ass over here to take place in whatever conversation was happening.”

More chuckles bounce my entire frame as I shake my head. “You just been right underneath him from the jump, yeah?”

“Fuck yeah,” she giggles, pride pumping undeniably through her tone. “And the day I learned to walk was the day he put skates on me. No lie. Stelio Armstrong, a retired defenseman from that era, *still* tells that story every time he sees me.”

“When was the last time you saw him?”

“Dad’s funeral.”

Sorrow swiftly shifts itself into the moment commanding stiff and uncomfortable silence that I don’t want to succumb to.

No.

I want Harlow fucking talking.

And smiling.

And fucking laughing at the shit I don’t know or with me about something I’ve said.

I don’t like her sad.

I don’t like her hurting and not being able to do dick to stop it.

She’s basically my goal and I’m the tender ready to do whatever, whenever to stop anything from harming her.

“You really love it here,” I quietly coo, hoping it coaxes her into speaking again.

“This place is fucking home, babe.”

It's impossible to keep the pounding in my chest from increasing over a random term of endearment being used.

"I swear to God whenever I step out onto that ice—day or night, spring or fall, pre-season or post—I can *literally* feel a fucking heartbeat."

Eager to stay stuck in this *vibe* rather than the other I kick my chin her direction and encourage, "Tell me about something else that happened here."

Harlow practically leaps out of her seat to dart away for the stands.

One minute we're talking—like normal people—and the next it's apparently fucking cardio day with us doing bleachers to get our heartrate up.

And instead of just using the stairs, which are clearly there to be used for the fastest, most direct routes, she jogs along an entire row, goes up a couple steps, takes off towards the middle of that row, then hoists herself onto the next by standing on the seat.

It's weird.

Unnecessary.

And the most eyebrow raising shit I've seen in a minute.

But it's fun.

And definitely tests my athletic abilities, something I hope impresses her.

At least a bit.

For Cripes Sake, though, she shouldn't be *this* fucking much faster than me. After all she's fucking pregnant! Not like super far along but still.

Harlow finally stops in the middle of the row, in the middle of the stands, about center ice. Her frame rocks eagerly on her feet prior to her pointing to the seat. "I was right here the first time I remember winning The Cup."

Pretending I'm not winded is hard as fuck. "Don't you have an owner's box?"

"We do and we *did*, but Dad and I wanted to be closer to the action. *Be* in the moment with all the other hockey lovers, which we were unless he had to do ass kissing. Whenever that happened, I was down here on my own so to speak; however, Letty typically came with me to those games. Chick loves hockey almost as much as I do. She even has front row season tickets now."

"Where?"

“Her seats are right down there,” she casually points below us.

I smile, wipe the sweat off my brow before she can notice, and recall, “First walking, first ice skates, first Cup. What other firsts you got?”

Harlow sprints off again forcing me to grumble about having to keep up.

We jog around the arena for a bit in another zig zag path that leads us to the highest section below the boxes behind the visitor’s goal.

Upon our arrival, she curls her hands around the edge of the seat in front of her and announces, “I was here when I got caught making out on the kiss cam with my first real boyfriend.”

Amusement barely outweighs jealousy. “How old were you?”

“Thirteen.”

“Thirteen?!”

“He was fourteen.”

“Gotchu. You went from chasing graves to cradles.”

She lightly scoffs and playfully punches me in the chest. “Fuck you.”

“That’s how you ended up in the latter.”

Another loud squeak is followed by a second swing that I intend to dodge yet fail. Laughing and collecting my breath aren’t really an option due to her sprinting away once more. Thankfully, it’s not far this time. And even more thankfully, it’s only a couple rows down.

“I was here when I saw Edward Johnstone, the famous movie director cheating with an actress in his upcoming movie. The scandal broke like three days later and all I could say was ‘duh’.”

This time she doesn’t wait for a comment before taking off again.

I assume this is punishment for the earlier jabs.

You know make sure I’m too out of breath to give her anymore bullshit about her pre-me dating life.

Our journey to the exact opposite side of the stadium from where we first began comes to a halt on an over dramatic sliding along the railing to the row closest to the glass. “Right here,” she motions both hands towards the end seat, “is where I punched Deevon Honka—he was a forward for our affiliate team at the time—in the face for telling me to stop giving a shit about hockey and just become one of the ice girls.”

“The cheerleaders?”

“They don’t *cheer*. They clean the ice and inspire morale.”

“So...*cheerleaders*.”

She glares, skips—literally fucking skips—along the row about six seats and stops. Harlow uses the edge of a sneaker to kick the location that possess the information. “I was *here* watching the boys practice when I told Dad I was going to college at the closest university for Sports Management to which he pleaded I go for basically *anything* else. Literally anything else. He told me he’d even send me to the best broadcasting school money could buy if I would just choose an indirect to this business degree, which I did not.”

“Broadcasting?”

“For like a *minute* I wanted to be one of the chicks you see on TV telling you about hockey shit, but the truth was, it wasn’t me. I wasn’t that type of person then and I damn sure am even less so now. Every time I open my mouth, I swear to God we lose fans.”

“The interview wasn’t that bad, baby. Geoffrey and I both thought that TV twat was being unnecessarily unprofessional towards you.”

Adoration momentarily blankets her face; however, I don’t know if it’s from the fact that I watched it, the term used—surprised myself a little there—or the defense in my voice regarding the subject.

I’ve seen enough press conferences and interviews to know what’s acceptable and what’s not.

And the shit that chick pulled was *not*.

They were total trash TV moves.

Harlow smiles, spins around, and slowly backs up. “I’ve got one more really important spot to show you.”

My hand motions for her to continue to lead, although I am secretly praying, we can walk.

I’m tired of fucking running.

She lazily strolls the next stretch almost as if seeking rather than recalling, hand gently stroking the edge of the row she’s passing by. Eventually, she descends the steps until we’re on the front row yet keeps wandering around until we’re nearest the area the players come out to take the ice. At that point, she flops down in the edge seat and motions for me to position myself in the one beside her.

To my surprise, she doesn’t immediately begin whatever wild tale is next.

No.

Harlow props her legs on the edge of the seat in front of her, folds her hands on her stomach, and presents me with a mischievous smirk.

I try to hide my nervousness as I tease, “Is this where one of the players asked you out or challenged you to a beer chugging competition post game or some shit?”

“No, this is where you kissed me for the first time soberly.”

There’s no hesitation to lean over and smash my mouth against hers.

Absolutely.

None.

How my body registered the shit before my brain did is a mystery I honestly don’t need solved now or ever.

Unlike the rest of her which is hard and toned and shit I swear is capable of cutting diamonds, her lips are soft and supple and perfect for sucking. The bottom one is easily slipped between mine and teasing it with the tip of my tongue receives a whimper so faint that I’m left with no choice but to chase it. To hunt it down and demand it makes itself truly fucking heard. One hand possessively curls around the back of her neck and yanks her towards me. Whether it’s the physical force or the aggression I use that causes her to gasp doesn’t fucking matter nearly as much as the fact my tongue is granted access inside where it feverishly whirls. Does laps around hers. Rolls and rolls and rolls in circles until she’s the one out of breath, looking for a moment to catch it. Rather than show her mercy—the thing she didn’t show me running around this place—I increase the speed. Gently pull her into the pushes so that the only thing she can feel...taste...fucking *think* is me. Her fingers paw at my polo and collect the fabric into a ball, a ball she uses to keep me pinned to her.

Us cemented in this moment.

Like she doesn’t want this shit to ever end.

Maybe she doesn’t.

I damn sure don’t.

While the one set clings onto my shirt, the other skates across my crotch to clamp down on my cock, an action that fumbles my mouth from hers on a heavy groan. “*Fuck, baby.*”

“That was my idea, too,” she tempts in an airy tone. “How about we add fucking for the first time soberly to the list while we’re here?”

My dick answers on my behalf with an encouraging thump against her palm.

Which isn't the first time it's spoken for me sans my consent.
And something tells me when it comes to Harlow it won't be the last.
Another dark, heated grumble precedes my response, "We—"

Sudden machine humming sounds slap away the prepared answer prompting us to look over at Fred who is entering the rink on his ice resurfacer.

Cock blocked by a fucking Zamboni.
That's a new one.

Harlow removes her touch completely at the same time she snickers, "It would probably be better for both of us if we didn't get fined by the league for fucking in front of employees, huh?"

"*Probably.*" I reluctantly remove my touch as well. "And I can't really afford that. Fuck, I can barely afford to buy you the shit to make dinner. I haven't exactly been paid yet."

She offers me a smile so sweet that it practically makes my teeth hurt. "How about we go to the store *together*—you can still drive—and we'll add, we were *right here*, the first time we decided to make that new adventure happen?"

"I like that there are moments with me in your collection of favorite memories."

"I like that shit, too."

And I really fucking like that she shared all of them with me to begin with, that she's showing me a side of herself I know others don't get to see, but it's probably best I don't say that shit right now...

And not just because of the noisy ass piece of machinery making for the *worst* mood music a person could think of.

I get the feeling that being with Harlow is gonna be just like playing her favorite sport.

It's gonna take patience.

Practice.

And above all else fucking stamina to keep up with the constant emotional line changes.

I have no doubts that I'll master this shit eventually.

Just hope that eventually happens before that final divorce time buzzer.

CHAPTER 7



Harlow

Trying to assemble the perfect fantasy hockey team is stressful.

Trying to actually assemble and manage the *best team you can afford* is absolutely fucking more stressful but not by the significant amount it should be.

Maybe because I've basically been training for this moment since I could walk, which wasn't a memory I expected to share with Brendan a couple weeks ago.

I also wasn't planning to take him on a literal jog through memory lane.

Or to create a new memory.

Or *memories* to be more accurate.

That first kiss was followed by our first trip to the grocery store—something we've done a couple more times since but that he tends to do on his own for both the main house and guesthouse, although I demand that I foot the bill. It was also followed by our first homemade meal together, and our first make out sesh on the couch, which could've—and probably *would've*—led to more had it not been for the mini goalie growing inside me stopping the action with a round of vomiting.

Which I'm thankfully doing a lot less now.

The change in diet—prompted by Brendan’s research and backed by Margot’s demand I listen to it—has definitely helped.

And finally being past the most important post-season, pre-season moment does as well.

I don’t care what anyone fucking says.

The draft is the most fucking stressful time of the year.

That shits like if Christmas fucked Valentine’s Day and your wedding day in a three way.

It’s just non-stop anxiety until everything you’ve ever consumed in your entire life is coming out of every possible orifice of your body.

Pretty sure at one point my fucking eyes were puking.

I’m grateful that shit is *finally* fucking over.

And I’m equally grateful for our picks.

The thing I’m currently *most* grateful for?

Being home.

I can’t believe I’m gonna say this, but I actually...really...*missed* Brendan while I was away.

We’re talking so fucking much that I put my “wedding ring” back on the first night while we were texting before bed and haven’t taken it off since. I’m not entirely sure why I took it with me to begin with. Maybe because I wanted a little “piece of him” around me for good luck? Maybe because it felt like he was “there” with me? Whatever the fucking case was, I’m glad I brought it because it absolutely eased some of the ache, I wasn’t expecting to feel from not sharing a simple cup of coffee together in the morning. Or what’s become our breakfast smoothie routine, which includes so many different types of fucking berries. Or from not letting him drive us to the barn and having him pop by on lunch to drop off something for me to eat in between meetings, saving Margot a little time to get to another item on her check list—such as lysoling the guest chairs—complete. Most of all, I underestimated how much I’d miss relaxing beside him on the couch after a round of air hockey to watch sports highlights until I doze off. I... *admittedly*...like the way he wraps his arm on my shoulder and kisses the side of my forehead when he thinks I’m passed out. That shit has somehow become the single most important play of my day.

I was fucking *crushed* we got home so late last night or should I say this morning.

I couldn't blame him for already being asleep when I walked through the door.

He did sleepily kiss me goodnight before stumbling back to the guesthouse.

It wasn't exactly a perfect welcome home, yet it was.

And it was the type I couldn't help imagining I'll have a lot more of in the future, except then he'll be holding our baby.

Fuck, I hope it's a boy.

My fast approaching of the guesthouse unexpectedly starts to slow down due to the sight of Cookies and Cream lingering near one of the living room's wide-open windows. Unsure of why they're there of all places has me cautiously creeping closer; however, the instant I see Cookie's mouth open wide to receive some sort of treat it's quite obvious what they're doing.

They're being spoiled by treats from the person who seemed terrified he was going to accidentally murder one while goat sitting this week.

Changing tactics from a direct entry to the house to spying on him from the side between the two of them leads to me discovering what can only be described as a comical vision. Brendan's stretched out legs are propped up on the nearby coffee table while he uses his upper, ripped, bare chest like a small bowl to house the popcorn he's chomping on and periodically tossing to my pets. The hand not being used for eating—or refilling the peck picnic area—is gripping onto a bottle of Runt's beer that is being pointed at the flatscreen in an accusatory fashion.

"She didn't use enough butter." The father of my future child gripes while shaking his head in disapproval. "That just wasn't enough, bro." A small sip is had prior to him tipping the bottle towards the screen a second time. "Tell her that just wasn't fucking enough, Kutner! For fucks sake, tell her!" He tosses a piece of popcorn in his mouth and smacks, completely clueless I'm watching. "He better fucking tell her. He better not let me fucking down."

"Unfortunately, Sheryl, you didn't use enough butter," the male on the show states.

"Booyah, motherfucker!" Brendan victoriously exclaims, fist thrown up in the air. "That's my boy!"

My head tilts to one side in utter confusion.

Is this really happening?

Is he cheering on some fucking cooking show the way I do a hockey game?

Is he broken?

Is this...normal?

No.

This can't be fucking normal.

I mean...it's amusing as fuck, but definitely not normal.

"Celebration shot!" Brendan announces and effortlessly tosses a piece of popcorn over to the window for Cookies and then another for Cream, both catching it in the air.

Playfully, I call out, "One more for me, brah."

He thoughtlessly grabs another treat, shoots it my direction, and I crane my neck forward to ensure it lands on my tongue rather than the ground. Brendan initially grunts an impressed sound, however, about four seconds later, he realizes I'm not a goat and that he has been caught red handed doing whatever weird shit he's doing.

"*Holyfuckingshitballs!*" is the garbled reaction that accompanies his body flailing around to an upright position. "What are you—Why are you—Where did you—How long have you—"

"Why are you making a bigger mess for housekeeping to clean up today?" I ask at the same time I send my pets away and climb through the large, open window. "You think they need practice for when we eventually have another toddler running around the place?"

The age jab receives a small twitched playful glare. "You shouldn't be climbing around like that."

"I'm pregnant, not paralyzed."

"*Har-*"

"Moving on." My frame parks itself on the arm of the dark, navy-blue couch. "What in the actual fuck are you watching?"

"*What's Cookin', Good Lookin'.*" He dusts away the final bits of his snack to the hardwood floors. "It's a cooking competition show in which these four contestants compete for a chance for their favorite judge on the show to come over to their house and cook a huge meal for their friends or family. The catch? They have to do it while wearing a specific set of clothes."

"Is that why everyone looks like they were just kicked off the set of *Downton Abbey*?"

Brendan's face doesn't hesitate to scrunch in confusion. "You watch *Downton Abbey*?"

"Of course I don't watch *Downton Abbey*, you fucking plug. Margot does. It reminds her of a simpler time she appreciates."

"A time before hockey was invented?"

"Hockey has been around since the 1800s, Disney Junior, so no." The smirk I let slide on my face is extra sarcastic. "It's the pre social media, cellphone, internet shit. I have no doubt that if she could time travel *that's* where she'd choose to go."

"Where would you go?"

"Forward to when we're winning another Cup."

Brendan allows a flicker of a grin to appear.

"Now, why do you watch this shit?"

"Like this particular show or cooking shit?"

"Uh...both?"

"My favorite chef is on this one--"

"Kutner."

He places his beer bottle down on the coffee table and cringes. "Exactly how long were you watching me watch this?"

Instead of a direct answer, he's delivered a wink.

"Cooking competitions are just something I kinda got into. One day while I was visiting my mom, she was watching a marathon, and I got sucked in, and then next thing I knew any time I had the remote in my hand, I was putting one of these on." His bare shoulders innocently bounce. "I like the adrenaline and the cutthroat nature some of them get and watching the fucking clock countdown. It's fucking intense."

Perplexity pierces my stare once more. "We're talking about...*cooking* shows, right? Not sports?"

"Cooking is a fucking sport!"

The sneer he's immediately given gets him laughing.

"Why don't you sit your ass down beside me, I'll make some more popcorn, and I'll show you what the fuck I'm talking about?"

"*Hard pass.*" My head rapidly shakes. "Besides, we're working today."

"Uh...today's my day off." His eyebrows dart down in immediate concern. "Did I read the scheddie wrong?"

"No, and gino for calling it a scheddie."

Pride pumps away in his brown gaze, and his shoulders push themselves back a bit.

What can I say?

I'm a sucker for a dude who talks my language.

"You're off from your job so to speak but not exactly because we're going shopping."

"Shopping?"

"Yeah. As much fun as it is watching you sport out of season gear around the barn, it's a bad look for me. I look like a shitty GM and honestly, I don't need any help in that department, you feel me?"

"Baby, you're *not* a shitty GM."

"You have to say that shit because you wanna fuck me."

"I don't *have to* say any shit, and technically, I've already fucked you hence why you're wearing those overall shorts to hide your *barely* growing stomach because you're not ready to give up your half shirt life yet." His cocky smirk has me squeezing my thighs together. "What you *should've* said is because I wanna fuck you *again*. And again. And again. And again until you have to blow the whistle for unsportsmanlike conduct to the shit I've done to your beautiful body."

Holy. Fuck.

Yes, please and thank you.

"Still though. I don't have to lie to you to bang you, Harlow. That's actually the *opposite* way of getting you in the sack. That's the shit that keeps you from wanting to bone someone at all."

"And you may have another point on the board for knowing that."

"Thank you."

"On a serious note, you need gear of *your own*. Skates *you* picked. A stick *you* prefer for when they borrow you for a little action during practice. Plus, a bucket customized just for you versus the basic bitch black shit you wear now. On top of all those *musts*, you need better gloves, a cup, sweats, under tees, and of course a few suits."

His eyes bulge to the size of the room. "What the fuck do I need suits for?!"

"Game days. Even our equipment team wears them for travel. You change after we land and then handle the gear. You have to look professional coming in just like the boys."

"But-

“And if you wanna attend award ceremonies or other ass kissing events with me, you need something to wear. As much as I love you in board shorts and throwback tees and Mac Miller style hats, it’s not exactly professional shit.”

The corners of his lips struggle not to kick upward. “You want me around for those things?”

“I wouldn’t mind you on the assist.” This time a full fledged smile is presented, and unfortunately for me, it’s too sweet, too adorable, and too irresistible not to get me grinning too. “Go get dressed, babe.” I fiddle around with the edge of my white crop top t-shirt. “You’ve got ten and then I do that thing where I make you run behind me for three blocks before stopping.”

“Fine. But you can’t change the channel. You just gotta watch the cooking show.”

“Ugh,” my grunt is heavy and hard as I slide onto the actual couch, “fucking why?!”

“We both should have to be miserable for a little bit today. Let’s call it matching penalties.”

His arrogant chuckles convince my own to begin while watching him exit the living room.

I hope he knows I could change the fucking channel if I wanted.

But I won’t.

Only because he spends so much getting into the shit I like.

I should probably make a little more effort to be a better teammate in this avenue. Afterall, he has, and constantly is. I think that’s how dating is supposed to work? I don’t really know. It’s as foreign to me as fucking cooking is. There’s a high probability I won’t figure that shit out... fucking...ever...however, I think I can get the hang of this whole couple shit with a little more practice.

Post a quick change of clothes and stop at the nearest gas station for gas someone forgot to put in the SUV while I was gone, the two of us venture into downtown Dalvegan to the Locker District, the specific area that contains nothing but athletic related business.

Even the bars and restaurants have to be in theme.

The Assist is the higher end hockey gear store that our rookies not only shop at but are gifted a trip to upon their initial contract signing. Those

fresh drafted are probably my favorite to see step foot inside. It's legit kid at Christmas shit.

Which is ironic to me since all I wanted for Christmas growing up was a hockey player.

Asked for one every year from nine—the age I took a different type of interest in those wearing skates—to fourteen when I realized I didn't need a jolly old dude in a suit or a Hallmark holiday miracle to get one underneath the mistletoe.

I just needed tits.

And the little pair I got I wasn't afraid to use.

Upon entering the store which is mirrored after a basic barn vibe with light blue and white colors to give a neutral appeal, I announce, "So, we have an account here, meaning if you *ever* need anything else from here, it's covered. Just come in. Show them your badge. They'll put it on the monthly bill."

"*Monthly* bill?" Brendan croaks in shock.

"Yeah, hockey's expensive," I mutter more to myself than him as we're approached by one of the salesgirls, I'm more familiar with due to her obsession with trying to find a callup to attach her claws to.

"Hennington!" Helena Hill over enthusiastically squeals, petite body bouncing so that the work her push up bra is doing can be admired in her mock ref button up blouse. "I was hoping to see you sooner rather than later!" She doesn't give me the chance to respond to the comment before she's eyeballing Brendan in a way that has my fist curling. "What'd you bring me today? Rookie or callup?"

"I didn't bring *you* dick, Hill."

My bitter bite is disregarded with a playful giggle and hand toss my direction, yet her attention stays planted on him. "Hennington is always giving me shit. It's like *our thing*."

It's not our thing!

She just seems too dumb or too daft or too desperate to graduate from bunny to rabbit to realize it.

"Fun," Brendan casually comments at the same time he slides his arm around my waist so that his hand can rest on my hip, "*our thing* is making out in public spaces." His arrogant grin encourages me to grow my own. "You might actually get to see it later like I saw this."

Her shoulders noticeably drop in disappointment. “Oh, I um...I didn’t realize the GM could *date* players. I thought there was a league law or something.”

“Not a player,” the man that’s tucking me closer to him informs.

“You just crush a lot?” I helplessly tease, looking his direction.

Brendan’s eyebrows immediately furrow indicating he doesn’t get the reference.

There’s no stopping the outrage from leaving my lips. “*Fucking seriously?* You don’t know that song?”

“It’s a song?”

It’s also the fuckboy mantra, but now does *not* seem like a goodtime to add that jab.

Not with little Miss Sahara over here still looking for a drop.

“Must be an *old* song,” Helena quickly tries to comfort him, “because I don’t know it, either.”

Oh...what a clever little bunny.

Make me out to be the old woman who lives in the skate so that she can cuddle up to a new potential meal ticket.

Yeah.

Not happening.

“Craziest shit about being old enough to know that song is that I’m also old enough to have this much money, which helps fund your paycheck, so how about you go open us up one of the private dressing rooms in the back and then skate off to the wings where you can wait to do your job aka *the assist*.”

Hill curtly nods, tucks her stringy, long brown hair behind her ear, and struts away in her stilettos, swaying her hips extra hard in hopes that he’ll sneak a glimpse of her ass that’s basically suffocating for air in her black, form fitting miniskirt.

Fuck. Me.

I now hate her for being able to wear fucking miniskirts while I’m going to have to start wearing moo moos or whatever those oversized t-shirts are called.

I don’t even like miniskirts.

It’s the principle of the fucking matter!

“That was hot,” Brendan casually states causing me to instantly sneer.

There's no stopping my head from whipping around in order for us to be face to face. "Look, *Monopoly Jr.*, just because you're both still ring pop age doesn't mean you'd be a good match for one another's roster, okay? Yeah, she's hot. And yeah, her waistline and brain size are probably the same making her perfect for the shit she's looking for which *isn't you*. She's looking to be someone's Stanley Cup for a season or two and *you* deserve better. You deserve some Ovi shit. You should be with a woman who isn't afraid to get after it, to fucking work for it, to break records and shatter ceilings and do shit that people said she couldn't do. You deserve to be with someone who is actually fucking great, not just someone who *looks* fucking great."

"Good thing I already am."

His unexpected response renders me speechless.

Brendan lets his brown gaze burrow deeper into mine to drive home his point.

Okay.

We really *are* doing this couple shit...like...all the time? Not just when we're alone? Not just when the world—outside of Margot—can't see? Should we be using labels? Fuck, I can't even remember the last time I did. Which ones should we be using? Should I be using them every time I introduce him to someone?! Where is the playbook for this shit?

Maybe I should ask Letty?

No. Her dating record is as scarce as my own.

Oh!

I'll text Winslow.

He's been pussy whipped enough times in life to give me some good pointers.

"*What I meant*," his fingers dig deeper into the area on my hip he's gripping, "was I thought it was pretty fucking hot watching *my wife* flex her stats like that."

Mmm...the wife label seems like a bit of an offside move. Technically, yes, we're still married, and yes we're both wearing our rings—he *rarely* takes his off—but we're not...*really* married. We're just dating and avoiding paperwork.

Right?

Rather than admit my blunder or allow the blush on my cheeks to get any brighter, I naturally tease, "You want a gino for using the word stats

like that, don't you?"

His expression transposes to one that's easily my favorite. Light. Playful. "Pretty sure that's a verbal bar downsky."

"The incredibly thoughtful compliment you said before was bar downsky. You proving you can use a basic locker room level word, not so much."

"What I'm hearing is I still get a gino."

"What I'm hearing is that we need to get this game moving into the second period."

Brendan chuckles and tips his chin forward. "Lead the way, boss."

"I like to build from the ground up, so let's start by getting you some skates."

Our heading that direction isn't done like I expect. I *expect* him to unwind himself, follow slightly behind me like a lost puppy, then wait to be told to sit, stay, and take off his socks and shoes while I give him an overdue lesson on one of the most important pieces of gear. I *expect* to be teaching and talking and having him hang on my every word, yet instead he's conversing about performance, asking the right questions regarding quality, leaving my hip as the only thing for him to hang onto.

Which he does.

He hasn't let go.

Not. Once.

He simply stays stuck to my side wordlessly stating to everyone in eye radius that *we* are a thing. That *they* can and should fuck off. Despite the store currently filled mostly with dads helping their sons replace shit they've outgrown, it feels a little unnecessary, but fuck me does it feel good.

To have someone *this* into me.

This concerned with keeping me.

And if I rewind the tape to better understand what's happening—like a good player shoulder—I know I'll spot the fact that it feels this good to *be* into someone else.

To be this excited by the idea of building something with someone.

Someone who gets me.

All of me.

Everything from the constant chirping to my closeted obsession with collecting weird keychains from places I've been.

Someone who I feel comfortable sharing stories from my childhood with as much as the trouble I've gotten into during my so called adulating.

I like that he not only makes me feel seen but *sees me*.

Ugh.

On the other skate, though? I don't fucking like the Lifetime Channel bullshit he makes me spew.

Could *definitely* do without that shit.

"Do they have to be 3Ps?" Brendan questions, finally unpinning himself from me to plop down on the bench to try on the pairs we grabbed. "Is that why that's the only brand you picked out?"

"No, it's just the superior brand," I thoughtlessly state while pulling out my phone to check the latest round of missed messages. "And we only buy the best for the best."

The mirth in his tone is unmistakable. "You think I'm the best?"

"I think everyone who puts the dragon on their chest is the best," I tease on a swipe open of the texts.

"Even Page?"

Pausing my reply is done to meet his challenging gaze. "As much as it fucking *pains me* to admit...yeah. Even Page. His attitude sucks. His mindset sucks. His skillset is getting sucky but...he's a veteran for a reason. He was *signed* for a reason. I think he just needs to remember what it was and be given the right opportunities to showcase it versus just what a pain in the cunt he can be."

Only a hum is given in response prompting me to resume texting. Not even a full beat passes before he curiously asks, "Blanc?"

Whether he wants to make sure he's the only one I'm texting dirty thoughts to or the fact he just wants to be more involved in this aspect of my life like he claims is unknown; however, it doesn't truly matter at the moment since I'm going to cave and answer either way. "Margot."

"And where is your prized Pitbull? Why isn't she here barking at us?"

"She's dealing with finalizing and shopping for the cookout shit."

"What cookout?"

Looking back up exposes to me the uncomfortable expression he's bearing. "Too tight?"

"Depends." Brendan wiggles his leg a bit. "Are my toes supposed to be fist bumping the toe cap before I lace 'em?"

"No."

“Then yeah. Too fucking tight.”

“Thank fuck we got different sizes and styles.” My non phone holding hand whirls a finger around to indicate he should continue the process. “Next pair.”

He nods and proceeds to pull them off his feet. “What cookout?”

“I’m hosting a little summer bonding sesh at the house in a couple weeks for the players and their families—this is your heads up.”

“At least I got one.”

“There’ll be food and drinks and they can use the pool *at their own risk*. I am so not playing lifeguard. And I only did that one summer in Doctenn because Winslow was. Well, that and because I knew it would be better than listening to my mother bitch about my lack of makeup skills for three months.”

Several questions clearly cross his face prior to him picking one to actually ask. “And who’s cooking?”

“The caterer.”

“Wouldn’t it be more of a bonding experience if *you*—the owner, the GM—did the grilling yourself?”

“And burn down my backyard? Fuck you.”

He tosses the skates to the side and grabs the next pair. “You wouldn’t burn down the backyard, Harlow.”

“Need I remind you I set off the smoke alarm making microwave fucking popcorn for us to eat while we watched *Happy Gilmore* the night before I left for the Draft?” His mouth tips down pushing me to snap a little hard. “*Microwave. Fucking. Popcorn. Brendan.* The shit comes with fucking instructions and a premade button on the machine!”

Both of his hands lift and make a gentle, calming motion. “Calm down, baby.”

I suck in a deep breath and carefully lean against the nearby shelf.

“How about *I* grill?”

My eyebrows immediately furrow in bafflement. “What?”

“Let me grill.” Pulling on the new skate is done in tandem with him continuing, “I’ll go with Margot, grab all the shit, prep it, and cook it up. That way they’re getting the whole family vibe you’re clearly after versus the phoned in corporate company event shit.” He tugs the object in place and lets his head tilt in contemplation. “*Plus*, I can bartend. Practically anything from a Chateau Lafite Rothschild Pauillac Bordeaux to a Forest

Fire Shot to a Guinness Draught. It's the shit I've spent most of my money-making life doing."

"Why?"

"Why what?"

"Why have you always bartended? Why's that your go-to?"

"It's the easiest shit you can do literally *anywhere* in the world that's not a dry county." Brendan stops fiddling with the skate to meet my gaze. "And I pretty much have. Spent a couple months doing it in Bali. Another three helping out on a yacht in Ibiza. Two weeks at a private villa in the south of France. As far as here in the states...I've bounced around from coast to coast from big cities like Camelot and Highland and Manhattan to smaller ones like Monzroe and Middlebook and A2."

"Holy shit, dude."

"Yeah, I grew up moving around, so never staying in the same place for too long is familiar shit to me. Not having an actual home but *making a home* wherever I end up for a few months has always kinda been my thing. And I'll man up and say it's not the *best* fucking habit."

"Nope."

"But it's one I'm breaking."

I can't keep hope out of my voice even if you paid me my entire club's price cap. "Are you?"

"Wouldn't have had Tate and Geoffrey ship me my shit if I planned to just fucking bail on you."

Chomping down on my bottom lip prevents me from cooing over the announcement out loud.

"Me and Margot will hit up Costco and then we can swing by one of the bigger liquor stores where it's cheaper to buy in bulk." Brendan drops his attention back to the object he's trying on, wiggles his leg around, and then bounces his foot left to right to test the comfort. "Cooking and bartending for the team will give me a good chance to connect with them in a less formal setting, and *you* the chance to showcase that while you're like your dad in a lot of ways you're *different*. You're there for them on and off the ice. That shit is business, yeah, but personal, too." He lifts his stare back to mine once more and delivers a crooked smile. "I think these are a good fit."

He's the good fucking fit.

And never in a million seasons would I have guessed it.

“They look good,” I quietly coo, the overwhelming feelings of awe creeping into my voice. “They’re a lighter, faster skate. They’ll provide better flexibility especially when you finally master speed.”

The grin on his face brightens. “Peck gave me some tips for that.”

“I’d listen. Rookie’s good.” Another exchange of smiles precedes me retreating to the previous subject. “And you can grill. And bartend.”

A shit eating grin wastes no time replacing the sweeter one.

“*But* I’m having the caterer on speed dial just in case of a fuck up.”

He lets his shoulders innocently bounce. “Fair.”

I struggle to refrain from beaming once more and drop my attention back to my phone. “I’m gonna step outside to call Margot now, deal with her meltdown, and let you browse around for base layer shit to try on while Hill takes those skates to the counter. Get two pairs of them. And extra laces.” Hitting the call button is followed by me adding. “You can look at bags and helmets too. Avoid sticks. Like skates that shit is shit that should be done *together*.”

“Got it, *boss*.”

“I meant to say that shit with love.”

“Love?!” Margot’s voice squawks on the other end of the phone, loud enough to get Brendan laughing. “Did you say love?!”

My eyes playfully narrow. “You did that shit on purpose.”

Like the mischievous asshole I adore that he is, he cockily winks and flags over little Miss Jock Rider to handle his equipment.

The rookie player in me wants to hang back.

See how the two of them interact while I appear to be occupied with this phone call but the veteran in me is pushing me to walk away. Show him some respect. *Trust*. Afterall, he’s yet to give me a reason to prove he doesn’t deserve it.

Stepping outside into the scorching summer heat to take my assistant’s phone call is a dumb, wise decision. While I don’t love sweating my tits off, it’s easier to have a censor free conversation away from those inside the store. As much as I like to entertain the idea that everyone minds their own fucking shit in there, I *know* that chicks like Hill would sell a rumor they heard the instant they were offered *anything* free. I mean anything. Free drink. Free dinner. Free chance to meet one of the broadcasters for ESPN or STN—married or single. I always reminded Dad *not* to do any business

outside of gear shopping within those walls for that very fucking reason. I'd be an idiot not to take the advice myself.

And while I may be messy as well as unconventional along with savage at times, I know I'm not balls out stupid.

Post one long call in which I advocate letting Brendan cook and bartend and cohost the pending event like I'm captain of the ice girls and he's the one rocking a C on his chest, I linger outside a bit longer to discuss some pre-season concerns Blanc—who calls right after Margot—has come across. That conversation ends when his wife interrupts with a family emergency which just so happens to be around the same time Winslow calls to interrogate me about my current living situation before asking me if I finished coping healthily with going to The Draft without my dad.

Don't know if eating and crying into an extra-large bag of gourmet cheese popcorn is healthy, but it's what happened.

I ate and cried and listened to Brendan do his best to comfort me about being in over my head.

That too honestly made me wish I had brought him with me.

Ending the call with Winslow reveals to me the time, a sight that causes my eyes to widen in fear.

Shit!

I didn't intend to be gone this fucking long!

Rushing back inside for the private dressing room is done in tandem with me bracing myself for hearing a bitch fit about what an awful wife I am.

Er...girlfriend.

Girlfriend wife?

Is that a fucking thing?

Tapping gently on the door is followed by a quiet, "You still in here?"

Brendan opens the door and showcases me a surprise.

A smile.

A *huge* fucking smile.

"You think these fit right?" He casually asks at the same time he steps back to let me inside the spacious fitting area.

"The shirt or the pants?"

"Both?"

Inching towards the nearest wall is done while he shuts the door behind me. "They feel tight?"

“Yeah, but comfortable.”

“Breathable? Moveable?”

“Yeah.”

“Then yeah.”

“Guess I do know how to shop for my big boy clothes.” Brendan offers me a proud smile prior to asking, “Everything on your end good?”

“Yeah, Margot’s switching gears—expect to hear from her first thing tomorrow regarding menu and itinerary—and then Blanc called to discuss a couple conditioning ideas for mental prep which is just as important as physical prep which is something so many players and coaches fail to see in the bigger picture of things when really you gotta get the win up here,” my finger taps the side of my head, “before you can ever get one on the ice.” My back braces itself against the space beside the mirror. “And then Winslow called to see how the end of The Draft went. Sorry the shit took so long. Girlfriend penalty on me, right?”

“*Wife.*” Playfulness pierces his bright brown gaze. “I mean you *are* wearing your ring.”

He gets another point for being observant and then another for not bringing it up sooner.

However, I am not adding those verbally out loud.

He’s gotta start tallying his own shit eventually.

After a small chuckle, Brendan’s head cocks to one side in genuine confusion. “What’s your penalty for? Working? Having friends? Are those things against the rules now?”

I slightly shift my weight between my feet. “Fuck, I don’t know. I don’t know how this whole couple thing works. I’m probably newer at this shit than you are. Like since we’re out on a date-”

“*Is this a date?*” he lightly laughs again. “I thought this was work.”

“Kinda? I mean we could’ve done this shit on the clock or with Blanc or some of the callups, but I wanted it to just be us for your first time-”

“Low bones for not taking my v-card in front of an audience.”

Holding in a snigger is almost impossible as our fists meet in the middle of the space to bump. “I also figured we shop and then go eat or to a movie—nothing that could ever be put in the romance category—or throw darts or do sports trivia night a few blocks over at The Net.” The shoulder shrug that escapes is mindless. “Anyway, I just...I don’t know a lot about dating,

but I know enough to know that it's fucking rude to take a really long call—or fucking *three*—right in the middle of it.”

Brendan hums, folds his arms across his chest, and nods. “It’s not *polite*.”

“See.”

“But I’m also married to my boss-”

“Not great phrasing.”

“-who is running a franchise team in the NHL. *The fucking NHL*. That’s not clock in, clock out, forget about it type of shit.”

My shoulders slowly unglue themselves from their tense location.

“I expect unfortunate interruptions—although I am requesting, if I’m allowed to make fucking requests, that they don’t happen *during* sex—and am flexible about the shit pretty much day in and day out. I know how important this team is to you. Your career. Fucking...*hockey*. I know your hockey first, hockey last mentality and respect it. I’m not gonna go all *Teen Wolf* on you every time you gotta handle your shit or occasionally need to talk to a friend.” A smile smoothly slides back into place. “I just ask that you too remember that sometimes your family—me and the little dude you’re growing—need a bit of that attention too.”

Unfamiliar emotions sparked by a level of understanding I’ve never experienced outside of my best friends skates all through my system, threatening to score, threatening to take me completely out of the dating game, leaving me with no choice but to deal with shit the only way I know how. “Take off your pants.”

Brendan’s words stumble in tandem with his frame. “Wh-wh-what?”

“Take off your pants,” I repeat during the cross over to where he’s standing. “I swallow, but I don’t wanna risk getting anything on the damn things especially before we’ve paid for them.”

More bewilderment bursts onto his expression. “Wh-wh-”

My open mouth brushes against his as my hand lowers itself to assist him in the process. “*Pants. Off. Babe.*”

Before a possible sound of objection can be given, my tongue snakes between his lips to tease his, prompting a hungry growl and faster movements.

Getting the pants off probably doesn’t go the same level of smooth getting them on went thanks to me lowering myself to my knees to help yank them off. Like the klutz he claims he’s not, he fumbles into the wall

closest to the door while ridding the situation of his underwear and hits his back with a thud hard enough to knock the air out of his lungs.

Rather than wait for him to regain that breath, I slowly suck one ball into my mouth to ensure that he doesn't.

That he's caught off guard.

That he's left wordlessly flailing around the same way he constantly keeps me.

"*Fuckfuckfuck*," is whispered out through gritted teeth, fingers not hesitating to bury themselves into my hair to tug me forward on a wordless imploring for more.

Lazily freeing the one currently in my possession allows me to shift the other into its position and the choice to do it in an unhurried nature not only receives the same mumbled response but a noticeable curling of his toes against the floor.

Huh.

You'd think he's never had a woman on his sac before.

With as waxed as this area is, I find that hard to believe.

The leisure oscillation of sucking effortlessly continues on low, pleased hums that add just enough vibration to the moment to cause his hard cock to twitch for attention. Despite the fact this isn't the first time I've seen it, it's damn sure the first time that I'll remember seeing it and what a fucking sight it is to see.

I've seen a lot of dicks in my day. Between childish locker room stunts and a fondness for fucking and forgetting, it just kind of comes with the territory. You could pretty much call me the Dr. Seuss of dicks. I've absolutely done that one dick, two dick, curved dick, short dick shit. However, this dick?

This long, smooth, can barely wrap my fingers around it but can't wait to try dick?

This is the shit you only find once in your whole career...

And that's if you're lucky.

And not only have I found it, but I drunkenly married it.

Guess not every tequila decision is a *terrible* decision after all.

Snaking my tongue upward allows for me to drag the tip along the underside of his shaft and trace every single inch I manage to touch in my languorous sweeping. Heavier groans are accompanied by harsher tugs, yet

it isn't demanding. He isn't trying to force me to where he wants me to go so much as tell me that when I wanna go there, he's ready.

He's *more* than fucking ready.

His self-restraint leads to my natural need to push.

To taunt.

To summon that piece of him that I love for always going skate to skate with me.

Um...not love.

Like.

Like a lot.

Leaning back on my heels occurs right before my tongue can connect to the tip of his cock, an action that receives an audible, annoyed huff. When Brendan's hooded eyes drop down to mine, I playfully poke, "Was that not enough?"

His heaving chest suddenly heaves faster.

Rises and lifts like he's done speed drills for the last four hours rather than been teased for the past four minutes.

The wetting of his lips is slow and deliberate, a process being taken to clearly collect his thoughts. "You rewarding me for the shit I said or punishing me for it?"

"Both."

He twitches a glare prior to growing a savage smirk. "None of that shit, Harlow. Have the balls to give me the fucking goal or give me the fucking penalty."

I wanna give him *everything* and that is so. Not. The. Right. Response.

"Have the balls to decide what you deserve."

Having him grab a fistful of my hair unlatches my jaw yet having him dive his dick into the space he created has my fingers slipping between my thighs to alleviate the ache it ignites. Brendan groans and grumbles, grumbles and groans, grabs and guides his cock to the point I'm helplessly gagging around it.

"*Fucking take it for me, baby,*" he commands in a tone so barbarous I barely recognize it to be his.

The words combined with the delicious brutality have me humping my hand and bobbing my head to the same frantic rhythm. Both sets of muscles repeatedly constrict. Increasingly grow slicker. Are continuously met with crazed stroking. Brendan carves away the territory on grunt after grunt after

grunt, ruthlessly reaching the brink, holding me in place at times, ceasing my inability to do anything other than succumb to the power he's flexing.

And God does he flex it.

With every yank of my hair forward, every disregard for how tangled it's becoming, every fuck not given to the way pain and pleasure are blurring, he proves that he deserves to have me on my knees.

To have me period.

Feeling his shaft suddenly swell in the deepest depths of my throat spurs my fingers to push harder against my clit.

"Rub that shit the right way," he unexpectedly instructs, prompting my gaze to shift up. *"I want you screaming on my fucking cock."*

Whimpers are rewarded with an arrogant smirk, and the determination to deliver exactly what he's asked for is instantly increased. Slipping around the jean barrier is quickly followed by the same treatment being given to the panties I remembered to put on. Almost the second I've got a finger inside and my palm pressed firmly against my swollen nub, Brendan resumes his brutish behavior. Fucking my face with both hands latched onto the locks right above my ears and lowly groaning through gritted teeth while watching his dick disappear through his sexually hazed gaze. He rocks my entire body back and forth with so much momentum, he's practically forcing me to fuck myself to the same rhythm as though he's the one with his finger curled inside. Spit smears past the corners of my lips. Leaks down my chin. Trickles along my neck threatening to find its way to the tops of my cropped t-shirt covered tits. Tears are mercilessly conjured but aren't allowed to simply prickle at the corners of my eyes.

No, they're summoned to the rims.

Ordered to fall one by one until blazing hot bursts bombard my throat.

Brendan's entire body shudders; however, his harsh grip doesn't waiver. *"Show me how good you fucking swallow, baby."*

And I do.

Like my goddamn life depends on it, I guzzle down every last drop.

I moan at the salty flavor.

I moan at the dominance he's not afraid to establish.

I moan at how good it feels to please while pleasing myself.

Licking him clean is meant to be my main play yet having him switch gears to light tugs and even lighter caresses, showcasing me care even after he's gotten his transposes my moans to screams as an orgasm pitilessly

pummels me into a trembling mess that has to latch her nails into her husband's thigh to keep from collapsing.

A heated hiss precedes a greedy grumble, "*Fuck, I love making you come.*"

The heavenly pulsations in my pussy are all of a sudden mirrored in my chest.

Holy shit.

Did he just make my emotions climax?!

Is *that* a fucking thing that can happen?!

Ugh.

Why is it that every time I feel like I'm finally on solid ice with him, he finds a way to melt it?

Fuck, why am I not afraid to fall?

Or slip?

Or trip?

And why is it that every part of me believes Brendan "Bricks" Brickley is going to be there to catch me whenever it happens, wedding ring or not?

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CHAPTER 8



Brendan

Only thing a bigger deal than knocking up your boss?

Knocking her up *twice*.

Or I guess I should say with *two* babies instead of just the one.

You know...the one neither of you signed up for to begin with but were adjusting to having.

“What the fuck do you mean we’re having twins!?!?” Harlow screeches at the top of her lungs, shooting her frame up to her bent elbows to meet the doctor’s gaze.

Dr. Melissa Dillard begins removing her gloves. “You’re having twin boys, Hennington.”

At least we’re having boys?

That’s a...positive, right?

“How is this fucking possible? *Why* is this happening!? Is it because my boyfriend’s so much fucking younger than I am? Has his sperm not finished developing their tiny sperm brains, so they don’t understand the whole one fucking baby at a time thing?!”

Look, I know I’m not always the smartest fuckhead in a room, but even I know that’s not how that shit works.

“*Hennington*,” the redheaded woman states at a slow, calming speed, “*breathe*.”

“Breathing is fucking overrated!” My wife shouts, entire body sitting completely upward. “Why are you just *now* telling me I’m having twins?!”

“Because you are just *now* showing up for your appointment,” she sasses back as she folds her arms across her chest. “*You* were the one who rescheduled this particular appointment three times, Hennington.”

“Three times?!” I thoughtlessly bark from the waiting chair I’m stationed in.

“I’m a busy fucking person!”

“And so am I,” Dr. Dillard casually retorts, “however, before I go and continue to do the other parts of my job, with other patients who too probably live busy lives, I’m going to finish doing it with *you* first.”

Harlow presses her lips together in an all too familiar fashion.

She wants to chirp her doctor.

She knows she shouldn’t.

But she *really* fucking wants to.

My head slowly twists from side to side to shut the shit down like a tendie who refuses to fail his teammates during a PK.

And fuck me, learning that we’re having twins *does* feels like some weird penalty kill shit being done on a double shot of whatthefuck whiskey.

“There are a few things you should know now that you are dealing with multiple births.”

“That just sounds like multiple penalties.”

See.

Wait.

Have we really spent so much time together that we now *think* the same?

Is this the type of shit that happens when you’re married?

Dr. Dillard tries to avoid smiling by professionally and promptly pushing past her patient’s retort, “Your online chart will include reading material for signs to be aware of going forward. Possible body changes. Recommended diet improvements or removals. And red flags that warrant a sooner visit than the increased visiting schedule you’re about to be on.”

“*Increased*?!” Harlow emotionally whines.

“Yes. Between having multiple births-”

“*Forfuckssake, please stop saying that phrase*.”

“-your older age and a few hereditary issues, you are now in an increased risk category.”

My light pink shorts covered ass flies to the edge of the seat. “What the fuck does that shit mean?”

“It means,” her gaze oscillates between us while providing the answer, “that I would like her coming in twice a month instead of just once to closely monitor the progress of the pregnancy. At this time, there is no reason for any alarm; however, keeping a better and steadier and *more consistent* handle on the situation will allow us to be *proactive* versus *reactive* if anything abnormal develops.”

“*Forfuckssake*,” Harlow overdramatically gripes on a drop of her head backwards.

“We understand,” I warmly state to the woman in the white coat prior to looking around her thin frame to viciously bite at the woman carrying my children. “*Don’t we, Harlow?*”

She cuts a disapproving glare my direction yet doesn’t have the chance to speak due to the doctor cooing, “Aw, she lets you call her Harlow? That’s so sweet.”

It is.

It’s a fucking privilege that I don’t take lightly much like the D I rock on my chest for work.

But...bottom of the whiskey glass truth is...it’s one she may revoke in about two minutes when I chew her ass the fuck out.

And I’m chewing *hard*.

We’re talking gonna verbally hit like the cheapest bottle of vodka they sell hard.

“Do you two have any questions or concerns you would like to discuss with me before our visit ends?”

“You’re not gonna start charging me twice as much for these visits, are you? It’s a two for one special, right?” Harlow sarcastically snips with a sardonic smirk.

“Hennington, I understand this is not what you expected-”

“No, scoring a silky mitted nineteen-year-old from Milan during The Draft was not what I expected. Having two fucking kids when I can still hardly fathom, I’m having one is like playing in the bush league yesterday but being expected to suit up for The Cup today. *This shit is. In. Fucking. Conceivable.*”

Dr. Dillard nods in what I'm assuming is a sympathetic way. "Everyone processes pregnancy different, Hennington. Take the time to do that for yourself. And take it without guilt. And if you need resources or references for someone to speak to about the process or changes feel free to let me know and I'll arrange some reference materials as well as recommend outside sources such as a therapist or support group. Remember you are *not* in the situation alone."

"No. The. Fuck. You. Are. Not," I growl her direction.

My response causes the doctor to dismiss herself from the growing tension. "Stop by the front desk and make your next appointment before you leave, okay?"

Harlow reluctantly nods.

"I'm just one click away if you have any questions we didn't cover today." She hits me a good luck grin and slips past us out the door.

Once I hear the click that confirms we're alone, I launch myself onto my feet and into her face. "Let's get something real fucking clear before we walk out of this room, Harlow." One palm plants itself on each side of her open thighs. "You are *done* fucking around when it comes to this shit."

"I-"

"No more fucking canceling appointments because you're 'busy' -"

"I am busy!"

"You are busy, but that's not why you haven't been coming, and we both fucking know it!"

"I-"

"You haven't been coming because you wanna keep *avoiding* the fact that you're really fucking pregnant. That you're about to do some shit you are not ready to fucking do. That you'll probably never be ready to do but fucking nut up, buttercup."

Her jaw drops in outrage.

"You are growing not one but *two* fucking people right now and that's the part of this shit that only you can fucking do, baby. I can *and will* be here for all the other shit but *only you* can do this part, so I need you to fucking *do this part*. To stop being so fucking selfish and for cripes sake be responsible!"

"I need you stop being so goddamn sexy and strong and get off your *Raging Bull* shit for like ten seconds and let me fucking breathe!"

“No.” My bite is given at the same time I invade her space further. “If I give you a fucking inch right now, your ass will skate a fucking mile, Harlow, and I’m not letting you risk *our kids* or *my wife’s life* because you don’t wanna deal with what’s happening!”

“I’m fucking scared shitless!”

“Me too!”

The admission I haven’t said to anyone besides myself in the shower seems to soften her tense demeanor.

“Fuck, baby, me too,” I quietly reassure, face just inches from hers. “But we gotta stop playing defense with this whole situation and get into the offense position.”

Seeing a slight shift in her brown gaze pushes me to continue.

“Raising babies isn’t bush league shit. I know. I get it. But I’m *here*. I’m on your *team*. I’m willing and ready to do whatever I gotta do to get us through this pre-season shit and into the minors.”

Her lips quiver as they fight the urge to smile.

“We’re *rookies* together. Like the doc said, you’re not alone, so for the love of Gretzky could you please stop fucking acting like it?”

For the first time outside of a blowy, I see tears collect in her eyes; however, rather than acknowledge them—and get a kick to the nuts for doing so—I simply maintain my hold on her stare until she nods in submission.

“Good.” My frame steps away to retrieve her workout tights from the place they were banished on the ground. “We’ll make an appointment on the way out and then we’ll put it and all future appointments in our phone calendars and order a fucking wall calendar for the kitchen, too.”

“And tell Margot.”

Offering her the pair of black stretchy pants I love for being mildly see-through is done on a smirk. “Didn’t that go without saying?”

She snatches the pants on a small snigger.

After wiggling back into her bottoms, Harlow adjusts her oversized tank top to properly cover her starting to round stomach that we still haven’t told many people about and kicks her head towards the door for us to bail.

Personally?

I kind of wanna tell everyone.

Like fucking strangers in line at the grocery store type of everyone.

I almost did yesterday when I was buying almond milk.

It was on the tip of my fucking tongue and everything.

But that's—unfortunately—not my call to make.

She's got a bigger picture of shit to think about before just telling the whole world, "Hey look, I'm knocked up!".

Again, I understand this shit, but I don't *like it*, which is a common theme in our marriage.

Geoffrey finally knows and can hardly fucking believe it. Good news is he's excited. Keeps claiming he's going to be the Godfather and that Margot can't be the Godmother because a house is due to drop on her any day now.

Post making another appointment—against all of my wife's bitching and moaning that it'll probably interfere with some really crucial meeting—we stroll side by side to and through the parking lot to Margot's vehicle where she has leaned back her seat and let the windows down for more comfortable reading on her phone.

"How'd it go?" she inquires, body swiveling to be our direction. "Is it growing actual feet or hockey skates?"

The teasing is met by a glare from her best friend and a chuckle from me. "*They* are growing feet. Or at least...I think those were feet? They were webbed so either feet or flippers."

I remove my hand from Harlow's side to give her a small, playful swat to the ass, wordlessly chastising the comment.

"They?" Margot's brows lift in concern. "As in—"

"*Fucking. Twins,*" Harlow complains through gritted teeth.

"They're not incestuous."

My retort immediately has her delivering the same treatment she just received.

Turns out the pat on the ass is one of her most used body language techniques—outside of the fist bump of course—which I *know* has to come straight from all the sports shit.

So far, I know the "good game", "good try", and "wanna get some good" taps.

I also know she hates having to refrain from using it on the players now that she's the GM.

And me?

I fucking love it.

Like free top shelf shot shit all night long type of love.

Harlow Hennington belongs to me and only me.

Having her hands on other dudes' asses would not only drive me fucking mental but be the reason she'd constantly have to replace current players with callups.

"How did you get twins?!" Margot squawks, bewilderment bulldozing her expression. "I didn't even think you'd get one!"

"*I know*," Harlow whines, body bouncing around in outrage until my fingers flex against her hip in an attempt to calm her back down.

"Holy shit," her best friend mutters under her breath, "this changes so many things I have planned."

"Including doctor's visits," I pipe in before my wife can pretend to forget. "She's gotta start coming in twice a month. I'll text the dates so you can keep them on her schedule and *rearrange*," my eyes cut Harlow a brief but harsh glare, "meetings going forward to accommodate them. No more missing this shit."

Margot nods in agreement. "I'll also make a list of what we've stockpiled so far and what needs to be doubled."

"Stockpiled?" The woman I adore more and more everyday grunts. "Are we planning for babies or more goats?"

"You didn't *plan* for those damn goats," her assistant hisses on a disapproving headshake.

"You know, I don't know who you hate more, Cookies and Cream or Winslow."

"Winslow," she replies without missing a beat before turning her attention to me. "Anything else I need to know from the doctor?"

"We'll review her chart and get you deets." This time I gently turn Harlow's face my direction with the tip of my index finger. "Won't we?"

There's the smallest hesitation that's followed by a nod Margot's direction.

Her best friend looks taken back yet expresses her approval of the change with a gleeful grin.

"What's next?" Margot casually investigates, attention bouncing back and forth between us. "Should we finalize the menu for the BBQ? Get a head start on acquiring some items like the liquor or dishware? Oh! Oh! Go over the cleaning itinerary? The last thing I need are those goats not locked away when landscaping comes by to tidy up. Last time that happened, they refused to get out of the truck until someone had them secured and stood guard so they wouldn't 'come for revenge'."

Despite how much I want to poke fun at the last thing she said, I suggest, “Why don’t you take the rest of the afternoon off?”

They toss me matching looks of confusion.

“I’ve got a fun surprise for Harlow-”

“I’ve had enough surprises for the day, thank you.”

Ignoring her occurs on an eyeroll. “Why don’t you call it an early day? Go out to happy hour? Or plan a dinner with a different friend? Maybe go bang some dude you’ve been ignoring because work comes first?”

“Yeah, I’m not really into that.”

“Dudes?”

“*Banging.*”

Her statement stumbles me slightly back and my jaw to the asphalt.

Alright.

That’s some new shit for me.

“Margot’s asexual,” Harlow casually informs, pulling my attention down to her. “She has low to no desire to date or fuck or really engage in any sort of romantic physical activity with herself or others.”

“Although, I do have this somewhat odd love affair with historical romances.” Her head falls contemplatively to one side. “The sexual tension and all that bullshit doesn’t do it for me, but I do get a small rush from the courting and the rules or willingness to break them for your person.”

“But you, yourself, have no interest in finding your own person.”

“Correct.”

Her crisp, clean answer has me stumbling around for the right words to say. “Then um...how about you uh...spend the rest of the day doing one of those *Downton Abbey* marathons you like while deep cleaning your kitchen tiles?”

“Or *Bridgerton*,” Harlow tosses out.

“Oooo, I have been wanting to try *Upstairs, Downstairs*. Maybe I’ll start that and review a few employee policies that need updating.”

“Whatever gets you off” is right on the tip of my tongue to playfully state when it hits me that is so the *wrong* shit to say.

Very wrong shit.

I don’t wanna offend her, primarily because she’s my wife’s best friend, but also because now I know better so I can do better.

The smile I grow in replacement of the joke is polite. “Sounds like a solid gameplan.”

She offers a similar expression, tells us to text if we need her, and starts her car giving us the whistle to get my plans in motion.

During our stroll over to our SUV I keep my hand nestled on Harlow's hip and occasionally give it a comforting squeeze when I hear her breathing shift from calm to chaotic.

It's strange but...over our past few weeks together I've been picking up on all the cues as if she's my teammate who really does need me on the assist in life versus just on the ice. Sometimes the shit is super subtle—like now—and then sometimes it's much more in my face—like when she runs out of TP because being preggers gives her the trots. Shit between us—pun not intended—isn't always super fucking romantic or sentimental like movies and TV leads you to believe. Just because you're *with* someone doesn't mean the other weird, normal, unbecoming life shit stops happening. She farts in her sleep. I come home smelling like sweat and feet and ass after work. We spill shit on our clothes, and both randomly get caught picking wedgies. It's...real life shit...yet it doesn't make me want her less.

Or need her less.

Or *love* her less.

Mom says that's actually how you know *when* you're really in love.

When you can accept more than just the polished performance people put on during dating.

I've never stuck around a chick long enough to get here in the past.

And even if I had...I don't think I'd feel about them an *inkling* of the way I feel about Harlow.

She's somehow my best friend *and* the best ass.

I mean we haven't fucked since Vegas; however, handy js and blowies are in no short supply in the Brickley-Hennington household.

She refuses to take my last name.

Ever.

I'm working on getting her to hyphen it...but...not much luck there, either.

Opening Harlow's passenger door is followed by the retrieval of my vibrating phone from my pocket the instant it's shut. The sight of my mom's photo is what pushes me to answer rather than sending it to voicemail if it were anyone else.

Particularly Zao, who keeps calling to ask can he have random shit of mine he's recently found.

It's like come on, bro.

You really think I'mma pay for you to ship me an old car charger and an out of season bartender's mixing guide?

Fuck off.

Now, if it were my original copy of *Nothing Lasts Forever*—the book *Die Hard* is based off of—or one of my missing *Die Hard* blue-rays, it'd be a different story.

Pretty sure that fucker is keeping those for himself.

Hitting the answer key and putting it on speaker happens the second my ass is in the driver's seat, "Hey, Mom."

"Hey, B!" Her excitement is so palpable that Harlow can't resist smiling, too.

"Hey, Nora!"

"Aw, hey, Hennington!"

Yeah.

Even Mom calls her Hennington.

"How did everything go today?"

"Awful," my wife answers before I can. "Just...pure...awful."

Mom's gasp echoes throughout the vehicle. "What?!"

"And your son yelled at me!"

"Brendan Anders Brickley!"

Harlow impishly snickers under her breath. "Forgot your middle name is Anders."

"Why the hell would you yell at your wife?!"

Mom using the term causes Harlow's expression to transform into a glower and mine into a victorious grin.

She's still not one hundred percent comfortable with the label, but it's growing on her.

I know that for a fact because she hasn't taken off her wedding ring since she got back from The Draft a couple weeks ago.

"What is going on you two?!" Mom's voice increases in concern. "Do I need to hop a flight and come down there?"

Despite the fact it's not what either of us wants, it's evident by the soft grin on Harlow's face that she doesn't mind the threat nearly as much as I do.

Ever since Mom found out about the whole marriage and babies and pretty much accidentally settling down thing, she's been active in the situation. Lending advice on relationship arguments—turns out slamming the door in each other's face isn't healthy or helpful. She's also done some reassuring us that the pregnancy shit happening—like random nose bleeds—is totally normal and doesn't mean Harlow's body is trying to reject the baby—er *babies*. Mom's definitely momming—too much for me sometimes—yet knowing the very little I do about Harlow's relationship with her own mother is what keeps me from bitching about it.

Harlow *likes* having that relationship.

And I like her happy.

And like a good teammate, I'm gonna keep doing whatever I can to maintain that shit.

"We'll send the plane," my wife good-naturedly insists as I start the engine to get the AC going.

"We're not sending the plane," I huff in exasperation, "and the hot piece next to me is being overdramatic. *Severely*."

"Finding out you're having fucking twins is not being overdramatic!"

"Aw, you two are having twins?!"

Her excitement shifts Harlow's gaze to the ceiling in further annoyance. "Apparently these things inside of me are Gremlins. I wasn't supposed to get them wet or feed them after midnight or something."

The cringe on my face is instant. "Is that a reference I'm supposed to get?"

"You've never seen the movie *Gremlins*?!" Her shouting shifts to the device I'm holding. "What is wrong with your child?!"

"He got nightmares very easily and with me not always being home through the night, it was just better to avoid anything that might spook him until he was about sixteen."

"This explains more than you know."

"Boys," I loudly invade, interrupting their humorous moment at my expense. "We're having twin boys."

"Awwww," she coos even more enthusiastically, "I'm having grandboys!"

Against her own volition, Harlow's shoulders slightly sag under the weight of my mom's excitement.

“Everyone’s healthy and developing like they should be, but due to the increase of occupants in Harlow’s stomach, we will now be going to the doc twice a month instead of once.”

“Which is absolutely normal,” Mom swiftly reassures, spreading more relief in my woman’s gaze. “Good doctors want to be *prepared* and have *you* prepared versus having to do damage control after the fact.”

“Makes sense,” Harlow quietly concedes.

“And just be aware, you may be end up being scheduled for a c-section as well. This doesn’t mean you’ve done anything wrong or fucked up the process. It doesn’t make you less of a woman or a shitty parent for not delivering vaginally. Sometimes that shit is just about safety for all lives involved. And, Hennington, the only thing me and B want is for *all* lives involved to be okay. Okay?”

Her eyes swing to me where she spots a smug smirk.

Yeah.

Like mother, like son.

“*Young lady*,” Mom firmly states, expecting to be answered.

“Yes, ma’am,” Harlow answers on a faint smile.

“Good. Now that that’s settled, we can wrap this shit up. I was just calling to see how everything went.”

“Appreciate it, Nora,” the chick next to me says before I can even open my mouth. “*A lot*.”

She releases a small hum. “You’re too sweet for my boy. You know that?”

“I do.”

“Excuse you guys,” I mirthfully grouse. “I am *in* the vehicle.”

“Such a whiner,” Harlow playfully scolds. “You better not teach our kids how to do that shit.”

“I love you, B.”

“I love you, too, Mom.”

“Call me if you need anything.”

“Always.”

Ending the conversation is followed by something I’m not expecting whatsoever.

Harlow completely angles herself to face me as she confesses, “I want that shit.”

“What shit?”

“I want our sons to...call me or text me or come to me for shit like you do your mom. I wanna be...*like your mom*. I wanna be the mom I never fucking had and assumed I didn’t deserve.” Her fingers tangle together uncomfortably in her lap. “Look, I know, I’m not the best with processing all this shit, but I *want* our kids. And even if I’m not ready for them or have no idea how to handle them, it won’t stop me from trying or trying again when I fuck up. And no matter what? I will *never* say that having them is the worst thing to ever happen to me.”

Cautiously, I investigate, “Is that...what your mother said to you?”

“Not *to* me but *about me* while in a screaming match with my dad to which he countered by saying having me was the *best* thing to ever happen to him.” Her grin briefly returns. “And he fought like hell for full custody because he really did want me, yet she fought like hell because she knew she could get more money. Everything is about money with her. *Fucking Everything.*”

“You should know something, right now, Harlow.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m gonna be like your dad, baby.” The promise is accompanied by my hand reaching over to fold with hers. “I’m gonna be *here* for my boys. And I’mma fight like hell to *be* in their lives no matter what does or doesn’t happen between us.” A tight squeeze is given from her. “They’re gonna know *me*. They’re gonna know *you*. And no matter what, they’re gonna know *us*. They’re gonna know that we’re on the same team when it comes to them and whatever they need.”

Instead of adding on anything else, she simply smiles, nods in agreement, and directs her attention to her own phone that’s now vibrating for attention.

Our drive home mainly consists of her working, which is pretty on brand for our time together in the car. While she doesn’t tell me about everything she’s dealing with or every email she’s answering, she does involve me at unpredicted times. Lately—today included—we’ve been discussing different warm up music to try out pre-season.

Music is definitely one of the topics I prefer us to discuss.

I don’t have to refer to one of the five Ws nearly as often.

“I think ‘Legends Are Made’ is a great onto the ice song,” I agree at the same time we exit the SUV, “but-”

“No buts,” Harlow immediately denies.

“*But* don’t be afraid to think out the box. The chorus to ‘Last Man Standing’ by Bon Jovi would send a pretty solid message.”

Her head bobs back and forth unconvinced along our walk to the front door.

“You could get really creative and do some out of the rink shit like *Synthony Orchestra*.”

“Did you just suggest symphony music for a fucking hockey warm up?”

“*Synthony Orchestra* which is different. It’s this fusion shit of electronic, dance, DJs, and old school tunes presented in a new way. Almost like a much bigger, much more immersive 2CELLOS type of thing.”

Harlow’s face scrunches in befuddlement. “Why are you so into instruments?”

“Why are you only a fan of the skin flute?”

The jab gets a low fist bump of recognition alongside a snicker.

“I’ve always had a thing for instrumentals. They kind of remind me of making a good mixed drink. You need a solid base before you add all the other bullshit. And a solid base can always be enjoyed by itself.” My lips briefly twist in contemplation. “I also used to have a thing for band chicks for most of my pre-high school graduation existence. Couldn’t afford to play in it but definitely enjoyed helping them with stretching their lung capacity for blowing.” The waggle of my eyebrows is followed by another extended set of low bones. “Since instrumental shit is *too top cheddar* for you-”

“Not a thing.”

“-what about some throwback Pit, like ‘Feel This Moment’? That shit could hit just right.”

At that her expression changes to one that lets me know the idea will actually be noted.

“For now, though, let’s pause warmies playlist shit-”

“*Booooooo*.”

“And gear up for my surprise.”

Skepticism doesn’t hesitate to shift onto her face.

“Meet me in the living room. Give me twenty.”

“Why twenty?”

“I gotta go get it and set everything up. Plus, you’re gonna put on ass shorts, take a piss, and spend four to nine minutes scrolling through NHL highlights and updates on social media.”

She unlocks the door and tosses a teasing glare over her shoulder. “You don’t know me that fucking well.”

“Got a hundo that says you were planning to grab your Dragon green cheer shorts before I just called you out on it.”

Her lips purse to one side on another playful stare. “You only know that because you did laundry yesterday and remember that they’re my favorite pair.”

I merely waggle my eyebrows in response.

“Ugh,” she grumbles prior to giggling. “See you in twenty.”

And it does take almost twenty minutes exactly for me to change clothes, grab the yoga mats, and get the video pulled up on the flat screen that’s on the non-fireplace side of the large room.

Like I predicted, she saunters in wearing the aforementioned green shorts and a black sports bra, swelling stomach on full display, a vision that makes my dick rock hard.

Look, it’s not *all* pregnant chicks.

It’s just *my* pregnant chick.

Something about seeing the woman I’m fucking balls to the walls crazy about growing our family just gets the boys below the belt fist bumping my dick.

It’s normal.

Or at least according to Tate it is.

And he’d know.

“Are those fucking *yoga* mats?” Harlow questions with the utmost disgust in her tone. “Tell me they’re not. Tell me they’re some required cushioning for pregnant lady bowling or some shit.”

I prepare to answer but curiosity gets the better of me. “Is that a real thing?”

“We could look it up,” she immediately suggests at the same time she slows her stride. “Even that would be better than whatever this,” her finger waves around, “is supposed to be.”

“You don’t even know *what* we’re fucking doing yet, so how do you know that would be better?”

“Because I’m not a granola eating, horoscope reading, *Desperate Housewife* watching, mom of four trying to squeeze in ‘fit time’ between Starbucks and over-priced soccer.”

Her harsh criticism receives a hard glower. “How about you just shut the fuck up and hear me out?”

Harlow lets her teeth sink into her bottom lip to prevent from whimpering.

“I found this prenatal yoga channel on YouTube and figured we could give it a shot.”

The sneer I’m presented is followed by leaning against the edge of her gray sofa.

“I know how much you hate that you can’t be on the ice with the boys, so I figured maybe working out with one of them off the ice might help. You need some sort of exercise to blow off steam—seriously you can’t keep throwing an empty ginger ale can around your office every time it’s free skate and you can’t join in—so I looked into different shit and found this. Figured doing it together would make it less awful for you. And believe it or not this yoga shit isn’t as easy as you think.”

Her scowl instantly becomes sarcastic.

“It’s not!”

My loud counter causes her to smirk and shake her head.

“How about we just go ahead and give this shit a try? You hate it? I’ll go back to the drawing board.”

“What if I magically love it?”

“I’ll make time to do it with you twice a week.”

“Deal.”

The lack of further pushback shoots my eyebrows into the air.

“But stuff a pillow under your shirt so that you’re pregnant during this nightmare, too.”

Initially, I laugh, but when she doesn’t join me, I abruptly stop. “Oh shit, you’re fucking serious?”

“Like a midseason trade.”

“Alright,” I naturally cave and snatch up one of the nearby throw pillows. “Get over here and knock me up.”

Harlow enthusiastically bounces my direction, takes possession of the object, and yanks up my white t-shirt. Her fingers help themselves to more than a handful of my abs during the process of securing it between my boxers and shorts and no part of me wants to complain. She’s simply offered a wicked grin.

A low groan.

And of course, my tongue in her mouth for a brief penalty period for toying with my patience, something that I've learned over our few past weeks together is her favorite thing to fucking do.

Once the item is secure, we step on our respective mats, and I hit play.

It doesn't take more than thirty seconds for Harlow to ask, "Can we fucking mute her?"

"On it."

My prompt doing so has Harlow instructing Alexa to play Pitbull over the speaker system.

Not at all surprised, I focus back on the screen where the adorable, pregnant brunette who can't be any older than me, is getting into the first position.

It's a basic sitting pose.

Not bad.

Reading the closed captioning about opening up my non-existent vagina muscles while Pitbull raps about fucking in the background...is a little fucking awkward.

Add in Harlow scolding me not to break the baby each time we shift to a new stance and the whole thing becomes a when is last call situation I hate being in.

Being on all fours to the ass song playing is—yet again—fucking uncomfortable but seeing Harlow really get into the stretches and push herself to properly pose makes it a bit easier to disregard.

"Keep those abs and that pelvic floor tight, Brendan," she playfully taunts while leaning to one side, hand stretched up to the sky.

"Yeah, I don't think you should say shit like that to me," I lightheartedly jab back. "The last thing we need is me going into early labor."

She snickers and switches sides as the instructor does.

"But I'll admit it. I do *love* the view from here."

Her gaze cuts over to me admiring her perky ass that's trying to peak out from underneath the very edge of her shorts. Rather than give into the compliment or thank me for it, she impishly states, "That makes one of us."

I dramatically gasp and plant my palms gently on my protruding stomach. "Be careful, little Gretchen can hear you."

"Gretchen?!" Harlow spreads her legs wide and bends forward so that the top of her head is resting on the mat. "Why would you fucking name her Gretchen?"

“‘Cause I can't name her Gretzky!”

“You could've named her Paulina after his *actual* daughter.”

Bending over to do the weird headstand beside her occurs at the same time I confess, “I didn't even know he had a daughter.”

“Or Gordie could've been cute. You know after Gordie Howe.”

“Why do I get the feeling that our boys are going to have hockey names regardless of how I feel?”

Her head turns towards me. “Because they will.”

“What if I wanna name them something different? Like after my favorite chef? Or a name I saw in a book?”

“Well, you're pregnant now, too, Whora the Explorer, so go ahead and name your pillow after whatever Power Ranger it was you grew up watching.”

The two of us rise to a standing position which I use as the perfect opportunity to remove the object from my pants and pop her on the ass with it.

A tiny gasp is followed by a narrowed gaze. “You know what this means, don't you, Bam Bam?”

“Bring it on, Betty *Bubble*,” I goad with a point to her stomach.

Outrage bursts in her expression a split second prior to her popping me across the face with a pillow I didn't even fucking see her pick up.

Fuck me, did I marry a ninja?!

Another hard swing makes its way to the same space, landing an equally severe hit. It isn't until she goes to swing for a third time that I manage to dodge and counter, landing another blow to her backside. She squawks. Rotates. Attempts to repeat the action delivered to her only to fail and receive a pop to the forehead. Now more fired up than ever before, Harlow lowers herself to a better attacking position and engages in an intense pillow duel that somehow manages to take place around all the laughing we're doing. My strikes obviously avoid her stomach while hers are primarily concentrated on my face only stopping when I manage to rip away her weapon all together and toss it towards the kitchen. More squeaks of unhappiness are thrown my direction along with several attempts to return the disarming.

Our tugging gets more and more aggressive but the more we tug the hungrier it seems we both become for something else. Who possesses the pillow begins to pale in comparison to the way her tits bounce and my

tattooed biceps flex and needing ownership of the object is instantly an idea of the past the first time her palm brushes against my cock.

Abandoning it to capture her face with both hands is the right call given how effortlessly she melts into my hold. And having her there, having her at my mercy isn't power I don't plan to use. Our mouths spread wider and wider apart yet still together to accommodate the accelerated tempo at which our tongues are rolling around one another, a speed barely outmatched by our fingers that are aggressively yanking away barriers between broken breaths.

First thing exiled is my shorts.

Then it's her sports bra.

My boxer briefs are next, with the bite-sized material she's calling bottoms coming in dead last.

And the moment we're both naked—a state we should really spend more time in—is the same moment I detach my mouth from hers to command. “Knees.” Harlow's swollen bottom lip tumbles down, obviously preparing to pushback, prompting me to curl my grip around her neck and growl, “Now.”

On a sharp, shaky intake of air, her body plummets to the padded ground, gaze rising to find mine once it's there.

“Face the couch.”

My wife doesn't hesitate to follow the order.

“Head on the edge.”

The sight of her submissively bent over, hands splayed on the cushion, curvy frame already trembling from just the sheer idea of being touched brings drops of pre-cum to the tip of my cock. In one swift jerk, I smear it the length of my shaft, stare fixated on all of her backend that's slowly swiveling from side to side, wordlessly begging for my attention.

“*Fuck, baby,*” I thoughtlessly grumble under my breath in tandem with inching myself over. “Open those legs for me.”

They shift about an inch apart, but it's not enough.

And I know *she knows* that it's not enough.

Leaning over only slightly is done just to deliver a solid slap to her ass.

She loudly whimpers yet continues to push her luck.

Discover what's offside.

What'll get a whistle blow.

Harlow barely opens them further which instantly receives her another swat to the other cheek.

Louder whimpers are accompanied by an arch in her back that indicates she wants more.

Needs more.

“Be a good little slut and show me what’s mine.”

The raspy demand receives the exact response I expected.

Her long legs widen to their furthest points and reveal a set of smooth, soaking wet lips I haven’t been blessed to see since she left me high and dry in Vegas. Seeing the stickiness coating the area I can’t wait to leave my mark on is enough to literally bring me to my knees but spotting where the juices have overflowed to the insides of her thighs damn near gets me coming on the first thrust inside.

Harlow’s back bows in ecstasy at the same her head is tossed my direction on a ball clapping moan. *“Ohmygod, Brendan.”*

Between the airy praise and the knee wobbling way her pussy pulsates around my dick there’s no controlling the savagery that slips past the good guy goalie trying to hold down the situation. Both sets of fingers lunge forward and latch on her locks. Yanking her into merciless dive after dive after dive is a mindless fucking decision I wouldn’t resist making even if it was consciously done.

I want her where I want her when I want her and using her hair like a leash is the easiest way to make that shit happen.

Moans morph into howls that mutate into screams that become amplified by the baseline reverberating throughout the space.

Forcing her by the fistful to work the length of my dick from balls to tip to tip to balls not only allows me to control every moment of the situation but to decide how much she gets and when. What pace and pressure and how much pitilessly pumping her quivering little pussy has to endure. Each stroke is used to steer her to the edge of coming before snatching it away, reminding her that *she* isn’t in control here.

I am.

And that’s exactly what she fucking wants as much as needs.

“Such a good little slut creaming all over my cock,” I groan at the same time I finally slow down my thrusts to admire the thick, wetness, I’m tempted to have her turn around and lick off.

Harlow's breath hitches in such a familiar way I can't help the animalistic grunt it conjures.

"Say it." Her hesitation results in me relinquishing my hold with one hand so that it can deliver a disapproving pop to her sweat coated ass cheek. *"Fucking tell me what a good little slut you are."*

The intensified squeezing around my shaft indicates this is exactly the shit she wants to hear. *"I'm a good little slut."*

"Yes, you fucking are." This swat is given in a rewarding nature and in turn gets her slick muscles pulsing harder. Slightly faster. "And tell me whose cock this is." When the instruction is yet again met by reluctance a coordinated pull of the hair and strike to the ass are delivered. *"Fucking tell me, baby."*

"Mine," Harlow quietly replies, breath unable to get steady.

"Louder."

The volume increases the tiniest. "Mine."

"Fucking. Louder."

"Mine!" She screeches to the ceiling.

The neighbors.

The whole fucking state.

"That's right," I purr, gliding my hands around her hip, heading straight for her clit. *"And whose fucking cum do you want in that tight little pussy?"*

"Yours," she airily proclaims as my index finger lightly brushes where she's dying to have it. *"Yours!"*

Her unprompted screaming causes me to arrogantly chuckle and resume my faster paced pumping along with more frantic rubbing. Unable to withstand the amount of pleasure body checking the amount of pain skating through her system leads to her exploding around my shaft in a matter of a few short breaths. Harlow wails like she's dying and trembles like she's on the brink of collapsing and claws at the couch like she's digging for fucking buried treasure all the while milking my cock. Gripping and grasping and grinding, entire body being thrown into my ceaseless jerks, shaky frame unyielding until I'm unloading long, scorching hot ropes deep inside on bestial huffs at which point she shatters again.

And again.

Back to back to back orgasms?!

Holy. Fuck.

I knew this shit would be better when I was sober, but I didn't expect it to be *this* good.

Or for us to go *this* hard.

Maybe everything feels this incredible because it's our first time together?

Or because there's no glove?

Or maybe...is it...*possible*...everything is this mind fucking blowing because it's with the one person I never wanna be without?

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CHAPTER 9



Harlow

No fires.

No drownings.

No fighting.

Er...no brawls I should say.

At least not yet.

With the way Page won't stop running his mouth, it's safe to assume it's only a matter of time.

"Yes b'y." Page loudly chuckles from the poolside edge he's leaned against in the water, plastic cup being tipped towards Laurence Lazar—aka Lazo—our new goaltender coach. "How can we be having this conversation about the greatest sports movies of all time and exclude *Dodgeball*?"

"Maybe because I thought we were having an *adult* conversation and not one with the thirteen-year-old versions of yourselves?" I playfully poke back at the same time I toss Cookies a treat to distract her from trying to take the goodies being thrown Cream's direction from Somerfield's two kids. "Now, let's work this shit again."

McVie's wife shoots me a disapproving expression for the tenth time from the patio couch she's occupying with her small child on the opposite end of the area.

Ugh.

Forfucksake, I'm doing the best I can!

What does she want me to do? Wear a shock collar around my neck for the rest of this outing just so her precious baby boy doesn't hear too many "potty" words?

God, should I be more worried that the twins are gonna drop an f bomb as their first word?!

Wait.

This is me we're talking about.

Chances are their first word will be hockey.

Or Dad and *then* hockey.

Which was the case for me.

And honestly, I wouldn't mind if it was the case for them, either.

I think Brendan is going to be an amazing father and not just because he's reading the parenting books, I keep promising I will.

I mean...I *probably* will.

I know you're supposed to study the rules when starting a new sport... it's just...so much of this shit seems to come natural to him. Like how he puts headphones on my stomach to play them 2CELLOS while we watch *Guy's Grocery Games* or the *Mighty Ducks: The Animated Series*. Or the way he ordered me a pregnancy pillow after researching for the best one on his lunch break.

Shit like that tells me I've totally signed a fucking winner to this season.

Which is good since I'm still struggling just to take the right vitamins.

And also hating the fact they're not *all* in gummy form.

"It's gotta be *Rudy*," McVie states, dropping his legs into the water not too far from Page. "Hands down. The definition of classic."

"Classic, yes, personal favorite? No." Somerfield turns our direction despite the fact his son is still throwing things out for Cream to eat. "Gotta go *Rocky*."

"Because they didn't know how to stop fucking making them?" Brendan taunts, briefly angling away from the cooking area he's practically spent all afternoon at.

We all laugh at the retort, yet it's Craig who puts his plastic cup down on the edge of the pool to comment. "*Moneyball*."

"Fuck baseball," most of the present players—and myself—immediately chirp back.

“Oh, but I love *Trouble with the Curve*,” his girlfriend quickly announces, fake tits bouncing during her whining. “It’s so dramatical.”

Love him.

Have loved him for years.

Will love him for many more.

But the chicks he fucks?

Not so much.

Primarily because their age matches their IQ level.

“*The Blind Side*,” Killian Kittle, a red-headed center from our most minor team calls out from somewhere closer to the hot tub area. “And not just ‘cause I wanna bang Sandy B.”

“Pretty sure it’s only ‘cause you wanna bang Sandy B, bud,” Trenton Johnson, a d-man also from the same team chuckles out between gulps of his beverage.

“*Remember the Titans* has my vote,” Blanc contributes after picking up and tossing his youngest back into the water for the millionth round of “cannon dad”.

“Is no one really gonna say *Goon*?” Page scoffs, summoning me away from my goat over to where they’re congregating.

“Thank fuck someone else finally said it!” We engage in a small fist bump. “*Goon* is one of the best sports movies of all time, and not because I used to bone a chick last season who looks like the lead actress—you know like Page did-”

“Amanda didn’t look anything like her!”

“Bro, she could’ve been her fucking stunt double.”

He laughs a bit louder and shakes his head. “No.”

“Pretty sure they might’ve been the same person.”

“No.”

“Like a Lindsey Lohan *Parent Trap* situation.”

“Oh me nerves,” Page laughs, headshaking increasing exponentially. “Amanda was hotter than that broadskie. Not as hot as you,” his cup tips my direction, “but definitely hotter than that tram wreck.”

I shoot him a wink of gratitude over the compliment prior to proceeding with my explanation, “Not only is *Goon* based on a true story, which is worth a stick tap in itself, but it also doesn’t waste time trying to hold your hand like it’s your first fucking day of Mini. It expects you to know your shit. It expects you to understand the shit happening. It basically said we are

making this movie for fucking hockey people, and if you're not a fucking hockey person then this shit isn't *for you*, so fuck off."

"Yes b'y." Page promptly agrees, extending his fist once more.

Our second bumping is attached to a small set of snickers that are unexpectedly interrupted by the father of my children, "Baby, will you come over and taste this, please?"

Due to the fact I'm starving—evidently I've crossed over into that phase of preggers—I instantly abandon the first real bonding moment I've had with Page to possibly please the growing life inside of me.

My arrival occurs in a handful of steps and as soon as I'm within ass touching distance it's exactly what I get. Brendan curls his arm around my black swimsuit cover up guarded waist yet casually lowers his hand to rest comfortably on the curve of my ass.

Yup.

Total territory marking move.

And I don't hate it.

Hell, I fucking love the shit so much I wanna let him fuck me against the outdoor countertop.

Probably will once everyone goes home.

That shit is peaking, too.

However, I'm not sure if the wanting to fuck around the clock is from the preggers hormones or the fact that the man, I'm becoming more and more comfortable saying I'm married to beats up my pussy like a defenseman fresh out of the box with a vendetta to settle against a league rival.

I've never come this much in my entire life.

Hundy P.

He's racking up record breaking ginos in that department.

And really...isn't that worth staying married for all on its own?

Using the hand not wordlessly telling all other men in our presence—married and not alike—to fuck off, he lifts a burger up to my mouth to bite. A moan worthy number of flavors explode across my pallet, buckling my entire body, and giving into the foodgasm—which according to the cooking competition shows we watch is a real thing—gets him arrogantly grinning. "Good?"

"Amazing," I whimper prior to sinking my teeth into it a second time, "but—"

“Does it physically hurt you to compliment me?”

“It does.”

My playful brush off is rewarded with loud chuckles.

“Needs cheese,” is mumbled around the pieces in my mouth at the same time he lowers the object back to the paper plate.

“It has cheese.”

“Does it, though?”

“Yeah.”

Licking away the grease from my lips, I poke once more. “Does it *really*?”

Brendan’s brown gaze suddenly becomes coated in mirth. “You want me to double that shit, don’t you?”

“Like we’re back in Vegas, babe.”

This time we both snicker which has me barely hearing Margot calling out my name, “Hennington!”

I cut a glance the direction she’s storming over from but swiftly have my attention summoned back to the man whose grip I’m wrapped up in. “You know we didn’t actually gamble that night?”

“We so did.” My left hand lifts to flash him the ring I’ve stopped taking off. “And we bet fucking *big*.”

“*Hennington!*” is repeated in the background by my assistant, a little louder.

A little more urgent.

“Then I guess we hit the motherfucking jackpot,” Brendan flirts, fingers flexing, digging possessively into my flesh. “And I plan to keep hitting that jackpot morning, noon, and twice at night because it helps you sleep better.” He reaches for his nearby beer on an arrogant chortle. “Between that shit and *that shit*,” my husband just barely tips the bottom of the bottle towards the rounding stomach I’m hiding, “the job shit and house shit, I think it’s safe to say at least one of us is on a hot streak.”

“*Win streak*,” I needlessly correct.

“Hennington!” Margot huffs upon her arrival at my side, face in full fledged panic. “I need to-”

“Yo, GM,” Leslie Ryann—or Ry Dog—one of the affiliate players from our AHL suddenly calls out, “isn’t that you?”

Looking over to see where he’s pointing leads to me redirecting my attention to the slightly off to the side flatscreen that been playing STN all

afternoon, except now instead of viewing last season highlights and special charity events from around the country, it's my archnemesis, Florence Ramirez who tends to do more gossiping than real shop talk.

And to make matters more unsettling...she's fighting the urge to smirk at what I assume is my expense.

Fuck, I swear she's gotta be the long, lost, gave up for adoption daughter of Ursula because this twat is a sea bitch running around on land for sure.

Margot rushes to say my name again as I untangle myself from Brendan, grab the nearby remote, and increase the volume, "Henning-"

"This is quite *unprofessional*," Florence calmly states to her on air partner, Timothy Warren, "and I honestly don't know how the league will be responding to these allegations."

"What allegations?!" I thoughtlessly shriek at the screen.

"For those of you just joining us," she smoothly shifts her gaze back to the camera like she heard me, "reports regarding inappropriate conduct between Harlow Hennington, the new GM and owner of the Dalvegan Dragons, and Brendan Brickley, one of the team's assistant equipment managers, have recently surfaced. Statements have been made to STN *exclusively* from multiple sources near the woman in question regarding the nature of their relationship. These sources believe the relationship between this *boss* and *employee* to be one with not only fraudulent beginnings that include blackmail-"

"I didn't blackmail anyone!"

"-but to be one that is continuing to add financial hardships that the new owner of the club cannot afford."

"I'm not fucking broke!"

"One source in particular has expressed going to the league with additional concern that a pending child is a direct result of these misconduct allegations, which violates Dalvegan's inhouse as much as the league's increasing tight fraternization policies."

"Child?" croaks one of the players, although I can't say who without turning to look because the only distinct sound, I can hear is blood thrumming in my ears.

"Like a...like...a baby?" another member of the team questions in what appears to be confusion.

"You pregnant, GM?" someone else inquires.

“You got somethin’ cookin’ in your sin bin, bro?” one more player jokes.

Timothy sucks in an overdramatic sharp breath, “Yikes, Florence. That is not quite the ideal pre-season start, especially for a team that already has so much on the line.”

A block of dread plummets to the pit of my stomach.

“A team that is already so close to completely *folding* given the contract and other conduct issues they’ve been facing,” she states with a hint of victory in her tone. “I cannot imagine something like this will win them any points with their fans *or the league*.” Her smug face looks back into the camera. “We have contacted Miss Hennington’s camp for response yet have been unable to reach them for a comment.”

Losing my grip on the remote happens in tandem with me shouting at Margot, “What?!”

“*That* would be one of things I came running over here to talk to you about,” she heavily sighs in defeat.

There’s no stopping my eyes from bulging out of my skull.

“We have however been in contact with Miss Hennington’s mother-”

“What?!” I bark both Margot and the TV’s direction.

“-who will be giving us an *exclusive opinion* regarding the subject in question as well as her daughter’s turbulent transition into ownership.”

“And that would be the other,” my best friend defeatedly exhales once more.

Both hands cover my face in frustration.

Humiliation.

Embarrassment.

Of course, this is happening to me.

Because why wouldn’t it fucking happen to me?

Afterall, Brendan is right.

One of us is on a fucking win streak while the other?

The other cannot pick up a goddamn W like the team she is now in charge of thanks to her dad dying before properly training her on how to skate this rink away from the railing.

“*Fuckkkkkkkk!*” is the only exclamation I can fathom screaming repeatedly at foghorn level during my hasty storm away from the party to my upstairs ensuite bathroom where I plop down on the edge of my white, freestanding tub. “*Fuck!*”

Two familiar—and honestly expected faces—come barreling through the door immediately afterward.

Margot is first to speak, “Henning-”

“*Fuck!*”

She uses two fingers to flip strands away from her forehead. “Yes, I am aware of that.”

My hands grip the edge of the white furniture to assist in my leaning towards. “*Fuccckkkk.*”

“Yes, I am aware of that, too.”

“Are you aware that she’s not *actually* saying anything other than the word fuck?” Brendan cautiously asks on an arching of his pierced eyebrow.

“*Tone, Tiny Tim.* Different fucks, at different tones, mean different things.” She tosses him an unimpressed glance. “You’re still new here. You’ll learn it eventually.” The parting of my lips to belt out the word yet again is promptly stopped by a stern finger point. “Not that fuck, Hennington. Not until you’ve calmed down.”

“Let me give this calming her down shit a shot,” he immediately suggests only to receive the same unamused glare he did two seconds ago. “Give me two minutes alone with her in the bin.”

The choice of metaphor actually causes the corners of my lips to curl upward.

Partially because he really has gotten to know me and partially because annoying Margot with hockey terms always brings a grin to my face.

“Ugh,” she gags before grumbling, “I don’t need *more* jock talk in my life. I need *less.*”

“And I don’t need her going into early labor when a timeout could’ve prevented it.”

“And I don’t need the two of you talking about me like I’m not fucking here.”

Margot shoots me a small glare and then shifts her to stare to him. “Fine. You get *two* minutes.”

“Two minutes.”

“That’s a hundred and twenty seconds, *Muppet Baby.*”

“Got it.”

“And don’t count mississiply, either.” Her glower deepens. “Use your big boy numbers.”

Brendan offers her an annoyed grin of understanding, steps back over to the door, and ushers a hand for Margot to go. She exits without further hesitation while he makes sure to lock it once she's on the other side.

Why do I get the feeling he may be planning to keep me all to himself for longer than two minutes?

"We're gonna handle this shit in two plays," Brendan announces as he drags the makeup stool from the vanity area over to the space in front of me. The instant his ass hits the seat, his words hit my ears. "First, regulation."

Intrigue has me crossing my ankles and remaining silent.

"You win this faceoff by using the handbook and guidelines manual. You go stick to stick against the allegations. You watch the puck. You watch the ref. Don't set eyes on the other *player*. You focus on the topics at hand."

An odd amount of comfort bodychecks the dread darting around the bottom of my stomach.

"We were married *before* I was offered a job; therefore, no rules have been broken nor punishable actions allowed to be taken. You didn't violate your contract or fraternization policies which imply you are not to *begin* a relationship with someone at the company or club or who works for the league. We were already in one when I got the job. You didn't use your position of power over me to ensure we continued a relationship against my will, and no one obviously blackmailed anyone into doing this."

My lips purse to one side in silent argument.

"I didn't *blackmail* you. I *bargained* for ninety days."

Those words feel awfully similar.

"Which brings me to the nonregulation play."

The lifting my eyebrows informs him I'm listening.

"Fire me."

"Fuckin' what?!"

"Fire me," he casually repeats, hands folding together in front of him. "Or 'let me go' or whatever mumbo jumbo bullshit you wanna call it to save face. Do that and eliminate anymore possible complications in this situation."

"Wait," new surges of panic dart up the back of my throat, "do you... hate your job? Do you not like being a part of the team?!"

"I fucking *love* being a part of this team, Harlow. *Fuck. Me.* Do I love wearing that D on my chest each day, but I love *you* more."

Holy shit.

Did he just...

Did he just say...

Maybe I misheard him?

Is pregnancy hearing a thing?!

You know hearing shit that's not really there?

"And protecting *you...your legacy...our relationship...our...family* matters a million times more to me than any job ever could. Even a good one with benefits, which just for the record I've never had before."

"Makes sense. You like *just* graduated from high school, so I doubt your afterschool gig had any to offer."

The age joke receives the slightly amused grin I hoped it would. "Cut me, and I'll go get another bar job somewhere. Probably in the Locker District since it's close enough to the barn for us to comfortably carpool."

We should probably get him his own car.

But that feels like a different day topic.

Particularly on one where I'm not facing a whirlwind of negative press, and he hasn't just confessed he loves me.

Which he probably meant like...a close friend.

Or the way you will always love the woman who births your offspring.

He's not...like...*in* love with me.

It's not possible.

Hot as fuck sex doesn't equal love. And neither does falling asleep together on the couch. Or talking shop over coffee in the morning. Or holding my hair back while I puke out everything I've ever eaten. Or making sure he has popcorn to guzzle down while we watch his favorite cooking shows. Or ordering him a very expensive set of cookware because his favorite chef endorses it. Or letting him help pick instrumental warmies music. Or talking about the most meaningful hockey names to me. Or having him hold me during a sob fest over a photo on my laptop I found of me and my dad from what would be our last Christmas.

Oh...*forfuckssake...*

This *is* love, isn't it?

All of sudden, his leg gently nudges mine to summon my stare back to his and away from the thought space I had slipped into. "Just realized you love me too, huh?"

There's no stopping my entire body from leaning dramatically forward. "Yeah, when the fuck did that happen!? And why didn't you tell me?! Why are you being a bad teammate?!"

"I thought you knew!"

"You just thought I *knew* I was in love with you?!"

He fails to swallow all of his chuckles. "Yeah, baby. I figured you knew that. Fuck, I figured you'd be the *first* to know that shit."

"Then do you really know me at all?!"

My idiot retort gets us both snickering.

Then laughing.

Then laughing so hard tears congregate in the rims of my eyes.

Ugh.

I'm a fucking mess.

And my life constantly keeps turning into an 80s Red Wings brawl I can hardly fathom making it out of alive.

Yet some way, somehow, not only did I manage to fall in love, someone managed to fall in love with *me*.

The real me.

The snoring, alphabet belching, will never be as dolled up as the puck bunnies I'm often picked over for version.

The one that just hopes to—at some point in her existence—make her father proud.

Brendan lovingly reaches out for my hips and tugs me forward until I'm straddling him, arms intertwined adoringly around his neck. "Regardless of a job, paperwork, bad press, or being banished back to the guesthouse again for tricking you into thinking zucchini bread was banana nut bread—"

"A divorceable offense."

"I'm *not* going anywhere, Harlow." He sweetly pinches my chin to keep our stares locked together. "You're it for me. And I already put a fucking ring on it."

Girlish giggles I'm embarrassed to make are quickly followed by my mouth pouncing his. Like usual, there's no reluctance for him to part his lips to grant my tongue access inside as much as unleash his to feverishly tangle with mine.

They've barely touched twice when Margot aggressively knocks at the door. "Time's up!"

Brendan ends the moment on a disgruntled groan.

“Everything good, Hennington?”

“Hundy P.”

My answer manages to spark a light in his gaze I can’t get enough of.

“Do me a solid, Margot, and go check on the boys?” Running my hands down the front of my husband’s sculpted, bare chest receives a low, hungry, grumble. “We’ll be back down in a period or so.”

Her irritation with the hockey time reference is announced on a loud gag. “Fine.”

The salaciousness of my smirk deepens during my fingers continued descent.

“I’ll also check in with Alice in PR. See where we are on containment strategies of this situation.”

Sounds of Margot stomping away prompt Brendan to cup my ass on a playful grin. “A full twenty minutes of game play with no whistle blows?” He grips my cheeks a bit rougher. “Wonder what we could do with that shit...”

“Each other.”

His light laugh is cut off by me resuming our kiss.

A kiss that is repeatedly broken and busted and fractured due to the frenzied nature of getting his dick out of his swim trunks and rammed deep inside of me where it belongs.

The first heave is hard.

And brutal.

And proof that he respects the limited time frame he’s been presented with.

Throwing my chest against his in ecstasy is unfortunately interrupted by Brendan yanking at the coverup in his way. “Take this fucking shit off, Harlow. Stop fucking hiding your body. Let me see that shit.”

Much like it only took a single pull at my string bikini bottom to give him the space he needed to slip inside, it only takes one swift action to free my increasingly shapely figure from the paper bag I’ve spent all afternoon hiding it under.

I was trying to avoid telling the team what was up in this regard, but that puck has now been iced.

Perhaps I should just lean into the shit?

Resume showing off my form.

Prove that just because I'm pregnant doesn't mean I have to be less confident in the clothes I wear?

Brendan's fingers savagely scrape against my chest during his unrestrained pursuit in having my nipple peak just around the thin fabric shielding them. Barbaric groans of approval precede a sharp slap to the ass. *"Be a good little slut for me. Make them titties bounce."*

I sink my nails into the tops of his shoulders, sadistically cutting into the skin, and begin to recklessly execute the command. Furiously rising to the tip of his cock only to just as quickly fall to the base effortlessly builds a heavenly burning that has my toes curling against the cold bathroom floor. Wetness persistently whirls around his shaft on every pump, coating and covering and caressing each inch it comes in contact with, needing it soaked. Begging it to return the favor by painting my pussy white.

Remorselessly, Brendan grabs a hold of the string in the middle of my top, and yanks down on a growled demand, *"Fucking take that dick, baby."*

There's no denying the way the words make my muscles swell.

Constrict.

Capture his cock and sloppily slather it with more and more white-hot stickiness to showcase its pending surrender.

I wildly bounce the entire length, head thrown forward in determination to see the sight of me being rapaciously split wide open and to be mesmerized by the view of juices leaking down to his balls that are unremittingly slapping against my pussy.

Having the thin fabric rub against my hard nipple each time its pulled calls for the airy moans bouncing between us to amplify in volume.

Intensity.

Sounds of need transpose to sounds of greed and that greed gets revealed through gritted teeth.

Barked curses.

Nails dragged along his collarbone.

The side of his neck.

Brendan hammers into me harder, lifting his hips up to meet every buck while using his other hand to push me down, to force me to feel the full strength of his hits. Between the incessant brushes against my nipples and the continual ones from our frenzied fucking against my clit, the voraciousness to come as well as have him come reaches a pinnacle so high and so pleasurable that I literally struggle to breathe.

All of sudden, my husband's lips bump against my ear to purr, "*You're gonna walk around the rest of the party fucking full of me, understood?*"

It's no surprise to me when my body responds faster than my brain.

A mirror shattering scream is attached to the climax that splinters me into a million tiny shreds. I tempestuously buck and cry out. Brazenly buck and bang my open palms against his solid chest. Uncontrollably buck and buckle until my orgasmic bursts are bulldozed by boiling rushes being buried as far as they can possibly fucking go. Heavier huffs of rapture simultaneously escape both of us yet are almost instantaneously replaced by squeaks courtesy of the stool collapsing underneath us.

The unpredicted event quickly has me shifting gears from the mindless fuck machine he turns me into back to the strong, sassy bitch I need to be to face the waiting crowd downstairs. "You're the reason we can't have nice things, Nick Jr."

"Don't make me fuck you on this pile of broken shit, *Joanie Loves Cocky*."

The squawk of shock from the well-played chirp encourages him to laugh loudly.

Give me a good game pat to the ass and pull me down by the nape of my neck to kiss him.

Our kiss while short and messy—kind of like the quickie we just shared—is exactly what I need.

That's the craziest thing about Brendan.

No matter the day...no matter the place...no matter the situation...he always seems to know exactly what I need.

Of course, I love him.

How could I not?

CHAPTER 10



Brendan

Fuck, I love waking up like this.

One hand on my wife's tit while she grinds her ass against my swelling cock.

The only thing I think might be better than this shit is when I open my eyes, and she's already on my sac.

Why?

Because I married a woman who believes swallowing cum is the real breakfast of champions, not Wheaties.

God, getting her to switch to wheat *anything* has been a hard season in itself.

You'd think I cost her a chance at The Cup for having her eat her sando two nights ago on *wheat bread* instead of white.

Harlow releases an intoxicatingly soft whimper at the same time she begs, "One more time before you have to go to work?"

That's also what she said when she straddled me at two a.m. having just rode my dick two hours before that.

And because I'm a gentleman—and not one to complain—I most certainly handled that shit until she was yet again passed out.

You know what? I'll just fucking say it.

I love this part of fucking pregnancy.

Even if it means I'll be going to the teambuilding trip today running on fumes.

And I do mean fumes.

I swear to our cooking lord and savior Gordan Ramsey that every time I finally drift back asleep, she senses that shit like a sex assassin and wakes me up to fuck.

I pretended to work late yesterday just so I could take a decent nap in the breakroom before coming home.

Giving her nipple a brutish tug is done in tandem with taunting, "I didn't hear a fucking please in that shit."

"Please," she airily pleads, body arching into the pulling motion. "*Fucking please, Brendan.*"

Rolling Harlow onto her back requires little to no effort, much like relocating myself between her widespread thighs. "You know when you beg like a good little slut, baby, I can't say no."

Her lower half rises so that her soaking wet pussy can tease the tip of my cock.

"And you're already so fucking wet for me..."

"So *fucking wet*," she needily echoes while I lift her ankles to rest on my shoulders.

As much as I would love to prolong the session with a bit of teasing and edging, I know that I can't.

I have somewhere I have to be, and she *needs* sleep.

I mean so do I, but she needs it more.

She's baking babies.

Guiding my dick past her dripping wet entrance happens on matching, overly pleased groans, "*Fuck, baby.*"

Harlow hums her continued enjoyment prior to sassily snipping, "That's the point."

Boorishly jerking my hips forward naturally occurs giving my wife exactly what she wants.

To be taken *rough*.

She *always* wants to be taken rough.

I once offered to make love to her—the slow shit they do in movies—and she chirped me so hard that the session ended with her head banged

against the edge of the couch, her panties in her mouth, and her covered in so much cum it looked like she had just finished filming a gang bang.

Turns out not *all* women want that shit.

And that's okay with me.

I'd rather deliver the shit my woman wants than ruin a good thing by listening to false outside notions.

The original idea to have her ankles where they are is quickly swapped for a better one. Collecting both in one hand not only reminds her of who's in command but allows for easier control. I tighten my grip and slam into Harlow harder, refusing to let her already quivering figure move an unapproved inch.

Each pound is slow.

Steady.

Packed with enough power to skate her frame towards the padded headboard.

Her inability to contort away from the increasing rabid ramming causes her slick pussy to scream out in protest and content alike. Every dive to the hilt warrants new waves of wetness to trickle past where we're connected down the crack of her ass prompting the fingers from my free hand to maneuver themselves around the territory to swipe at it.

Spin it around her back hole.

Slather it on my balls.

Seeing as much as feeling the increase in shakes pushes me to ferally thrust.

Ferally fuck.

Push her legs out of the way for me to spit right on top of her sopping lower lips.

Harlow gasps at the unexpected sensation, yet the small thrumming around my dick delivers more accurate information for me than that sound ever could. I wolfishly grin on a guttural groan, "*You're such a good dirty little slut.*" Two fingers from the hand not holding her ankles descend to her clit to spread the dribble around her swollen nub. "*You want me to fill you up, baby?*" My circular motions accelerate in speed. Pressure. "*Keep me with you all day?*"

Knowing exactly what the combination of filth mixed with sentimental shit does to my other half has me bracing myself for what I have no doubt we're on the cusp of. Previously spaced-out constrictions transition into

constant clamping summoning my nuts to tighten in anticipation of coating her white. Non-stop tugging her to me simultaneously bounces Harlow's fuller tits and rounder ass, two features that are increasing in size the same as her stomach. She struggles to anchor herself to the sheets underneath her during the tumultuous thrusting and my determination to make sure she can't is felt in every ferocious blow. Frantic strokes from both halves of my body sync to the point my fingers and thighs and fucking toes are all cramping from the unending amount of momentum I'm delving out.

Finally, the sweetest, softest sigh slips loose clearing space for the back breaking scream I fucking live to hear.

Create.

"Ohmygod, I'm coming!"

And it's fucking fantastic.

Sweltering stickiness submerges my shaft and selfishly sucks it in deeper and deeper and deeper, buckling my knees. Cutting off my ability to breathe. Forcing me to fold forward and fight back with blistering bursts of my own.

Hisses through gritted teeth are met by breathless, lewd demands, *"Yes, make me your cum slut."* Harlow throws her entire body into the additional bucking. *"Make your wife your dirty little cum slut."*

Fuck. Me.

If I could come even more, I fucking would.

Loud, beastlike grunts leak free in tandem with my final jerks forward. Regardless of how tense my muscles are and how horribly my lungs burn and how much fucking sweat I have along my taint, I don't stop thrusting until my balls are completely empty, and my cock completely stops kicking.

At that point, Harlow melts into the mattress, granting me the gift of a satiated whimper.

There's not even time to verbally ask how she's feeling or doing before soft snores are flooding our room once again.

I quietly chortle, give myself a mental fist bump, and grab a towel to clean her up.

Er...mostly.

I meant that shit.

I want me nestled between her legs while she's at home watching ESPN and I'm out...doing...whatever fucking bonding experience Blanc has conjured up that she wouldn't tell me about.

You'd think fucking the boss would let you become privy to that shit but nope.

Post gently wiping her down, tucking her back in, and engaging in an extra hot shower to make sure I'm up, I duck out a tad ahead of schedule to grab coffee from Loca Mocha Casabloca.

My arrival in the parking lot occurs not only around the same time as Margot's but at the same time as an alarming amount of charter buses.

I'm barely out of the SUV before I'm calling out, "Hey, *Man's Best Friend!*"

Her narrowed stare immediately swings to me.

"Why the fuck are there so many busses?"

She lowers the matching to go cup away from her lips to answer. "I don't know, *Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*. Could it be because there are so many fucking hockey players?"

"There's only like twenty of 'em!"

"*Twenty-three* for the Dalvegan Dragons, *twenty-three* for the Texas Dragons, and *twenty* for The Valley Drakes." Margot tosses me a taunting smirk. "I know you're still covering addition and subtraction, but I can pull up a *Sesame Street* Count video on YouTube if you need further assistance."

Sidestepping her verbal jabbing is much easier than her best friend's. "Why are all three teams here?"

"For the trip."

"But—"

"Blanc will explain it when you get to your location, so just be patient until then." Her gaze finds mine again. "And *do not* board the same bus as Page. In fact, refrain from *talking* anywhere near him whenever possible. We haven't proven it yet, but I'm about ninety seven percent certain *he* was the one working with that shop girl to leak the story about you two a month ago."

Wouldn't surprise me.

At first, I just thought that asshole had it out for me specifically, and then when I saw how hard he tried to comfort Harlow during the media shitshow, I realized it isn't about *me*.

It's *her*.

Every move he makes is about getting *her* attention.

Even his tantrums.

That whole negative attention is better than no attention bullshit.

I'm also pretty sure the reason he's an extra dick to her is because he's doing that childish bully shit where you're mean to the chick because you don't know how to just nut up and say it.

I don't approve of his fucking methods.

And I damn sure don't approve of him lusting after my fucking *wife*.

The little media stunt put Harlow through an unwanted season of showcasing our marriage and her pregnancy to every sports outlet that gave a fuck. She strategically answered questions regarding the secrecy, did damage control in reference to her mother's paid for ramblings prior to hitting her with a cease and do not talk to the press order—and cleverly put the light back on the team's improvements she's been working on all summer. Every interview was glorious to watch. I mean yeah, I loved hearing her talk fondly about us and our situation—including why she doesn't want a diamond on her hand—but it was the *confidence* in which she talked about hockey that was fucking mesmerizing. The woman *knows* her shit. And she never lets *anyone* treat her like she doesn't. Watching her go toe to toe with some ex-pros regarding the future of her franchise was some of the sexiest shit I've ever seen. Plus, when they get her all fired up like that, she comes homes and lets me fuck her calm, which I also love.

However, I don't *love* that I don't get to travel with her.

I hate sleeping in our bed alone.

Also hate that I'm not allowed on camera with her—despite the fact we could be a hockey power couple like The Beckhams are for soccer.

Double hate the amount of paperwork I've had to sign over the past few weeks to acknowledge in the case of our divorce I don't get half of anything, especially not the team—which I wouldn't try to take from her anyway.

The only thing I would want is custody rights to see our kids.

But I'm not trying to think about those types of gameplans.

I'm focused on the ones meant to *strengthen* our expanding family.

Like convincing Harlow not to paint fucking scary ass dragons all around their nursey.

"Is that why you're here?" I ask during our slow approach to the crowd of waiting players. "To babysit me?"

"Not *just* you," she corrects, keys being tucked in her small handbag, "but *everyone* involved in today's outing. I'm here to make sure in-house media captures enough footage, security keeps unwanted visitors away, and

that the coaches remember that while this is all fun and games, they're responsible for making sure that the multimillion dollars walking around doesn't get hurt or injured during the festivities." A heavy, almost defeated sigh passes her lips. "Basically, I'm supposed to be *Hennington* without *being Hennington*."

"Sounds accurate." After stealing a small sip of my coffee, I ask, "And why can't she just be here again?"

"This is about bonding *without* the boss breathing down your neck. She wants the team to learn to be there for each other whether or not the woman who signs their paychecks is present."

My hum of comprehension is cut short courtesy of our arrival which happens just as Blanc is giving out seating arrangements. More or less we're all divided by last name—non player team members included—and instructed to start loading up immediately. Each bus has a couple members of security on it as well as other employees there to do whatever job it is they're there to do.

Our trip from the arena parking lot to the inside of Say Jump, Sucka, the largest indoor trampoline park in the state, isn't too long unlike the opening safety video we're forced to watch for liability reasons.

Once the film has concluded, Blanc takes the front of the room, summoning the other coaches to flank him. "Alright, boys, you're probably wondering why you're *all* here together. Why you've been mixed and matched. Why you were *required* to do any shit before training camp starts next month. And the answer is simple. *This* is your family now." He shoves his hands into his gym shorts pockets. "You will be *better* on the ice if you know them *off* of it. I'm not saying braid each other's hair while you have a tea party and shit. I'm merely stating that you will be a better team when you can see and respect one another as individuals rather than *just* teammates. Camp will teach you that you are a team. This time will teach you that you are a family. The Dragon family. No matter how high or how low you currently are, no matter what line you will hit the ice on, no matter what duration your contract says, for at least this coming season *you are a family*. To me. To the other coaches. To the GM. Use this opportunity to learn how to *communicate* with your family. How to *protect* your family. How to *trust* your family." The grin on his face is surprisingly warm. Welcoming. "We will be sticking true to the words of our beloved GM. Work hard, play hard, fuck hard."

Yup.

That's the woman I married.

"Next month you will work harder than you ever fucking worked at camp, but for now *play* harder than most of you have probably played all year." He doesn't wait for someone to comment on the last portion of the statement. "Fuck hard on your own time, though, boys. And not the employees here. If I catch word that any of you fucked a single one of them, you won't play for the first three games of the season, under *any* of us up here. Got it?" Chuckles ping around the crowd prior to him pushing. "Got it?!"

"Got it," we echo back.

"You've got four hours," Blanc informs on a head kick. "Refreshment stations are open for anything you want *except beer*. Have a good time!"

Piling out of the packed room proves how excited everyone is to get going, self-included. Admittedly, unfamiliar with our lowest team level players, even after meeting a couple at the BBQ and several long talks with Harlow about *all* the players, is what pushes me to challenge myself into changing that.

Proving I *am* a member of this team despite having been told otherwise by Page since my first day.

Being poached by Fredrick Potapova—aka Potato—a d-man from our AHL team, for a game of two-on-two trampoline basketball leads me to meeting a couple of the ECHL players I have little to no recollection of as does being recruited by Igor Alexeyev—better known as Eeyore due to his always grim demeanor—for a dodgeball match that's somehow both harder and easier when bouncing on a trampoline.

Drink breaks have me bumping into familiar faces like Craig and Lazo and Piers Rice—the equipment manager for our AHL team.

Pizza sessions connect me to Peck and Somerfield—who is a lot more tolerable without his master around.

And just when I think the entire trip is gonna go off without a hitch, I'm proven wrong by a Sour Patch kid throw at the back of my head on my way to climb the rock wall.

"Yo, GM fucker," Page's accented voice calls out causing me to turn on my heels his direction. "How about a little competition on the Champion Course? Me and my three against you and whatever three dusters are willing to lace up for you."

He shouldn't call his fellow teammates fucking dusters.
Fuck, I can't wait for Blanc to make him bleed at training camp.
Teach his ass some respect.

"That is unless you're too much of an ice bitch to do it."

Part of me wants to just tell his ass to fuck off.

To grow up and just learn to get along with others like his coach wants.

And the other part?

Yeah, it's the other part that gets along so well with the woman we're both in love with.

It's the part that cannot fucking wait to put him in his place.

"Yeah, alright." I scan the area around for the three most familiar faces I can find. "Eeyore! Peck! Snowman!"

The defenseman, the center, and the left wing come over from their respective spaces all bearing the same curious expression.

My casual question occurs on a slightly crooked grin, "You up for a little Champion Course competition against Page?"

Their collective "fuck yeah" further lets me know I chose wisely.

Outside of his dick riding crew, he's not well liked.

By *any* of his team.

"Let's go den," Page villainously grins, motioning his friends with a small finger wave.

"Should we bet?" McVie inquires. "Losing team buys a round after we leave?"

"Can't," Eeyore announces during our trek to the track. "Gotta go get my little girl. I was lucky my mom could take off this morning to watch her for this shit."

"Still no luck finding a nanny?" McVie investigates, genuine concern in his voice.

"Nope," the six-foot five defenseman defeatedly grunts. "And the shit is only getting fucking harder."

"I'll ask Kayla again. See if she knows anyone."

"Appreciate it, McVie."

"Gonna be a no for me, too," Peck cautiously declares. "Gotta catch a flight back to Vlasta."

"And I gotta get home to Harlow."

That proclamation receives a side eyed glare from Page yet a small, backhanded pop on the arm from Tanner "Snowman" Frosky. "You really

fucked the GM?”

“Fucked. Married. And knocked up the GM.”

Not quite in that order though.

“She’s such a fucking rocket, Bricks,” Snowman groans out on another hit.

“I don’t know if you should say that about your GM,” Peck quietly objects.

“Why not?” Somerfield pokes back as we arrive to the empty course. “That’s some true shit.” Our attention all cuts his direction. “Some of the truest fucking shit. Hennington is a fucking rocket.”

“*My fucking rocket*,” I cockily remind on the flash of my wedding ring. “Never forget that shit, boys.”

“*Bet!*” Page barks out in obvious irritation. “What are we bettin’, boys?”

“Training camp humiliation,” McVie suggests again, this time more certain of his idea. “Losers show up early to training camp in one of the ice girls outfits to welcome the team.”

The hiss out of me is unfortunately heard by Page. “*Perfect.*” His gaze swings to those on my side. “Youse in?”

“Fuck yeah,” Snowman enthusiastically claims. “*Bet.*”

Eeyore is a little less excited yet agrees. “*Bet.*”

“Uh...” Peck does his best to clear away his uneasiness, “*Bet?*”

“Bet,” I state firmly, sealing my team’s terms to the agreement.

Page’s devious chortles are followed by him along with the other players compliance.

Well.

No matter which way this shit goes I can’t be accused of not being a fucking team player.

The tiny, meek, probably barely over eighteen girl in charge of the course does her best to explain what’s expected of us before we’re allowed to huddle up to create a game plan. Eeyore to no surprise takes the lead—further proving Blanc’s decision to make him captain this season is a wise one—and lays out our roles. Peck is to go first. Between his age and stamina, he has the highest chance of getting us ahead allowing for any other shortcoming that may magically occur. Eeyore will go next followed by Snowman who if necessary, can over agile his ass into shaving off time. I’m to go last since I’m athletically the most unknown stats wise, leaving me the most unpredictable variant of the situation.

Peck and McVie climb the short ladder to prepare and brace themselves for the whistle.

Like Eeyore predicted, Peck is first off the line with incredible speed.

Precision.

In spite of the fact that I know his feet are touching the ground, he's gliding so fast I swear he's fucking floating.

The instant he finishes the short obstacle span, Eeyore gets in motion, body already prepped to take his first step, just like he would be if changing lines on the ice. His completion time while not nearly as impressive as the player ten years younger than him, it's still remarkable. He's less of a flyer and more a bulldozer that shit seems to just jump out of the way for. Snowman slides onto the course next keeping the same momentum. He moves through the complicated space in what I swear is a single breath showcasing that I truly am the weakest link in this crew.

Again.

It's not like I'm lazy or not athletic.

Fuck, since being married to Harlow, I don't really have a choice in that department even if I wanted to. The chick *needs* physical workouts to stay sane. They give her a self confidence boost. Mood boost. Attitude adjustment. Everything those stupid studies are always rambling exercise being good for is proven with my wife.

Huh.

Come to think about it.

That shit goes for me too.

I didn't used to get happier following a workout sesh but after a round or two of disc golf or swimming laps, I undeniably do.

Kind of like she does post ping pong, which is basically beer pong without the beer to her.

A little tidbit she tells me *every time* we play.

My foot takes its first step onto the course, and I immediately slip backwards on the wobbly step.

Familiar laughter escapes Page who is still waiting for Somerfield to finish—probably convinced he has no reason to fucking worry—yet claps of encouragement suddenly overpower the sound. “Let's go, Bricks! You got this!”

Eeyore's voice has me simultaneously doing two important things.

Ignoring Page.

And focusing on the goal.

Regaining my balance is followed by an ugly sprint stretch of crossing the wobbly path to the next portion. As much as my frame shakes, threatening to tumble me over into the pit of foam bricks below, I hold steady onto the rope. Breathe it out and keep moving towards the next portion. Thankfully crawling through the spider web ropes is much easier. In and out and in and out I weave, winding and worming myself through the bigger opening, noting my next move versus simply waiting for it to come to me when I get there. Swinging from the dangling chains requires upper body strength I'm grateful to have and hearing the boys cheer me on with steady positive shit really does keep my head in the contest.

Guess this is why they're always yelling during games.

Real teammates support each other.

Not drag one another down regardless of the venue.

Or sport.

Or situation.

That's the point Blanc wants to drive home today.

Kind of like that's the point I've been trying to skate home to Harlow.

"Atta boy!" Snowman shouts in excitement as my feet hit the ground for the final stretch. "Wooo! Get it done!"

Grabbing the rope to climb the padded wall occurs in a single swift movement. I hoist myself up the high distance, stomping with determination each stage of my progress, determined to bring my team victory rather than myself. Managing to reach the top happens just minor moments ahead of Page; however, it's undoubtedly enough. Sliding down the sloped backside into the ball pit gives us the dub and hopefully Page the kick in the dick he needs.

Victory fist bumps barely precede the whistle blow to wrap shit up to head back to the buses. Seating for the ride home has the players divided up by positions with those of us that don't take the ice randomly choosing wherever we want.

Gratitude over the chance to finally feel as though I belong here floods my system during the trip back to the rink as well as during the duration of the phone call to my mom. I ramble a little bit about what we did, how Harlow's been feeling lately, and which dates we're looking at for her to come up and visit during pre-season.

The fact my woman told me she'd fly whoever I wanted down to visit whenever I wanted them to visit whether she uses her plane or pays for their ticket and that they could crash with us was some of the sweetest shit anyone's ever said to me. She tried to play it off like it wasn't a big deal, but it *was*. She was basically acknowledging that she accepts the fact I'm not going anywhere.

Not now.

Not ever.

And the way she slyly called it "our home" had me expressing my approval on top of a fresh pile of laundry that didn't exactly stay fresh after that.

Ending the call with Mom happens at the foot of the steps and just when I drop my jaw to announce to Harlow I'm back, she shouts, "What the fuck is that shit?!" A beat passes before another outburst. "That's not where grandma keeps the fucking cookies!"

Perplexity pierces my stare along the remainder of my walk.

That's a hockey reference.

We're not *in* season yet.

Fuck, we're not even in *training* season yet.

She also doesn't use terms for her beloved sport on other sports. She just shifts shoptalk the best she can—which is always fucking impressive—and keeps the conversation going.

Arriving in the doorway to our bedroom reveals to me a sight so unexpected I almost feel guilty for interrupting it.

Sprawled out in the middle of the bed is Harlow surrounded by empty root beer cans, a half-eaten pizza in the box, and partially nibbled on wings damn near spilling out of the container. Her attention and heated words seem to be completely plastered on the cooking show that's playing on the flat screen on the opposite wall. "How'd you fucking learn to make brownies, bitch?! With an Easy-Bake Oven?!"

I lean against the edge of the doorframe. "Strong chirping from someone who didn't even know there was difference between fudge brownies and cake brownies."

Her head instantly whips over to me, mirth skating around her expression. "I know it when it's my mouth."

"That's what she said."

The juvenile joke gets the giggle I was hoping for. "You're home early."

“Am I?”

“Yeah, I figured you’d go to The Net with the boys after. Have a few beers. Keep the whole teambuilding shit going.”

I let the corner of my lip curl upward. “Missed you too much.”

“Ugh. You’re such a fucking girl.”

Her response receives a slow nod and small chuckle.

“*Next time* go for a beer with the boys.”

“So you can chirp housewives dressed up as Disney Villains in peace?”

She playfully waggles her eyebrows. “Nah, chirping is *always* more fun with a teammate.”

Laughing a little loud thoughtlessly happens.

“I want you to go because bonding with the team is important, not just for them, but for *you*. Yeah, they need to respect you and welcome you into the club; however, you need *friends* in town, Brendan. Support. People to be around when I’m working. Or when I’m out of town for work. Or just when I’m sick of your face and you’re sick of mine.”

“Never gonna happen, baby.”

“Fine, when you’re sick of only talking to the twins for two hours straight and need adult interaction that *isn’t* with the eighty-year-old nanny.”

“We’re not hiring an eighty-year-old.”

“Fine, eighty-one.”

“For cripes sake, we’re not hiring someone that old to watch our kids.”

“Well, we damn sure aren’t hiring someone younger than me.”

“Oh, come on, Harlow, that’s not fair. You’re ancient.” The age jab causes her to fling an empty can my direction. It’s easy to dodge and that simple fact seems to irk her more. “How about I shower off and join you for the next few seshes of *What’s Cookin’, Good Lookin’*?”

She excitedly nods, picks up a lemon pepper wing—*my favorite*—and rewinds whatever portion it is she just missed.

I casually stroll to our ensuite bath, grin growing wider and wider by the step.

I’ve got a great job.

Great home.

An amazing fucking wife.

Kids on the way.

Real friends in the making.

Who knew the play of getting a little too wasted in Vegas could lead to shit this fucking phenomenal?

I will say this though...There's a tiny little voice in the back of my mind cautioning me to skate carefully.

To be aware that when a game's going *this* fantastic it doesn't stay that way.

That when your goals are this high and you've scored so well for this long, to brace yourself, not to take a midgame celebration shot because the worst penalties are yet to come.

I just hope we survive whatever relationship PK I know we'll be inevitably thrown into in the coming months.

I just hope we make it through the shit in the one way it matters.

As a team.

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CHAPTER 11



Harlow

Margot releases a piercing squeak from her position on the opposite side of the kitchen island. “You’re acting like the toddlers you don’t even have yet!”

I drop my mouth in preparation of a counter to the statement but change gears mid thought to ask, “Ooo, speaking of, how’s the nanny sitch? Any prospects?”

“No.” Her hands lift to rest on her maroon dress pants covered hips. “You’re whole ‘not younger than me’ parameter make the task a *tad* more difficult than I assumed it would be.”

Yeah, Brendan thought I was fucking bullshitting with him about that.

I wasn’t.

Secure or not with my own shit, there’s no fucking way I’m letting some chick closer to his age, come up in our house, with her everything is where it’s supposed to be body and her let me take my top off to prove it to you while your baby sleeps attitude. Fuck that. Fuck *all* of that and the skates they glided in on.

I’m not looking to make my life any messier than it already is.

And it’s already a pretty big, industrial sized pile of bullshit.

How and why Brendan chooses to stay are questions that would keep me up at night if he didn't fuck like a single guy fresh to the NHL with a line of puck bunnies just begging to be knocked up for a free ride.

Between his dick and his tongue, every night I'm home, I end up out like a rookie at his first training camp.

It's glorious.

And shit I can't stop bragging about to my besties.

"Back to the topic at hand," Margot commands on an unhappy wave of the palm. "You are going to this event. It is *not* up for negotiation."

Deciding to make a different play has me winding my Dalvegan green sweatshirt covered arms around the midsection it doesn't cover. "*But I'm-*"

"No," my best friend glares in disapproval, "you're not faking sick *twice* in one week to get out of shit you don't wanna do, Hennington."

"Fine," I plant my hands on the nearby counter, "but in my defense, budget meetings are one of the most boring things on this planet that they purposely fucking drag out and *I know that* because everything he had discussed during it was wrapped up in a short and sweet email, which had he just done to begin with could've saved us all some goddamn time. Time that could've been better spent tracking Tye Gray's complicated status with the Camelot Cheetahs that does not seem to be improving."

Frustration flares her hazel gaze at the time she squawks, "You're fucking going!"

"You know, *Cujo*," Brendan's voice suddenly joins the conversation as he strolls into the space, "I don't mind coming home to you being here, but I don't *love* coming home to you barking at my wife."

"And I don't love having to bark at her like she's *seven* instead of *thirty-seven*."

He slips a loving kiss on my cheek prior to wrapping a hand around the fridge handle. "What's going on?"

"A charity event."

"The one where the proceeds go to a foundation that helps shelter homeless children around the country?"

"Correct."

"Isn't that also the one that the prince of Doctenn-"

"*Second prince*."

"-runs and operates with his wife and the whiskey billionaire?"

"Wilcox. And yes, you're still correct."

“His comprehension skills have come such a long way during summer school,” I playfully poke, an action that prompts Brendan to deliver a swift swat to my ass.

“This is the same event where the best friend I haven’t met yet will be attending, right?”

“Right.” Margot’s face flashes the smallest cringe. “About that...avoid leaving them alone together for too long. Someone or something always ends up going missing or on fire.”

Brendan swings around with a cold bottle of water in his hands, concern caked on his complexion. “*Fire?*”

“That only happened three times!” I announce at the top of my lungs.

“*Only?!*” he croaks out, disbelief pumping deeper in his voice.

“The franchise donated a pair of season tickets to the auction and you and *your wife*,” my assistant tosses me an annoyed glare, “are expected to be there. Not only because you should be there supporting the woman who *always supports you Harlow Emery Hennington-*”

“Ohhhhhh, I forgot your initials are basically a giggle,” Brendan chirps in an amused mumble.

“-but because *this* is good PR. Because *this* shows the league, the media, the fans, that you are a real couple. A couple that cares. A fucking *franchise* that gives a fuck about bettering the community versus only themselves.”

We do.

And we have for as long as I can remember.

Yeah, Dad had the few on the books that looked good for tax deductibles and press shots; however, we had quite a few he didn’t boast about that we donated to. That I went to visit as a spokesperson for the team. Giving back to anyone who isn’t my mother has always been something I enjoyed doing. Whether it’s donating my time—by showcasing the barn on a Sunday morning to junior hockey players while explaining what coaches and agents and pro teams look for—or my money—like when giving a large anonymous donation to a foundation that works to keep kids in sports related after school activities in higher crime statistics areas—I *happily* do so.

I just don’t wanna do *this*.

Which shouldn’t make me the Wicked Witch of the Rink.

Margot sucks in a sharp breath, “*Plus-*”

“Oh, you’re still talking?” I mutter not so quietly to myself.

“*Plus*,” she repeats louder, stare now plastered to mine, “it would give the media more *positives* to focus on at the start of training camp rather than the *negatives* such as what a terrible idea it is to have Blanc be given the opportunity to *lead* an NHL team with having *no coaching experience* under his feet.”

Forfuckssake, I didn’t need the reminder.

I’ve seen the coverage.

I’ve heard the whispers.

Almost nut checked another GM last week during a cocktail hour where he was purposely trying to get me rattled.

I know that people think I have no fucking clue what I’m doing.

And on one glove, maybe I don’t.

Maybe I should’ve just modeled my choices after the last couple of Cup holders and hoped for the best.

But on the other glove?

My gut says to trust it.

That *Dad* would want me to trust it.

So, I am.

Even if means being the laughingstock at the beginning of the season.

Brendan curls a comforting arm around my lower waist, offering me the wordless support regarding the line of bullshit he knows has been causing me to stress eat strawberry Pop-Tarts—which totally *should* count as a fruit serving. “Why don’t you wanna go the event, Harlow?”

“Ugh,” I grunt and thoughtlessly collapse into his hold, “it’s like a whole fucking thing! Hair and makeup and dress! And I like *just* did that shit less than a fucking week ago! I *just* played a game of kiss ass and punch no one! I’m not in the mood for another session!”

“We are in the fucking season of kiss ass and punch no one!” Margot fiercely points at me. “*Deal. With. It.*”

He has a large gulp prior to investigating, “Do I need a tux?”

“No, because we’re not going.”

My best friend ignores my proclamation to reply, “Yes. It’s already in the closet upstairs.”

“You know my measurements?”

“The important ones.”

“Not *all* the important ones,” he playfully inserts on a waggle of the eyebrows.

“I loathe you less than Winslow but not by much.”

Her statement gets me snickering and sends her glare back to me.

“How much time do we have?”

“We’re not going,” I repeat a little louder to indicate I’m serious. “We’re having grilled chicken and farro and roasted cauliflower and a few diced jalapenos to give all the blandness a kick and binging *Baking It*.”

“Stick tap for wanting a healthy meal,” Brendan lovingly states at the same time he drops his attention down to me. “But-”

“No. Let me just have the victory.”

“*But* we’re gonna have to do all that shit tomorrow because we’re doing *this* today.”

“I’m growing *two* people inside of me! Don’t I get two extra votes?!”

“No,” they both state in tandem prompting my jaw to tumble down in shock.

“Limo will be here in ninety,” my best friend announces to us both.

“That’s enough of a window to hose off.”

There isn’t even a chance for me to move my mouth.

“And if you wrap up your whining *now*, you can jump in on the assist.”

His hockey reference being tied to his impossible to resist smirk and equally impossible to resist cock is what gets me caving as though I have no lady balls whatsoever.

“We all know you’re going, Hennington,” Margot states after a heavy sigh. “So, stop this useless fighting, pick out which dress of the two I already have pulled for you that you wanna wear, and go get fucked a new attitude.”

Brendan abandons the bottle on the counter and uses both hands to take mine. Hunger in his glare begins to glow along with his guiding me past her and in spite of every effort I make to find my strong voice, I breathlessly answer, “Whichever shows more tits and less tummy.”

“Done.” My assistant retrieves her cell from her pocket. “I’ll pack your clutch that way I *know* you have hand sanitizer to cleanse yourself of all *those* germs and a ginger pill in case you get a nausea spell. Alyssa will be here for hair and makeup in forty-five, so clock’s ticking.”

His grin transposes to one much more wolfish. “Probably shouldn’t waste another minute of play, huh?”

I chomp down on my bottom lip to stop the whimper from escaping.

Ugh.

Not only does he get me, but he *gets* me.

Doesn't matter if we're in or out of the sack.

My husband knows exactly what it takes to please me.

Going from glowering in my green sweats at the kitchen island to screaming behind the tie my husband plans to wear tonight while wildly riding him on the chase lounge happens in what feels like a single whistle blow.

One of the best things about Brendan is how easily it is for us to shift gears.

Whether it's from fighting to fucking or business to babies.

Our same team mentality seems to have no bounds and never having had that with someone in a romantic sense before him just has this way of repeatedly signing the mental contract in my mind that staying married longer than ninety days was the right call.

Being with Brendan Brickley will *always* be the right call.

A sharp, stinging pop is delivered to my backside causing me to grit my teeth harder.

Grind them into the expensive fabric I can't wait to see dangling around his neck all night.

"That's it, baby," the man I'm undeniably in love with growls on another pop to my ass. "*Ride that dick for me like my favorite little slut.*"

Moaning with my entire body is mindlessly done. I throw myself into the steadily increasing frenetic rhythm, rocking faster and faster, releasing higher and higher pitched screeches on each fast-paced jerk forward, enamored by the way every one of them caresses my clit.

Fills me and splits me.

Forces the muscles to release the same sets of screams my mouth is.

I lean back, anchoring myself to his legs, spreading mine further, offering all of myself like some sacred gift I know he would never reject.

"*Such a good little whore, screaming for me...*"

His perfectly timed amalgamation of praise and degradation gets my pussy weeping more, drowning his dick in gratitude of his approval while simultaneously swelling in warning that I can't take much more of what he's delivering.

Brendan barbarically groans, attaches one set of fingers onto my frantically bucking hip, and uses the other to execute a short slap to the place I least expect it. The screams from having my clit spanked like he just

did my ass are so strong I nearly spit out the fabric yet am immediately commanded otherwise, *“Don’t you fucking dare drop that tie.”*

My next whimper is out of objection; however, the one that follows is out of compliance.

Another sharp swat is given to the sensitive area prompting me to scream in consent.

Content.

Be impressed at the angle he’s managing to manipulate around my stomach and excited for the twinges of pain providing me a new level of pleasure.

“What a good little whore, taking my cock like this.”

More taps of the tingling nub.

More screams soaking the balled-up material.

“Scream like you missed me today,” he demands at the same time I can feel his shaft somehow grow stiffer. *“Scream like you fucking missed this dick.”*

Piping hot pulsations begin without my permission, promising him an orgasm like it’s the only goal he ever needs to make in order to be happy, pushing me to violently toss myself into the salacious lashes. Pushing me to heartlessly claw at the skin underneath my nails and surrender to the nonstop rapture being released with every strike. Torrid torrents untiringly coat his cock, soak his base, his balls, the cushion under his ass only amplifying in amount and magnitude when I’m finally propelled just past my breaking point.

“Fuckfuckfuck,” my husband hisses behind clenched teeth, “yeah... that’s right, baby, keep fucking screaming.” The words are huffed. Grow airier by the passing second. *“Keep screaming while you fucking come on my cock.”*

Howls so heavy and harsh that they burn my lungs are shot to the ceiling while my hips ferociously continue to lurch forward enduring more slaps to the clit, obsessed with the delicious way they burn. Enamored by the way they prolong the euphoria being pounded into me.

“Keep screaming until I’m fucking coming, too.”

Determination to follow the order leads to me sadistically screeching and screaming and scraping during each additional grind. Spit trickles past the tie, down to my tits, where the hand that was previously holding my hip abandons it to swirl the fluid around my nipple prior to giving it a hard

yank. The wailing that's conjured not only brings tears to the corners of my eyes but searing streams of cum. Brendan grunts and grumbles as his dick rabidly thrashes, branding me his on the inside before slipping out just enough to mark me on the outside as well.

You know I was planning to hose off already.

He didn't *have to* make the shit a fucking necessity.

Our shared shower should go quickly—after all the clock is ticking and we're toying with overtime—but instead it's slow.

Much slower than I know it should be.

He uses the moments under the hot water to kiss my shoulders and whisper sweet sentiments no one else ever has. He lathers me while teasing me about the shower cap I'm sporting and washing it all away between tickles meant to make me squirm in a puerile fashion. Words of love are attached to actions of the same sentiment allowing us to both warmly transition from the filthy fuck buddies we were behaving like in the closet to the adoring husband and wife duo the media has heard we are.

They don't typically see it because I fly solo more often than not.

It's *my job* to be the face.

His job is to be the padding.

And thankfully, it's a job he's done pretty well since the moment he touched down in Texas.

Getting dressed, made up, and accessorized happens at a stressfully swift pace and luckily for me, I attached myself to someone who *doesn't* need the same apple when it comes to these situations that I do meaning by the time I'm good to go so is he.

The only wardrobe advice he requests is whether or not he can wear his eyebrow piercing or if he needs to keep it removed, wanting to look nothing but "respectable" for our big appearance.

Ugh.

Hearing those words damn near has me trying to delay our walk to the waiting vehicle in order to express my gratitude in the form of a handy j.

Our ride in the limo is filled with less sexy talk and a shit ton of last minute conversational reminders that I wear the C in this marriage on camera and that like the one bearing the A, he looks to me for guidance rather than just assuming he knows the best play to make.

The second we've stepped deeper inside past the last line of photographers outside the event room, Brendan leans over to brush his lips

against my ear, “Did you say *all* tits and no tummy for your dress, baby? Because that’s what the fuck *I’m* seeing.”

I adjust the arm that’s looped around his on a playful poke. “Is that a problem?”

“It will be if they can spot my semi in any of those photos.”

Needing to hide my girlish giggles leads to me burying my face against the arm of his jacket while my clutch wielding hand delivers a sweet swat to his stomach.

God, I don’t know what I love more, the fact that I turn him on so much or that he isn’t ashamed to say it.

Seriously.

Is there any woman on the planet who hates hearing how fuckable someone finds her?

“Champagne?” a waiter politely offers, forcing me to unhide my slightly reddened complexion.

“For her? *No*,” Letty’s voice unexpectedly interjects as she grabs one of the flutes being offered. “For me? *Yes*.” She tips it towards him with a wink. “And keep them coming.”

He bows his head in acknowledgement and presents the selection to Brendan. “Sir?”

“Yeah, no. Cheap champagne isn’t really my shit.”

The male’s brow pinches together. “It’s not-”

“It is,” my husband casually cuts off, expression unbothered. “Events like this may cater to higher clientele but unless specifically told otherwise, you operate like any other. You serve cheap shit you got a good wholesale price on in expensive glasses to give the illusion they’re consuming something better than they are. Most either aren’t champagne connoisseurs therefore it’s an easy misconception to sell, or they prefer something directly from the full-service bar, which is where the real money is for both the event as well as the bartenders.”

Shock sends Letty’s mouth to her high heels and the waiter elsewhere. “How the fuck do you know that?”

“When you’ve only really had one type of job, you get to know the ins and outs of it.” He innocently shrugs before extending an open palm her direction. “Bricks.”

“Letty,” she shakes in return, although her gaze soars to me. “And I thought you were married to a guy named Brendan?”

“My name *is* Brendan,” my husband corrects on a small chuckle, “but only my mom and my wife call me that.”

Letty nods her understanding and allows herself to grin brightly. “It’s so good to finally meet you!”

“Same.”

The warmth in his tone pushes me into doing something unforeseen.

I nonchalantly adjust my hold and protectively pull him closer.

Why?

Fuck. Me. I don’t know.

It’s just what my gut is telling me to do.

Am I afraid he’s gonna leave me for my best friend?

No.

Could I blame him for thinking about banging her at least once?

Also no.

She’s fucking *gorgeous*. The *literal* definition of gorgeous. Won *awards* for being gorgeous. And is one of the most popular, beloved faces in Hollywood.

I’d actually think something was fundamentally wrong with him if the thought *never* crossed his mind.

I just...I don’t need *her* thinking the same things about him.

She can have any dude in the world she wants...except this one.

As if privy to my private thoughts, Brendan unhooks us so that he can rest his arm in its favorite small of my back position. The one that lets his hand rest on my hip and allows his fingers to steal a graze of my ass during “adjustments”. The one that he uses to not only tell the world I’m his but that he’s *mine*.

Fuck. Me.

I probably shouldn’t love this little shit as much as I do.

However, I *do* love it.

And him.

Maybe...too much sometimes.

“Gross,” Letty juvenily gags, “you two are even more nauseatingly adorable in person.”

Light laughter leaves us both as she has a sip of her bubbly beverage.

“And you can both relax,” she insists on a casual gesture to our bodies, “while I think you’re great *together*, neither of you are great for *me*.” Her

light brown mirth filled stare shifts to mine. “Although, we both know if we played for the same team-”

“We would’ve been married straight out of high school,” I smoothly finish with a sexy smirk and extend my clutch wielding hand for a low fist bump from her.

She taps it using her champagne free hand at the same time she states, “*Exactly.*”

“Wait, what?” Brendan croaks, voice cracking in noticeable concern that gets her and I laughing again.

“Nothing.” My best friend smiles in her signature fashion, which effortlessly brushes away the spritz of tension. “You know you honestly don’t look any younger in person than you do in your pics which is what I was assuming was gonna happen.”

It’s inconceivable to miss the amusement in his tone. “Oh, so, you’ve seen pics of me?”

“You knocked up and married my best friend—*both without my consent*—of course I’ve fucking seen pics of you. And Googled you. And stalked your social media account. And had a friend in the FBI do a little colon digging.”

Laughter leaves the three of us as we slowly move further into the *Midsummer Night’s Dream* decorated space.

“That’s...thorough,” Brendan comments around chuckles.

“I don’t fuck around when it comes to my family.” Her expression hardens in a way that gets me smiling. “However, for the record? I *absolutely* would’ve given you my blessing,” Letty informs between additional sips. “From what I’ve gathered, you’ve seen enough of the world not to ditch her to see more, Hennington’s balls aren’t bigger than yours, you fuck like a porn star with a top tier Only Fans page, *and* you have somehow trained her to watch things *other* than only sports related material and my movies.”

She’s shot a narrowed glare. “Yeah, I don’t like how you said trained.”

“And I don’t like that you had to lose a bet before you’d watch *The Best Man* with me.”

Annoyance briefly lifts my gaze to the ceiling. “*Forfuckssake*, you act like you wrote and starred in the damn thing.”

“That’s the only other way I’d get you to watch something with that much drama and that little sports.” Letty hits my husband with another kind

expression. “Also, kudos for showing up to boring shit like this for spousal support. I’m really glad you came with her.”

“With her...,” his head slightly bounces back and forth, “in her...on her...” It’s his turn to flash a humor bearing smirk. “Same shit, right?”

There’s no stopping me and my best friend muttering in tandem, “Nice...”

What can I say?!

We’ve loved a well-played dirty line since we were both eight discovering much naughtier shit than I’m pretty sure eight-year-olds had any business learning.

Both of us extend him a round of low bones that conjures more laughter.

Our childish chuckling however is suddenly cut short by me spotting an unpredicted face shoveling shrimp down his gullet. “Speaking of coming... any clue why the fuck *Page* of all people is here?”

“No, but I can openly say I don’t like the word *coming* and *Page* being in the same sentence when it leaves your fucking mouth,” Brendan bites, barely bothering to mumble his displeasure.

“Oooo, a jelly belly, and I ain’t talkin’ about the candy,” Letty needlessly stabs the situation.

Reprimanding her isn’t allowed due to he who is obviously irking my husband seeing me see him which encourages him to abandon the guzzling to come socialize.

“And he’s headed this way...”

“Can we head the *opposite* way?” Brendan not so quietly suggests prompting my best friend to giggle louder.

It only takes a few short strides for Page to appear where we’re gathered and during each one, the hold on my hip grows tighter.

Dominating.

Almost bruising and I fucking love it.

“GM,” Page sweetly greets to my surprise, smile softer than normal.

“Page,” I politely retort on a nod.

He shifts his attention to my best friend rather than my partner. “*Letty*.”

“Page.”

Missing the hurt in Brendan’s voice is practically impossible, “You’ve met Letty before?”

“Of course.” Page arrogantly grins at the same time he shoves both hands into his suit pockets. “You’re the one who’s new here, bud. Not me.”

Letty leaks a dramatic squeak that's accompanied by a side eye my direction.

Okay, but what does she expect me to do?

They're grown ass men.

Grown ass men who *work* together might I add.

They've gotta deal with their shit *their* way.

At least according to Margot.

Evidently letting them scrap it out in the middle of the ice on skates is a "liability" issue.

Ugh, fucking politics.

"And now that we're on the subject of *being here*," I segue what I hope is smoothly, "what *are* you doing here, Page?"

"Blanc voluntold me that I was the one delivering the season passes for auction." His broad shoulders innocently bounce. "Guess he figured I could use the good publicity."

My retort is rather thoughtless, "We all could."

A familiar phrase instantly escapes my player, "Yes b'y." Our exchanged grins are promptly followed by a wise suggestion, "What do you say we pose for a photo together at the auction table, GM? Show that we're a *united* team when it comes to giving back and caring for the community?"

"That's actually a really good idea, Page." Brendan's mouth twitches to object but isn't allowed adequate time. "Mingle with Letty for a few, babe." I cut my gaze to her. "And don't get my husband shitfaced for your own sick, twisted amusement."

"I would never-"

"McKay. Cancun."

Her mouth immediately shifts to say something else. "Okay, but he wasn't your *husband*."

"Letty."

"We could all just go," Brendan rushes to counter.

"It'll hit better if it's just the GM and player." My hand gently lifts to cup his cheek. "I'll only be gone a few."

He reluctantly nods his understanding.

Just as I prepare to slip out of his grasp, he drops his mouth to mine, smashing them together with such force it damn near knocks the wind out of me. Having his tongue dart inside proves to not be enough by the way it

aggressively rolls and drags and refuses to leave until I acknowledge its power with a light whimper.

At that sound, Brendan abruptly part us and cockily coos, “Don’t take too long, baby.”

Prying my lids open to allow my eyes to meet his takes all the energy I can fathom. The sight of the man I’m crazy about needing an assist in what can only be described as a crucial moment has me shooting him a sweet wink of reassurance.

While I like the *benefits* of this pissing contest—getting my mouth banged—I don’t like seeing him so unsure about us.

Me.

We’ve never been plagued with *those* particular types of doubt—at least not out loud—and I don’t wanna start now.

Page and I wordlessly wander away from those I love yet the instant we’re out of earshot, he casually states, “You look really nice this evening, Hennington.”

I give my low plunging, high slitted, flowy gown a quick once over prior to responding, “I do, don’t I?”

He lightly chortles along our route to the back corner that’s near the stage. “Most women would’ve said thank you.”

“Yeah, but I’m not most women.”

“No, you are not,” he concurs in an interesting tone. “You’re better. *Best kind.*”

The accented Newfoundland phrase successfully pulls a grin to my lips. He’s not *always* awful.

I remember when my dad signed him.

I remember the heart he used to have.

The hope.

The spirit of a champion before money, fame, and ego all scored goals on his open heart.

Part of me thinks that between the player dump and new coach, the old Page is returning, but the other part of me isn’t dumb enough to believe you can teach an old athlete new tricks.

Our arrival at the camera clad area is immediately recognized. Flashes go off and like professionals, the two of us squeeze together for photo after photo. We candidly laugh at jokes the other makes. Share small embraces to provide the illusion there has *never* been any tension between the two of us.

We even pose very closely near the ticket sign up like we're sharing a secret. Each picture will give off the party line that we are the hockey family we've been selling ourselves all summer to be.

The truth is, I don't want it to be a lie.

I want it to be fucking real.

And I have been working tirelessly to make that happen from the minute the reigns landed in my hands.

Once we're finally done with our media montage, Page suggests something else to stun me for a second time. "Dance?"

The shift in music syncs to the one of my eyebrows. "Is that English?"

Page gives me hearty chuckle and shakes his head. "*Dies at ya.*"

"Now, I *know* that shit is Newfish."

He extends his open palm my direction. "Come on, Hennington. Dance with me."

Digging my golden kitten heels literally and figurately further into the ground is attached to a counter. "Mmm...do you dance better than you skate?"

"I skate like a pro!"

"You skate like you *wanna be* a pro."

Expecting his temper to flare prompts me to brace myself for the blast, yet when I'm hit by more laughs instead, I'm knocked a bit unsteady.

Okay.

Whistle on the play.

Illegal line change!

Can't have dick Page and...non-dick Page swapping at unapproved times.

"We're dancing," he playfully proclaims and grabs my clutch free hand. "And we're doing it now."

"I see that," I snicker in return as I'm slightly dragged to the area closest to the instrumental cover band.

While these stuffy events are awful enough between the uptight food choices and snobbish clothing options—both made even more unbearable when you have to deal with them completely sober—the choice to have a classically trained ensemble play shit like Kool & The Gang and Melissa Etheridge and fucking Sting is borderline new-age torture.

Add in having to slow dance to "I Turn to You" by Christina Aguilera with the one player I'd bet money is going to send me into early labor and

I'm fairly certain someone should put a call into the Geneva Convention for unsportsmanlike warfare.

Page places his hand respectfully on my hip and clutches the other with his. "Haven't done this shit since Ridley's wedding last summer."

"Ohhhhhh," the memory has me scooting closer to him, "when he married Taylor Chen right before training camp with Boston but then found out right after camp that she had been sleeping with his brother their *entire* relationship, anytime he was on the road where he was—she knew—wheeling road rockets."

"That'd be the one."

"Then a week later it was revealed she was knocked up and had *no clue* which brother was the father."

He lets loose a small snicker at the same time he shakes his head. "That would've had me right rotted."

"Who the fuck wouldn't be?" A large, exasperated huff fills the space between us that I swore there was more of a few seconds ago. "I was actually fucking *relieved* when Ramirez reported on it. Thought maybe... *just maybe*...the drama would keep him off his game."

"Didn't."

"Not. Much. Does." Another exhausted sigh escapes. "I want that to be us someday, you know? The team so good...so fucking good...*nothing* stops them from dominating."

Page leans in a little closer and quietly promises, "*We will, Hennington. Trust me.*"

"Hate to interrupt," Brendan suddenly interjects, startling the two of us in opposite directions. "But uh...Letty needs you for more photos, Page." My husband smoothly slides me from his rival's possession into his. "Don't worry, bud. I can handle shit from here."

Brendan's wink causes Page to noticeably glare; however, he does the nondramatic thing shockingly yet again.

He bows out with a nod.

Locates Letty.

Dismisses himself to tend to what I can only assume was a masterfully concocted cockblock plan by my bestie.

I'm gently spun in a slow circle for no particular reason prior to having his other hand glide down my spine to rest right above my backside. The

instant we begin swaying to what I'm fairly certain is a Fall Out Boy song, I tease, "Should we send you to the box for interference?"

"*Fuck me...*" Guilt doesn't hesitate to glow in his brown gaze. "Is it really that obvious?"

"Your jealousy? Uh...*yeah.*"

"What do you want from me, baby?" His shoulder shrug is followed by the lowering of his hand even more. "I couldn't stand the sight of seeing my woman in another man's arms, *especially* not that one."

Girlish giggles only he seems capable of conjuring are the prize granted for his confession.

"We owe Letty a post-game press pass for this assist by the way." He lets the corners of his lip curl upward at the same time he rests his forehead against mine. "And um...we might wanna discuss who exactly is wearing the G on their jerseys because as of right now we're looking at being called for too many godparents on the ice."

The hockey reference along with the topic warrants another snicker.

God, is it possible to fall *more* in love with someone you're already in love with?

Shouldn't that be a whistle on the play?

But you know what?

I'll just fucking say it.

If I've gotta do two minutes in the box, I don't think there's another man on this planet I wanna do them beside.

And really...isn't that the definition of true love?

CHAPTER 12



Brendan

Charlotte Spalding, one of the new hire ice girls, looks up at me with her bright brown eyes wide and her barely covered chest protruding forward, “Am I doing this right, Bricks?”

Is she doing *what* right exactly?

Dangling herself like a baby bunny begging to be eaten by a wolf or—to stay in theme with our mascot—a dragon?

Because if *that’s* the fucking question then without a doubt.

She is *definitely* doing that shit right, just like she’s definitely making it crystal fucking clear to me why there is a strong no fraternization policy in these walls.

The ice girls—the chicks that clear the ice during the game, hype up the crowd, and behave like cheerleaders without the pom poms—are respectfully...*insanely. Fucking. Hot.*

Every single one of them.

And because Harlow knows what the fuck she’s doing, she got them in all colors and sizes.

Okay, not *actually* all sizes, they’re all roughly in the same athletic shape category, but even within that there’s a surprising amount of diversity. Blondes, brunettes, redheads. Curls. Straight. Bobbed. Blue eyes. Green.

Brown. There's even one girl who has two different colors. Some have tits. Some have more ass. Some have thighs that belong ear muffing dudes out here. We've got White females, Black, Hispanic, Asian, and this season they hired this Israeli chick who looks like a fucking Gal Gadot stunt double. As for careers—because this shit really is just a hobby for most of them—they've got a wide range from dental hygienists to city librarians to a fucking solar consultant.

Basically, our ice girls are a pack of Skittles.

One that our team clearly wants to taste.

Self-excluded.

Now, if I wasn't the happily married bastard that I am—and I really the fuck am despite how hard Geoffrey finds it to believe—I wouldn't be the exception to the situation.

I'd be finding ways to help myself to several handfuls.

These women are...*tempting* to the unsatisfied bro.

Like...the whole Eve says eat the apple, you consume the whole orchard level of tempting.

Again, I absolutely fucking get why the no fraternization policies exist and why there are literal teams arranged to keep them separate from the players whenever necessary.

"You missed a few spots," Craig casually informs and points back out at the ice.

She hits me a girly pout, flutter of the eyelashes, and skates away with her shovel.

"Crew has their work cut out for them this season," my boss mumbles under his breath while we resume watching the unofficial practice in session.

"I'll say."

A small beat passes prior to him stating, "Girls need their skates sharpened by end of the week."

"It's already on the scheddie for me to start tomorrow."

An impressed grunt slips free. "I see you're getting the hang of shit."

"Trying to."

"Keep it up. Boys need that level of dedication in the barn."

Nodding in agreement is easy.

They *do* need that shit.

And that's why I'm glad I'm still here.

I mean I would've gone back to bartending if I had to, but fuck me, am I thankful I didn't have to. I love my job. Am I out here fighting fires or rescuing babies from wild animals? No. But my shit still has purpose. Meaning. Faulty equipment could cost someone their life whether people think about that shit or not. Concussions. Head injuries. Bleeding out on the ice because of fucked up protection. There's a lot more that goes into this gig than sharpening skates and ordering buckets or biscuits. It's been interesting to learn. The challenges of tasks have pushed me in ways I would've never expected. Plus, it's fun to "study" with Harlow who's basically a walking, talking, fucking—pun intended—hockey dictionary.

Although, I prefer putting the *dick* in dictionary.

Huh.

That was like a pervy dad joke.

I gotta work on my *non* pervy ones for the twins.

"This shit *will* fucking work!" Page shouts in his captain's face, summoning my attention that direction.

"It's not gonna fucking work with real bodies, blocking real shots, PP or not!" Eeyore hollers back.

"I'll fucking prove it!"

"You will *not* fucking waste game time trying to pull trick shit that could get us fucked over!"

"I'll prove it right fucking now!" He whips his head to where we're lingering and points. "Bricks, get on the fucking ice!"

I wanna say no.

I wanna tell him to get bent.

That I'd rather fucking skate with the ice girls who are having their torsos measured for enough skin to be showing as they exit the rink than be a trained chimp in his circus.

But I don't *get* to say no.

A "Rink Bitch Rule" is what Page calls that when overhead isn't around to hear.

Guess he's still a bit bitter about having to greet all the players under the Dragon banner in cut off jean shorts, bikini tops, and cowboy hats.

Hey, a bet's a bet.

You'd pay up in Vegas if you lost, and I play by Vegas rules.

Afterall, I hit the physical embodiment of the jackpot last time I was there.

Craig nudges me forward forcing me to grab my stick and exit the home bench area to join whatever shitty idea he won't part with.

"Stand the fuck over there," he points to the area in front of the tender, "and help out Eeyore." He snatches up the puck near his skate. "I know it's hard but try to make me look *less* fucking amazing."

"Not hard at all," I counter just loud enough that Cap hears.

He chuckles under his breath, shakes his head, and takes a defensive stance opposite of mine.

"McVie," Page calls out to his number one fan, "like we practiced. Aye?"

"You got it."

His dropping the puck in one of the neutral face-off zones provides him whatever run up time he requires to complete the planned play. Knowing I have to watch the slippery black object as much as the person directing it pushes me to remain in my stance. Only glance at where McVie is headed and pay more attention to where Page is trying to get to. The harsh swipe from McVie sends the puck around the rink, along the wall, right behind the goal, an action that prompts Page to throw his shoulder into the nearby boards to stop its trajectory. In an impressive set of movements, he gets the puck back to the ice, back into play, and takes the shot without hesitation. Unfortunately for him, Eeyore's frame is exactly where he promised it would be.

Blocking the shot.

But on a double fuck you to Page, that's not the only thing he does.

He manages to get the puck in my vicinity and yells, "*Fucking wheel, Bricks!*"

It takes less than five seconds for me to go from warm body there to embarrass Page to skating like my ass is on fire. Keeping low to the ground, not bent from the waist, but maintaining my shoulders nice and level—words I've heard Blanc bark during speed drills—propels me out of the defensive zone, through the neutral, and allows for a perfect setup for a slapshot. While I'm aware of Page's hostile pursuit, determination to regain the puck as much as dignity, it doesn't matter.

I listen to my wife's voice screaming in the back of my head to take the shot on the empty net.

Doesn't matter this isn't a real game.

That there's no ranking at stake.

No agent watching for possible representation.

You play like there fucking is or don't bother playing at all.

Pulling back, I channel my inner Pronger and smack the puck towards the goal.

Page hustles to dive in front of the shot, but once more, it's irrelevant. He throws himself on the ice too late, missing the chance to stop the small object from soaring into the unprotected territory.

"Goaaaaallllll!" Craig shouts from where he's watching, an announcement that has Page cursing at the top of his lungs.

Well, I'm pretty sure he's swearing.

Sometimes that shits hard to tell when he taps into his native Newfoundland side.

"Nice fucking clapper, bro!" Eeyore enthusiastically proclaims as the other players whose "team" I was momentarily on rally to celly with me.

"Sexy gino, bud," Snowman compliments with a playful punch to the shoulder.

"*Lucky. Fucking. Shot!*" Page complains during his march our direction.

"Come on, Page," Eeyore arrogantly chortles, "you know the deal. They don't ask..."

"They ask how many," the rest of us finish, joining him in on a laugh.

"*Fuck!*" Page yells again at the same time he breaks his stick over his leg.

For cripes sake, I wish he'd learn to tantrum differently. I get tired of ordering those fucking things for him.

"Callin' it," Eeyore announces to the group in a nature that informs there's no room for argument.

"Brewskies?" Snowman suggests to everyone participating in the unofficial practice. "First rounds on me."

"Can't," Eeyore immediately denies like I've come to expect. "I gotta get-"

"Your kid," Snowman brushes off on an eyeroll. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, we know." He hits his captain with a playful grin. "Wasn't talkin' to you, but the other boys." Everyone else agrees to join him and afterward, he turns his sights to me. "You comin' or what, Bricks?"

Maybe I shouldn't?

Maybe I should wrap up and get home?

I mean I haven't seen my woman all day due to her fighting what might be a stomach bug. Fuck, it even kept her in the house versus in the office, which she didn't even fight Margot about this morning—the real red flag something was up. The few texts I've received state that she's mainly been sleeping and hydrating, both things she needs.

Maybe I should go?

Give her a little more time alone to sleep uninterrupted.

Hearing Harlow's voice once more in the back of my mind demanding I do that is what convinces me to nod. "Yeah, fuck it. Why not? You're buyin'."

Snowman laughs the loudest, yet the rest of the group chuckles along with him.

Post a quick shower in Harlow's office—perks of being married to the GM—I shoot her a text to let her know where I'm headed and drive over alone rather than ride with any of the players.

Yard Sale, the hockey themed pub named after the well known action, in The Locker District is packed. And according to Snowman it's always packed, which is the main reason he loves it with the other being that they're recognized but not bombarded. Craig calls it similar to that of The Viper room, a comparison that's lost on all of us given the clueless expression we all share.

We're sat on the opposite side of the room from the front door but close enough to the bar for us to talk shit to the bartender who evidently is a huge fan. Fun laid back conversation between our group and him cause something inside me to twitch that hasn't since I stepped off the plane months ago.

I guess...part of me *misses that*.

Being back there.

Demonstrating my knowledge.

Mixing skills.

Meeting new people.

Shit talking with regulars.

Bonding over stupid shit.

And I guess part of me misses my old bosses even though we still text when we have time.

I wouldn't say being here, drinking a damn good glass of Runt's is making me homesick because *this* is my home—Harlow, the team, the goats

—but I can say it is making me think back on how quickly shit has changed.

How quickly shit can always change.

Especially when you're not expecting it to.

Craig bounces after just the one beer, but when I attempt the same shit Snowman puts an instant halt to it. "Come on, bro. You gotta stay for one more after that Connor McDavid shit you pulled at pracky."

"It wasn't *that* good," Page grunts from his space directly across from me.

"Oh, then your trick shot attempt was just *that bad*," Snowman taunts with a childish grin.

"Clearly McVie was a bit mauzy on the instructions," he grumbles as he picks up his glass.

Rather than argue with his leader and commander, he innocently shrugs.

Fucked up thing is...I almost feel bad for McVie. Like he'd be such a better player and just a better fucking *person* if he could unlatch his mouth from Page's balls.

"I can tell you one thing I'm not *mauzy* about you Newfish fuck, and that's the group of bunnies at twelve o'clock coming our way." Snowman let's his grin grow dangerously wide. "*Come. To. Daddy.*"

"Nope," I chuckle while lifting my beer. "You should definitely not say that shit."

Laughter erupts at the table prompting the already prowling females to speed up their process of reaching us.

Naturally, the young, energetic, bouncy group of strictly blondes, fawn and latch onto all of the players, including the married ones. The team as a whole welcomes the attention. Eats it up. Says trite textbook pick up line shit that makes me roll my eyes and prepare to bail now that they're properly occupied.

Scooting my chair back to begin my exit becomes my move yet is unexpectedly stopped by a female that's obviously late to their puck bunny party.

She plops herself in the seat right over my shoulder, smiles wide, and introduces herself. "I'm Lexi!"

Angling myself to better face her is done at the same time I inform, "I'm not a player."

To my surprise, she doesn't seem deterred. "Friend?"

“Manager.” My face unconsciously scrunches prior to my correction. “Er...*assistant equipment manager*.”

“Not sensing any SDE about it,” she warmly states on a smirk and pulls her hair to one side of her face, “so tell me your name.”

Reluctance occurs effortlessly. “Bricks.”

“Sexy,” she coos at the same time she tosses one long toned leg over the other. “How long you been with the team?”

“Um...since...*really* late spring or *really* early summer depending on how you tell time.”

“With a clock like everyone else.”

Her snarky comment causes me to lightly chuckle. “Regular or hockey?”

This time she giggles and shoots me a small nod of approval. “No SDE and you’ve got rizz?” She takes a small bite of pink, glossed lips before teasing, “You *sure* you’re not a player?”

“I like *just* graduated to fucking Puckhead.”

Lexi giggles a second time and does something else unexpected. “Let me buy you a drink? Talk shop for a bit?”

Another wave of hesitation hits harder than the first.

Probably *not* the best idea.

I should probably go home.

Check on Harlow.

See if she needs anything rather than stay here surrounded by half-dressed cheerleader wannabes.

“Ask him about his Connor McDavid moment!” Snowman shouts from his position beside McVie.

“It wasn’t that good,” I bashfully deny.

“God, I’d ride him like the Grey Hound from here to the mitten,” Lexi loudly coos.

Curiosity immediately grabs a hold of my judgement. “You’re from the mitten?”

“A2 originally.”

“No fucking shit!” Excitement has me tossing a hand in the air. “That’s where I moved from!”

“No shit!” She squeaks in return. “No yeah, you *have* to let me buy you a drink now. You are the *first person* I’ve met in this state who even fucking knows where that is!”

I warmly chuckle and nod in understanding. "It's fucking wild, right? How many people don't know what that shit is?"

"They're just jelly they can't use their hand to give directions."

Louder laughter leaves us both.

"Whatcha drinkin'?"

"Runt's."

"Good choice." Lexi gives my shoulder a cordial pat and pops up to go place an order.

Alright.

I'll stay for just one more beer.

It's been...fucking...*forever* since I really talked to anyone about Michigan. I mean, yeah, Harlow listens to the shit I miss or orders me specific apple jam through my mom from a special orchard in Applecourt, but she doesn't *get* mitten shit. And not in the same way I don't get all the hockey shit.

Sports can be taught.

Mitten shit has to be *felt*.

This'll be good.

We'll reminiscence a little bit about the last place we both lived, I'll get rid of the tiny bit of longing for it that got stirred up, and I'll bond with the boys, which will also make my wife happy.

It's basically a social situation hat trick.

What could possibly go wrong?

CHAPTER 13



Harlow

How fucked up is this shit?

I spend the evening texting *his* mother about my passing vertigo—making sure I didn't need to go to the hospital—crying my eyes out because I had to call *his* mother for help rather than reach out to my dad and watching *Is It Cake?* since *he* couldn't stop fucking raving about how fun it is while this motherfucker was out enjoying a hefty amount of barely legal pussy.

Hopefully all legal.

Margot started fact checking that right when she texted me the newest social storm of the season, I so did *not* want to be the center of.

Fuckmylife, who I wouldn't blow right about now to have Folgers instead of fuckery in my cup this fine October morning.

The flashing light of a text having come in calls to me to check it.

To guarantee more drama isn't being fed to the llama fucking up my day already.

Letty: PAP AND SOC SUX.

Her short and sweet reassurance is gifted a grin I know she can't see but probably feels.

Paparazzi and social media *do* fucking suck. And she of all people knows that shit firsthand. She also deals with it much more often than I do.

Right as I'm about to put my device back down a text alert from Winslow slides onto the screen prompting me to open it rather than exit out.

Winslow: WTF?! How much of that shit is true?!?!

That's what I wanna fucking know, too.

"Morning, baby," Brendan sleepily greets upon his entering the kitchen and my placing of my phone back down. "You're up early." He flashes his sweet smirk which I typically adore yet currently find repulsive. "Thought it was my turn to make us coffee."

"It is."

His expression immediately becomes playful. "Then why do you already have some?"

"Couldn't wait."

"How long you been up?"

"Couple hours."

"Why didn't you wake my ass up?"

"Wasn't really sure *when* you had gone to bed."

The word choice successfully stops him in his tracks. Causes him to abandon his stroll to the coffemaker. Face me with his full attention.

I clutch the "Get Pucked" mug in my hands aggressively tighter and ask in the most even tone I can muster up, "Exactly what time did you get home last night?"

He folds his arms across his work polo covered chest. "I don't know the *exact* time."

"Would you say it was before or after midnight?"

"Um...before?"

"You sure? Or were you doing shots of tequila and playing *cornhole* at The Net to some shitty Nirvana cover band?"

"Given how *oddly specific* you're being about this shit, I'mma guess that one. Which means I came home sometime after midnight." His head tilts slightly to the side in what I assume is annoyance. "Is that a fucking problem? Do I have a fucking curfew you forgot to mention? Am I the grown ass dude you're fucking or the high school in juniors you hope to recruit when he turns eighteen, so I need a bedtime on the books?"

“You fucking tell me!” I bite back at the same time I slam my mug down on the counter. “*You. Got. Me. Fucked. Up. Right now!*”

“What the fuck is your problem, Harlow? Is this actually about *me* or is this a new batch of hormone shit I’m about to pick up the tab for?”

There’s no stopping the low, seething sigh that slips past my flared nostrils.

“Okay, gonna guess by the demon noises you’re making that it’s me.”

“Yes, it’s fucking you!” Despite my best efforts to keep my emotions as much as my voice in check, I fail. Epically. “You were the one who didn’t come home until almost *two o’clock* this morning after spending all night out drinking!”

“You told me to get a beer with the boys!”

“I told you to get a beer not fucking down a keg! Not fucking *bar hop!* Not drape yourself in so much barely legal pussy that my fucking assistant has to literally track down the girls in the photograph’s ages to make sure we don’t have *an additional* fucking scandal to deal with!”

“Wait, what photos?”

“Oh, you weren’t aware your little fuckpacades were being documented and blasted all over social media?”

“I didn’t fuck anyone last night, Harlow!”

“It doesn’t matter what you *actually* did or didn’t fucking do, you pylon!”

“It should!”

“Yeah well, Tye Gray should’ve played in the NHL All-Star game last season, and he fucking didn’t, so shit happens!”

Bewilderment bulldozes itself onto his face forcing me to regain my focus on the conversation we should actually be having.

Which isn’t about my bitter feelings about one of the greatest players being overlooked due to in league political bullshit.

Political bullshit that I can’t seem to stop being fucked by.

It takes all of the inner peace I can muster up to unlock my phone, pulls up the photos, and to slide the device the short distance across the island top over to him. “Page and McVie and Somerfield posted your little puck bunny adventures last night.” My fingers curl around the edge of the counter as he lifts my phone. “You can scroll the pics. There are some *really good* shots of you and some chick practically giving you a lap dance at Yard Sale. You know the same chick who you were photographed doing tequila shots with

at The Net. And then later walking her to her hotel room or apartment or fucking *classroom* since she's practically an infant!"

"Har-"

"Oh, and the plot worsens, Peter Pan. This whole do you or don't you have a fucking side piece bullshit, this whole can he be faithful or is he no better than all the other piece of shit players that fuck around on their wives day in and day out in this industry, has already begun to make its way into the media *that fucking matters*. It's now being reported by most of the major sports blogs with the subject *yet again* focused on can I or can I not fucking do *my job*! Do I or do I not have control over my team! If I can't handle my personal shit, how the fuck can I handle my business?!" Snatching my device out of his hand stumbles him a bit backwards. "And that's what this shit is, Brendan! It's a goddamn business! I'm a fucking brand! Whether I like it or not, whether I want it or not, I represent this club at all times, which means if you wanna be married to me, *you* represent this fucking club at all times, which means you can't stay out until two in the morning with diamond digging whores who will sell whatever story fits their bank account to the highest bidder at the drop of a fucking puck!"

"Har-"

"It doesn't matter if you really were or weren't cheating on me-"

"I wasn't!"

"It matters what it *looks like*. To the media. To the fans. To the fucking *league*." The slow shake of my head is given as a wave of exhaustion and nausea hit me. "Everyone is already just *waiting* for me to fail. To fold. No one, Brendan, fucking *no one* outside of our club and my best friends believes I belong doing this shit. I'm too young. I'm fucking female. I'm black. I'm inexperienced. I am a *walking, trash talking* abomination of all the things people in this industry fucking rally against! I have to work twice as fucking hard, twice as fucking long, and be *twice as fucking careful* every time I even *think* about walking out my front door! Is it fair? *Fuck. No.*" My venomous bite is felt given the way his entire body suddenly sags. "And this shit will never *be* fair. This will never be a fair called game, so I have to do whatever it is I can do to keep myself and my team out of the box and on the ice and provided with a fighting chance to win. This isn't some little after work beer league bullshit with people who have other jobs to fall back on. These are people whose mortgages I have to think about. Whose families need to be fed. Whose medical bills need to be covered.

And not just the boys in the sweaters but the legion that works tirelessly at the offices. The same legion I now have to go see about—*yet again*—cleaning the ice of my social life fuck up.” Feeling my phone begin to vibrate drops my gaze along with my volume. “Maybe we should’ve never done this shit.” Another slow head shake wedges itself between the practically whispered words. “Maybe we should’ve never fallen in love. Maybe we should’ve never tried ninety days. Maybe we should’ve just signed the fucking papers and never looked back.”

It’s impossible to ignore the pain in his objection, “*Harlow-*”

“*Hennington,*” I sigh into the device upon answering.

“Good morning, Hennington,” the chipper voice immediately greets, “this is Alice Lopez in PR.”

Ugh.

I bet my lucky fucking skates I haven’t worn in months that she’s not calling with good news.

“Morning, Lopez.”

“Margot said you were headed into the office-”

“I am.”

“Good. However, I wanted you to hear it from inhouse first this time-”

“Hear what?!” I growl during my exiting of the kitchen.

“Things regarding last night’s situation seem to have gotten...*worse.*”

“Worse?!” The barbaric barking has me bracing myself against the edge of my living room chair that’s closest to me. “How could they possibly have gotten *worse?!?*”

“There was an accident.”

Shutting my eyes in frustration is immediately followed by two fingers soaring to the middle of my forehead to deliver a soothing rub.

I can’t fucking handle worse.

I already can’t fucking handle whatever *this* shit is.

Fuck. Me.

Maybe everyone’s right.

Maybe the whispers and the gossip and the well thought out opinion pieces ran on the blogs and discussed during podcasts are fucking right.

Maybe I don’t need to be the owner.

Or the GM.

Or a wife.

Maybe I should just give it all up, move to Greece, and forget everything and anything that has to do with this fucking sport. Maybe I should just become a fucking museum tour guide. Live in a tiny hilltop home. Teach my kids to appreciate the country's beaches and loukoumades the way my dad did me.

At least then I wouldn't be ruining his legacy anymore but finally fucking honoring it.

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CHAPTER 14



Brendan

You know having to work hungover is a bitch.

But having to work hungover after taking a goddamn Uber here because your wife left without you, and you left your car in the bar parking lot so that you wouldn't drive home drunk is a whole other fucking story.

And once you add in this loud ass skate sharpening machine to the mix, it's then the trifecta of a fucked-up morning.

Worst part is...I can deal with the throbbing in my head. I've pretty much made peace with that.

However, this ache in my fucking chest from hearing the woman I love *regret* falling in love with me?

Well, that shit hurts a million times more.

Running the edge of the steel against the sharpener requires focus and a steady hand—two things that are in short supply when you feel like shit. Thankfully, the holder does the heavy lifting in that department, leaving me the responsibility of simply ensuring that I rotate the skate properly. Slow enough that each centimeter gets caressed but not so slow that the skate gets an uneven finish.

I'm grateful that the ice girls' skates don't require the same constant maintenance or conversations that the players do. From what I've been told

and learned firsthand over the past few months, some of the boys prefer hitting the ice with the freshest steel possible, which means me sharpening their blades multiple times a day. Those are the ones I've come to believe are a little more dedicated, not necessarily because they need something from us every day, but because of that desire to only work in top condition. Craig—who has done the job for years—explained it'll come to a point where instead of them approaching us about steel replacements, that we'll have that connection to go to *them*. That we won't have to be told to have their backups packed and sharpened and ready to go everywhere we go because it'll be second nature. Also, while walking me through the more extensive steel replacement process, he educated me on other procedures to be aware of and signs that will help us—the new equipment team—be more proactive than reactive, which will be great for the boys.

Harlow's said similar shit about other situations like learning allergies and towel preferences and who to sleep next to on the plane.

Honestly, that's the shit I love most about working for this franchise.

It's a giant fucking family.

A family that I find myself willing to do anything to help or protect.

At the end of the second cycle, completing this pair of skates needs, an unexpected voice calls out to me, "*Bricks*."

I glance over my shoulder to spot Margot standing in the doorway, expression more rattled than I'm used to. "You good?"

"I don't think I've been good since I took that signing bonus for this gig," she sassily sighs and flicks her hair away from her face. "However, this isn't about *me* and my goodness, but Hennington and hers."

Culpability causes me to divert my efforts to putting guards back on the freshly sharpened objects. "Yeah, well, I can't exactly make her *good* when she won't even let me put a fucking word *in* the conversation."

Not that I exactly had the best shit to throw out there.

Damn sure didn't have dick after she lined the bar with shot after shot after shot of the hell she struggles with daily.

Fuck, it has never been clearer why she pushes herself as hard as she does.

Why she *has* to.

What her dad—may he rest in peace—tried to protect her from.

"Look, *The Little Equipment Manager That Could*, right now this shit isn't about *you*." The statement snaps my head over my shoulder. "This shit

isn't about what you did and didn't do last night or the Spamela Anderson slut you did or not did not accidentally get used by for five minutes of fame or even the unknown status of your *romantic* relationship in reference to a woman who you serenaded with a Mac Miller song *literally* right after you said I do."

Seemed romantic.

It *was* the best day ever.

"This shit is about *her*. And being there for *her* when she needs an assist that she damn sure won't ask for."

Finished with covering one skate allows me to turn to her a second time.

"Page is headed up to the office to discuss everything that went wrong last night."

My head cocks to side in confusion. "What *else* happened last night, Margot?"

"Wow," she whistles out in a truly impressed fashion, "she really must've shut you out if you don't know yet."

"Do you mean *won* a shut out?" I joke in my best attempt to lighten the dreary mood.

"You really think I—*of all people*—would actively make a hockey reference like that?"

"Stranger things have happened."

"Yes, like Hennington knocked up by one of the *Bubble Guppies*." She doesn't wait for me to snap back at what I imagine to be an age reference jab. "Post your little...*whatever that was*...last night, you took a Lyft or an Uber home, correct?"

"Yeah. I don't fuck around when it comes to drinking and driving."

"It's good that *you* don't because the same can't be said for some of the other players."

There's no stopping my eyebrows from launching to the ceiling.

"Thankfully, Frosky—who did not go to the secondary location with all of you—"

"Because he landed himself a hat trick of the best kind."

Three blondes.

Back to back to back according to the bragging texts I woke up to.

The corner of her lip twitches a sneer, "Like I was saying, thankfully Frosky didn't *drive* anywhere last night. One of the bunnies drove while he had sex with another in the backseat."

Keepin' it classy there, Snowman.

"However, Page convinced Somerfield and McVie he was good enough to drive them back here to the barn where their cars were and sideswiped another vehicle on the highway."

"What?!"

"Somerfield and McVie and the single mom of three who was headed home from her shift as a fucking ER nurse are all still in the hospital. *Alive*, but we don't know much else about their conditions at this time. Page—somehow—made it out pretty much unscathed. His BAC was below legal limit—"

"I don't know fucking how. He had more shots than I did!"

"-*and* according to the statement he made, he claims that the wreck was *her fault*. *She* was the one swerving into his lane, probably too tired to be driving."

"Fucking, seriously?!" I bark twice as loud this time around. "*He* fucks up, and it's somehow some innocent woman's fault!?"

Margot bobs her head in agreed upon annoyance. "Yeah. And he's on his way up to talk to Hennington and Blanc now about the situation. He wants her to hear 'his side' of everything before they make any crucial decisions while they wanna hear from him to know what *legal* actions to be braced for." She clutches the tablet in her possession noticeably tighter. "I can't be in there due to the sensitive nature of the subject and my position at the company; however, her *spouse* can as he has privileges to certain information and situations that others don't."

Hearing the play loud and clear has me carelessly tossing the skate guard to the side and quickly moving her direction. I manage to make it just three steps past her before I'm turning on my heels to say, "Order her salmon and some sort of Mediterranean kale salad for lunch from that restaurant around the corner. She probably skipped breakfast with all this shit and will be starving by lunch."

"Will do, but she definitely ate this morning," Margot informs, mirth swirling around her tone. "I watched her rage inhale three chocolate donuts."

"*Fuck...*" I grumble under my breath and continue backing my body away for the exit. "She hydrate?"

"Does hydrate mean having Blanc bring her a giant Mountain Dew Slurpee?"

“*Fuckfuckfuck,*” pours past my lips prior to me pushing myself to hustle faster.

Getting from our work area near the rink over to the adjacent building is not an easy task, especially since jogging hungover is never fucking fun. On my way, I manage to warmly greet members of security, politely acknowledge some of the janitorial staff—including Norman who has caught us having sex one too many times in her office—and snatch a bottle of cold-water from Amaryllis on the last leg of my journey.

I don’t bother knocking, yet I prepare myself to hear an earful about the shit later.

Three sets of eyes immediately swing to me—two showcasing surprise and one—much to my own surprise—*relief*. Closing the door as quietly as I can is followed by me kicking my chin her direction and tossing the bottle across the room. She catches it one handed demonstrating reflexes I pray the twins get and offers me a small, stubborn grin of gratitude.

Seems like Margot was right.

I am needed on the assist.

“Whaddya at, you fucking beauty?” Page cockily greets the instant I’m further into the room, accent and homeland word choice stronger than normal, which I’ve learned are his tell regarding the mood he’s in. “How’s she getting’ on?” The villainous smirk expands. “I see youse still have a job.”

“Yeah, no fucking thanks to you, you pencil dicked prick.”

Another arrogant chortle escapes him at the same time he leans back in his seat. “Crooked as sin...” His smile extends calling me to stomp closer. “Why?”

“You fucking know why.”

“*I didn’t put that bunny in your lap for pettin’ anymore than I put that bottle of tequila in your hand for drinkin’.*”

More infuriating snickers.

More reasons for my fingers to curl like they are.

“All me did was leave you an empty net. *You* scored those fucked up goals. *All. On. Your. Own.*”

Breathing grows a bit more difficult.

Choppier.

It suddenly goes from challenging to keep my voice even to unimaginable. “*Say that shit to my fucking face.*”

Blanc tries to interject from his seat beside Page, “*Boys-*”

“No,” Harlow swiftly cuts off. “Let ‘em drop the gloves.”

Page rises to his feet, closes the small gap, and bites so close to my face that I can still smell hints of booze. “*You. Fucked. Up.*”

Between the stench and him in my space I can’t quite resist tightening my clenched hand.

“You know why? ‘Cause you’re a fuck up. And that’s what fuck ups do, bud.”

“You’d know.”

His bushy brows sharply lift.

“Afterall, that’s what *you are*. In fact,” I deliver a loud suck of my teeth, “*that’s all you are*. Nothing but a selfish, reckless, fucking overpaid duster.”

“Fuck you!”

My balled fist flies for his jaw, connecting with the amount of force that matches my nickname.

Page’s head snaps back and to the side, simply stumbling him a couple steps away rather than to the ground like it would someone who didn’t fight in their career. Using the pad of his thumb, he checks the corner of his mouth for blood. He grunts—clearly under impressed by its absence—before nefariously beaming, “That’s assault, me boy.”

“Is it?” Harlow chimes in, instantly grabbing our attention. “Because I didn’t see anything.” Her expression remains emotionless. “Blanc?”

“Can’t say that I did, GM.”

Page twitches a glare their direction. “You’ve got *cameras*.”

“Damn things are down for routine maintenance.”

This time it’s me who wickedly grins as he’s tossed a second punch. Unfortunately, that’s the last undefended shot I get. Page stretches out a hand, balls up the edge of my polo near my shoulder for leverage, and begins pounding his fist into my face. Each hit should hurt. Should have me howling in agony, yet adrenaline takes over every bit of blood in my body. It gives me strength to break his hold and extend my own arm to keep Page at distance while hammering away at one side of his face. Having a longer reach is an advantage that allows me to keep the upper hand, add more momentum to my swings, and above all else have more time to dodge the flailing retaliation. Our back-and-forth strikes are accompanied by blood splatters hitting the space under our continuously shuffling feet. While I wish he would just go down, have his knees hits the floor first, proving he’s

the shittier fighter, the lesser man, I know it's unlikely. He's got an impressive center of gravity. And an even more impressive amount of endurance. Air gets harder to grasp in between blows, but I persist onward. Remind myself that my boss is watching.

My fucking *wife* is watching.

The same wife he's been after since long before she said I do to me.

Fueled by new bursts of rage regarding the lengths he's gone to over the recent weeks to split us apart has me unleashing every ounce of force I possibly can until his seemingly unmovable stance waivers.

He loses his footing.

And then his balance.

Page's body mistakenly bends forward, and I execute the strike to the back that drops him to the ground.

"*Enough*," Blanc firmly announces to the room.

I stagger backwards toward the edge of Harlow's desk closest to her, wordlessly agreeing that that's the end of the tilly; however, Page snaps his head up to reveal he's not finished.

That this shit isn't over.

That it'll never be over until one of us is on a fucking plane headed back to where they belong.

Page hawks up blood onto the hard wood space in front of him. "Can't believe you picked him over me."

"*Forfuckssake, really?!*" Harlow screeches at the top of her lungs, redirecting everyone's attention back to her. "Tell me you're fucking with me right now, Page. Tell me that *all this bullshit* over these past few months isn't because you couldn't bag the fucking rocket!"

It's difficult not to grumble in disapproval over the degrading way she references herself even if it's fucking true.

"Tell me you're really not that fucking stupid."

He growls at the same time he straightens himself completely upward.

"Tell me you didn't really believe that because you couldn't have the sniper when her dad was alive that you decided you'd do whatever it took to get her when he was gone. Tell me...for Gretzky's sake," she folds her hands together and leans forward, slightly across her desk, "that you didn't try to get Bricks thrown out of the game so that you could score a sloppy knee down half clapper."

They wait for Page to refute what it is she's saying despite the fact we all know he won't.

Can't.

"Forfuckssake, you fucking plug, that would never happen!"

I struggle to swallow the laugh her outburst conjures.

"Even if things don't work out with me and Bricks..."

Fuck, I hate how she keeps calling me that. It's probably being done out of spite.

Wait.

I know Harlow.

It's definitely being done out of fucking spite.

"He's not going anywhere." Her expression grows firm. "Regardless, if he works for this franchise or not, he's still the father of my fucking children. His ass will be in this barn. His ass will always be *welcomed* in this barn as long as this is my team and I'm in charge."

As much as I hate the idea of us not together, I appreciate the statements she's making.

I fucking love knowing that we'll always be a team for the sake of our kids.

"And just to hit you with the highlights, Page. Bricks is basically the Ovi of fucking husbands. He leads. He supports. Isn't afraid to be there for the apple and always appreciates the gino. He's there for this team," she points to her round stomach in the elegant, peach bodycon dress I don't remember her leaving the house in, *"and this team,"* Harlow's thumb gets kicked to the logo painted on the wall behind her, *"unlike you who's been known to fuck around on your girlfriend. Unlike you who points mouth pieces to the press. Unlike you who drove fucking drunk last night and nearly got his teammates as well as an innocent mother of fucking three killed!"*

Pain pumps through his gaze at the same time he rushes towards the desk, "That's not-"

"You have cost this team so fucking much, Page!"

"I-"

"Your ego has cost us almost everything!"

"But-"

"Your contract is void."

He frantically shakes his head. "You can't-"

“I didn’t. *You. Did.*”

A deep audible swallow reverberates around the room.

“You should also know your position has already been filled.”

“Henning-”

“Security will walk you to Richards in medical if you would like him to stitch you up before being escorted to remove your things from the premises.”

Desperation overwhelms his voice. “Hen-”

“McVie and Somerfield are both injured and will be out on LTIR, which is where they’ll stay until I can permanently end their contracts.”

“But-”

“You managed to kill *three* careers in one play, Page.” She flashes him a sardonic smirk. “*Impressive.*”

All of a sudden, his face begins to quiver, sending me into a new level of stunned.

“I hope you treat your next GM and *team* with more respect than you did this one.” My wife leans back in her seat, reaches for her sipped-on bottle of water, and motions her head for the closed door. “Legal will be in touch when necessary.”

An outcry of epic portions precedes him flinging his chair out of his way upon his storming out.

The door isn’t even completely shut when Harlow turns to Blanc to make an order. “I want Peck, and I want him now.”

There’s no reluctance out of the head coach to agree. “He’s the perfect fit. He just...*as you already fucking know...*comes with more heat.”

“I know.”

“And his family-”

“I know.”

“Which means the league and the press-”

“*Blanc*,” she savagely snips. “Make the fucking call.”

In spite of the fact, I know I shouldn’t interject myself into the conversation, I do. “What’s the deal with Peck? He seems like such a good dude.”

“He is an *extraordinarily* good kid,” Harlow informs, gaze shifting up to mine. “And amazing fucking player. It’s just...his name is all over the league.”

“Why? Dad play? Uncle?”

“Peck is the P in 3P.”

Bafflement momentarily hops onto my face.

“Your skates. Your sticks. Your bags. Your fucking honorary *sweater* bears the 3P logo.”

“That 3P?!”

“*That 3P,*” Blanc sighs in worry.

For cripes sake, if the league wasn’t already up her ass about everything, they damn sure will be when she literally moves that living, breathing, brand to her front lines.

I’ll do my part.

Whatever I can to help keep some of the pressure off her in that department.

Whether that means never looking at liquor again or never being seen without her in public settings from this point forward, I’m game.

I’m listening to the coaching.

All of it.

“Peck *belongs* here,” Harlow insists, focus back on Blanc. “You know that. I know that. He fucking knows that. It’s time we bring him home.”

Blanc nods once more in agreement. “Who do you want for his spot?”

I interrupt—what’s probably out of turn for a second time—with a suggestion. “Rajiv Kapoor would work.”

Harlow’s head tilts to the side in contemplation.

“Met him at Say Jump, Sucka. He’s recently signed. Got mobility. Flexibility. He’s eager. Hungry but not starving. Didn’t hear anyone utter a bad word about him.”

“Blanc?” My wife investigates.

“Uh...haven’t personally seen him much, but I can check with Stroll. See if he thinks he could survive those shifts.”

“Do that.”

“On it,” Blanc states at the same time he stands up. “Keep me up to date on legal?”

She casually nods and has another sip of water.

His departure is accompanied by a small parting nod my direction.

Finally being alone, has me relocating my body around to lean my ass against the edge of Harlow’s desk directly beside her. It takes my wife longer than I wish it would for her to look up at me. I expect to see displeasure and rightfully placed resentment but am only met by care.

Palpable concern.

“You hurt or you injured?”

The familiar hockey adage in reference to whether you can walk off the pain or need real help kicks the corner of my lips upward. “*Hurt.*”

“Eh, then you’ll be fine.” She abandons her bottle of water to fold her hands on top of her stomach. “I’ll call Richards to tell him you’ll be down shortly to make sure nothing’s broken *after* I call the custodial team to clean this shit up.”

“What are you gonna tell them happened?”

“Nothing,” Harlow casually brushes off. “*Perk* of being the owner. I don’t have to explain dick to anyone besides the head legal.”

“Menville?”

“Madelyn Li. Menville actually answers to *her*, which he hates.”

“Because she’s a woman?”

“That and like two decades younger than him.”

“Shit, I didn’t realize she was that young.”

“Age isn’t fucking everything,” Harlow bitterly bites. “Whether we’re talking job capabilities or romantic ones, that little factor is not the be all, end all.”

Sensing the shift in the subjects prompts me into pressing my lips together rather than retorting.

“Despite the fact there’s this huge fucking age between us, I have never *once* worried that was a problem until this morning.”

Her confession causes the ache in my chest that had momentarily dispersed to return.

“And honestly, I pretty much fucking *adore* all the ‘young shit’ about you. You’re quicker at finding new music sources which have benefited both me and the team. You’re not just settled or stuck in your ways, so you’re willing and wanting to learn about all sorts of different shit. You’re open fucking minded about so, so much. There’s an undeniable ease that comes from having someone around that’s so flexible and so optimistic because the world hasn’t taken nearly as many dumps on you yet. You’re health conscious without being worried that every cough that leaves me is a cancer scare. Yeah, you’re not always the best with money—still can’t believe you spent that much on a copy of the *Die Hard* soundtrack—but like neither am I. And I’m probably ‘too fucking old’ to stay up ‘til three in the morning for an air hockey, foosball, ping pong tournament, but I do it

anyway, just like you're probably 'too fucking young' to be that obsessed with different types of kitchen sinks--"

"Fuck me for thinking about how much easier it would be to clean the babies' bottles or all the dishes from hosting Thanksgiving if we had a bigger sink."

She shoots me playful finger point. "Also not typical shit for a dude your age to be thinking about, but you *do*. And it's shit that a woman my age probably should, yet I don't. That's why a line in the sand about age has never been a thing between us before, but after last night...I need to know that we're on the same page of this playbook going forward, Brendan."

My mouth twitches to proclaim we are but doesn't get the chance to actually speak.

"I'm not asking you to not have a beer with the boys. I'm asking you not to get shitfaced *in public*."

"I really didn't *mean* to get that drunk, baby."

"It's not about what you did or didn't mean to do. It's a matter of *thinking* about the bigger picture before you make any sort of decision like that. And believe me, I know it's not fair. I know it's selfish to expect that out of you, but this is the deal, Brendan. You wanna stay married to me? Then you have to abide by certain lifestyle rules. You have to be more cautious of *who* you talk to. How it might look. *What* you say. How what you might say in passing could make it to the press. You have to sacrifice your own personal preferences and put this franchise first. *This fucking brand*." Her thumbs give her tummy a small stroke. "I'm only gonna ask you do you want this shit once. Just this *one* time. And if you say yes, then that's that. We'll scrape the ice of last night's bullshit loss, agree to move forward as the team we are, and I'll proceed to figuring out a plan with Lopez. However, if you say no..." there's a noticeable sadness that hits her stare, "then I'll accept that. Without shade or malice because I know what I'm asking you...what I'm *really* asking of you is a lot. I'll put a call in to the lawyers, have divorce papers drafted, and make sure you receive a sizeable settlement and a bonus for signing an NDA regarding what happened between us like we discussed before."

Hearing both options laid out without any sugarcoating briefly cuts off my ability to breathe.

"Brendan Anders Brickley, do you or do you not wanna stay with this team?"

“I loathe the fact that you even have to fucking ask.”

“Well, I do.” Her chin kicks up higher. “And I want an answer.”

“Of course, I wanna fucking stay with this team,” my finger frantically gestures between her, me, and her stomach. “I’m not looking to make a trade or to hang ‘em up. I’m just gonna need a little more slack cut my way.”

Harlow’s mouth lowers to argue prompting me to rush the rest of my sentence.

“Whether *you* like it or not, I’m still a rookie, baby.”

The hockey reference relaxes her shoulders.

Her face.

“I’m still out here learning all this shit. And I’m gonna fuck up because, that’s just life, and we fuck up and we keep going, but I promise...*I fucking promise* to always do my best. To always give this shit everything I’ve got. And to try to *learn* from my fucks up.”

A smile finally crosses her lips.

“I’m also gonna need you to *not* yell.”

“Was I yelling or shouting?”

“That’s not a hockey phrase. You *know* those are the same fucking thing.”

An unmistakable twinge of guilt can be seen in her brown gaze.

“I need you to *talk to me* not *at me* even when you’re pissed. Talking to me makes me feel like we’re equals, like we’re on the same team, like we want the same shit at the end of every day. *Yelling* at me makes me feel like I just got my driver’s license and am skipping last period to fuck a chick in the backseat of my car.” My hands curl around the edge of her desk for support. “Yelling at me makes me *feel* that age problem shit.”

Harlow’s face yet again softens as she quietly concedes, “Understood.”

“And?”

“And that’s as good of an apology as you’re gonna get,” she sassily proclaims. “Now, *Bricks*, take your hurt ass down to medical. I’ve got calls to make.”

“Yeah, I’m not leaving without a kiss goodbye to my wife.” I playfully shrug. “I know I’ve fucking earned that shit.”

“For winning that tilly against Page?”

“For defending your *honor* against Page.” Dramatics drip from my tone. “For riding into battle and slaying *that dragon*.”

“Your dad puns are getting worse and worse. Don’t make me ban you from talking in front of the twins so they don’t chirp like you.”

Laughter leaves us both prior to me leaning over to lightly press my lips against hers.

Pain is immediate but so is relief.

Relief in knowing I still have a wife.

A family.

A *team* as she prefers to call it.

Harlow separates us on a pleased hum, gives my leg a small pat, verbally pushes me out. “*Wheel, Bricks.*”

Another light chuckle slips loose on my way over to the door. Upon my opening it, Margot saunters in with lunch in hand. “Mediterranean salmon with a kale salad and a side of lemon olive oil dressing.”

“I didn’t order that.”

“No, your husband did,” she offhandedly informs while placing the items on the desk. “Get the Lysol wipes out of your top desk drawer. I need to wipe down this space before you even *think* about eating in it.”

My attention swings to the woman I love one last time, and I shoot her a cocky wink.

Maybe I don’t always get everything right.

But I damn sure don’t always get everything wrong.

And hopefully, above all else, the one thing she knows without a doubt is that she can always count on me for the assist she needs most.

CHAPTER 15



Harlow

Game day.

Actual. Fucking. Game. Day.

This shit is always stressful.

For everyone.

Add in the fact it's the first of the whole fucking season, the first in our barn, the first with me as the owner, first with me as the GM, first with Blanc as the coach, first with practically a brand-new team, and what you have is no longer a typical game day level of stress, but a nuclear one.

And my poor husband is learning front and center just how fucking nuclear from two different ends of the rink. It's an all-hands-on deck sort of situation with the boys because everything for everyone from first line to last line to ice girls needs to be ready to go. Skates sharp as fuck. Sticks in the right spots. Sweaters hung up. Logo fucking shining. He's been at work since four thirty this morning doing whatever Craig and Bryant—the other equipment assistant we hired around the beginning of training camp who'll be Craig's second in command due to his willingness to travel and multiple years of experience—needed done. Around their needs, he's been rushing to meet mine. He knows Margot has me covered—it's literally her job—yet still texts to check if I'm hydrating. How I'm relieving the built-up anxiety.

To remind me to stop pacing the office and get off my slightly swollen feet.
Not to eat because they need to run tests today at the doctor.

He's basically helicopter momming me.

I hate it.

Ugh.

I really fucking appreciate it.

Just like I appreciate him lingering in the very back of this media circus for emotional support.

In some ways, he reminds me of me. How I'd be there for my dad and how Dad would never verbally admit he needed me there but make sure to wink my direction, so I knew that he did. I was always there for the tough times and over the past few months I've learned just how truly important it is to have someone you love there for those.

I mean yeah, I have Margot—obviously—and Letty and Winslow, but it's a different type of love.

And I don't know.

This type gives me a whole other strength when I really need it.

Like now.

Another round of flashes goes off prior to me providing a statement for what I hope is my final question of the morning. "To answer your question, I'm feeling excited. And proud." Flipping my long, wavy hair over my shoulders, I continue to gush, "So proud of *every* part of this team. The boys have really shown up and put in the work basically since last season ended. They've given all of themselves whenever requested, and I couldn't ask for a better group of guys to take the ice. They're being coached by an incredible leader." My hand gestures Blanc's direction who is waiting for his stretch in front of the mic. "I have faith in him. I have faith in them. I know it's gonna be an incredible season. I know it's gonna be one that would've made my dad proud."

The air in the room immediately shifts from the declaration.

Most of them are respectful enough *not* to bring him up.

Not sure if they think I can't handle it or if they can't.

Nonetheless, this was Dad's franchise. This was his legacy. He won't turn into a fucking memory that haunts us but be a spirit who inspires. Once upon a time, he raised legends. And thanks to everything he's ever taught me, I get to do the same.

“One last question...” Florence Ramirez speaks up from her corner position.

Only if I can choke her out after answering.

My hand politely waves her direction to continue.

“Given the recent *incidents*,” she begins, making sure to emphasize the word with disgust, “this team you are quite proud of seems to be in disarray.”

“There wasn’t a question there, Ramirez.”

“The *question*,” she hisses like the snake she pretends not to be, “is how can the league or the fans *trust* this team the way you do when all we’ve seen lately are its failures and shortcomings and blatant disrespect for their industry by behaving so irresponsibly?”

Oh, whose jock I would ride so hard to bitch slap her with a skate just one time.

Just one time!

Snark shoots up the back of my throat and almost off my tongue when movement out of the corner of my eyes stops it.

Brendan’s slow headshake successfully ceases the hell I was about to unleash while the gentle tap to logo on his polo causes me to suck in a deep breath.

Exhale.

Focus on the key strengths like Lopez instructed.

“I understand your concern, Miss Ramirez, and to be quite Frank, it has its place.”

She doesn’t hesitate to smugly smirk.

“*However*,” I calmly continue, “this team is made of more than just the trouble that has been seen in the media lately. There are a number of players who eat, sleep, and *bleed* Dalvegan, and those are the boys the world will see hit the ice tonight. Those dedicated to giving this franchise, this league, *this community* the very best of them will be out there to properly represent the crest on their sweater. And for the players no longer with our team, we wish them only the very best.”

Even though Page tried to chirp me on social media for weeks following the accident until he was hit with a fucking gag order.

“As for the woman who was involved in an accident with a couple of players, she along with her three children will be in the barn tonight—located right behind the home bench—as special guests of the team. Her

injuries were thankfully minor, and we look forward to seeing their smiling faces in the crowd tonight.” Ramirez is flashed one more professional smile before I turn back to the rest of the group. “On that note, I am going to hand things over to our head coach, Milano Blanc.”

Claps from me quickly catch onto the crowd allowing a warm transition of me out of the spotlight and him into it.

Strutting over in my strappy heels to Brendan is accompanied by the closing of my tan, knee length sweater blazer to cover up my skintight nude dress that Lopez insisted I wear specifically to prove I’m not ashamed of my pregnancy.

To be fair, I’m not.

Perhaps some of the dirty deets aren’t the best.

However, there are *definitely* worse ways all this shit could’ve come together.

I know that.

It took a while to become *comfortable* with that but that’s one more thing my best friends have been good for.

Reminding me that I’ve always done shit on my “out of the rink” terms, which is why they love me.

Brendan swoops an arm around the small of my back the instant I’m within in reach and begins to guide us the direction of the parking garage.

I give Orson, the member of in-house security preparing to trail closely behind us to the area, a small nod of acknowledgement and send my attention to the man lovingly cradling me to his side. Once we’re across the threshold towards the offices, I ask, “Thoughts?”

“That Ramirez would even find a way to make something amazing like our team saving a house full of orphans and puppies from a blazing fire a fucking bad thing.”

He’s extended a fist to bump in agreement. Our knuckles respectfully fall back to our sides at the same time I investigate, “How was *I*?”

“A fucking beauty.”

The hockey reference receives a sweet nudge and an equally sugary smile. “Appreciate it.”

Brendan knocks me with a small kiss to the side of my forehead. “Remember, we’re going straight from the doctor to pick up Mom from the airstrip, which means, yes you can crush a game day sando, but you’re gonna have to do that shit in the car.”

I open my mouth to touch on the other tradition when he lifts a hand to hush me.

“Yeah, I know the nap on game day tradition. All the boys evidently have that shit, too. Mom’s already been warned that she’ll have to socialize during the drive home because once we get there, you’re out of commish.”

“Oooo I bet we can train the twins to nap at the same time as me on game day.”

A small chuckle bounces his entire frame. “I feel like you haven’t read a *single* fucking parenting book yet.”

“I’ve read...” my hand flails around as we swing right for the vehicle, “*highlights.*”

“Oh, Harlow, you’re gonna have to do more than that over the next few months,” he laughs a little louder, which receives a glare. “You’re gonna have to get in a different type of shape for the baby season that’s coming.” Brendan opens the passenger door for me on a crooked grin. “You know what? I’ll let Mom condition you and assist *her* for a while.”

“Hey, you’re supposed to assist *me!*” I playfully squeak. “*I’m your wife.* Alternate cap of this team.”

“I know you are.” He delivers a good game swat to my ass along with a cheeky wink. “Just like you know I always will.”

The truth is I do know that.

Whether it’s about our relationship or our expanding family or career moves, I know without a doubt Brendan “Bricks” Brickley will always be there to provide the support I need.

And if that isn’t the definition of winning...then I don’t know what is.

EPILOGUE



The Following Summer...

Brendan

Tightening my hold on the nape of Harlow's neck happens at the same time I growl against the shell of her pierced ear, "*Be a good little slut and come again for me.*"

She whimpers in protest.

Attempts to whip her head side to side, only to result in my fingers digging in tighter while the other pair thrusts faster. Continues to carve out what will be the third orgasm, which is the one she's gonna need to tide her over until the twins crash tonight.

And the only reason she's getting my two digits instead of my dick is because I don't know exactly *when* they'll be showing up with my mom for the annual family free skate event.

Very little puts my wife in a bad mood like having me balls deep and not getting to come at least once.

Not exactly a fan of the shit myself, but it's a lot easier to rub one out for me in passing than it is her, a little fact she never lets me fucking forget.

"*Come again for me, baby,*" I command, thumb caressing her slippery clit in ceaseless circles. "*Come on my fucking fingers like they're my fucking cock.*"

Wetness seeps past the edge of my palm, trickling towards the space underneath my watch, coating me in juices that I love to be covered in. Slightly curling my fingers causes Harlow's entire frame to arch forward again as her pussy clamps down on the slippery appendages that are savagely sliding back and forth, bringing her to the orgasmic brink each time they touch the hilt but agony every time they retreat to her soaking entrance.

Using my tongue to toy with the nearby jewelry seems to do just the trick. Harlow squeezes her thighs shut on a small hitch of her breath before unleashing a scream so intoxicating it leaves my head spinning like I've downed ten Jägerbombs on an empty stomach. Desperation to taste the sound sends my tongue into her mouth where it laps up any little flavor of the noise it can. Rapid pulsations continue around my fingers prompting the muscle I'm whirling around her upper lips to switch gears until it's syncing to the same rhythm she's delivering with her lower ones. Toe curling trembles are felt and heard and felt more when her palm grabs a handful of my ass to yank me further on top of her.

The idea of slipping my dick out of my pants and right into her unfortunately never becomes a reality thanks to the one man I'm surprised hasn't learned to knock yet opening the door.

Also, a little surprised he hasn't *quit* yet given the circumstances he keeps interrupting.

Norman glances over his shoulder just in time to catch Harlow yanking her baggy black sweats back in place. His shiny balding head slowly swivels in disapproval before adjusting the headphones that I'm fairly certain he wears *because* of us.

Hey, sometimes a quickie late at the office is our best bet for getting laid.

I swear sometimes that as soon as the twins—Marcus after her father and Mario after the hockey player Mario Lemieux—*sense* our presence they make an adorable pact to keep us attached to them rather than each other.

And they're fucking *masterminds* at the baby dangle.

Convincing us we're gonna have a few moments together in peace only to then snatch it away the instant our mouths damn near touch.

She birthed cock blockers that we're both hoping translate those skills into becoming hockey puck blockers aka goalies.

Once Harlow's fixed her Dalvegan green crop top sweater, grabbed her gear bag, and I've put my team shirt back into its proper place, we offer him small cringes on tiny handwaves during our exit.

I mean *really*, we don't have to apologize for shit.

She *is* the owner.

It's *her* office.

She can do whatever she wants in there, which is typically me between meetings.

That's probably the only "abuse" of power she ever flexes and given the ups and downs of our first season, I call that shit impressive. While it would've been nice to have smooth skating after the shit with Page, McVie, and Somerfield, that wasn't the case. Other players caused other hiccups and like she said during her rightfully earned meltdown at me the morning I punched Page in the face, everyone was watching. Our franchise has made headlines for everything from scandals to point streaks no one saw coming. I'm still getting used to that amount of media coverage for our boys fucking sneezing too close to the wrong person; however, my wife has mastered it. Has proven and continues to prove she can handle whatever or whoever comes for our teams.

Either of them.

She protects the one that hits the ice very similarly to the one that doesn't.

She's *all* in.

When she's at the office, she's at the fucking office. Our nanny, Athena—who is forty-two, widowed, and suffering from empty nest syndrome—knows to call or text *me* first when it comes to the twins, especially on game days. I wear the C for our family and honestly? I couldn't be fucking happier about it. Being a dad gives me this odd sense of purpose and direction, kind of like being a husband does. It brings this unexpected vibe of value to know that the people in my life I love rely on *me*.

Me to make the right calls.

Me to make the right plays.

Me to devise the best plans.

That's not to say that Harlow doesn't do her part or that she's a shit mom, which I know she feels like when she has to jet off without us to handle franchise shit like the annual Draft.

The thing is she's a great fucking mom.

And just like when she steps in the barn, she's GM, when she steps in the house, she's *mom*. *Work* has to wait. Our boys become the only boys she gives a fuck about until they're taken care of the way they need to be. Doesn't matter if it's feeding or cleaning or playing or arts and crafts—although she seems to think everything, they fingerpaint with assistance is a hockey puck. And when it comes to care for them—physical, mental, emotional—she looks to *me* for leadership. Probably because I read all the books—and am still reading parenting books—and am the one there for all the doctor's visits—as well as making sure we all go to our respective ones—and am the one that keeps in touch with their private preschool teachers—who sometimes forget I'm married and get a little *too* friendly during pick up. Harlow looks to *me* for guidance when it comes to our family and that shit fills me with so much fucking pride sometimes it brings tears to my eyes.

Not that I'd ever let her see it.

She'd chirp the shit out of me.

Yeah, being a mom hasn't made her nearly as soft as Winslow joked it would; however, him having fallen in love has definitely made *him* softer, which she continuously does give him shit about.

Letty too.

It's weird, but I swear, it was like once Harlow found me, they found *their* people.

Like she started a trend.

A weird fucking trend.

I wind one arm around her lower bare back on our way towards the opposite end of the hall and like always, she leans into it on a crooked grin. "You think we'll get a decent turn out?"

"Are you fucking kidding?" She lightly chortles at my expense. "The place is gonna be fucking packed. It has been *every year* since we started doing this shit when I was kid, even the seasons where we sucked donkey balls."

Entering the elevator upon our arrival happens on a small, amused headshake.

Yeah, getting her to censor herself in any shape has been an impossible task I've given up on for the time being. Mom says over the next couple of months as the boys really start to develop talking skills, we can start a swear jar and that we can use the money in there to take a family vacation to

Disney or some shit. My problem isn't with the idea. It's more about how many trips to fucking Disney we're gonna end up going on.

"Media coverage?"

She peers up at me, additional amusement bouncing around her expression. "Is that your way of asking if Maleficunt is gonna be here?"

I deliver her a look and a simple nod of acknowledgment regarding the correction.

"Yup."

Her entire body tenses during the descent prompting me to give her hip a supportive squeeze.

Unfortunately for us, Florence Ramirez doesn't seem to be disappearing or any less invested in our shortcomings. She was the first to cover any issue we faced during last season yet—to no surprise—last to want to talk about our victories, including how well we did in playoffs, which was fucking impressive for basically a brand-new team under management as well as leadership.

Blanc and every player Harlow signed did what they said they'd do all season long.

They delivered.

And knowing that...fuck, *seeing that* has helped ease the worries regarding making her father proud.

On the anniversary of his death, I forced her to take the time off to grieve.

She was pissed.

And then thankful.

And then introduced me to the man for the first time.

It was weird talking to a headstone but necessary.

I think it finally bridged a gap between the man who used help take care of her and the one who currently does.

And as for the designer mouthpiece that has a tendency to try to make up shit in order to still profit from her thriving daughter? Legally speaking, she's been bound and gagged. She cannot discuss anything that isn't *opinion* based—as in her own personal feelings in reference to a topic—including details regarding the grandsons she hasn't been welcomed to meet. The same grandsons she used to get an endorsement deal for some "young grandmothers" modeling thing in spite of never having been an

actual grandmother to them. We both doubt she's done testing the limits of her verbal confines.

But we're also both prepared to make her life hell in that aspect if it comes to that.

Exiting the elevator is followed by me casually investigating, "Are you prepared to be both Mom and GM simultaneously? You typically only have to do one or the other."

"I'm not worried," she off handedly insists, waving to security along our stroll towards the adjacent building. "I've got you. And *you*," Harlow cuts me an unusually sweet glance, "are always available for the apple."

My grin is bashful, but I know better than to keep us in the sentimental shit for too long. "Yeah, I can tell you came enough. You're spouting girly shit my direction."

"Oh, get bent, fuckface."

Laughter immediately springs from both of us, yet I playfully mutter, "There's the woman I married in Vegas."

And there's something I haven't regretted fucking once.

Regardless of the ups and downs and sideways shit, I've never wished I hadn't.

Never wished I didn't ask for ninety days.

Never once have I wished she didn't end up pregnant or our lives to grow into the crazy mess that they have.

To me?

I'm still racking up the jackpot.

"There's mommy and daddy!" My mom announces to Mario who immediately lights up at the sight of us.

"There's my baby boy!" Harlow loudly coos collecting him into her arms. "Did you miss me?" Whether it's the bouncing or talking to him that gets him giggling is unknown. "Did you have fun with grandma?!"

"Of course he had fun with me," Mom insists as I lean over to peek in on Marcus who is passed out on his side of the stroller. "*I'm fun.*"

"So fun that you're gonna come skate with us?" my wife asks her while booping our youngest's tiny nose.

"God no," she immediately shudders. "I can hardly balance in heels. I won't even pretend to do it in skates."

"You're not that bad, Mom."

"I am, but you're just that sweet, B."

“Eh,” the love of my life adds, instantly receiving a swat to her ass.

Thankfully, it doesn’t take long to get Mario back in his stroller, which he huffs and puffs about, or that long for us to get our skates on for the activity. Mom hangs back to take photos on her phone—something she constantly does whenever she’s in town—while the two of us take the ice with me carefully pushing the stroller as well as myself. We’re greeted warmly by the players, their wife or girlfriend, their kids, and many of the fans who have all paid to be here. Some skate by to tell Harlow what an amazing job she’s doing, and others glide by to swoon over how adorable our kids are. Whenever necessary, I lead us away, allowing her space to be the owner that she is; however, I make sure to keep an eye on her as much as the now wide awake and excited babies enjoying their time on the ice.

I never know when she’ll need me for the assist, so no matter the situation or the scenario I stay ready.

For her.

For the Dalvegan team.

For our family.

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Did you enjoy reading The Owner (Dalvegan Dragons #1)? I would appreciate you leaving a [review](#) if you did!

Wondering who is next up on the roster?

Keep an eye out for [The Veteran](#) (Dalvegan Dragons #2) featuring Igor “Eeyore” Alexeyev.

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OTHER WORKS

Here are links to other stories/places/people that were mentioned/referenced in the book!

[*Frost Luxury Hotel \(Freeform\)*](#)

[*Wilcox Whiskey \(Private Series\)*](#)

[*Gym Life \(Just So Far Away\)*](#)

[*Winslow and Tate \(Waiting\)*](#)

[*Winslow's Brother \(Eden\)*](#)

[*Julian \(Baby Got Pack\)*](#)

[*Spike's Shack \(Already Designed\)*](#)

[*Wyatt Kutner \(The Chef\)*](#)

[*Middlebrook \(Must Love Series\)*](#)

[*Prince of Doctenn \(The Duched Series\)*](#)

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GRATITUDE

The list of people who assist in this entire process is truly too many to name. So rather than run the risk of forgetting anyone, I want to just say thank you to EVERYONE. Readers, bloggers (new and old), friends, family, reviewers, and street teamers...you have all helped me settle into the role as “the owner” of my career quite nicely. Thank you for supporting me and making every step of the journey filled with more empowerment and love and acceptance.

Until next time...

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FULL LIST OF MY WORKS

Standalones

[Cinderfella](#) (YA Contemporary)
[The Gamble](#) ([Romantic Comedy](#))
[Freeform](#) (Romantic Comedy)
[Part of The List](#) (Contemporary Romance)
[Walking Away](#) (Contemporary Ménage Romance)
[Can't Match This](#) (Romantic Comedy)
[Hike, Hike Baby](#) (Romantic Comedy)(Available in Audio)
[Baewatch](#) (Romantic Comedy)
[Sleigh Bride](#) (Holiday Romantic Comedy)
[Aleatory](#) (Contemporary Age-Gap Romance)
[Picnic Perfect](#) (Romantic Comedy)
[Eden](#) (Dark, Taboo Romance)
[Baby Got Pack](#) (Romantic Comedy)
[Waiting](#) (Contemporary Age-Gap Romance)

Senses Series

(Sports Romance/ Romantic Comedy) (Complete Series)

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[Senses Box Set](#) (Books 1-5)

Adrenaline Series

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[Masterpiece](#)

[Unmask](#)

[Error](#)

[Iconic](#)

[Box Set](#) (Books 1-3)

Prince of Tease Series

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[Prince Arik](#)

[Prince Hunter](#)

[Prince Brock](#)

[Prince Chance](#)

Prince Zane- TBA

Hollywood Exchange Series

(Romance/ Romantic Comedy)

[Already Written](#)

Already Secure- TBA

[Already Designed](#) (The South Haven Crew #1)

Already Scripted (The South Haven Crew #2) - TBA

Already Legal (The South Haven Crew #3) - TBA

Already Driven (The South Haven Crew #4) - TBA

Already Cast (The South Haven Crew #5) - TBA

Havoc Series

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[Chaos](#)

[Insanity](#)

[Collapse](#)

[Devastate](#)

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The Just Series

(Second Chance Romance)

[Just Out of Reach](#)
[Just So Far Away](#)

Private Series

(Romantic Suspense) (Complete Series)

[Private](#)

[Public](#)

[Personal](#)

*Popular (A Private Series Standalone)—TBA *(This novel will be about how J.T. and his wife, Janae got together.)*

Duched Series

(Romantic Comedy) (Complete Series)

[Duched](#)

[Royally Duched](#)

[Royally Duched Up](#)

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The Bros Series

(Erotic Romance) (Complete)

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[The Hacker](#)

[The Suit](#)

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Must Love Series

(Sweet, Romantic Comedy)

[Must Love Hogs](#)

[Must Love Jogs](#)

[Must Love Pogs](#)

[Must Love Logs](#)

Must Love Flogs- TBA

The Culture Blind Series

(Contemporary Romance)

[Redneck Romeo](#)

[Cowboy Casanova](#)

[Horseback Hero](#)

Blue Jean Bachelor- TBA

Camelot Misfits MC Series

(MC Romance/ Romantic Suspense)

[King's Return](#) (Available in Audio)

[King's Conquest](#) (Available in Audio)

[King's Legacy](#) (Available in Audio)

[Wiz's Remedy](#) (Available in Audio)

Locke's (Currently Untitled) Novel - TBA

Trick's (Currently Untitled) Novel—TBA

Synful Syndicate Series

(Dark Romance)

[Unleashed](#)

Unchained- TBA

The Bennett Duet

(Dark, Mafia/Mob Romance) (Complete)

[Dark Ruler](#) (Available in Audio)

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