Pucking Sweet

A Jacksonville Rays NOVEL



EMILY RATH

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR

PENGUIN BOOKS

PUCKING SWEET

Emily Rath is an international bestselling author of fantasy and romance. Her books are swoony, spicy, and laugh out loud funny! She currently lives in Florida with her husband, son, and cat. They regularly comb the local beaches looking for shark teeth.

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Pucking Wild (#2)
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I make no apologies for how long this book is, but I will apologize in advance to anyone who has ever worked in PR for an actual NHL team. This will not be accurate, but I promise it'll be fun.

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Content Warnings: This book contains themes that may be distressing to readers including homophobia, patriarchal gender norms, judgmental parents, narcissism, gaslighting, history of a past abusive romantic relationship (verbal and emotional, cheating), and history of child abuse (verbal, emotional, physical, neglect). There are several medical emergencies depicted including two graphic on-ice injuries (blood/open wounds and sudden cardiac complications). A character experiences debilitating claustrophobia, to include hyperventilating and panic attacks. A character also suffers from anxiety.

A main character experiences an unplanned pregnancy. She drinks alcohol while pregnant (only while she is unaware of the pregnancy). She goes into preterm labor, but there are no complications for parent or child. The delivery is not shown on page.

Aside from the above, this book contains detailed MF, MFM, MMF, and MM explicit sex scenes that include elements of public sex, voyeurism, dirty talk, cum as lube, cuckolding, bondage/restraint, impact play, anal play, toy use, praise, and mutual masturbation.

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Author's Note

Welcome back, friends! This is the third book in the Jacksonville Rays hockey romance series. Book One, *Pucking Around*, is Rachel's story. Book Two, *Pucking Wild*, is Tess's story. It's finally time to read Poppy's story. Are you ready to travel back in time?

Pucking Sweet starts at the beginning, even before Rachel arrives in town. We have a lot of ground to cover, so buckle up! I left a ton of Easter eggs for Novy, Poppy, and Morrow across the pages of the first two books (and the HEA novellas). Did you catch them all?

If you want the best, most comprehensive version of all the Jacksonville Rays characters and their universe, I recommend reading all three of the main books in order (and don't forget the spicy prequel that started it all, *That One Night*).

XO,



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Meet the Rays

PLAYERS

*Compton/Price, Jake (#42): defenseman
Davidson, Tyler "Dave-O" (#65): backup goalie
Fields, Ethan (#94): forward
Gerard, Jean-Luc "J-Lo" (#6): defenseman
Gordon, Sam "Flash": rookie, non-starter
Hanner, Paul (#24): defenseman
Jones, Brayden "Jonesy": rookie, non-starter
Karlsson, Henrik (#17): forward
*Kinnunen/Price, Ilmari "Mars" (#31): starting goalie
Langley, Ryan "Langers" (#20): forward
Morrow, Cole (#3): defenseman
Novikov, Lukas "Novy" (#22): defenseman
O'Rourke, Patrick "Patty": rookie, non-starter
O'Sullivan, Josh "Sully" (#19): forward, Captain
Perry, David "DJ" (#13): forward
Walsh, Cade (#10): forward
West, Connor "Westie": rookie, non-starter
Woodson, Chris "Woody" (#51): defenseman

COACHES

Andrews, Brody: Assistant Coach (defense)
Denison, Nick: Assistant Coach (offense)
Johnson, Harold "Hodge": Head Coach
Tomlin, Eric: Goalie Coach

TEAM SUPPORT

Gordon, Jerry: Assistant Equipment Manager
Jones, Cody: Equipment Tech
*Sanford/Price, Caleb: Assistant Equipment Manager

MEDICAL SUPPORT

Avery, Todd: Director of Physical Therapy
Jacobs, Hillary: Team Nurse
O'Connor, Teddy: PT intern

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Price, Rachel: Barkley Fellow
Tyler, Scott: Team Doctor

OPERATIONS/MANAGEMENT

Francis, Vicki: Operations Manager
Ortiz, Claribel "Wednesday": Social Media Manager
St. James, Poppy: Public Relations Director
Talbot, Mark: Owner and Interim General Manager

*Jake, Ilmari, and Caleb are listed with their unmarried and married names as this book crosses timelines with books one and two in the series.

STAR SIGNS

POPPY: Libra (air): strategic, compassionate, indecisive
LUKAS: Scorpio (water): intuitive, calculating, guarded
COLTON: Leo (fire): passionate, playful, loyal

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1
poppy

"Hey, Poppy, I think you're gonna want to see this . . ."

I look up sharply over my laptop screen, eyeing the cellphone my social media manager extends my way. Claribel Ortiz was my first official hire in my new position as public relations director for the Jacksonville Rays. She may have all the charm of an angry black crow, with her goth girl eyeliner and dyed inky black hair, but she's a genius. Besides, she works behind the camera, not in front of it.

Personally, I like her fierce attitude. These days, marketing on social media is like battling a hydra. Each time you slay the algorithm and start seeing success, the darn thing grows three new heads, and you have to start all over.

Enter Claribel.

This girl is quickly becoming the Rays' own personal Hercules. She's sharp and inventive with content creation. Nothing feels boring or overdone. She teases trends rather than beating them dead. In a matter of weeks, her team took all our fledgling NHL accounts and turned them into content machines. Our views are climbing, and our followers are growing—just in time for the first game of the season.

In the past few months, I've learned Claribel only has two expressions: lifeless and loathing. To see a third on her face is a little unsettling. In this moment, she looks almost . . . amused?

"What is it?" I say, warily reaching for her phone. "Oh heavens, please don't tell me this is still about those gosh darn balloons."

"It's not about the balloons."

"Thank goodness for small mercies."

Last week, we used two large balloon arches outside the new practice facility to decorate for our inaugural training camp. Within hours, every climate change group in the city descended to declare

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the Jacksonville Rays an environmental scourge. Claribel's team has been working overtime across our social media accounts to showcase all the environmentally friendly features of the facility.

But this is definitely not about balloons.

"Oh, no." I flick the screen with my thumb. My frown deepens with each picture I scroll past. Most of them are grainy, but there's no mistaking what I'm seeing—dancing women in bikinis; glassy-eyed, lounging men; and lots of free-flowing alcohol. I huff, flicking my ponytail off my shoulder. "Seriously? These look like stills from a Pitbull music video."

Claribel raises a dark brow. "Latin crunk doesn't seem like your vibe, boss."

I eye her over the phone. "Don't let the pearls and polish fool you, Miss Claribel. I'm a woman of the world."

You have to be tough to work in public relations. You have to be even tougher to work in a male-dominated field like the National Hockey League. I may look like a kitten, but with the St. James name and the reputation of a major international PR firm behind me, I'm a tiger.

Claribel is one of the only people who isn't intimidated by my family connections or my cutthroat business style. Just one more reason why I like working with her. She crosses her arms, her long black nails tapping her forearm as she surveys me. "Let me guess . . . you were a sorority girl?"

I smile, glancing back at her phone.

"Yeah, I bet you ran circles around those frat boys," she teases.

My smile falls when I realize the same man is in almost every photo. I'd know his stupidly handsome face anywhere—that sculpted jaw, those serious eyes, the confident smirk. It's Lukas Novikov, star defenseman for the Jacksonville Rays. He has tousled, light brown hair and a soft spray of freckles across his pale cheeks and nose, a nose that has been broken at least once judging by the little lump in the bridge. His colorfully tattooed arm drapes casually over the shoulders of girl after girl. In every picture he looks bored and cocky, downright unobtainable.

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But I know the truth: the man is *too* obtainable.

Lukas Novikov is a walking PR nightmare—the constant parties,

the endlessly rotating roster of girls, his surly post-game interview tactics. If he weren't one of the top-ranked players in the League, he'd probably be unemployed by now. But I've seen him in action. He hits like a freight train and fights like a bear. It'd be easier to dismiss him as a mindless bruiser if he wasn't one of the top defensemen scorers. Not only can he assist with goals, he makes them too. He's worth the seven million dollars a year the Rays pay him . . . *on* the ice.

Off the ice, he's nothing but a thorn in my side. The season hasn't even started, and I already wish we could trade him away. But that's above my pay grade. I don't get to pick the cards I'm dealt. I just have to find a way to win with them.

Novikov is my wild card. When the Bruins announced his trade to the Rays, their PR manager sent me a file on him an inch thick. She'd slipped a pink sticky note inside the manilla folder that said, "He's your problem now." I'm sure she laughed her way to the nearest bar and bought everyone the first round of drinks to celebrate.

As if I don't have enough problems! I'm trying to build the reputation of an international men's hockey team from scratch. Do these players really think it's so easy? In the current political and social climate, sports teams are under a microscope every hour of the day. If the city is willing to pick up their torches and pitchforks over a balloon arch, what will they do to our whiskey-guzzling manwhore of a star defenseman who spends every moment he's not on the ice with his hands on a different puck bunny's cleavage?

I glance up at Claribel. "When did these post?"

"Last night. More this morning," she adds. "Novikov rented a rooftop bar over at the beach and threw this little private party."

"When will these guys learn?" I hand the phone back to her with a tired shake of my head.

"Learn what, boss?"

"Nothing is ever private anymore."

"It can be, if you know how to be careful," she hedges. "Novikov clearly doesn't . . . or he just doesn't care."

I close my laptop and push away from my desk, slipping my feet back into my patent leather Saint Laurent slingbacks. "Okay, Clary-B. Give it to me straight. What's the fallout?"

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"Pretty much what we expected. They're calling the Rays a bunch

of party boys and players. The fan groups are split between wishing they were invited and wishing the team was setting a better example for the city."

I stand, slipping into my heels like armor. "Did Novikov post any of those photos to his own social media?"

"No, he hasn't posted anything since he announced his trade."

That's a relief at least.

"You know, Angela Whitney over at the Bruins warned me about him," I say, stuffing my laptop into my purse. "The moment they announced, she was in my emails asking for a call. I'd hoped he'd at least wait until the season started before he pulled this crap here."

"Maybe it's a one-off. Just letting off some end-of-summer steam before the season starts."

"Yeah, and maybe he's a party-loving pretty boy with more charisma than sense, determined to make my job here impossible." I sling my heavy bag over my shoulder, clutching my buzzing phone in my manicured hand. Whoever they are and whatever they need, they're going to have to wait.

Claribel watches me round the desk. "What are you gonna do, boss?"

"I'll tell you what I'm *not* gonna do. I'm not giving Novikov the long leash he had up in Boston." I snatch my facility access pass off the hook by the door. "He thinks he can behave here the way he did up there? I intend to educate."

"You gonna tug on his leash a little, Pop?"

I slip the lanyard around my neck. "If I have to."

She leans against the wall by the door. "You gonna call him a 'bad boy?' Make him crawl?"

"I'm not above treating these grown men like naughty children," I say, freeing my ponytail from under the lanyard. "Athletes crave structure. Sometimes they just need a firm hand."

"Kinky. Can I watch?"

I step past her and shrug. "Sure."

Her expression brightens just a little. "Can I record it?"

"No."

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She shuts my door and follows me down the hall. "What about just audio?"

My heels click as I head for the elevator. "No, Claribel."

"What about a picture?" she says at my shoulder. "Trust me, boss, there's nothing hotter than seeing a man who deserves it get reprimanded by a female superior."

I laugh, jabbing my thumb on the elevator's shiny silver down button. The elevator doors open and we both step inside. I hate elevators, but it can't be helped. I am simply not climbing four flights of stairs every time I need something from one of the players.

As the doors close, I smile. "Fine. One picture. We look at it, then we delete it."

Her eyes are already back on her phone, but I see her smirk. "Consider it done, boss."

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2
LUKAS

Well, hot goddamn. I am on fire. Training camp is going exceptionally well for me. Thanks to my grueling summer cardio routine, I'm as fast as I've ever been out on the ice. Strong too. At twenty-six, I'm seven years into my NHL career, and I'm in the best shape of my life. I feel like a bull only just hitting my prime.

As if I need the affirmation, the next words out of the physical therapy intern's mouth are: "You've been looking great out there, man."

"Thanks."

"Seriously, you're really fun to watch." Teddy O'Connor stands at the end of the massage table, my feet cupped in his hands as he gently jiggles my legs. It always helps me to get some of the lactic acid moving before I hit the ice.

I groan, tipping my head back as his strong fingers massage my left calf muscles. "God, you're good at that." I feel my body go slack. "What will it take to convince you to come to my house and do this every night?"

Teddy stills.

"Novy, stop propositioning my interns," Doc Avery calls from the next table over. He's busy working on Langley, one of the flashy young wingers. I don't know why, but Avery always makes me grit my teeth. The guy is a fucking asshole.

"Don't listen to him, Teddy Bear," I tease. "You know I'm totally loaded, right? I'll make it more than worth your while." I flash him an obnoxious wink that Langley and Avery can both see.

Teddy laughs. "Sure, Nov. Why don't I just move in for the season? I can kip on your couch and make you oatmeal in the morning too."

"Sounds like a plan."

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He grins. "Cool. My going rate is a thousand dollars a night."

I huff a laugh that comes out part grunt as he digs his thumb into my soleus muscle.

"Hey, you just said you're loaded, right?"

"Don't even tempt me, bud. You're that good. You've got way better technique than old Hotdogs-for-Hands Avery over there."

Avery grumbles something under his breath while Teddy puffs out his chest a little, pleased with my compliment. "Okay, man. That's about all I can do," he says, lowering my leg. "Hit the bike for fifteen to twenty minutes when you get off the ice. Keep it loose and casual."

"Loose and casual? Did you memorize my Tinder bio?"

"I can help you stretch after if you need me," he offers.

"Hey, there are twenty-two other guys on this team," Avery calls over to him. "Time to crawl out of Novy's ass, kid."

Sitting up, I swing my legs off the side of the table.

"Good luck out there today," Teddy says, his voice lower now, his smile falling.

I hop off the table and flash him my most confident grin. "Like I need it."

He's right to wish me luck though. On a regular team, training camp is typically used to decide which farm team guys will fill out the twenty-three-man roster. But this is year one for the Jacksonville Rays. No player's position is guaranteed, not even mine. All the rookies are hungry for a chance to shine, and the older guys are desperate to stay relevant. Hopefully, Coach Johnson is about to announce that I'll be the starting left defenseman this season.

I think the only holdup at this point is deciding who will skate at my right. There are a few good prospects. Jean-Luc Gerard is a legend. Jake Compton is definitely solid. We've been chasing each other in the League rankings for years.

But I've got my hopes set on Cole Morrow. Methodical and confident, he's like a cannonball on the ice. He's knocked me on my ass more times than I can count over the years. And we already have a shorthand we can dust off from the time we played together back in the Western Hockey League. It was only for one season, but when we started together on the Seattle Thunderbirds, we were a well-oiled, two-man machine.

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Langley hops off the other table. He's only an inch or two shorter than my six-foot-two frame, but he's a forward and I'm a defenseman. He's lean and fast, while I'm built like a tree. "You ready for another exhibition game?"

"I was born ready."

"You're from Thunder Bay, right? And you played in the WHL?"

I eye him carefully. "Did you google me, Langers?"

"Might have done."

I press a hand to my chest. "Aww, I'm touched. You wanna know my star sign too there, bud? My favorite food?"

He laughs. "Don't pretend you didn't look up my stats just as soon as they announced the full trade list."

"Of course I did. Gotta know your enemy, right? And my star sign is Scorpio by the way—not that you asked."

"So, I'm your enemy now? You really want to start the season with an enemy on the team?"

"Hey, they traded you in from Montreal, Langers. I was a Bruin. You do the math. Besides, everyone loves a good enemies-to-lovers trope."

"Spare me, tough guy. I know you're a marshmallow under all that angry muscle. And it doesn't matter where we came from. We're both Rays now."

"Rivalries die a slow death," I intone.

He just shrugs. "Not for me. I don't like to dwell on the past. Tell you what, the first game we play in Montreal, we'll find a great dive and split an order of poutine. My treat. Then I'll have to beat you away with a stick." He holds out a hand, intending for me to shake it.

I glance down at it. "Oh, so you think it's that easy to woo a Canadian? A little poutine and I'll just forget about how you smoked us during the last playoffs?"

"It worked for me before," he replies, still holding out his hand. "If poutine's not your thing, I'll just shake a box of maple candy at you. Either way, we'll both be dressed in the teal and white of the Rays. Boom. Best friends forever."

Okay, I officially like Langley. I laugh as I reach out my hand, but the sound dies as I take in the sudden look of panic on his face.

"Uh-oh." He drops his hand to his side. "Dude, watch your six."

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I hear the soft click of heels coming from directly behind me and my shoulders stiffen. "Oh shit . . . PR Barbie?"

"Yep."

"No."

"She's clocked you, man."

I groan. "Exactly what color is her pencil skirt?"

"Uhh . . ." He glances surreptitiously around me to check. "Black."

"Fuck."

Black means no nonsense. Black means it's about to be someone's fucking funeral.

He claps me on the shoulder. "She's hungry for it, man. Total blood in the water."

My gaze darts around, noting all the exits. I feel it when her eyes lock on me. "Can I still escape?"

"Not a chance. Sorry, man."

I grab his arm as he tries to step past me. "Goddamn it. Don't leave me."

He twists his wrist, wrenching away from my grasp. "If I stay here, she'll drag me into whatever mess you're in, and I'd rather keep my balls attached, thanks."

"You are dead to me," I hiss. "*This* is how we become enemies."

Langley laughs, ducking around me like a rabbit fleeing from a fox. Only in this case, the fox stands at all of five-foot-two and has pink manicured nails for claws.

"Good luck ever becoming my lover now, you fucking Judas," I rasp at his back. He uses Teddy as a human shield, darting away from our approaching director of public relations.

"Yoo-hoo, Lukas," Poppy calls. "Honey, do you have a minute to chat?"

Teddy looks wide-eyed at me while, behind him, Avery just smirks. Arrogant fuck. I hate him. I take a deep breath, filling my chest with air as I spin around.

Fuck me. Why does the biggest ball-buster I've ever met have to be so gorgeous? She marches toward me in her kitten heels, that devilish black pencil skirt hugging the narrow curve of her hips. Her blazer is unbuttoned, revealing a silky blouse underneath that hugs her perky boobs.

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Fuck—don't look at her boobs.

My gaze darts up to take in the pointed features of her face instead. Her bright blue eyes are narrowed at me, while that curly blonde ponytail swings from side to side with each step. "Poppy St. James, as I live and breathe," I say at her approach. "To what do I owe the pleasure?"

"Spare me the sass, Lukas. We need to talk. In private, if you please," she adds, her gaze darting over to the PT staff. Behind her, Wednesday Addams deadpans me, her phone clutched in her pasty hand capped with pointed black talons.

Avery just chuckles and walks off in the direction of his office. But sweet Teddy doesn't take the hint. "Good morning, Ms. St. James," he says brightly.

She turns, blasting him a megawatt smile. "Teddy, honey, haven't I told you to call me Poppy?"

Sure, for *him* she coos like an angel.

He gives a nervous laugh. "Right. I'll remember one of these days."

"Am *I* allowed to call you Poppy?" I ask.

She turns back to me, her every feature sharpening. Fuck, it's terrifying how she can just turn it on and off like that. "That remains to be seen. Shall we?" She gestures with her free hand, daring me to walk ahead of her toward some private location. But I've seen this all before. This is the moment in the horror movie where the jock boyfriend named Jason goes down into the cellar alone. No way. I'm not dying like that.

"I'm good right here," I dare to say, crossing my tattooed arms. I lean my hip against the massage table. "There's nothing you could say to me that you can't say in front of my good friend Teddy."

Poor Teddy glances between us, looking like he'd rather follow Langers out the nearest exit. At Poppy's shoulder, Wednesday smirks.

Fuck.

I see the flash in Poppy's eyes as she steps forward, pressing right up in my space. "Alright then. Here it is." She plops her heavy bag down on the empty massage table and turns her back on Teddy, glaring fiercely up at me. It's so cute how she has to crane her neck. I'm

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at least a foot taller, even when she's in her heels. "Stow the smile, Lukas. This isn't a courtesy call. It's a formal reprimand."

Am I smiling? I think I must be. I clear my throat, wiping the smile from my face as I drop my arms to my sides. "Of course. Give me a second to warm up first, yeah?" I bounce on the balls of my feet and roll my shoulders. "Right. I'm ready. Lay into me. Just not the face, okay? Gotta look pretty for my roster pictures later."

"Everything's a joke to you, isn't it? You can't take anything seriously—not your career, not your reputation, certainly not the reputation of this team."

I stiffen, my good mood souring. "I'd argue that you don't know me—"

"Oh, I know you, Lukas Novikov. I've known cocky showboats like you my entire life. You think I haven't been following your career—on and off the ice? You think I didn't do extensive research on every player on this team, every member of the support staff? I have a dossier on you back in my office. You want to know what the top page says?"

"Enlighten me."

She squares her shoulders, ready to fire her sharpest arrow. "It's a personal note from your last PR manager that says, 'he's your problem now.'"

Shit. Not gonna lie, that fucking hurts. It shouldn't. The Bruins PR team were a bunch of no-fun Nancys. But hearing Poppy say the words feels like taking a cross check to the chest with no protective pads.

"Is that what you're going to be, Lukas? Are you determined to be my problem? Because I have to tell you here and now that if that's what you want, you will be sorely disappointed."

Something dark and heavy roils in my gut. "Before you tear me a new asshole, why don't you back up a step and start by telling me what great sin I committed?"

She raises a brow, obliging me by backing away. "Fine. Claribel?"

Wednesday steps in on her left, flashing me her phone screen. She swipes with her thumb, and I see pic after pic of me from the party last night. Gotta be honest, the details are a bit fuzzy. All I remember was being bored at home around nine o'clock and calling

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some of the guys out to that rooftop bar. None of the married guys came, of course. It was just me and some rookies who all quickly got shit-faced and left me with the bill.

All around, it was a pretty shitty night.

I laugh. "Seriously? That's what you're so mad about? It was just a private party—"

"That every single bunny in attendance photographed to kingdom come," Poppy cries with a dramatic wave of her hand. "And posted all over every social site and fan group. Now the city is calling you all a bunch of playboys and party animals."

"Wow." I drag a hand through my short hair. "I didn't take this team's management for a bunch of prudes. You know we're allowed to have a little pre-season fun, right? We're allowed to have private lives too—or is that banned in the contract I signed?"

"Private implies just that," she counters. "You think I care that you flounce around from bunny to bunny every night?"

"Hey, I don't flounce. I wouldn't even know how to flounce—"

"You think it bothers me one iota that you drink and party and otherwise waste away all your free time in the dark corners of seedy bars and clubs? I don't care, Lukas. It's your life. Do what you want with it. Just keep it off the front pages of the gossip rags and fan sites."

"What do you want me to do? I can't stop the bunnies from taking pictures—"

"Yes, you *can*," she insists. "This is simple PR. You want to throw a private rooftop party? Fine. But make it *private*. Have security at the stairs and confiscate phones. They can't post the pictures they don't take. As for your constant dalliances, all this 'take a number' like you're a one-man deli counter has to stop. There's this nifty little device called an NDA. Have all your lady friends sign them—preferably *before* the miniskirts come off. If your lawyer doesn't have a template ready, I can provide one my clients have used in the past."

I blink down at her, my anger fizzling. "Wait—what are you doing?"

She leans away. "What do you mean?"

"I thought this was a reprimand. Are you seriously advising me on how best to throw a private rooftop orgy right now?"

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She does me the courtesy of blushing, but she brushes it off with another wave of her hand. "I just told you, Lukas. I don't care what

you do. I only care *how* you do it. If you're determined to make it your job to party every moment you're not on the ice, then as your PR manager, it's *my* job to ensure you do it with as little damage to your reputation as possible."

I glare down at her. "Why do you care so much about my damn reputation?"

"Because you're a Ray now."

I bristle again. "Oh, and it's as simple as that?"

"Yes, it's as simple as that."

I glance from her to Wednesday to Teddy, who still looks like he'd rather be anywhere else.

Poppy sighs, leaning her hip against the massage table. "Look . . . I don't relish this part of my job, okay? I don't want to come off as the morality police. It's not about that. I'm sorry if, in my frustration, I sounded like a prude just now . . . or made you feel like you should be ashamed of your behavior."

"*If*?" I press with a raised brow. "Poppy, you may as well have sprayed me down with disinfectant. Are you sure you wanna stand this close to me? You never know, my proclivity for promiscuity might be catching. I'd hate for you to become afflicted. Don't they take your pearls away when you join the 'bad girls club?'"

A heavy moment of silence hangs in the air between us as she doesn't take my bait.

"Are you finished?" she asks.

Goddamn it, the pink of her lipstick matches her nails. Why does that turn me on? I don't want to be turned on by this harpy of a PR manager. I want to be *pissed*. When I signed up to play professional hockey, I didn't know I'd receive this constant policing of my behavior. *Don't be too slutty, Lukas. Don't chirp the competition, Lukas. Don't pull pranks, Lukas.* It's fucking exhausting. What does it matter what I do *off* the ice so long as I dominate *on* the ice?

But it's been like this on every team in every league. It's like they expect us to behave like goddamn choirboys. I'm tired of getting my nose swatted with a rolled-up newspaper for daring to live my life on my terms. I've done enough of living under the rules and restrictions of others. Lukas Novikov is his own fucking person. If I want to fuck and drink and party my way into an early grave, that shouldn't put

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my PR manager's pink frilly undies in a twist. I do my job, and I do it better than practically everyone in the League. So, PR Barbie can just get off my fucking back already.

I only *think* all this, of course. I don't actually say any of it out loud because I've been doing this dance for years. Instead, I grit my teeth and say, "Yeah, I'm done."

Reaching over, she pats my thigh. I stiffen, my gaze darting down to where her hand is touching me. She moves it away too soon. And then she's moving away entirely. "Let's start over," she says, flicking her ponytail off her shoulder. I bet when that hair is down, it nearly touches her perky butt—

Shit—don't think about her butt.

I grunt something that may be the word "okay" or may just be a sound like "harglumph."

She offers me a weak smile. "I don't want to be your enemy, Lukas. And I *really* don't want you to be my new problem. Between the balloon arches, and the fundraisers, and the whole 'newest team in the NHL' curse I'm trying to break, I have my hands more than full right now."

"I don't want that either," I hear myself admit.

She checks on her buzzing phone, sending the call to voicemail. "So, then let's find a new way forward. Right, here's what we'll do. Lukas, I want you to work with Claribel."

Okay, shoe fucking drop.

I push off the massage table. "What?"

"Yeah, what?" Wednesday echoes.

"Claribel possesses the skill set you lack," Poppy reasons, stepping between us to fetch her massive bag. "She'll coach you in the art of living your private life *in private*."

Wednesday looks like she'd rather be torn apart by wild dogs. "I already have a job, boss. And I don't do charity work."

"Yeah, and she sorta scares the shit out of me. No offense," I add.

"It's fine," Wednesday deadpans. "Actually, I take it as a compliment."

Now it's Poppy's turn to huff in frustration, juggling her bag and her still-buzzing phone. Our new PR director is clearly in high demand. "Heavens—fine. Lukas, I suppose I'll just have to deal with you myself."

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Deal with me? Why am I perking up at this? I should definitely still be annoyed, right? Affronted even. And she'd clearly rather skydive into a volcano than waste more of her precious time talking to me.

That's probably why I'm excited . . .

God, I'm such an ass.

I smirk. "You're gonna be my new sexual sensei? You'll teach me the art of hush-hush hookups? Why, Ms. St. James, you surprise me. They really *are* gonna take away your pearls—"

"I already said to stow the sass, Lukas." She slings her heavy bag on her shoulder, nearly hitting me with it, her eyes locked on her phone. "Be in my office Monday morning at ten o'clock."

"I have a better idea," I tease, my mood brightening at the thought of wasting her time. "Let's make this an evening affair and say we meet at seven o'clock over at Neptune Beach. I'm thinking the fish camp. Candles on every table. Very intimate . . . and delicious. Are you a raw oyster kind of girl?"

She lowers her phone and glares at me. That little pointed nose of hers looks so cute when she's annoyed. "This is not a date, Lukas. This is business. Be in my office Monday morning, or I *will* assign you to Claribel and watch as she runs you over with the Zamboni."

I flash her my most asshole-ish smile. "It's a date."

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3
POPPY

"Ugh, that man is infuriating! Everything is a joke to him. Nothing is serious. You'd think he didn't even care that this kind of behavior could get him traded . . . *again*." I march down the fourth-floor hallway back toward my office, heels clicking. "He's nothing but a big . . . a big butt!"

At my side, Claribel snorts. "A butt? Is that the best you can do?"

"Hey, don't laugh," I say, eyes on my phone as I shoot off another text to the ticket office manager. "If you grew up with my Nana, you'd be afraid to curse too."

"Were you looking at his butt, boss?"

"Of course not."

"There's no shame if you were," she teases. "Hockey butts are some of the best butts around. I think it's all the squats they do. And the lunging. They lunge a lot—have you noticed that?"

I release a weary sigh. "Claribel, *please* stop trying to make me picture the players' butts. These men are our work associates now. They are hard-working professionals. We are to treat them with respect, and not ogle their . . ."

"Juicy hams?"

I pause, frowning at her.

"I was just trying to fill in your blank," she says, raising a hand in surrender. "Gluteus maximus? Is that better? More technical . . . sounds sportier, right?"

I turn on my heel and keep walking. We have to duck around a painting crew doing touch ups to the fancy new wall mural, sidestepping their buckets and trays.

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Mark Talbot spared no expense in designing this new facility, but it's taken a couple acts of god—and more than a few extra checks—to

have it ready on time. I'm still without internet or a working phone in my office. And the overhead lights keep flickering . . . something to do with glitching backup generators. But so long as the ice stays frozen for the team to practice, the rest of us are expected to just suffer through these initial growing pains.

This is fine. I love running a public relations department from my cell phone . . . incurring roaming charges because of the terrible reception inside this bunker of a building . . . while I sit alone in the dark. It's all going to be just fine.

I can hear my old Division 1 track coach's voice inside my head. *Mind over matter, Poppy. Winners never quit.*

Paint cans rattle as the workmen shuffle out of our way.

"Boss, I can't make the ten o'clock," says Claribel, both thumbs feverishly tapping out a message on her phone. "Dale is having some kind of crisis down at warm-up. I need to get down there."

I pause again. "Wait—what's at ten o'clock?"

"The meeting with the new Barkley Fellow. You wanted me to get some content for the socials. 'New Doc on the Block' and all that—"

"Oh, sweet goodness," I gasp. "That was today? For some reason, I thought she was flying in tomorrow."

"Nope, her flight got in yesterday."

I flick through my calendar to make sure there's nothing else I'm missing. "I swear, the closer we get to the start of the season, time is losing all meaning for me."

As we stand there, Caleb Sanford comes wandering out of one of the office suites. He's one of the lead equipment managers for the team. He gives off a broody, "don't look at me" vibe, which I'm sure just lures all the ladies in faster. Too bad he backs up the looks with an even grouchier personality. He'd be social media gold if Claribel could just get him to cooperate for the cameras. But so far, the man has proved to be more slippery than an eel.

"Is the new Barkley Fellow coming in today?" I ask him.

"Rachel? Yeah, she's in there with Vic now," he replies.

"She's here?" I cry, my excitement bubbling. After going two rounds with Lukas Novikov downstairs, this is just what I need to put my day back on track.

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"Pop, I gotta go," Claribel says at my shoulder.

"Well, come right back," I say with a distracted wave. "I want us to dive in with her announcement. All the socials. Static posts and video."

"Got it," she calls, slinking away between the painters.

I step past Caleb, letting myself into Vicki's office. She gives me a smile in welcome, but I hardly notice. Dropping my heavy bag to the floor, I only have eyes for the beauty sitting in the chair opposite Vicki's desk. I've seen pictures of her of course, mainly in trashy tabloids and airport fashion magazines. But she's even prettier in person—the dark hair, the pouty lips, the mocha chocolate eyes. She looks effortlessly cool, even in her scrubs.

"Are you our new Barkley Fellow?" I say in welcome.

She stands and holds out a hand. "Yes, hi. Doctor Rachel Price."

I wave her hand away as I step forward. "Oh, sweetie, here in the South, we hug." I wrap her in a quick embrace, noting the sweetly spiced scent of her perfume. "I'm Poppy St. James," I say, letting her go. "Head of PR for the Rays. And can I just say that I am *so* excited to have our team participate in the fellowship program this year? I mean, who doesn't love good press? And when I learned that you were going to be our new fellow? Well, I just about died!" I laugh, glancing from Rachel to Vicki.

"I mean, it's enough that you're gorgeous and so deeply talented," I add breathlessly. "But then I found out about your family. I mean, nothing goes with hockey quite like rock and roll, right?"

Her smile falters and she leans away.

Okay, maybe I *am* laying this on a little thick. I didn't just "find out" she was Rachel Price and connect the dots to her famous dad. She's Rachel Freaking Price! She's practically American royalty. She grew up in the spotlight—concerts and movie premieres, fashion weeks, awards ceremonies.

My family is rather established too. We're just part of the East Coast old money set. We live quieter lives, much less public. Think DC dynasty-makers, not LA icons. But Rachel and I are about the same age. We even share some mutual acquaintances. I followed all her escapades over the years—the brief modeling career in Paris, the wrecked yacht on the Amalfi Coast, the whirlwind engagement to that smarmy fashion photographer.

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And those were just her teen years.

But now she's a doctor. Her wild child days are behind her, and she's got a bright, shiny career in sports medicine ahead. With that pretty face, and her famous father, she'll be public relations gold for us this year.

Time to lean all the way in. "Say, do you think your daddy might be interested in coming out for a game this season?"

Her smile flickers and disappears. "Umm . . . you know, I'm not really sure of his schedule," she replies noncommittally.

Vicki glances between us. "What are you two talking about?"

I turn to her. "Oh, hadn't you heard? Our talented new Barkley Fellow has some added star power. Her daddy is Hal Price from The Ferrymen!"

Poor, sweet Vicki looks completely clueless. She must have missed the gossip train. We've all been humming with the news for the last two days. "Is that a band?" she asks.

I feign a gasp, clutching my chest. "A band? Vicki, they're only one of the biggest rock bands of *all* time!" I turn back to Rachel, my hand lightly brushing her arm. "I swear, when I told my brother, he nearly fell out of his chair."

"That's great—"

"Say, does he ever play the national anthem?" I press. "You know, like Hendrix? Oh, wouldn't that be amazing, Vic? The Ferrymen in our arena! Can you imagine?"

"That would be really great," Vicki replies with a nod.

It would be more than great. We'd be able to ride the good press of that for weeks.

Rachel shifts uncomfortably. "Yeah, you know, I can ask."

Okay, fine. I've tortured her enough for this first meeting. I turn to the business at hand. Digging inside my bag, I look for the press events calendars, pausing to shoot Claribel a text.

POPPY: Get back up here. We need pics of Rachel.

She responds in seconds, my phone buzzing in my hand.

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CLARIBEL: Can't. Rookie tripped over camera cords and almost chipped a tooth. Coaches chewed us out. Moving cords now.

I huff in frustration, tugging out the folder marked with Rachel's name. "Sorry." I nearly drop my phone as I right myself, folder in hand. "I've got, like, three press events this morning, and I'm trying to hunt down Claribel. I wanted her to get a few pics of Rachel in action—*oh*—do you mind if I call you Rachel?"

Yeah, I just said all that in one breath. Rachel looks at me wide-eyed, like I'm about to pop into a cloud of pink confetti. Honestly, I'm not entirely convinced I won't. I'm wound so dang tight right now. As soon as I get off work, I need to go for a run . . . or drink a whole bottle of bubbly champagne . . . or have a back-breaking orgasm.

All three.

Preferably in that order.

Behind her desk, Vicki laughs. "Poppy, honey, *breathe*."

I pause, taking a deep breath. She's right. I can't do this job if I'm wrapped up in a ball of jitters. Everything will work out. I'll have a desk and lights that stay on. I won't have to fight the players or lock them up in towers to make them behave.

It's all going to be fine.

As I think it, the lights overhead faintly flicker.

I let out another shaky breath.

This is all perfectly fine.

"Thanks, Vic, I needed that."

Rachel is still eyeing me like she's not sure what to make of me.

"I'm sorry," I say at her. "I'm just a big ole mess these days. I think it's all this stress leading up to the first game day."

"We're all a little on edge," Vicki assures me.

I step forward, handing Rachel her folder. "I promise I'm not always like this," I say with a laugh. "I can be normal. You'll see. Hopefully once the season starts, we'll all find our rhythm."

Rachel relaxes a little, taking the folder. "Of course." She glances down at the calendar, quickly scanning each row. "What's this?"

"That's a schedule for some upcoming public relations events," I explain. "With a new team, we can't leave it to just the players to help put the Rays on the map."

Her eyes go wide as she takes in all the colored dots. It's jam-packed, I know. But we're going with the "shock and awe" approach here. She glances up at me. "I'm attending all these events?"

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I don't know why she looks so concerned. Her schedule is light. I had to leave room for her to do her actual fellowship hours too. "Yeah, don't you think it will be great? We've got the coaches hitting the town too, the players, even staff. Like I said, it's all hands on deck."

For a brief moment, she looks like she might hand her access pass back over to Vicki. Is Rachel Price about to disappoint me? Seeing as she's a doctor now, I was hoping that she'd come ready to work. The last thing I need is another diva on this team. I already get enough of that with the players.

I mentally bat away the image of Lukas Novikov that floats in front of me. Claribel's wrong if she thinks I was looking at his butt earlier. It's those devilish caramel-colored eyes that threaten to make me melt.

"I really hope you're a team player," I press, ignoring the repeated buzzing of my phone. "Because we mean to win this game."

"Which game?" she asks, tucking her calendar back inside the folder.

"*The* game," I reply. "The only one that matters."

She searches my face like she's confused.

I smile, hefting my portable office back onto my shoulder. "Sports at this level is never just about the sport, Rachel. It's about everything else. Our most important game this year won't be played on the ice. It's about winning the hearts and minds of the people of Jacksonville. We need to let the hockey world see that the Rays are here to play, and we're here to stay."

That's my job this year, to put the Rays on the map. That's why Mark hired me. And I can't fail him. If I do, he won't be renewing my contract next year. I have exactly one year to show this team and this city what I can do.

One year.

No distractions. No mistakes.

Let's do this, Poppy. Winners never quit.

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4
COLTON

My heart races as I skate into the corner, chasing after the puck. There's only two minutes left in this exhibition game, and my team is winning—not that the points actually matter. We're all just out here showing the coaches what we can do. I beat Walsh to the puck, elbowing him into the boards. Then I slap the puck behind the net over to Novy and he bats it out of the corner. As one, we dig our toe blades into the ice, launching back toward the blue line.

Gripping my mouth guard between my teeth, I slide to a stop, surveying the action. Our forwards are clumped around the net, looking for one last score. *Good luck.* Mars Kinnunen is a two-time Stanley Cup-winning goalie. As I watch, he easily catches the puck in his glove, stopping the action. It gives me a moment to breathe and assess.

Hockey is a highly technical sport, which is why I love it so much. It's about input and output. My body is my machine, and each input and output helps it to work at peak efficiency—nutrition, exercise, hydration, sleep. Everything is flowing today, and I'm feeling great. Muscle memory is good. My legs are strong. Lungs and heart are working in rhythm. My recovery time between shifts feels well-regulated. This is definitely the best I've felt in years, and it's showing. I'll be shocked if the coaches don't start me.

The game ends, and Novy skates over to me, grinning around the blue mouth guard hanging out of his mouth. "If that doesn't secure us starting spots, I don't know what will."

"Compton and J-Lo are skating well too," I hedge, glancing to the bench where Jean-Luc Gerard, our most senior defenseman, is chatting with the equipment manager. Jake Compton skipped this game altogether, but he doesn't have to worry. He's flashy and strong and well worth the millions the Rays paid to trade him in.

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"I bet they take second pair," says Novy. "No way the coaches don't pair us up. We're dynamite together. Just like old times, eh?"

I shrug. Nothing is sure in this sport. I'm playing, and that's all that matters. Whether I'm first pair or third, I know I'll be on the ice for another season, and I'm grateful. "Hey, great assist," I say. "That's gotta feel good, eh? Scoring on Kinnunen?"

"Nah, Mars was distracted," he replies. "Doesn't count if the tendy lets you have it."

"Well, you can guarantee the Canes won't let us have a damn thing next week."

I follow him off the ice and back to the dressing room. It's noisy and high energy as we all get changed. Metallica blasts through the speakers as I shrug out of my gear, handing off the pieces that need to go to the laundry to one of the waiting EMs.

"Hey Sanny, where's your DLP?" Novy calls from the stall next to me. The stall on the other side of him belongs to Compton. All his gear is stacked neatly inside, untouched.

Caleb Sanford, our assistant equipment manager, just shrugs, taking my practice jersey. "DLP" stands for "domestic life partner." It's what all the guys call Compton because of how close they are. "No idea," he says. "He was supposed to be back from the DMV already."

"Hey, we should all hang out this weekend," says Novy. "Let's grab dinner or something, celebrate the end of training camp."

"The team is going to Rip's tonight," I reply.

"Yeah, I'm saying *we* should still celebrate," Novy replies. "You know, just us?"

"Who's us?" Davidson asks from the other side of me. He's the backup goalie and he's weird as fuck. The guy always eats these crunchy, everything-flavored bagel crisps, giving him permanent bagel breath.

"Not you, Dave-O, that's for damn sure," Novy replies. "This is a D-man only invite."

"Sanny's not a D-man," Davidson says, unbuckling his pads.

"Yeah, but he's Compton's emotional support friend, so we gotta invite him to all the barbecues," Novy replies, making Sanford smirk.

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"He shouldn't be on all the group chats either," Davidson mutters.

Novy digs in. "Aw, you jealous there, bud? Well, how 'bout this:

Prove you can grow a personality better than you can grow that lip lettuce on your face, and we'll add you to the blue line group chat. Deal?"

Davidson glares at him before shuffling off.

I give Novy a wary look and he shrugs. He likes to joke, and he loves to chirp. But sometimes he doesn't know where to find the line, and he skates right over it into full asshole zone.

Most of us are in the changing room attached to the showers when Coach Andrews pops his head in. "I wanna see all the defensemen in my office before you leave," he calls out. "Gerard, Compton, Novikov, Morrow, Hanner, Woodson—let's go!"

"Compton's not here," says J-Lo.

"Find him," Andrews shouts as he walks away.

The mood in the room quiets as we all glance at each other.

"Well, here we go, boys," Novy says. "Moment of truth." He claps Gerard on the naked shoulder. "J-Lo, no hard feelings if I take the left-side starting spot over you, eh?"

Gerard tugs on a shirt and punches Novy in the arm. Novy just laughs, leading the way out of the room. We run into Paulie and Woody in the hallway. Once we enter Andrews' office, I see Compton is already there, leaning against the desk. He's smiling from ear to ear.

"What the hell happened to you?" J-Lo asks.

Compton spreads his arms wide. "Just call me Buddy the Elf because I'm in love, and I don't care who knows it."

Gerard sinks into the chair by the door. "Lord, help us."

"Don't tell me you've already fallen for Hot Doc," Novy says, perching his ass on the arm of Gerard's chair.

"Oh no. What happened to the girl from Seattle?" Woody asks, snagging the other chair.

Compton mimes zipping his lips, his eyes flashing with barely contained glee.

"Bud, wake up," Novy says at Woody. "The Seattle girl was fictional."

Compton bristles. "She wasn't fictional, asshole."

"Yeah, I gotta admit, that always sounded a bit too good to be true," says Paulie. "It's good you're moving on, man." He pats Compton consolingly on the back.

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"Wait—who's Hot Dog?" Gerard asks.

"Hot *Doc*," Novy corrects. Leaning in, he cups Gerard's ear with his hand and shouts. "Doc, as in doctor. Jeezus, J-Lo, get a hearing aid there, bud."

"The new Barkley Fellow," I add over the guys' laughter. Then they all start talking at once.

"She's a total babe—"

"Did you see her tattoos?"

"Hey, asshole, she's a doctor. She's *our* doctor now—"

"Is she married?"

"I thought she was a physical therapist—"

"She's a smoke show," Novy says, leaning around me to show Woody a picture of her he snapped on his phone earlier.

Woody's eyes go wide. "Whoa."

Paulie leans in too. "Okay, yeah . . . ten outta ten. Do we know, is she seeing anyone?"

Compton snatches Novy's phone. "Dude, stop taking pictures of our doctor."

"She wasn't our doc yet," he teases. "She was just 'woman at coffee cart.'"

"Well, now she is and you're gonna knock it off," Compton warns. "And I'm deleting these."

"Easy there, Jakey." Novy snatches back his phone. "She doesn't need you playing bodyguard. Besides, she's so far out of your league—"

"Let me know when you're all done playing *Gossip Girl*," Coach Andrews calls from behind his desk. "Then maybe I can tell you who's gonna start this season."

That settles us down real quick. We all look to Coach and wait.

He stands behind his desk, hands pressed flat to the surface. "Right, fellas, here's how it's gonna be. Hanner and Woodson, you're paired third."

They look to each other and give a curt nod. Paulie makes a great grinder, and Woody is a useful enforcer. Solid players, both. I certainly won't complain when it's time for a shift change.

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"As for you four," Coach goes on, gesturing between the rest of us. "Look, we all know the Rays are still in a period of settling—"

"Oh shit." Novy's mask of humor flickers.

"I don't want any bruised egos here, guys," Coach says. "You'll all be getting plenty of ice time. And no one is getting punished here," he adds, looking directly at Novy. "We're just not locking down the first and second pairs quite yet—"

"But someone's gonna start next week," says Novy.

Coach nods. "For game one next week, we want to see Gerard and Morrow on the ice first. Compton and Novy, that makes you second pair."

Holy shit, I'm starting. In the first game the Jacksonville Rays play in the NHL, Colton Morrow, the Black kid from Canada who everyone bet against will be the starting right-side defender. Given what's it taken for me to reach this point, I can't help but smile . . . and send up a little prayer of thanks.

Gerard reaches around Novy to pat my arm. "First on the ice. We'll make a great team, eh?"

Compton crosses the room to his hand outstretched for me to shake. "Well done, Morrow. Between you, me, and Paulie, we'll have a strong right side this season. Let's leave it to these other assholes to pull their weight on the left."

"That's the team spirit I'm looking for," Coach says. "Now, make sure to check in with PT before you leave for the day. Good work this week, boys."

I shake Compton's hand, making room for Paulie and Woody to step out behind me. "You sure there's no hard feelings?"

"None at all," Compton replies. "Hey, let's celebrate. We'll let Cay pick the dive, and I'll take the check. Nov, you're coming too."

Novy just shrugs.

"Gotta count me out, boys," says Gerard. "The missus and I have plans this weekend. Last little getaway before the season starts."

"We never counted you in," Compton teases. Then he drops my hand. "Right, fellas. I'll have Cay send a message in the group chat with the time and place for dinner. Let's make it Sunday. For now, I gotta go see a girl about a number." He ducks away without a backward glance.

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Coach Andrews follows him out, leaving his office door wide open.

I look to Novy. "Hey . . . you good?"

Novy stands, flashing me a smile that doesn't quite meet his eyes. "Always."

I don't even realize I'm reaching for him, but my hand brushes his shoulder. "Hey, man, you know you don't have to—"

"Cole, I said I'm good," he says, shrugging away from my touch.

His use of my name has me dropping my hand to my side. I don't think I've ever heard him say it, even when we played together.

"Come on, let's get outta here." He ducks around me. "Hey, wanna help me pull a prank on the new Hot Doc?"

I follow him into the hallway. "What kind of prank?"

He fishes his phone from his pocket. "How hard do you think it would be to rent an inflatable ball pit on short notice?"

I pause in my steps, looking at the back of his head. "Do you really wanna get fired that bad, Nov? You just got here."

He laughs, eyes still on his phone. "We can't let Compton have all the fun. Let's go see a girl about a number."

I laugh, shaking my head. *This* is the Lukas Novikov I remember from my days on the Thunderbirds: Prankster, chirper, competitive asshole, constantly wheeling multiple girls at once.

It's oddly comforting to know some people really do never change.

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5
COLTON

My phone buzzes on the kitchen island and I know it's Novy texting me to hurry up. I'm running so late. My mom called for her Sunday chat as I was hauling in groceries, and I couldn't get her off the phone for almost an hour. Now I'm still wet from my shower, T-shirt tucked into the top of my shorts, letting my body air dry as I hunt around this tiny apartment for my wallet.

"Aha." I find it sitting beside the bowl of seashells on my coffee table, along with my lip balm. I slip both in my pocket and glance around.

Unlike most of the guys, I'm still living in the team's temporary housing. This apartment is just an efficiency unit—two small bedrooms, a laundry stack in the kitchen, a little balcony barely large enough for three people to stand on. But hey, I've lived in much worse dives over the years.

With all my family drama, I barely made it to town in time for the start of training camp. Most of my stuff is still in suitcases in the bedroom. I'm lucky I even found a clean T-shirt to wear tonight.

But I can't think about that now. I pass through the kitchen. Grabbing my buzzing phone, I answer the call as I slip on my slides. "Nov, what?"

Loud bar sounds echo around him. "Where are you? We said seven."

"Yeah, and it's only just now seven," I say, juggling the phone to my ear as I snag my keys.

"Well, we're all here waiting—"

"Jeez, I'm on the way, I'm in the car."

"No, you're not, asshole."

I pause. "How the hell do you know that?"

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"Because I synced our contacts with the Find My Phone app."

I groan, pinching the bridge of my nose. "Why did you . . . you know what? Fine. Forget it. I haven't left the house yet. But I've got my keys in hand, and I'm leaving right now. Just order me a beer, and I'll be there in like ten minutes."

"Well, what kind of beer do you want? They have like thirty on tap."

I drop the phone to the counter, switching it to speaker so I can shrug into my T-shirt. "Nov, we've only been friends for, like, ten fucking years. You know what I like."

"A double IPA, right? Something pale and extra hoppy? Hey, they have Space Dust—"

"Sounds good. Hanging up now." I tap the red circle before he can respond.

Double-checking my pockets, I step out onto the fourth-floor apartment landing. I lock the door and spin around, headed for the stairs, but I don't take two steps before I nearly topple into someone.

There's a sharp squeal as a pair of small hands grab my forearms. "*Ahh*, Colton."

I latch onto Poppy St. James, keeping her from falling over. "Shit, sorry."

"Heavens, honey, you scared me," she says with a laugh, dropping her sporty headphones down around her neck. She takes a step back, neck craning as she smiles up at me. I'm six-foot-three and she's barely five feet tall. "Where are you going in such a hurry?"

I let myself look at her. She's usually wearing those sexy business outfits. Everything is always covered, always professional. Now she's standing in nothing but a pair of blue runner's micro shorts and a hot pink sports bra. I can see *every* curve of her fit body. Her chest and arms are slicked with sweat, her tanned skin is flushed, blood pumping. Her pretty blue eyes are bright with exercise. She searches my face, still smiling.

Shit, she asked me a question.

"I . . . out," I manage to say. "Dinner."

"Fun," she chimes. "You meeting some of the guys?"

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I'm distracted by the little rivulet of sweat that is inching down her collarbone, threatening to disappear between her breasts.

Speak words, Cole.

"Yeah."

Perfect.

I groan inwardly. "I'm meeting Novy, Compton, and Sanford," I add. "Sanny found a dive he wants us to try. Just some bar food and music."

Her smile flickers as her eyes flash with annoyance. "Be careful with Novikov. Don't let him throw any parties tonight . . . or any punches. That man is trouble. You're in charge, okay?"

"Yeah, we'll watch him. No parties and no punching. Just a few beers and a good cheat meal."

She relaxes, propping her hands on her hips. "Well, it's so good to see you, Colton. I feel like we haven't gotten any chances to talk since you arrived in town. And here we are, neighbors sharing a wall. Small world, huh?"

I like the way she's calling me by my full first name. Not Cole, not Coley, and definitely not Morrow. And she pronounces the "T" too. I fucking love that. Each time, it parts her lips and I see a little flash of her teeth, like my name alone is enough to make her smile.

"Yeah," I say for the third time. "Small world."

Hockey *is* a small world. The smallest of worlds. There are only thirty-three teams in the League, so the chances were high I would know at least a few of the people who got transferred to the Rays. Poppy and I were both at the Washington Capitals when the new team was announced. Mark Talbot worked quickly to snap her up, naming her head of public relations even before he'd announced a single player.

The timing felt perfect for me too. I got to negotiate a new contract with excellent terms, giving myself some job security. But there's no denying the added incentive I felt to accept the trade. I came because I knew she'd be here. Hell, let's face it: I followed her like a lovesick fool. Poppy St. James—Queen of NHL Public Relations . . . and my poor, busted heart.

I'm not crazy; I know this is just a crush. She's beautiful and smart. But I don't know a real thing about her. She's always been a dream, a mirage I could hold at a distance and pretend to chase while I focused on my career.

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But the universe clearly understands the concept of give and take. It took something precious from me, and now it's giving me this chance. I share an apartment wall with Poppy St. James. I get to learn new things about her. I get to see her outside of work. The door is open to more if I'm bold enough to step through it.

I search her face, ignoring my buzzing phone. "Hey, would you ever want to—"

"Oh, my goodness," she says on a breath. "Oh, Colton—here I am making small talk about sharing walls, and I haven't even offered you my condolences yet." She steps in, her hand brushing down my arm. Her sun-kissed skin still looks pale against my forearm. "Honey, I'm so sorry. That should've been the first thing out of my mouth."

I go still. I haven't been able to escape this reality for months. My dad died. It happens. People get sick, then they get sicker, and then they die. I was ready for it, and so was he. We said our goodbyes. We buried him in the ground the day after I signed my new contract.

The Rays have been great, offering me extensions and delaying my move so I could be there for my family. That's the reason all the other guys have flashy beach houses and bachelor pads and I'm stuck here in temporary housing. I couldn't be bothered to plan for the future when I was so focused on the present, on being there for my mom and sisters.

Poppy's head tilts, her smile softer now. I hate it. "How are you doing, honey?"

"I'm fine."

Sensing my stiffness, she drops her hand away. "I lost my Nana two years ago. She was as close to me as a parent could be. I understand how hard it is. If you ever need anything, I'm just a wall away."

"Thanks." In my hand, my phone buzzes. It's Compton calling this time. They must really be getting restless.

She glances down at my phone, then back up at me. "Well, I don't wanna keep you from your dinner. And if I stay here any longer, I'll start to smell like a stinky possum," she adds with a laugh. She gives me a little wave, then she's turning away, our moment over.

I feel frozen. So long as she's out here sharing air with me, I don't want to move. I take in the profile of her lithe body as she inserts her key into her front door lock. I watch as she turns it. I hear the click.

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Moments. That's all I get with Poppy St. James. These little moments that are nothing. But to me, they're everything.

Her door squeaks open. "Hey, do you like granola?"

I blink, pulling my eyes away from the narrow curve of her hip. "Hmm? Granola?"

"Yeah, I just made a big batch before my run. It's cooling in here on the stove," she adds, pointing inside her unit. "If you want, I'll give you some. You know, as a 'welcome to the neighborhood' gift."

"Uhh . . ."

"It's delicious," she goes on. "It's my Nana's recipe. She made it for me all the time during my competitive running days. It really packs a protein punch. It's got some maple syrup, slivered almonds, pistachios, pepitas, dried cherries, cranberries . . ."

My stomach grumbles loud enough for us to both hear it and we laugh.

"Yeah, it sounds fucking amazing," I say. "I like granola, Poppy."

Fuck, I just said her name. I don't know if I've ever actually said it out loud. It's so pretty. It fits her so well.

Her smile widens and her face brightens like she's got particles of light trapped beneath her sun-kissed skin. She's fucking breathtaking. "Great. Well, I'm a bit of a night owl, so just give my door a knock when you get back and I'll have it ready for you. Have a good dinner, Colton."

With a last wave, she disappears inside her unit, and I'm left standing here, staring at her closed door. My phone buzzes in my hand again. This time it's Sanford, and I know I'm in trouble. Twenty bucks says the guys threaten to take me off the group chat and replace me with Davidson as soon as I sit down.

In this moment, I really don't care. I just learned four new things about Poppy St. James:

Close to (and still grieving) her dead grandmother.

Former competitive (now occasional) runner.

Likes to bake.

Night owl.

That's four things I didn't know before. Four things that make her real. A mirage can't make homemade granola. A mirage doesn't fill

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my senses with the sweet smell of her athletic sweat. A mirage can't touch my arm, offering me the condoling caress of a friend.

Poppy is real, and she's here.

I was a chickenshit in DC, too focused on chasing my own career to bother with actually chasing *her*. But Dad's dying put so much of my life into sharp perspective. I don't want to look back on my deathbed and realize I only ever had my career to keep me warm. I want a partner, a friend, a lover. God willing, I'll have a family too. I want something that lasts when I'm gone. I want something *real*.

I want Poppy St. James.

This is my second chance. I've been chasing the idea of her in my dreams for so long. Now it's time to man up and chase the real thing.

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6
LUKAS

"Novikov?"

My feet go still on my exercise bike. I watch as Doctor Price strolls out of her exam room, tablet in hand. Compton steps out after her, bouncing on his feet like he's walking on a damn cloud. The fool must really have it bad for her.

Hot Doc glances around the gym again. "Lukas Novikov? You're up next!"

"Dude, that's you," Paulie says from the bike next to me.

"Okay," I say under my breath. "Go time, Nov." I've got a multi-part prank planned for today, and it all hinges on this moment. I slip off my bike and wave my hand to get her attention. Pulling a Poppy, I call out with a, "Yoo-hoo! Doc, over here!"

Paulie and Woody snort, miming my wave as I saunter over to where Doc Price waits.

"Hey, Novikov." She tucks her tablet under her arm and offers me her hand. "I'm Rachel Price. Nice to meet you."

I shake her hand, winking over at Compton just because I can. The asshole glowers at me, so I step in a little closer. "Nice to meet you too, Doc. And you can call me Novy. Everyone does."

She gestures for me to go into the exam room first. My gaze darts around as I search for my prize. Right there, resting on the counter next to her coffee cup, is a set of keys.

Bingo.

She keeps the door open as she follows me in. "Okay, so this is just a routine hip and knee checkup. We'll do some range of motion exercises, and I'll test your flexibility, making note of any pain or worry spots you may have."

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"Righto."

"Doctor Tyler said you tripped and fell off a treadmill last week. Banged up your knee pretty good, right? Do you mind showing me which knee?"

God, that was fucking embarrassing. Hit both elbows too. And my hip. I manage to huff a laugh and wave her off. "Oh, that was nothing. I feel fine."

"Mhmm. Hop up on the table for me, Novy."

I do as she asks, and she sets the tablet down next to me. Without preamble, she places both hands on my left knee and presses in lightly with her thumbs on either side of my kneecap.

"Ow—fuck," I all but squeal, jerking away from her.

"But you're fine, right?" she says, clearly unimpressed.

I mutter a curse, rubbing the sore spot.

"I think it's likely you may still have some intramuscular bruising from the fall. Rate your pain for me on a scale of one to five."

"Uhh . . . yeah, like a one," I say with a shrug.

She looks up at me. "Do you want me to squeeze the knee again?"

I hold her gaze. "It's a two."

She nods. "The most I want you doing today is a leisurely walk on the treadmill. Otherwise, you're on the RICE regime for the rest of the week. Rest, ice—"

"Compression and elevation," I finish for her. "Yeah, I know the deal."

"Good. Because we want you in top shape for the season starter. No weights, no high impact. Doc Tyler did your initial checkup after the fall," she goes on, picking up her tablet. "And he says here that he's confident there'll be no lasting damage so long as you rest, ice, compress—"

"And elevate. Yeah, I got it."

She surveys me for a second before nodding. "Good. And hey, Novy?"

"Yeah, Doc?"

She holds my gaze. Fuck, she looks as serious as Poppy. "Within the four walls of this practice center, you can call me Doc, Rachel, Doc Price, or Doctor Rachel Price. What you will *not* call me is Hot Doc. Agreed?"

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I nod. "You got it, Doc."

"Good. You will also not lie about pain or minimize your injuries. I'm on your side, Novy. Your pain is my pain. Tell me the truth. That's how we keep you on the ice longer. Agreed?"

Searching her face, I give her my truth. "My hip hurts from the fall. It's still a little bruised . . . worse than the knee. I've been popping ibuprofen like candy."

She smiles. "Thank you, Novy. That's very helpful. Now, lie back on the table, and let's do these range of motion exercises. I promise to be gentle as a lamb. And I'll check that hip while we're at it."

Ten minutes later, she's tapping my shoulder. "Okay, you're all good to go. Stick to the RICE regime, like I said. If anyone from strength training gives you any problems this week, direct them to me."

"You got it," I say, sitting up and swinging my legs off the table. "Hey—do you mind if I wash my hands in here before I duck out?"

She's got her eyes back on her tablet. "Be my guest."

Cool as a cucumber, I saunter over to the sink and make a show of turning the water on and noisily pressing the soap dispenser. Then I reach out and gently pluck her keys off the counter. Quick as I can, I tuck them in my pocket. "Ooookay," I call, jerking a few paper towels out of the holder. "Thanks for everything, Doc."

"Yeah, just make sure you double-knot your shoelaces from here on out, okay?"

I spin around and give her a lame-o salute. "Right you are, Doc. I'll just see myself out, eh?"

She follows me to the door and I duck out as she calls for J-Lo. He's ready and waiting, flashing her that endearing, toothless smile. As soon as she steps into the exam room with him, I snap my fingers at two of the young farm team guys. "Patty, Flash Gordon, on me."

"Yeah, boss?" says Flash.

"I need your help with something top secret. Can you do it?"

Their eyes brighten. God, rookies can be so easy. These two can't be a day over nineteen.

"Yeah, anything you need," says Patty.

On principle, I hand the keys to Flash Gordon, starting with my own. "Okay, here's the deal," I say, lowering my voice. "I need you to go down to the parking garage and find my truck. In the back, you'll

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find a ball pit's worth of colored balls tied up in black garbage bags. You both with me so far?"

Flash nods, taking the keys. "Truck, bags, balls. Got it."

Fuck, these guys get to vote in this country.

"Okay, I want you to take all those balls and move them into *this* truck." I hand him the second set of keys. "Can you do it?"

Patty the Brainless nods while Flash glances down at the second set of keys held flat in his palm. "Whose truck is this, Nov?"

I puff out my chest a little. "It's Mr. Novikov to you. And that information is above your pay grade. Can you do it? Yes or no. Don't make me find more willing rookies."

"We got it," says Patty, snatching the keys out of Flash's hand.

"Good boys." I slap both their shoulders. "You have fifteen minutes. Go."

The two of them dart away just as Morrow saunters up behind me, munching on some granola. His walnut-brown eyes lock on me. "Do I dare ask what you're doing?"

"Plausible deniability would say no, but I'd stick around this afternoon for the show."

He raises a dark brow. "The show?"

"Yeah, around four o'clock, I'm thinking. We're meeting down in the parking garage. Spread the word." I try to reach my hand into his granola bag, but he bats it away, the greedy fuck.

"And until then? What are you gonna do?"

I glance around the gym, looking for my other mark. "Well, right now, I'm gonna go nurture my tender little sprout of a prank idea and just hope it grows fruit."

He pauses, mid-chew. "What the fuck are you talking about?"

I just laugh and step past him. I slip my shirt off, stepping up onto the open treadmill next to where Langers is lifting weights. This Judas, he thought it was soooo funny to leave me alone with Poppy. Let's see how he likes it when the tables are turned.

"Hey," he pants, dropping his weight bar down with a clank.

"Hey," I say, making a show of tugging my shirt back on now that he's looking. "Just finished my physical. You do yours yet?"

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"Nah. I'm up in, like, ten. Just wanted to finish this set before she calls me in."

"Well, don't get too sweaty," I warn. "You'll get the table all sticky when you take your clothes off."

"Gotta finish my set," he grunts, lifting the bar up again.

Doc Price calls out. "Kinnunen, you're up next!"

I feel giddy as I press my treadmill's "on" button.

After a minute or two, Doc Price walks up behind me. "Hey, have you seen Kinnunen this morning?"

I glance around and shrug. The Bear is pretty damn hard to miss. He has the look and build of a Finnish Thor. "Maybe his practice ran long," I say. "I'd just skip him, Doc. He'll show up eventually."

She sighs, checking her tablet. "Langley, you're up!"

The weight bar clangs as Langers drops it and sits up. "Great," he calls in that cheery tone. "Yeah, Doc. I'll be right there!"

I watch as they walk away, parting for a moment as he heads into the exam room, and she goes into the little broom cupboard of an office. I slam the red button on my treadmill, stopping it. Compton walks up, leaning in with both arms on my machine. "You mind telling me what the fuck you're doing?"

I laugh. "Just wait."

"Nov—"

"Watch and wait," I say, hopping off my machine. I grab him by the shoulders and turn him to face Doc's office.

Morrow steps up on Compton's other side. "Novy, what the hell did you do?"

"I told Langers it was a full physical."

They both glance sharply at me and Morrow sighs. "Nov—"

"Hey, I owed him one. He left me to the wolves last week. I got cornered by Poppy, and now I'm in private remedial PR lessons. Oh!" Doc Price emerges from her office and steps into the exam room. I sling an arm around Compton, holding my breath. "Here we go . . ."

The three of us stand still, waiting.

"Ohmygod," we hear Doc shriek from inside the room. "What the hell are you doing?"

"What's happening?" says J-Lo, standing with Karlsson and Teddy.

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"I convinced Langers to get naked for his knee check," I say. "Just wait . . ."

"Oh, fuck those guys," we hear Langers shout from inside the room. "I'm gonna kill Novy!"

In moments, Doc Price steps out, clutching her tablet, and we all burst into laughter. Her eyes find me at once, glaring from me to Compton.

"See somethin' you like in there, Doc?" I call.

Her eyes flash with mirth, even as she tries to keep on her mask of annoyance. "Who are you hazing here? Him or me?"

Langley comes barreling out of the room, tugging his shirt down. "Fuck you, Novy," he shouts. "You guys are all jerks!" With pink blooming in his cheeks, he ducks back into the exam room.

"Please tell me he stripped totally naked," I say, tears in my eyes.

"No, he didn't," Doc replies. "And just for future reference—the first guy who gets naked in my exam room is gonna get benched for a week. Bad idea to piss off the person who signs your medical releases."

"What's wrong, Doc?" I call. "Can't appreciate the male form?"

Morrow shoots me a warning look.

"Oh, I appreciate the hell out of a fine male form," she teases right back. "I just like to have finished my damn coffee first."

Compton joins in. "So, you *would* want to see us naked . . . just later in the day, after you've finished your coffee."

"Yeah, it's all a matter of timing," I add with a nod.

"Noted, Doc," he says with a grin.

"We could try again after lunch," calls Walsh.

From somewhere over by the exercise bikes, a few of the guys start singing the chorus of "Afternoon Delight" and we all crack up again.

"You're all twelve," says Doc, turning back to her exam room.

"And you love our dumb asses!" I shout, the whole gym howling as she closes her door.

"You are so gonna get traded," Morrow mutters. "Or fired for harassment."

"Nah, Doc Price is cool. Way cooler than Avery the Ass. And I promise all my other pranks will involve everyone's clothes staying on."

Both Morrow and Compton turn.

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"Other pranks?" says Morrow.

At that moment, my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out and read a message from Flash.

FLASH GORDON: Huston, we have a problem!!!!

The asshole spelled "Houston" wrong. And there's a video. I tap the play button, groaning as I watch Patty stumble around the parking garage, trying to catch all the colorful plastic balls tumbling from one of the broken trash bags. "Motherfuck—" I take a deep breath. "Must I always do everything myself?"

"What's wrong?" asks Morrow.

"What's wrong is we need another flood," I say, shoving my phone in my pocket. "Only this one needs to target incompetent rookies." Turning on my heel, I march away.

"Hey—you better not be pranking Poppy," he calls after me. "Novy, I'm serious. Leave her alone!"

I just wave over my shoulder. "Sorry, I've gotta go bust some balls."

Before Doc notices her keys are missing.

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7
POPPY

Florence & The Machine pulses through the sound system of my little sports car as I pull into the practice center parking garage. I bop my head to the beat, flipping my sunglasses up onto my head. For once, I had a nice, relaxing morning. I get better internet back at my apartment, so I took a series of important fundraising calls from my lanai. I also treated myself to a proper homemade breakfast: avocado toast, a poached egg, and two cups of caramel iced coffee. I even squeezed in ten minutes of breathing meditation.

My afternoon, however, is stacked with in-person meetings downtown. I wouldn't have even come to the office at all today, except I told Lukas Novikov to meet me here at ten o'clock. That flashy showboat somehow has the ability to ruin my day without even trying.

I blink in the sudden darkness of the garage, slowing my car to a crawl as I look for a parking spot. With a gasp, I pump the breaks, both hands tight on the wheel. "What the . . . ?"

Speak the devil's name, and he shall appear. Lukas Novikov and two of the rookies are standing in the middle of the garage. They spin around, eyes wide. They look like I've just caught them in the act of moving a dead body.

I gasp again. "Oh my . . ."

Clutched between them is something large and lumpy, wrapped in a black trash bag.

"Oh, sweet heavens, I do *not* get paid enough for this," I hiss, jerking my car into park. I fling open my door and pop out the side. "Honeys, *please* tell me that is not a human body! Or an animal body!"

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Lukas lets out a laugh that echoes in the empty concrete space.

"Seriously, Poppy? Do you really think we're down here moving bodies?"

"Well, I don't know," I cry. "Why do y'all look so suspicious then?"

"Maybe because you rounded the corner and flashed your lights at us," he replies.

I take a breath. "Okay that's good because I cannot be a witness to a murder this morning. My goodness, can you even imagine?"

"Uhh, boss . . . what do we do now?" the tall one mutters.

Lukas stands upright, still holding his side of the lumpy trash bag. "We greet the nice lady, Patrick, and we let her go on her way."

I glance around the garage. "If you're not moving bodies . . . then what *are* you doing?"

"Just hauling some gear," Lukas replies. "You know—sticks and pads, some smelly jocks. Nothing to interest you."

"Mhmm." I cross my arms, still peering around.

"I think there's some open parking spots down that row," says the raven-haired cutie, pointing to the sunlit corner of the garage.

I level my gaze at him. This is the one. He'll break for me so nicely. Lukas is a steel vault, and the tall blond is a brick wall. But Raven Boy? He'll crack like an egg.

I leave my car in park, the headlights shining on their malfeasance, and saunter forward. My stiletto heels click softly on the concrete. I give my hips a little sway in my camel pencil skirt, feeling the flip of the fabric against my calves. I shift my long hair off my shoulder with a practiced flick of my wrist and stand before him. "What's your name, honey?"

"Don't tell her anything," Lukas mutters.

Raven glances between us, lips slightly parted. "Uhh . . . Flash. Flash Gordon . . . ma'am."

I smile, batting my lashes. "What's your *real* name, sweets?"

During my time in the professional hockey world, I've found the players' constant use of nicknames to be clever shields. Sure, it creates a sense of camaraderie, but it also helps these men hide who they really are. Which is why I'm out here like a perky, blonde Rumpelstiltskin, collecting names, growing in my power. I widen my smile, encouraging him to spill.

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He shifts his weight, distracted by the death glare Lukas is no

doubt giving him over my shoulder. "It's uhh . . . Sam, ma'am. Samuel Gordon. It's why they all call me Flash. You know, 'cause it's for Flash Gordon, like the superhero."

"Fuck," Lukas mutters.

Cracked, just like a sweet little egg.

"Samuel." I hum. "Now, what are you doing, Samuel?"

"We're moving the balls from that truck into this truck," he replies.

"Moving the—" I glance around to where he points. "What balls?"

"The ball pit balls," says Big Blondie. I didn't even need to give him the eyes and he's cracked by association.

I slowly turn to face Lukas. "Do you want to fill in the blanks, here? Or should we all just keep playing rookie mad libs?"

He sighs. "We're pranking Doc Price by putting ball pit balls in her car."

I raise a brow at him. "We?"

"Me," he admits. "I'm pranking her. These two proved to be completely useless."

"Hey, we moved like half the balls without you," Samuel retorts.

"Yeah, we had it under control," Big Blondie adds.

Lukas turns on them, his tattooed arm flexing as he still holds the trash bag. "Then why did I get a text from Flash saying 'Houston, we have a problem' and a video of *your* dumb ass chasing the balls all over the damn parking garage?" He rounds on Samuel. "Oh, and Houston has two 'o's by the way, Flash."

The three of them bicker about the spelling of Houston until I step forward and place a hand on Lukas's shoulder. "Why don't we leave these two to finish this good work alone? Lukas, you and I can go ahead and get an early start on our meeting. Sound good? Good."

I walk over to my car and pluck out my purse and keys. Walking back over to the ball boys, I hold out my keys to Samuel. "Park my car and finish moving your balls. Then I expect to have my keys *and* Rachel's keys returned to their owners. Do you understand me?"

"Yes, ma'am."

Next to me, Lukas narrows his eyes. "Wait, you're gonna let us finish the prank?"

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"Yes, I am."

"Why?"

I glance over at Rachel's rental truck. I can see the mess of red, green, and yellow balls already filling her backseat. "Because this prank is utterly benign. And if I don't let you do it, you'll just do something else once my back is turned again, and it will likely be even worse . . . like putting a dead fish in her air vent . . . or gluing her shoes to the floor."

He smirks, and I know I've just given him two fresh ideas for future pranks.

"Move your balls, and then bring me my keys," I say at the rookies. "Lukas, let's go. I'm moving up our meeting to now."

I drop my keys into Samuel's hand and turn on my heel, not waiting and not looking back. I know Lukas is following me. I know because I can hear him cursing at me under his breath.

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