
LOVE AND HOCKEY
BOOK 3
THE
Proposal
PLAY
#1 New York Times Bestselling Author
LAUREN
BLAKELY

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THE PROPOSAL PLAY

A #1 *New York Times* bestselling, #1 *Wall Street Journal* bestselling, and #1 Audible bestselling author, Lauren Blakely is known for her contemporary romance style that's sexy, feel-good and witty. Lauren likes dogs, cake and show tunes and she is the vegetarian at your dinner party.

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This book is dedicated to anyone whoever wondered, "Do I have too many toys?" The answer is you can't have too many toys.

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PROLOGUE

THE MARRIAGE PACT

Asher

Two Years Ago

"The thing about bad ideas is they usually seem like good ideas at the time."

I take a planned pause from my best man speech to survey the sea of wedding guests. They're relaxed here under the white tent, rumpled suit jackets and little purses slung over their chair backs as the sun dips below the Golden Gate Bridge behind us.

With a glass of award-winning champagne in hand, I stroll around the head table, flash a *we knew better* glance at the groom, then shoot a winning smile for the hundred-strong crowd. Time to bring this speech home for Beckett. He deserves the best toast ever, and I'm the one who can give it to him.

"Like, say, that final shot of tequila," I say, with a curve in my lips. "Always seems like a good idea. But it's pretty much the opposite."

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A collective groan echoes through the room. Yup. We've all been there and done that.

"Or, for instance, a homemade zip line," I add, shaking my head in disbelief at the antics of our younger selves. I stage whisper into the mic, "College. The genesis of nearly all bad ideas."

At the head table, the maid of honor—also known as the sister of the groom—laughs, then lifts a manicured hand in solidarity, her sparkly silver nail polish glinting in the soft light. "Can confirm it was the worst idea."

"We were lucky you were there." I nod toward the sometimes blonde, sometimes brunette. Maeve's hair color seems to change with her mood. Tonight at her brother's wedding, it's chestnut brown and twisted in, well, some kind of twist, with golden-streaked tendrils framing her face. "After all, she's the one who took us to the ER the night Beckett and I made a backyard ride out of rope eight years ago." A handful of guests laugh lightly, and I add, "But the shoulder injury—so worth it."

"Better your shoulder than mine," the groom shouts.

"My coach disagreed, but I digress," I say, then turn back to the audience, which is made up mostly of friends, but some family. Beckett's family primarily consists of him and his sister, and it's been that way since we met. I clear my throat, heading into the home stretch. "But luckily, it goes the other way, too, with good ideas. Like when Maeve said she wanted to set up her brother with a gallery manager she knew." I gesture toward the bride, Reina, who smiles dotingly at my friend. "I thought it was a terrible plan. Especially since there was that little matter of Beckett *refusing* to go on a setup."

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Maeve smiles faux demurely, maybe a little wickedly.

Kind of her specialty. "But we knew better," she says proudly.

I shoot her a pointed look. "*You* knew better. Me? I told you setups *never* work." I turn back to the guests. "But Maeve insisted, and I went along with her. She's very clever. Very creative."

"Very tricky," Beckett says with a fake cough.

"You benefited from it," Maeve says and gestures grandly to the evidence—the damn wedding.

"So we organized a game night. Invited...*a bunch of friends*." I sketch air quotes since we invited exactly no one. "When Beckett arrived at my place, he looked around and asked where everyone else was. I said they were coming but we could get started, just the four of us. Spoiler alert: No one showed up but Reina, and during a vicious game of trivia where those two tried to one-up each other, Maeve and I slipped into the kitchen to refresh the snacks. And..." I gesture proudly to the newlyweds. "Here we are. Thanks to a fake-out from the maid of honor and the best man."

"It was the best idea," Beckett says genuinely, then drops a quick kiss to his bride's cheek, before turning to his sister and giving her a grateful hug. "Can't thank you enough, Maeve," he says, his voice choked with obvious emotion. She hugs him back, holding on before letting go.

The emotional moment between the two of them makes me look away. It feels private, personal. But then, it's not a secret they're all each other has.

When Maeve blows out a clearing breath and adopts a smile, I take that as my cue to restore the levity.

I lift a glass. "But don't worry about me, Beckett. I've still got a partner in crime the next time I want to make a homemade zip line." I look to the new second-in-

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command in troublemaking, Maeve, then once more to the guy who's been my best friend for almost a decade. "To finding the love of your life and keeping her close every day."

The crowd toasts with a *hear, hear*, while Maeve's big hazel eyes capture mine for a long beat, and then she mouths, *"Good job."*

And I...blink.

Because wow...

Look at her lips.

They're awfully pouty tonight. Terribly glossy. And strangely, incredibly tempting. They're shiny and the color of a raspberry—a ripe, red raspberry I want to taste.

What. The. Hell?

I jerk my gaze away as I try to shake off the fog of lust that rolls in like unexpected weather. Maybe it's the wedding makeup. Because *something* has to be messing with my head.

I clear my throat. Fucking raspberries.

"So," I say to the crowd once more, "let's get this party started!"

I set down the mic and try to dismiss these new thoughts about Maeve. I've known her for eight years. Met her in grief counseling. She's not only my best friend's sister—she's my *other* best friend.

In all that time, I've never thought of her lips. I mean, not much. No more than the average number of lip-related thoughts a straight guy would have about a straight woman.

This is just a passing thought. And passing thoughts... pass.

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Bet it goes away right now as the bride and groom hit

the dance floor, urging everyone to join them while the upbeat pop song plays.

Maeve's heading toward me in a black dress that hits right below her knees and hugs her hips. "Want to know what's never a bad idea?" she asks when she reaches me.

"What's that?"

"A dance," she says, and yes, of course. That's a perfect reminder of our long-standing friendship.

We dance to a few tunes, all fun and friendly. It's enough to erase those errant thoughts from before. We roll into the cake-cutting and then the toasts from the bride's relatives. Then another slow song begins, and Beckett grabs the mic and points to us. "And now it's time for the traditional best-man and maid-of-honor dance."

"That's not a thing," I say.

Maeve rolls her eyes at my retort. "I don't bite," she says as she nears me.

But *does* she bite? In bed? Does she like to be bitten?

Ah, fuck.

What is happening to me? I could blame Frank Sinatra, singing about foolish hearts. Or maybe it's the wedding messing with my head. I'm a big fan of weddings —my dads took me to a million of them when I was growing up. In the years since, the dates were always plentiful, the times were always good. I'm simply a wedding kind of guy.

That's all.

Relieved that I finally get what's going on in my brain, I take Maeve into my arms, my hands curling around her soft waist.

That's nice.

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A friendly kind of nice though.

The way my palms fit around her figure is very, *very*

friendly, I'm sure. I'm not distracted by her bare shoulders and the freckles dotting her fair skin. Besides, we're a respectable distance away from each other. Several inches, probably. Studies have shown that several inches is a platonic amount of space.

"Question for you," Maeve says, pulling me out of my thoughts and back to the speech.

"Hit me," I say.

"Do you remember something else that seemed like a good idea? Like the morning you thought it'd be a good idea to do a Zoom interview with The Sports Network while *not* wearing pants?"

"The team publicist almost didn't forgive me," I say, laughing as I recall the *are you kidding me* shock on the publicity director's face when I showed up at the arena later that day.

"But of course, you had to get the Pop-Tart out of the toaster in the middle of the interview."

"It would have burned," I say with zero sarcasm. No remorse either.

"Thank god you saved that Pop-Tart. If not, the whole world wouldn't have seen your...wait for it...*best hockey butt ever*."

I'm not even embarrassed that I'm known for having a great ass. "I had on compression shorts—"

"Tight, nearly see-through, white compression shorts," she corrects.

"That made my ass famous," I counter. "And now I have a great underwear sponsor. So really, the ass paid off."

It pays handsomely every day. The top three search results for me are Asher Callahan stats (they're awesome), Asher Callahan girlfriend (the answer is none), and Asher

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Callahan ass (it's even more awesome than my stats, and that's saying something).

"I stand corrected," Maeve admits. "In *hindsight* it was a good idea to get the Pop-Tart out in the middle of an on-air interview."

"It was brown sugar cinnamon."

"Ah, that makes perfect sense now," she deadpans, but then her brow cinches like she's considering something. "I was always curious what kind it was. I tried to figure it out from the video. I watched it so many times," she muses.

"So it was *you* that drove up the view count. How many times? 'Fess up," I say, but the second the taunt breaks free from my lips, my head spins. *Why* did she watch it so many times? Did she like it?

Why do I care?

But Maeve simply shrugs innocently. "A lady never tells. But maybe I'll tell the story at your wedding someday when I give a toast," she says as we sway, then she slows her pace, asking with a soft laugh, "wait, am I going to be your best woman when you get hitched?"

"Only if I'm your man of honor," I fire back. My toasting her at her nuptials feels distinctly possible. More likely than my learning if she likes biting.

But Maeve simply scoffs. "You know my track record. No one wants to marry a broke artist who's bad at romance."

"You're not bad at romance," I say gently. *You just pick dickheads who don't appreciate you*. She looks to her brother and Reina with a happy sigh, then turns back to me with a helpless little shrug—like she wants what they have but doesn't think she'll ever have it.

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Something comes over me—maybe it's the champagne, or maybe it's just that weddings make you think

about, well, weddings. Whatever it is, I say casually, "Don't worry. If it comes down to it, I'll marry you."

She pauses, then arches a skeptical brow. "You're suggesting a marriage pact, Callahan?"

Seems I am.

I don't back down from a challenge—not one thrown at me or one *I* throw down. Besides, she seems to need certainty right now. "Sure," I say. "If you ever need a husband, I'm your guy."

A laugh bursts from her, but then she schools her expression. "Fine," she says primly, adopting a regal air. "Since you made such a heartfelt proposal, I accept your marriage pact."

"I'll hold you to it," I say.

"You do that."

Then I dip the fuck out of her here on the dance floor. Her back bows and her foot pops up, but she holds on tight, laughing brightly. The sound of her laughter knocks something else loose inside my head as I tug her back to standing. Possibly a few brain cells that slept through the last eight years of friendship. Because...Maeve is pretty and charming and fucking adorable. How did I miss what's been right in front of me?

Her laugh, like wind chimes, sounds prettier than it has before. Her perfume, like wildflowers on a sultry summer day, hits differently now. Her lush lips are suddenly impossible to look away from. How much champagne did I have tonight? A couple of glasses? But even so, I'm not a lightweight. I'm more than six feet tall, and I'm sturdy as fuck.

As I try to count my cocktails, I glimpse one of the bride's uncles dancing near the band. He's cutting the rug,

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twirling his wife, but when he pulls her back into his arms —*bam*.

He bumps right into Maeve's back. She pitches forward in my arms, slamming against my chest, her chin tipped up, her eyes wide. "Oh!"

She's breathless.

And she's also suddenly a very dangerous four inches closer to me. I'm barely aware of anyone else on the dance floor, under the tent, in the whole damn city. I look down at my best friend's sister, mesmerized without warning. It's like I've never quite seen her clearly until tonight—from the hair to the lips to the laughter to the dance, to her *this* close to me. "I've got you," I say softly, holding her hips tighter, keeping her near.

She glances down, too, but doesn't pull away. "You...do have me, Asher."

She sounds surprised. Maybe confused. That makes two of us. I swallow roughly and simply echo, "I do."

I don't move.

She doesn't either.

Her body fits mine in a whole new way. Our hips flush, her breasts pressed to me—everything temptingly aligned. Her raspberry lips are so close that I can tell it's not the makeup making her look so pretty tonight.

She *is* pretty.

Did it take me crossing these final four inches to notice Maeve *like this*?

No idea, but I'm noticing Maeve like this now. Oh hell, am I noticing my friend. My chest is crackling. My skin, hot. My pulse, spiking. Everything inside me turns electric, and I know the meaning of the term insta-lust.

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It's my goddamn life right now.

For several seconds that go by too fast we sway together as the song inevitably ends.

When a fast song blasts brightly under the tent, we wrench apart. In a heartbeat, that shuddery sensation vanishes like it didn't even happen. Like it was just a very vivid dream.

A passing thought doing what it does—passing.

My skin's no longer hot. My chest isn't tingly. Whatever dirty spell I was under is broken.

I can breathe again. I inhale and exhale a few quick times. And yup, order is restored to my universe.

What a close call. I can't believe for a second there—okay, for several seconds—I thought I was into my best friend.

Good thing I'm not.

Because falling for your best friend would be a very bad idea. Especially if you just made a marriage pact with her.

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1

A PRETTY PINK DICK

Maeve

Present day

Does this clutch look like a dick?

When I grabbed it from the back of my closet of thrift shop wonders this evening before racing out the door, it looked innocent enough for a fancy pants event. But now that I'm sitting demurely under a chandelier in an upscale ballroom in a historic mansion, I'm having second thoughts about my choice of accessory.

I want to ask Asher what he thinks of it—one of our regular *questions for you*—but he's getting ready to parade around on stage so someone here can bid on a date with him.

Pretty sure I can make an executive call, though, about the clutch. It's pink, shiny, and about seven inches long.

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Yup. It's definitely got dick energy, and I don't want to look like I'm fondling it as I sneak another peek at my phone during this charity fundraising auction.

In my reserved seat in the front row, I surreptitiously slide my index finger along the sparkly satin material and snap it open in slow-mo, hoping no one notices me checking my phone *again.* There's room for lipstick, too, in the clutch and a couple credit cards, so maybe people will think I'm just making sure my makeup is safe and my accounts are in good standing.

No one will see me sneaking a peek. No one, like, oh say, my big brother next to me. Or his wife next to him. Or, really, anyone at all.

Because...rude.

But in my defense, I'm waiting for an email about a life-changing job, and it's supposed to arrive tonight. I peer around the packed ballroom. Every seat is taken this Thursday night in January, filled with perfumed, groomed, and coiffed humans eager to bid for dates with all the eligible hockey bachelors in the city.

Asher's not due to strut his stuff yet. Miles Falcon is up next, so I can get away with one more look before it's my best friend's turn.

As Erin—the color commentator for the team's games on The Sports Network—regales the audience on stage, I slowly slide out the corner of my phone. My agent told me she'd email this evening about a huge mural project she submitted my portfolio for weeks ago. I made it past the first round. She assured me the decision was coming tonight, and I was among the top three candidates.

"And now we have Miles Falcon, the accomplished center for the San Francisco Sea Dogs who dominates the faceoff," Erin says into the mic, her confident and playful

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voice filling the room as she reads from an index card touting Miles's hobbies like hiking mountain trails and playing a mean game of pool. "He also enjoys the thrill of urban treasure hunts. Get ready to bid high when it's time —because a date with Miles Falcon will be an adventure!"

Well, with that kind of setup, no one is going to be looking at little old me.

As Miles crosses the stage, I slide a thumb over the screen and pray to the universe to deliver me my dream job at last. I've spent the last few years cobbling odd jobs together, trying desperately to make a living as an artist. Mostly, though, I've been making a living as a server at some high-end events, which thrills my aunt, who owns the catering company I work for, but it doesn't thrill me.

When I glance at the screen, it mocks me with its nothingness, and the empty bars in the corner where my cell reception should be.

Who invented phones?

Shoulders slumping, I snap the clutch closed as my brother nudges me.

"Maeve. You can swipe right later," Beckett whispers in my ear.

I shoot him a look. "I was not checking a dating app. Those things are dead to me," I hiss.

They are so dead that I hosted a party with my girlfriends the other month to delete the hell out of the latest and last dating app I'd tried. It had delivered nothing but bad matches, like men who claimed dumpster dinners were a new life hack, or guys who asked me for pictures of my feet.

Screw apps. I'm a goddamn goddess. I deserve only top-tier matches.

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Beckett glances down at the phone peeking out of the

little purse, then back to my face, his gaze just shy of disappointed. He's such a big brother. "Asher's next," he reminds me in case I forgot.

Which I didn't.

"I know," I say out of the corner of my mouth. "He's the reason I'm here."

My brother arches a brow. "Oh, so you *are* going to bid on him?"

I stare him down. "Yes, Beckett. *I'm* going to bid on a star athlete. With all my spare change. There's actually a piggy bank inside here," I say, patting the clutch. "Can't wait to break it open."

The coin in it, plus my catering gigs at my aunt Vivian's company, add up to almost, maybe, possibly just enough to cover the rent each month.

I'm not here to bid. I'm here for one reason only—Asher Callahan worships at the altar of superstitions. He's gone for the highest bid at the last two of these auctions while I've cheered him on from the front row, and he hasn't missed a single hockey game in all that time. Now he claims I am the key, somehow, to his fundraising success and injury-free status on the ice.

Who am I to argue with someone's quirks? I've got a suitcase full of my own. So here I am in the same chair, rooting for my bestie to go for top bucks.

As I set my hands on the clutch, I spot Asher offstage in the wings, looking polished in a three-piece, sapphire-blue suit I picked for him to wear tonight from his closet of custom clothes. The man makes this tailored choice look stunning. It hugs his muscles in all the right ways. Plus, that vest looks as good as I'd predicted.

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Asher runs a hand through his thick, slightly unruly

brown hair. His green eyes are movie-star-level mesmerizing. He spots me as he smooths his lapels, and he smirks, lifts a brow, then mouths, *"Hey, good luck charm."*

I roll my eyes. "*You're ridiculous,"* I mouth back.

But I'm ridiculous, too, since I'm here, showing up for him as requested.

As Miles leaves the stage, Erin flips to the next card—this one for the final hockey star in this year's auction. "Ladies and gentlemen, prepare to meet the player who's as golden as his stats! It's our fan-favorite left winger—the fiery *Asher Callahan*!"

The crowd goes even wilder than before as Asher strides across the stage. Whispers of *I'm going to bid so hard on him,* and *OMG, I want him* land on my ears. A few seats away, a woman with jet-black hair and a spray tan points at him. She looks familiar. Maybe she's the daughter of some San Francisco rich dude? Oh! I think she's the one who's launching a new beauty line. With a cool, confident air, she says something to the friend next to her.

Probably, *I'll win him, hands down.*

More power to you, babe.

Erin introduces him. "When Asher's not leading the charge on the rink, he's a dedicated supporter of mental health initiatives, using his platform to make a positive impact." Erin sings his praises, encouraging big bidding for charity. "But do you know why we call Asher fiery? The Vancouver-born winger is a hot sauce aficionado, constantly hunting for the hottest, most daring flavors to challenge his taste buds. So, if you're up for an evening full of spice and excitement, raise a paddle for Asher when it's time to place your bids…because a date with him is sure to sizzle!"

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Pride floods me at the intro—not the hot sauce part because whatever. The *other* part. With his megawatt smile and high profile, he'll have no problem going for top dollar, with or without me.

Erin finishes Asher's intro and says, "We'll take a fifteen-minute break for you to prepare your bids now that you've seen all the entrants. Then, get ready to break the bank to support a good cause."

I get ready to support a good cause too—my self-esteem. It's time to find somewhere in this historic mansion with cell service. "Be right back," I tell Beckett, gripping the clutch tightly.

"Good luck checking your matches. But remember, just because *you* think napping is an Olympic sport, it's a bad idea to pick a guy who lists sleeping in as a hobby."

"I told you," I say, "I am not trolling for dates right now. Also, napping *is* an Olympic sport, and I am a gold medalist."

Whirling away, I hustle my ass toward the door, weaving through the guests who pop up from their seats as they plan their bids. Women with cut-crease eyeshadow and glittery dresses. Men with sharp suits and fresh haircuts. The team raises a ton of money for charity at this annual event, with its eligible players entering each season.

I dart through the pretty crowd, the scent of seductive colognes and alluring body sprays nearly cloying—everyone is dressed to win a date with a pro athlete tonight.

My focus, though, is singular, and it has been for a long time.

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Follow your dreams.

Those words are tattooed on my heart, and I'm putting

them into action. After I escape the ballroom, I extract my phone and scurry down an opulent hallway, holding the device out in front of me like an offering to the technology gods.

Still no signal.

What about the ladies' room? I pop inside, where a throng of women check their reflections. It's a dead zone in here, too, so I retrace my steps and then march farther down the hall.

Don't rich people need to communicate like the rest of us? Actually, come to think of it, they probably clap, and the universe delivers whatever they need on silver serving platters.

Frustration bubbles up inside me as I search for a room that'll lead to, I dunno, maybe a window?

That's it! All I need is a window.

I'm almost at the last door in the hallway when my phone flickers with a hint of a bar.

The door's closed, which *probably* means I shouldn't go in. There's also a reserved sign hanging on it. Which is *possibly* a nice way of saying *stay the hell out*.

But reserved doesn't necessarily mean *off-limits*. There's room for interpretation, so I interpret.

Holding my breath, I gently push open the door that leads into...a library.

And it's empty.

Well, it's clearly not reserved now.

I shut the door most of the way, just in case anyone comes by, and take in the towering mahogany bookshelves filled to the brim with leather-bound tomes. They're beautiful enough, but the real prize is in the corner.

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"Come to me, you sexy window. Wait, no. I'll go to

you," I say to the glass panes since now I evidently talk to windows.

I race across the library and stand under the towering window, phone held aloft. The first bar fills in. Hope floods my cells. Except...that's barely enough service to send a text, let alone receive an email.

But if I were *at* the window level...

There's a ladder positioned against the bookshelf right next to the window, and a grin takes over my face. That has to be a sign. I'm a painter, so ladders and I are tight.

I set the dick clutch on the marble floor, then give a quick glance at my vintage, rose-gold dress—1920s style but without the flapper fringe. I need a little more wiggle room, so I kick off my shoes, hike up the skirt, and climb the ladder attached to one of the bookshelves. I angle my phone toward the source of that elusive signal, trying to balance myself on the ladder rungs while holding the phone high.

The window is a foot or so away. If I can just stretch out my arm, my phone will receive emails like coins pouring into a leprechaun's pot at the end of the rainbow. And I can surely reach a little farther. I'm limber. Hell, I'm almost a cat, thanks to the pole classes I take with my friends. This ladder's practically a pole.

Like Belle in *Beauty and the Beast*, I lift my left foot up to get a little more reach, then stretch on my right.

A faint chime echoes through the library, breaking the silence with its sweet sound. That has to be my inbox.

My heart! It foxtrots.

My future is landing. I just know it. But right as I'm about to climb down, my heart tugs.

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Only...that's not my heart.

That's the delicate lace bodice of this vintage dress caught on one of the protruding hooks on the ladder.

No, no, no, no.

I try to free the dress, but the hook stubbornly refuses to release its grip on the fabric.

Holding on tight to the ladder with one hand, I try to wiggle the lace with the hand that's holding my phone. But footsteps creak in the hallway, growing louder. My heart speeds. Shit. I can't be caught like this by mansion security. It might be embarrassing for Asher if his plus-one is discovered climbing ladders she shouldn't be climbing, in libraries she shouldn't be frequenting.

Are the owners going to slap me with a trespassing fine? Is that even a thing?

I don't know, but my phone's dangling from my fingertips in its protective case. I make a split-second decision and let it go. Right as it clatters to the marble floor, I hoist my boobs up, freeing the dress from the hook.

I am a superhero! I saved the dress and the phone and my ass.

I swing around the ladder like it's a pole. It'll be faster to jump than to climb down. I let go, bracing myself to land on my feet, when...

Oof!

My head snaps back as my dress snags on another hook. My feet hit the floor, and just as a loud rip echoes through the air, the door swings open and Asher walks in.

"I was looking for you. I'm almost up. I need my good luck charm."

He stops, his smile vanishing when he sees me crouched on the marble floor, my pink zebra-print bra on full display thanks to my first-ever ripped bodice. This

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didn't come in a fit of passion but rather a fit of desperation.

Asher's green eyes widen, as if he's never seen a person who's been stripped by a ladder before and he doesn't know what to say. But he has an auction to do, and I don't want him to feel off-kilter.

I glance down at the phone case and back up at Asher. "Question for you—does this clutch look like a dick?"

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2

MY ACTIVE IMAGINATION

Asher

I've found Maeve in some unusual places over the years. At my door, dressed as a coquettish French maid, holding a butler costume and asking me to a last-minute costume party. In an empty lecture hall on her college campus, crying on the anniversary of her mother's death. Stuck in a roadside gas station restroom after a concert one night. (Her hairpin came in handy to free her that time.) But this is tops.

Still, I didn't think when I spotted her darting into this room that I'd find her on the floor...like *this*.

Maybe I *should* have, but this is fucking distracting. Because there's...cleavage and kissable flesh on display. There's a sexy bra in my line of sight and wildly inappropriate ideas forming in my head. Disheveled is a surprisingly good look on Maeve.

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I never knew zebra print was hot.

Except...she's Beckett's sister and she's *my* best friend.

Best to banish those dirty thoughts to a faraway land because there's no place for them in our friendship. Or in my life, frankly. I have plans and shit.

But before I can even ask what the hell happened, she pops up, hastily grabbing at the tattered top of her dress, trying to jam the fabric back together with sheer will. "So much for being a good luck charm," she says, her voice trembling. "I can't go back in there looking like a bad omen."

She's right. She *can't* go back in there looking like this. Because nearly every man will stare at her hungrily, and I'm not okay with that.

But first things first. "You're not a bad omen," I reassure her.

"I am. I'm the worst, Asher. I'm so sorry," she says as she tries to tie the tops of the ripped sides together with her talented fingers. She's good at all things creative, but I'm pretty sure fixing a torn dress without a needle and thread is out of her wheelhouse. "I ruined your night. I came in here looking for a cell signal, and instead, I turned into..." She flaps her hands, letting go of the bodice. "A fucking agent of chaos."

Well, she *is* an agent of chaos and it's one of her many endearing qualities. But now probably isn't the right time to point out that Maeve is simply being Maeve. I have to go back on stage for the bidding in seven minutes, and I need her in the audience. I went looking for her to make sure she hadn't lost track of time or, I dunno, discovered a stray dog or cat or duck that she needed to take home tonight. All viable possibilities.

This is potentially a big night for a lot of reasons, and not simply because I *want* to keep up the tradition—

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though, of course, I do. The exposure that comes with winning big will help the plans Beckett and I have to launch a new charity. It's not necessarily difficult to get people to pitch in for stray dogs and cats; it's harder to know how to help underprivileged kids. Our charity can bridge that gap… *if* I can get their attention in this media-saturated world.

But that's a few weeks down the road. *This* is now. Like we're on the ice, behind in the third period, and it's up to me to send the puck to the net, I say, matter-of-factly, "Let's fix it."

That's what I do best. Solve problems for people. Help my friends.

Shutting the library door, I advance into the room.

"How?" she asks, plucking at the lace in a way I can't let distract me. "I don't have a sewing kit with me." A moment later, she brightens. "Do you think somebody does? Reina? Maybe Everly? She's backstage, right?"

Everly is both the team publicist and Maeve's good friend. But who carries a sewing kit in their pocket? Even if she did, that rip is inches long and would take more than a few minutes to fix. "There's not enough time. We need a fix in this room," I say.

Maeve bites the corner of her lips. "Will you forgive me? I'm such an idiot. I should never have climbed that ladder."

"Forgiveness?" I laugh; this is nowhere near the unforgivable zone, and she should know that. "On one condition."

"Name it."

"I have to know—what made you climb it? Was it because it was there? Because honestly, that's reason enough." Every moment with her is a delightfully unpre-

Copyrighted Material

dictable show, and this one might just be the most Maeve thing yet.

As she fiddles with the pieces of the dress, trying vainly once more to fix it somehow, she confesses, "Angelina said she'd email me tonight." Angelina is Maeve's agent, and Maeve has been waiting to hear about a particularly coveted commission that could be a big break for her.

"Did you get the gig?"

She shrugs. "No idea. *This* sort of took precedent," she says, gesturing to her ripped bodice. She spins around, searching the library. "Wait! What if I carry a bunch of books in front of me? I can hold them like a prop!"

"That might be a little obvious." But that word—*obvious*—presents the solution. For fuck's sake, how did I miss this?

I shed my suit jacket and thrust it at her. "Here."

"You're brilliant," she says as she slides her arms into it, the cuffs hitting the tips of her fingers. A laugh bursts from her. "Why do you have to be so big?"

But that's not really the problem. The problem is the button in the middle, since that's where jacket buttons live. When she fastens it, the jacket doesn't even begin to cover up the top of her breasts, which, *wow,* look particularly lush and tempting right now.

Get it together.

"It looks better on you anyway," she adds, shrugging off the jacket and handing it to me. I set it on the ornate arm of the forest-green couch.

"Not sure I agree. Looked pretty good on you." Though I'd never admit just how good.

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Maeve, ever the optimist, scans the room. "Think

there's a wrap or something lying around? Maybe a fancy scarf or a throw forgotten by some posh guest?"

Her suggestion is cute, but I have another plan. It just requires a little ingenuity. "I've got a better idea," I say, brushing my fingers over the fabric of my vest, then glancing at her elegantly twisted hair. The solution is right there. "But I'm going to need your help. Can you hand me one of those hairpins?"

"Sure thing." Always game, she reaches up to pull one out, and as she does, the bodice of her dress slips lower.

Her dress was already hanging by a thread. Now, gravity tugs down, leaving nothing but the barest of barriers between us and something far more dangerous. Rogue thoughts conjure scenarios I've no business entertaining—her dress torn away, her body laid bare, her lips daring me to do something reckless.

I fight to clear my head, but my imagination has always been a double-edged sword. As a kid, I was always pretending I was someone else—a superhero, a spy, a pirate, a fireman, and sometimes even a professional hockey player.

Okay, that last one came true. But that doesn't mean this push-Maeve-up-against-the-wall one will. Because it'd be a very bad idea. Our lives are too tangled together. Something might go wrong. I hate when things go wrong.

Focus—fix the dress, help her out, get your head back in the game. But damn, if it isn't a struggle when Maeve is this close, this vulnerable—a temptation I never expected I'd struggle to resist.

Focusing on things I can control, I take the hairpin and blow out a steadying breath.

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"Question for you," she begins.

"Yeah?"

"What's the plan?"

Wresting control of my thoughts, I give her a *don't you worry* grin. "Do you trust me?"

Her head tilts. "You know I do." It comes out soft and true. A promise made again and again over the years.

A promise kept.

"I've got this, then." I tuck the hairpin in my pocket then make quick work of the buttons on my vest. Good thing there are more of them. Good thing they go higher than the one on my jacket did. Maeve's eyes widen with intrigue and then with understanding.

"Are you MacGyvering me an outfit?" There's excitement in her voice now. Maybe even a thrill.

I don't say a word. I answer with actions, sliding the vest onto her. One side, then around her, then the other side. My hands feel a little buzzy as they touch her arms.

"Good thing I told you to wear a vest," she says.

"And I resisted. But you knew best."

She rolls her eyes. "Don't give me too much credit tonight. You're the one fixing my dress without a sewing kit."

But I'm giving her all the credit because, so far, she looks extraordinary in my clothes.

She slips on the dark blue vest, and I do the buttons up. Her scent tickles my nose. At her brother's wedding it was wildflowers. Now it's like sweet plums, something I'd pick from a tree in the summer and sink my teeth into. My pulse surges as my fingers skate over her soft skin. This is ridiculous, these reactions to her. She's a friend—that's all.

I slide the final button in, a vein throbbing in my neck.

Or something is throbbing, and it's not in my neck.

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This moment is dangerously close to that wedding two years ago all over again. I remind myself I have an active

imagination, and thoughts are not actions. Wild scenarios don't need to come true.

I step back.

She looks down at her new ensemble, her smile spreading fast.

"It hits just right," she says, choosing the words she'd said to me when I tried the vest on at her suggestion.

"A little loose, though," I say, my voice gravelly. I move behind her, grabbing the hairpin from my pocket. Quickly, I gather the silky fabric at the back of the vest and fold it over, tightening it, then sliding the hairpin over it to hold it in place. "How's that?"

"You're a tailor," she says, tucking the pieces of lacy fabric out of sight under the front of the vest while I adjust the back. I smooth a hand over it, making sure the pin will stay.

"Everything good back there?" she asks.

I roam my eyes up and down her. *You have no idea how good*.

"It's great," I say as evenly as I can. I move around her, and holy fuck...

That vest does unfair things to her tits. It boosts them up, but not too much, she's not too risqué. Just right.

She offers a hopeful smile as she makes a few final adjustments to the ripped fabric. "Do I look good in your clothes?"

The question echoes through my head. *Does she look good in my clothes*? She looks fucking incredible, and I don't know what to make of that. "You look like..."

Mine.

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The word forms on my tongue. How could she look like anything else but mine when she's wearing my vest?

Instead, I amend my statement to, "You look like the best lucky charm. Now, go check your phone."

"You know me too well."

"Yeah, I do," I say.

She flicks open the case. A few scrolls and her shoulders slump. She groans when she meets my eyes. "Angelina says they haven't decided and they're putting it off for another week or two."

She swallows hard, gulping down her disappointment, I'm sure. I wish I could make things easier for her. She's made inroads in her career for sure, nabbing opportunities here and there, chances to paint some murals on buildings, and to showcase some of her more unusual pieces of art—bedazzled lamps made from liquor bottles—at a night market. But it hasn't been easy. It's been years of desperately trying to make it. Years of yearning.

"Who's the job with?" I ask, wondering if it's one of the galleries or gigs she's mentioned to me. If I know more, I can give her a pep talk. Keep her spirits up.

She shakes her head. "Doesn't matter."

"It does to me," I say.

She smiles faintly and pats my shoulder. "It's your night. You're the ultimate prize. Let's get in there."

We leave with two minutes to spare. When we pass the restroom on the way back, Maeve nods to it and says tightly that she'll pop in there for a second. "I promise I'll be out in thirty."

I gesture to the ballroom at the end of the hall. "I'll meet you inside," I say.

"I'll be there," she adds quietly.

"I know," I say, a little like Han Solo, but I can be cocky for a moment. It's a good feeling to know she'll be there.

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It's a feeling I don't want to ever lose.

3

SNAKE GIRL

Maeve

How stupid am I? I can't believe I did that. I can't believe I nearly ruined his night, and for what?

For nothing.

I shut the door to a stall. I don't have to pee, but I need to get myself together before I go back in there. I yank off some toilet paper and daub under my eyes as Angelina's words replay in my mind.

They received an influx of portfolios at the last minute, so they won't be making their decision yet.

But I submitted mine early, so that means it wasn't good enough to make it to the final round. If it were, they wouldn't care about the last-minute submissions.

Story of my adult life. I can't catch a break. Maybe the universe is trying to give me a sign—*give up painting. Toss the towel in on making art. No one makes a living as an artist anyway. You're not special.*

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That's certainly the message I get from my aunt

Vivian, though hers is coated in honey and laced with a little vested interest. She says things like, "Oh, sweetie, it's too hard to make it as an artist. Just work with me instead."

I try to shut out both voices with a few deep breaths as the main door to the ladies' room swings open. The clock is ticking. Wallow time is over. But shoes click, and a voice carries.

"I'm so ready. Daddy upped the limit on my card, so I got an advance to bid on Asher," a soprano voice says gleefully.

Hand on the latch, I tip my head closer, straining to catch every word.

"And when people think I'm dating him, I'll get soooo many new followers for the brand," she adds. "I've laid all the groundwork by wearing his jersey in videos. One date, and it'll be catnip for clicks."

My skin crawls, and I gasp silently, but I don't move.

The other woman's voice is softer, almost cautious. "It sounds like a great plan, but...are you sure this is the best way to go about it? What if it backfires?"

"Backfire? No way. He's dating someone new every few months. It'll be easy to pull off."

"People might see through it," the careful one says.

"Ever heard of Photoshop? I'll take so many pics of us, change my outfits in them, and then I can just dole them out like we're totally a thing. The timing will be perf. People believe what you tell them."

My temperature shoots through the roof as I peer through the slat, glimpsing jet-black hair and a spray tan.

Her. The one launching a new beauty line. And she's planning to use Asher to do it.

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I burn, then I break, fumbling with the latch as I push

open the door to give her a piece of my mind. "Are you for real?" I bite out. But the liar-to-be is already scurrying out of the restroom, ready to spin fables about my friend.

I beeline for the ballroom, debating tactics on the way and not sure confronting her will do a thing. Instead, I try to devise a more clever solution to her kind of trickery. It's not like I can dramatically shout, *Stop, thief!* from the doorway. She'd laugh it off and call me crazy. I could race backstage and tell Everly, but what could she do? Disqualify a bidder on account of me overhearing a ladies' room convo?

I certainly can't outbid an heiress and her daddy's money. I'm...nobody.

Pissed off and penniless, I join my brother, slumping into the cushioned chair with a *harrumph*.

"In the nick of time," Beckett says, then eyes me suspiciously, arching a brow. "Are you wearing Asher's vest?"

"Vests are totally in, babe," Reina tells him, like it's the moment for a gentle fashion correction. "And you look hot," she tells me.

"Thank you." But I don't care about me right now. I care about Snake Girl with the credit card. "Listen to this."

I spill everything I overheard.

Reina's nose twitches, and then she nods to my new nemesis a row over. "That's Miranda Blush. Her dad owns a shipping business. I heard she claimed her new beauty line is cruelty-free, but a research lab discovered it's not."

"It's cruelty-full? Ugh, I hate her even more," I seethe.

"How do you know all this?" Beckett asks his wife, eyebrows raised in amazement.

"I like knowing things. It's an Akiyama thing," she says, using her maiden name, which she kept because she wanted to keep her Japanese heritage alive.

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"And you're damn good at it," he agrees. He hums thoughtfully like he's weighing all this intel. Beckett's more measured than I am. I got all the impulsive genes, and he got the strategic ones. Maybe that's why he owns a small chain of gyms, and I climb ladders that rip my dress. But a moment later, his eyes narrow, and he says darkly, "No one fucks with my guy."

Reina squeezes his arm. "Protective Beckett is in the house. But what are you going to do?"

Before Beckett can answer, Everly's voice echoes bright and loud as she strides on stage with the mic.

"Thank you so much for coming back with full wallets and big hearts. Let's have a round of applause for Erin and her intros," she says to the buzzing audience. The color commentator started the auction. Now it's the team publicist's turn to finish the night. Everly looks sleek and stylish in a blue dress and black heels with her signature blonde ponytail. "We are so excited that all the money raised this evening will go to San Francisco-based non-profits, including animal rescues, food drives, housing initiatives, and efforts to combat homelessness, as well as our ongoing support for local libraries. So get ready, Sea Dogs fans! Now is your chance to win a date with a hockey star. I'll tell you a little more about what each date package with each guy looks like."

As she dives into the details, I huddle with my brother and his wife again. Reina whispers a warning, "It's going to be bad if Miranda claims she's dating Asher."

"She might make up all sorts of things about him for her own purposes," I second.

Asher's on the brink of launching a new charity he's been building over the last year with my brother—they're calling it Total Teamwork. Asher's reputation matters to

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him. He's earned it with focus and dedication throughout his entire career. He's known as one of the most accessible, friendly, outgoing guys on the team for a reason—that's who he legit is. He's the guy who has his teammates' backs and who cares about his city in a deep and real way.

On the eve of the Total Teamwork debut, it'd be a terrible stain on Asher's rep if he was embroiled in a messy lie of a fake romance with someone who's only using him for clout—especially since that *someone* has a dubious history of her own. With animals, no less!

"I can already see the posts spinning out of control before we have a chance to stop them," I say.

"It could be a real mess," Beckett agrees. He lets out a long, annoyed breath as Everly talks up date packages that include concerts, cooking classes with gourmet chefs, and an art and culture day touring the best museums and galleries in San Francisco.

I picture Snake Girl gallivanting around the city with *my* friend, then tossing photos online, claiming they're together. Then Asher would have to say they're not together, and she would no doubt throw some sort of online fit.

Frustration boils up inside me. I have to do something. There are still a few more minutes for me to pull Everly aside somehow. Tell her what I heard. Ask her to refuse Snake Girl's bid, maybe.

It could work. Stranger things have happened.

"Next up, we have a date with the formidable and fun Alexei Volkov," Everly says, as Beckett whispers something to Reina only. "Who's ready to take a shot at an unforgettable evening? The bidding begins at twenty thousand dollars."

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When the first paddle lifts, I don't wait another

second. "I'm going to find someone backstage. Maybe Everly's assistant," I tell Beckett, pushing up in my chair, ready to jet off, to fly past my friend Leighton, who's freelancing here tonight, snapping pictures of the event for the team.

Setting a hand on my shoulder, he keeps me in place. "No, you're not."

"Why not? We can't let this happen. How else can I stop it?" I implore him.

If I can go hunting in libraries for cell service *for me*, I will damn well finagle my way backstage for *my friend.*

But as a pair of women vie for Alexei, a clever smile spreads across my brother's face. He strokes his chin, looking like he's got the world at his fingertips. "The money does go to a good cause. These are all causes that I support, anyway. My accountant said it was time to make a charitable donation."

"But you're launching your own charity," I point out.

"Yeah, and I like *these* causes too."

I connect the dots and breathe the biggest sigh of relief, wrapping an arm around him. "I knew you'd come through and do it."

But he shakes his head, his smile turning downright wicked. "I'm not going to outbid her," he says. "You are."

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4

MY BROTHER'S MONEY

Maeve

Fifteen minutes later, I'm on the edge of my seat as Everly begins the bidding on the last man standing.

"And now, for our final hockey player of the evening, we have a date with none other than Asher Callahan. You've heard all about our auction superstar. He's gone for the highest amount the last two years. Let's see if he can make it a hat trick."

Asher grins, then leans closer to her mic, his trademark charm radiating across the whole ballroom as he says, "And I've already had two on the ice this season."

Everly laughs. "Then this ought to be easy. Like a straight shot to the net." She pauses and turns back to the audience, all business. "Bidding starts at fifty thousand dollars. Who's ready to take home the night of a lifetime?"

Snake Girl doesn't bat an eye. From her seat, a row over, she casually lifts her paddle like it's nothing. She's

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seated next to a freckled redhead. Must be the woman she was talking to in the ladies' room.

My stomach churns with nerves but also excitement. Playing with Monopoly money is like riding a death-defying, daring roller coaster. It's terrifying and thrilling all at once.

"Are you sure?" I ask Beckett one more time.

"Save our friend," he says with a crisp nod.

Doesn't have to tell me twice.

I lift the paddle I never thought I would lift. But I am not cool. I am not calm. I have zero chill as I shout, "Fifty-five thousand."

On stage, Asher blinks. It's the play he didn't see coming. His green eyes lock with mine and questions flash across them. Like *where did you get fifty-five thousand dollars?* And *aren't you the girl with the ripped bodice who can barely make her rent?*

I flash a knowing smile his way, then a *take that* one in the direction of my competition.

Buckle up, Snake Girl. This woman does not back down.

Without missing a beat, Miranda raises her paddle again, her voice dripping with smugness. "Sixty thousand."

My heart pounds, but I refuse to let anyone see me sweat. I glance at Beckett, who gives me a subtle nod. I lift the paddle higher, my voice steady now, but my insides shaking. "Seventy thousand."

There's a collective gasp in the room.

Everly looks around, searching the audience, shooting a concerned glance my way, cautious for me. "Seventy thousand. Anyone want to bid more than seventy thousand for a date with Asher Callahan?"

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Snake Girl shoots me a scathing look, then flicks her black hair over her shoulder, sneering in my direction before she ups the ante. "Eighty-five thousand."

For a moment, the air has been sucked out of the room. Then, whispers begin, and in seconds they turn louder. "*What are you doing?*" Asher mouths to me.

I don't answer him. I can't back down now. Not when I've come this far. I lift my hand one more time, my voice loud and clear. "One hundred thousand."

Beckett wheezes out a shocked, "Holy fuck."

Like he's not okay that I've gone that high. But...I guess I don't fuck around with my brother's money.

Everly blinks, her surprised smile taking over her face. "We've never had a bid that high. Does anybody want to counter the bid?"

Even Snake Girl hesitates, her confidence faltering for the first time. She looks at me, eyes narrowing into slits as if sizing me up, but there's a flicker of doubt in her gaze.

How much is a beauty line worth? *I guess we'll find out, folks*.

"Going once, going twice," Everly says.

A few tense seconds that extend longer than my last relationship tick by. Snake Girl lingers, tapping her long, fuchsia fingernails against the wooden paddle before she reluctantly lowers it.

The victory is mine. *Yes!* I punch the air.

Everly's voice cuts through the tension, triumphant. "Sold! One hundred thousand to the woman in the vest! Congratulations, Maeve! You've just won a date with Asher Callahan!"

A wild laugh bursts from me, adrenaline still pumping through my veins. Next to me, my brother's face is pale

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and he's clutching his stomach like he can't quite believe he gave the go-ahead on that.

Reina is rubbing his back.

And Asher looks equal parts impressed...and bewildered.

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5

THE ICE STREAKER SCALE

Asher

I'm not usually thrown for a loop. But consider me officially loop-thrown here on stage. It's like that time last season when some dude jumped over the glass and onto the ice during a break in game action. Wearing only a bathing suit, a sandwich board, and skates, he flew down the ice toward the tunnel, advertising his new adventure tour business. Talk about a stunt.

And on a scale of one to ice streaker, I'm definitely off-the-charts surprised right now. Because I'm going on a hundred-thousand-dollar date with my best friend. Why would she do that? It can't be a real date she wants. She wouldn't need to throw down money for a real date since, well, we hang out all the time.

Then, like a puck slamming into the boards, it hits me. She wanted to drive up the price to make sure I didn't break my streak. She did it for me because I wouldn't have

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gone for the top amount if she hadn't started a bidding war with Miranda Blush.

She did it because, well, I asked her to be my good luck charm.

Did I...overplay my hand? Force my luck? Shit. Tinkering with chance can be a big mistake. I don't even want to think about what *could* go wrong.

Everly's voice breaks through my spiraling thoughts. "And there you go," she announces, turning the mic toward me. "For the third year in a row, you've gone for the highest amount in our Win a Date Auction. What's the secret?"

I push aside the unease gnawing at my gut and take the mic with a practiced grin. *Think fast. Don't be the buzzkill.* I'm the guy who keeps the party going, not the one who kills the vibe.

"It must be my good luck charm," I say, shrugging like it's no big deal.

"Do you have a rabbit's foot in your pocket? Or maybe a lucky puck?"

I shake my head and nod to Maeve, who's sitting in the front row wearing an outfit that matches mine perfectly. "My friend Maeve's my good luck charm. She's been here for the last couple years, but tonight she decided to surprise me with a date," I say easily.

"Did it work?" Maeve chimes in, as if this is another of our big adventures.

"Sure did but you know what I like," I say, up for the challenge too.

"Are you a big fan of Outrageous Record?" Everly asks, cutting in.

That must be the date package we're going on—a concert. I didn't pay close attention to the details. But no

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harm, no foul. "Love that band," I reply, smoothing over my earlier distraction. A concert will be easy enough to attend with Maeve. Just like every other time we've hung out. It'll be like old times—bonfires, amusement parks, spelunking, cake-making. "I've always wanted to see them in concert," I add, keeping control of the situation.

Maeve grins, victorious. "That's why I wanted to surprise you."

"It seems it worked," Everly says, wrapping up the auction. "Thank you again to everyone who came out tonight. We raised more than half a million dollars for some great causes and on behalf of everyone at the Sea Dogs, we are so grateful to all of you. And here's hoping the winners post pics of their dates—we'll be sure to reshare. Thank you again."

As the crowd begins to disperse, Everly nods to me as we head backstage. "Stay with me while we finalize the details. We need to record everything formally."

"Absolutely," I say.

A few seconds later, the winners of the dates are ushered into a room backstage. I cut through the crowd, making a beeline for Maeve. I need to know what she was thinking.

I pull her aside. "What was that all about? And where are you hiding one hundred grand? You know you could get a *date* with me for less than a dime," I say, sketching air quotes as I try to keep the moment light, even though the truth of that statement unnerves me in a way I don't want to deal with right now.

Or ever, to be honest.

"To protect you," she replies, her expression serious. "I'll explain more later." She pauses, a playful smirk

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crossing her face. "But it's a good story. There's always a story with me."

Truer words. But this is a Maeve plot twist I didn't see coming. And it's driving me a little batty. "Give me a hint," I whisper.

She rises on tiptoes, cups my ear, and whispers, "Miranda Blush was going to bid on you and claim she was your girlfriend. Use you to build up her new beauty line. Probably spin a ton of lies. I couldn't let that happen. That would be bad luck. So, I told Beckett, and he put up the money. And I saved you from her." She steps back, meeting my gaze after serving up well more than a hint. "Just like you saved me earlier."

"That was hardly an even trade," I say, but holy fuck. Maeve has quite the protective side. It's...sexy. But I shouldn't find it sexy. Maybe it's just...captivating? Yeah, that's it.

And sure, it was nice of my friend. I'll need to pay Beckett back. He shouldn't be putting up that kind of money.

Either way, maybe there's no forced luck after all. Just quick thinking from both of them. I let out a relieved breath, glad that debate is resolved.

Everly finishes taking down the details of Maeve's bid then gives her friend a pointed look. "Girls' breakfast soon —I'm going to need all of the details of your big surprise," she says.

"And you'll get them," Maeve says, her voice brimming with mischief.

Everly looks to both of us. "That is, if you can fit me in before you guys take off for Vegas next weekend."

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Wait, what? "We don't play the Sabers till next month," I point out, reminding Everly of the hockey schedule that

she usually has memorized. Our game against the Vegas team isn't till February.

"I know. I mean the date package we assigned to you, Asher," Everly continues with a professional smile. "It was donated by Outrageous Record. They have a week-long stint in Vegas, so there's a whole package—flight, a night at a hotel, dinner on the Strip. It's next weekend, which is perfect since you have two nights off from hockey. Have fun."

She spins around and heads to Miles's highest bidder to handle the details of his date, leaving me standing there, trying to wrap my head around this new wrinkle.

I look back at Maeve, and my thoughts feel like they're tangled up in knots even though a quick trip with her should be no big deal. We've taken lots of trips—it's kind of our thing. So why does this feel different?

It shouldn't feel any different simply because my best friend looks ludicrously sexy wearing my vest. It shouldn't be any different no matter how good it feels when I wrap my arm around her and Leighton snaps a picture for the team's social feed.

But Vegas?

Vegas *is* different. It's like walking into a carnival and getting swept up in the crowd right away. It's a vortex for all varieties of luck, good and bad, forced and natural.

And for troublemaking.

We've never needed help finding trouble—but in Vegas, trouble usually finds you.

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6

NO HARD FEELINGS

Asher

I seriously appreciate Maeve playing the role of goalie tonight. But now I've got to handle the fallout. She takes off, and as the crowd thins out, I grab my phone from the back pocket of my pants and toggle over to my banking app. I don't think twice. I tap a few keys, setting up the transfer. Then I cut through the lingering groups and make my way to the front entrance of the Cartwright Mansion, where Beckett's picking up a pair of jackets from coat check.

Reina's probably in the ladies' room, so I stride over, determination in my step. "Hey, Beck. About that bid—thanks, but I can't let you drop that kind of cash just to save my streak."

Beckett looks up from tipping the woman behind the counter, one eyebrow quirked. "It wasn't about the streak."

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"Fine, you were looking out for me, which is

awesome." I clap his shoulder. "I appreciate it, man. But I can't let you cover that. I'm going to pay you back."

Well, I already did, but he'll find out soon enough. Semantics and all.

Beckett laughs, low and easy. "You don't owe me anything, Ash," he says, thanking the woman and stepping away from the counter and next to a scalloped mirror that looks like it costs five figures. "And I'm not taking your money."

I give him a stern look. "You can't just drop that kind of cash and brush it off. I can cover it."

"And so can I," he says. "Look, that situation was going to be messy, and neither one of us needs that right now, but especially you. You're the face of Total Teamwork, man. Maeve came to me with the situation, and Reina and I made the decision to put up the money. It was for a good cause, and we're always happy to give to charity. Besides, I didn't want Miranda Blush anywhere near you. That woman's trouble."

"I appreciate that," I admit, but I can't let this go. "And yet...I still felt like I owe you something."

My best friend's a smart man. He shoots me a searing stare. "No, you don't. We're all good. We're in this together. You hear me?"

He makes a fair point, but sometimes I just like to get my way. Fine, fine. Most of the time. "I do. But sometimes a man's got to do what a man's got to do."

He shoots me a searing stare. "No, you didn't."

I flash a big grin. "Yes. I did. Have fun with the wife tonight. Catch you later."

I don't even give him the chance to protest. I take off, heading into the cool San Francisco night. Once outside,

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as the fog curls its arms around me, I open an app to grab a ride home when a hand comes down on my shoulder. I don't flinch since it's my job to handle surprises.

I turn around to see...Miranda. Her smile is as sleek as her hair. Her eyes glint with opportunity.

"We could still go out. Maybe it's even better this way," she says, her voice a purr, her hand curling tighter around me. I hear a rustle nearby. Someone else, maybe? Who knows?

"Thanks, but I'm busy," I say coolly. It's not the first time a woman has sashayed over and put her hands on me without asking. I'd be naive to think it'll be the last.

"You can't be busy every night though," she says, inching closer, hand gripping tighter.

I reach for her hand and peel it off me. And I do mean peel, because holy hell, this woman has claws, and they are digging in. I'm well aware that eyes are always on pro athletes. That rustle could be someone, and *someones* have cameras. One wrong move can lead to a scandal. So I'm careful as I let Miranda's hand fall, then step back from her.

"Thanks again for coming tonight. Really appreciate your support," I say as shoes click toward me on the sidewalk, coming from the other direction.

I turn to the sound.

A vision emerges in the foggy night. A woman sporting a vest, a trench coat, and an attitude.

I fight off a smile.

"Hey, babe," she says, then flashes a saccharin smile at Miranda. "And hey, no hard feelings about that whole thing in there, right?" Maeve waves a hand airily at the mansion. "I just couldn't let anyone else get their hands on this man."

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She slides right up to me, wraps an arm around my neck, the other around my waist, and drops a kiss on my cheek, like the date she won is real.

Right now, with her wedged against me, the date *feels* real.

That's my excuse at least. Since this might seem like a bad idea later, but right now, I have zero regrets as I make a game-day decision, turn my face, and impulsively capture her lips with mine.

A soft brush. An almost-chaste touch. But I smell sweet plums, and I taste raspberry lipstick. Most of all, I *feel* Maeve's mouth as she kisses me back. Brushing her lips against mine. Parting them the slightest bit.

An invitation, perhaps, for more?

Like I could say no. I coast my lips across hers. In no time, her fingers curl tighter around my neck. Her other hand presses more firmly on my waist. The tiniest gust of breath from her sweet mouth has my chest overheating. I cup her cheek, and my head pings with wild possibilities. What if this kiss became more real? What if it was a prelude to something else entirely?

In a few terribly short seconds, I already want to toss her over my shoulder and take her home. See if she looks as good in my ties, bound to her wrists, as she does in that vest.

But just as quickly as it started, the kiss ends. Over after it barely began. I don't know if she wrenches apart first or if I do. Maybe we both knew we needed to stop. I swallow roughly. She catches her breath.

My brain comes back online, and I reconnect to the fog, the night, the rustle of people, the birds, a car nearby.

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And, most of all, the onlooker.

Right…Miranda.