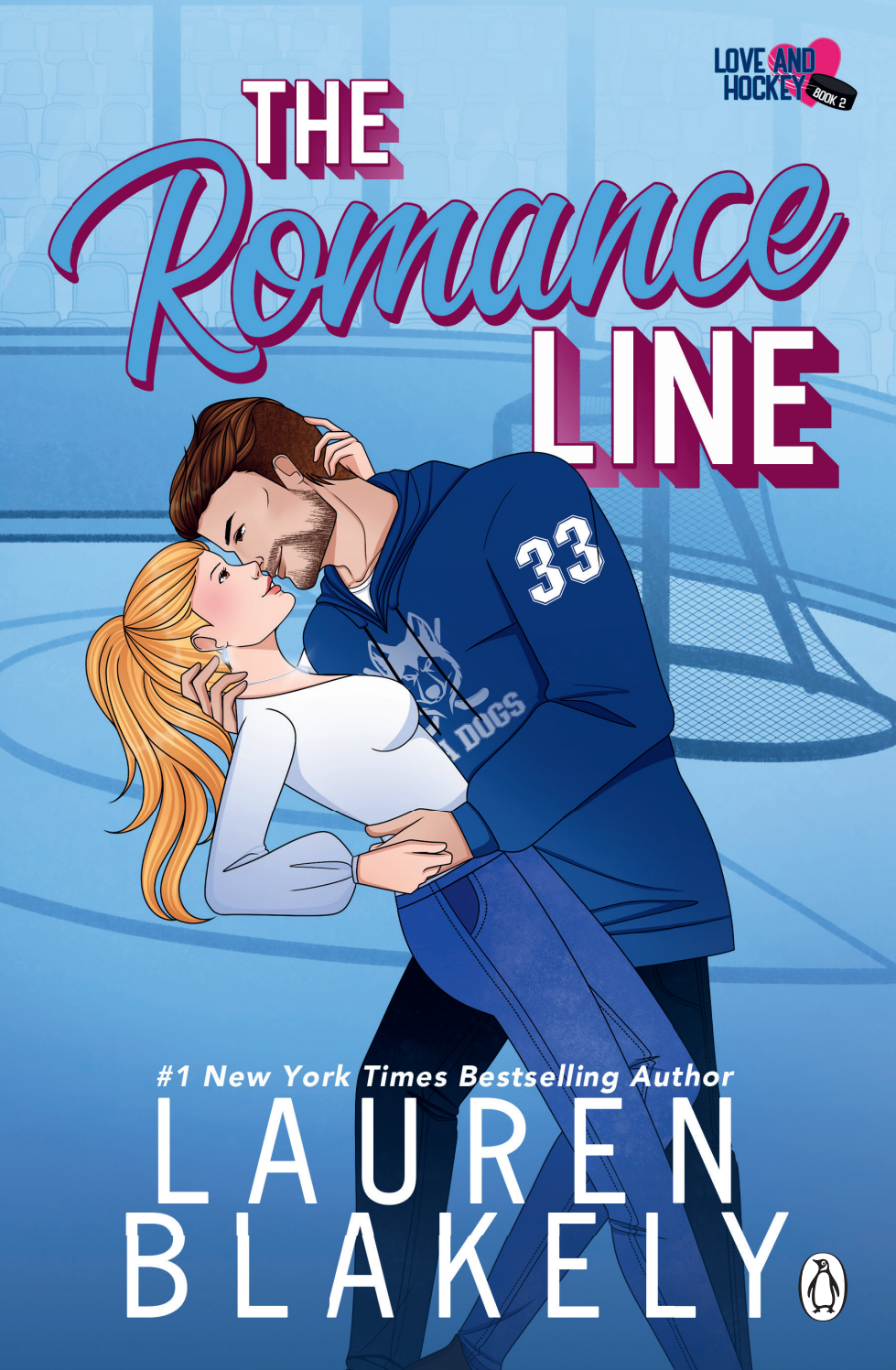
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THE Romance LINE



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1

ZIP IT UP, MAN

Max

Look, I can pull off pretty much anything in the clothing department, but this *might* be outside my wheelhouse. Especially since I definitely didn't pack a purple pair of underwear with little flowers all over the waistband and so little material that nothing is left to the imagination. Even mine, and I have a very active one.

Intrigued, I hold the scrap of purple fabric in front of me in my hotel room. Studying this less-is-definitely-more piece of lingerie, I have to wonder—who even wears this almost thong and also, does it hurt?

I should probably stop pawing around in this bag that's clearly not mine but looks just like it. Must have grabbed it in the lobby by mistake, and I'm guessing this suitcase doesn't belong to one of my teammates either. Not that there's anything wrong with that. To each his own and all. But this cornu-fucking-copia of lace and satin doesn't look like it would fit a pro hockey player.

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There are only a handful of women traveling with the team on this road trip to Seattle. The athletic trainer, the team doctor, and the publicist.

My mind catches on that last possibility.

This can't belong to her.

It just can't.

Not straightlaced, rule-following, pantsuit-wearing Everly Rosewood. She's the kind of woman who owns exactly seven sets of cotton bras and panties, in the same matching shade of nude, same matching style, so she can grab and go at the crack of dawn all while devising new ways to torture me with press requests and promo shoot ideas.

No way does Everly own anything that's not navy, black, or beige. Best I return this bag to its rightful owner, pretend I never saw what's in it, and then never think about it again. Searching for the luggage tag, I find one attached to the handle and flip it over.

I freeze. Then, I heat up everywhere. We're talking inferno levels. This bevy of beautiful lingerie belongs to the team's publicist after all. The clever, mouthy woman who hates me. Yep, the one and only Everly Rosewood, who accomplishes more before her workday begins than most people do in a year. But this does not compute—she can't possibly dish out a list of promo duties in that teacherly way of hers while wearing a purple thong.

This is a test. This is clearly some kind of test. No, it's a downright moral dilemma.

Do I slam it shut or hunt around in her things a little more?

I need some distance from temptation. Spinning around, I pace toward the window overlooking the city of Seattle, rainy because of course it's rainy, and the arena

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where I'll be defending the net early tomorrow against one of the toughest teams in the league.

"All you have to do is zip up that suitcase, return it, and go the fuck to sleep," I mutter.

Great. Just great. Now I'm talking to myself. They say goalies are a little unhinged but this is next level even for me. I grip the windowsill, staring at the Space Needle lit up against the night sky, then I tear myself away, stalk right back over to the bed, ready—I swear I'm ready—to zip that suitcase all the way up and say goodbye to it.

Or, really, I'm almost ready.

I scrub a hand across my beard and gaze a little longer at the treasure trove of lace and satin, like a siren calling to me in the most tantalizing voice.

How do you think the slay-the-world-one-member-of-the-media-at-a-time queen would look in purple lace? Or in soft blue satin?

Does she have a date tonight? My jaw ticks. *Is she meeting a secret boyfriend in the rainy city tomorrow?* It ticks harder. *Does she—oh, hell—wear these every day to work under those pantsuits that drive you crazy?*

And it ticks the hardest.

I haul in a breath, trying to locate my moral compass. But it's hard to find right now. I try again with a pep talk. "All you have to do is reach for the zipper. Pull the teeth closed around one side, then the other. Done."

But I don't move. I stand here stupidly because all those sexy things are scrambling my brain. Taking up all the space in my head now that I know Everly Rosewood wears red lace panties, the color of my dirty dreams.

"Doesn't matter," I mutter. "It really doesn't matter what she wears." Squaring my shoulders, I get ready to perform the most herculean task—zip it up.

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As I reach for the bag, my phone buzzes. Saved by the bell. I grab it from my back pocket at Mach speed, grateful for the distraction from a moral dilemma worthy of that vintage board game Scruples.

It's a text from my agent, Garrett.

> Been talking to Thrive about your sponsorship. Need to run some things past you. Let's chat when you return to SF.

That has to be good. Why else would he text me late at night? Dude isn't going to text with bad news like, saying, *you lost your last sponsor less than a week into the season.*

So, clearly this is a good sign. I dictate a reply.

> Works for me. Maybe I'll even let you take me to that new kebab place on Polk Street and give me the good news.

The bubbles dance for a minute. A long minute that should cool me off so I stop obsessing over this bag. Finally, Garrett's reply lands.

> Don't think I didn't notice you finagling a free meal. And sure. Kebabs will do. Just know this—I'm working hard to make this happen. I know you've got plans.

I furrow my brow. Well, no shit. That's his job. He always works hard. Doesn't need to tell me that twice. But I'm not his easiest client lately, so maybe this is just his nice guy way of reminding me he's juggling all the broken plates I've thrown his way.

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So I should take this exchange as a win, return this bag, and crash.

Except, what is that scrap of sinful red lace taunting me from the top of the stack of neatly folded blouses in the center of her bag? I shove the phone back in my pocket and then my curious fingers have a mind of their own. One look can't hurt. Fine, one touch. I snatch up the soft strap poking out of the blouses and fish out—what is this? A demi-bustier? A halter half bra?

I lift it to get a better view. It's sheer red lace, the color of a cherry, with the daintiest ruffle along the top. Maybe it's a bra of sorts. I don't even know. Then, with a new kind of reckless abandon, I reach for the next thing, and the next, and the next.

Until...what have I done? I've plundered her bag. Yep, I'm a lingerie pirate.

This is bad, man.

But this is also an opportunity. I smirk as I get to work neatly folding every single silky item.

An opportunity to give her hell.

I pack them all back up, except for this little red thing, and head to the door, like a good boy.

Well, not really. Because tonight, I've been a little bit bad.

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2

YOU SEXY LITTLE SNOOP

Everly

It's official. I am a thief. Crouching back on my heels on the plush hotel room carpet, I steal a whiff of the grumpy goalie's cologne.

It's bold and spicy, but strong too, starting with chili pepper and finishing with cedar, and it smells like the kind of guy you can't stop looking at when you go to a club with your girlfriends. That unknowable man with the dark gaze who leans against the sleek, silver bar and surveys the scene with cool blue eyes. The man whose stare is undressing you as you dance for him.

Someone so cocky you hate yourself for wanting him.

I shudder as I close my eyes, catching the final afternotes from this sapphire blue bottle. When I open my eyes, I force myself to cap it.

Blinking off the heady fog, I set the cologne back down in Max's black travel kit as I stare at the evidence in front of me. A wide open suitcase that isn't mine—one I

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didn't shut when I discovered we'd accidentally grabbed each other's bags when we arrived after our flight to Seattle from San Francisco.

It's damning. I'm not just a scent thief. I'm a veritable snoop.

Why don't you just lick his tube of toothpaste too? Rub your thigh on his shampoo bottle? Mark his things a little more?

Ashamed, I jerk back from the suitcase that's been my downfall for the last five minutes since I noticed the luggage switcheroo when I arrived at my room. I undo and redo my ponytail again and again. What have I done? Did I really look through one of the hockey player's things?

Girl, you sure did. And you relished every single second of it.

Embarrassment crawls up my chest. I can't believe I rooted through his clothes and his travel kit instead of just, oh say, closing the bag and texting him about the mix-up.

LIKE AN ADULT WOULD DO.

But I'm evidently a cat. I now know what cologne Max wears, what color his boxer briefs are, and what flavor lip balm he likes. Also that he uses a coveted face moisturizer that's made from the best grape-seed oil. I wish I could afford this stuff. But I can never let on to Max that I know all these details of his life.

I can definitely never admit I pilfered an inhale of his Midnight Flame—such an annoying cologne that annoying men who like to needle helpful women wear.

Especially since he probably didn't even toss a glance at my things. The man's so uninterested in anything but his own agenda.

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Hustling, I hunt for my phone so I can text him. I spot the device, then quickly dictate a note.

Hi, Max! There's been a little mix-up, and I have—

A loud knock on my door startles me, then a deep, masculine voice calls out: "Room service. We have the Veuve Clicquot you ordered and the birthday cake in bed."

What?

I didn't order that. Or anything. Plus, that's way over my per diem. My boss would reprimand me with a cool smile, and I hate reprimands, especially ones I don't deserve.

"Coming," I say, before I can close the suitcase. Once I cross to the door and peer through the hole I gasp, then drop down even though he, obviously, can't see through the peephole.

It's Max Lambert, the wearer of the cocky cologne. The owner of the bag I snooped through. The man who's hated me since before I worked for this team.

Think fast.

Several feet away from me, his suitcase is wide open. He might hear if I head back over there. I slip off my heels as quietly as a mouse. "One sec," I call out in a muffled voice, like I'm far away from the door, then pad back to the bag and zip it up, but the zipper snags.

Fuck a duck. It's stuck on a pair of his boxer briefs.

Kill. Me. Now.

"Coming," I say, hastily.

"No worries, Miss Rosewood," he says in his fake room service voice. "Happy to wait all night with your special cake."

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I barely have the time to roll my eyes, but I manage even as I shout brightly, "I know it's you, Max."

"And your champagne. Don't forget I have your champagne," he says as I yank harder and harder.

"I still know it's you," I say, trying to stay cheery as I tug the damn zipper. But I just. Can't. Get it. Squatting in front of the suitcase, I put everything I have into pulling on it, but then I land on my ass.

"You busy rooting through my things?"

I cringe, mortified. Actually, what is worse than mortification? Because that's what I'm feeling right now. Exponential mortification.

But I am a problem solver by nature. I didn't land this plum gig handling press for the NHL team because I can't handle problems. I can so handle them. I wiggle the zipper a little to the left, a little to the right, using a soft touch, and voila.

It's closed.

I take a breath, smooth out my navy blue blouse, run a hand down my ponytail, then head to the door, chin up, smile on, *never let them see you sweat*. Max won't know I was a bad girl. I swing it open and paste on a smile as I meet the face of the man who's made an art form of vexing me. Ice blue eyes, fair complexion, a chiseled jaw covered in a trim beard, and dark brown hair that's a little wild, a little wavy, a little too long. The net effect? All you want to do is run your fingers through it. A scar cuts through his right eyebrow, unfairly making him even sexier, and also a bit scary. He's six-foot-four, and when he's on the ice he looms over the net like some kind of Arctic monster guarding his frozen cave. He's a fearsome goalie, and he's big everywhere—with thick thighs, strong arms, a broad chest, and a hockey butt. This sport does unholy things to players' backsides. Right now though, he's resting one

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forearm against the doorframe, the other is out of view, and he's smirking.

I'd like to say it's a welcome change from his scowl. But I'm not so sure. Still, I like to fight fire with fire, so I smile wider. "How's it going? Do you need anything? Like a debrief on all the fabulous things we can discuss with the media tomorrow? If memory serves, Seattle is where you started out." I splay out my hands like I'm creating a headline. "The hometown boy makes good."

It's a story the press would eat up, even though he plays for the visiting team. Still, there's little the media likes more than a returning sports hero.

Well, a scandal. They like a scandal more. Which is exactly what I don't want him to ever face again, though the last one was no fault of his own—at least as far as I know. I don't have all the details. Max is notoriously tight-lipped.

But he isn't now, as he scoff-laughs at my request. *Jackass.*

"Let's take a raincheck on that feel-good story," he says, then tips his chin behind me. "By the way, the zipper's a little wonky on that. But you probably already know."

My cheeks flame, but I ignore the splash of heat, holding my chin up high. "Thanks for the heads-up," I say.

Looming in the doorway, he hoists up my suitcase and I try to grab it, but the jerk is too tall, too strong, and too tricky. "And I believe you left this with me. But you probably figured that out when you opened mine."

"I did not leave it with you," I say, momentarily exasperated. Does he think I wanted him to look through my luggage? Oh, crap. Did he give it the same examination I

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gave his? I really hope not. The last thing I want is Max knowing a single detail about me outside of work.

"Fine, fine. It was just a mix-up. But I have one question."

I groan privately, but smile publicly even though it's just the two of us here in the hallway of the Luxe Hotel late at night. "Yes?" It's asked sweetly, with sunshine, like how I usually try to behave around him. *Around everyone*.

He motions to my room. I sigh but open the door the rest of the way, and he strides inside like he owns the hotel. That's how he walks. Oozing confidence. Radiating sex appeal. Looking like sin. I hate how sexy he is, and he can never know.

As the door shuts with an ominous click, he sets down the luggage on the carpet and raises his other hand. My eyes widen in shock as he asks, "What is this called? Out of curiosity?"

I gasp.

One of my favorite little lacy things is dangling from his finger. And I was dead wrong about him spying. He's as bad as I am. I snatch it from his big hand. "It's a bralette," I say defensively as the sunshine in me starts to fade, clouds rolling in. "Why did you go through my things?"

He shrugs nonchalantly. "How else would I know if the bag was mine?" Max bats his ice blue eyes so innocently. But of course he's not innocent.

Then again, neither am I. "You take one quick look, then shut it when you don't see a thousand and one pairs of gray sweatpants," I explain in my best helpful tone.

But as I say that, a voice in my head tsks me. *You didn't take one quick look. You scratched and sniffed.*

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"Please, Everly. I travel with a thousand and two."

"Appreciate the correction." I stare him down, not giving an inch. "Though I presume once you saw it wasn't full of your things, you would've just returned it."

Instead of taunting me. But I keep that to myself. I don't need to give him more ammunition.

His gaze drifts pointedly to his suitcase behind him. "Right. I probably should have done that. It would be wrong to go through someone's stuff. To discover their, say, black boxer briefs, raspberry-flavored lip balm, noise-cancelling headphones, secret journal that they keep every night listing all the good things that happened that day or could happen one day, and their expensive moisturizer because God only gave them one face, and it's a fucking great face so they treat it well?"

Is he an evil wizard? Or just the biggest pain in my ass? "I'm sure you don't keep a secret journal," I say brightly.

But I remind myself that the season just started and I can't let difficult people irritate me. My boss told me a few days ago there's a promotion available this year, so I'm going to have to keep my eye on that prize, and not on the prickly problems.

"Are you, Everly?" With one dubious brow arched, he stares at me, like he's a lie detector test. "You sticking to that?"

I cross my arms. "Yes. And you?"

He waves a muscular arm at the suitcase he's returned. "Oh, I already admitted I looked through it. I was damn curious. And I asked what that piece of lace was. A bralette, if you recall. I'm just wondering if you did the same. It's a simple question really."

I swallow and school my expression. "Of course I didn't."

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Liar, liar, pants on fire.

"If you say so," he says, smiling, leaning an inch closer. "But I think you're a terrible liar."

I burn, but I'm not a team publicist so I can fight with players. I'm a team publicist so I can fight for them. I swallow down my ire, and say, "It's a good thing you stopped by actually. I've been meaning to connect with you. I'm thinking about putting together a promo event with a local animal rescue once we're back in San Francisco. And I thought, how adorable would it be if we had the big, bad goalie posing with a little kitten?"

Max will hate that for ruining his icy image. He loves it when the other teams think he's an unapproachable dick. Well, guess what? He is.

"Does that work for you?" I ask.

He steps closer. So close I catch another hint of the Midnight Flame. Only this time, it's mixed with his skin. It's muskier, darker, sexier. More virile, and it sends a rush of heat down my belly as he drawls out my last name. "Rosewood." He says it like he's playing with me, ready to pounce. "Good thing I love kittens."

Damn him. I want to stomp my foot, but I'd never give him the satisfaction. "Wonderful. When I think of you I think of kittens. And don't you forget to put it in your secret journal of good things that might happen some day, 'kay?"

"I'll be making an entry tonight, alone in my bed wearing only my black boxer briefs," he says dryly, as he grabs his bag. Then, without a smirk or a scowl, he wheels it to the door. "Enjoy the bralette, Rosewood."

I can't let him get the last word in. "Lambert!"

He turns my way. "Yes?"

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I tilt my head. "Where's my cake? It sounded so good."

His eyes narrow as he draws in a sharp breath. Then

his gaze drifts to the bag he returned, and he asks, a little strangled, "Got a hot date here?"

Like I'm going to tell him. I bob a shoulder. "I don't wear my bralette and tell."

He grabs the door handle. "Shame. I was about to send you the birthday cake."

My mouth waters. I want birthday cake. But I want the satisfaction of not revealing that the lingerie is for me and only for me. I wave happily to him. "I guess I'll order it myself for my company and me."

His eyes flash with something almost feral, then he huffs out an annoyed goodnight, and leaves.

Heart beating too fast, I shut the door, catching one last hint of his fading cologne. Max Lambert is the bane of my existence and if I could wish for one thing this season, it'd be to never have to deal with him again.

If only wishes came true.

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3

PRETTY AND POWERFUL

Everly

As I pull on the bralette the next morning, I try not to think about its misadventures last night. Like a twelve-year-old might, did Max slingshot it across his room for fun? Toss it up and down in the air for kicks? Inspect it like it was an item in a curio shop? Or just laugh at me for wanting something like this?

Something extravagant. Something pretty.

I believe in splurging on underthings but I have my reasons. Ones he'll never know. Especially since he assumed I must have sexy lingerie for a man. *Please.* My reasons have nothing to do with a hot date.

But as I adjust the bottom of the cherry-red lace bralette, I picture his big hands on the soft lace and I unexpectedly shiver. What an annoying reaction to an unbidden image. I squeeze my eyes shut to get rid of it, but that does nothing to erase the image of Max touching my lingerie, or the chill that rushes through me.

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I open my eyes and shake my head in frustration, then pluck at the left strap. Maybe I should just retire this bralette. I don't need the reminder every time I wear it of a man I once stupidly crushed on when I was a reporter. Before I worked for the team. Then, when I stuck a phone recorder in his face post-game, he'd toss me a useful comment or two, offering something fun for my network —*what can I say about all those saves? Sometimes you just get lucky*. He was friendly then. He's an enemy now.

And yet the fucker still makes my skin tingle. Why am I wired to be attracted to men who don't give me the time of day?

Nope. Don't answer that, brain.

But rather than get lost in my thoughts of all the things I need to change about myself, I wiggle the strap around a little bit more, lifting it gingerly over the scar cutting across my left shoulder. As my fingers skim the raised, reddish-pink skin, a familiar image flickers through my mind—a painful one and I wince, feeling the inexorable pull of time. The way it wants to swallow me into that evening three years ago.

But rather than let it, I fight back. Rooting myself to the here and now, I take the opportunity to catalog my surroundings. How does the wall look? Beige. What about the floor? The creme-colored carpet has a diamond pattern on it. How many windows are there? Three, and then beyond the glass is Mount Rainier, rising up, steady, strong, powerful.

With that strength in me, I cross the room to the full-length mirror, hanging by the door. Time for the hardest parts of the getting ready ritual. The last thing I do before I leave every morning for work, whether at home or on the road.

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I look.

I'm wearing black slacks and a bralette. My arms are toned. My body is tight. My legs are strong.

I look pretty and powerful, I tell myself. I say it out loud anyway. "You're pretty and powerful." Maybe one day I'll believe it.

I turn sideways and gaze at the jagged row of scars that travel from my shoulder down across my back to my hip, cutting zigzags into my skin. Most are pale, faded over time, but they still mark a map on my body. Some are mean, refusing to go quietly into the night. Together, they are all a story told in one act of what happened one horrible night.

I am pretty and powerful.

I return to the bed and grab the shirt I left on it. Then, with a simple silver gray blouse I cover up the lingerie that makes me feel like I'm more than these scars. When I do the last button, it's hidden. No one would know I'm the kind of woman who doesn't simply like wearing pretty things—but I need to.

Max doesn't know. And he never will.

I leave my hotel room so I can head to the lobby to meet up with one of our centers, Miles Falcon. Miles is from Seattle, and we're going to meet with a local sports talk podcaster, who I pitched doing a feature piece on one of our players from the Pacific Northwest. The podcaster —a persistent and affable guy named Ian Walker—liked my idea, but kept asking for our star goalie too, who grew up here before moving to the Bay Area as a teenager. I kept saying *sorry he's not available.*

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There's a coffee shop-slash-recording studio right across from the Seattle team's arena, and the shop hosts several podcasters, including some sports-centric ones

that draw live audiences. The guy who runs the whole coffee shop-slash-podcast setup—his name is Joe—has emailed me a couple times to let me know there's a full house this morning. The place holds about seventy-five. "They better not heckle my star center," I said to him in my last email.

As I head to the elevator, I spot Joe's reply on my phone. "Fans'll be fans," he writes, but there's a winky face, so that's good. Plus, Miles is a veteran who's been playing for ten years so he won't be bothered by a rowdy crowd member if one speaks up.

After I push the button for the lobby, another email lands on my phone from Ian. *Last minute, but I had this idea! We do this segment on Five Fun Places to Go in the PNW. Would Max do that? It's not even hockey talk. I promise I won't ask about that game.*

Hope really does spring eternal. And maybe it does in me too. My boss would be thrilled if Max started talking to the media more, especially in a feature-style piece. It's a low-risk way for him to get back out there, and the powers that be have been telling me for months to keep asking him to chat with the press now and then, especially in safe forums like this. I send Max a cheery text. I don't even sass him. I opt only for directness.

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Everly: This would be such a great chance to make a rare appearance in a controlled environment. He's not going to ask about that game—just about your favorite places here. We'll do it at the Pick Me Up coffee shop right across from the arena. You can join in at the end, and you can even talk about your favorite cat café in Seattle. C'mon, you know you have one.

His reply comes quickly.

Max: I do. I'm there right now. There's a calico rescue cat draped around my neck, and she refuses to budge. Which means I won't be able to make it over to the coffee shop in time. Shame.

I roll my eyes, then drop the upbeat attitude for a few seconds as the elevator chugs down.

Everly: If I had a dollar for every excuse of yours…

Max: What would you do with all that dough?

Everly: I'd have enough for a lifetime supply of blowouts from my stylist Aubrey.

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I wish I could say I don't understand his reasons but the thing is—I do. I get that we all have secrets and scars we don't want anyone to see.

* * *

The coffee shop is massive, even by Seattle standards, and this city worships its beans. Pick Me Up started as a college radio station several years ago, then expanded into podcasts recently, and now has a state-of-the-art studio, a dais with comfy chairs for interviews, and, of course, coffee by the IV drip. As Miles grabs an espresso, the fans filter in, some of them wearing gear for the Seattle team, some for the Sea Dogs, and most just in hoodies and jeans. I'm by Miles's side the whole time, and as he downs his drink, Joe emerges from behind the counter. He's in his late thirties, sports a goatee, and has warm brown eyes. He looks like he never sees the sun, which is probably true here in this city.

He smiles a little awkwardly when he sees me. "Good to see you again, Everly. Would love to show you the setup if you have time. We've done some cool stuff with the space."

"Sure. That would be great," I say, since it can't hurt to be nice to the guy who hosts so many sports shows from here.

"Come find me when you're done. I'll be ready."

"I will," I say.

He returns to the counter. As the fans fill the seats in front of the dais, I snag a chair off to the side. Miles and Ian take the seats on the stage in front of two standing mics set on a table. Once the interview begins, I answer

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emails quietly on my tablet but keep my ears trained on the conversation as Ian chats affably with Miles about playing in his hometown. It's an easy conversation and after twenty minutes, Ian asks him his five fun places to go in the area—the question he also wanted to ask Max. I grit my teeth. Would it be that hard to answer those?

After a thoughtful pause, Miles rattles off a hiking trail he likes, the Hello Robin cookie shop in Capitol Hill, anywhere at all in the entire region but The Gum Wall in Pike Place Market, Snoqualmie Falls, and then, with a happy sigh, he says, "And Dick's."

I sit up straighter, my ears pricked.

Ian nods, a friendly grin coasting across his weathered ebony complexion. "Right on. Love that place. You all do too, don't you?" he asks the audience, and they hoot in agreement, nodding heads, shouting *hell yeah.*

Oh, right. Dick's is the drive-in fast-food chain here that the locals love to drop into casual convo. From the stage, Miles looks to me, sliding a hand through his floppy hair to push it off his forehead. "Everly, you ever had them? Their fries are next level. Back me up here, Ian."

A stocky guy in a ball cap jerks his gaze to me, then shouts at me from the front row. "Falcon is right. You gotta eat a bag of dicks, lady."

Lady. It's such an annoying thing men can say, but I fasten on a brighter smile. "I will take that under advisement."

Miles turns back to Ian, intensity in his eyes. "When they opened one up in Bellevue, the local paper said, *The town welcomes Dick's with open mouths*."

Another guy, this one with a Seattle jersey, barks out, "Fact: dick jokes never go out of style."

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I might beg to differ. But since Ian has the crowd under control, I keep my head down as they wrap up with zero heckles. I seriously don't get why Max can't do this. It was...painless. Miles and Ian chat briefly, then Miles hops off the dais, shakes some hands, signs some autographs, and finds me a few minutes later. He points his thumb toward the door. "Thanks for setting that up. I should hit the weight room for some cardio before morning skate."

"I'll stick around to talk to Ian and Joe, but thank you again for doing this," I say.

"Thank you again for the opportunity," Miles says, then takes off, and I join Ian at the dais as he breaks down his podcast gear, folding up the legs of the mic stands.

"I'll post that interview before the game. We get the best traction then," Ian says as the crowd thins, most of them filtering out.

"Awesome. I appreciate that."

"Nah, I appreciate you making this happen. Shame we couldn't get Max, but maybe next time," he says, as he tucks the mics into a sturdy silver case.

I don't have the heart to say *maybe never* so I reply, "I hope so."

As he rolls up the cables, he stops suddenly mid-roll. "Oh, did you hear?"

The words *did you hear* never lead anywhere positive. I glance around, making sure no one's within earshot. "Did I hear what?" I ask with false bravado, pretending this will be good news when my gut already tells me it's not.

Ian flashes an apologetic smile. "Lyra Raine's in town."

My smile takes a dive straight into the Puget Sound. "She is?" I scratch out.

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A sigh of resignation comes from the podcaster. "She's here for a surprise show tonight. Although I guess her

concert's not a surprise anymore," he says. "She dropped it on social this morning."

This is bad. This is really bad. The entertainment press will leach onto Max after the game, trying to corner him, to find out if this means he's back together with the pop star who broke his heart more than a year ago. The press loves a second-chance romance, and they won't stop until they get a response or a rise out of him.

I'll have to run some serious interference for the goalie who hates me. "Appreciate the heads-up, Ian," I say, grateful for the tip and ready to track down Max and warn him. "I should get out of here. I'll find Joe and let him know I have to take off."

The tour will have to wait.

"Take care, Everly," Ian says, then snaps his podcast case closed.

"And hey, be sure to eat a bag of dicks," I say as he heads to the door.

With a chuckle, like he can't believe what he's saying, he calls out, "And you...eat a bag of dicks yourself."

Laughing, I shoo him off, then spin around and beeline to the coffee counter. As I walk, I tap out a message to my counterpart on the Seattle team, asking for some help tonight with security. When I reach the counter, I look up again, tucking my phone away. Joe's serving a customer, and once he's done, he flashes me an awkward smile. "Can I show you around?"

"Actually," I say, frowning apologetically, "I've got a pressing thing I need to take care of."

He frowns too. "Shoot. I'm sorry to hear that." In no time, he moves around the counter, leaving a tattooed gal with a pierced nose to handle the rest of the customers, while he comes to me, standing awfully close. I don't need

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to know what he ate for breakfast—sausage and coffee, I think.

I inch back, and now I'm the awkward one. "Me too. I was looking forward to the tour. Maybe next time."

He steps closer again, not getting the hint. "Definitely. Also, I've been expanding in San Francisco and would love to get your thoughts on that."

Hoisting up my bag higher on my shoulder, like I'm using it as a wedge to shoehorn myself a little bit of personal space, I inch away a second time. "I'm not sure how I can help, but if I can I'll do my best," I say. It's not quite a no, but I'd like it to be one without being rude.

"And maybe," he says, his lips crooking up as footsteps echo behind me, likely coffee shop customers milling about and grabbing their drinks, "I could take you out to dinner there? They might not have a bag of dicks but I'm sure we can find something good."

Well, that escalated quickly.

"I'm not sure," I begin, working on an excuse that'll be diplomatic since we sort of have a business relationship.

He slides closer, cuts in with, "It'll be fun. I promise."

But before I can say another word, a wall of a man is right next to me. Like he came out of nowhere.

He's tall and glowering as he stares at Joe like he wants to rip him apart. "She's busy that night."

Max Lambert is here, turning down the date for me.

What gives him the right to speak for me? I scrunch my brow and turn to him. "How do you know?" The question flies out of my mouth.

Max lifts a coffee cup, then takes a long, leisurely sip. When he's done, he says, "You're booked most nights." There's zero remorse for butting in—only certainty that he's done the right thing.

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I narrow my eyes at the big hockey star who's inexplicably here. "You don't know my schedule or when he's coming to town."

Max shrugs, like he's completely unfazed. "I took a guess. Bet I'm right."

I'm so shocked he'd turn down a date for me, even one I was hunting for a way to turn down myself, that I don't even know what to say next to him.

But Joe, evidently, does. He holds up his hands in surrender. Now it's his tone that's awkward as he says, "My bad. I'll let you two sort this out."

"No worries," Max says, in an offhand way. Like the guy just bumped into him on the street. That's all. "She's got a packed sked."

"I don't," I say, because he should not be turning down dates for me. I can say no myself.

But Joe is well past the rejection it seems, since he directs his gaze to Max. "Don't take this the wrong way, but hope you lose tonight."

"We won't," Max says confidently as Joe gets the hell out of my space at last. He disappears behind the counter, then into the back of the shop, out of sight.

I swivel back to Max. He's got another cup of coffee in his other hand, probably for one of the guys. But other than that—he's standard Max. Inscrutable and broody. I flap my hands. "What was that about?"

He gives a careless shrug. "You didn't want to go out with him."

True, but that doesn't even matter. "It's not your job to turn down my dates."

"He's not your type, Everly."

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"How would you know what my type is?"

"Not that guy," he says.

He's exasperating. "Okay, I'll take the bait. Why not that guy?"

"He's a little crass. The bag of dicks thing?" he says, dismissively. "C'mon. You can do better."

I stare at him, trying to figure out what is going on with Lambert. "Why are you here?"

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4

A NICE INTENTION

Max

That's a really good question. And an easy enough one to answer. I lift my drinks. "Can't a guy get a cup of coffee or two?"

"At the place where the interview you turned down was being held?" she counters, one eyebrow raised. Fuck, she's hot when she's irritated. How is that possible? Witchcraft, I'm guessing.

I look around the massive space as if I'm seeing the exposed brick walls, the dais and the lounge chairs for the very first time. "Hate to break it to you, Everly. But it *is* a coffee shop."

"Max," she says, exasperated. "Why did you..." She waves to where that pushy dude was crowding her but then shakes her head, like she's letting go of the whole thing. "Forget it. Let's go."

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Good. The less she asks, the better. I'm not even entirely sure why I pulled that shit other than I had a

feeling he was going to ask her out since I walked in, and she doesn't need that kind of hassle in her day. From the second I stepped in here to get in line to grab a cup, his eyes were tracking her as she helped Ian pack up. He was totally unable to focus on making a latte for the customers in front of me since his gaze was lasered in on my publicist.

So yeah. I butted in. Everly barely needs a defender, but she got one anyway. "Look, if I was wrong, I'm happy to go find him and play matchmaker for ya. Maybe you two can have a nice stroll in the park and a cup of tea," I say dryly.

She heaves a sigh as we walk to the door. "No, Max. Obviously I don't need you to set up the date you already turned down for me."

"You don't want to date someone in Seattle anyway, do you?" I ask casually, grabbing the door and opening it. "I mean, aside from last night. You had company, right?"

I'm fishing. I'm totally fucking fishing.

"How would I have had time to see someone last night? With my *packed sked* and all," she says, throwing my words back to me.

"So I was helpful, then, to turn that dude down for you," I say. And I've just learned, too, that she didn't have a hot date last night, which makes me way more pleased than it should. "Bummer that you didn't get that cake from room service though."

"What goes better with working late in your hotel room on upcoming publicity plans than cake?" she asks, then quickly types something on her phone. She puts it away once we're outside the shop-slash-studio and shoots me a serious look. "Why are we having this conversation about dating?"

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That's a fair question too. I don't care who she dates. Or where she dates them. She vexes me. She pushes me. She drives me crazy. The feeling's mutual. But it was the principle of it. Some men are just pushy fuckers, and he was looking like he was veering too close to that territory.

And she deserves that answer. It's not the easy answer I gave her at first, but I should probably say it. "Because you shouldn't have to deal with that," I grumble as we head to the arena. "And before you can say it, I know you had it handled."

"I did," she says firmly. "I was going to turn him down. You didn't have to do it for me."

True. I didn't. Guess I wanted him to get the message loud and clear. "Look, I didn't like his dick joke, and he was getting in your space, and it was rude."

She whips her gaze to me, brown eyes flickering with curiosity. "You noticed that?"

"I noticed it, and I didn't like it," I say. "He looked like he was trying to touch your arm. You kept stepping away. He kept stepping closer."

"True, but he was never inappropriate."

"Good. He shouldn't fucking be," I say, breathing fumes. There's a special place in hell for men who don't listen to women. "Look, I saw the crowd of guys he courts. They're all kind of...a little crass. Shouting stupid jokes. I could tell you didn't want to be near any of them, let alone him. I took care of it. So sue me."

She chuckles, rolling her eyes too. "*So sue me*? That's your answer?"

"Well, yeah," I say as we reach the crosswalk.

While we wait, she pins me with her sharp gaze. "See, Max? You do something borderline nice, then you're kind of flippant."

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I arch a brow. "Was that nice? Not sure I'd agree."

"It was a nice intention," she says.

I shudder.

"Aww. Don't worry I won't tell anyone about your kind thoughts," she says.

"Good," I say, as the pedestrian light blinks green. We're quiet as we cross, and she seems like she's mulling something over. When we reach the other side, she tilts her head in question, her brow furrowed, like she's adding something up that doesn't quite equate. "You heard the whole thing. You were in line right as he was asking me out?"

I take the alibi she's offering—the idea that it was a coincidence. Like in a movie when the guy overhears the villain monologuing. Mostly it was. I won't let on I'd popped into the shop for a cup of coffee, but when I heard those dick jokes I hung around, keeping an eye out. Good thing. I'd figured it'd be a fan getting fresh with her instead of the owner of the shop and the podcast network. So yeah, maybe I was on patrol. Not like I'm going to tell her. She doesn't need to know I was playing the bodyguard. "Yup. Needed a morning boost. Glad I left that calico at the cat café when I did. But she was so darn cute," I say, then since I don't want any of this to seem like a big deal, I nod toward the players' entrance. "I should go join my teammates for practice. I like to give them a target they can't get past."

"Actually," she says, but her expression is soft and so is her voice, "there's something I need to discuss with you."

That sounds serious. "Let me guess. I'm in trouble again."

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"Would that even matter?"

"Probably not," I reply before she pulls me aside outside the arena entrance to a quieter area.

She moves closer to me now, so close I'm distracted by the whoosh of her hair in that high ponytail, the way it swishes as she moves into my space. "Lyra's in town. I don't know if you know."

The blood drains from my face. "Seriously?" I croak out.

It's not my ex I don't want to see. I'm so over the woman I was going to propose to.

It's the attention that comes with her. The attention that comes to me. I'd give my left nut if it would erase from existence the breakup song she wrote about me. The one that was a lie. But, then again, I like both nuts a whole helluva lot. Maybe I'd give up my spleen to make "Surprise Me" disappear from every playlist in the world and public memory.

"She's doing a surprise show," Everly adds.

"How nice," I mutter.

"I've got it covered," she says, then holds up a finger. Quickly, she scans her phone, then looks up. "I checked with security for the Seattle team. There's a back exit out of the locker room that'll help you avoid the press. I can let the team bus know what time and to look for you, and you should be able to leave unnoticed after the game."

Wow. I'm seriously grateful for that. And for what's unsaid. She won't even ask me to talk to the media tonight. "Thanks. Appreciate it," I say, then I square my shoulders. "I do."

"And don't worry. This changes nothing." She narrows her eyes and holds up a finger. "You get one night off from my requests. And then it is on again."

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"I would expect nothing less."

She's made a one-upmanship-style approach of asking me to talk to the press after every single game even though I've made it crystal clear I don't do media.

This is merely a brief detente—not an end to our battle. Then, because she might have noticed I'm holding two cups, I thrust one her way. "For some reason, they gave me two London fog lattes," I say, then offer one of the Earl Grey concoctions to her. "You like them, right?"

Curiosity flickers across her eyes, and she studies me for a beat, her lips curving up. "I do."

"Cool," I say, waggling the cup. "It's yours then."

She takes it. "Thanks. They're my favorite."

"Even better," I say, as if I didn't know that already.

Once inside, she heads one way and I go the other way to the locker room, then hit the ice, the one place where no one really bothers me.

* * *

That evening, the Seattle winger barrels toward me, swift, determined. But I'm not in the mood to let any goals in.

Nothing to do but deflect the puck.

A minute later, one of their guys is flying around the back of the net, flipping the little black disc to a forward who aims then shoots.

Not on my watch. I drop to my knees, my leg pad blocking the shot.

Better luck next time.

And the next time, the puck flies at me and I knock it down, where it lands harmlessly on the ice.

For another period, they come at me, as they should. But I'm feeling impenetrable tonight.

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Imagine that.

By the time the game clock winds down, I swear every player in their lineup has tried and failed to take a shot.

When the buzzer blares, I've nabbed a shutout.

My closest friends on the team, Wesley Bryant and Asher Callahan, skate over to me, clapping me on the back as we head off the ice.

In the tunnel, I rip off my helmet, and as promised, Everly's waiting at the end. She gives a crisp nod, and I nod right back, then move on as she asks some of the other guys to talk to the media. Technically, all players are supposed to be accessible.

Twenty minutes later, I'm dressed in my suit and out of there, earbuds in, an online course playing that I really need to focus on as I head for the team bus that'll take us to the airport.

But when I hop on it, the driver is nodding her head, rocking out to "Surprise Me." It's so loud, I can hear it even as the instructor in my ears rattles on about navigational tools used in the eighteenth century.

"Can you shut that off?" I ask.

"Lyra? No way. She's the best," the driver says, but then her eyes widen, her lips part, and something must click. "Oh. Shit. You're…"

Yeah, I'm the guy who inspired the break-up song that America's sweetheart sent to the top of the charts. Only that's not the way things went down.

"Whatever," I mutter.

Doesn't matter. I head to the back of the bus, slump down and listen to the class so I can take a quiz later this week to see how much I've memorized. I don't miss the way things used to be. Really, I don't.

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* * *

The next morning, I'm back home in jeans and a Henley, about to head out to see Garrett at the kebab place. I'll be skipping today's team yoga class for this, but I've got the distinct impression that this meeting with him will be more important than one with the yoga mat. I'm heading downstairs, phone in hand, when a text from him lands.

> Best we have this meeting at the office, Max.

Doesn't take a genius to know bad news is coming my way.

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5

THE LIKEABILITY QUOTIENT

Max

What do you wear to an execution? I want to make a good lasting impression and go out with a bang, so I trot back upstairs and grab my best dress shirt from the closet—a light blue one along with a pair of black slacks. I change quickly, trying my best not to obsess on what might happen in my agent's office.

Dun dun dun...

With my best ready-for-the-guillotine attire on, I head downstairs again and stop in the hallway with a groan. A little silver tabby with white paws is hanging from the blinds on the window overlooking Pacific Street but trying to hoist herself higher. She's determined to reach the ceiling for fuck-all-knows-what reason. I hustle over to Athena and do my best to untangle the kitten from the blinds without losing an eye.

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Not sure that's likely, since she is stronger than ten men. "How are you four pounds and a hellion already?" I

ask, extricating her from the wood slats, then setting her on the floor, where she shoots me a look of utter disdain, then jumps right back up on the blinds, hurling her way up like a ninja warrior.

"Let's do this again," I say, then remove her once more. "Try to be a good girl and not climb to the ceiling for the rest of the day," I tell the kitten I've been fostering for three whole hours.

The rescue volunteer dropped her off bright and early.

As I set her down on the floor, Athena attacks my forearm, wrapping her little ones around me. Carefully, so the she-devil won't scratch me, I unwrap her from my wrist. "Fine, have it your way. Climb the blinds," I tell her because cats are going to be cats.

They're going to do whatever the hell they want and fuck you.

I get it. I really do.

But instead she scurries down the hall, done with the find-the-ceiling plan. With the terror off to terrorize a lampshade or a mug, I head to the garage and hop into my car, where I tune back into the online course. Something I'm taking to keep my brain sharp, but it also keeps my mind off the blade that's coming down on my neck *any minute*.

Fifteen minutes later, I arrive at Garrett's agency just off the Embarcadero, a prime location since it's near both one of the city's baseball parks and a football stadium. I nab a spot in the underground lot easily. That'll probably be the last thing that goes my way today. Maybe I'm a pessimist but I like to think I'm a realist. The world is a dumpster fire, so it's best to meet the world on its own terms. Bonus? With my attitude, I won't get blindsided. Been there, done that. Don't want to get blindsided again.

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I go to the parking garage elevator, then I hit the button for my agent's office. When the elevator dings open on the seventh floor, I turn down the hall, making my way to the corner suite. The Garrett Emerson Sports Management Agency is a force. My agent left one of the big agencies a few years ago to branch out on his own, and the dude can pull. His client list is impressive across the major pro sports, as well as the Olympic ones.

I push open the sleek, modern doors. Glass walls reflect the sunlight on this October day in San Francisco, polished wooden floors gleam underfoot, and sports memorabilia is tastefully displayed around the waiting room.

The air is filled with a faint scent of leather and success.

The second the receptionist sees me, he flashes a courteous smile. He doesn't look a day over twenty-one. "So glad you could make it on short notice, Mr. Lambert," he says, ready and eager to help. "I'll let Mr. Emerson know you're here."

"Thanks," I say, but before he can even dial the boss, Garrett's already here in the lobby, a warm smile on his face as he strides over to me and extends a hand in greeting. "I see you dressed like you're meeting with the team owner," he says wryly, knowing me too well.

"I can read subtext," I say.

He claps me on the back. "Let's head to the conference room and talk business."

And he doesn't deny that I'm reading his text tone correctly. I follow Garrett down a corridor lined with framed jerseys and signed tennis rackets and golf clubs. There's even a volleyball in a glass case from one of his gold medalists in that sport.

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Are these other clients as difficult as I am? But I dismiss the thought. I brought him a cup a few years back. Doesn't get much better than that. We pass by offices bustling with other agents making deals over the phone. The conference room we enter is just as swank as the rest of the office—a long mahogany table surrounded by comfortable leather chairs.

I stop in the doorway though, tilting my head. We're not alone. A young woman I don't know is here. She shoots me a cheerful smile that lights up her curious green eyes. She's with my financial advisor too—John Saito. He played baseball in Japan, where he's from, for a brief stint. Love the straight shooter and his investment strategies, but I'm not sure what to make of him showing up. Plus, there's a whiteboard in the corner, with a sheet of paper covering it.

What the hell have I just walked into?

Garrett gestures to the woman. "This is Rosario Valdez, who's in our branding division. And you know John."

"Nice to meet you, Rosario," I say warily as I shake her hand. I'm not used to meeting with the whole crew, but then again, it's been a long-ass while since Garrett called me to his office. Come to think of it, has he ever?

A sense of foreboding wraps tighter around me as I take a seat. I'm beginning to wish I hadn't skipped the team yoga class for this meeting, since I bet I'll be needing something to chill the fuck out after this meet-and-greet is over.

"Good to see you, Max," John says, but I'm wondering —*is it?* "Do you want water, coffee, tea?"

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He doesn't offer me an energy drink. It feels like a purposeful omission. "I'm good," I say, and the tension in

the room is obvious in their smiles and their graciousness.

Not one to mince words, I sit back in the chair and say heavily, "Just get it over with. Thrive dropped me. I've put that together already."

Garrett's smile of acknowledgement is at least kind. "Max," he begins as he sits, his tone more serious than I've ever heard it. "Thrive has decided not to renew their sponsorship with you."

Even though I knew it was coming, my lungs feel crushed, like I'm gasping for air. Thrive had been my biggest sponsor for years, providing not only financial support but also a sense of legitimacy in the sports marketing world. Without them, I'm going to lose more than just a paycheck.

It's weird that you can brace yourself for something, that you can read the writing on the wall, and yet it's still a gut punch when it happens. But I don't want to let on how disappointed I am. When you let down your guard, that's when you get sucker punched again. "Okay," I say, trying to keep my voice steady. "Any reason in particular?"

Well, besides the obvious. I'm one of the most hated men in America. That's what happens when the world thinks you broke up with America's sweetheart.

Garrett exhales, then steeples his hands together. "It comes down to visibility, Max. You're not as active on social media as they would like. You're not seen at events or engaging with fans. You're not in the game highlights on ESPN."

I scoff. "I beg to differ. I *was* the highlight of the game last night."

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"Yes, a shutout is impressive. It's even better when you give a comment to the media," he adds, then with a *hate to*

mention this smile, he adds, "Also, you are *kind of* supposed to be available to talk to the press after games."

I give him a look. "You know what happened when the press tried to talk to me last year. It was *not* about hockey." It was all about the split with Lyra and about her new guy.

"We know," Garrett says. "And the front office is certainly aware of the media attention that came with your last romance."

"The breakup," I correct, since there's no need to be coy here. "You can say it out loud. I do know we've split."

Garrett moves on with the smoothness of a good agent. "And the front office understood that a lot of things happened—"

"A lot of things happened? That is the fuck-all euphemism of the century. The press showed up at my sister's house."

Garrett nods, still the picture of calm. "Yes, and the front office understood you needed a break. And then, after that, they tried to help by having their PR ask you to do features and soft pieces."

Features—like the thing Everly asked me to do in Seattle. I don't mention that though. He probably already knows I refused. Dude probably knows what I ate for breakfast too. I stay quiet, waiting for him to keep going.

"But it's been over a year," he adds. Translation: the team's patience is running out. "And it'd be good for you to get out there. Give a softball comment now and then after a game."

"Like, *I'm just focused on helping the team*," I say, rolling my eyes.

Rosario clears her throat, beaming, as she chimes in. "Actually, that's a great start. Our market research shows that a simple team-centric comment to the press can go a

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long way to endearing the public to a professional athlete."

"Long enough to make them forget a pop star wrote a song about you that was dead wrong?" I counter. Not to mention *the fight* that came before that too.

Garrett levels me with a serious stare. "Not gonna lie—it'll take some work, but it'd be a start."

"You want me to tell everyone, too, why we split? Does the world need to know the truth of that?"

"No, Max," he says, deadly serious. "It doesn't do you any good to air dirty laundry. But it doesn't do you any good to be so reclusive about yourself and the sport either. As it is, your reluctance is sending you backward."

I sigh heavily. "There's a reason I don't talk to the press," I say. And it has little to do with that song. Little to do with *the fight.* It has everything to do with what happened a week or so later when the press tried to track me down at my sister's house after the fight. I burn with anger as I remember that night more than a year ago.

"We know," John cuts in, his voice even more no-nonsense than Garrett's. "But still."

Then I get pissed. Like I would if I missed a save in a game. "This is bullshit from Thrive. I've promoted their product in every way possible. I did promo shoots and commercials."

Garrett nods solemnly. "I know, Max. But the numbers don't lie. Your marketability has decreased significantly. And they aren't the only ones who have moved on."

I bristle at the reminder. I lost Power Kicks, a sneaker company. I lost the watchmaker Victoire. Hell, I couldn't even get a sponsorship with Seductive, the company that owns the cologne I actually wear every day.

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The last year's been a long, slow march away from me.

I'm nuclear to brands. But Thrive felt like a lifeboat, consistently keeping me afloat.

"We have nothing compared to the other season," John adds.

The one *before* I discovered Lyra's lies. The one before the world blamed me for her lies. Lies she spun in her song of heartbreak. "Surprise Me" in-fucking-deed.

"And it's affecting your likeability quotient," Rosario puts in.

Frustration bubbles inside me. "What the hell is a likeability quotient?"

"It's a measure of how appealing you are to audiences, Max," Rosario chimes in gently, popping up from her chair and heading to the whiteboard. She rips off the paper covering it and shows a thermometer drawing, with only a small section at the bottom colored in red. "And right now, yours has gone way down."

I scoff. "That sounds like a BS marketing term they use in ad agencies in TV shows. Or like a sign at a bank that's trying to raise funds for something."

Garrett nods, giving me that much. "Maybe, but the thing is, market research matters. Brands use it. They rely on it. Guys like Carter Hendrix?" he says, naming the star receiver for the San Francisco Renegades. "Very high likability quotient."

I groan. Love the guy. He's a friend. But of course he's beloved. "He took his best friend on dates to farmers' markets and chocolate shops and shot videos for a dating app. Of course everyone loves him."

"So you understand how the likeability quotient works," John says, his tone precise, ready to move on.

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Wait. Hold the hell on. "Are you about to suggest I fake