



One Goal in Mind (Needing to Score #3)

Author: Irene Bahrd

Category: Sport

Description: After an incredible night with a flirtatious hockey goalie, Scarlett North returns home to Québec to a new physical therapy position with his rival team. Between her new job, her brother being one of his coaches, and thousands of miles between them, being friends with Russell Campbell is the safest—and only—option.

Except, Russ has one goal... and he's playing for keeps.

When there's an altercation with a player, Russ is suspended for the remainder of the season. With his friendship with Scarlett the only thing left to lose, he's ready to finally admit his feelings for her, taking a shot at something more with his best friend.

One Goal in Mind is a deliciously spicy romantic comedy novella, intended for mature audiences. Just because it's a romcom, doesn't mean you should forget to check your content warnings

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PROLOGUE — RUSS

“ W e’ve been through this,” I huff. “It was just an accident. I don’t have anger issues.”

My friends in my online group therapy sessions don’t understand. I never would’ve tried to slice his throat with my skate if he wasn’t touching my girl. Consequences. The whole ‘fuck around and find out’ thing.

Except, admittedly, I may have taken it too far.

On top of my suspension, they have added individual therapy on top of the group I meet with. A year ago, I chose an online group with three other athletes—Ronan, an Irish footballer; Will, an American Football quarterback; and Lucas, an Australian rugby hooker. These men have become more than men I attend therapy with; they’re friends. Our meetings are once a week on Mondays, but we talk daily in group texts.

Our therapist has me recount the incident for what feels like the hundredth time, and everyone’s sick of hearing it; all of them are preoccupied. Ronan’s smirking at something he’s reading away from the video call. Deflection is my specialty and I ask, “What’s so fucking hilarious, Ronan?”

“Nothing,” he rushes out, eyes wide.

I continue, “As I was saying??—”

“Actually, it’s not nothing. I have something I’d like to share,” he steamrolls over me,

and I've never been so grateful for his admission. "I've met someone."

Intrigued, I ask, "Met someone?"

"I suppose I'm using 'met' loosely; we've been talking for over a year. This past month, things have been shifting between us to the point that I haven't dated... anyone. No one interests me. I know this isn't meant for dating advice, but I don't know what to fucking do!" He takes a deep breath, raking his hand through his hair. "I'm like a damn teenager with a crush."

Sadly, I can relate; I'm in love with a woman I can't have. Though to say I have a crush on Scarlett would be the understatement of the century.

Vicky, our therapist, interjects. "Ronan, we've been over this. We'd like to keep our f-bombs to a minimum here. This is a safe space. Russ, can we pause on your incident and circle back to it?" I nod, reining in my amusement and grateful the spotlight is off of me. "Ronan, feel free to tell us about this woman."

"How do you know it's a woman?" Lucas asks curiously. For a man who dominates the pitch, I'm always surprised when he chimes in with his calm, quiet voice. His question doesn't surprise me; he falls in love with people for who they are, not giving a fuck if they identify as a man, woman, or non-binary—and this man falls often .

"True, a valid point, Lucas," Vicky agrees.

Ronan rolls his eyes and groans, but it doesn't feel directed at Lucas. He's only here based on a mandate from his football league and keeps to himself most days. "Yes, it's a woman. She's my mate's ex."

Oh, shit! This is worse than I thought!

“No, nope, nooooo!” Will barks. “Run away, change your name, change your phone number.” I couldn’t agree more. He’s in the same predicament as I am: forced into therapy to save our careers and have feelings for women we can’t have. Will’s one of the top quarterbacks in American football and was traded to New York after an altercation with a New England linebacker. The PR manager who helped him change his image is also the woman he’s been pining after.

“It’s not like that,” Ronan insists. “They dated over a decade ago, and we’re just friends. She interviewed me when I played for Ireland in the World Cup, and we kept in touch. She’s smart, fucking beautiful...” Vicky gives Ronan a look of warning at the curse, and he blows out a long breath. “In the last month, we’ve been... flirting? At least I am. She’s coming to Ireland in a few weeks for work. What should I do?”

Vicky smiles with a nod and offers, “You could ask her on a date when she’s there, after discussing it with your friend? But as far as relationships are concerned, I’d highly recommend that any potential partners you gentlemen court are privy to the fact you’re attending therapy. Don’t wait until eight months into the relationship to discuss your mental health.”

“I don’t have mental health issues,” I growl, folding my arms over my chest.

“We know,” Will, Lucas, and Ronan say in unison, and I can’t help but chuckle.

“I say go for it,” Luc suggests with a wide grin. “What’s the worst that can happen? Single mums are hot.”

“When was the last time you dated, Luc?” Will asks, and I’m also curious; he hasn’t mentioned anyone new recently.

“It’s been a while,” he admits. “I think I need a change. The new Irish rugby league has been interested in me for a while. I should move to Cork, then Ronan’s girl can

match me with one of her friends.” He winks, and Ronan cocks an eyebrow, then they both burst into laughter. “What do you say, mate?” Ronan smirks but doesn’t reply.

We discuss Will’s predicament with the PR manager. He makes her out to be an ice queen, but she’s holding him accountable for the first time in his career. Vicky wraps up our call, and as soon as I close out of my laptop, I send a text to Will.

Stop being an ass to Elle. She’s doing her job.

Will

Of course you would take her side.

She’s not like Scarlett, she’s a fucking pain in my ass.

True. She would totally peg you if given the chance.

Fuck off.

Respectfully.

I chuckle, pocketing my phone. There’s a good chance it’s all a front and he’s secretly falling for Elle. If he’s half as in love with her as I am with Scarlett, he’s fucking screwed.

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CHAPTER 1

SCARLETT

EIGHT MONTHS EARLIER

“N o means no,” I snap to the man on my left as I push him off me.

Man is generous. Asshole is too nice. There is no appropriate word for this poor excuse for a human who thinks he can kiss me without warning. Is fuckface also too nice? I feel like it is.

Yes, it’s the obligatory kiss cam while we wait for the Zamboni, but I don’t know anything about this man—except he claims he’s the uncle of one of the players—and I’m now regretting coming to this stupid game. It was supposed to be a fun night out for my friend’s birthday, with free tickets my brother reserved for us. I’d rather be anywhere but here; I barely follow hockey, and now have someone trying to make out with me.

“Come on! It’s for the?—“

Slam!

The goalie bangs one on the divider, the loud thud startling everyone. He rips off his helmet as he shouts, “She said no!”

Eyes wide and mouth agape, the makeout king to my left slinks into his seat. Of

course, the whole thing makes the jumbotron. Whistles and applause fill the stadium, and the cameramen finally move on to an actual couple. My heart is still stuck in my throat, but Mr. Goalie smirks and offers a wink. I can't help biting my lip as I watch him skate over to talk to one of the coaches.

Campbell. Number thirty-five. The Train.

“Scar! I saw the whole thing!” Rachel laughs, finally returning from her excursion. The man to my left is too embarrassed to stay, and I couldn't care less where he's going, as long as his musk cologne is out of my space.

“Calisse,” I mutter under my breath, then clear my throat to ask, “What whole thing?”

“Our hot goalie coming to defend your honor.” She hands me a beer, but I don't think I can stomach it. “Do you know him?”

“No,” I reply with a quick shake of my head, then brave a quick sip of the beer. It barely touches my lips before I have to set it down—hops and I aren't friends.

“Then why does he keep looking over here?”

“He's not.” I glance over again. It has to be a coincidence, but with most of his face covered, it's hard to tell if he's looking at me or just in our direction.

From the small glimpses I've seen of him tonight, he's actually quite attractive—for an athlete. It's a shame my brother is one of the assistant coaches; he'd frown upon me going home with one of his players. I check where I saw my brother last, finding his eyes on me. His gaze is murderous, though he could be pissed at the man who tried to maul me.

“It’s too bad you’re not wearing his number,” she teases. “Could’ve been fate.” We’re both wearing generic Caribou tees I bought from an online fan shop a week ago, a far cry from a numbered jersey. There is no fate here.

As the second period begins, we’re only up one-zero. As a physical therapist for a soccer team, I’m used to low-scoring games, but this is boring. No fights, no injuries, no close calls. I’m only grateful the douchebag from earlier hasn’t returned to his seat.

The next hour is more of the same, except we’re now up two-zero, with Campbell deflecting everything coming his way. There’s only three minutes left; the game is essentially over. I tell Rachel I’m going to use the restroom before the rush and that I’ll meet her at the top when it’s over. After what has to be one of the most underwhelming games I’ve seen, we make our way to the team store—something about her wanting a ‘Beaver’ jersey. I don’t recall anyone with the name Beaver playing tonight, but I’m also not familiar with the team’s roster.

As we’re browsing, a television broadcasts post-game highlights on a few screens. The volume’s off, but I read the captions as Campbell addresses the press.

The woman from the kiss cam—how do you know her?

I don’t, but my parents have always taught me that if you see something, say something. She was uncomfortable, and I would’ve wanted someone to do the same for a friend.

Sources say the woman is Scarlett North, the sister of your assistant coach.

Sources? What sources? How the hell do they know who I am?

Campbell’s eyes widen, and it takes him a moment to respond.

I had no idea. I suppose it'll get me out of cardio with Coach North at four tomorrow morning.

Rachel slides up beside me and coos, "Oh, look, it's your new boyfriend." I roll my eyes, but this Campbell guy is sinfully gorgeous, and my stomach has been doing little flips ever since my kiss cam debacle. "Here. I got you something."

Rach hands me a bag and it only takes a quick peek to see what she bought me. "Where am I supposed to wear this?" I chuckle, shaking my head. "It's not as if I can wear it to a game back home."

"Why not? I'm sure they play Québec City at some point." She shrugs. "Then again, I doubt there are many Vancouver fans there. They might kick you out."

"They probably would," I laugh. "It's your birthday! I should be buying you a gift, not the other way around."

She waves me off and we make our way out of the shop. "I showed the man my tits and he gave me a discount." There's a fifty-percent chance she's telling the truth.

"Well, if that's the case, you should've bought two."

"I did!" Rachel reaches into her other bag, pulling out a jersey. "I wouldn't dare wear your boyfriend's number, so I got Beav's. He's a defenseman. You do know what a defenseman is, right?"

"Yes," I lie. While I enjoy watching a game once in a while, I was the girl with her nose in a book when I was growing up, all the way through college. When I do see a game in person or on TV, I watch more for the fights than the game itself. "And he's not my boyfriend! I've never even met him." I smack her shoulder, and she giggles before putting on the oversized jersey. She gestures for me to do the same; I

reluctantly shrug it on. “What do you say we get out of here and have a real dinner, maybe a properly made cocktail? A burger sounds amazing.”

“I know just the place.”

CHAPTER 2

RUSS

C oach North's sister. Fuck. Me.

I'm not easily distracted during a game, but she reminded me of the girls I chased in college—dark brown hair tied up in some kind of haphazard bun, plastic-framed glasses, and didn't appear to give a fuck about the game. At one point, I swear she was reading a book on her phone or ereader. My best guess is that she's a librarian or a coffee shop owner. My fucking kryptonite. I spotted her early in the first period, and couldn't take my eyes off her. When the man who was clearly not with her tried to make a move, I snapped.

And now I have a name. Except... she's off-limits.

Once I'm in my car, I can't help myself, and pull up the internet browser on my phone for a quick search. She's listed as a physical therapist for the Québec City Titans—a soccer team I know literally nothing about. Hell, I didn't even know Québec City had a soccer team. I click on the site and scroll the staff directory until I find her. Fuck, this was a mistake. She's stunning and smart?

But luck is on my side tonight; the siren doesn't live here, and I'll likely never see her again.

I plug my phone in and start the car, when there's an incoming text from Berkeley, one of our D-men, though we all call him Beaver, Beav for short.

Beav

Are you up for going out tonight?

I'm fucking sore, but I'm starving.

Too sore for bunnies?

Honestly? Yeah.

More for me!

I shake my head, chuckling to myself, and he sends me a link to a bar a few miles away, with several beer options and burgers the size of your face. It's close to the stadium, so we'll likely be recognized, but I'd give just about anything to sink my teeth into a perfectly cooked burger right now.

Once I arrive, I spot him seated at the bar with a few open stools on either side of him. With a clap on his shoulder, I take a seat to his right. "Hey, Beav."

"Hey! What took you so long?"

The bartender slides a menu in front of me, and I thank him with a nod before replying to Beav, "There wasn't anywhere to park."

"That's why I took a rideshare."

I take a minute to peruse the menu; my stomach is already growling. After settling on a burger with mushrooms, caramelized onions, and blue cheese, I flag down the bartender. The combination should ward off anyone attempting to flirt with me.

“What’ll it be?”

“I’ll do a blue cheese burger and a stout. What do you have?”

He rattles off a few options, and I order one with a lower ABV. While I joked in the post-game interviews about skipping cardio, I won’t be, and being slightly hungover while running six miles isn’t my idea of fun.

As the bartender sets my beer in front of me and replaces Beav’s IPA, two women sit to my right, both wearing Caribou jerseys. If I keep to myself, there’s a good chance they won’t recognize me. The blonde directly next to me raises her hand to get the attention of the bartender, giggling, “Two shots of your finest tequila, fine sir. It’s my birthday!”

“I’m not drinking tequila,” her friend grumbles.

“Yes, you are.” She then asks me, “Can you tell my boring friend she should have a birthday shot with me?”

“I’m the wrong person to ask. I’m too old for shots,” I chuckle, and as I glance over at her friend, I do a double take, all of the air leaving my lungs.

Of all the bars...

Beav leans over to reply, “I’m not too old, I’ll drink hers.” Scarlett hasn’t looked up from her phone, and I can’t tear my eyes away from her. Beav finally notices why I’m tongue-tied like a damn schoolboy and laughs, “Hey! It’s kiss cam girl.”

Scarlett finally looks over at us, her cheeks flushing a gorgeous shade of dark pink. “Oh, um, yes. That’s me.”

“You had this one all worked up today.” He nudges my shoulder, and I’m officially in hell.

The blonde gasps. “I’m so sorry I didn’t recognize you both!” She smacks Scarlett’s arm and whispers to her, but I can still make out her saying, “Your boyfriend is here.”

Boyfriend?

Scarlett having a boyfriend is the best possible solution, but my mind conjures up an image of her having an intimate dinner or cuddling on the couch with some asshole. I don’t even know this girl, but an irrational pang of jealousy settles in my gut.

I blow out a long breath and rake a hand through my hair. She’s just a beautiful woman, I see beautiful women every day. Why the fuck am I acting like this?

“Make that four shots of tequila!” Beav yells to the bartender.

He sets four tall shot glasses on the bar and pours what’s closer to three shots into each one. Bile rises in my throat with each glass he fills. Once he slides them over, the birthday girl toasts, “To me! Thirty is the new twenty!” I huff a small laugh; she’s certainly acting twenty.

Beaver and Blondie take their shots, downing them in one go, while Scarlett and I don’t so much as look at ours. Beav elbows me, but I shake my head. With a smirk, he snatches my shot glass and finishes mine. The birthday girl does the same to Scarlett’s, and my eyes catch on our numbers on their jerseys. Did they follow us here? Scarlett seemed uninterested at the game, but maybe I got this all wrong. Her brother is on the coaching staff, why wouldn’t she love hockey? None of this makes sense.

“You had an amazing game tonight.” Blondie offers her hand. “Rachel.”

I take it, and this is the part of every introduction I hate—they know me and my name, but I feel obligated to tell them all the same. “Russ.”

“I know.” She winks, and my food can’t arrive fast enough. “So, what are your plans for the night?”

I’m in no mood for small talk, and I sure as fuck don’t want to flirt with her. I should order my burger to go and get the hell out of here. I’m about to flag down the bartender when Beav replies, “Having dinner with you two.”

Fuck. Me.

“She’s Coach North’s sister, and the birthday girl could be literally anyone,” I whisper to him. “We should get out of here.”

“That’s a great idea,” he announces, and I pin him with a glare.

“What’s a great idea?” Scarlett asks, nervously biting her lip. The way I want to take it between my own teeth... No. She has a boyfriend.

The bartender sets my burger down, and I’ve never been so grateful for an interruption. The blue cheese is pungent, and I’m hoping it does its job. I take a long drink of my beer but nearly spit it out when Beaver suggests, “Taking our dinner to go and celebrating a birthday at my place.”

Motherfucker...

“That would be so much fun,” Rachel squeals. “That burger looks amazing, but maybe I should order it with no onions or blue cheese.” She then raises her arm to get the bartender’s attention. “Hi, sorry, could we do a to-go order.”

A horny D-man, a bubbly birthday girl, a grumpy goalie, and an off-limits woman... What could go wrong? If Beav wants to go home with them, that's his business, but I'm not about to spend the night flirting with a taken woman. "I'm staying here," I announce, gripping my burger with both hands and taking an obnoxiously large bite of it.

"Same." Scarlett orders the same burger as me, and asks, "Could I have extra onions?"

I try to hide my smirk, but fail. Fuck, she's cute. Why does she have to be Coach's sister? And where the fuck is her boyfriend? I could've sworn Rachel said he was here.

As Beav and Rachel place their to-go orders, I keep my attention on the game highlights. We played well today, but I have a nagging feeling if I don't step things up, I'll be forced into retirement. Once their food arrives, Beav hops off his stool and offers his arm to Rachel. "Shall we?" he asks with a dimpled grin. None of it should surprise me; he said himself he was coming here to bring someone home. She links her arm with his, and he guides her away from the bar, calling over his shoulder, "Nice to meet you, kiss cam girl," leaving me with the last person I should befriend right now.

CHAPTER 3

SCARLETT

I will not flirt with the hot goalie.

I will not flirt with the hot goalie.

I will NOT flirt with the hot goalie.

With our friends gone, I can't stand the awkward silence. "So..."

"So," Russ grumbles.

This is going well...

I blow out a long breath and take Rachel's seat. "I didn't have a chance to thank you for earlier."

"There's nothing to thank me for." He takes another bite of his burger, effectively silencing me.

I thought he'd be friendlier than this, especially with how he was acting at the game. I swear he was flirting. Maybe he has a girlfriend? It isn't as if I could seriously date someone like him, and there's no way in hell he'd be interested in me. Guys like him have beautiful women chasing after them. He could have anyone he wants. Still, there's no harm in a little friendly conversation between two burger-loving people.

I try again. “You played well today.” Did he play well? For all I know, he is a mediocre player on the verge of being traded.

He wipes his mouth with his napkin as he finishes chewing. “What was your name? Red? Sorry to disappoint you, but I only came out tonight for a burger and a beer. I’m not in any mood for small talk.”

“It’s Scarlett , and I was just trying to be nice,” I groan. “I didn’t want to be out either, but Rachel insisted and it’s her birthday. Oh, and in case you didn’t notice, she left me here and I’ll have to track her down in the morning.”

He rakes his hand through his hair and sighs, “I’m sorry. I’m on edge because you’re one of my coach’s sisters.”

“Why does that matter?”

Finally looking at me, he replies, “Because if you weren’t, I would...”

“You would what?”

“Nothing, it doesn’t matter.”

“Why don’t we start over? I’m Scarlett. I don’t watch hockey, and I love blue cheese.”

A smirk tilts his lips, drawing my attention to his strong jaw. “I’m Russ. I play hockey, and I also love blue cheese.”

“See? That wasn’t so hard.” I lift my burger in a toast. “To friends who love cheese.”

He taps his burger to mine before taking a bite. “To cheesy friends.”

I sink my teeth into the greasy goodness and can't help the moan that escapes me. This burger is better than sex—or at least sex by myself. I glance over at the hockey hero, who's choking on his burger mid-bite. "Fuck! Are you okay?" I manage through my mouthful.

After a few coughs and sipping his beer, he laughs, "Yeah. Just, uh, went down the wrong way."

We continue eating in comfortable silence, but I'm ravenous, devouring my fries well before he does. This man—this beast of a human—gives me half of his without breaking away from watching the game highlights on the television above the bar. Certainly he needs the calories more than I do. As much as I will the butterflies in my stomach to calm the hell down, they refuse.

"So, Red, what's the plan for the night, since your friend left you?" He smirks, and there's no way he called me that by accident.

"It's Scarlett, and I don't know. I'll finish this burger, then get a rideshare or taxi."

"I can drive you to your hotel," he offers. "If your boyfriend doesn't mind."

With my burger halfway to my mouth, I set it down. I don't have a boyfriend, but I should let him believe I'm taken—less temptation for me to do something reckless. "How do you know I'm staying at a hotel?"

"The internet."

"The internet?"

After taking a sip of his beer, he clarifies, "Yeah, I looked you up after the press conference."

“Then you know my name is Scarlett.” He tries to mask his grin with the beer to his lips. “And what did you find in your internet deep dive?”

“You’re a physical therapist for a soccer team in Québec, so you don’t live here.”

“That’s all?”

“Yup,” he replies, popping the ‘p.’

“Good thing I had the nudes taken down,” I tease, then grimace at my stupid joke.

Russ lets out a full laugh and a dimple pops on his cheek. It’s fucking adorable, and I want to make him do it again. “So, how long are you here for?”

“Only for the night. I came for Rachel’s birthday and to visit my brother and his family.”

At the mention of my brother, he glances to the bustling bar behind us for a few moments. “It’s getting a little crowded. Are you okay if we leave once we’re done eating?”

“Oh, right. Big hockey star. Of course.”

Russ huffs a small laugh. “I’m more worried about you than me. I get recognised everywhere I go, but after the whole kiss cam thing...”

“Good call.” I quickly finish the last three bites of my burger and flag down the bartender for the check. Russ snatches it before I can. “Hey! You’re not paying for me. If anything, I should buy yours as a thank you.”

“Not a chance, Red.” He pulls out his credit card and hands it to the bartender without

looking at the check.

There's no use in arguing. "Thank you."

Guiding me out of the bar with a hand on the small of my back, my heart thumps loudly in my chest. The simple, sweet touch lights me up, loving the feel of his large palm against me. I shouldn't read anything into it; he thinks I have a boyfriend. He's likely this way with all of his friends.

He leads us to his car parked five blocks away. It's a two-door sedan, modest but in good condition. I would've pegged him for a sports car or truck guy. He opens the passenger door for me, and the moment I take a seat I'm greeted by something crisp, like fresh sheets with a hint of pine. Once he's next to me, the scent is stronger—maybe his cologne? Fuck, he smells delicious. I want to brush my nose against his neck and nuzzle him.

Shit, where did that thought come from?

"Which hotel are you staying at?"

"The Cherry Inn."

Russ reaches behind me to the headrest and checks through the rear window to back out, despite his car having a backup camera. He doesn't reverse, keeping the shifter in park. My gaze falls to his lips and words tumble from me before I can stop them, "You know, if this was a first date, this is where you'd get a goodnight kiss."

Marde! Why did I say that?

A smirk briefly tugs at his lips as he mutters, "Fuck it," and he grips the front of my throat, bringing my lips to his in a bruising kiss I feel all the way to my toes. We're

both practically sober, only having one beer; I have nothing to blame other than my own selfishness. I can't help the whimper that escapes me, and the rumble from his chest sends a jolt right to my core. We shouldn't do this, but fuck, I can't stop kissing him. He pulls back suddenly, his dark brown eyes searching mine. "I'm so sorry, Red. I shouldn't have done that."

"Why not?"

"Because if you were mine, I wouldn't want another man kissing you."

"Okay," I say carefully as he sits back in his seat. "I must've misread this. Do you have a girlfriend?"

"No, but you have a boyfriend."

"No, I don't," I laugh. "You think I'd kiss you back if I did?"

"Your friend said you have a boyfriend."

I glance away in thought for a moment, then my eyes widen as a laugh bubbles out of me. "She was talking about you!"

"Me?"

"Yeah, you. After the kiss cam moment, she joked that you were acting like my boyfriend. She even bought me this jersey to drive home the point." I pluck the fabric away from my chest. "I don't have a boyfriend, not married. Extremely single... And I'd like to kiss you again."

He smirks, the little dimple from earlier appearing. "Is that so?"

Closing the distance, I cautiously brush my lips to his and whisper, “Yes.”

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CHAPTER 4

RUSS

Scarlett is the last woman I should be kissing, but I can't help myself. She's beautiful—that's undeniable—but even if she doesn't have a boyfriend, she's Coach North's sister.

She's wearing my number—and now I know what her lips taste like. I'm so fucking screwed.

"This is a bad idea," I mutter, unable to break away from her.

"The worst," she confirms, and I still can't stop tempting fate as my tongue sweeps across hers. Maybe we can be friends? Friends kiss. It's a thing...

No. It's not.

I'm a willing and able participant, desperate for more of her. Then again, so is she. This siren is only here for a night, asking her to stay with me would be the mistake of a millennium. I'm still sore from the game, and had every intention of going home alone. Why the hell do I suggest, "My place or yours?"

The burger certainly didn't do its job preventing this from happening.

"I don't have sex with guys on the first date," she whimpers into my mouth.

“Neither do I,” I tease, making her chuckle against my lips. “Your call, Red.”

“The hotel.” She pulls back, lips swollen and eyes wild. “That way I don’t need a rideshare in the morning.”

My brows pinch. “You think I wouldn’t drive you?”

“I... I don’t know. Athletes have a reputation. Puck bunnies? Isn’t that what you call them in hockey? Don’t you have a new girl every night?”

“Some do.” I shrug. “But if we spend the night together, we’re not having sex. I’m not hooking up with my coach’s sister—it’s too messy—but I also don’t want to say goodnight yet.”

She huffs a small laugh and bites her lip. “Does that line work on all of the girls?”

“I don’t know. Did it work on you?”

“Yes. But you’re serious? You don’t want to sleep with me?”

“I never said I didn’t want to,” I chuckle, unable to hide my smile. “There’s just something about you. I can’t explain it. The moment I saw you, it’s like time stopped. And when that guy tried to touch you, I wanted to rip his arms off.”

“I don’t believe in happenstance. People come into our lives for a reason—either they are going to change your life, or you’re going to change theirs.”

I shift my car into reverse and check the rear window before exiting the parking space. “Are you going to change my life for the better?”

“That remains to be seen. It’s not like we can date. You live here, and I’m three

thousand miles away. And you're one of my brother's players. If things didn't work out, it could strain on my relationship with him or jeopardize your career. They wouldn't trade you, but he'd make your life a living hell."

"Well, when you put it like that, it's downright depressing."

"So... what do you say we become best friends for a night, and in the morning, we pretend we never met?"

"Then I probably shouldn't have kissed you."

"I practically begged you to," she laughs, sliding her hand onto my thigh, squeezing once. My cock twitches at her touch, a reminder that this is a bad idea. I wasn't lying when I said I wanted to get to know her, but keeping my hands to myself will prove to be difficult when a simple thigh grab is making me hard.

"Friends don't kiss," I counter, covering her hand with mine.

"Says who?"

"Name one other friend you kiss." We pull up to the stoplight and I glance over with a cocked eyebrow.

"Well, you'd be the first."

The light turns green, and every fiber of my being wants to pull over and taste her again. As much as I would love to lick every last inch of this woman, I continue driving while my cock protests, throbbing against my jeans.

We arrive at her hotel, and I'm able to find a parking spot near the entrance. I hop out, rounding the car to open her door before she dares to. It earns me a smile, and I

swear my heart leaps out of my damn chest at the sight. As I shut the door, Scarlett slides her hand into mine, interlacing our fingers. It feels more intimate than any sex I've ever had. I don't know anything about her—aside from my brief internet stalking—but from the moment I laid eyes on her, I've felt this pull. Maybe she's right, and for some inexplicable cosmic reason, I was always supposed to meet her.

She leads the way through the lobby and up the two floors to her room. The hotel is older but recently renovated, with new carpets and updated fixtures. The moment she swipes her keycard against the sensor, my breath catches—are we really doing this? I can't remember the last time I went home with a girl, let alone someone I wanted more than a quick fuck with. A small part of me worries she won't like what she sees. Everyone knows me as Russ the athlete, not Russ the man behind the jersey.

We step inside, and the click of the door seals my fate. Scarlett drops her purse and keycard on the small table by the door and spins to face me. "I'd offer you a glass of wine, but the best I can do is water."

"Water's fine." I stuff my hands in my pockets, rocking back on my heels.

"Make yourself comfortable."

If I actually wanted to be comfortable, I'd have her naked in bed with me, but that can never happen. She strips off her jersey, revealing the Cougars tee she wore to the game, and kicks off her shoes. I remove my own shoes and leave them by the door, then help myself to a glass of water before she can.

"Hey!"

"Hey, what?" I say into my glass, but as I'm about to retrieve a second for her, she snatches it from me and takes a sip.

“So, tell me, why hockey?”

“Why not?”

“That’s a non-answer,” she laughs and makes her way onto the dark gray loveseat, bringing the water with her. I prep a second one and join her. “I’m serious. You probably know how my brother wanted his own career but wasn’t good enough to go pro. Apparently, you are. So, how did you decide being a goalie was for you?”

We’ve all heard the stories about Coach North. He was incredible on the ice but never had his chance. I’m grateful for all that he’s done for our team, but I can’t imagine that kind of disappointment. “I’ve played since I was old enough to stand,” I reply, blowing out a long breath. “I haven’t known anything else. My parents encouraged it when coaches saw something in me. I played through college—even though I barely graduated—and have played professionally ever since.”

“What did you go to school for?”

“Business. I figured it would be the most versatile if hockey didn’t work out. I was on scholarship and could’ve picked any subject I wanted. My parents wanted me to be practical, and I’m grateful for it. I was never supposed to be a doctor or a lawyer. I was always supposed to be on the ice. What about you? Why soccer PT?”

“Well, my family loves hockey but I hardly follow it. I loved my sports medicine courses, and even though the injuries are predictable, I like that they are still interesting. In soccer, there are lots of knee injuries and pulled muscles, but it’s not as aggressive as other sports. I did apply for a position with the Québec Dynasty, so maybe hockey is in my future after all.”

“You know they’re a rival team, right?” I laugh and take a long gulp of my water.

“It’s just a game.”

I sputter a cough. “Just a game? Please never say that in front of your brother.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it.”

“So, if you got that job, you’d travel with the team, and when they play here in Vancouver...”

Scarlett lightly licks her lips, and I can’t take it a moment longer. She may want to be friends, but I can’t help my desperate need to kiss her again. I cautiously lean in, and she closes the distance, bringing her lips to mine. If she gets this job, I’ll be able to see her again. Fuck this being one night. Her lips part, letting me tease and taste her, but as I nip at her bottom lip she climbs onto my lap, straddling me.

“What are you up to, Red? I thought you said you don’t have sex on a first date?”

“Well, this isn’t a date, and last time I checked, we’re both fully clothed.”

I grip her ass and pull her flush with me, my now painfully hard cock straining against my jeans. “You’re right, but I bet if I stripped you out of these pants, you’d be wet for me.”

“Oh, I absolutely am, but we’re not sleeping together.” She leans in and whispers beside my ear, “I have to know—are the books right?”

“Books? What books?”

She pulls back, laughing, “You know, romance books. The star goalie with a Jacob’s ladder, or even just a Prince Albert.”

“Is that really in books? You’re full of shit.”

“I’m not!” Scarlett climbs off of me, and I stifle a groan. Once she’s retrieved her phone, she climbs back onto my lap, swiping and tapping for a minute. “See? Here are four books with pierced cocks.” She turns the phone to show me her book app, all of them featuring “puck” in the title. “So, you’re not pierced? Such a shame. You should get one.”

“Just because you read a bunch of hockey romance books with goalies who have pierced cocks doesn’t mean I’m going to fulfill your fantasies, Red.”

“Fine,” she playfully groans. “That nickname is sticking, isn’t it.”

“Yup,” I reply, popping the ‘p.’ I’m so gone for this girl, and I don’t even know her.

“Well, as disappointed as I am that your dick isn’t christened with barbells, it’s getting late. Do you want to stay over?”

“Do you want me to?”

“I normally hate sleepovers, but I’ll make an exception for you.” She winks and climbs off of me. As she struts over to the bed, she strips off her tee, and the sight has my cock leaking precum. There’s no way in hell I can stay the night and not touch her. She rummages in her suitcase and takes out an oversized tee, then pulls it over her head. Glancing over her shoulder, she teases, “Are you going to wear that to bed? Or do you need to borrow your jersey?”

I stand and tug off my shirt, tossing it to the floor. “I sleep naked. Hope you don’t mind.”

Her jaw drops, but she quickly schools her expression. I fucking love that her eyes

darken at the sight of me. “Fine.”

“Fine?”

“Fine,” she confirms and unhooks her bra, letting it fall from under her shirt. She watches me intently as I unbuckle my belt and strip out of my pants. With my fingers in the waistband of my underwear, about to drag them down my legs, she rushes out, “But maybe keep your boxer briefs on.”

“Why? Because my cock isn’t pierced?”

Scarlett lets out a full laugh as she unbuttons her pants. “No! It’s because we’re just friends .”

“Friends who kiss,” I correct. “And sleep in the same bed together.”

“Yes.” She clears her throat, stepping out of her pants. “But not friends who sleep in the same bed naked .”

I close the small distance between us and brush her hair off her shoulder, exposing her delicate throat. As I press a small kiss to her neck, I whisper, “If we’re friends who kiss, am I allowed to kiss you anywhere I want?”

“Wh-where do you want to kiss me?”

I nip at her earlobe, making her suck in a breath. “What’s off-limits?”

“I don’t know. Nowhere?”

I grip behind her thighs and toss her onto the bed. She lets out an adorable laugh, and I can’t help the stupid grin on my face. Her shirt rides up, revealing her black lace

thong. As much as I'd love to rip it off and bury my face in her pussy, I want her to be comfortable first. With a featherlight touch, I glide my hands up her smooth thighs, wanting to trace behind my fingers with my tongue. Swiping my knuckle between her legs, the lace is already damp, and I lose all resolve. "Tell me to stop."

"No," she breathes. "Don't stop."

This has to be the stupidest idea I've ever come up with, but I can't remember the last time I wanted someone as much as I want Scarlett. She wants to be friends? Fine. But every time she hears my name, I want her thighs clenching at the thought of what we did.

I take my time pulling down her thong, and she's fucking glistening for me. I spread her wider, loving the small trail of curls at the top of her otherwise bare pussy. I lick once up her slit and swirl my tongue around her clit, unable to help the groan that escapes me. Her thighs might clench at the thought of me after this, but my cock will be hard as fucking quartz at the memory of tasting her. I flick my tongue, making her gasp, and I drive two fingers inside her. She's tight, but as I curl my fingers, I add another. She cries out, and her whimpered moans spur me on. I find the perfect pace and pressure, building her up until she comes hard on my tongue, drenching my beard and fingers. I'm fucking ruined and need more. Her pussy pulses around me as I slow my movements, and her breathing slows.

"Just a little goodnight kiss between friends," I chuckle against her swollen clit.

"Yeah," she manages through her laboured breaths. "Just a... yeah."

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CHAPTER 5

SCARLETT

I wake to soft lips and a scratchy beaded against my neck. The strong hand splayed across my stomach pulls me closer until my back is flush against a hard chest.

What time is it? Where am I?

My eyes flutter open. 3:14 a.m.

Who is in my bed?

Russ. The hot-as-fuck goalie. Who made me come so hard I passed out.

Calisse!

His thick— sadly unpierced —cock is pressed against my ass. Maybe he'll touch me again, or slip it inside me?

No! We can't do this.

Just. Friends.

Friends who kiss and stay the night together... but just friends. Why did I think this would be a good idea?

“Mornin’, Red,” he murmurs against my skin, and the vibration against my back making my nipples peak.

I turn in his arms, needing a little distance. If I’m not careful, I’ll develop a little crush on this beautiful stranger. “Good morning. Sorry I fell asleep last night.”

“Why? I’m not. Now I can proudly say my tongue is so talented it made a woman black out in pleasure. Next time I stay the night, I’ll wake you up the same way you fell asleep. In fact...” In one swift motion, he rolls me onto my back, making me squeak in surprise. “I didn’t get a good morning kiss.”

Russ slides down my body and I suck in a breath— where are my panties? The room is dark, only the glow from the alarm clock illuminating the space, and I can’t make out any of his features. I jolt as I feel his teeth graze against the inside of my thigh. He draws the soft skin into his mouth as he marks me, and I can’t help crying out at the light sting. As he lifts my legs over his shoulders, he places a pillow under my ass, and I can’t help feeling a little self-conscious, even with the lights out.

I can count on one hand how many men have made me come with their mouth, and Russ is definitely at the top of that list. Still, I feel obligated to return the favor. We could have sex, then we’d both come—except it would complicate things further. My mental gymnastics come to a screeching halt as he teases my entrance and slips two fingers inside me with ease.

“Oh, fuck, that feels good,” I moan, gripping the sheets. He licks firm circles around my clit, matching the rhythm of his fingers curling inside me. It takes mere minutes of his talented tongue before I’m dizzy with bliss, inches from release. “Right there, don’t stop.”

He chuckles darkly and spreads my legs wide, forcing a moan from me. As he adds a third finger, continuing his perfect pace, I shatter, soaking the pillow, the sheets, his

face and... Oh, fuck, please tell me I didn't blind him with cum!

"Another," he growls against me, and I can hardly catch my breath. He doesn't let up, lapping at me as he coaxes a second orgasm out of me. How the hell am I supposed to be friends with this man if he's turning me into a damn puddle?

As I come down from the high, he slowly pulls his fingers from me, and there's a dip in the bed on either side of me. When my vision clears, Russ is above me, and I can't help myself—I take his face in my hands and kiss him. My whole body is buzzing, but I need more. As I reach between us to feel him, he grips my wrist and pins it above my head.

"I have to get going, but next time I'll kiss you goodbye with my cock deep inside you."

"There won't be a next time... and we're just friends."

He presses a soft kiss to my forehead. "Sure, Red, just friends." Lifting off me, he turns on the lamp and asks, "Where's your phone?"

I squint to adjust to the light. "Still in my purse."

Once he retrieves it for me, I pull out my phone and hand it to him. He types for a moment, and no words pass between us as he gets dressed. With a final kiss to my lips, he's gone. It all feels like a dream. Did I imagine it? A moment later, my phone buzzes with an incoming text.

Russ "Bestie" Campbell

Get some sleep. If you're still there when I'm done with my workout, I'm having you for breakfast.

Who is this guy? The most selfless man in existence? I never got to touch him, feel the weight of him in my hand, the taste of him on my tongue... and he's threatening me with another tongue-lashing?

Russ Campbell is trouble with a capital T. I change the name in my phone to just "Bestie" in case someone were to read over my shoulder while in public, then send off a quick text, needing to nip this in the bud.

Hope you have a good workout. Tell my brother I said hi.

The reminder should be enough to keep his flirting to a minimum—or at least I hope it will. There is a missed text from Rachel, and I click over to the conversation.

Rachel

Hey, bitch! I'm starting my walk of shame. Should be at the hotel in twenty.

I check the timestamp—it was sent ten minutes ago. My legs are jelly, but I've never hopped out of bed so fast in my life. My underwear is nowhere to be found, and I rummage in my luggage for another pair.

The sheets!

Fuck!

There is no way in hell I'll be able to explain it as anything other than what it is—evidence of what that beautiful man did to me. It's Rach, she'll understand.

Two minutes later, the door opens, and in walks a very drunk Rachel with a bag of... beef jerky?

“Why does it smell like sex in here?” she asks, popping a piece in her mouth.

“I didn’t have sex,” I rush out.

She peers around me to the bed. “Well, at the very least, you had sex by yourself. Damn, girl, that is impressive! I didn’t take you as a squirter, but I thought for sure you’d hook up with your boyfriend last night. Come on, let’s get an early breakfast.”

I gesture to her beef jerky. “Pre-breakfast snack?”

“Yeah, I was already missing meat in my mouth.”

I cough out a laugh. “Seriously, Rach?”

“What? That man filled all of my holes. I can still taste him, and his cum is leaking out of my?—”

“Rach! It’s four in the morning. Can we table the play-by-play until after I’ve had coffee?”

“Fine,” she groans. “Put on some pants, we’re going out. I worked up an appetite and need to hydrate. Then you’re going to tell me what happened with Campbell after I left.”

The memory of his face between my legs skates across my mind, making my thighs clench. If he’s true to his word, he’ll come by after his workout, and any hope of remaining friends with him will be thrown out the window. I quickly dress and pack my bag, needing to be as far away from the crime scene as possible. With a final glance at the soaked sheets, I follow Rachel out of the room that I’ll never forget, no matter how hard I try. Admittedly, I’m jealous of Rach. My only regret from last night is I never touched him. It’s for the best. I’m sure if he had done to me what her

hockey boy did to her, I'd be ruined for life.

We make our way to a small, twenty-four hour diner. There are six booths and four small square tables, but only two of the booths are occupied. As soon as we're seated, Rach begins recounting how she was twisted like a pretzel and fucked for hours. She pulls her hair to the side, revealing a dark purple bruise on her neck that definitely wasn't there yesterday.

"Doesn't that hurt?" I ask curiously.

She smirks and sips her coffee. "A little, but he's a biter, and I was into it."

"Shit, Rach, he bit you?"

"Sure. But don't worry, I left my own marks. Poor guy is going to have some explaining to do in the locker room when he looks like a cat attacked his back. So, what happened with Campbell."

"Nothing happened. He stayed the night but had to be up early."

"Bullshit. He stayed with you, and you didn't take him for a test drive? Not even a mustache ride?"

"No," I laugh, shaking my head. "I didn't ride his face."

Not technically a lie...

Her eyes narrow. "You mean to tell me the only thing he ate last night was that burger?" I nod, not wanting to lie out loud. "Such a shame."

"It's fine. But maybe I should've had a mimosa instead of coffee for this

conversation.”

“Sometimes you need a cocktail, and sometimes you need a bearded man’s face between your legs,” she says into her cup.

“Can I have both?” I tease.

My phone vibrates in my back pocket, but I ignore it. There’s exactly one person who would be messaging me this early, regardless of the timezone. It buzzes a second time, and Rachel asks, “Are you going to answer that?”

“Answer what?”

“Either you have a rogue sex toy in your back pocket, or someone is texting you.”

I take out my phone to find two messages from the one person I was afraid they’d be from.

“Bestie”

Your brother is an asshole and has me doing drills when I should be doing cardio. My knees are killing me.

I should make you do them with me. Naked. While you’re riding my face.

There will be no face riding, bestie.

“Oh, my sweet Scarlett has a crush,” Rachel coos.

“I do not. We’re just friends.”

“The stupid grin on your face says otherwise.”

Calisse , she’s right.

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CHAPTER 6

RUSS

ONE MONTH LATER

Happy one-month best friendaversary!

Red

A good morning would suffice, bestie.

It's not a good morning.

Why? Is my brother being an ass?

No. It's not a good morning because I didn't wake up next to you.

I should have seen that coming.

You would indeed be coming.

Promise

Absolutely.

Good luck in your final interview today! Let me know how it goes.

I'm still nervous about it, but I'll text you when I'm done.

Am I obsessed with a woman I can never have? Fuck, yes, I am. We text daily— all day . I've been selfishly hoping she gets the job. If she signs on with Québec, there's a chance I'll see her when they play Vancouver.

And yeah, I lied to my little vixen when she asked about her brother. It's been a fucking nightmare since I met his sister. He doesn't suspect anything, but he's been on my ass ever since that night.

Once practice is over, I check my phone, disappointed there's no message from Scarlett. As I'm about to pocket it, an incoming text has it vibrating in my hand.

Red

I got it.

I knew you would. I'm so fucking proud of you.

Should we celebrate?

Fuck, yes! Give me thirty minutes and I'll be home.

Vodka?

Nope! We're breaking out the good stuff.

I don't have aged whisky, bestie.

Leave it to me.

I place a quick delivery order that should arrive at her place in the next hour, then pack everything up and make my way home, hating that I'll be walking into an empty apartment. Beav and Dixon invited me out for drinks, but my priorities are focused on exactly one thing. One person, really—Scarlett. From the moment I saw her, I knew she was special, and the tug I feel toward her hasn't faded since that night.

As soon as I have my duffle stowed away, I call her, anxious to hear her voice. She picks up on the first ring, and I can't help the smile spreading across my face. "Hey, bestie," she sings, and my heart finally slows for the first time since I woke up.

"Hey, Red, tell me everything."

Scarlett recounts her interview, including several hard-hitting questions I knew—without a doubt—my girl would obliterate. Truly, she's overqualified, but I'm loving the excitement in her voice as she tells me how she schooled them on arthritis in older athletes. Thankfully, I haven't experienced many symptoms myself, but I love that she's passionate about the care of her patients, even after retirement.

"So... are you really going to do it?" The hint of teasing in her voice is undeniable.

My grin hasn't left my face, but it widens at her question. "It'll be a rough three or so months, but I think I can manage."

"Please tell me you're not doing this for me."

"One piercing for every month I can't see you is a torture I'm willing to endure, Red."

Fuck! I didn't just admit that...

"What did you say?" she asks with a quiver.

“Nothing. Only that I’ll be tortured for a few months.”

She doesn’t buy my horrible save and sighs, “Russ, why are we doing this?”

My heart stops at her question, refusing to acknowledge our shitty predicament. Neither of us have admitted to anything beyond friendship. Sure, there’s fun banter and flirting, but I’ve always wanted more. Losing her altogether is a fate I’m not willing to consider. We may hide behind our friendship, but I’m hers. We both know it.

Her doorbell dings, and she excuses herself for a minute. When she returns, she laughs, “This is your doing, isn’t it?”

“What are you talking about?” I stifle a chuckle.

“You don’t happen to know anything about a mysterious delivery of your favourite whisky appearing at my doorstep?”

“Nope,” I reply, popping the ‘p.’ “Innocent until proven guilty.”

“The receipt literally says ‘from your best friend’, and there is no way Rachel sent it.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yes,” she laughs, and the sound fills me with warmth like I’ve never felt before—except with her. “Did you send it?”

“You know I did.”

“I know,” she sighs. All of the levity has been sucked out like a vacuum.

Treading carefully, I offer, “We’re supposed to celebrate your new job.”

“You’re right.” There’s a faint sound of the wax peeling from the bottle, and I’m almost positive she’s taking a drink directly from it. She coughs, confirming my suspicion. “Bottoms up, bestie.”

“Hey, be careful! That’s not a beer.”

“I know what I’m doing, Russ,” she snaps.

“And what’s that exactly?”

Scarlett pauses for a moment before she answers, “Drowning my feelings.”

“Because you’re in love with me and wish you were here?” I tease, but hope blooms in my chest that I’m right.

“Yes.” The small word takes me by surprise, but my whole world crashes down around me when she corrects, “I mean no. We’re just friends.”

That fucking F-word.

I can’t bring myself to admit that I’m falling in love with her, especially with her putting up walls between us. I default to what has always felt safe—humour. “Friends who kiss and stay the night together.”

“Why are we doing this?” she echoes her question from earlier.

“Because no one can be best friends for just one night, like you suggested. You know me better than my therapist I’ve been seeing this past year. I don’t care what you want to call this, Red, but I’ve been all in since the moment the hotel door clicked

shut behind us that night. I know how important this interview was for you, and I'm so fucking proud you got the job. Let me celebrate with you, even if it's just as your friend."

Scarlett blows out a long breath, then chuckles to herself. "We will... should. I'm sorry for questioning this, it's just?—"

"I know. Should we also celebrate my new jewelry I'm getting?"

"To be clear, what you do with your body is your choice. But... I selfishly love that no one will touch you if you get pierced."

Scarlett is the last woman I've been with; I don't want anyone else. Keeping my tone light, I ask, "You like the idea of staking your claim?"

"Yeah," she sighs. "I think I do."

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CHAPTER 7

SCARLETT

ONE MONTH LATER

Bestie

Happy two-month best friendaversary!

Oh, this is a thing now?

Why wouldn't it be? We're best friends.

Wish you were here for breakfast.

You could have me for breakfast.

I quickly unsend the message.

I saw that, Red.

No, you didn't.

Did you think of me while you fucked yourself this morning?

Let's just say my toys are used to me calling out your name.

I unsend the last message as well.

Was it the blue one or the orange one?

I'm not telling you. Have a good morning, bestie!

Fuck, I'm hard thinking about it.

Have a great first day!

Thanks, I will! Keep an eye on Berkeley today.

Why?

Just trust me.

And it was blue.

It's harmless flirting; there's no chance he's hard thinking about me. The idea of him in bed—hand tight around his cock—sends a pulse of heat straight between my thighs. Would he slowly stroke with a tight grip, toying with each piercing as he moves up and down his shaft? Or would he quickly tug until he comes on his chest? I shouldn't be fantasizing about my friend—especially not about his pierced cock I've never even seen—but the conjured image lingers the rest of the morning.

After a few hours of familiarizing myself with the roster and patient files, I'm waiting in line for lunch at my favourite sandwich shop, tempted to text Russ. I haven't heard from him since this morning. Normally, I'd have several missed texts from him by now. Did I overstep with my flirting? He started it... or at least I think he did. I check our text exchange and reread the messages. I hesitate on the last one, tempted to delete it. With my thumb hovering over the message, ready to erase it from existence,

there's a new one below it.

Bestie

How's your first day going?

It's a jump scare, and I suck in a breath.

Good.

Thanks for the heads up about Beav. He won't shut up about tomorrow night's game.

As I'm typing a reply, he calls me, and I can't help my smile seeing his name dance across my screen. "Hey, bestie."

"Hey, Red," he purrs, making my belly flip.

"I wasn't expecting to hear from you until later."

"I just finished up a quick pre-game workout but wanted to see how your day was going."

I bite my lip and deflect. "You're going to be amazing tonight."

"Oh, I know. I'm more worried about tomorrow." Russ huffs a small laugh and explains, "Beav insists on having Rachel sit with the WAGs. He'll be so distracted keeping an eye on her, he won't even care about beating Québec."

"You're not beating us," I taunt.

"If we win, what do I get?"

My instinct is to tell him ‘me,’ but quickly squash the temptation to reply with a flirtatious response. “What do you want?”

“Stay with me,” he pleads, making my heart ache. We’re just friends who flirt, but every fiber of my being knows it would be more if we lived closer.

I chew on my thumbnail. “That’s not a good idea. Maybe dinner or coffee?”

“If Vancouver wins, you stay in my bed. That’s the deal. I won’t touch you, I just...”
He blows out a long breath.

“Okay,” I concede. “You have a deal. I have to get back to work, but good luck tonight.”

“I’ll text you after the game. It’ll be late there, but if you’re up, I want to know how the rest of your first day went.”

This. Man.

“I’ll stay up. Bye, bestie,” I sing.

“Bye, Red.”

We hang up, and there’s a new text from him.

Use the orange one and tell me all about it tonight.

Orange one?

My breath catches. I never should’ve told him about my toy collection last week. Stupid tequila...

The rest of my day is spent meeting with the medical staff and management. Once I'm home, I order dinner and pull out college binders, wanting to brush up on goalie injuries—Jones has been suffering from knee issues, and I want to keep an eye on it.

Two glasses of wine, yellow curry with rice, and several hours of research later, I fall asleep on the couch. I wake to my phone vibrating on the coffee table. I snatch it up, hopeful it's Russ. I breathe a sigh of relief the moment I see Russ' name on the screen and can't answer fast enough. "Hey, Red," he greets before I can say hello.

"Hey, how was the game?"

"You mean you didn't watch?" he teases, and I can't help but chuckle. "We won—because of course we did. Are you ready for tomorrow?"

"Sort of," I groan as I set my binder on the coffee table. I check the time; it's a few minutes after midnight. "Are you home?"

"I am, and still riding the high from the game. So, tell me, how was today?"

"I can't say much—don't want to give you an edge for tomorrow, you know."

All of my fun, flirty Russ is gone when he asks, "Why would you say that?"

"I'm so sorry," I rush out. "I didn't mean anything by it! I know you wouldn't use anything to your advantage. I'm just protective of my patients and, well, if you win tomorrow, I'm..."

"You're what?"

"I'm afraid if I stay with you tomorrow, things might change between us," I admit, shutting my eyes tight. My soul calls to him in an indescribable way. It hurts to

imagine a world where we aren't at the very least friends. If I stay, if we cross that line, I don't know if I could handle a version of reality where I lose him completely. The only place I can think clearly is the shower, so without much thought, I pad off to my bathroom, turning the knob to scalding. Just how I like it.

His voice is gentle but sure. "I'll love you in any capacity you need, but the fact remains, I love you, Scarlett. You want to be friends? I'm in, but I... Are you doing dishes? It's the middle of the night."

"No, I'm going to take a shower." His words finally register, and I screech, "Russ! You did not just tell me you love me." I swallow thickly; he hasn't called me Scarlett since the night we met. Even then, I can't recall if he ever said it. He loves me? Surely he can't mean it.

"Sync the call to your shower Bluetooth speaker," he commands, and I regret telling him how I belt out nineties pop while I'm getting ready for work.

"We should just hang up," I offer, even if it's the last thing I want to do.

"I won't be able to hear you. Do you trust me?"

I reply honestly, my voice breathless, "Yes."

"Sync it." I do, and since he can no longer hear me, I text him to confirm. His dark chuckle rumbles through the speaker. "You're overthinking this, Red. Step in, wet your hair, then grab your shampoo." I do as he says. "Lather it a little longer than usual—massage it into your scalp. If I was there, I'd comb my fingers through your hair to make sure every strand was covered, so you need to do the same." I close my eyes, imagining it's his hands instead of mine. "Just like that. Take a few deep breaths. Good. Now, rinse it until all of the suds are gone." He gives me a minute to work the shampoo out of my hair. "When you're done, add your conditioner and let it

sit.”

I pull my conditioner from the shelf, spotting my vibrator next to it. The temptation to use it is almost too much. Instead, I add conditioner to the bottom half of my hair and wait for his next instruction.

“Touch your neck as if you’re taking your pulse. It’s where I’d kiss you and you’d melt into me, just as you did the night we spent together.”

My breath picks up, but I continue to do as he asks. My heartbeat is erratic against my fingertips.

“Take your loofah or washcloth, add your favourite bodywash, then slowly drag it up your left arm and down your right. I know you want to wash your perfect tits, but I’d take my time, making you ache for it. Don’t think, just feel the extra hot water beating down on you.” I continue to work as he talks me through it. “I’d wash both of your legs, pressing a soft kiss to your belly. We both love me on my knees for you, don’t we? The anticipation would be too much. You’d stop worrying about any possible consequences of letting me take care of you, and slide your hands into my hair, hooking your leg onto my shoulder. I’d nip at the inside of your thigh, but draw your lightly soapy skin into my mouth to claim it as mine. A soft moan escapes you, needing me to touch you. But you’re not in charge, Red. Your sweet cunt will have my mouth soon enough.”

I glance to my vibrator. He’d never know...

“Don’t even think about it,” he growls. “If you want to come, you have to earn it. Your vibrator stays right where it is.”

I suck in a breath. Can he see me?

“Massage the soap between your fingers. Now, wash down your chest, sliding your slick hands over your full breasts. Your nipples are hard the moment your fingers skate over them, aren’t they?”

“Yes,” I breathe, even if he can’t hear me.

“Pinch one, imagining it’s my teeth. Savour the sting, then do the same to the other. Fuck, you’re doing so well, Red.”

I whimper at his praise, wishing more than anything I could have his mouth on me.

“I know you want to touch yourself. You’re being such a good girl waiting for me. Don’t you dare slide your hand between your legs until I tell you. Wash the rest of your chest, then move lower.” I can’t take it anymore and drop the loofah to grab my vibrator, slathering it in lube. His voice startles me. “Red, what did I say about touching yourself?”

There’s no way he actually knows what I’m doing, and the ache is too much. I switch it on and tease my clit, crying out at the contact.

“You need me to make you feel good, don’t you? Let me,” Russ purrs. “Slide your vibrator up and down your wet pussy, but don’t push in. Half of the fun is the build up, baby. I’m stroking my cock to the thought of how amazing it’ll feel to tease your clit with my piercing.”

I pause. Piercing? As in one? I thought for sure he was getting a ladder. I circle the vibrator around my clit and I’m so damn wet knowing he’s fisting himself to the thought of me.

“I want you begging for it. Dip the vibrator into your tight cunt, but only an inch and pull out. Just like that. Fuck, you listen so well, baby. Do it again, but take another

inch and hold. You're so fucking perfect, letting me stretch you out like this." I increase the intensity and can't help the feral moan that escapes me. "Drag it out slowly, then press it against your clit. Hard." My cries echo in the shower as he continues, "You're so wet and ready for me, aren't you?"

"Only for you," I whimper.

"Press it back inside you, imagining it's me, one inch at a time, until I'm fully seated inside you. You feel that, baby? My cock is fucking swelling being this deep."

Bracing myself on the shower wall, my imagination runs wild—his hands holding me steady, his thick cock deep inside me, his teeth sinking into my shoulder. I slowly pump my vibrator in and out of me, relishing each punishing thrust.

"I'm yours, Red. Use my cock to make yourself come."

I'm so close, desperate to come on his command.

"That's it, beautiful. Keep going until you make a mess."

There's an unmistakable sound through the speaker of him fucking his hand, the delicious sound spurring me on. I'd give anything to touch him, to feel his hard cock piercing me over and over. Even if my team loses tomorrow, I'm staying the night with him—if only to quench my thirst for whatever this is brewing between us. Though I don't know I'll ever be satiated.

"Fuck, baby, I'm so close. Where do you want me to come? Deep inside you? Pull out and paint your back? A little of both? Your choice, Red. The moment you come, shut off the shower and turn off the Bluetooth."

I don't wait. Turning off the shower and have never been so grateful for a waterproof

phone. I click the icon to switch from my shower speaker so he can hear me. “Come with me, Russ.”

“I’m right there. I’m waiting for you.”

“I’m... oh ... me too.”

“Let go, baby.”

I thrust the vibrator inside me one final time as I shatter, not caring that my mewling is far from sexy. My pussy flutters around the vibe, and I turn down the intensity, struggling to catch my breath. I blink a few times, my vision is spotty, and my entire body is both on fire and shivering. Russ grits out a few swears, and I can’t help my smile. We may have ruined our friendship tonight, but in this moment, I couldn’t care less.

“Fucking hell,” he breathes out with a laugh. “I don’t think I’ve come that hard in a long time.”

I can’t help but chuckle, savouring my afterglow. “Same.”

“I know you can take another.”

“I have to be up early tomorrow,” I sigh. I’ll likely touch myself in bed, but he certainly doesn’t need to know that. “Are... are we going to talk about this?”

“What is there to talk about? You know where I stand. I’m yours, Red. However you want me.”

My heart swells and shatters at his admission, and I can’t bring myself to admit the truth—I want more than what we have, but I’m too scared of getting hurt. There are

too many variables. What we have is easy—or at least, it was until tonight. “Call me tomorrow?”

“Of course. Sleep well, beautiful.”

I’m grateful for the smile in his voice. We hang up, and I finally say the words he deserves to hear, even if it’s only to my empty bathroom— I love you.

CHAPTER 8

RUSS

Beav has been on my ass all day. I've kept my friendship—relationship, or whatever the hell this is—with Scarlett a secret from him these past few months. Knowing I'll be seeing her tonight, I haven't been able to wipe the stupid smile off my face since I woke up. He can give me shit all he wants, I couldn't care less. It's not like he isn't a ball of nerves. Poor guy has also been pining after a girl he had one night with.

The moment my skates hit the ice, the roars in the arena echo, making my heart swell. I allow myself a final glance at the Québec City medical staff and find my girl's eyes on me. While she's not cheering, her wide grin is undeniable, even from here. Beav taps his helmet to mine and shouts, "We've got this," before preparing for puck drop.

For the first five minutes, I only have to deflect one shot. Beav and Haas are on fire tonight, keeping Québec busy. We pull off the ice for it to be resurfaced, and as I'm about to return, my message for Scarlett appears on the jumbotron:

CAN'T WAIT FOR TONIGHT, RED!

FROM YOUR BESTIE

Her hand flies to her mouth before her eyes meet mine. She looks away briefly, chuckling to herself, then her gaze snaps back to me. It's as if the entire arena fades away—there's only her. My cheesy rom-com moment is record-scratched harder than an early nineties hip-hop track.

Number Nine, Smith.

He claps Scarlett's ass before hopping over the divider. He touched what's mine. More than that, she didn't ask for it.

The fucking audacity.

As everyone piles onto the ice, I make a beeline for the fucker, the only sound of my heart racing against my chest. The entire arena fades away as I pull down my mask and knock into Smith. No one stops me—or at least I don't think they do. I whack my stick against his cheek before he can react, and the sound it makes—like the crack of a baseball bat hitting a fastball—sends a sick satisfaction through me. He crumples to the ground, but I'm not done. I lift my skate, aiming for his throat. I'm pulled away from him, and through the ringing in my ears, someone says, "He's not worth it." Except this asshole is absolutely worth it. I try to wriggle out of their hold, needing another shot.

"Campbell, listen to me, man. They're going to eject you if you?—"

I charge at him again, but the fucking padding throws off my aim, and my skate misses Smith's throat by several inches. There's a blur of white and black in my vision, the faint sounds of whistles blowing, and someone shouting, "You're done, Thirty-Five."

It takes me several seconds to process his words as someone ushers me off the ice. The entire arena is filled with boos and chants of "Let him play!"

The moment I reach the coaching staff, all of them are shouting at me. I lock eyes with Coach North and growl, "Nine slapped your sister's ass. I... I'm sorry, Coach." He gives me an empathetic nod and helps me out of some of my gear as he leads me to the locker rooms.

“Thank you,” he mutters, low and steady. “I saw it happen. While Scar can protect herself, I’ll make sure his life’s a living hell after what he did.”

“Thanks, Coach,” I sigh, the entire interaction flooding back to me. If it wasn’t for the extra gear, I would’ve killed him. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Let’s get you out of here before press. I’ll take care of it.” His steady, reassuring voice calms me.

Once I’m changed into sweatpants and a hoodie, security escorts me to my car. I hesitate—I shouldn’t be driving—and ask one of the attendants to order a rideshare. I’ll get my car in the morning. Within five minutes, an unmarked sedan pulls up. Not a brand-name service.

“Mr. Campbell, my name is Trevor. I’ll be your driver for the evening.” I glance back at security, and they nod. I blow out a long breath and I slide into the backseat, hating I’m being chauffeured, even if it’s the safest option. If his front windows were tinted, I could sit in the front with him. He could help me forget what happened by talking about anything from hockey to his family to how we’ve had drier weather than normal. Instead, I’m on time-out. I lost my shit on a player for being inappropriate with a woman. She’s part of his team, for fuck’s sake. If I’m being honest with myself, I still would’ve lost my shit on him—even if it wasn’t Scarlett. Group therapy is going to be a joy on Monday.

When the league required therapy for all athletes, I chose a group with three guys who didn’t play hockey. My sister studied psychology and drilled into me the importance of attending therapy. I wouldn’t be able to work on myself if it was a damn pissing match. The guys in my group are more like friends now. Ronan is quiet but has a great sense of humour. Will is constantly complaining about his PR manager, but I’m certain it’s because he wants to bend her over. Lucas is always making sure we’re inclusive. Truth be told, I was a fucking asshole before I met

them. I don't want to be that guy, and hate that I'll have to tell them what happened. They might look at me differently—like a monster. I'm out for the game, but what if the league slaps me with a suspension? My team needs me.

Scarlett didn't need me, but there was no way in hell I'd stand by and watch one of her players disrespect her that way. I selfishly want to be needed by her.

Fucking hell, is this the shit my therapist has been spewing for months? A saviour complex?

Once I'm home, the adrenaline crash kicks in. I take a quick shower before taking a nap, hoping to wake before the game is over. The turning of a key wakes me, and I'm back on high alert.

"Russ?" my favourite person in the world asks hesitantly, stepping into my apartment.

"Hey, Red," I shout back, albeit groggily. "What are you doing here?"

My heart leaps into my throat at the sound of her tossing her keys and the thump of what must be her purse on the counter. "What were you thinking?" she seethes before she's even in view.

I make my way to the kitchen, and the moment I see Scarlett, I barrel into her, nearly knocking her over as I take her into my arms. "Fuck, Red, I'm so sorry."

"It's... okay," she manages, muffled against my chest. I accidentally bump her suitcase and it clatters to the ground.

I pull back to ask, "What are you doing here?"

“Rach bribed your friend for your spare key. I had to make sure you were okay, since you weren’t picking up your phone.”

Bringing her back into me, I sigh, “I’m so sorry. I don’t know what happened, but I’m so fucking happy you’re here.”

“I need a shower—without an incredibly attractive hockey goalie trying to feel me up. I’ll stay with you tonight if I can shower alone and we’re both wearing clothes.”

“Of course.” I can’t help asking, “Who won?”

“You did, but that’s not why I’m here.”

I can’t help my heart swelling and take her face in my hands, kissing her as if I’ll never feel her lips on mine again. How is she even more beautiful than when we video chatted just two days ago? Having her safe and wrapped in my arms brings me more peace than I’ve felt in months.

Scarlett pulls back and places her palms on my chest. “Maybe I should go.”

“Go? Why?”

Her eyes search mine, and she stops and starts to reply a few times before settling on, “We shouldn’t do this, especially after last night and what happened on the ice today. We’re friends and?—”

“No,” I growl. “We’re not friends. It’s a fucking label we slapped on this to explain how every morning you wake up to a text from me, and a few hours later I wake up to a voice memo from you. We start and end our days with each other. We spend hours every day talking. You’ve told me your secrets and I’ve told you mine, and there is no one in this world I care about more than you.”

“That’s what friends do, Russ.” She sighs and chews on her bottom lip.

“Fine, you’ve got me there, but does your heart skip a beat every time you see a message from me?” She doesn’t reply, and I press on. “Do you get wet thinking about how I’d properly fuck you if you were mine?” Her eyes widen as she sucks in a breath and I can’t help a small smirk pulling at my lips. “Do you miss me all fucking day, and the moment you hear my voice, you finally relax? You know the answer is yes to all of it. You don’t want to be my friend, you want me as much as I want you. The only reason we’re friends is because I can’t have you.”

I take a step back and lean against the counter, folding my arms over my chest. She rubs her hands down her face and lets out a deep sigh. I could lose her for this, but I’m done dancing around everything. I’d risk it all to be with her.

“What do you want me to say? That I’ll quit my job and move here to be with you? Because I won’t... but I also can’t lose you.” She steps toward me and places my hand over her heart. “I love you, Russ, but we can’t be more than friends.”

All of the air leaves my lungs. She’s my dream girl, the once-in-a-lifetime person you meet and are supposed to spend the rest of your days with. And she loves me. “We’ve always been more than friends.” I lift her by her waist and twist to set her on the counter. She squeaks as I set her down. As I step between her legs, I admit, “I’m yours, Red.”

“You’re going to break my heart.”

“No.” I lean in to press a soft kiss to her neck and whisper against her skin, “When it comes to you, I have exactly one goal in mind: to keep you.”

My phone vibrates on the counter and my instinct is to answer it—it’s usually Scarlett. With my girl here, her hands resting on my sides, there isn’t a single damn

reason to see who's calling. It stops, but as I'm kissing up to her jaw, it buzzes again.

"You should get that," she breathes, fisting my shirt and pulling me closer.

"It isn't you calling, so whoever it is doesn't matter."

"They'll probably keep calling. It could be Berkeley or one of the coaches."

"Fine," I groan and step away from her to answer it. Unfortunately, she's right and it's her brother calling. "Hey, Coach."

"Fucking hell, Campbell! We've been trying to reach you for hours. Smith was hospitalized and the league is asking for a suspension. We're trying to keep it to ten games, but Québec is asking to pull you for the rest of the season."

"I hit him with my twig for fuck's sake. He'll be fine."

"It was your skate. The blade nicked him and he lost a lot of blood."

"No, I missed," I insist, raking my hand through my hair, recalling how my gear got in the way.

"You did, but when you were pulled away from him, you sliced into his neck. We've been reviewing the footage, and it was an accident, but the league is taking it seriously."

"What about what he did with Scarlett?"

She whisper-shouts, "I'm okay." I press my finger to her lips, not wanting her brother to suspect she's here. While I don't want to hide from him, now isn't the time to divulge that I'm in love with his sister.

“His team will take care of it; there was video of that as well. My concern lies with you and your career. We’ll sort this out, but for now, try to stay home and avoid all press. We don’t want to add fuel to the fire.”

“Understood. Thanks, Coach.”

“Get some rest, we’ll talk in the morning.”

We hang up and I rest my forehead on Scarlett’s. “He’s hospitalized.”

“I heard,” she sighs. “It was an accident, but you shouldn’t have attacked him in the first place.”

“He touched you,” I seethe, a rumble vibrating my chest.

“I’m a big girl, bestie,” she teases, pulling back and bracing her hands on my shoulders. “I can handle myself. I’ve worked in a male-dominated field all of my life. An ass grab or smack comes with the territory.”

“The fuck it does! No one should ever touch you without your consent.”

“You’re right.” Scarlett closes the distance and kisses me. It’s soft and gentle, not the playful licks and nips I’m used to with her. She speaks against my lips, “I only want you to touch me.”

CHAPTER 9

SCARLETT

A growl erupts from Russ' chest as he grips my ass, bringing me impossibly closer. He wraps my legs around his waist and lifts me off the counter as if I weigh nothing. Keeping my lips on his, I'm unsure where he's going, but I can only assume it's his bedroom.

He sets me down in front of his ensuite, and I whimper the moment he breaks our kiss to ask, "Can I shower with you?"

"Is this really the best idea?"

His lips tilt up in a smirk, little crinkles appearing next to his eyes. "Probably not, but we both know if you take a shower alone, you'll overthink this."

Excitement swirls in my core; I've never seen him naked. He's sent me shirtless photos before, even ones where he's only in boxer briefs. Never completely naked. While I work out four days a week, my body is significantly softer than his. It's intimidating.

"Okay," I concede.

"I was serious when I said no one should touch you without your consent, Red. If you're worried about this"—he gestures between us—"I won't touch you."

“It isn’t that I don’t want you to.” I chew on my lip and inhale a deep breath. “I’m scared of losing you.”

Russ tucks my hair behind my ear and keeps his fingers cupped behind my neck. “You’ll never lose me.”

“You don’t know that. We both have grueling travel schedules.”

“Which we’ve dealt with these past few months. What are you really afraid of?” He brushes my cheek with his thumb, grounding me.

“I haven’t been with anyone since the night we spent together. I... I don’t want anyone else, Russ. I’m not like Rachel, who can detach herself emotionally from sex. If we sleep together, it would be more for me. I don’t enjoy one-night stands.”

Leaning in, he brushes a soft kiss to my cheek and whispers, “You’re my favourite person, Red. Nothing about you and me is temporary.” My breath catches at his admission. As he pulls back, I’m lost in his chocolate brown eyes. “I haven’t been with anyone since you either, but you could never be a one-night stand. I only had a night with you, and I’ve been yours ever since. I’m more interested in having something real with you than sleeping with you. You want to come? You know I’ll be on my knees in a second to taste you again. But I’ll never push for more if you aren’t ready.”

He’s my person, the one I trust more than anyone. It’s about time I trust him with my heart. A lump forms in my throat as I will back my tears.

“Come on. Let’s get your ‘thinking shower’ started.” He tugs his shirt off by the nape of the neck and tosses it to the ground, then turns the knob for the shower. He’s so damn beautiful, I can’t stop staring. “When you walked in, you said you wanted to take a shower alone. My worst fear is you’ll step inside and realise I’m not worth the

trouble. But this isn't about me—it's your choice."

"Russ," I breathe. "You're absolutely worth the trouble. I'm scared of losing my best friend, but also if we shower together, then you'll see me naked, and I certainly don't look like..." I gesture up and down his body.

Russ barks out a laugh. "I certainly hope not, but you've forgotten, I've already seen you naked."

"No, you haven't."

"Maybe not all of you, but you're acting as if I haven't had my face between your legs. More than anything, I want you to be comfortable here, so if you want to shower solo, I'll leave you to it."

He takes my hand and presses a kiss to my palm. My heart swells as my breath hitches and any excuse I've come up with is utterly pointless. He told me I'm his favourite person, but he's also mine, and there isn't a single part of me that can deny how much I want him. I slide my hand down to his chest and walk him backwards into the shower. The water is the perfect temperature—not scalding but hot enough for steam to fill the space. I don't give a fuck that I'm still wearing my clothes, taking his face in my hands and kissing him, loving the feel of his expertly trimmed beard under my fingertips. He chuckles against my lips, and I can't help smiling against his.

"What do you want, Red?"

"You," I whimper, dropping to my knees and hooking my fingers into his now-soaked sweatpants. I don't tug them down, wanting his permission.

Russ brushes my hair away from my face then covers my hands with his. "If we do this, I get to keep you after."

“Keep me?”

“Yeah,” he laughs. “Keep you. We can figure it out together when my cock isn’t aching for you to touch me, but I need you to admit we’re not just friends. I won’t be your fuck-buddy, Red.”

It would be difficult, but not impossible. “We’re friends,” I carefully admit. “But I want more too.”

“Then I don’t want you on your knees.”

“One of my players smacked my ass tonight. You didn’t hesitate. Mere seconds later, you were on him, ready to defend my honor. In that moment, you were on your knees for me. Now, it’s my turn.”

“That’s not how this works,” he groans.

“Why not? I won’t be shamed for wanting to see the elusive piercing you claim to have.”

Russ releases his hold on me, and I tug down his soaked sweats to find a single piercing through the tip of his cock. “Just the one for now.”

“Why just one?”

“You don’t remember? I told you I’ll get a piercing for every month I don’t see you. The minute you told me you were hired by Québec City, I checked the game schedule, then made an appointment.” His cock is long and thick and will probably break me. Still, it has to be one of the most romantic gestures I’ve ever experienced. “I’ll be adding my ladder once you leave to cover the rest of the season.”

“If I say you have a beautiful cock, is that weird?”

“No,” he chuckles. “It’s healed, but my piercer recommends a condom for anal. Otherwise, every inch of me is yours.”

I’ve never had this kind of power. “Show me,” I breathe. He takes my chin in his hand and guides me to stand. “What are you doing?”

“Showing my girl she’s mine.”

Russ presses me against the shower wall and, in an instant, his lips are on mine. I whimper on contact. So many nights I imagined the next time I would see him. None of my fantasies could compare to feeling his hard body against me, or the rough claiming of my mouth. He tugs my shirt off me, and the thump of it hitting the floor echoes against the walls.

As he drops to his knees, he hooks his fingers in my waistband as I did for him moments ago, and with a shaky breath insists, “Tell me to stop and I will. I love you, Scarlett. We can stop at any time and it won’t change how I feel about you.”

He never calls me by my name. Ever. I do the work for him, dragging down my sopping wet pants to my ankles and stepping out of them. I unhook my bra and slip it off my shoulders, letting it join our mess of wet clothes.

Kissing my stomach, he whispers, “Even more beautiful than I remember.” He shifts until his back hits the wall and stretches his legs out, patting his lap. A smirk tilts his lips, and as I climb onto his lap, I grip his cock in anticipation of lining myself up for what will likely be the best sex of my life. Instead, this adorably sweet man swats my hand away and pulls me close. While I’m straddling him, his hard cock pressed between us, he holds me tight, breathing me in.

“I told you I needed a shower,” I joke, hoping to make light of all of it.

“I don’t fucking care,” he sighs against me, kissing my shoulder. His lips travel up to my neck and my breath is uneven. “I missed you every day since I left your hotel room.”

The water beats onto my back and I can’t take it another moment, blurting, “I’m on the pill, and we’ve been accidentally exclusive for months.”

“Does it matter? If I came deep inside you and you ended up pregnant, I’d take care of you and our child. We’re not strangers. But until you’re ready for that step, birth control is a must. Your career comes first. I don’t speak empty words. You know the league requires therapy—I’m doing the work. I’d never suggest being inside you bare unless I was ready for potential consequences.”

I lift up and reach between us, guiding his cock inside me. Only an inch, just like he told me to do last night. I slide down another, relishing the stretch.

“Calisse ,” I mutter, mostly to myself.

“Sorry, I don’t speak French.”

“Oh, sorry! It slips out after living in Québec for the last ten years. It is just a swear.”

“It’s hot. Any time you want to talk dirty to me in French, you have my full permission.”

I can’t take it another second. I sit, sinking onto him until his cock is fully buried inside me. It’s too much, I’m too full. With his strong arms keeping me close, I whisper, “Je t’aime. ”

“What does that mean?”

“Oh, um, just that it feels good,” I lie, but the guilt tugs at my chest. “Actually...” I pull back and brush his wet hair off his forehead. “It means I love you.”

A wide grin splits his face with my favourite dimples popping at the corners. “I know.”

“Then why did you ask,” I chuckle, playfully smacking his chest. “You said you don’t know French.”

“Everyone knows what je t’aime means. I just wanted to hear you say it.”

“You’re such an asshole,” I laugh, but my giggles are cut short as he rolls my hips and presses deeper inside me.

“Yeah, but I’m your asshole.”

Russ continues to rock me on his cock as he meets each movement with his own thrust. The friction on my clit is incredible, and I can’t help the sighed moans slipping from my lips. He captures my mouth with his, silencing my cries, and I’ve never felt this close to someone before. My heightened emotions building inside me spill over, and I let myself fall—savouring every second of it.

“Fuck, baby, you’re too tight. We can’t do this here. There’s no point in taking a shower when I’m just going to make a mess of your beautiful pussy.” He lifts me off him, helping me stand, and my pussy is all but screaming at me. Once he’s up, he turns off the water and tosses me over his shoulder with a sharp smack to my ass. “You deserve better than shower sex, Red.”

“Can I at least have a towel?”

“What’s the point?” He continues into his bathroom and tosses me onto his bed. My hair whips across my cheek—definitely not sexy. I attempt to recover, brushing it away from my face, but the damage is done.

“Seriously, Russ? Let me dry off first.”

He licks up the top of my thigh, groaning, “I’d rather clean you up myself.”

The moment his tongue meets my pussy, my back arches off the bed and I grip the sheets like a lifeline. “You were inside me,” I protest, despite me not wanting him to stop.

“You think I care?” He nips at my clit, and whatever sound I scream out is unintelligible. “You’re mine, Scarlett. I want every part of you to taste like me.”

“That’s— ah —a bit possessive of you.”

“I don’t give a fuck, baby. I warned you... after this, I’m keeping you.”

He dives back in, licking and sucking while driving two fingers inside me, curling them right where I need him. I close my eyes, savouring every stroke as my core tightens, aching for release. My orgasm is almost within reach as he continues the same pace until I fall apart for him.

“You’re mine, Red,” he growls against me, and I whimper at his words.

There’s no denying he’s right. Every inch of me is buzzing as my pussy pulses around his fingers. He doesn’t let up, ready to pull another from me, and I selfishly let him. The second is like an aftershock, tearing through me just as strongly as the first.

My heart is racing and I manage, “I need you,” through my laboured breaths.

“I’m not going to last long once I’m inside you again,” he admits, pressing a kiss to the inside of my thigh.

“I don’t care. We have all night.”

There’s an immediate energy shift at my words. The playful edge between us fades into something heavier. We both know the truth—we really only have tonight. I’ll be on a plane in the morning and I won’t be able to see him for months. Long distance relationships aren’t ideal, but he’s more than worth the effort. We’ve been kidding ourselves, calling this a friendship, when it’s always been more.

“You’re right.” Russ kisses up my body until his lips are on mine. His cock slips inside me with ease, but he takes his time helping me adjust. His thrusts are slow and deep, keeping a steady rhythm that has my third orgasm building within mere minutes. His lips never leave mine as he reaches for a pillow, placing it under my ass, and presses his palm on my lower abdomen. The added pressure is perfection and I shatter, coming hard all over his cock and soaking the pillow beneath me. Embarrassment washes over me but he assures, “That was so fucking hot, baby. I want you to do it again.”

“I ruined your pillow,” I chuckle against his lips.

“Then I’ll buy another.” He trails kisses down my neck and thrusts harder, nipping at my shoulder. “I’m close, but I’m not coming until you do. Destroy every sheet in my house if you need to, I want your sweet cum branding every one of them by the time I’m done with you.” He reaches between us and teases my clit with his thumb; it’s enough to send me over the edge. “That’s right, baby, I know you’re close. Show me you’re mine.”

My vision is spotty and I cry out, “ Yours ,” as I come. His own release is right behind mine as he pushes deep and holds, his cock twitching inside me.

Russ waits before pulling out, and part of me never wants him to. He feels too good, too mine . In this moment, nothing matters but the two of us; the outside world doesn't exist. When he finally slips his cock out of me, I gasp at the immediate emptiness.

As he presses two fingers inside me, he growls, “No empty words tonight. You're mine, Red.”

“I know,” I breathe, but he drives deeper. “Should we take that shower now?”

“There's no point in cleaning up.” He drags them out and I grip his wrist, bringing his coated fingers to my mouth and greedily suck them clean. The mix of the two of us coats my tongue, and I'm already so turned on I need him again. Closing the distance, he roughly kisses me and mutters against my lips, “I knew we'd taste good together.”

CHAPTER 10

RUSS

I wake to the sounds of the bustling city several flights below my apartment and reach for Scarlett. Her side of the bed is cold, and panic rises within me. My eyes fly wide and there's no sign of her. I throw the sheets off me and rush to the bathroom—her wet clothes are gone from the shower. Fuck . I slip on a pair of boxer briefs and check the kitchen, where I find a piece of paper on the island.

Morning, bestie!

Had to catch my early morning flight and I didn't want to wake you.

I'll call you when I land.

xoxo,

Red

While I hate that she left without saying goodbye, I fucking love that she signed the note Red . I check my phone for the first time since last night and see dozens of missed texts and calls. I click on the group chat with Ronan, Lucas, and Will.

Will

Fucking hell, Campbell!

Ronan

I just watched the footage. Are you okay, Russ?

Lucas

What happened?

Will

He nearly killed a guy.

Lucas

Shit, I just saw it. Russ, are you okay, mate?

Russ

Hey guys! I'm sure we'll have to talk about it later with Doc, but Smith smacked Scarlett's ass and I lost my shit.

Will

I heard you might be out the rest of the season. That's fucking bullshit!

Lucas

She's his physical therapist, there's no excuse for him touching her.

Ronan

How is Scarlett? Is she okay?

She stayed with me last night.

Will

I fucking called it! You two aren't just friends.

We were.

Lucas

Were? Past tense?

Ronan

Fucking finally! I have to get to practice but I'll catch up later.

I'll talk to you guys later tonight. I have to check in with my team

Lucas

Good luck!

I have a missed call from my agent, but I'm not in the right headspace to deal with it right now. After a tall glass of water, I make my way back to my bedroom and slide under the sheets that still smell like Scarlett.

I wake a few hours to my phone vibrating, and can't help my smile that it's my girl. "Hey, Red," I answer through a yawn.

“I saw the news. I’m so sorry, Russ.”

I sit up straighter. “What news?”

“What have you been doing? It’s everywhere.”

“I was asleep. What news?” I repeat, more sharply this time.

Scarlett lets out a long sigh. “I think it’s better you see for yourself.”

I click the speaker icon on my phone and spot several news alerts on my phone, all of them saying the same thing—I’m out for the rest of the season. “Fuck,” I groan and scroll to find a statement from my team.

“I’m so sorry. This is all my fault. If I?—”

“No,” I snap, then take a steadying breath. “None of this is your fault. I shouldn’t have gone after him. I need to call my agent. Can I call you back later?”

“Of course. We don’t have a game tonight, but I might be with one of my players.”

“I’ll call you as soon as I’m done. Love you.”

Scarlett sucks in a breath, and it takes me a moment to register what I said. So many times, the confession nearly slipped from me. There were no empty words or promises last night—I’m hers.

“I love you too,” she sighs, but there’s still a smile in her voice.

My heart swells at her admission. We hang up and I call my agent. Unfortunately, the reports are true. Smith is facing a worse fate than I am—he’s being released from his

team. Scarlett mentioned yesterday that this wasn't the first time someone touched her, and my blood boils at the thought of anyone putting up with that kind of harassment. There's no excuse, and while I can't beat the shit out of every man who touched her, I won't sit idly by when there's something I can do about it. I pull up my group chat with the boys and send off a quick message.

What are your thoughts on an awareness campaign?

Will

Awareness for what? Like saving sea turtles?

Workplace harassment.

Lucas

Doesn't that already exist?

I'm sure it does but I can't recall anything after we sign with a team.

Will

Elle put something together before the season started. One of the players of another team assaulted one of our cheerleaders, and she worked with the team owners to ensure there are harsher penalties for sexual harassment. Want me to have her give you a call?

That would be great, thanks!

The next few hours are packed with video calls, meeting with my team's public relations staff, lawyers, and my agent. They're all supportive of me working with the

league to bring awareness to sexual harassment and assault in the workplace, even with my suspension. As we hang up, an incoming call from an unknown number with the same area code as Will pops up. Hoping it's Elle, I answer. "Hello?"

"Hi, is this Russell Campbell?" Will's always described Elle as being an ice queen, but the woman on the other end sounds anything but. While she's professional, there's a lightness in her tone. Maybe it isn't Elle?

"Speaking," I hesitantly reply.

"Hey, this is Elle Davis. I'm one of the media relations coordinators for the New York Cougars. Will Darling asked me to give you a call."

"Yes! Thank you so much. He mentioned you spearheaded a sexual harassment awareness campaign. To my knowledge, one doesn't exist for my hockey league, and I'd love to talk to you a bit more about what you helped implement for football, so I can pitch it to them."

"I heard about what happened with the player from Québec City. I'm glad the team has released him. That's part of what we pitched to the football league—harsher punishment than just a fine. If there's no consequence to their actions, people do it again. The world saw what he did, and nearly all of the comments on social media were calling for him to lose his contract. That isn't always the case."

"So, what can I do to help?"

"Other than trying to murder a man with your skate?" she chuckles.

"I wasn't trying to murder him," I huff, though it's absolutely a lie. I was blinded by rage last night.

“Rumour has it this wasn’t the first time you’ve come to her rescue. While we all love a good fight on the ice, violence is never the answer.”

“I know,” I grumble.

“Your HR director likely has something in place, but there’s always room for improvement. A lot of leagues—from rugby to ice hockey—have required therapy for all players. The ones that do have lower incidents of assault in general. My suggestion, if you’re looking to shine a light on what happened more broadly, is to promote a proactive approach and normalize therapy. It’ll take the spotlight off the incident itself and direct it to something actionable.”

“That’s a great idea.” The last thing I want is Scarlett to deal with any added scrutiny; there are fans who will likely blame her for their favourite player being let go.

“I’m about to step into a meeting, but if you text me your email, I can send you everything I have,” she offers, and I’m still surprised Will has issues with her when she’s been nothing but helpful.

“Thank you, truly.” We say goodbye and hang up. I feel lighter than I have all day, with a renewed sense of purpose. I text Will, thanking him for connecting me with Elle, then shoot off a message to Elle with my email.

I check the time, and there’s still several hours before group therapy. Coach told me to stay put, but there’s no harm in taking a quick walk down the street to my favourite sushi restaurant. I call and place a to-go order, then make my way outside. The moment the door swings open to the crisp air, I’m blinded by camera flashes.

“Is Scarlett North your girlfriend?”

“Are you dating your coach’s sister?”

“Is your girlfriend pregnant?”

I shield my eyes from the bright lights and duck back inside my building without answering their questions. If the press thinks Scarlett’s my girlfriend, it’s only a matter of time before Coach finds out. I rush into my apartment and type out a quick message to Scarlett.

There was paparazzi outside of my apartment asking about you.

There are dancing bubbles for a moment, but then her name appears as an incoming call. I can’t answer fast enough. “Hey, Red.”

“Hi, um, why were they asking about me?”

“One asked if you were my girlfriend, another asked if you were knocked up.”

“What?” she squeaks.

“Yeah.” I rub the back of my neck and wince. “I didn’t tell them anything.”

“Oh.” The simple word is laced with disappointment.

“I’m used to sports reporters asking about my dating life during post-game interviews, but these guys seemed more like the assholes you see chasing after celebrities. Our relationship is none of their business.”

“And if it was a sports reporter? What would you have told them?”

“The truth. I know we didn’t talk about what the rest of the season is going to look like, but I’m not sliding backward. I want to tell Coach about us. Hell, I’d scream it to the world from the rooftops that you’re my girl. But I won’t if you’re not one hundred

percent okay with going public.”

Scarlett huffs a small laugh. “You really want to tell everyone we’re dating?”

“Why not? It isn’t as if we’re casually dating, Red. I’ve never been a fan of labels. We’re not just dating, we’re not friends with benefits, you’re mine. There’s no one else and hasn’t been since we met.”

“So... I’m your girlfriend?”

“Yeah,” I chuckle. “You’re my girlfriend.”

She takes a deep breath. “We’re really doing this?”

“It’ll be hard, but yes. I’ll have flexibility with my schedule since I can’t play. We’ll make it work.”

“Okay. Oh, shit, I’m sorry, I have to run. But if you want me to tell my brother, I will. Though, I suspect he already knows if there’s rumours circulating.”

“Whatever you want.”

“I love you, bestie.” The song in her voice returns, and I can’t help my smile.

“Love you too.”

We hang up, and I book the first flight to Québec City. I’ll be travelling all day, but I don’t want to spend another night without her in my arms.

CHAPTER 11

SCARLETT

THREE MONTHS LATER

I'm grateful the media frenzy around the accident was short-lived, but I hate that the league didn't make an exception for Russ to be in the playoffs. Vancouver is playing Québec City in the conference championship—it's game seven, and could be one of the biggest games of his career. Instead, he's had to watch his team advance, game after game, without him. Their goalie is good, but not as good as Russ, and it's killing him to not be on the ice.

As I'm helping Edwards through a few stretches to help with his groin strain, Dean Thomas, our team's owner, knocks on my open door. "Hey, North. Have you seen who's playing tonight?"

"Yes, I spoke with the strength and conditioning coach yesterday. Lawrence is good to go."

"No," he chuckles, pulling out his phone. He taps it a few times and shows me the Caribous, including Russ. "Your boy is playing today."

"What?" I shriek. "He's supposed to be out the whole season, including the playoffs."

Dean smirks and tucks his phone in the breast pocket of his blazer. "He never should've been suspended for more than a few games. So, I made a call."

“We’ll probably lose tonight,” Edwards huffs, and I draw my lips into my mouth to smother my smile.

“Probably, but it was the right thing to do. See you out there.” Dean points to Edwards and walks out.

“Okay, is it feeling better?”

Edwards nods, and I scramble to pull my phone from my back pocket, only to find no missed calls or texts from Russ. Why wouldn’t he tell me he’s playing?

The next few hours, I’m on edge, excited for the game but worried about Russ. As the guys begin their stretches and skating drills, I can’t take my eyes off him. While he’s fun and playful off the ice, the moment he’s in his goal, he’s all business.

Berkeley skates over to him, gripping behind Russ’s neck and tapping helmets. He then makes his way to the glass where Rachel is sitting. She blows him a kiss, and I can’t help but laugh at them. In the years I’ve known her, I never thought anyone could tame her. He matches her crazy, and I couldn’t be happier for them.

The guys leave the ice and, once the ice is resurfaced, the players are announced. Even with the majority of the stadium filled with Québec fans, it erupts in cheers as Russ is announced. He’s done so much for the league these past few months, helping them adopt the same therapy requirement other sports do. I’m so fucking proud of him and am grateful he’ll be able to play tonight.

I’m checking on Rivers, who took a nasty hit to his shoulder last game, when the roar of the stadium erupts with no other announcement. I glance up to find Russ skating toward us. “What are you doing?”

He tugs off his helmet, revealing his wide, devilish grin—complete with a dimple.

“Come here, Red.”

I move closer to the divider, and it takes everything in me to not hop over it. “Why didn’t you tell me you were playing?”

“I wanted it to be a surprise. Now, are you going to kiss me or do I need to wait for the damn kiss cam?”

I lean over and grip a fistful of his jersey to pull him closer. The moment his lips touch mine, I melt. “Good luck, bestie,” I whisper against him, and when we break apart, I notice we’re on the jumbotron. My cheeks heat, and he glances behind him, chuckling when he sees it too. He kisses me again, then skates over to his place between the pipes.

The first period is stressful, the Caribou defense not letting the puck anywhere near Russ. They’ve scored on us twice, and two of my guys have ended up in the sin bin. They pull off the ice and there are various messages on the jumbotron wishing people happy birthday or anniversaries. I don’t pay any attention to it, checking on Edwards and Prince.

Once the boys are back on the ice, there are more cheers than usual. I look for Russ, confident he’s pulling another stunt, only to see the last message on the big screen is a marriage proposal from Berkeley:

WILL YOU MARRY ME, RACH?

LOVE, BEAV

Rachel is on her feet, hand over her mouth, as he skates over to her. I pull out my phone and open my camera app, zooming in to record him dropping to one knee. They’ve only known one another for a few months, but she nods excitedly and one of

the players' girlfriends hands her a ring box. She opens it and screams, then places her hand on the glass. He does the same, and she slips it on her finger. It's on the wrong hand, and the wife sitting to her other side whispers to her. Rach puts it on the correct finger as Berkeley skates off, blowing her a kiss. While I'm happy for my friend who adores grand gestures, my hope is if Russ ever decides to propose, it's not during a game—there's too much pressure, even if I'd probably say yes.

The next period is quiet, but the boys are slowing down, letting Vancouver score three goals in the past ten minutes. Edwards slips past Berkeley along the wall; I wince as he shoots the puck. Russ stops it with his left skate, and it ricochets back into play. Berkeley snags it, chasing it down the ice and passing to Graves. My goalie is out of his mind, leaving the goal unattended. Graves effortlessly hits in their sixth goal of the game. The energy has shifted, and the coaches are pissed—there's no coming back from this.

As predicted, Vancouver wins after scoring on us two more times. As much as it was a kind gesture on Dean's part, his call cost us the game. The players congratulate Russ with helmet taps, then are celebrated for their win. I'll have my work cut out for me tomorrow with a few of my guys freshly injured with new sprains. With a final glance over at Russ, his eyes are on me, his dimpled smile lighting up the stadium. He may have won the game, but this man stole my heart the day we met.

After wrapping up a few administrative tasks, I head home, disappointed Russ won't be staying with me. The team is out celebrating, and as much as I'd love to join them, I'm exhausted and wouldn't be able to keep up with them—they'd drink me under the table. He'll stay at the hotel with the team after, so I take a quick shower and slide into bed, hoping to catch up on a bit of reading. I'm three chapters into a billionaire romance Rachel insisted I read when there's a knock at my door. I throw back the covers and groan—it's likely my neighbour Cheryl needing something. I answer it and gasp.

“Hey, Red.”

I jump into his arms, wrapping my legs around his waist. He holds me tight and I breathe him in. His body wash is damn catnip for me, the crisp, clean scent always grounds me. “Hey, bestie. What are you doing here?”

Russ walks me into my apartment and locks the door. He doesn’t set me down until we’re in my bedroom. “I wanted to celebrate with my girl.” Taking a seat at the edge of the bed, he still doesn’t let me go.

“Oh yeah? And what’s your idea of celebrating?”

“Do you still have the whisky I sent you a while back?”

I nod and reply, “In the kitchen.”

He kisses my neck and a soft moan escapes me. “Go grab your waterproof blanket. I’ll be back in a minute.”

I climb off his lap, and he kisses my forehead before leaving for the kitchen. I pull out the blanket from my closet and lay it on the bed, excited for whatever he has in store for me. He returns with the bottle and two glasses, setting them on my nightstand. Without a word, he retrieves my Campbell jersey hanging in my closet and tosses it onto the bed. Dropping to his knees, he takes his time dragging my black and white buffalo plaid pyjama pants down my legs, and I step out of them. He does the same with my black cotton panties and I’m regretting not wearing something sexier—not that he’d truly care. I take off my top and toss it to the ground, and he presses a soft kiss to my belly.

“Fuck, baby, you’re so beautiful.”

I blush at his praise as he stands and slips his jersey over my head. “You’re not so bad yourself,” I tease, my gaze raking down his body. He’s wearing a basic tee and jeans, but he’s truly the most gorgeous man I’ve ever known. “Let me guess, you’re going to fuck me while I’m wearing your number?”

“Yup,” he replies, popping the ‘p,’ and I can’t help laughing. It’s cut short when he pulls me to him by my lower back. He slips his hand lower, squeezing my ass. “Did you buy more condoms since the last time I was here?” I bite my lip and nod. “Good girl.”

“Top drawer, next to my toys.”

With a playful smack to my ass, he releases me and commands, “On the bed, baby. Hands on the headboard. You know the rules.” He winks, and I crawl up the bed, gripping the headboard.

Each piece of clothing hits the floor with a thud as he undresses, and I can’t help glancing over my shoulder at him. True to his word, he got additional piercings. While his intention was one for each month we couldn’t be together, Berkeley convinced him to get six. We’ve only had sex a few times since he got them, and I can’t wait until they’re fully healed and we don’t have to use protection.

Russ slowly strokes his cock, swiping his thumb over the head to wipe away his precum. He prowls toward me and slides between my legs until his face is an inch from my pussy. “Since we’re celebrating, you’re going to give me three, just like this.”

“Three?” I rasp, breathless already.

“Three,” he confirms, voice dripping with dark promise. “Now, sit.” He grips my thighs and pulls me onto his mouth, diving his tongue into my pussy. Using the

headboard as leverage, I roll my hips, loving the scratch of his trimmed beard against me. Each flick of his tongue and moan against my clit brings me closer to the edge. My legs begin to shake, my breath unsteady. There's no way I'll handle three. "You're right there, baby. Fucking soak me." At his words, I shatter, my orgasm crashing over me in waves. My vision blurs as my core tightens, every inch of me radiating with pleasure.

"I need you," I breathe, barely above a whisper.

"Not until I take two more from you."

"I... I can't. It's too much." I attempt to lift off him, but he holds me in place. "Russ!"

"Yes, baby?"

"Don't you yes, baby me! My legs are jelly, and if you have plans of twisting me up like a pretzel today, I can't take two more."

"Fine," he groans, loosening his grip on my thighs but doesn't let go. "One more. I need to condition my beard."

I let out a full laugh, shaking my head. "You win one game and you think you can do whatever you want?"

"That's the general idea."

"What am I going to do with you?"

"Live with me this summer." He licks firm circles around my clit, forcing a moan from me.

“I... oh... I can’t. My job.”

“Now might be a good time to tell you they’re negotiating my trade.”

“Russ!” I shriek, but it quickly becomes a moan as he nips at me. “Wh-where are you being traded?”

“I’ll tell you once you come for me.” It never fails—he always gets what he wants. Then again, I always let him.

CHAPTER 12

RUSS

I flip Scarlett onto her back, and a giggle bubbles out of her. Spreading her legs wide, I lick up her centre, chuckling against her swollen clit. She gasps as I press two fingers inside her, driving them deep before curling them just right as I swirl my tongue around her clit. A low chuckle rumbles in my chest when she greedily reaches for me, tangling her fingers in my hair and pulling me closer.

I pick up my pace, and as I suck hard, she cries out, “Right there, don’t stop!” As she winds tighter, her legs shake, and I feast on her until she soaks my beard.

Finally slowing the strokes of my fingers and tongue, I murmur, “One more, Red.”

She tugs on my hair, laughing, “That wasn’t the deal.” Reaching for the pack of condoms in the nightstand, she tears one off and rips it open with her teeth. I sit up, slipping my hands under the jersey to cup my perfect breasts. Her nipples peak under my palms as I rest my cock just above her clit, shifting to rub my length against her. Each barbel swipes across her slippery clit, making her breath ragged. “Be careful,” she warns.

“I will, but I love how wet you are for me. I want to feel it before I slide that on.” I take the condom from her and roll it onto my cock, mindful of each piercing.

A wolfish grin tilts her lips as I reach for her vibrator and a small bottle of lube, setting them beside her. “What are you up to?”

“Nothing.” I pour a little whisky into one of the glasses, then take a sip. Scarlett props herself up on her elbows, and I lean in to kiss her. The rich, golden liquid slips into her mouth, and I fucking love the mix of the spicy alcohol and her release. I press my cock deep inside her in a single thrust, a moan slipping from my lips as she kisses me back harder. “Fuck, baby, you feel too good.”

As I rock in and out of her tight pussy, her kisses become desperate, like she can’t get close enough. I pull out, and she whimpers, “What’s wrong?”

“Lay back and relax.” I squirt a dollop of lube onto my cock, stroking to coat the condom, then lift her ass to tuck a pillow underneath her. Teasing her tight hole with the head of my cock, I groan, pressing in an inch. “Québec City.”

Her brows pinch. “What? Is that your new safe word or something?”

“No,” I laugh, and push in another inch. “I’m being traded here.”

“Are you serious?” she gasps as I continue to slide inside her.

“Yeah, baby.” I grab the vibrator, adding a bit more lube. “That’s why they made the call for me to play tonight.” I never mentioned a trade before, not wanting to get her hopes up. I also wanted to ensure it wouldn’t disrupt her job. We’ll need to sign paperwork with HR, and I’ll need to find another physical therapist to work with, but it’ll be worth it.

Scarlett grips the blanket as I slowly thrust the vibrator in and out of her. She’s so fucking beautiful laid out for me like this. When I turn it on, a tear slips from her eye, and I wipe it away with the pad of my thumb.

“Shit, Red, are you okay? Is it too much?”

I begin pulling the vibrator out, but she grips my wrist, keeping it in place. “No,” she breathes. “It’s not too much.”

“Then why are you crying?”

“You’re moving here.”

Cupping her cheek, I whisper, “For you.”

Scarlett covers her mouth to stifle a sob, and it’s taking everything in me to not get choked up myself. I’ve wished for something like this to happen for so long, hating how we’ve been long distance this whole time. In the next month, I’ll be able to move here and be with the woman I intend to spend the rest of my life with.

“Guess we’ll have to get you another sweater once the trade is complete,” I tease. “As much as I love seeing my name on your back, if I have it my way, it’ll be our name.”

“You are not proposing to me while you’re— Ahh! ” I increase the vibration of her toy, chuckling darkly as she writhes beneath me. “You’re not playing fair!”

“No, I’m playing for keeps.” With my cock buried inside her, I swirl the vibrator as I thrust it in and out of her tight, wet cunt. She’s unable to hold on a moment longer, and as her orgasm barrels through her, I praise, “That’s it, beautiful, let go for me.”

Her pussy clenches around the toy as I slowly pump into her ass. I grit out a few swears as my balls tighten and cock swells, and empty myself into the condom. We’re both a sweaty mess, struggling to catch our breath.

I’m at a loss for words, unable to properly articulate how much I love her. She’s it—my forever. The moment I pull out and remove the condom, she scrambles to climb onto my lap, wrapping her arms around me. We stay there, locked in each

other's embrace, as our breathing slows.

“Will you move in with me?”

“Of course.” I kiss her neck and whisper against her skin, “ Je t’aime , Scarlett.”

An adorable laugh bubbles out of her. “I love you too, bestie.”

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THREE YEARS LATER

Scarlett and I are attending Lucas and Bridget's wedding in Australia, and being surrounded by so much love has me itching to propose to my girl. I've been carrying her ring around for almost a year, but the right moment never presented itself.

Will and Elle are meeting us for a quick lunch and suggested a burger place that claims to serve the best in town. We grab a table, and as I'm perusing the menu, I spot a burger with caramelized onions and blue cheese and can't help but grin.

"What are you getting?" Elle asks, not looking up from the menu.

"Blue cheese burger," Scarlett and I answer at the same time.

Will turns up his nose. "Are you fucking kidding me?"

"Nope," Scarlett replies, popping the 'p.'

We place our order, and I keep Scarlett's hand in mine as Elle tells us how she was inspired by me promoting therapy for athletes. She's planning to start a non-profit to encourage all sports to adopt it as a policy, including affordable options for players' families.

Our food arrives, and I lift my burger in a toast to Scarlett. "To friends who love cheese."

She taps hers to mine and laughs, "To cheesy friends."

As she's about to take a bite, I ask, "What if I want you to be my cheesy wife instead?"

Eyes wide, she slowly lowers the burger. "Russ..."

"Yes, baby?"

"Are you..."

"Am I what? Proposing? Yes. Yes, I am." I drop to one knee beside her chair and pull out the ring box. "I've wanted to ask you hundreds of times. There will never be a perfect moment, so... will you marry me, Red?" She nods excitedly, and I slip the ring onto her finger. Cheers and applause surround us, but I don't take my eyes off her. Lucas and Ronan will give me shit for not waiting for them to be here, but I couldn't wait another second. "That's a yes, right?"

Scarlett cups my cheeks and kisses me; my heart has never felt so full. After all this time, I'll finally get to marry my best friend. "Yes," she mutters against my lips. "Of course it's a yes."

"I love you, baby."

"Je t'aime, meilleur ami. "