



Spring Break with a Slap Shot (Love Beach Spring Break Collection)

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Category: Sport

Description: Dakota Lucky Miles has it all—a coveted spot on the Charleston Renegades hockey team, a reputation as the ultimate playboy, and a lifestyle that’s all fast pucks and fleeting flings. But when a stunning, fierce-eyed blonde steps into his path, something inside him shifts.

Harmony Bradford, a no-nonsense meteorologist from Oklahoma, is looking for a little escape during her vacation—and definitely not looking for trouble. Yet when Lucky swoops in with his irresistible charm and takes it upon himself to rescue her from a vacation gone wrong, the sparks between them fly hotter than a summer storm.

Caught between the world of ice rinks and tornado warnings, can Lucky and Harmony defy the odds and make a long-distance relationship work? Or will their undeniable chemistry burn out before they even have a chance to heat up?

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My cursor hovers over the array of weather models spread across my dual monitors, but I can't focus. Not with the image of Dr. Higgins, our esteemed division head, accidentally activating the emergency alert system for a sunny, cloudless day. The booming siren had sent us all ducking under desks before we realized it was a false alarm. Now, he's sheepishly making rounds, apologizing with a red face that could rival any severe thunderstorm warning on our charts.

"Sorry about that, Storm," he mumbles as he passes my desk, using the nickname that's stuck to me like dew on grass since my first forecast nailed a hailstorm's bullseye.

"Nothing like a little adrenaline rush to wake up the office," I quip, earning an appreciative chuckle from him and a few others within earshot.

I try to return to analyzing the pressure systems dancing over the Midwest, but my concentration is broken. Instead of cold fronts and jet streams, my mind replays the scene of seasoned meteorologists scrambling like rookies during their first tornado drill. It's like watching a blooper reel of the most serious people I know, making me smirk.

I shake my head in a vain attempt to dislodge the lingering amusement.

But every time I glance at the radar, I see Dr. Higgins' flustered expression superimposed on the swirling greens and yellows. I stifle a laugh and take a deep breath, trying to refocus on the task at hand.

The buzzing of my phone pulls my attention. I glance at the screen, and a grin spreads

across my face as Marina's name lights up the display.

Marina: Counting down to a Spring Break full of sun, sand, and a serious lack of severe weather updates! (beach and cocktail emojis)

Me: Looking forward to tan lines rather than tornadoes!

I power down my computer and start disconnecting cables with methodical precision. My laptop slides into its weathered sleeve, and I tuck it under my arm.

"Night, Harmony! Have a great vacation! Don't forget your sunscreen!" calls out one of the techs over the cubicle walls.

"Thanks, but don't go chasing any storms next week while I'm out," I call back, my voice light but laced with the underlying truth that I'm already missing the thrill of the chase.

I slip on my comfortable commuter shoes. The desk is left clean, with every pen and paper in place. I love things to be in order amidst the chaotic forces of nature.

Out in the parking lot, the sun is starting to set as I slide into the driver's seat of my practical sedan.

Onward to home. Then Love Beach.

I'm excited to see Marina again after all these months. I'm definitely ready for some uninterrupted girl time and relaxation.

Ignition, air conditioning, favorite playlist—check, check, and check.

I pull out of the lot. The Bluetooth connects and Marina answers on the first ring.

"Harmony, you better not be packing any of those cardigans. Love Beach demands bikinis and sundresses!"

"Ha, the forecast does seem to favor minimal fabric," I chuckle, already picturing the soft white shores and lazy cabanas dotting the landscape. "But remember, it's me—I'll have at least one sweater for insurance."

"Girl, the only thing you need to insure is that we have enough sunscreen for your pale self," she teases.

"Speaking of protection, are you bringing that hockey player repellent, or do I need to pack some extra?" I ask, knowing full well the local team likes to roam the sands without fear of paparazzi.

"Only if you insist on deflecting every bit of flirtation coming your way," Marina quips. "Seriously though, Love Beach was the perfect pick—no distractions, just us and the waves."

"Yeah, you're right. It checked all the boxes on vacation list," I reply.

I click off the call as I pull into my driveway. My suitcase lies open, awaiting its orderly transformation. I begin with the essentials, folding each item with precision, creating neat piles. Swimsuits paired by color, shorts aligned by length, shirts buttoned up and smoothed out.

"Let's see, evening wear for potential dinners out... Check." I fold a sleek black dress.

I snap the last clasp of my suitcase shut, which is a small victory against me being a workaholic. A week off? The idea is strange, but I'm ready for some Marina-time, and honestly, I'm ready for a break from the Doppler radar.

With a huge tug and a pull, I drag the suitcase off the bed. It lands with a thud and then the silence of my apartment presses in. I'll miss this place, but the thought of early morning walks on cool sand with my best friend washes away any lingering doubts.

I know that work will survive without me. It's just something I'll have to get used to for a week. I know it's just a week, not the rest of my life. I remind myself, grabbing my toothbrush and tossing it into the side compartment of my luggage. A whole week of no predictions, no alerts, just the unpredictable ebb and flow of tides and perhaps... romance?

A smirk plays at the corners of my lips. Who am I kidding? Marina's probably got a full itinerary of marine biology fun facts planned. Which is fine, but, if anything—or anyone—crosses our path, I'm not going to turn it down. It's been far too long since I've felt the weight of a man on top of me.

I grab my jacket, sling it over my arm, and flick off the light. It's time to let loose.

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With a flick of my wrist, the puck sails past the goalie's desperate lunge and into the back of the net. Game winner, baby. The crowd erupts in a frenzy of red and black, their cheers ricocheting off the rink's walls like my heart is bouncing inside my chest.

The red light blinks, and the buzzer roars.

"Callahan scores!" The announcer's voice booms over the PA system, and I love the cheers and the sweet taste of victory.

My Charleston Renegades' teammates circle around to celebrate with me.

"That's how you do it, boys!" I shout.

Soon the cheers die down and we're about to hit the showers and head out for the night.

I'm still riding that high, so I start chirping the guys like it's my second language—which, let's be honest, it kind of is.

"You see that? Pure finesse. You could learn something from your center," I say with a grin, tossing my gloves into my locker dramatically.

"Sure, Lucky," Asher snorts, "Because hot-dogging it every chance you get is definitely what I wanna pick up."

"Go cool your ego off in the showers," Kaleb chimes in, chucking a rolled-up tape at me. It bounces off my shoulder, but I don't flinch.

"Hey, scoring game-winners is an ego boost. You should try it sometime," I quip back, catching the tape and spinning it on my finger.

"Does that big ego keep you warm in bed at night," Ryder adds, smirking from across the room, "'cause you're always alone after the game."

I waggle my eyebrows. "You know me sleeping alone at night is just because I choose to kick the ladies out before they get to comfortable there, Raines. Can't be too predictable." My phone buzzes in my pocket, the screen lighting up with a text. I ignore it for now, don't want to ruin the mystique.

"Predictable?" Asher shakes his head, laughing. "The only thing predictable about you is that you'll be the last one out of here, preening in front of the mirror."

"Got to look good for tonight's ladies," I say, flipping my hair for effect. That gets a round of jeers and someone's sweaty towel whips in my direction.

"Yeah, yeah, Casanova," Kaleb says, pulling his jersey over his head. "We heading to The Sand Dunes for a celebration beer?"

"Ah, can't tonight. Got a puck bunny already laying naked in her bed waiting for me," I lie effortlessly, hiding the fact that my bed will remain cold and empty tonight. They don't need to know the truth – that sometimes, the silence is better company than another faceless name.

"Sure you do," Ryder drawls, but there's no heat in it.

"Enjoy, but don't get yourself into a spot where you need an escape route. We will not be sober to save your ass tonight," Asher adds, grinning as he zips up his bag.

"Good to know. Will do, gentlemen," I reply, giving them a salute before grabbing

my own gear and walking out.

Behind the wheel of my black Porsche 911 the road stretches out before me. I'm cruising at a steady pace, my hands relaxed on the wheel, when the ping of my car phone breaks the silence. The dashboard screen lights up, "Mom" in bold letters.

"Hey, Ma," I answer with a click of a button, trying to keep the surprise out of my voice. Anita Miles doesn't do late-night calls.

"Dakota, did you win tonight?" Her voice is tinged with her usual formal cadence.

"Of course we did." The grin spreads across my face. "Clutched it in the third period."

"That's my boy," she says. "I just wanted to hear your voice. It's been a while."

We chat about inconsequential things—the weather in Charleston, the Renegades' standings, her book club's latest read—avoiding anything deeper lurking just below the surface.

"Sorry, I missed your game. I had dinner plans," she adds, and I wonder if she's mentioning it for my sake or hers.

"No sweat, Ma. There's always next time." The words are automatic, but they leave an odd hollow feeling in my gut.

We say our goodbyes, being careful around the words we don't say. "Love you, Mom," I manage.

"Love you too, Dakota. Goodnight."

The line goes dead, and I look at my reflection in the rearview mirror—hazel eyes that look too much like hers.

As the miles slip away, I'm left alone with the ghosts of what used to be. The divorce sliced through our family years ago, leaving behind a scar that never quite fades. Mom tries, in her own way, but the distance isn't just miles—it's memories, misunderstandings, and the fear that creeps into my heart, warning me I might end up just as alone.

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The wheels of our plane kiss Charleston airport's tarmac.

"We're actually here," Marina smiles as she claps her hands together.

She flew into Oklahoma City yesterday, spent the night, and then we flew out early this morning to Charleston.

It only takes a little while to taxi up to the terminal and for us to unload from the plane. Then we weave through the crowd to the baggage claim.

At the rental car kiosk, I tap my phone against the reader.

"Convertible or coupe?" Marina asks.

"Let's not tempt the weather gods," I say as I knew I'd reserved a sturdy SUV.

I slide into the driver's seat, and we begin our short journey to Pawleys Island, just beyond Love Beach. The coastal scenery looks like a postcard. I roll down the windows, letting the salty breeze ruffle through my curls, untamed for once.

"Imagine, Harmony, this time tomorrow we could be sipping cocktails with some Spring Break hunks," Marina teases, nudging my arm.

"Or buried in a book under an umbrella," I counter, though the idea of toned men lounging nearby isn't entirely unpleasant.

We cross the causeway to Pawleys Island, and the feeling of quaintness hits me.

"Home sweet temporary home," Marina declares, snapping a photo of the two-story beach house for her insta-story.

The key slides into the lock, and the door swings open to reveal our paradise for the week.

"Here we are." I step over the threshold.

Marina's already bounding up the stairs.

"First dibs on the bedroom with the sea view!" she calls back laughing.

I choose the opposite room on the second floor, dumping my duffel on the bed. It's smaller but feels cozy, almost bohemian with its eclectic mix of patterns and colors.

"Okay, schedule time!" Marina pops her head around the doorframe, tablet in hand, eager as ever to organize our fun.

"Let's keep it loose," I suggest, unpacking my clothes and placing them in the dresser. "You know, like, some beach volleyball, a few lazy afternoons reading at the coffee shop that's on the water, maybe check out The Sand Dunes Bar & Grill one evening?"

"Perfect. Also, don't forget about the Yacht Club." Marina grins. "I've heard that's where the real action is."

"Action?" I arch an eyebrow. "You mean watching boats bobbing on the water?"

"Harmony, you're hopeless." She laughs and shakes her head.

With our week loosely sketched out, we wander downstairs, slipping on sandals for

an impromptu sunset beach exploration.

"Can you believe how beautiful this is?" Marina's eyes are wide while her dark hair whips around her face.

"Sometimes I forget the world can be this stunning," I admit.

We walk in silence for a while, letting the vastness of the ocean and the whispers of the tide speak for us. These are perfect moments in life that I enjoy.

"Spring break, huh? It feels so... collegiate." Marina says as we stroll back from the beach, our footprints trailing behind us like breadcrumbs.

"Yeah, but with less keg stands and more sleep." I chuckle.

"Hey, I wouldn't mind a healthy mix of both. Maybe throw in a couple of those hot guys on the beach," she winks.

"Marina!" I feign shock, but the truth is, the idea sends a flutter through my stomach that's half nerves, half excitement. "I thought we were here to recharge, not chase after guys."

"Who says we can't do all of it? A little eye candy might be just what Dr. Kay prescribes for relaxation," she retorts.

"Fine, but I'm setting boundaries at drooling from a distance."

"Agreed. Drooling only," she echoes.

We reach the house, and Marina heads straight for the kitchen.

"So, chef Harmony, what's on the menu tonight?"

"Something easy. How about pasta with whatever mystery sauce the closest store has?" I suggest.

"Sounds perfect. Carb-loading for all the absolutely nothing we're going to do," Marina chimes in.

The next few hours, we check out the local small store, feed our bellies, and chat about randomness.

Before I curl into bed, I step into the steam filled shower. I close my eyes, letting the water flow over my shoulders and slowly exhale.

It's been two years—two years since I've felt the touch of a man, since I've allowed myself the pleasure of being wanted, of wanting in return. My hand, almost of its own volition, drifts lower, past the flatness of my stomach to the place between my legs to my sensitive nub.

I think of those tan, toned men tossing a frisbee on the beach that Marina and I giggled about earlier. Their broad shoulders and the way their muscles stretched as they leaped in the air to catch the round disc have had my thoughts running with what one of them would feel like on top of me.

My fingers find the rhythm I've perfected for release over the last few years. The tall one with brown hair and tan skin stays at the forefront of my mind. I can imagine the press of his lips, the grip of his hands. Mmm.

God, I need this.

Scientifically speaking, sexual release is beneficial, right? Endorphins, stress

relief—it's practically health maintenance.

As my movements become more deliberate, more insistent, I let go of the analytical and just feel.

Every stroke coils the tension tighter, and I chase the approaching climax.

"Ah," I gasp as it hits its peak pressure point. My body quakes, my knees weaken, and I ride my hand until my pussy's last pulse against my fingers dissipates.

The water continues to pour as I lean against the cool wall, catching my breath before dressing and getting a great night's sleep.

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The ceiling fan whirs above me, doing nothing to cool the heat that's pooling low in my belly. I'm slick with sweat and lube, my hand moving in a steady rhythm that's got me teetering on the edge of oblivion. My other arm is thrown over my head, fingers gripping the edge of the pillow while my hazel eyes are screwed shut, images of scantily clad women from last night's party at The Sand Dunes Bar & Grill flickering behind my eyelids.

"Come on, Lucky," I mutter to myself, a nickname that's more about scoring on the ice than in the sheets—though it applies to both, if I'm honest.

My phone is somewhere on the floor, discarded along with the rest of my clothes. I don't need porn when my own fantasies are vivid enough, replaying every flirtatious smile, every accidental brush of skin against skin. But as I'm about to cross the finish line, as the tension coils tighter and I'm ready to let go, there's this godforsaken racket coming from next door.

"Son of a..." The words die on my lips as I force my eyes open, the orgasm that was just within reach slipping away. Hell, I grip myself harder, trying to stay in the zone, but the commotion isn't letting up. It sounds like someone's trashing their place or... something worse?

"Fucking hell." I release my cock. Can't even get five minutes of peace in my own home. My pulse is still racing, but now it's laced with irritation instead of impending pleasure. I push off the bed, already knowing that I'm going to be left with an ache only a guy can understand.

I wipe myself off on the towel I brought earlier to the edge of my bed and make my

way to the window.

Peering out, the cool night air is a slap to my overheated skin, but it's nothing compared to the jolt in my gut when I spot them—two women looking frantic. One's got fiery curls escaping her ponytail like she's been through a storm, which, judging by her agitated gestures, she probably has. Next to her, the other lady bounces on the balls of her feet with all kinds of wild hand gestures.

"Great," I mutter, feeling the telltale twinge that confirms my night's taken a turn to frustration. Blue balls are a guarantee now, a punishment for being neighborly. With a resigned sigh, I grab a pair of jeans from the floor—because decency dictates I can't show up pantsless, even if my upper half is still showing off last summer's tan lines and this season's gym gains. Time to play good Samaritan... or at least find out why my almost-orgasm got interrupted.

"Damn," I curse under my breath, feeling the cool air hit my chest—goosebumps traveling across my skin. I should probably grab a shirt, but the urgency in the ladies' voices through the windowpane has me bolting for the door instead.

I fumble with the lock, and then I'm out the door as the porch light flicks on automatically.

"Control yourself, Dakota," I whisper-chide myself. "Can't have you looking like some Pavlovian mutt at the sight of damsels in distress."

I jog down the driveway. The sound of running water and muffled curses grows louder as I approach the neighboring house, where two women stand on the porch, flustered and phone-lit.

"Hey," I call out, managing to inject a hint of calm into my voice despite the tension knotting in my lower belly. "Need a hand?"

The one with auburn curls pinned back eyes me like she's sizing me up. Her silk green tank top pajama set clinks to her wet body as the cool breeze makes her nipples hard. That green color matches her gorgeous eyes.

She clears her throat and crosses her arms over her chest to break my lust filled daze. So what that she caught me. It's nothing out of the norm for me. Afterall, my boldness is half the reason I have to call my friends at least once a weekend to come pick me up and get me out of my late-night escapes from women's beds. Once those women have been satisfied and my release has been completed, it's time to get the hell out of there. I'm not even in their beds long enough for the relationship word to even be mentioned.

The other lady standing with Miss Green Eyes is petite with a playful glint despite the crisis. She gives me a quick, assessing glance. Her eyes linger just long enough on my abs that I feel a mix of pride and a pang of lost opportunity.

"Uh, yeah," Miss Green Eyes says. "It's raining indoors, if you can believe it."

"Lead the way," I reply with a grin.

We troop inside, but even before we hit the stairs, I hear the water downpouring that's probably coming from the attic. We make our way up there, and yep—a hot water heater spewing uncontrollably.

"Looks like your heater's had a major blowout. Since this house is similar to mine, I think I know where the main shut off valve is. I'll run down to turn off the water, but you ladies grab what you can salvage of your things and meet me outside."

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Our supposedly idyllic vacation home now stands as nothing more than a drowned rat.

"What a clusterfuck, Marina. We plan this getaway for months, and it gets flooded out before the end of our first night."

"Literally." With a sigh beside me, she scrolls through her phone, likely searching for nearby hotels or rentals, but it's Spring Break and high season at Love Beach.

When the neighbor appears from around the back of the house, he looks like he's got the confidence of someone who owns the place – which, judging by the look of him, wouldn't be a stretch. He's all relaxed muscles under sun-kissed skin with bright hazel eyes. His casually tousled brown hair almost seems designed to highlight the natural charm he exudes.

"I'm Dakota Miles." His voice is smooth, the kind that probably gets him into all sorts of trouble – or out of it. He extends a calloused palm toward us.

"Harmony Baker," I reply, my grip firm despite the unexpected flutter in my stomach as I shake his hand. "And this is Marina Wells."

"Charmed," Marina says, her tone polite but distant. She's always been better at keeping her cool around men like him.

"Sorry about your place," Dakota continues with a sympathetic tilt of his head towards the rental.

"Thanks," I manage, not sure what else there is to say. It's clear Dakota's the type who thrives on attention, his every move seemingly calculated to draw the eye. As much as I'm determined not to be another notch on his belt, there's no denying he's caught my interest.

"Are you part of the Charleston Renegades?" Marina asks, ever the hockey fan. Her eyes roam over his athletic build in a way that's anything but subtle.

"Guilty as charged." Dakota winks. "Center."

"Figures," I mutter under my breath. Maybe it's the way he balances that cockiness with charm, but I can't quite dismiss him as just another jock. There sure seems to be something more than just those abs.

Dakota's eyes flicker between us, his brow furrowing slightly as if he's wrestling with some internal debate. Then, as if coming to a decision, he flashes that million-dollar smile again.

"Listen, I know this might sound crazy, but... I hate to see you ladies stranded like this. Why don't you stay at my place tonight?"

The words hang in the air, shocking in their casualness. I blink, certain I've misheard him.

"Your... place?" Marina echoes, her eyebrows shooting up.

"Yeah, I've got plenty of room," Dakota says, gesturing towards his beach house. "There're couple of spare bedrooms. You'd be doing me a favor, honestly. It gets a little lonely rattling around in there with my roommate who is gone most of the time."

I can feel Marina's eyes on me, practically vibrating with excitement. But my mind is

already racing through all the reasons this is a terrible idea.

"That's... very generous," I begin cautiously, "but we couldn't possibly impose—"

"It's no imposition," Dakota interrupts. "Consider it neighborly hospitality. Besides, it's not like there are many other options right now, right?"

He's got a point there. I glance at Marina, who's nodding.

"Harmony," she says, her voice low. "It does beat sleeping in the car."

I chew my lip, weighing our options. On one hand, staying with a stranger – an incredibly attractive stranger at that – seems foolish and potentially dangerous. On the other hand, the alternative is spending the night in our rental car or driving hours to find some place to stay in the middle of the night.

"I promise I'm not an axe murderer," Dakota adds with a playful grin, as if reading my thoughts. "You can even lock your bedroom doors if it makes you feel safer."

"Well, he is a professional athlete. I'm pretty sure the Renegades would notice if he started offing fans," Marina says matter-of-factly.

"Alright," I say, letting out a long breath. "If you're sure it's not too much trouble..."

"Not at all," Dakota says, looking genuinely pleased. "Grab your bags and follow me. I'll give you the grand tour."

As we trudge through the sand, our suitcases bumping along behind us, I think about how this turn of events has affected our vacation. Less than an hour ago, we were settling into our rental. Now we're following a professional hockey player – a stranger – to his beach house.

"So, Dakota," Marina pipes up, her voice pitched just a little too high with forced casualness. "Do you often invite stranded tourists to stay with you?"

He laughs. "Can't say that I do. But then again, I don't often come across such charming company in need of rescue."

I roll my eyes at the line, but there is a little thrill that runs through me as my lower lip slips between my teeth deep in thought.

The pros of staying with Dakota Miles—shelter, safety, proximity to beaches that are practically calling my name—tally up nicely. Then there's the con, singular and massive: he's a sexy as hell stranger who probably has a different girl here every night. Let's not forget, the man is a Charleston Renegade; they're known for their... scoring abilities.

"Harmony, hold up a minute, we need to talk." Marina's voice snaps me out of my internal debate.

"Will you excuse us for a second?" She doesn't wait for Dakota's reply, already tugging me by the elbow toward a quieter spot back from Dakota's house. When we're a few steps away, she turns to face me.

"Girl, don't think I haven't seen the way you've been looking at him. There's some serious heat there."

"Marina, it's not—"

"Save it," she interrupts with a wave of her hand. "I know you. You analyze everything to death. But sometimes, you just gotta jump in and see where the current takes you."

She's known me a long time, and I know she's not just talking about tonight. This is about every tightly wound decision I've ever made, every chance at love I've dissected until it was nothing but a cold hypothesis.

"Look," she continues, her voice softening, "we stay at his place tonight, get a good night's sleep, and first thing tomorrow, we hunt for another spot. What's the worst that could happen?"

I open my mouth to list all the potential disasters, but instead, I exhale a laugh. Trust Marina to find the silver lining in crashing with a possible playboy.

"I know. I said we could do this already, but if this goes sideways, you owe me a lifetime supply of chocolate-covered espresso beans," I reply, shaking my head slightly.

"Deal!" Marina grins, linking her arm through mine. "Now let's go before Mr. Hockey thinks we ditched him."

We stride back to Dakota, who leans casually against a pillar on his front porch like a model in a beachwear ad, phone in hand—probably posting on social media about his good deed for the day.

"Welcome to Casa de Dakota," he says with a huge smile.

The foyer is spacious, tastefully decorated with seaside accents—shells, driftwood, pictures of sunsets over the ocean. It's elegant yet inviting.

"Nice place," Marina comments.

"Thanks," Dakota replies. "My former roommate and teammate, Asher, had the place decorated when he first bought the place."

He leads us up the staircase, our suitcases thumping on each step. At the top, he points Marina toward a room at the end of the hallway. "That's you," he says, "And Harmony, this one's yours, across the hall from mine." He nods to the door, and his proximity gives me the good kind of chills.

"Hope you find it comfortable," he adds, pushing open my door to reveal a surprisingly cozy space. There's a plush bed, a window with a view of the dunes, and fresh towels folded neatly on a chair.

"Thank you, Dakota," I manage, despite the lump in my throat.

"Anytime," he winks. "Goodnight, ladies."

"Night," I reply, watching his retreat. As the sound of his door closing softly punctuates the end of a long day.

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The girls have long gone to bed, but I can't sleep. As I tiptoe down the dark hall of our beach house, I slip on a rogue ice cube that feels like it was just tossed there. My arms flail, a half-hearted attempt at regaining balance, but instead, I collide with a warm, unexpected soft body.

Harmony.

"Whoa there, Dakota," she chuckles, steadying me with surprisingly strong hands on my biceps. "You're not very stable there."

"Well, I'm as graceful as they come on the ice where it should be, in the rink, and not on a dark floor in the night," I quip back, flashing her my trademark grin.

"Sure you are," she retorts. "And I'm predicting sunny skies in the middle of a hurricane."

"Speaking of predictions," I start, leaning against the wall and regarding her with interest. "What are the chances you'd let a hockey player make your heart race?"

"Depends," she replies, cocking her head to the side, those curls brushing her shoulders in a way that makes it hard not to imagine them spread across a pillow.

"Are we talking sprint or marathon?"

"Let's call it interval training," I suggest, taking a step closer. Her breath hitches just slightly, and I know I've piqued her interest.

"Intense bursts of excitement followed by recovery periods?" She arches an eyebrow

with a smirk.

"Exactly." I nod, closing the gap between us until our bodies are nearly touching.

"Gotta build up stamina somehow, right?"

"Right," she whispers, her voice dropping an octave.

"Besides," I add, my gaze dropping to her mouth for a split second before meeting her eyes again. "I've always been a quick learner."

"Is that so?" Harmony challenges, the corner of her mouth twitching upward. "Well, then you should know that I don't play games unless I intend to win."

"Good thing I'm not playing," I murmur, and the air crackles between us.

With the tension between us thick, I lean against the hallway wall, smirking down at Harmony's curious gaze.

"You know," I start, "I'm not exactly known for my patience. How 'bout we move this little chat of ours to my room?"

She doesn't flinch or back away, which tells me she's not just bold with her words. Her eyes maintain contact with mine.

"We're both grown-ups here, Dakota," she says. "And let's not kid ourselves, 'chat' is just code for sex."

The way she calls it out so frankly, no beating around the bush, I like it. Harmony's directness is refreshing. A grin spreads across my face because, damn, this woman knows what she wants and goes in for the kill.

"Alright, lay it on me then. What's your answer?"

She stands there, toeing the ceramic floor with her bare foot, until her eyes slowly roam up and down my boxer clad body. The silence hangs for a beat—two beats—then she mumbles something that sounds a hell of a lot like a game changer. "Fuck it, I'm on vacation."

Before I can even process the words, she flashes across the small space between us. Her body crashes into mine, and her lips seize mine with a ferocity that rocks me back on my heels.

I'm Dakota Miles, Charleston Renegades' golden boy, always in control on and off the ice. But damn if this woman doesn't have me reeling, surprised by the sudden heat of her, the way her fingers tangle in my hair like she's clinging to her controlled desire. This kiss, this woman, the way she feels in my arms. This feels different.

I scoop Harmony up, her legs instinctively wrapping around my waist like she's been waiting to do this all night. Her kiss never falters while I navigate us down the hallway and to my room. I can feel the heat from her body seeping into mine, and it's driving me fucking wild.

"Got you," I murmur against her mouth, half-laughing, half-gasping for air as I kick my door open and step inside.

I lay her down on my bed, wanting to see that beautiful hair fan out against my pillow.

She's a vision in the dim light, the kind that would make any red-blooded man jealous.

Starting at her ankles, I trail kisses up her calves, savoring the softness of her skin.

Every inch of her is so soft. When I reach her thighs, my hands glide along her curves, fingers hooking the hem of her silky short nightgown and drawing it upwards.

"God, you're beautiful," I breathe out. The gown slips off, leaving her in nothing but lace panties. The sight knocks the wind out of me.

I peel away her panties, tossing them aside. Standing, I rid myself of my black boxer briefs that have become far too constrictive. My heart hammers in my chest as I cover myself with a condom, protection an instinct that's been ingrained.

"Are you ready for this, beautiful?" I ask, voice thick with a longing that's new, different—unsettling almost.

I look down at Harmony. The heat of her gaze locks with mine. I guide myself to her entrance, our eyes still locked.

"Yes, please," Harmony breathes out, her fingers digging into my shoulders.

I'm pushing inside her, slow and steady, savoring the way she stretches and adjusts to me. There's an intimacy here, in the way she opens up for me, that has my heart slamming against my chest. It's not just physical; it's emotional in a way I can't quite comprehend. This isn't a quick one; this is something different. I want every second of it, yet it's something that's completely new to me.

I find a rhythm, one that's less about the ending result and more about enjoying each minute. With every thrust, I study her reactions—the way her eyelids flutter, the soft moans spilling from her lips, the subtle arch of her back. It's like I'm learning all about her.

"Feels good?" I ask, even though I can read the answer written all over her flushed face.

"Better than... oh... better than good," she stammers, giving me a sense of pride.

Shifting my weight, I angle my hips to hit that sweet spot I know will make her unravel. She gasps, and I chase it, repeating the motion until her hands are clawing at my back, urging me closer, deeper.

"Right there, Dakota... don't stop," she pants, and that's all the coaching I need.

My movements become more deliberate, a focused effort to bring her to the brink. Harmony's breath catches and her body tightens around me.

"Harmony," I say. My hands roam over the curves of her body.

"Da-Dakota..." she gasps out. Her fingers dig into my shoulders, nails leaving delicious, stinging trails that only urge me on.

"Let go, beautiful. I've got you," I coax, hips rolling in a steady rhythm designed to push her over the edge. Every nerve ending in my body alive and sparking.

"God, yes... I'm—" Harmony's words break off into a moan, her entire body tensing beneath me as her pussy walls pulse around my cock. The sight of her abandoning herself to the feeling—eyes fluttering shut, mouth open in silent ecstasy—it's enough to send my own pleasure skyrocketing.

"Right there with you," I grunt, each thrust with a sense of urgency. There's a tingling sensation in my balls as my sack tightens, an impending surge that I know I can't, don't want to stop.

With a deep groan that feels like it's being pulled from the depths of my soul, I let go, surrendering to the intense wave of satisfaction that crashes over me, leaving us both breathless and intertwined.

"Holy Hell." I exhale once the world stops spinning. "That was..."

"Unexpected?" Harmony finishes with a chuckle.

"Yeah, you can say that," I reply, still dazed.

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I blink awake seeing sunshine sneaking past the blinds. The warmth of the bed is cozy as I turn my head, taking in the sight of Dakota beside me. His chest rises and falls in a steady rhythm with the quiet sound of his breathing. He's sprawled out, boxer briefs clinging to his hips, and damn it if he doesn't look like a Greek god.

Last night was amazing with the way his hands explored every curve of my body and the intensity in his hazel eyes as he looked at me. That was a damn good way to break my two-year long dry spell.

What's the protocol here? Do I wake him with a kiss or slip away like Cinderella minus the glass slipper drama?

I opt for stealth mode, gently untangling myself from the sheets and tiptoeing across his room. For a split second, I have a notion that I'm not just leaving the room; I'm trying to escape what happened. No, I can't think like that. I just don't know how to navigate post-hookup awkwardness.

Finally, I make it back to my own room and head straight for the shower. As hot water cascades over me, I scrub away the remnants of last night, willing my brain to switch off. Acting like nothing happened seems like the best play. After all, isn't that what Dakota would do? Mr. Laidback Hockey Star who probably sees this as just another notch on his stick.

Steam still swirls around me as I step out of the shower and wrap myself in a towel. My curls cling to the nape of my neck, still dripping wet. I'm startled by the buzz of my phone against the bathroom counter.

Marina: Ready to brave the world for some coffee? Meet me by the stairs?

Me: Give me 5.

I dress quickly, opting for comfort in a soft tee and denim shorts. Slipping into sandals, I grab my phone and take a deep breath before stepping into the hallway.

Silence greets me first, then Marina's impish grin as we convene at the top of the stairs. We exchange a look that says 'let's not talk about it,' and descent to the kitchen. We pause at the base of the stairs to see another well-defined muscular guy casually leaning against the kitchen island.

"Good morning," he says with a deep voice. His intense gray eyes scan us briefly.

"Morning," I manage, feeling a blush rise to my cheeks. It's one thing to deal with Dakota, quite another to meet his roommate in this awkward morning-after atmosphere.

He extends a hand, introducing himself with a firm shake. "I'm Kaleb, Dakota's roommate. He sent me a text last night letting me know to expect guests."

"Harmony," I say.

"Marina," my friend chimes in beside me.

Kaleb nods, a hint of a smirk tugging at his lips.

"Want some coffee?" Kaleb offers, already reaching for mugs and filling the first cup.

"Please, we were about to go out and find some, but the sooner caffeine gets into my body, the better," I reply, wrapping my hands around the warm ceramic as he hands it

to me.

The sound of footsteps echoes from the stairs, and then there's Dakota in just shorts, no shirt. The sight of him makes my core tighten.

"Good morning," he says, voice still husky from sleep as he strides over to me. Before I can respond, his arm is around my waist, pulling me closer, and I'm suddenly very aware of every place our skin connects. His lips press against my cheek in a kiss that's far too intimate for a room that isn't just ours.

"Morning," I reply, a little breathless, trying to act like I get good morning kisses from half-naked hockey players all the time.

From the corner of my eye, I catch Marina exchanging a look with Kaleb. It's the kind of look that doesn't need words, that says they're both fully aware of the way Dakota's sheets were tangled between us a few hours ago.

Trying to ignore the prickling awareness on my skin where Dakota's lips had been, I take a sip of my coffee.

We gravitate toward the kitchen island bar stools to sit. Marina hops onto one, while I take my place beside her.

"Okay, tell us something interesting about yourselves," Kaleb says, leaning back against the counter.

Marina goes first, "I'm a marine biologist. Octopuses are my favorite—they're basically the geniuses of the ocean."

Kaleb nods, clearly impressed. "I'm Canadian and play hockey with Dakota. The guys call me Viking."

"Nice." Dakota's turn brings a roguish grin. "I've played hockey since I was three. And yes, before you ask—I do have all my teeth." He flashes a perfect smile.

Their eyes turn to me. "Well, I'm Harmony, a meteorologist," I say, tucking a stray curl behind my ear and hoping my profession sounds at least half as cool.

Settling into Dakota's world, with its open spaces and the constant sound of waves crashing in the distance, I sense a shift inside me—an intrigue. It's different from my structured life. Here, it feels like spontaneity rules, and it's different. I like it.

"Your turn, Harmony. Tell us something else about you," Dakota challenges.

"Let's see..." I sip my coffee, buying time. "I guess... I play the violin. Not exactly rock star material, but it's my secret skill."

"See? Full of surprises," he teases, and there's warmth in his tone.

Marina laughs, breaking the moment. "This is like some kind of alternate universe breakfast club."

"Except with more coffee and less detention," Kaleb adds, earning chuckles from all of us.

The sound of a ringtone cuts through the laughter, and Marina frowns, checking her phone. "Sorry, guys, I need to take this," she says, slipping out through the sliding glass doors onto the porch.

Kaleb leans against the counter, arms crossed. "So, Harmony, what do you think so far of this little chance encounter? Crazy? Fun? Or just plain weird?"

I chuckle softly. "A mix of all three, I'd say. You guys are like living characters in a

sports movie.”

Dakota grins as he fills his own mug. “Just wait until you see us in action on the ice. That’s when it really gets interesting.”

“Speaking of which,” Kaleb pipes in, “we’re heading into playoffs soon. Big deal for us.” He raises an eyebrow at Dakota, who nods in agreement.

“Yeah! This is where things get intense,” Dakota adds. “No more messing around. We’ve gotta be on our game.”

“What makes playoffs different? Marina is the one that knows all about hockey. I only know the basics,” I admit.

“Well, it’s not just about skill; it’s about tradition too. Like the whole no-shaving thing.” Kaleb smirks, the corners of his lips lifting slightly.

I tilt my head slightly. “Yeah, I’ve seen something about that. What is it that you actually do?”

Dakota laughs and runs a hand through his messy hair. “Yup! It’s a tradition where players don’t shave their facial hair during playoffs. It’s supposed to bring good luck and team spirit.”

Kaleb nods in agreement, his expression turning serious for a moment. “It symbolizes that we’re all in this together and willing to endure discomfort for a common goal. Plus,” he adds with a hint of humor in his voice, “have you seen some of our playoff beards? They’re legendary.”

“Legendary might be an understatement,” Dakota chimes in with a laugh. “Kaleb here is the true Viking look-alike and looks like he’s been lost at sea for weeks by the

end of it.”

I giggle at the image they paint—hockey players morphing into lumberjacks mid-season. “Do you actually buy into that superstition?”

Kaleb shrugs casually. “I guess it becomes part of our identity during playoffs. You grow attached to your beard; it’s like your battle armor or something.”

“And trust me,” Dakota adds with an exaggerated wink, “you don’t want to mess with hockey players and their rituals. It gets... hairy.”

“Ha!” I exclaim, laughing and shaking my head.

Kaleb leans closer to me over the counter and lowers his voice. “You know what else we do? We wear our lucky socks and eat specific foods before games—some guys even wear the same underwear throughout playoffs.”

“What? That’s disgusting.” I look at Dakota. “Tell me you don’t do that.” Before he can answer, Marina walks back in.

There is a look on her face that lets me know the call was not a pleasant one.

"Everything okay?" I ask concerned.

She shakes her head, taking a seat next to me at the bar. "It was my supervisor," Marina starts. "There might be some big funding cuts coming our way. It could affect the entire marine biology project."

A collective silence settles over us.

"Damn," Dakota finally breaks the silence, "that sucks."

"Anything we can do to help?" Kaleb asks, and I'm touched by the genuine concern in his voice.

Marina forces a smile, but it doesn't reach her eyes. "Thanks, guys. I'll figure something out."

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I lean against the kitchen counter, sipping my coffee as Harmony and Marina huddle over their phones at the breakfast bar. They're deep in concentration, scrolling through listings for a new place to stay. I'm not eavesdropping, but it's hard not to overhear bits and pieces about beachfront views and tiny homes.

Harmony's brow furrows with focus, and I catch myself staring. There's something about the way she carries herself – that effortless poise and the sharp glint of intelligence in her green eyes – that hooks me. She speaks in tech specs and logistics, her voice steady and sure. I never pegged myself as a guy who'd fall for brainy talk, but here we are.

"Look at this one," Marina says, tilting her phone toward Harmony. "It's got an ocean view and it's just steps from The Sand Dunes Bar it's like a quiet storm brewing on the horizon, and damn if I don't want to chase it. But then there's that nagging voice in my head, the one that reminds me I'm supposed to be Mr. Casual, no strings attached. Dakota Miles doesn't do complications or feelings.

"Hey, Dakota, what do you think?" Marina waves me over, breaking into my internal tug-of-war.

"About?" I stroll to where they're seated, trying to shake off the turmoil twisting up inside me.

"This place for the rest of our vacay," she replies, pointing at her phone screen. It's a swanky little beach house, all modern lines and high-tech amenities.

"Looks great," I manage, my gaze drifting back to Harmony. She hasn't asked for my

opinion, and that quiet self-assurance of hers is like a magnet. It's pulling me in, and I don't know if I want to resist or revel in it.

"Or..." I start, surprising even myself with what I'm about to say, "you could crash here. House is big enough, and Kaleb and I are hardly around with practice and games."

Marina's eyes light up, and Harmony gives me a measured look. "Are you sure?"

"Positive," I say, and I mean it. Because, despite the fact that having Harmony so close goes against every playboy rule I've lived by, I can't deny the truth. I want her here, and that desire is slamming against my usual M.O., leaving the lines blurry.

"Great, we are going to get dressed for the day and head out to start exploring," Marina says and grabs Harmony by the arm and practically drags her up the stairs.

I just stand there, swirling the remains of my black coffee in the mug, and watch Harmony's retreating figure as she ascends the staircase. The way she moves has a certainty that's damn hypnotic. I can't believe I've offered up the house like some kind of beachside Airbnb. My gaze flickers to Kaleb, who's chowing down on a protein bar with the intensity of a man who gives zero fucks about anything but his gains.

"Man, I don't know what's going on with me," I murmur, feeling the weight of confusion pressing down on my chest. "It's like... she's got this vibe, you know? Smart, doesn't take any crap. It's messing with my head."

Kaleb pauses mid-chew, gray eyes narrowing slightly as he takes in my confession. "You mean Harmony?" He tosses the wrapper into the trash with a practiced flick.

"Yep," I reply, running a hand through my hair. "She's just so—"

"Wait." Kaleb arches an eyebrow, cutting me off. "Are you telling me you actually slept with a woman in our guest room? That's directly across the hall from where you sleep, dude."

"Uh, yeah." I give him a sheepish grin, knowing full well it's out of character for me. "Never thought I'd cross that threshold."

"Fuck, Lucky," he says, shaking his head. "I never thought I'd see the day you'd break your own rule of not having any girl under your own roof."

"Neither did I," I admit, staring up at the kitchen light like it holds all the answers.

I lean forward on the kitchen counter, my fingers drumming on the marble. Kaleb's assessing gaze is still on me, like he's trying to solve a puzzle.

"Actually," I start but pause. "It wasn't the guest room."

Kaleb's eyes sharpen and zero in on mine. He knows me well enough to pick up on the significance of what I haven't said yet. "Don't tell me..."

"Yup." I nod, almost defiantly. "My bed."

"Fuck." He whistles low. "And here I thought you reserved that sacred space for solo time and beauty sleep."

"Hell, I don't know what happened," I say with a shrug that feels too casual for the churn of emotions inside me.

"Okay, fine." Kaleb leans back against the opposite counter, arms crossed over his chest. "But then she went to her own bed for the night, right?"

I pause, the image of Harmony's peaceful face, sleeping next to me, flashes behind my eyelids.

"No, actually," I find myself admitting, "she slept in my bed all night."

"Fuck, dude." Kaleb's mouth twists into a half-grin, half-grimace. "That's... new territory for you."

"Tell me about it," I mutter, running a hand down my face. It's like I can still feel the warmth of her body curled against mine.

"Man, I've seen you dodge 'seconds' with girls like they're slap shots coming at your head," Kaleb continues, disbelief edging his tone. "What are you gonna do next? Breakfast in bed?"

"Shut it," I snap, but there's no heat behind it. I'm too tangled up in the thought of Harmony's smile, the sound of her laugh. And hell, the thought of her staying anywhere else but here suddenly puts a knot in my chest.

"Whatever's going on with you, bro," Kaleb says, eyeing me, "it's gonna be one interesting thing to watch."

I don't have a comeback for that because, for once in my life, Lucky Miles is at a loss for words.

There's this twist in my gut, not from last night's indulgences, but from something else, something that feels suspiciously like... guilt? No, more like fear—fear of messing up whatever this thing with Harmony is turning into.

Kaleb shakes his head. "Dude, she's a guest, and guests leave. You get tangled up in this, it's gonna end in emotions you're not ready for."

I lean against the fridge, arms folded across my chest, trying to look unfazed. But Kaleb's words hit hard. "She seems different." The confession slips out before I can stop it.

"Harmony's smart, funny..." My voice trails off as I realize I'm not just talking her up to Kaleb—I'm convincing myself too.

"Look, I know it's risky," I continue, "but I can't shake this feeling. I want her around, even if it's just for another week."

"Your funeral, bro," Kaleb sighs, but there's a softness in his eyes. "Just don't say I didn't warn ya."

"Thanks for the pep talk," I shoot back with a grin that doesn't quite reach my eyes. The truth is, Kaleb's words have planted a seed of doubt, but it's too late. Harmony's already under my skin, and I'm not ready to let her go. Not yet.

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I notice the quiet as I open my eyes. There's no kitchen clatter or footsteps upstairs. It's early, but Dakota and Kaleb told us last night that they had practice this morning, so I'm sure they're already gone.

I slide out of bed, padding softly down the hall to Marina's room. Gently, I push her door open and see her nestled in her blankets.

"Rise and shine," I whisper softly, giving her a gentle nudge.

She stirs. "Five more minutes." Her voice is muffled by the pillow.

"Come on," I coax. "Let's hit the beach before it turns into a tourist frenzy."

Marina sits up with her hair being a wild mess. "Sold," she grins, "Time to work on this tan."

We quickly swap pajamas for swimsuits. Mine is a simple black two-piece and Marina's a vibrant coral suit.

Out on the beach, it feels calm. The sand is cool beneath my feet.

"Perfect spot right here," I declare, spreading my towel near the dunes. Marina follows suit, laying hers beside mine.

"Absolutely," she agrees, surveying the slice of paradise. "Just us and the sun."

"Speaking of which," I say, reaching for the sunscreen. "Don't want to end up like a

lobster."

"Pass it here when you're done," she grins, taking out her sunglasses and sliding them on.

With my face tilted up to feel the warmth of the sun, I close my eyes and just relax.

"Hey, girl?" Marina says softly.

"Yeah?"

"Are you finally going to spill the beans about what happened between you and Dakota? The sexual chemistry has been off the charts, and you've been so tight-lipped about it." Marina asks.

I chuckle. "Well, the first night, I ended up sleeping in his room."

Marina squeals, clapping her hands excitedly. "I knew it! Tell me everything!"

I grant her wish, leaving out the actual bed scene of the event, of course. After that, and when she ran out of questions, I close my eyes and enjoy the sounds of the beach.

A coolness drapes across my skin from a sudden blockage of my personal sunshine. Reluctantly, I peel open one eye and squint up at the towering figure looming over me.

"Miss me, Miss Green Eyes?" Dakota asks with that relaxed drawl of his. Wow, once again, there he is looking like a Greek god.

"How did you know?" I quip, shielding my eyes with a hand as I sit up.

"How about you and Marina join me at my favorite spot on Love Beach? It's down by the marina."

Marina sits up next to me. "What's so special about your 'favorite spot'?" she asks, a hint of skepticism in her tone.

"Guess you'll have to come and see for yourself," Dakota winks, extending a hand to help us up.

"Give us a sec to grab our stuff and then clean up," I tell him.

"Take your time," he assures us, flashing a toothy grin before heading back toward the house.

As soon as we get back to the house and have a quick shower, Dakota drives us to the marina.

He parks his car, and we walk up to a dock that houses yachts. Marina and I follow closely behind as he leads us to a secluded area a little way down to a bench. When I look up to the horizon, there's a breathtaking view of the ocean.

"This is amazing," Marina gasps, taking in the scene. The water sparkles in shades of blue and green, dotted with boats and yachts of all sizes.

"Right?" Dakota grins, clearly pleased with our reaction. "This is my go-to spot when I need to clear my head or just take a break from everything."

We find a comfortable spot on the few benches overlooking the water, and Dakota pulls out a small cooler from his bag. He hands each of us a cold drink and we clink bottles before taking sips.

"So," Marina starts, leaning back against a rock. "Why did you bring us here?"

Dakota smiles softly, looking out at the water before turning back to us. "I just wanted to show you guys another side of me," he says, his eyes meeting mine briefly before flicking away.

"I know you both think I'm just some jock who only cares about hockey," he continues. "And while that may be true most days, there's more to me than that."

"You seem to be surprising me every day," I admit, liking how endearing he is being.

He scratches the back of his neck nervously and smiles. I stretch my legs out, feeling the wooden dock slightly bounce.

"Love Beach seems to have the best weather." I change the subject to a lighter topic, my eyes tracing the horizon where blue meets blue. "It's like it knows how to put on a show for the tourists."

"Is that the tourist talking or the meteorologist?" Dakota teases, lounging beside us with his hands behind his head.

I chuckle, shaking my head. "This is Mother Nature's handiwork." I watch a seagull glide overhead. "Actually, my fascination with weather started with something much less serene—tornadoes."

"Tornadoes?" Dakota echoes.

"Yep," I confirm. "Growing up in Oklahoma, you learn to respect their power. I saw one rip through our town when I was eight. It was terrifying... and mesmerizing. That's when I knew I wanted to study meteorology. To understand these forces, to predict them, maybe even save lives."

"That's intense," he replies, his gaze meeting mine.

"Life often is," I answer simply.

Marina's phone buzzes. She frowns at the screen, her expression quickly shifting from relaxed to concerned. I recognize that look, and it's not going to be good.

"Sorry, guys, I need to take this. It's the lab," she says, pushing herself up and moving away for privacy. Her voice fades into the background as she answers the call, leaving Dakota and me alone.

"Sounds like you two are pretty passionate about your work," Dakota observes, breaking the silence that has settled between us.

"Guilty as charged," I confess, turning back to watch Marina pace at the end of the dock, her hands gesturing animatedly. "It's not just a job for either of us. It's more like... our existence."

Marina's footsteps fade into the distance, and I'm suddenly aware of my own heartbeat drumming in my ears. Dakota shifts his weight, the wooden planks of the dock creaking under his sneakers.

"What about you? How did you get into your career?" I turn my body towards him.

"Alright, but it's not your typical jock story," he says, stretching out beside me without any pretense of personal space. The warmth from his body is distracting, but I focus on his words.

"I was this scrawny kid, always picked last for teams. No joke." He chuckles, but there's a shadow in his eyes. "One winter, the local pond froze over thick, and I just... found myself out there every day after school. It was quiet, y'know? Just me and the

ice."

His gaze drifts off to where the sun glitters on the waves, and I can almost see that lonely boy, skating in endless circles.

"Turns out, I was good at it. Really good. It gave me control. Made me feel significant." Dakota's voice drops, and it's as if he's sharing a secret.

"I get that." I stare at him like we have a shared understanding.

"Yeah?" He turns to look at me, and there's an intensity in his gaze that wasn't there before.

"Absolutely. The weather, it's pure chaos, right? But studying it, predicting it—it's like I'm wrangling the chaos into order."

"Exactly," he breathes out, and our eyes lock again. "You get it."

It seems like we're both seeking the same thing: mastery over the unpredictable, a way to make sense of the world in our own ways.

"Never figured a meteorologist and a hockey player would have much in common," he muses with a soft laugh.

"Life's funny like that." My lips curve into a smile, and his arm brushes mine, sending a jolt of electricity from my head to my toes.

The clack of Marina's sandals on the weathered wood deck jerks me back to reality. I look over to see her silhouette framed by the setting sun, and her shoulders are slumped in a way that spells trouble.

"Sorry to break up the whole intense convo you have going on here, but I've got news."

Dakota sits up straighter next to me. "Everything okay, Marina?"

She stops at the edge of the bench. "My project's hitting a critical point. They just called, and there's some big issue with the coral samples."

"Bad?" I ask, already mourning our remaining days of beach vacation.

"Bad enough. Especially with the uncertainty of budget cuts." She sighs, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "I need to be back at the lab first thing. There's a flight out at oh-dark-thirty tomorrow morning."

"That sucks," Dakota mutters, running a hand through his sandy blond hair.

"Yeah, it does." Marina's quick wit is absent as she plops down beside us, staring out at the yachts bobbing gently in their slips. "This was supposed to be our epic vacay recharge, you know? But those damn corals won't analyze themselves."

I reach over to give her knee a squeeze. "You're saving the oceans, one polyp at a time. We get it."

"Still—" She shakes her head. "I hate bailing on you."

"Research waits for no one," I say, trying to muster cheerfulness.

"You're doing important stuff, Marina. Tell you what, we'll send you off with a bang tonight. How about dinner at Sand Dunes Bar and Grill? My treat," Dakota offers.

"Only if they have that chocolate lava cake. Stress-eating it is practically a ritual

now." Her face lights up, the offer cutting through the disappointment.

"I'm sure they have that or some other yummy, large, chocolate dessert," Dakota says.

"Thanks, guys." Marina's smile is genuine again. "Let's make tonight count."

I pull Marina off to the side alone for a minute. The thought of her leaving weighs heavily on me.

"What am I supposed to do? Go home too?" I ask.

"No, no! Stay. Enjoy your vacation. I'm certain that Dakota will watch after you and make your time here worthwhile." She winks at me with a big smile.

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The door clicks shut behind Marina, and I'm left standing there with Harmony's eyes locked on me. Without missing a beat, I stride over to the gift bag I had delivered earlier today and hand it to her. She peaks inside and then pulls out the black and red jersey.

"Would you like to come to my game tonight and wear that?" I say, nudging my chin towards the jersey now draped over her arms. "It's like a good luck charm, you know?"

She unfolds it, the number twelve is large on the back along with Miles embossed at the top, and I admire her holding it. The way she looks at it makes my chest tighten.

"Oh my God! I'd love to go. Thank you!" she exclaims as she bounces on her toes.

"Uh, I was thinking you could sit with the other players' girlfriends at the game. They're a riot; you'll fit right in." I flash her my best winning smile.

"Girlfriends, huh?" She raises an eyebrow.

"Yep, they've got their own VIP squad in their box seats going on. You won't miss a thing from up there." I lean back against the couch, trying to seem as casual as possible while my pulse kicks up a notch.

"Okay, count me in," she says, and slips the jersey over her head.

"Fucking hell, you look so damn good in that jersey." I shake my head, knowing that I don't have any time to take her back to my bed and fuck her with my jersey on. "So,

I'll catch you after the game then," I say, leaning in close. My lips brush hers, lingering just long enough to make a promise without words. Her mouth curves into a smile against mine, and that's all the confirmation I need.

Pulling away with a wink, I grab my gear and head towards the rink, leaving Harmony standing there in my jersey. It swallows her slender frame. The number on the back is mine, and now, so is she – at least for tonight.

The pre-game chaos is a blur of motion and adrenaline, but through the noise, my mind keeps replaying that kiss, brief as it was. It's a spark that's got me burning from the inside out.

As I take a lap, I scan the VIP boxes at the top of the stands, searching for that cluster of women, each in their man's jersey. Found her.

Miss Green Eyes.

Our eyes meet across the distance, and it's just me and Harmony, with her practical ponytail and those eyes that see right through my bullshit.

She's not cheering or waving frantically like the others. Instead, there's this small, knowing smile playing on her lips, as if she's privy to a secret that no one else in the arena has caught onto yet. She's right. I'm not just playing for the win; I'm playing for her.

I tap my stick against the ice, and with one last glance at Harmony, I turn my focus to the game. Although, her wearing my name on her back and looking at me like I'm more than just a guy on skates, lights a fire in me.

The game is ready to start. I'm at the faceoff circle, stick in hand, eyes locked on the puck. The ref's arm drops, and everything else fades into the periphery.

The puck skitters across the ice, and we're off. Blades carve into the frozen surface with every turn. Asher sweeps the puck from their center, and Kaleb is already bolting down the rink.

I'm right behind him, cutting through defenders like they're nothing. The cold air burns my lungs as I suck in breaths to keep my legs pumping.

"Lucky!" Ryder's voice cuts through the crowd noise, and I pivot just as Kaleb sends a pass towards me. There's that split second when time hiccups, when the puck glides toward my stick, and I know this is it.

I lean into the shot, the stick flexing under the tension before it releases energy into the rubber disk. It's a slapshot straight out of the textbook, and the goalie barely has time to blink before the puck slams into the back of the net. Goal lights flash, and the siren wails.

"HELL YES!" I throw my head back, arms raised in triumph as my teammates swarm me with pats on the helmet and shoulder bumps. The crowd erupts louder, if that's even possible. I tilt my head up to find her—Harmony.

She's standing now, clapping, that small, knowing smile still there. Scoring feels good, hell, it feels great—but Harmony watching me do it? That's a whole new level of pride.

"Nice shot, Lucky!" Asher shouts, grinning like a maniac.

"Damn straight, ladies love a scorer," I shoot back, but my gaze drifts back up to the stands, to Harmony. Yeah, they might love a scorer, but I'm starting to think I'm

playing for an audience of one.

The adrenaline from the first goal still pumps through my veins as I glide across the ice. Every so often, my gaze flicks up to the box seat where Harmony's chatting with the other WAGs—wives and girlfriends of my teammates. She's laughing. Something warm and unfamiliar bubbles in my chest again. I'm starting to like these strange feelings.

"Keep your head in the game, Dakota!" Coach yells from the bench, and I snap my focus back to the puck.

When the final buzzer sounds, sealing our victory. My teammates are slapping my back, but I'm already scanning the stands. There's a cluster around Harmony now, and even from this distance, I can see she looks happy. The guys' girls are all smiles, clearly taken with Miss Green Eyes. I knew she'd fit in.

"Your girl up there, she seemed to enjoy the show," Asher claps me on the shoulder as we make our way to the locker room.

"Harmony's not my—" I start to correct him but then hesitate. What is she exactly? We're... something. Whatever that something is, it has me grinning like an idiot.

"Sure, pal," Asher chuckles, not buying my hesitation for a second. "Just wait 'til you see how much more fun winning is when you're celebrating with someone special."

I roll my eyes, but I know he's right.

My shower to clean up is quick, and soon I'm striding through the corridor in search of Harmony, my heart hammering like I've just played double overtime.

"Miss Green Eyes!" I call out as soon as I see her.

She turns, those eyes lighting up. I close the distance between us in a few long strides, not caring about the line of puck bunnies eyeing me like I'm the last chocolate in the box.

Without warning, I wrap my arms around her waist, pulling her close. Her lips part in surprise as I lean down and seal them with mine. The kiss is deep, possessive, and all-consuming—a public declaration that leaves no room for doubt.

I'm vaguely aware of whispers and gasps from the onlookers, but they fade to nothing. It's Harmony's response that matters, the way she melts into me, her fingers tangling in the back of my hair.

Pulling away, I press my forehead to hers, grinning like a damn fool. "Looks like you're officially off the market, too," I murmur, loud enough for anyone lurking close by.

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“My friends are all going to Sand Dunes to celebrate, but I’m much rather have you in my bed sooner rather than later,” Dakota growls in my ear.

“Sounds good to me,” I breathe out.

“Let’s leave your rental car here, and we’ll pick it up tomorrow.”

“Okay,” I agree.

As soon as Dakota's sleek black Porsche 911 purrs into the driveway of his and Kaleb’s house, my heart hammers like it's trying to break free. I glance at Dakota, his profile lit by the dashboard's soft glow.

We exit the car, and I follow Dakota up the steps, the sound of the ocean in the distance. When he unlocks the front door and we step inside, he immediately leads me through the spacious living room straight to his room.

He turns to me, closes the door behind us, and it's like a switch flips. All those playful, nonchalant vibes evaporate, replaced by an intensity that draws me in. His eyes lock onto mine, and there's no mistaking the raw desire reflected back at me.

"Harmony, I want you so fucking bad." His voice is a husky whisper.

"I need you, Dakota." My response comes out breathy.

His hands frame my face, pulling me in, and finally our lips meet. It's all-consuming, the way his mouth moves against mine with a fervency that's near desperate, as if he's

been holding back.

I'm lost in the sensation, my fingers tangle in his hair, pulling him closer. Our hands roam eagerly; there's a hunger in our touch, an urgency.

"More," I whisper.

Clothes are shed like the final barriers to our connection. Buttons give way under deft fingers, fabric slinks to the floor, and suddenly, the cool air of the room kisses my heated skin, making me gasp.

We fall onto the bed. His body is all hard muscle and warm skin, and mine is curves and sighs, ready to be explored. Each touch, a discovery; each kiss, a conquest.

"God, you're incredible," Dakota breathes out.

I trace the contours of his shoulders, feeling the power beneath his skin.

"Your hands," he murmurs. "They're like magic."

"Magic, huh?" I tease, allowing my fingers to dance across his skin. My touch is light, yet deliberate. "I thought you were the one with all the tricks up your sleeve."

"Maybe," he admits with a wink. "But I'm willing to learn a few new ones from you."

We're slow, unhurried, as if time has no meaning in Dakota's bedroom. There's no rush, no urgency. His fingertips skim over my collarbone, dip into the valley between my breasts, igniting tiny fires wherever they land. I arch into his touch.

"Harmony," he begs in a whisper. The anticipation coils tighter within me.

"Take your time," I whisper back. This isn't just about the rush of pleasure, it's about savoring every second, every sensation that draws us closer together.

"Look at me," he commands softly, and I do. Those hazel eyes lock onto mine, and his latex cover cock enters me in one fluid stroke.

The fullness makes me gasp, and I reach for him.

His sharp intake of breath is the only sound before he starts moving in and out of me, groaning my name like a prayer.

We move together, a symphony of sighs and whispers, giving way to a crescendo of passion. It's a game of give-and-take, an ebb and flow of desire that we ride with the same intensity.

"Harmony, you're incredible," Dakota pants.

Our movements grow more urgent, until the world narrows down to the point of no return.

"Harmony!" Dakota's voice breaks on the edge of his climax, and it's all the spark I need to follow him over, our release a shared quake that rocks us to the core.

Dakota's heartbeat thumps against my ear. We're a tangle of limbs on his unmade bed, the sheets twisted around us.

I look up at him, our noses almost touching, and there's this warmth in his gaze. His fingers trace lazy circles on my back.

"Isn't it just..." I start, but words fail me.

"So much more," Dakota supplies, and it's exactly right. More than lust, more than convenience. There's a depth in the way he looks at me, like he sees past Miss Green Eyes and into the core of who I am—my passion for science, my occasional sarcasm, the part of me that's always chasing after the next big breakthrough.

"Yeah, more," I echo, and the admission feels like stepping out into the unknown. Some things aren't meant to be measured or forecasted. Like the feeling of his arms tight around me, promising silent things that make my heart race faster.

"Scared?" he asks, his thumb brushing my jawline in a gesture so tender it might as well be a kiss.

"Terrified," I confess, because it's the truth.

"Good," he says with a grin. "Means it's real."

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Harmony is only here for a little bit longer so I selfishly keep her in bed the entire day, but now we are meeting my friends at a beach bonfire.

I lead Harmony down the narrow path to our bonfire spot. Weathered driftwood logs line the trail to the beach.

"Watch your step," I murmur, guiding her over a piece of driftwood. She's wearing jeans and a light jacket that's probably too thin for the evening chill, but she hasn't complained once. Three days of knowing her, and I already know she's not the complaining type.

"I know I met the ladies already and they are great. But your teammates won't bite, will they?" She tucks a strand of auburn hair behind her ear.

"Only if you ask nicely." When she rolls her eyes, I squeeze her hand. "They'll love you. They're assholes, but they're my assholes."

As we approach the fire circle, Asher spots us first, his guitar pausing mid-chord. "The prodigal son returns!" he calls out, grinning. "And he brings a guest!"

Everyone turns, and suddenly I feel like I'm bringing a girl home to meet my parents. Except worse, because these idiots know all my secrets.

"Everyone," I announce with more confidence than I feel, "this is Harmony. Harmony, this is everyone." I gesture broadly with my free hand. "Welcome to our little hockey family."

Jayden bounces up first—literal bounces, like she's got springs in her shoes—and hugs Harmony. "It's great to see you again!"

"Dakota hasn't stopped talking about you," Ryder cuts in from his spot by the fire. "Three days of 'Harmony this' and 'Miss Green Eyes that.' We were about to stage an intervention."

"He's exaggerating," I tell Harmony, who's clearly enjoying my discomfort. "You already know the tall, quiet one with the Viking look is Kaleb. The broody one who thinks he's funny is Ryder. The one with the guitar is Asher. And you've met Jayden, who has no filter."

"And you met me too at the game the other night," a voice calls from the other side of the fire. Elle waves, curled up next to Asher. "I'm with the musical one."

"Nice to meet all of you," Harmony says, comfortable in a way I didn't expect. "Dakota's told me almost nothing about you."

That gets a round of laughter. I guide her to an empty space on one of the logs where a couple of blankets are spread out. The fire crackles between us and the others.

"Beer?" Kaleb offers, already reaching into a cooler.

"I'm good with water," Harmony replies. "I don't want to have a hangover my last day here tomorrow."

"Right," Asher nods. "Dakota mentioned you're heading back to Oklahoma soon?"

"Norman," she confirms. "Work waits for no weathergirl."

"Meteorologist," I correct automatically, having been schooled on the difference three

times already.

"You remembered." She smiles.

Ryder launches into a story about an away game last season in Toronto, where I apparently blocked a shot with my face instead of my stick. "Blood everywhere," he says, hands gesturing wildly. "Ref had to stop the game to scrape Lucky's DNA off the ice."

"It wasn't that bad," I protest.

"You needed seventeen stitches," Kaleb reminds me.

"Seventeen stitches isn't bad?" Harmony asks, looking genuinely concerned.

"Hockey standards," Jayden explains, nestled into Ryder's side. "These guys are basically walking scars at this point."

As the conversation flows, I lean closer to Harmony, pointing out little details about my friends that you don't get from first impressions.

"See how Kaleb keeps scanning the beach? Former military dad. He's always looking for threats that aren't there," I whisper. "And Asher only plays songs in minor keys when he's thinking about his parents. They died when he was a kid."

"That's sad," she murmurs.

"He's got a good support system," I say, watching Elle lean in to kiss Asher's cheek. "And Ryder pretends to hate everything, but watch how he looks at Jayden when he thinks no one's watching."

On cue, Ryder's scowl softens as Jayden laughs at something Elle said. It's brief, but it's there.

"They're a family," Harmony observes.

"Yeah," I nod. "They're my family too."

The night deepens around us. Elle shares stories about readings she's done as a phone psychic, Jayden complains about rude customers at the Sand Dunes, and Asher strums quiet melodies of the best of the oldies. Harmony fits in seamlessly, asking questions, laughing at the right moments, offering stories of her own about storm chasing and weather patterns that somehow don't bore anyone.

I watch her instead of the fire, studying the way her hands move when she talks, how her eyes crinkle when she smiles.

A tap on my shoulder pulls me from my thoughts. Kaleb nods toward the water's edge, and I follow him, excusing myself from Harmony's side.

"What's up?" I ask when we're out of earshot.

"Man, I've never seen you act so damn smooth—with a girl you barely know," he says, crossing his arms. "Usually you're all swagger, bad pick-up lines, and one-and-done by the end of the night."

I brush a strand of hair from my forehead, trying to ignore the nervous flutter in my gut. "Maybe I'm tired of the old game."

"Just shy of a week, Dakota." His voice drops lower. "You've known her five days."

"I know how long it's been."

"And she leaves tomorrow."

"I'm aware of the calendar, thanks."

Kaleb sighs. "Just... be careful. Long distance is hard."

"Who said anything about long distance?" Even as I say it, I know I'm lying to myself. These last few days of coffee dates and beach walks and late-night texting, and somehow I'm contemplating changing my entire MO.

When we return to the fire, the group has shifted. Asher and Elle have wandered down to the water, his guitar abandoned beside the log. Ryder and Jayden have disappeared entirely, probably back to the house. Only Harmony remains, poking at the fire with a stick.

"The natives have abandoned us," I say, sitting beside her again.

"Apparently I'm very boring," she replies with a small smile.

"Impossible."

The fire pops and hisses, sending sparks upward to join the stars.

"Day after tomorrow, you're off, and I'll be stuck here with these old goons," I say, trying to keep my tone light.

Harmony's laugh is gentle. "You know I have a life back home, Dakota. Yeah, it sucks, but that's the real world."

"The real world is overrated."

"Says the professional hockey player with the beach house."

"It's not my beach house," I clarify. "I just pay rent."

She nudges my shoulder with hers. "Still."

I turn to face her, studying her features in the dying firelight. The freckles across her nose, the slight cleft in her chin, the way her eyes reflect the flames. Five days shouldn't be enough to memorize someone's face, but here I am, trying anyway.

I lean forward and kiss her, soft and slow, like we have all the time in the world instead of just a day. When we break apart, she rests her forehead against mine.

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There's a heaviness in my chest. Today. That's all we have left before I fly back to Oklahoma and reality crashes down on whatever this thing is between Dakota and me. His arm is draped over my waist, but when I turn to look at him, his eyes are already open, staring at the ceiling with an intensity that makes my stomach clench.

"Morning," I say, my voice still rough with sleep.

"Hey." Just one word, but it lands between us like a stone. None of his usual warmth, no "morning, Miss Green Eyes" or playful grope under the sheets.

I slide out from under his arm, feeling suddenly exposed despite wearing his oversized Renegades t-shirt. The clock on his nightstand reads 7:38 AM. Time—the enemy we've been ignoring all week—is suddenly very much present.

"I need to check some weather data," I mutter, reaching for my phone. It's a lie. The first of the day, and it's not even 8 AM. I don't need to check anything; I just need a moment to rebuild the walls he's been systematically dismantling since we met.

Dakota sits up, sheets pooling around his waist. His hair is a mess, sticking up in all directions, and normally he'd make some joke about sex hair and morning stubble. Today, he just runs a hand through it and sighs.

"Caffeine Beach?" he asks, already swinging his legs over the side of the bed.

"Sure." I clutch my phone like it's a lifeline. Data. Numbers. Predictions. Things I understand.

We move around each other in a dance that suddenly feels choreographed rather than natural. He showers first while I pretend to be absorbed in my email. I shower next, lingering under the hot water, trying to wash away the feeling that something fundamental has shifted overnight. By the time I emerge, dressed in shorts and a lightweight blouse, he's waiting by the door, keys in hand, face a blank canvas.

The walk to the boardwalk is excruciating. Our shoulders brush occasionally, but Dakota keeps his hands shoved deep in his pockets. He's wearing his game-day expression—focused, distant, unreachable.

"Big game coming up, huh?" I venture, desperate to break the silence stretching between us.

"Yeah. Conference semifinals on Friday." His voice is flat, professional. The voice he probably uses for sports reporters, not for the woman he's been whispering filthy promises to all week.

"You'll do great." I sound like a fan, not someone who's had him inside me in ways that make me blush to remember in the morning.

He nods but doesn't elaborate. The boardwalk is waking up around us—joggers with their dogs, early tourists clutching maps, locals power-walking with the determination of people who've seen it all before. I find myself cataloging these details like I'm preparing a weather report. Mild morning temperatures, chance of emotional thunderstorms increasing throughout the day.

Caffeine Beach sits at the edge of the boardwalk. It's a local favorite that Dakota introduced me to on our second day together. The smell of freshly ground beans and warm pastry hits me as he holds the door open, one small courtesy that momentarily cracks his distant facade.

"The usual?" he asks, and I nod, grateful for this tiny thread of normalcy.

I find us a table by the window while Dakota orders. Two college-aged girls at the counter recognize him, their eyes widening as they nudge each other and giggle. Normally, this would amuse me—watching women react to him like he's some rare celestial event—but today it just underscores the reality I've been avoiding. Dakota Miles exists in a world of adoring fans, championship games, and a life rooted firmly in Charleston. My life is 900 miles away in Norman, with tornado warnings and radar systems that don't care about hockey playoffs or hazel eyes that change color depending on his mood.

"One almond milk latte with an extra shot," Dakota says, placing the mug in front of me. "And a chocolate croissant to share."

"Thanks." I wrap my hands around the warm ceramic, studying the pattern the barista has created in the foam—a simple leaf that's already beginning to dissolve. Like us, I think, and then mentally kick myself for the melodrama.

Dakota sits across from me, his own black coffee steaming between his hands. His fingers tap against the side of the mug.

"So," he begins, and my stomach drops at his tone. "You head back tomorrow?"

"Yeah. My flight leaves at 11:20." I take a sip of my latte. "I have to be back at work on Monday. We're entering severe weather season, and the team needs all hands on deck."

He nods, taking a long drink of his coffee before responding. "The playoffs could take us through the end of May, if we make it all the way."

The unspoken implication hangs between us. Two months where our schedules and

locations make any continuation of this—whatever this is—nearly impossible.

"That's assuming you make it to the finals," I say, attempting a teasing tone that falls flat.

His eyes finally meet mine, a flash of the old Dakota peeking through. "We'll make it."

"Such confidence." I manage a small smile. "Is that why they call you Lucky?"

"They call me Lucky because I am." He breaks off a piece of the croissant, flaky layers separating between his fingers. "At least on the ice."

Something about the way he says it makes my chest tighten. "And off the ice?"

Dakota's gaze drifts past me to the ocean. "That's more complicated."

I take another sip of my latte, buying time. I came to Charleston for a vacation with my bestie, not a vacation romance with a professional hockey player known for his aversion to commitment. Yet here we are, dancing around what happens when fantasy collides with reality.

"We could try long-distance," I suggest, the words escaping before I can analyze their wisdom. "FaceTime, weekend visits when our schedules align."

His expression shifts, a cloud passing over the sun. "Harmony..." He sighs, running a hand through his hair. "Long-distance is a bitch. I've seen what it does to some of the guys on the team. All the missed calls, the fights over nothing, the jealousy when you can't be there for big moments."

"So you're saying it's not worth trying?" My voice comes out sharper than intended,

the hurt bubbling up despite my best efforts.

Dakota breaks off another piece of croissant but doesn't eat it. "I'm saying I don't want to make promises I can't keep. The season gets crazy. There are road trips, media obligations, charity events. Some weeks I barely have time to sleep, let alone maintain a relationship with someone in another state."

The analytical part of my brain understands his logic. The statistical probability of success for a long-distance relationship between two career-focused individuals is undoubtedly low. But the part of me that's spent the last week wrapped in his sheets, laughing at his terrible jokes, and feeling more alive than I have in years isn't interested in statistics.

"You know what I do for a living, right?" I set my mug down with more force than necessary. "I predict things. Complicated, chaotic, atmospheric things. I look at data points and calculate probabilities for events that could destroy lives if I get them wrong."

He frowns, not following my point. "Yeah...?"

"So I understand uncertainty better than most people." I lean forward, lowering my voice. "But I also understand that some things are worth the risk, even when the forecast looks grim."

Dakota's expression softens momentarily, and he reaches across the table to touch my hand. The contact makes me realize how much I've come to crave his touch.

"It's not about worth, Harmony." His thumb traces small circles on my wrist. "You're worth it. That's not the question."

"Then what is the question?" I challenge, fighting the urge to turn my hand over and

lace our fingers together.

He withdraws his hand, leaving my skin cold. "The question is whether either of us is set up for this right now. Your career is in Oklahoma. Mine is here. We met a week ago."

"Six days," I correct automatically.

A ghost of a smile touches his lips. "Six days," he concedes. "Not exactly a solid foundation."

I know he's right. The rational part of me knows that what we're experiencing is likely nothing more than vacation-induced intensity. Yet the same analyst in me also recognizes outliers, anomalies that defy conventional patterns.

"You're withdrawing," I say quietly. "I can feel it happening. Since last night, you've been pulling away."

Dakota's jaw tightens. "I'm being realistic."

"No, you're being scared."

His eyes flash, the hazel darkening to amber. "Excuse me?"

"You heard me." I lean back in my chair, crossing my arms. "The great Dakota 'Lucky' Miles, fearless on the ice but terrified of genuine connection. Your teammates call you the team's resident fuck boy for a reason, right?"

It's a low blow, repeating what he told me himself during one of our late-night conversations, but I need to break through the wall he's constructing between us.

"That's not fair," he says, voice dropping an octave. "You don't know my life."

"I know what you've shown me," I counter. "This week, you showed me someone who isn't afraid of intimacy. Someone who talks about more than just hockey and hookups. Someone real."

His expression flickers. I think I've reached him, but then his game face slides back into place.

"This week was real," he admits. "But so is the fact that our lives don't align. I have the biggest games of my career coming up. You've got—what did you call it?—severe weather season. Neither of us can afford distractions."

The word 'distraction' hits me like a slap. Is that all I am to him? A pleasant diversion before the real work begins?

I retreat into the safety of facts and figures. "Did you know that long-distance relationships actually have about the same success rate as proximate ones? Around 58% according to some studies."

Dakota's expression shifts from frustration to something like pity, which is infinitely worse. "Harmony..."

"And technology makes it easier than ever. There are even apps specifically designed to help couples maintain intimacy across distances." My voice sounds hollow even to my own ears. "Of course, the success variables include communication frequency, visit regularity, and commitment clarity."

"Are you seriously giving me statistics right now?" He shakes his head. "This isn't a weather pattern you can predict."

"No, it's not," I admit, deflating slightly. "Weather is actually more predictable than human emotions. At least storms follow physical laws."

A heavy silence falls between us.

"I just think," Dakota finally says, carefully measuring his words, "that we should enjoy this last day without expectations. Let's not ruin what we have with promises we might not be able to keep."

The scientist in me understands his perspective. The woman who's spent nine days falling for him wants to argue, to fight for the possibility that we could be the exception to the statistical rule. But his expression—guarded, resolved—tells me this is a battle I won't win today.

"Fine," I say, wrapping my fingers around my now-lukewarm latte. "No expectations. No promises."

Relief and something like regret flash across his face. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet," I warn, meeting his gaze directly. "Because while I won't push for promises, I'm not giving up on us entirely. I've spent my career studying unpredictable phenomena. I know that sometimes, against all odds, patterns emerge from chaos."

Dakota's lips part slightly, surprise evident in his expression. Whatever response he was expecting, it wasn't this.

"You're not what I expected, Miss Green Eyes," he says softly, using the nickname he gave me the night we met.

"Good," I reply, feeling a strange calm settle over me. "Because predictability is

overrated."

He laughs then, a genuine sound that cracks through the tension. It's not a resolution—the uncertainty of our future still looms large—but it's a moment of connection in the midst of withdrawal.

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Harmony looks peaceful, her auburn curls fanned across my pillow like she belongs there. Maybe she does. That's the thought that's been keeping me up at night—that this woman, somehow fits into my chaotic life. However, in three hours, she'll be on a plane back to Oklahoma, and I'll be... what? The same old Dakota Miles, Charleston's favorite hockey-playing fuck boy? The thought sits heavy in my chest.

I trace the freckles on her shoulder with my finger. We've had one week together—one week of showing her around Charleston, late-night talks at the beach bonfire spot, and mornings tangled in my sheets. One week that somehow feel more meaningful than the string of nameless hookups that came before her.

Her eyelids flutter open, those beautiful eyes focusing on me.

"You're staring," she murmurs.

"Hard not to." I give her my practiced smile, the one that makes most women blush. Harmony just raises an eyebrow.

"What time is it?" She sits up, already reaching for her phone on the nightstand.

"Too early to think about leaving," I say, trying to pull her back down.

She resists, glancing at her screen. "Dakota, my flight's at 11:30. I need to get ready."

Reality crashes in. Right. Today's the day. The last day.

I watch her gather her clothes and disappear into the bathroom, listen to the shower

running and try not to think about how empty this room will feel tonight. How empty my bed will feel. How empty I might feel.

Hell, when did I turn into such a sap?

By the time she emerges in a practical button-down and jeans, hair pulled back in that no-nonsense ponytail, I've put on my game face. Dakota Miles doesn't do sad goodbyes. Dakota Miles keeps it casual, keeps it cool.

"You all packed, Miss Green Eyes?" I ask, using the nickname that made her roll her eyes the first time I used it but now sometimes makes her smile.

"Nearly." She zips up her toiletry bag. "Just need to double-check I haven't forgotten anything essential."

I lean against the doorframe, arms crossed. "Like what? Your heart? Because I think you might be leaving that behind."

She pauses, those eyes meeting mine with an unreadable expression. "That's not funny, Dakota."

"Who says I'm joking?"

The moment stretches between us, taut with possibilities. Then she looks away, back to her suitcase. "You're the one who said long distance relationships are too tough. Don't tease me with possibilities. Plus, I've got two major storm systems to track when I get back. The National Weather Service doesn't care about my... personal situation."

"Right." I push off from the doorframe, grabbing a t-shirt from my drawer. "Well, can't keep those storm systems waiting."

Harmony sighs, zipping her suitcase closed with unnecessary force. "Don't do that."

"Do what?"

"Act like this is easy for me." Her voice is steady, but I catch the slight tremor in her hands as she checks her ticket on her phone.

I run a hand through my sleep-mussed hair, letting out a breath. "Look, let's not make this a whole thing, okay? You've got a flight to catch."

She studies me. "Fine."

We move through the rest of the morning routine in uncomfortable silence. I carry her bags to my Porsche, trying not to think about how we stumbled through the front door with those same bags a week ago when her vacation rental flooded.

"Dakota, where's my rental car?"

"I hired someone to return it for you this morning. I wanted to take you to the airport. You can check your email. I'm sure you have a return confirmation," I say.

"Oh, okay. Thank you," she replies with a small smile.

The beach house is quiet. Kaleb's the only one who might be around, but there's no sign of him as I lock up.

Harmony slides into the passenger seat of my Porsche, her posture straight and tense. I climb in beside her with the engine purring to life as I back out of the driveway.

"Nice day for flying," I say lamely as we pull onto the highway that leads to Charleston International.

"The conditions are optimal," she agrees, professional meteorologist mode engaged. "Clear skies, minimal wind shear, no weather systems that would cause turbulence or delays."

I tap my fingers against the steering wheel. "Good to know."

The silence grows again, broken only by the GPS voice giving directions. Harmony stares out the window at the passing shore.

"I had a good time," she finally says, still looking out the window. "This past week."

"Yeah?" I glance at her. "Even when I dragged you to that team party and Kaleb tried to explain the entire history of hockey to you?"

A small smile touches her lips. "Even then." She turns to face me. "Your friends are... interesting."

"That's one word for them." I grin, remembering how she'd held her own against my teammates, correcting Kaleb's weather misconceptions.

"Elle and Asher make a good couple," she says.

"Yeah, they do." My grip tightens on the wheel. "Never thought I'd see the day Asher Gray settled down, but here we are."

"And Ryder and Jayden?"

"Disgustingly perfect for each other." I signal for a lane change. "Who would have thought two of the Renegades' most eligible bachelors would end up tied down within one season?"

She's quiet for a moment. "And then there's you."

"Then there's me," I say, forcing a chuckle. "I'll probably be the last man standing."

"Is that how you want it?"

The question hangs in the air between us. I keep my eyes on the road, but I can feel her watching me.

"It's what I'm good at," I finally answer. "No expectations, no disappointments. Everyone knows what they're getting with Dakota Miles."

"Do they?" Her voice is soft.

I shoot her a look. "What's that supposed to mean?"

She shrugs, tucking a strand of hair behind her ear. "Just that the Dakota Miles I've gotten to know this past week isn't exactly the one advertised in those hockey gossip blogs."

"Don't believe everything you read on the internet, sweetheart."

"I don't," she counters. "I believe what I observe. And what I've observed is someone different than the 'resident fuck boy' you pretend to be."

My hands flex on the wheel. "Maybe you just bring out a different side of me."

"Maybe." She turns back to the window. "Or maybe that's who you really are, when you're not hiding behind the persona."

The highway stretches ahead, each mile bringing us closer to the airport, closer to

goodbye. I want to tell her she's wrong, that what she's seen is just another act. Although the words stick in my throat.

"You know," I say instead, "Oklahoma's not that far. The Renegades play the Tulsa Tornados twice this season."

"I know. I looked up your schedule." The admission comes quietly.

"You did?"

She nods, a faint blush coloring her cheeks. "It's approximately a two-hour flight from Charleston to Oklahoma City, then another hour and forty-five minutes to Norman by car."

I can't help but smile. "You've got it all calculated out, huh?"

"Force of habit. I analyze data for a living."

"So, what does your data tell you about... this?" I gesture vaguely between us.

She hesitates. "The data is... inconclusive. Long-distance relationships have a 58% failure rate within the first four months."

"Those aren't great odds."

"No," she agrees. "They're not."

We fall silent again as the airport comes into view and then the departures terminal. I pull up to the curb, shifting into park and sitting there.

"Well," I finally say, "guess this is it."

Harmony nods, her hands folded in her lap. "I should go. Security might be busy."

Neither of us moves.

"Harmony, I—" I start, just as she says, "Dakota—"

We both stop, sharing a small, tense laugh.

"You first," I tell her.

She takes a deep breath. "I don't do casual. I never have. My job requires precision, planning, certainty. But with you..." She shakes her head. "With you, I can't predict anything. That both terrifies me and thrills me."

My heart hammers against my ribs. "Is that good or bad?"

"I don't know," she admits. "I do know I don't want to walk away without acknowledging that this past week meant something to me."

I reach across the console, taking her hand in mine. It's smaller than mine, but strong and capable. The hand of a woman who knows exactly who she is and what she wants.

"They meant something to me too," I say, the words falling from my lips before I can stop them. "More than I expected."

She squeezes my hand, a tentative smile on her face. "So where does that leave us?"

I want to have an answer, want to be the confident, cocky Dakota Miles with all the right moves. Yet sitting here, I'm just a guy afraid of losing something before I've even figured out what it is.

"I don't know," I admit. "I've never been great at the whole relationship thing."

"Neither have I," she confesses. "Too busy chasing storms."

I smile slightly. "And I've been too busy running from them."

The airport buzzes with activity around us, people coming and going, saying hellos and goodbyes. A family laughs nearby, loading suitcases onto a cart. A businessman hurries past, talking urgently on his phone.

"I should go," Harmony says again, but her hand stays in mine.

"Yeah."

Still, neither of us moves.

"Fuck it," I mutter, and lean across the console to kiss her.

She meets me halfway, her lips soft against mine, her free hand coming up to rest against my cheek. It's not frantic like our first kiss was, not desperate like some of the ones that followed. It's gentle, lingering, a question neither of us knows how to answer.

When we pull apart, her eyes shine with something that makes my chest ache.

"I'll call you when I land," she promises.

"I'll be waiting by the phone like a teenager," I joke, but we both know I mean it.

I get out to grab her suitcase from the trunk, then walk her to the entrance of the terminal. We stand there awkwardly, surrounded by strangers with their own stories

and own goodbyes.

"So," I say, rocking back on my heels.

"So," she echoes.

"Have a safe flight. Call me when you land."

She nods. "I will." She hesitates, then adds, "The Charleston area is expected to have clear weather patterns for the next week. You should have good conditions for practice."

I laugh. "Only you would give me a weather report as a goodbye."

A small smile tugs at her lips. "It's what I do."

"One of the many things I..." I stop myself. Too much, too soon. "One of the many things I like about you."

Her eyes search mine, and I wonder if she caught my near-slip. "I'll miss you, Dakota Miles."

"I'll miss you too, Miss Green Eyes."

With one last kiss—quick, like she's afraid to linger—she takes her suitcase and walks through the automatic doors. I watch her check in at the counter, watch as she looks back at me with a small wave, watch until she disappears into the security line.

Then she's gone.

I stand there longer than I should, staring at the space where she was, feeling oddly

hollow.

Finally, I turn and head back to my car. The Porsche feels emptier somehow without her in the passenger seat.

I drive slower on the way back, no rush to return to an empty house. The roads are familiar, but everything looks different somehow. I turn on the radio, flipping until I find something loud enough to drown out my thoughts.

It doesn't work.

By the time I pull into the driveway of the beach house, my head is a mess of conflicting emotions. Part of me—the part that's been Dakota "Lucky" Miles, ladies' man and commitment-phobe for as long as I can remember—is already telling me to shake it off, move on, find someone new to warm my bed tonight.

However a newer, unfamiliar part of me is already counting the days until the Renegades play in Tulsa.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:47 am

I stare at the satellite imagery until my eyes burn, tracking the pressure system that's been building off the coast for three days. Numbers and wind patterns blur together on my screen which is usually comforting. Today though, each data point feels like it's plotting the growing distance between Dakota and me. Three weeks, four days, and approximately seven hours since I left Charleston—not that I'm counting. My phone sits silent beside my keyboard, our last text exchange still open.

"Miss Baker? The director wants these projections by four."

I blink away from the screen, nodding at my colleague. "Tell him I'm almost done."

When I'm alone again, my fingers hover over my phone. Dakota sent a picture last night—him in full hockey gear, a grin, sweat making his hair stick to his forehead.

Dakota: Miss those green eyes of yours.

I'd responded with a storm front photo and some joke about high pressure systems. Real smooth, Harmony.

The weeks since Charleston have settled into a pattern. Dakota texts in the morning, usually something flirty that makes me smile despite myself. I respond during lunch breaks. He calls late at night after games or practices. We talk randomness—his teammates' antics, my frustration with outdated weather models, how neither of us can cook worth a damn.

What we don't talk about: whatever this is between us, whether it's sustainable, or if the pull I feel toward him is stronger than the gravitational force of my career.

My screen blinks with an incoming call—not Dakota, but Director Simmons. I straighten automatically, clearing my throat before answering.

"Baker here."

"Harmony, glad I caught you. Need your eyes on this developing system. Models are showing conflicting outcomes."

I tab over to the radar data. "I'm looking at it now, sir. There's an unusual temperature gradient forming along the frontal boundary. I'd give it a sixty percent chance of intensification within the next twelve hours."

"That's what I thought too." His voice shifts, the official tone softening slightly. "Listen, there's something else I wanted to discuss with you. Got a minute?"

My stomach tightens. "Of course."

"The Advanced Prediction Initiative at NOAA headquarters is looking for a lead researcher. Your work on the tornado prediction model caught their attention." He pauses. "They specifically asked for you, Baker."

I'm shocked. The equipment is cutting-edge, the meteorological equivalent of NASA for weather nerds like me. It's the kind of opportunity that comes once in a career.

"That's... unexpected." My voice sounds distant to my own ears.

"They'd need you to relocate to D.C. Six-month commitment initially, likely extending to permanent if the project succeeds." He clears his throat. "Which, with you on board, it would."

My eyes drift to my phone, to Dakota's grinning face still lighting up the screen. D.C.

is even farther from Charleston than Oklahoma.

"When would they need an answer?" I ask.

"A month. Take some time to think about it. Harmony—" his voice becomes serious, "—this is the kind of opportunity most meteorologists only dream about."

After we hang up, I sit motionless, staring out the window at the gathering clouds. The storm system I've been monitoring seems suddenly insignificant compared to the one brewing in my personal life.

My phone buzzes.

Dakota: Thinking about you. Game tonight. Wish you could be there.

I type and delete three different responses before settling on what to send.

Me: Good luck. I'll be watching.

The truth is, I've watched every game I can. Sometimes I mute the sound and run the forecasting models in the background, splitting my attention.

By six o'clock, I've finished the projections and am running a secondary analysis just to keep my mind occupied. The office has emptied out. I should go home, turn on the game, eat something besides the granola bar I had at noon, maybe even sleep before Dakota calls after his game.

Instead, I dial Marina.

"Well, if it isn't the weather witch herself," she answers on the second ring. "I was beginning to think you'd been carried off by a tornado."

"That would solve some problems," I mutter, leaning back in my chair.

"Whoa. That sounds ominous. What's up?"

I explain about the D.C. offer, words tumbling out faster than I can organize them. Marina listens without interrupting.

"So basically," she says when I finally pause for breath, "you've been offered your dream job, but you're hesitating because of Sexy Hockey Boy."

I wince. "When you put it like that, it sounds ridiculous."

"Not ridiculous. Human." She sighs, and I can picture her curling up on her couch.

"Look, I've known you for what, six years now? In all that time, I've never seen you get this twisted up over a guy."

"I'm not twisted up," I protest weakly.

"Your voice goes up half an octave every time you mention him. You've watched hockey games, Harmony. You hate sports."

"I don't hate sports. I just find the statistical analysis more interesting than the actual gameplay."

"My point exactly," Marina says. "This thing with Dakota isn't nothing. But neither is D.C.."

I press my fingers to my temples. "What would you do?"

"I'd talk to him," she says simply. "Tell him about the offer, see how he reacts. His response will tell you a lot about whether this thing has legs."

"What if it doesn't?"

"Then you take the job and throw yourself into saving lives with your weather wizardry. And I come visit you in D.C. and we get drunk on overpriced cocktails while plotting how to save the planet from climate doom."

"You make it sound so simple."

"It's not, but keeping him in the dark won't make it any easier."

After we hang up, I stare at Dakota's contact photo for a long minute. It's not even a good picture—just him making a ridiculous face during our night at the beach bonfire. There's something so alive in his expression, so present in the moment. The opposite of how I usually operate, always looking ahead.

My fingers hover over the call button, but I stop when a notification pops up from the weather alert system. The storm system has intensified, exactly as I predicted. I should feel satisfied, but instead I just feel tired.

By the time I get home to my sparse apartment, it's after seven. I kick off my shoes, heat up a frozen dinner, and settle in front of my laptop to watch Dakota's game. The Renegades are playing well, and Dakota makes several impressive saves. The commentators praise his focus, his quick reflexes. I wonder if they can see what I see—the way his body language changes after each play, like he's looking for someone in the stands.

My phone rings just after eleven. Dakota's name lights up the screen.

"Hey," I answer, trying to sound casual.

"Miss Green Eyes." His voice is rough around the edges. "Did you see that save in the

third period?"

"I did. Very impressive." I smile. "How's your knee?"

"Fine." He pauses. "Actually, it's sore as hell, but don't tell Coach."

"Your secret's safe with me."

"How about you? Save the world from any weather disasters today?"

I think about the D.C. offer, about what Marina said. About how this is the perfect moment to bring it up. "Just the usual. Tracking storms, making predictions."

"You sound tired." His voice softens. "Long day?"

"Yeah." I swallow hard, feeling the weight of all the things I'm not saying. "Dakota, there's something—"

My phone beeps with another call. Director Simmons again.

"Sorry, I have to take this. Work emergency."

"Go save the world, sweetheart. Call me back?"

"I will," I promise, but I already know I won't—not tonight, not about this.

The director's call is brief but urgent—the storm system has shifted, threatening coastal communities sooner than expected. I spend the next three hours coordinating with emergency management, refining models, making sure warnings go out. By the time I'm done, it's well past two in the morning, and my opportunity for a hard conversation with Dakota has slipped away.

I text him instead.

Me: Sorry about earlier. Work emergency. Storm system intensifying off the coast.
Rain check on our chat?

His response comes quickly, making me wonder if he's been waiting up.

Dakota: Always. Just don't stand me up too many times, Miss Green Eyes. I might start to think you don't like me.

I type out a response... Me: There's something I need to talk to you about. Important career opportunity.

I look at those words for a long time, my thumb hovering over the send button. Then I delete them and retype something else.

Me: Never that. Just busy saving the world from bad weather. Talk tomorrow?

Dakota: Count on it.

I place my phone face-down on my nightstand and stare at the ceiling, listening to the light rain that's started outside my window.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:47 am

I check my phone for the fifth time in twenty minutes. Still nothing from Harmony. It's been three days since her last real text—not counting the "busy, talk later" bullshit she sent yesterday. I toss the phone onto my bed and run my hands through my hair. This isn't me. Dakota "Lucky" Miles doesn't pine after women. They pine after me. At least, that's how it used to be before Miss Green Eyes stormed into my life with her that smile that makes me forget my own damn name.

"Fuck," I mutter, pacing the length of my bedroom. Our last time together replaying in my head.

The memory makes my jaw clench. I grab my gym bag harder than necessary, knowing I need to get to practice. Our team has a critical game tonight against the Chicago Bladed, and I can't afford to be distracted. Yet here I am, a grown-ass professional hockey player, moping over a woman who's clearly lost interest.

I grab my keys, slam the door behind me, and take the stairs two at a time. Outside, the sun beats down, mocking my dark mood with its cheerfulness. I slide into my Porsche, the leather seats hot against my back, and tear out of the driveway faster than I should.

On the drive to the rink, I try to focus on hockey. The team. The plays we've been working on. Although my mind keeps circling back to Harmony. The way she'd laugh at my ridiculous jokes just to humor me. The slight furrow between her brows when she's concentrating. I grip the steering wheel tighter.

When did I become this guy? The one checking his phone like a teenager waiting for a girl to text? I'm Dakota Miles, for Christ's sake. Charleston Renegades center. The

guy who once had three different women show up to the same game wearing jerseys with my number.

I pull into the players' lot at the rink, park haphazardly, and grab my gear. Maybe crushing it at practice will clear my head.

"There he is! The man, the legend," Ryder calls out as I walk into the locker room, already half-suited up. "Thought you might be running late, considering."

"Considering what?" I snap, dropping my bag onto the bench.

Ryder raises his eyebrows, exchanging a look with Asher. "Considering the game tonight. You okay, man?"

"Fine." I yank open my locker and start changing, avoiding eye contact with anyone. The room fills with the usual pre-practice chatter. It's all normal hockey player shit that usually feels like home but today just grates on my.

"Miles, you look like someone pissed in your protein shake," Kaleb observes.

"Just focused on the game," I mutter, lacing up my skates.

"Bullshit," Asher says, dropping onto the bench beside me. "This is about Weather Girl, isn't it?"

I shoot him a glare. "Her name is Harmony."

"So it is about her," Asher grins, nudging my shoulder. "Trouble in paradise?"

"There is no trouble, because there is no paradise." I stand up, grabbing my stick. "Can we just focus on hockey? You know, the thing we get paid to do?"

Practice is a disaster. I miss passes. I botch shots I could make in my sleep. Coach benches me twice to "get my head out of my ass," his words echoing across the ice for everyone to hear. By the end, I'm sweating, frustrated, and more wound up than when I arrived.

As we're heading back to the locker room, Asher falls into step beside me. "Hey, let's grab a coffee. We've got time before we need to be back for the game."

I start to refuse, but there's something in his expression that makes me nod. "Fine. Give me ten to shower."

Twenty minutes later, we're sitting in a quiet corner of Caffeine Beach. Asher pushes a black coffee toward me and leans back in his chair.

"So, you gonna tell me what's going on, or do I have to guess?" he asks.

I take a sip of coffee, burning my tongue. "Nothing's going on."

"Dakota." Asher uses my full name, a sure sign he's being serious. "I've seen you take hits that would put most guys in the hospital, and you've never looked as wrecked as you do today."

The coffee tastes bitter in my mouth. I set the cup down and sigh. "I think Harmony's pulling away."

"What makes you think that?"

"She's been distant. Canceling plans. One-word texts. The classic 'I'm too busy' routine." I trace the rim of my cup with my finger. "I've seen it before. I'm usually the one doing it."

Asher nods slowly. "Have you talked to her about it?"

"And say what? 'Hey, are you ghosting me? Because it feels like you're ghosting me, and I don't like how it feels'? Pass."

"Actually, yeah. That's exactly what you could say." Asher takes a sip of his own drink—some fancy latte thing that Elle's got him hooked on. "Look, before Elle, I was just as bad as you at the relationship thing. Maybe worse."

"This isn't a relationship," I say automatically.

Asher gives me a look. "Isn't it, though? You're checking your phone constantly. You're distracted at practice. You nearly took Ryker's head off with that wild pass today. That's not Dakota 'Lucky' Miles behavior. That's relationship behavior."

His words hit like a punch to the gut. "I just don't get it," I admit quietly. "Things were good. Really good. And now suddenly she's acting like I'm an obligation, not a priority."

"Did you ever consider that maybe her job actually is crazy demanding? She predicts the weather, man. That shit affects people's lives."

I hadn't really thought about it that way. In my mind, meteorology was just pointing at maps and saying it might rain tomorrow.

"How do you and Elle make it work?" I ask, surprising myself with the question. "With hockey and her... whatever it is she does."

"Nursing school," Asher supplies with a smile. "It's not easy. We miss each other sometimes. We have to be intentional about making time. We talk about it. We don't just assume the other person knows what we're thinking."

"Talking. Great." I drain the last of my coffee. "Not exactly my strong suit."

"No shit," Asher laughs. "Here's the thing about relationships—they're like hockey. You don't get better by avoiding the hard parts. You get better by practicing them."

The metaphor is so cheesy I have to roll my eyes, but I get his point. "I'll think about it."

"That's all I'm asking." Asher checks his watch. "We get going and go take our pregame nap. Game time's coming up fast."

Later, back at the arena, I try to focus as we suit up. Coach gives us the same speech he always does before big games—about heart and hustle and showing those Chicago bastards who owns the ice. I go through my usual pre-game routine, taping my stick just so, adjusting my pads, but my mind keeps drifting to Harmony.

Would she be watching tonight? She said she might catch the game on TV if work allowed.

As we take the ice for warm-ups, the crowd roars. I force myself to be present, to feel the cool air on my face, to sync my breathing with my movements.

The first period starts strong. I'm on my game, making clean passes and creating opportunities. We're up 1-0 on a beautiful goal from Ryder off my assist.

Then my phone buzzes in my gear bag during the first intermission. I shouldn't check it. I know I shouldn't. Yet I do anyway, hoping to see Harmony's name.

Instead, it's a notification from Instagram. Someone tagged me in a photo. Some random chick from a bar I don't even remember visiting. I close the app, disappointed and annoyed at myself for caring so much.

"Phones away, Miles," Coach barks. "Focus on the game."

I nod, shoving the phone deep into my bag, but the damage is done. My focus is fractured.

The second period is a different story. I'm sloppy and distracted. I miss a critical defensive assignment that leads to Chicago tying the game. Coach benches me for six minutes—an eternity in hockey time—before sending me back out with a look that makes me straighten my spine.

By the third period, we're down 2-1, and I'm playing like I've forgotten what sport I'm participating in. The frustration builds inside me.

With five minutes left in the game, I get the puck on a breakaway. It's just me and the Blades' goalie. I can feel the arena holding its breath. This is my moment to redeem myself and tie the game.

I fake left, cut right, and shoot—directly into the goalie's glove. A save so easy it's embarrassing.

"Fuck!" I slam my stick against the ice.

As I skate back to our zone, a Chicago player—Zach Mickelson, their star defenseman—skates past me with a smirk.

"Nice shot, Miles. My grandmother has better aim."

Something snaps inside me. All the frustration, insecurity, and anger I've been bottling up explodes. I drop my gloves and grab Mickelson by the jersey, throwing a wild punch that connects with his jaw.

The officials blow their whistles frantically as we grapple on the ice. I vaguely register my teammates trying to pull me off him, Kaleb's voice in my ear telling me to calm down. I'm beyond reason, beyond listening.

When they finally separate us, the penalty is announced: five minutes for fighting, game misconduct. I'm done for the night.

As I'm escorted off the ice and not even to the penalty box to boos from Chicago fans and shocked silence from our own, the reality of what I've done hits me. I've let my team down. In a critical game. All because I couldn't keep my personal shit in check.

In the locker room, I tear off my gear, throwing my gloves across the room in. I'm showered and halfway dressed when the final buzzer sounds. The door bangs open, and the team files in. We lost 3-1, Boston scoring on the power play after my penalty.

Kaleb storms directly toward me, still in full gear, eyes blazing. "What the actual fuck was that, Miles?"

"Back off, Jensen," I warn, not in the mood for a lecture.

"No, I won't back off. You cost us the game because you couldn't control your temper." He's in my face now, all six-foot-three of him. "We're fighting for playoff position, and you pull this childish bullshit?"

"It was one game," I mutter, though the excuse sounds weak even to my own ears.

"One game could be the difference between making playoffs and watching from home," Kaleb growls. "Whatever's going on with you, fix it. The team deserves better."

"The team deserves better," I echo sarcastically. "As if you've never had an off night,

Viking."

"An off night is one thing. Deliberately throwing away a game because you're pissy about your love life is another." Kaleb's words hit too close to home, making me flinch.

"You don't know what you're talking about," I say, grabbing my bag.

"We all know, Dakota," Asher cuts in, his voice softer but no less serious. "We're your friends. We see you. Kaleb's right—you can't bring that energy to the ice. It hurts all of us."

The locker room has gone quiet, everyone watching our confrontation. I feel exposed, raw, like they can all see right through me to the mess underneath.

"Fine," I say, jaw clenched. "I'll fix it."

I push past them, nearly running into Coach in the hallway. He gives me a look that says we'll be having a very unpleasant conversation tomorrow, but he lets me pass without a word.

In my car, I sit with the engine running, hands gripping the wheel so tight my knuckles ache. This is Harmony's fault. No—that's not fair. It's my fault for letting her get to me. For caring too much. For breaking my own cardinal rule: never get attached.

The solution seems suddenly, blindingly clear. End it now, before it gets worse. Before I'm so invested that I can't function when she inevitably walks away. Cut my losses and get back to being Dakota Miles, the guy who doesn't need anyone.

I grab my phone, typing before I can talk myself out of it.

Me: We should end this. It's not working for me anymore. Take care, Harmony.

My thumb hovers over the send button for a long moment. Then I press it, watching the message deliver.

It's done. I've cut the cord. No more checking my phone. No more wondering if she's thinking about me. No more distractions on the ice.

So why does it feel like I've just made the biggest mistake of my life?

My phone sits heavy in my hand and the bright light of the screen illuminating the interior of my car. Three dots appear, then disappear. She's typing, then stopping. My heart pounds in my chest so hard I can hear it in my ears.

Then nothing. No response. Just read receipts staring back at me, confirming she's seen my message and chosen not to reply.

I throw my phone onto the passenger seat and start driving, not sure where I'm going, just knowing I need to be anywhere but here, sitting in an empty parking lot with the hollow feeling in my chest.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:47 am

The numbers on my monitor blur together after sixteen straight hours of staring at weather patterns. I blink hard, trying to refocus, but my eyes sting with fatigue—or maybe it's the remnants of tears I refuse to acknowledge. The radar shows a low-pressure system developing off the Carolina coast, intensifying faster than the models predicted. Unpredictable. Just like him. Just like the way Dakota Miles smiled at me over Facetime three days ago before telling me it was over.

"Harmony, you should go home." My colleague pokes his head over my cubicle wall, concern etched across his face. "That's three shifts back-to-back."

"I'm fine," I say, not looking up from my screen. "This system is developing unusual characteristics. The wind shear patterns are—"

"Someone else can monitor it. We have a whole team for that."

I shake my head. "I need to track this."

What I don't say: I need the distraction. I need the numbers and data and patterns to fill my head so there's no room for replaying Dakota's last text.

My colleague sighs and retreats. Another notification pops up on my screen—the storm system is intensifying rapidly, barometric pressure dropping faster than expected. The data shows it tracking toward Charleston. Toward him.

I zoom in on the radar, fingers flying across the keyboard as I pull up additional models. The system has already been upgraded to a tropical storm, and it's organizing in a way that suggests further strengthening. Charleston isn't prepared for this—their

local forecasts are still treating it as a moderate rain event.

I ignore it and pull up the satellite imagery. The storm looks like a tightly coiled spring, ready to unload its energy. My hand hovers over the phone. I should call the Charleston office, alert them to my observations. It's protocol.

Instead, I grab my bag.

"Taking a break?" Another colleague asks as I stand.

"Yeah."

I walk out of the National Weather Service office in Norman with purpose. In my car—a reliable Subaru Outback that's weathered its share of Oklahoma storms—I open my weather app and check the latest updates. The storm system continues its alarming organization.

My fingers grip the steering wheel until my knuckles turn white. The rational part of my brain says to call it in, follow procedure. The irrational part—the part Dakota Miles woke up when he kissed me for the first time—wants to drive straight into the storm.

For once, the irrational part wins.

I stop at my apartment only long enough to throw essentials into a duffel bag: clothes, toiletries, phone charger. Almost as an afterthought, I grab my professional equipment—handheld anemometer, barometer, and the tablet with my proprietary forecasting algorithms. If anyone asks, this is a professional storm chase. Nothing to do with a hockey player with hazel eyes.

The digital clock on my dashboard reads 9:17 PM as I merge onto I-40 East.

According to my calculations, I can reach Charleston in about eighteen hours. The storm will make landfall around then. Perfect timing.

"This is nuts," I mutter to myself as the lights of Norman recede in my rearview mirror. "Completely nuts."

But I don't turn around.

Rain starts three hours into my drive, just light sprinkles at first. I turn on the radio, flipping past stations until I find weather updates. They're still underplaying the system's strength. Amateurs.

My phone rings—my boss. I send it to voicemail. Then my mother calls. Then my boss again. I silence the phone and toss it onto the passenger seat.

The rain intensifies as I cross into Arkansas. My windshield wipers struggle to keep up, and I reduce my speed. Lightning flashes in the distance, illuminating towering cumulonimbus clouds.

Dakota's face flashes in my mind. The day he took Marina and I to his favorite spot. He'd watched me, making me feel like I was someone worth paying attention to.

My hands tighten on the steering wheel. Stupid, stupid, stupid to let a professional hockey player with a playboy reputation get under my skin. I'd known better. I'd read the scouting report, so to speak. Dakota "Lucky" Miles, Renegades resident heartbreaker. And still, I'd fallen.

A crack of thunder so loud it shakes my car jolts me back to the present. The rain is coming down in sheets now, reducing visibility to mere feet. I need to pull over, wait it out. Even with my knowledge of storm systems, this is getting dangerous.

I ease onto the shoulder, hazard lights blinking feebly against the downpour. On my phone, I pull up the radar. I'm driving right into the outer bands of the system. It's intensified beyond even my predictions, now officially a Category 1 hurricane making its way up the coast.

A flash flood warning pops up on my screen. I scan the topography around me—I'm in a low-lying area. Not safe to stay here.

Back on the road, I navigate carefully, using my knowledge of storm systems to choose the safest route. East is dangerous—that's where the storm's eye is heading. North takes me too far off course. South... south could work. I can skirt the worst of it, then approach Charleston from below.

I glance at my reflection in the rearview mirror. My curly auburn hair has escaped its ponytail, forming a chaotic mess around my face. My green eyes—the ones Dakota has named—look back at me, tired and a little wild.

My phone rings again. This time it's not my boss or my mother, but a Charleston area code. The local weather service, probably. I answer, putting it on speaker.

"Baker."

"Harmony, it's Tom Jenkins from Charleston NWS. Your office said you might be headed our way?"

I wince. So my hasty departure didn't go unnoticed. "I'm tracking the system. Your team is underestimating its strength."

"Actually, we just upgraded our alert. Category 1, possible Category 2 by landfall. Are you really driving into this?"

"I have experience with systems like this." It's not a direct answer.

"Well, if you make it here safely, we could use your expertise. Just... be careful. Roads are washing out along the coast."

After we hang up, I feel slightly better. At least now I have a professional justification for this insane journey. I'm not chasing Dakota; I'm chasing the storm. I'm providing my expertise to colleagues. This has nothing to do with wanting to look Dakota Miles in the eye and ask why—why pursue me so relentlessly only to walk away?

The storm intensifies as night turns to dawn. I stop at a truck stop for coffee and to stretch my legs. The TV behind the counter shows weather alerts scrolling across the bottom of the screen. Hurricane warnings for the Carolina coast. Evacuation orders for some barrier islands.

"You heading east?" the cashier asks, eyeing my professional-grade rain jacket and the equipment visible in my car.

"Storm chaser?" I reply, which isn't exactly a lie.

She shakes her head. "Y'all are crazy. But good luck."

Back on the road, fatigue tugs at me. I've been awake for nearly thirty hours now, running on caffeine and hurt feelings. Not the safest combination. I find a motel just off the highway and check in for a few hours, setting multiple alarms. I can't afford to lose too much time, but driving exhausted into a hurricane is a death wish.

In the shabby motel room, I spread my maps and printouts across the bed. The storm has intensified further, now a solid Category 1 with sustained winds of 90 mph. Charleston will feel its effects within hours. I think of Dakota's beachfront house,

shared with his teammates. I wonder if they've evacuated or if they're riding it out, cocky and confident as always.

I doze fitfully, dreaming of hazel eyes and howling winds.

The alarm jolts me awake three hours later. Outside, the sky is an ominous green-gray, a color that makes every meteorologist's pulse quicken. Time to move.

Back on the road, I call the Charleston office.

"I'm about four hours out," I tell Tom. "What's the situation?"

"Deteriorating. We've got storm surge predictions of eight to ten feet for the barrier islands. Most residents have evacuated, but you know how it is—always some holdouts."

I think of Dakota again. Is he a holdout type? Probably. Too stubborn and sure of himself to leave.

The rain becomes torrential as I approach the South Carolina border. Twice I have to detour around flooded roads. The sky is nearly black despite it being midday, and the wind buffets my Subaru like it's trying to push me back.

Ten miles from the state line, disaster nearly strikes. A massive oak tree, its root system weakened by saturated soil, crashes down just yards ahead of me. I slam on my brakes, the car fishtailing before coming to a stop mere feet from the massive trunk.

My heart hammers against my ribs. Too close. I'm breathing hard, hands shaking on the wheel. For the first time, I question what I'm doing. Chasing a storm to a city where a man who doesn't want me lives? Risking my life for... what? Closure? An

explanation?

I pull over at the next rest area, which is deserted except for a couple of emergency vehicles. Rain pounds against my windshield in sheets, making it impossible to see more than a few feet. On my tablet, I pull up the latest radar. The storm has turned slightly, its eye now tracking just east of Charleston. The city will be hit by the dangerous right quadrant of the hurricane, where winds are strongest.

I should turn back. This is foolish. Dangerous. Unprofessional.

But as I sit there, watching the swirling patterns of the storm on my screen, something shifts inside me. Weather systems are unpredictable. We can model them, track them, name them—but in the end, they do what they do, governed by forces too complex for even our best computers to fully map.

People are like that too.

Dakota Miles is like that too.

I've spent my entire adult life trying to predict the unpredictable, to control the uncontrollable. I chase certainty in a world of chaos. And when I couldn't predict Dakota—couldn't control how he made me feel or what he would do—I panicked.

The realization hits me like a gust of wind: I'm not really chasing him for answers. I'm chasing the feeling of being alive that I had with him. The feeling of being out of control, at the mercy of something powerful and beautiful and terrifying.

Just like a storm.

I take a deep breath and pull back onto the highway. The rain is still coming down in sheets, but visibility has improved slightly. According to my GPS, I'm three hours

from Charleston. According to the radar, the storm's eye will make landfall in about the same timeframe.

Perfect timing, indeed.

As I drive, I make peace with the uncertainty. Maybe Dakota will talk to me. Maybe he won't. Maybe the storm will be as bad as predicted. Maybe it won't. The only certainty is that I'm driving into something unpredictable, and for once, I'm okay with that.

My phone rings—the Charleston weather service again.

"Harmony, where are you?" Tom sounds stressed.

"About to cross into South Carolina."

"Listen, the barrier islands are completely cut off. Storm surge has overtaken the causeways. If you're coming to help with forecasting, head straight to our office downtown."

"What about evacuations for the islands?"

"Coast Guard is handling critical cases, but anyone still out there is basically riding it out now. Including your boyfriend and his teammates, if that's why you're really coming."

I don't bother correcting him about Dakota's status. "How do you know they're still there?"

"Because one of them—Grey? Gray?—called in reporting conditions. Said they've boarded up and have supplies. Crazy hockey players think they're invincible."

Asher Gray. Dakota's roommate and teammate. Of course they stayed.

The wind howls around my car as I continue southeast, following a route that skirts the worst flooding according to my radar. The storm has begun to wobble, its trajectory shifting subtly. This is common near landfall, but it makes predictions harder.

Just like Dakota wobbled when things between us got serious. Just like his surety shifted when I told him I was falling in love with him.

Two hours from Charleston, the worst of the outer bands hit me. Driving becomes an exercise in white-knuckled focus. The wind pushes against my car so hard that staying in my lane is a constant battle. Rain comes in horizontal sheets, reducing visibility to almost nothing. Twice I have to ford sections of road where water pools dangerously high.

But I keep going, guided by my knowledge of storm systems and a stubborn determination I didn't know I possessed until Dakota Miles broke my heart.

An hour outside the city, the wind shifts suddenly. The pressure drops—I can feel it in my ears. The storm's eye is making landfall. For a brief period, the rain lessens, though the wind continues to howl. This is my window.

I push forward, grateful for my Subaru's all-wheel drive as I navigate around debris and standing water. The city appears through the gloom, buildings hunkered down against the storm's assault. Downtown Charleston looks like a ghost town, streets empty except for emergency vehicles.

I head straight to the National Weather Service office, as requested. But as I near the turnoff, I hesitate. The storm's eye is moving through. Soon the back end will hit—often more dangerous than the front, with its sudden wind shifts and potential

tornadoes.

Dakota's house is on Pawleys Island. Currently cut off by the storm surge.

I make a decision. I call Tom at the office.

"I'm not coming in yet," I tell him. "I need to check something first."

"Harmony, don't be stupid. The barrier islands are completely inaccessible right now."

"I know these systems. The storm surge will recede temporarily as the eye passes. There's a window."

"That's insane. Even if you could get out there, you'd be trapped when the back end hits."

He's right, of course. It is insane. But so is driving through a hurricane for a man who broke up with me three days ago. In for a penny, in for a pound.

"I'll be careful," I promise, then hang up before he can argue further.

I turn east, toward the coast, toward Pawleys Island, toward Dakota. As I drive, the skies lighten fractionally—the strange, eerie calm of the hurricane's eye.

And in that calm, I have my epiphany. Clear as the brief patch of blue sky visible overhead.

Weather, like love, is unpredictable. We can study it, track it, try to understand its patterns—but in the end, it follows its own rules. The best we can do is prepare ourselves, make informed decisions, and sometimes, take a risk.

I've spent my life avoiding risks. Playing it safe. Using data and analysis to keep emotional storms at bay.

But some risks are worth taking.

Dakota Miles might break my heart again. The hurricane might trap me on a barrier island. Both are possibilities I can't control.

What I can control is my decision to chase the storm. To face the unpredictable head-on. To tell Dakota how I feel, even if he doesn't feel the same.

Because living in fear of emotional hurricanes isn't really living at all.

As I approach the causeway to Pawleys Island, I can see the water has indeed receded temporarily, though debris litters the road. It's passable—barely. The wind is starting to pick up again as the back end of the storm approaches.

I have maybe an hour before I'm trapped on the island.

I press the gas pedal and drive forward. Into the storm. Into uncertainty. Into possibility.

After all, I'm Harmony Baker, storm chaser. And today, I'm chasing more than just a hurricane.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:47 am

I grip my stick tighter as I skate onto the ice, the roar of the crowd washing over me like a wave I can't quite ride. Playoff game three and I'm fucked six ways to Sunday – head not in the game, body going through the motions. Two nights of no sleep thinking about those green eyes, that sharp tongue, and the way Harmony Baker walked away from me like I was just another weather system passing through. The guys can tell something's off. Hell, I can tell something's off. The Charleston Renegades need Lucky Miles tonight, but all they've got is this hollow version of me wondering how I managed to screw up the one thing that actually mattered.

"Miles! Get your head in the game!" Coach bellows from the bench as I circle during warm-ups.

I nod, but the motion feels disconnected from my brain. The arena lights seem too bright tonight, the ice too slick, my gear too heavy. Everything's a little off-center, just like me.

Asher skates up beside me, bumping my shoulder. "You good, man?"

"Peachy," I mutter, twirling my stick in my hands.

"Bullshit," he says, but doesn't push. That's the thing about Ash – he knows when to back off. "Just remember, we need you tonight. Whatever's going on in that thick skull of yours, shelve it for three periods."

Easy for him to say. Elle's probably in the stands right now, watching him with those adoring eyes. Not all of us get the fairytale, bro.

The buzzer sounds. Game time.

First shift, and I'm already a step behind. Their center wins the face-off clean, sending the puck back to their defenseman who rifles a shot toward our net. I'm supposed to be blocking the lane, but my reaction time is molasses. The puck whistles past my ear, and only our goalie's quick glove keeps us from going down early.

"Lucky! Come on!" Ryder shouts as we reset.

Luck. What a joke of a nickname right now. Nothing lucky about the way I fumble the puck at the blue line five minutes in, creating a breakaway that puts us down 1-0. Nothing lucky about the way I drift out of position in our defensive zone, leaving a man wide open for a one-timer. 2-0.

My brain's a traitor, hijacked by a weather girl with storm-cloud eyes and a smile that hit me like lightning. I see her face when I blink, hear her laugh when the crowd roars, feel the ghost of her fingertips along my jaw telling me I'm not the man she thought I was.

"Miles! Bench!" Coach bellows after I miss another assignment.

I skate over, legs burning with shame more than exertion, and drop onto the bench. Coach doesn't even look at me, just stares at the ice like I'm not worth the oxygen it would take to chew me out. That hurts worse than any screaming ever could.

The first period ends 3-0, us getting absolutely dominated. The locker room is a funeral parlor. Guys with thousand-yard stares, silent except for the occasional curse or clink of equipment being adjusted.

Coach walks in, clipboard in hand, jaw clenched. He looks at all of us, then zeroes in on me.

"I don't know what kind of game you think you're playing, Miles, but it sure as hell isn't hockey," he says, voice low and dangerous. "You want to throw away your season, fine. But you're taking nineteen other guys down with you."

He turns to address the whole room, but his words are still aimed at me like heat-seeking missiles. "This is the playoffs, gentlemen. Everything you've worked for all season. Right now, ask yourselves if you're giving everything. If the answer's no, then why the hell are you even here?"

The words hit like body checks, but I can't argue. I'm not here. Not really. I'm stuck in a loop of Harmony's last words to me: "I thought you were different." The disappointment in her eyes when she realized I was exactly who everyone said I was – just another player, on and off the ice.

Second period starts marginally better. I manage not to actively hurt the team, but I'm nowhere near helping either. We get a power play opportunity, and I'm out with the first unit. The puck comes to me at the point, a perfect setup for the one-timer I've scored on a dozen times this season.

I hesitate. Overthink it. My shot goes wide, deflecting out of the zone.

"Fuck, Miles!" Kaleb shouts as we recover.

My cheeks burn under my helmet. I scan the crowd, a habit formed from years of playing to the audience. The arena's packed, a sea of red and black Renegades jerseys pulsing with frustrated energy. I'm letting them all down.

Then – a flash of familiar chestnut hair, greying gracefully at the temples. A soft, round face I know from Sunday dinners at coach's house. Grace MacIntyre sits ten rows up, directly behind our bench, wearing a Renegades jersey with my number and Coach on the back. Coach Mac's wife – watching me play like absolute garbage.

My stomach drops to my skates. Mrs. MacIntyre has practically adopted our whole damn team. She and Coach, treating us to home-cooked meals, asking about our lives, caring in that genuine way that reminds us all of what family should be. And now Grace is watching me throw away everything I've worked for.

She catches my eye and, instead of the disappointment I expect, she smiles. Warm, encouraging, like nothing's wrong. Like she believes in me regardless.

Something shifts in my chest. A memory surfaces – Grace in her kitchen last month, flour on her cheeks as she taught me how to make her famous chocolate chip cookies.

"You know, Dakota," she'd said, kneading dough with practiced hands, "my Marcus almost didn't ask me out. Too scared of rejection."

"No way," I'd laughed, trying to mimic her folding technique and making a mess. "Coach Mac doesn't seem like he'd be scared of anything."

"Oh, honey." She'd patted my cheek, leaving a smudge of flour. "The things worth having are always a little scary. That's how you know they matter."

The things worth having.

My hands are numb from gripping my stick too tight, but I feel a warmth in my chest, an uncomfortable heat that I recognize as something deeper than guilt. It's clarity.

I've spent my entire adult life avoiding things that matter. Keeping it casual, keeping it light, keeping everyone at arm's length. But Harmony Baker slipped right past those defenses, and now I'm terrified because she matters. She fucking matters, and I let her walk away because that was easier than admitting it.

The whistle blows. Back to the face-off circle.

I bend down across from their center, a stocky guy with a patchy playoff beard. For the first time tonight, I feel fully present. The ice beneath my skates. The weight of my stick. The rhythm of my breath inside my helmet.

"You're mine," I mutter to the opposing center.

The ref drops the puck. I sweep it cleanly back to Asher, then burst forward, skating harder than I have all night. Something's unlocked in me. I'm not just going through the motions anymore – I'm back in my body, back in the game.

Three quick passes and the puck returns to me with a lane to the net. I fire a wrist shot, top corner. The lamp lights.

3-1.

The crowd erupts, and our bench comes alive. I circle back, bumping gloves with my linemates.

"There he is," Asher grins. "Welcome back, Lucky."

The momentum shifts like someone flipped a switch. We're faster, hungrier, more connected. I steal the puck at center ice, dance past a defenseman, and slide a perfect pass to Ryder who buries it.

3-2.

Between second and third periods, Coach doesn't give a speech. He just points at the scoreboard. "That's what happens when you play like you give a damn."

I glance up at where Grace sits. She gives me a thumbs up, and I nod back. Message received, Mrs. MacIntyre. The things worth having are worth fighting for.

Third period. We're relentless. I'm everywhere – forechecking, backchecking, winning battles in the corners. My body's moving on instinct now, brain finally clear of everything except this moment, this game.

Seven minutes in, Kaleb ties it up on a rebound.

3-3.

The crowd's on their feet, the noise deafening. I catch Grace clapping wildly.

With four minutes left, Coach taps my line. "Go win this thing, Miles."

I hop over the boards, hungry for it now. We cycle the puck in their zone, wearing down their defense. Asher works it free along the boards, finds me in the slot. Time slows down. I see the goalie shift his weight slightly to his right, opening up the left side of the net.

I fire.

The puck hits the back of the net with a sound I swear I can hear over the explosion of the crowd.

4-3.

My teammates mob me, a tangle of arms and sticks and raw joy. But my eyes find Grace in the stands, on her feet. She's beaming like I'm their own son who just scored.

We hold on for the final minutes, every blocked shot and cleared puck bringing us closer to the win. When the final buzzer sounds, the relief and triumph surge through me like electricity. We've taken a 2-1 lead in the series, coming back from certain

defeat.

The customary handshake line, media interviews, locker room celebration – I go through it all in a happy daze. But there's an urgency building inside me that has nothing to do with hockey.

"Epic comeback, Lucky!" A reporter shoves a microphone in my face. "What changed in the second period?"

I could give the standard answer about teamwork and resilience. Instead, I hear myself say, "I remembered what matters."

Later, showered and changed, I step out of the arena's player exit. A small group of fans wait for autographs. I sign jerseys and pucks, pose for photos, but my mind's already racing ahead.

Grace is waiting at the edge of the crowd. I make my way over to them.

"Hi, Mrs. MacIntyre," I say, hugging her.

"Seemed like you found your way back to yourself out there," Grace says with that knowing look moms somehow perfect.

"Thanks to you," I admit. "That talk we had about things worth having... it hit home tonight."

"Sometimes we need a reminder of what's important."

"Right. I've got to go," I tell her, sudden urgency rushing through me. "There's somewhere I need to be."

Grace's eyes twinkle. "Would this somewhere happen to involve a certain meteorologist?"

I feel a smile spreading across my face – not my practiced camera-ready one, but something real and a little vulnerable. "If I'm lucky."

"Luck's got nothing to do with it," she says. "Just be honest with her."

I nod, already backing toward the parking lot where my Porsche waits. "I will. Thank you – for coming tonight, for everything."

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:47 am

The wipers can barely keep up with the deluge, smearing raindrops across my windshield in hypnotic arcs. I white-knuckle the steering wheel of my Subaru, leaning forward as if those extra inches might help me see through the wall of water. The rain is my element—I've spent my entire career predicting it, tracking it, respecting its power—but right now, it's just another obstacle between me and Dakota. Between me and what I should have said weeks ago.

My GPS announces that I'm fifteen minutes from the ice rink. Fifteen minutes from potentially the biggest moment of my life. I take a deep breath, trying to steady my racing heart. Three days ago, I was holed up in my office in Norman, tracking this hurricane's every move, watching with professional detachment as it barreled toward the South Carolina coast. Toward him.

Then something changed—in the hurricane's path and in me. When the storm made that unexpected eastern turn, sparing Charleston and the surrounding areas from its worst, I felt a relief that went beyond professional satisfaction. It was personal. It was about Dakota's house in Pawley's Island, about Love Beach where we'd walked that one perfect night, about the ice rink where he was probably finishing his game right now. The places that had become more than data points on my maps.

I check the radar on my phone at a stoplight. The system is moving through, but the heaviest band is right over Charleston—right over me—dumping sheets of rain that make the world beyond my windshield a watercolor blur. Classic. The meteorologist drives through the worst of the storm to get to the man she loves. There's probably a weather joke in there somewhere.

Love. The word still catches in my throat. Is that what this is? This ache that's been

hollowing me out since our fight three weeks ago? Since I told him his lifestyle was too unpredictable, too chaotic for someone like me who lives by data and forecasts? Since I flew back to Oklahoma telling myself it was for the best?

The arena parking lot comes into view, a vast expanse of asphalt shimmering with puddles under the floodlights. I pull into a spot near the players' exit, the same door I've watched Dakota emerge from after games when I visited before. Before everything imploded.

My phone pings with a score update. Final: Charleston Renegades 4, Atlanta Wolves 2. Dakota scored the game-winning goal. A smile breaks across my face despite the nerves rioting in my stomach. That's my—no, not mine. Not yet. Maybe not ever if I'm too late.

I check my appearance in the rearview mirror. My curly auburn hair, usually tamed into submission, has begun to frizz in the humidity. My green eyes—the ones Dakota called "hurricane eyes" because they "swirl like storm systems"—are wide with anticipation and fear. I look exactly like what I am: a woman who's driven twelve hours straight through rain and uncertainty because staying away hurt worse than risking rejection.

The clock on my dashboard reads 10:17 PM. Players should be emerging soon. I grab my raincoat from the passenger seat, the practical, waterproof one Dakota once teased me about ("Does it come with a built-in barometer, Miss Green Eyes?"). The memory squeezes my heart as I pull it on and step out into the downpour.

The rain is immediate and overwhelming, soaking my jeans within seconds. I make a dash for the covered area near the players' exit, but I'm already drenched by the time I reach it. Water runs down my face, and I push my wet hair back, wondering if I've made a catastrophic error in judgment. Dakota "Lucky" Miles, Charleston's resident heartbreaker, probably moved on weeks ago. Probably didn't give me a second

thought after I left.

The door to the players' exit suddenly bursts open. I straighten, heart pounding against my ribs like it's trying to escape. But it's just a couple of players I don't recognize, heading for their cars with equipment bags slung over their shoulders. They nod at me politely, probably assuming I'm someone's girlfriend waiting in the rain. If only.

I check my phone again, scrolling through the post-game updates. According to social media, the team is celebrating their third straight win. Maybe Dakota's not even coming out this way. Maybe he's already—

The door flies open again, this time with such force it bangs against the wall. And there he is—Dakota Miles in rumpled street clothes, his damp brown hair pushed back from his forehead, a duffel bag clutched in one hand and his phone in the other. He's moving fast, head down against the rain, not seeing me as he strides purposefully toward the parking lot.

I step forward, my mouth opening to call his name, but the words dissolve as he plows directly into me. His solid chest collides with mine, sending me staggering backward. His quick reflexes save me from falling—one strong arm snaking around my waist, steadying me against him.

"Shit, I'm sorry, I didn't—" He starts apologizing before he even looks at who he's hit. When his hazel eyes lock onto mine, the recognition hits him like a physical blow. "Harmony?"

My name on his lips sends a current through me more powerful than the lightning that flashes overhead. "Dakota."

We're frozen like that, him half-holding me in the rain, water streaming down our

faces. His expression cycles rapidly through shock, confusion, and something else I can't quite read.

"What are you—how did you—" He stammers, then shakes his head as if to clear it. "Are you okay? Did I hurt you?"

"I'm fine." My voice sounds strange to my own ears, breathless. "I was waiting for you."

His arm is still around me, his fingers pressing into the small of my back. I can feel the heat of him even through my wet raincoat. He doesn't move away.

"I was just heading to the airport," he says, his eyes never leaving my face. "I was going to fly to Oklahoma. To you."

The words hit me like another collision. "You were coming to find me?"

A crack of thunder punctuates the moment, making me jump slightly. His arm tightens around me reflexively.

"I couldn't do it anymore, Harmony. I couldn't pretend that I was okay with how we left things. With letting you go." His voice drops lower, nearly drowned by the hammering rain. "I've been a mess. Ask anyone on the team. Ask Kaleb—he told me I was playing like someone stole my soul."

I swallow hard, blinking raindrops from my lashes. "I've been a mess too."

A small, hopeful smile tugs at the corner of his mouth. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." I place my palm against his chest, feeling his heart race under my fingers. "That's why I'm here. I was tracking the hurricane, watching it head straight for

Charleston, for you, and all I could think was—"

"I'm sorry," he blurts out, cutting me off.

At the same moment, I say, "I was wrong."

We both stop, startled by the simultaneous confessions. A laugh bubbles up from my chest, surprising me with its lightness.

"You go first," I offer.

Dakota shakes his head, raindrops flying from his hair. "No, you. Please."

I take a deep breath. This is it. The moment I drove through three states and a tropical storm system for. "I was wrong, Dakota. About everything. I told myself that your life was too unpredictable for me, that someone who lives for routine and data couldn't possibly fit with someone who thrives on spontaneity and—"

"And sleeping with half of Charleston?" His voice is self-deprecating, but there's a vulnerability in his eyes that makes my heart ache.

"Your past doesn't scare me," I say firmly. "What scared me was how much I felt for you after such a short time. It was like... like a weather system I couldn't predict. And instead of embracing the unknown, I ran from it. Back to my safe, controllable life in Oklahoma."

"And how's that working out for you?" There's no mockery in his question, just genuine curiosity.

"Terrible." I can't help but laugh at the understatement. "I miss you. I miss your stupid hockey superstitions and the way you sing in the shower and how you ask me

endless questions about barometric pressure just to watch me get excited about weather patterns."

His smile grows, warming me from the inside despite the cold rain. "I love how excited you get about weather patterns."

"My point is," I continue, determined to get it all out, "I don't want safe and predictable if it means not having you. I'd rather have chaotic and messy and real."

For a long moment, Dakota just stares at me, rainwater dripping from his eyelashes. Then he lifts his free hand to my face, his thumb brushing across my cheekbone.

"My turn," he says softly. "I'm sorry I let you go. I'm sorry I didn't fight harder. When you told me you needed stability, someone who wouldn't be on the road half the year with a different woman in every city—"

"I never said that," I protest.

"You implied it," he counters, but there's no heat in his words. "And maybe you were right to worry. My track record isn't exactly stellar. But Harmony, what you don't understand is that everything changed when I met you."

Lightning splits the sky, illuminating his face in stark relief. In that flash, I see every emotion written there—fear, hope, and something that looks remarkably like love.

"Nothing felt the same after you," he continues. "The parties, the games, even the wins—they all felt hollow. I kept looking for you in the stands. I kept reaching for my phone to text you about something stupid that happened at practice. I kept waking up expecting to see your curly hair on the pillow next to me."

My throat tightens. "Dakota—"

"I was flying to Oklahoma to tell you that you were right about me needing to grow up, about needing to be worthy of someone like you. But you were wrong about one thing—I've never been more stable, more centered, more focused than when I'm with you. You're not my opposite, Harmony. You're my balance."

The rain seems to soften around us, or maybe that's just the rushing in my ears as blood pounds through my veins. I reach up, threading my fingers through his wet hair, pulling his face closer to mine.

"For a guy who blocks pucks for a living, you have quite a way with words," I whisper.

He grins, that heart-stopping Dakota Miles smile that first weakened my knees months ago when Kaleb introduced us at a team charity event. "Only when they matter. Only with you."

And then he's closing the distance between us, his mouth finding mine with an urgency that steals my breath. His lips are warm despite the cold rain, his body solid and real against mine. I melt into him, kissing him back with all the longing and relief and yes, love, that's been building inside me during our weeks apart.

Lightning flashes again, closer this time, thunder following almost immediately. The storm surrounds us, wild and electric, a perfect mirror to what's happening in my chest as Dakota deepens the kiss, his hand sliding into my wet hair, cradling my head like I'm something precious.

When we finally break apart, we're both breathing hard. Dakota presses his forehead against mine, his eyes closed.

"So," he says, his voice rough. "Does this mean you're staying?"

The question holds so much more than those simple words. It's asking about tomorrow, and next week, and the road trips, and the distance. It's asking if I'm all in.

I think about the predictable life waiting for me back in Oklahoma. The empty apartment. The colleagues who respect me but don't really know me. The safety of a life lived according to forecasts and probabilities.

Then I look at Dakota—beautiful, complicated Dakota—standing in the rain, looking at me like I'm a miracle he never expected.

"Yes," I say, certainty settling over me like calm after a storm. "I'm staying."

His smile could power the entire eastern seaboard. "Good," he says, then glances up at the still-pouring rain. "Because I think the universe approves of this reunion. Your favorite thing and my good luck charm, all at once."

I laugh, feeling lighter than I have in weeks. "Rain is not my favorite thing."

"Liar." He kisses me again, briefly but with promise. "You love it. You have a whole speech about how rain is the great connector of the water cycle."

The fact that he remembers this random detail from one of my weather tangents makes my heart swell three sizes. "Maybe I do love it. Especially right now."

Dakota releases me just long enough to pick up the duffel bag he dropped when we collided. Then his arm is back around me, pulling me tight against his side as we make a dash through the downpour toward his car.

"By the way," he calls over the rain. "We won tonight!"

"I know!" I shout back. "Game-winning goal!"

He looks surprised and pleased. "You were following the game?"

"I follow all your games," I admit. "Even when I was pretending I was over you."

His laughter rings out, joyful and free, as another flash of lightning illuminates us. In that split-second of brightness, with rain soaking us to the skin and Dakota's arm firm around my waist, I understand something I've missed in all my careful predictions and analyses.

Some forces of nature can't be forecast. They can only be experienced, embraced, surrendered to. The storm above us. The man beside me. The love I've been running from and toward all at once.

I'm done running. I'm finally home.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:47 am

The sky cracks open like a water balloon, and we're sprinting across the parking lot, Harmony's hand clutched in mine. Rain pelts us like tiny bullets, soaking through my thin t-shirt in seconds. Her green eyes flash with each lightning strike as she fumbles for her keys, her practical meteorologist brain probably calculating how many feet we are from being human lightning rods. I've never seen anything sexier than Harmony Fucking Baker leading me through a storm.

"This way!" she shouts over a thunderclap that rattles my bones.

We'd only meant to grab coffee at Caffeine Beach before heading back to my place, but Mother Nature had other plans. The sky darkened faster than Asher's mood when someone touches his guitar, and now we're caught in what Harmony would call a "severe thunderstorm event" and what I call a "we're-gonna-drown-in-the-parking-lot situation."

"Got it!" She clicks her key fob, and her Subaru's lights flash like a beacon.

We crash into her car, slamming the doors against the howling wind. Water streams down our faces, our clothes plastered to our skin. Harmony's auburn curls have escaped her usual practical ponytail, wild tendrils framing her face. She pushes her hair back, breathing hard, droplets sliding down her neck and disappearing beneath her soaked blouse.

"Well," she says, her voice still clipped with adrenaline, "that escalated quickly."

"You didn't see this coming, Miss Meteorologist?" I tease, wiping rain from my eyes.

"Isolated cell development." She shakes her head, sending water droplets flying. "Unpredictable, just like you, Miles."

The car windows fog almost instantly from our body heat and breath. Outside, the world has turned into sheets of water, the parking lot barely visible. The drumming on the roof is deafening.

"We're soaked," she says, looking down at herself. Her white blouse has gone completely transparent, clinging to the simple black bra underneath. My mouth goes dry despite the humidity.

"We should—" I start.

"Take our clothes off," she finishes, so matter-of-factly I almost laugh. "Before we catch cold."

My eyebrows shoot up. "Is that your professional weather advice?"

"Actually, yes." She meets my eyes, a challenge there. "Body temperature regulation is serious business, Dakota."

The way she says my name, all proper and scientific, sends heat straight to my groin. I've been with plenty of women – hell, that's basically my brand in the league – but something about Harmony Baker makes me feel like a teenager again, excited and nervous all at once.

"Back seat?" I suggest, nodding to the cramped front of her practical car.

She nods, and we awkwardly maneuver ourselves over the console. Her ass brushes against my face, and I resist the urge to bite it. Barely.

In the back seat, we face each other, breathing hard. Rain hammers the roof. Lightning flashes, illuminating her face in stop-motion bursts. Her fingers reach for the buttons of her blouse.

"Let me," I say, my voice rougher than I intend.

Her hands drop, and she watches me, those green eyes steady even as her chest rises and falls rapidly. I work each button slowly, revealing inch after inch of skin. When I push the fabric from her shoulders, she shivers.

"Cold?" I ask.

"Not exactly."

I cup her face, my thumb tracing her bottom lip. "I should warn you. I'm very serious about preventing hypothermia."

A smile plays at her lips. "I'm counting on your expertise."

My shirt comes off next, peeled away like a second skin. Her hands are on me immediately, those scientific fingers mapping the contours of my chest, my abs, my shoulders. I've been admired by women before – occupational hazard of being a professional athlete – but Harmony touches me like she's cataloging every muscle, every scar, memorizing me.

"Your turn," I murmur, reaching behind her to unhook her bra.

It falls away, and I'm treated to the sight of her perfect breasts, small and firm with dusky pink nipples hardened from cold or arousal or both. I bend to take one in my mouth, and she gasps, her hands clutching my hair.

"Dakota," she breathes, my name a prayer on her lips.

We wrestle with the rest of our clothes in the confined space, elbows knocking against windows, knees bumping the seats. It should be awkward – it is awkward – but we're laughing between kisses, cursing under our breath. I nearly knee her in the stomach trying to get my jeans off, and she snorts with laughter before helping me. Her practical pants come off easier, revealing simple cotton underwear that somehow turns me on more than any lace or satin ever has.

"Wait," she says when we're both down to our underwear. She reaches for her purse in the front seat, fishing out a condom. Always prepared, my meteorologist.

"Thank fuck," I breathe. "Or should I say, now we can fuck."

She rolls her eyes but smiles. "Such a poet, Miles."

I hook my fingers in her underwear, dragging them down her legs. She does the same to my boxers, her eyes widening slightly at what she unveils. Yeah, I've heard the joke a thousand times – Dakota "Lucky" Miles is lucky in more ways than one.

But when Harmony looks at me, I don't feel like the team's fuck boy. I feel seen in a way I never have before.

The car windows are completely fogged now, creating our own private world as the storm rages outside. I pull her onto my lap, her knees on either side of my thighs. The position puts us face-to-face, her eyes level with mine.

"You sure about this?" I ask, needing to hear it.

"I've never been more sure of anything," she says, and then she's sinking down onto me, taking me inside her inch by excruciating inch.

We both gasp as she bottoms out. Her forehead falls against mine, our breath mingling. For a moment, we just stay like that, connected, adjusting. Then she begins to move.

I've had sex in plenty of awkward places – locker room showers, equipment closets, even once in the penalty box after hours – but nothing has ever felt like this. The storm outside matches the one building inside me as Harmony rides me, her hands braced on my shoulders, her curls wild around her face. I grip her hips, guiding her movements, meeting her thrust for thrust.

"Fuck, Harm," I groan. "You feel amazing."

She makes a sound somewhere between a moan and a laugh. "Is that – ah – your scientific assessment?"

Even during sex, she's a smartass. I love it. I love her.

The thought hits me like a body check, knocking the wind out of me. But I don't have time to panic because Harmony is picking up pace, her breathing becoming erratic, her eyes losing focus.

"Dakota," she gasps. "I'm close."

I slip a hand between us, finding her center, circling with my thumb. Her head falls back, exposing the elegant line of her throat, and I can't resist leaning forward to taste her pulse point.

"Come for me," I murmur against her skin. "Let go, Harm."

She shatters around me, her inner muscles clenching, her body trembling. The sight of her coming undone pushes me over the edge, and I follow her into oblivion,

holding her tight against me as pleasure crashes through my body.

"I love you," she says, the words tumbling out as she comes down from her high.

"I love you," I say at the exact same moment.

We freeze, staring at each other in shock. Then we both start laughing, the kind of giddy, breathless laughter that comes after great sex and unexpected confessions.

"Did we just—" she starts.

"Say I love you during sex?" I finish. "Yeah, we did. Very original of us."

She smacks my chest lightly, but she's smiling. "Did you mean it?"

The vulnerable question sobers me. I cup her face, making sure she's looking directly into my eyes. "Every word. I love you, Harmony Baker. Even though you're a know-it-all with a weather fetish who corrects my grammar."

"I love you too," she says softly. "Even though you're a cocky jock with the emotional maturity of a teaspoon who uses 'ladies' as a greeting."

"Ouch," I laugh. "But fair."

We disentangle ourselves, the awkwardness returning now that the passion has ebbed. Harmony grabs tissues from somewhere – again, always prepared – and we clean up as best we can. The storm has lessened slightly, though rain still drums steadily on the roof.

We sit side by side now, naked and slightly damp, her head on my shoulder. It's the most vulnerable I've felt with anyone, and it has nothing to do with being naked. It

has everything to do with the words we just exchanged.

"So," she says after a while, her voice small against my skin. "I guess we should talk about what this means."

"Us being in love? Yeah, probably a good idea."

She shifts to look at me. "I got a job offer. From the National Hurricane Center in Miami."

My heart does a weird stutter-step. "Miami? That's... not Charleston."

"No," she agrees. "It's not."

I let this sink in. Harmony in Miami. Me in Charleston. Hundreds of miles between us. My first instinct is fear, followed quickly by the urge to ask her not to go. To stay here, with me. The Dakota Miles of old – hell, the Dakota Miles of a month ago – would have done exactly that.

But I look at her face, those green eyes that light up when she talks about weather patterns, that brilliant mind that can predict the path of a storm before it forms, and I know I can't ask her to dim her light for me.

"Tell me about it," I say instead. "The job."

Her eyes widen slightly, like she's surprised I didn't immediately try to talk her out of it. Then she straightens, excitement creeping into her voice.

"It's incredible, Dakota. I'd be working with the best in the field, developing new models for hurricane prediction. The kind of work that could literally save lives." Her hands move animatedly as she speaks. "It's everything I've worked toward."

"When do they need an answer?"

"By the end of the month." She bites her lip. "I haven't said yes because... well, because of you. Because of us."

I take her hand, running my thumb over her knuckles. "Do you want the job?"

"Yes," she admits. "But I want you too."

I let out a slow breath. "So take the job."

"But—"

"No buts." I squeeze her hand. "Harmony, I've watched you geek out over weather maps and storm patterns. I've seen how passionate you are about your work. I would never forgive myself if I was the reason you passed up your dream job."

She searches my face. "What about us?"

"We'll make it work. Miami's what, an hour flight from Charleston? I have days off. You'll have weekends. There's FaceTime and texting and all that shit." I shrug like it's simple, even though the thought of not seeing her every day makes my chest ache. "The season only lasts part of the year anyway."

"Long-distance relationships are statistically challenging," she says, ever the analyst.

"Good thing we're not statistics." I pull her closer. "Look, I'm not saying it'll be easy. But I love you, and unless I'm reading this all wrong, you love me too. That's worth fighting for, isn't it?"

She nods slowly. "It is. But I still have concerns. You're used to having women

available whenever you want. I know your reputation, Dakota."

The words sting, but only because they contain a kernel of truth. "That was before you. I haven't been with anyone else since our first date."

Her eyebrows shoot up. "Seriously? That's like... two months of monogamy."

"Don't sound so shocked," I grumble. "I'm capable of keeping it in my pants when it matters."

"And I matter?" Her voice is teasing, but I hear the genuine question underneath.

"More than anything," I say honestly. "More than hockey. More than my carefully cultivated reputation as a fuck boy."

She laughs at that, the sound brightening the car's interior more than any lightning flash. Outside, I notice the rain has eased to a gentle patter.

"So we're doing this?" she asks. "Long-distance, I mean."

"We're doing this," I confirm. "You'll take that badass hurricane job, and I'll be your very proud, very supportive boyfriend who flies down to Miami every chance he gets. And in the off-season, maybe I can be in Miami more permanently."

Her eyes widen. "You'd do that?"

I shrug. "I can train anywhere. And Florida has beaches too." I run a finger down her bare arm. "Plus, hurricane season and hockey season don't exactly overlap."

She smiles, a slow, beautiful smile that makes me want to kiss her again. So I do.

"We'll need a schedule," she says when we part. "Calendar invites for visits. FaceTime dates. Maybe a shared document for planning."

I laugh against her lips. "Of course that's your solution. Spreadsheets and schedules."

"Organization is sexy," she insists.

"You're sexy," I counter, trailing kisses down her neck.

She hums, tilting her head to give me better access. "The storm's passing," she murmurs.

I look up to see that she's right. The rain has slowed to a drizzle, and patches of blue are appearing in the sky.

"Perfect timing," I say. "Now we can head back to my place and celebrate your new job properly. In a bed, with room to move."

"Is that so?" She arches an eyebrow. "What about your roommates?"

"They're all at Asher's charity thing tonight. We'll have the place to ourselves." I wiggle my eyebrows suggestively. "I can be very loud when I'm celebrating."

She laughs, pushing me playfully. "You're incorrigible."

"But you love me."

Her expression softens. "I do. God help me, but I do."

We gather our damp clothes, getting dressed awkwardly in the confined space. Harmony's hair is a riot of curls now, her makeup smudged, her clothes wrinkled.

She's never looked more beautiful.

As she climbs back into the driver's seat, I catch her hand. "Hey, Harm?"

She turns, looking at me questioningly.

"I'm really proud of you. For the job offer, for all of it. You're amazing."

The smile she gives me is like sunshine after the storm – bright, warm, and full of promise. "We're going to make this work," she says, and it's not a question.

"Damn right we are," I agree, settling into the passenger seat. "Hurricane season won't know what hit it."

She groans at my terrible joke, but she's smiling as she starts the car. As we pull out of the parking lot, the clouds part further, letting sunshine stream through. It feels like a sign, cheesy as that sounds. The storm has passed, and we've weathered it together.

Whatever comes next, we'll face it the same way.

Source Creation Date: July 23, 2025, 7:47 am

Six months with Miss Green Eyes, and I still can't believe she's mine. The sun beats down on my neck as we stroll along the dock of the Love Beach Yacht Club, Harmony's hand tucked into mine like it was custom-made to fit there. Her auburn curls catch fire in the late afternoon light, and I have to remind myself we're in public. Public means keeping my hands to myself—mostly. The regatta flags snap in the breeze overhead, a rainbow of yacht club colors against the cloudless Charleston sky. Summer in South Carolina, my girl by my side, and a cold beer waiting at the club. Life's pretty damn perfect.

"You're thinking dirty thoughts again," Harmony says, nudging me with her hip. "I can tell by that smirk."

"Can't help it. Scientists say men think about sex every seven seconds." I pull her closer, my hand sliding from her waist to the curve of her hip. "But you're the meteorologist—want to verify that data?"

She rolls those green eyes, but I catch the smile she tries to hide. Six months ago, she would have shut me down with a weather metaphor. Now she leans into me, her body a warm promise against mine.

"Is that what they teach you at the Temple of Pussy?" she whispers, and I nearly trip over my own feet.

That's another change. My weather girl's got a mouth on her these days. And I fucking love it.

"That's definitely not in the curriculum," I say once I recover. "But I might suggest it

at the next board meeting."

The yacht club's white-washed deck stretches before us, dotted with tables under blue and white striped umbrellas. The regatta after-party is in full swing, Charleston's summer social scene on proud display. Women in flowy dresses and men in pastel shorts mingle with the sailing crowd still in their gear. The air smells like saltwater, sunscreen, and money.

I spot my teammates at our reserved section—perks of being Charleston hockey royalty. Ryder waves us over, already three beers deep by the look of his grin. Asher's charming some blonde in a sundress, while Coach Mac stands at the railing overlooking the marina, deep in conversation with one of the club officials.

"There's our favorite weather girl!" Ryder shouts as we approach. "Finally convinced her to move to civilization, huh, Lucky?"

Harmony squeezes my hand, a silent reminder to play nice. Not that I need it. These days, I'm so stupidly happy I can't even fake being annoyed with Ryder's bullshit.

"Actually," Harmony says before I can answer, "the National Weather Service needed someone to upgrade the Doppler system at the Charleston station. I merely pointed out that my thesis on coastal weather patterns made me uniquely qualified."

I wrap my arm around her shoulders. "She's being modest. She basically created a job that didn't exist, then convinced them they couldn't survive without her."

The pride in my voice might be embarrassing if I gave a shit. But I don't. My girl is brilliant, and I want everyone to know it.

"Well, we're glad you're here," Asher says, leaving his blonde to join us. "Dakota's been almost tolerable since you two got together."

"Almost," Ryder agrees, handing us each a beer from the ice bucket.

Harmony leans against me, her back to my chest, and I rest my chin on top of her head. It's still new, this casual intimacy in front of my friends. For years, women were accessories, temporary companions easily replaced. Now there's Harmony, who feels like a vital organ I somehow lived without.

The afternoon sun glints off the sailboats bobbing in the marina. Teams from up and down the coast came for the regatta, but the real action is here on the deck, where deals are made, gossip is exchanged, and summer romances begin and end. It's a Charleston tradition, one I've been part of since I was old enough to sneak beers and flirt with rich girls slumming it with a hockey player.

"So," Harmony says, turning to face me, "when were you going to tell them about the apartment?"

I choke mid-sip. "Way to steal my thunder, Green Eyes."

Ryder perks up. "What apartment? You moving out on us, Lucky?"

"Don't tell me you're getting your own place," Asher groans. "Who's going to cook when you're gone?"

I slip my arm around Harmony's waist. "We signed the lease yesterday. Downtown, near the market. Two-bedroom with a view of the harbor."

"He means I signed the lease," Harmony corrects. "Someone had a game in Nashville."

"But I sent my very enthusiastic approval via text," I add, kissing her temple.

Ryder clutches his chest dramatically. "The brotherhood is dying. First Kaleb moves out, now you."

"Kaleb moved out?" Harmony asks, surprised.

"Last month," Asher confirms. "Got some fancy condo near the practice facility. Solo living. Can't say I blame him—living with you two has been like an auditory pornography experience."

Harmony's cheeks flush that perfect shade of pink that still drives me wild. Her fingers toy with the collar of my polo shirt, and I resist the urge to drag her behind the boathouse right now.

"When's moving day?" Ryder asks. "We should have a rager at the house to send you off properly."

"Next weekend," I say. "And no ragers. We have the charity golf tournament on Monday, remember?"

Asher and Ryder exchange looks.

"Who are you and what have you done with Dakota Miles?" Asher asks.

"Seriously," Ryder agrees. "Next you'll be telling us you're shopping for rings."

My body tenses involuntarily, and Harmony notices. Her eyes meet mine, curious but not pushing. We haven't talked marriage. Six months feels too soon, but also not soon enough. The thought doesn't terrify me like it should.

"Let the man enjoy shacking up before you marry him off," Harmony says lightly, saving me from responding. "Besides, I need to make sure he can load a dishwasher

properly before I commit to forever."

I dip my head to her ear. "I'll show you what I can load properly later," I murmur, just to feel her shiver against me.

"And there's the Dakota we know," Ryder laughs.

A server passes with a tray of champagne, and I snag two flutes. I hand one to Harmony, raising mine in a toast.

"To new beginnings," I say, eyes locked on hers.

"To new beginnings," she echoes, clinking her glass against mine.

The moment feels significant, like we're sealing something important. Six months ago, I was the team's resident fuck boy, allergic to commitment. Now I'm moving in with a woman who knows my fears and loves me anyway.

"Looks like Coach is giving the club president an earful," Asher observes, nodding toward the railing where Coach Mac's gesturing has grown more animated.

"Probably about using the facility for youth hockey outreach," I say. "He's been on that crusade all summer."

Harmony watches him with thoughtful eyes. "I like your coach. He reminds me of my advisor in grad school—gruff exterior, marshmallow interior."

"Don't let him hear you say marshmallow," I warn. "He'll have us doing suicides until we puke."

We drift toward the bar for refills, Harmony's hand in mine. The yacht club's deck is

getting crowded as the sun begins its descent, painting the water in shades of gold and orange. A jazz quartet has set up in the corner, adding a soundtrack to the perfect evening.

"Happy?" I ask her as we wait for our drinks.

She studies me, those green eyes seeing straight through to the question behind my question. Am I enough? Are you sure about this? About us?

Her fingers brush my cheek, and I feel a spark – static from the dry air, but it jolts me nonetheless.

"Deliriously," she answers simply.

The bartender slides our drinks across the polished mahogany. I'm about to suggest we find a quiet corner to watch the sunset when I spot a familiar blond head entering the deck area. Kaleb Jensen, looking uncharacteristically nervous, which is weird enough to make me stare.

"Is that Kaleb?" Harmony asks, following my gaze.

"Yeah, but—" I stop mid-sentence when I notice he's not alone.

A petite brunette stands beside him, her hand clasped firmly in his. She's wearing a vintage-looking sundress and combat boots, an artistic misfit among the country club crowd. Her wavy brown hair is pulled into a messy bun, and she's laughing at something Kaleb says, her entire face lighting up.

"Holy shit," I mutter. "Kaleb brought a date."

Harmony raises an eyebrow. "Is that unusual?"

"Kaleb doesn't date," I explain, still staring. "He hooks up, sure, but he doesn't bring women around the team. Ever."

Our resident Viking looks different somehow—less rigid, more relaxed as he guides his mystery girl through the crowd. He spots us and changes direction, heading our way with determination.

"Incoming," I warn the others, who have also noticed the anomaly that is Kaleb Jensen with a woman in public.

"Afternoon," Kaleb says as they reach us, his voice carrying that hint of Canadian that gets stronger when he's nervous. "Nice day for it."

The girl beside him surveys us with curious blue eyes. There's something familiar about her face that I can't quite place.

"This is Hazel," Kaleb continues, his grip on her hand tightening slightly. "Hazel, these are my teammates—Dakota, Asher, Ryder. And Dakota's girlfriend, Harmony."

Hazel gives a small wave with her free hand. "The famous roommates. Kaleb's told me so much about you all."

"Funny," Ryder says with a grin, "because he's told us absolutely nothing about you."

"That's Kaleb for you," she replies easily. "The strong, silent, secretive type."

There's an edge of playfulness in her voice that makes Kaleb's lips twitch in what might be the beginning of a smile—a genuine one, not the media-ready version he usually displays.

"How did you two meet?" Harmony asks, always the gracious one.

Hazel and Kaleb exchange a look loaded with private meaning.

"Art gallery," Kaleb says.

"He was the only person who spent more than thirty seconds looking at my installation," Hazel adds. "Most people just took photos for Instagram and moved on."

"You're an artist?" Asher asks.

"Sometimes," she answers cryptically. "When I'm not slinging coffee or teaching art to kids at the community center."

I study her more carefully, that nagging sense of familiarity growing stronger. The shape of her eyes, the stubborn set of her jaw...

And then it hits me, just as Coach Mac turns from his conversation at the railing and spots us. His expression shifts from surprise to something unreadable as he looks at Kaleb and the girl.

"MacIntyre," I blurt out. "As in Coach Mac's MacIntyre?"

The group falls silent. Kaleb's face hardens into the mask he wears on the ice, while Hazel's chin lifts in defiance.

"That would be me," she confirms. "Hazel MacIntyre. The prodigal daughter returns."

Coach Mac is moving toward us now, his slight limp more pronounced as he hurries across the deck. The tension radiating from Kaleb is palpable, his posture shifting from relaxed to battle-ready.

"Well, shit," Ryder mutters.

Hazel squeezes Kaleb's hand, a silent communication passing between them. "Guess the cat's out of the bag."

"Does Coach know?" Asher asks, looking between them and the approaching storm that is Marcus MacIntyre.

"He does now," Kaleb says grimly.

Harmony leans into me, whispering, "I'm guessing this is bad?"

I nod slightly, unable to tear my eyes from the unfolding drama. "Dating the coach's daughter is hockey suicide. Especially Mac's daughter."

"Especially when Mac has basically been a father figure to Kaleb since he was drafted," Asher adds under his breath.

Coach Mac reaches us, his weathered face unreadable as he takes in the tableau—his daughter's hand firmly in Kaleb's, the protective stance of my normally stoic teammate, the defiant tilt of Hazel's chin.

"Dad," she says, breaking the silence. "Surprise."

The word hangs in the air between them, loaded with history I know nothing about. The jazz quartet plays on, oblivious to the drama unfolding on the deck. Around us, the regatta party continues, but in our little bubble, time seems suspended.

I look at Harmony, finding her green eyes already on me. We've weathered our storm, found our calm center. But for Kaleb and Hazel, it seems the tempest is just beginning.

Coach Mac draws a deep breath, his gaze moving from his daughter to his star goalie. "Jensen," he says, his voice deceptively calm. "My office. 8 AM tomorrow."

And just like that, I know there's a whole new story about to unfold.

Thank you for reading! Please take a moment to let me know your thoughts on Dakota and Harmony's story by leaving a review.

Chapter 1

Tyler

It's mid-November, and to most people this means the holidays are approaching with time for families to gather, sit around drinking beer and watch football. However, for me, I'm the one they are watching. As the starting quarterback for the Texas Tornados, Dallas's professional football team, this time of year is the heat of the season, and we only have one more regular season game. If we win, we are in the playoffs.

My life has been a constant revolving door of football seasons. The pattern has been in my life for as long as I can remember; regular season games, playoff games, championship games, spring football, summer training. All those repeat in full cycle the next year.

With my dad playing quarterback in the professional league while I was growing up, and as the only son out of three children, it was always expected that I would follow in his footsteps. I was never given a chance, or choice, for it to be otherwise.

Sometimes I feel like a thoroughbred racehorse from the elite pedigree for the next owner to race and win money off of. Quarterbacks are a select few at this level, and what's the difference between the owner of a horse and the owner of a professional football team? They both have huge gambles on their teams winning or losing.

Five years in this league, and I still have to give myself a pep talk to get out of bed each morning after a hard-fought game. Currently, my mind is doing just that and

trying to tell my body that it can endure more pain. However, my muscles are pissed and telling my mind to fuck off.

Last night the opposing team's defense ended up with more sacks in that game than this whole season combined, which equals my ass getting knocked to the ground way too many times. The mornings after a game we always meet for a light warmup to work out the soreness that has set in our bodies from the night before. Plus, we also review the film, to let us know what improvements we need to work on the following week in practice. I know once we get through the warmup and film, I'll be able to make it over to the massage tables to get the rest of this tightness worked out.

Finally, my mind wins the battle, and I roll out of bed to get dressed. It's slow moving, and ibuprofen is the first thing that goes into my mouth. Grabbing a cup of coffee, I head out to the stadium.

Warmup workout is still tough, even with the pain reliever, but I push through and am careful not to reveal my pain to the team. By definition, the quarterback is the leader of the team, and I have a huge impact on the team's attitude and perseverance. I have to be the strong leader that these guys need. The one who carries this team with a calm force and is able to handle any pressure that comes my way.

Film takes longer than usual; the offensive line needs some obvious adjusting. If we don't dedicate the time, it is highly possible I will keep getting killed in these final games of the season.

After we're finished I'm out the door and down the hall, straight to the training room's massage table.

I've been with the Texas Tornados for five years, and I've only ever seen men masseuses hired. There are probably several reasons for that. Starting with the anatomy of a man versus a woman, men are naturally stronger than women, therefore making them more effective with working out our soreness. Also, think about it, if we

had women here, and the guys were given the choice to choose whether to be rubbed down by a male or female, which do you think the majority would choose? I'm certain the line to get on the ladies' tables would be out the door and down the hall causing the wait times to be even worse than they are now.

Matt, the massage therapist, has been here all five of those years, and he knows exactly how to work my muscles.

"Hey, Matt. How've you been?" I greet him as I climb up on his table.

"I'm great, Tyler. Where is your sorest area? We'll start there."

"It's this left side. All night I got laid out by that defensive end who kept blitzing."

"Yeah, it sure looked like the O-Line was having a hard time keeping track of him."

I roll onto my stomach, and Matt works his painful, yet magically healing wonders. He finishes and sets the timer for me to rest and let my body set before I get up.

Sleep must have hit me hard because the next thing I know he's waking me up and kicking me off his table. Dazed and confused, I stumble off and right myself to go get dressed.

There are only a couple of the guys still in the dressing room when I walk in.

"Hey, bro," Drew calls out and walks over to me as I take a seat at my locker. "You coming to Mickey's with us tonight?"

Drew Elliott, is a veteran wide receiver, and his cocky attitude lets everyone know that he's been around the league a while. He also has a tag-a-long rookie, Reed Anderson.

This is Reed's first year playing in the pros, but that kid makes friends fast, he's fun to hang out with and always keeps us laughing. He's a confident wide-receiver on the field, and has the skills to back it up. That will serve him well for his future in this league.

Drew and I first met just after he was traded from Seattle to Dallas, about four years ago. He came in with an eagerness to connect with me on the field, and since I was a rookie, I truly respected that friendship. Being a veteran in the league, he understands that the connection between receiver and quarterback off the field makes their strength on the field that much more powerful and deadly to the opposing team.

Reed also sees that mentorship in Drew and has hardly left his side since the first day he arrived at camp. He'll grow up fast and learn lots on the field and off the field hanging out with me and Drew. Hopefully, we won't corrupt his young little mind too bad.

"Yeah, sure. That sounds like a good plan. I'll meet you guys there later," I answer, as I pack my bag to leave.

I don't have anything else going on, so at least, this will get me out of the house. Having cameras in my face all the time gets very tiresome, and it's hard to go many places without being recognized.

It wasn't this bad during my college football years, but from the moment I won the starting position of quarterback, here in Dallas, the media frenzy has not stopped. You can only imagine how crazy the dating life is. Well, it's almost nonexistent. Finding genuine women who are interested in Tyler Beckett just the average guy versus Tyler Beckett Texas Tornados' quarterback is next to impossible.

My parents were lucky, they are high school sweethearts. My dad never had this challenge. Yet, my mom and sisters are constantly asking who I am dating and are ready for me to settle down with a wife and babies. They harp on about me growing

old by myself and having no one to take care of me.

Resting and getting laundry done for the week makes the remainder of the day go by fast. Yes, I could hire out my laundry to be done, but doing it myself keeps me grounded. There's nothing better than washing your smelly clothes to remind you that you are just a man like everyone else.

Mickey's is a small pub that's walking distance of the stadium, tucked away within a group of buildings, and it's the team's hideaway. If you're driving by, you probably can't see it. There's no street parking, and you have to walk a couple of steps down to the entrance of the basement pub.

Most of the time there's only team members, staff, and a few other regulars. It's nice to go somewhere and be able to hang out with friends without the media vultures in your face.

When I arrive at Mickey's, I walk into the dimly lit room and give my eyes a quick second to adjust. We've all learned to pause before crossing the threshold because there is a step down just inside the door, and the bar is slightly off to the left. You can easily trip on that step and face plant on the floor. It's fucking hilarious to see people do it. Okay, maybe it's not funny to the person smashing his face, but it is to the bystanders.

I glance over to the right and see Drew and Reed sitting at our favorite table in the middle of the room. It's got the best view of all the tv's hanging around the walls. Mickey's truly is a great man cave where we can watch five different sports channels at one time, and we have an unlimited supply of alcohol delivered straight to us without ever having to leave our seat.

As I approach, Drew stands to greet me with a half-hug and back slap.

"Hey, guys. Have you been here long?" I ask.

“Na, we just got here and were about to order our drinks,” Reed says as the waitress walks up to us. His eyes instantly shift and focus on the pretty brunette wearing a tight black t-shirt with Mickey’s across the chest.

She gives him a slight smile and nods her head a little, turning to me as she asks, “Hi, Tyler. What can I get you guys to start off with tonight?”

“Hey, Peyton. I’ll take a Bud Light in the bottle and an order of cheese sticks, please.”

Peyton is the bartender and daughter of the owner at Mickey’s Pub. She is part of the reason we are able to relax and be comfortable here. One time a reporter tried to sneak in, and Peyton pulled down the shotgun that is displayed on the wall behind the bar and shot straight at him. He turned and hightailed it out of there so fast, and we haven’t had any others try to come in since.

I guess the word spread about the hot shot behind the bar. Little do they know there’s only blanks in that shotgun, but this is Texas after all, and one would never know.

“You and your damn cheese sticks,” Drew comments right after Peyton walks off. “You’re going to turn into a fucking cheese stick. You order them every time we are here.”

“Well, they are the Famous Mickey’s Cheese Sticks . Says it right here on the menu.” I grab the menu from the middle of the table, open it, hold it up to his face, and point to those exact large bolded black printed words on the first page.

“Yeah, they’re good, but I don’t know about Famous ,” Drew shoots back.

Reed’s chair scoots back, and the noise brings mine and Drew’s attention around to him.

“Dude, stop knocking the food here, Drew. It’s obviously not that bad, or you wouldn’t be shoveling it in your mouth just about every night,” Reed says as he stands and turns to walk off in the direction of the restrooms passed the bar.

I stare at him confused. Why is he upset? That’s not normally like him. Reed is the fun-loving guy who everyone wants to be around, but Drew’s comment put him on edge.

One of the responsibilities of being quarterback is making sure the morale of the team is high, along with mediating to keep the peace between everyone.

Reed’s gruff departure doesn’t even phase Drew. He goes right into telling me about his hook up last night, and in Drew’s true fashion, sparring no detail.

“I bent her over the back of my red Audi R8, hiked up her skirt, and...” he continues, but I lose interest, and I think about Reed again.

He’s standing at the bar talking to Peyton, but there is another girl standing next to him. She shifts a little to the side, and the movement of her ass catches my eye. Damn, that ass is perfection. I chance a look at the rest of her, but her back side is the only thing in my view.

Those long lean legs would fit wrapped around my waist as I hold her up against the wall and slam my cock into her. The mental picture has my cock swelling.

Roaming my eyes back up to her wavy blonde hair that rests on her shoulders, I’m hoping she will turn around, and give me a view of the full package.

I watch her for a little while interact with Reed, and he has both the mystery woman and Peyton laughing about something to do with his blonde messy hair. He’s one of those guys who can get away with waking up, only running his fingers through his hair, and it looks like a professional stylist fixed it. Drew and I both have brown hair

and brown eyes, but we all three have the same build, being over six feet tall. Still, Reed is the best wingman of our group, the girls seem to like his blonde hair and blue eyes.

He has such a way with people and could be locked into a relationship easy. The woman he chooses will be a lucky one because he would treat her like a queen. That's just the type of guy he is, loyal and committed.

Could I be that guy? Is it possible that I would ever care about someone so much, that they become my complete world, or would my career overshadow that relationship? My parents made it work, but my mom understood what dedication and sacrifice it took for my dad to have a job like this. They would go weeks without hardly seeing each other during the regular season. I see other guys with new relationships really struggle, and if they do get married the divorce rate is high. Damn, I bet it would be nice to come home to a warm body. Sex would be readily available. I'd never have to pick up random chicks and have to worry about the ramifications of what could happen.

Peyton hands mystery woman the takeout bag, and she is just about to turn to walk out. At the same time Drew hits me on the shoulder, making me jump and give him my full attention again.

"Tyler!" he yells.

"What the fuck, Drew?" I yell back at him and turn to see what in the hell could possibly be so important.

"Dude, look at the tv. Seattle's best defensive player just got suspended for the rest of the season. Something about the results of his drug test."

That's great news for us, since we will be playing Seattle Sunday. However, it really doesn't matter and could have waited. Seattle's got a deep line up, and they will

move the next man up to fill that position.

Quickly glancing back to the bar, but just as I thought, she's gone.