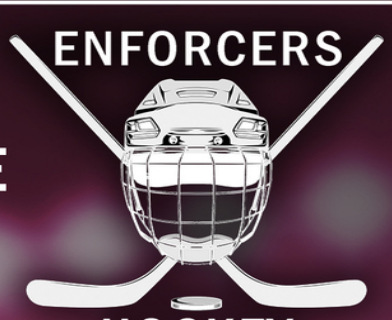
A MM HOCKEY ROMANCE



HOCKEY
BOOK 5

Dirty Zone

HEATHER LEIGHSON

Dirty Zone

Enforcers MM Hockey Romance

Heather Leighson



HL Books

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Acknowledgements

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To all my readers who had to face their past and unlearn shame.
Here’s to freedom!

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ABOUT THIS BOOK

Doing what's right matters, but he's here, close enough to touch.

Skylar

I did what I had to, for both our sakes. Sometimes love means letting go. And since he's living his dream and playing in the NHL, I've never doubted my decision.

But he's furious, standing in front of me and figuring out my secret.

Only a fool turns away a second chance at true love.

I'm a fool.

Yet, I can't resist him.

Maverick

I don’t know if I should kiss him or punch him. He ghosted me, leaving only questions about our relationship and what was real.

We were starry-eyed kids, but I was totally in love with him.

Still in love with him.

My deceit tore us apart, but fate’s giving me another shot.

But I didn’t count on fighting my Skylar, my angel.

Dirty Zone is the fifth book in the Enforcers series and can be read as a standalone. Maverick is the second-line center for the Enforcers, and Skylar is a dance teacher and a camboy.

Trigger Warnings: This book deals with past shame and acceptance of sexuality. Discussions of the past include sexual assault and violence against an abuser. There is a mentally ill side character with delusions and an on-page abduction without violence. There is no contact with parents and parents who do bad things for the “right” reason.

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GUIDE TO ENFORCERS ORGANIZATION

Ari Dimon - GM
Jayce McKenna - Director of Player Development
Finn - PR Director
Coach - Head Coach

Enforcers Team Roster

Season 1

Name jersey#-position-country-nickname

Patrik Liska #30-Starting Goalie-Czech Republic-Foxy
Lars Drakenberg #23-First line Center-Sweden-Drake or The Dragon
Dylon Felix #7-First line Right Wing-United States-Lucky

Caleb Benz #47-Backup Goalie-United States-Baby Benz
Austin Lapointe #8-First line Left Wing-United States-Ace
Jamal King #5-Second line Left Wing-United States-Rookie
Mason Griffin #21-Second line Right Wing-Canada-Griff
Chad Richardson #66-Third line Center-United States-Not worthy of name
Kenney #18- Defender- United States- trade

Season 2

Theo O'Keefe # 10-Defender-United States-Keefer
Rhys Brant #59-Scoring Defender-United States
Maverick #71-Second line Center-United States-Mav
Partners
Patrik and Trevor – Truth Zone Prequel
Lars and Dylon –Misconduct Zone
Caleb and Leo – Penalty Zone
Austin (Ace) and Grayson - Scoring Zone
Jamal and Theo – Enemy Zone
Maverick and Skylar – Dirty Zone

Crossover from Unframed Art Series
Shane Reynolds is cousin to Trevor Fox – Shane and Cole MCs of The Truth of Loving You Bk 1
Von Blixt childhood friend of Lars Drakenberg – Von and Alec are MCs of The Truth of Our Past Bk 2
Jayce McKenna is the Enforcers Director of Player Development – Jayce, Emmet & Madyson are MCs of The Truth of Our Secrets Bk 3

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CHAPTER 1

Maverick Maher

The wall at my back is a solid reminder that this is my new reality. Even if I'm not living life authentically, I'm surrounded by men, my teammates, who are brave and accept me. They're celebrating and dancing while I'm watching from the sidelines. An appropriate microcosm of my world.

The past six months have drastically changed me, but everything outwardly remains the same. Younger me could not fathom I'd be at an All-Star goalie's bachelor party *or that* he'd be marrying a man, but Patrik Liska and his fiancé Trevor welcomed me into their home with hugs. Their sixtieth-floor apartment has two walls of windows overlooking the Chrysler Building and the East River. The furniture and appliances are quality, high-end. Everything is sleek and modern with homey personal touches. A map of the Czech Republic, a poster-size picture of Trevor's design storefront, and lots of pictures of the two of them.

It's as close to an out-of-body experience as I've ever had, observing the team dancing in front of the Manhattan skyline as music blares from a thousand speakers while I stand by myself. Included but separate.

Telling the team I'm bi screams I'm a liar and a fraud. I don't deserve to be part of a community I distanced myself from for years. The one person who knew the true me left without a word or a backward glance. I haven't been brave enough to try again.

The culture here is drastically different from other teams, so I wasn't worried about coming out, but I wasn't prepared for the level of openness. We are unequivocally the queerest team in the league.

The pact I made with Rhys Brant, our first-line defender, an hour ago shouldn't depress me. Shouldn't have relegated me to a wallflower. Brant's right. It's not healthy for either of us to wish for impossible things.

My impossibility is Skylar Engelhardt, who ghosted me on high school graduation day. Not one word, text, or DM. My socials are public because of him and the chance he might change his mind. Losing him was worse than a death because I had no idea what happened. One minute, we were making plans to move to Boston together, and the next, he was gone without a trace.

The fairy-tale life still lives in my brain. We were supposed to go to the same college with plans to move in together after a couple of years while I was in the AHL. Sky had been consumed with how to pay for school, but I could've helped. And once I got called up to the NHL, money wouldn't be an issue. There are a million ways for a dancer to find success in New York City. Skylar could be so happy here.

The couples' dirty dancing makes my stomach flip-flop with thoughts of what might have been. This atmosphere is the type of place that would make Sky shine and thrive. The small things like the party and grinding against me to the beat of the music. And big things like the artist's creative culture.

A strangled sound takes me by surprise. I follow Griff's eyes to see his father and his best friend dancing. Griff's a winger on my line and becoming a good friend.

Griff groans. "Don't ever date your friend's parent." He clinks our cups together.

"Solid advice that I won't have any trouble following." I enjoy the alcohol hitting my system, and the pulsing beat prevents us from making small talk.

Seeing my teammates openly love men is as inspiring as it is terrifying. They represent what I could have if Skylar hadn't left me. They're living their best lives openly. Haters exist, but they don't take away from my teammates' love.

They've volunteered to be my wingmen, but it's wrong. I won't pick up a random guy when my heart is foolishly in love with someone else. Guys

hook up regularly because it’s so easy, but that’s not me.

Sometimes I wonder if I’ll ever get over Skylar and fall for someone else. It’s been over four years. How long do I hang on? Until our fifth high school reunion? Ten years? Not another day longer?

“Where are they going?” I motion to Griff’s dad, Leo, and Benz, our backup goalie, who are leaving the room.

“Hopefully, the bar and not some dark corner.”

“Cheers to that,” I say stupidly. At this point, the smell of sex would send me into a deep depression.

More drinking, less talking. I finish my drink, cross the floor to the dining room, and find Benzy rearranging the table and chairs. I glance at Griff, who’s talking to someone else.

“If you two get kinky, Griff will lose his shit.” I pour another shot and a drink, going for comfortably numb.

I’m not paying attention to the discussion, but Liska and Trevor sound mad, so I sit my ass down in a chair to stay out of the way. Benz rushes out, and Leo uses his coach-dad voice to get everyone into the dining room.

I have a front-row seat to whatever this shitshow will be. Guys fill in the seats around me, but I save one for Brant. As two single bi guys, we stick together.

Benz reappears, biting his lip, and there’s someone behind him. “Everyone,” Benz says, stepping to the side, and I drop my cup. Everything changes to slow motion, and Skylar waves next to Benz.

My heart leaps out the window and splats on the pavement. I’d recognize his petite dancer’s frame and bottomless brown eyes anywhere. His messy brown curls are pulled back with a headband, and he’s wearing slouchy workout clothes.

I’m frozen with shock until Benz speaks. “This is my friend, Lark, and he’s—”

The realization of why he’s here explodes in my brain and enrages me. I’m out of my seat, hauling Sky up and yelling, “My boyfriend.”

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CHAPTER 2

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

Panic fills my throat as I'm flung over Maverick's shoulder. My heart races a million miles an hour, no matter what my traitorous brain says. The stupid eighteen-year-old I left in Springfield, Illinois, has happy tears that Mav finally found me. But that's not what happened. This is a cosmic fuck-you.

"Put me down! Don't touch me," I command in my sternest voice. The door behind me slams, and my feet hit the ground.

"I said don't touch me," I shout, and scramble away.

"You're not"—Maverick's eyes bulge—"afraid of me, are you?"

The answer to that question isn't simple. He's so different and still the same. The transformation from a skinny high school athlete to a grown man is complete with stubble under his chin and on his upper lip. He could never grow a beard, so he could be trying for facial hair or he forgot to shave. His dark eyebrows scrunch at me, covering the hurt in his hazel eyes as he waits for an answer.

We're in an office with exercise equipment. This room definitely has a split personality. There's more equipment, but the desk is surrounded by drawings and fabric.

I swallow, steadying my breath so I don't betray how he gutted me the last time I heard his voice.

"You ghosted me," he accuses angrily.

I fix my loose-fitting clothes and snort. “Of course. I should’ve known.” One thing that will never change is his inability to shoulder an ounce of blame.

“You left without a word. I checked missing persons and the morgue! Your family wasn’t helpful.” The last sentence is a whisper, choking him.

I stare, open-mouthed. He seriously can’t be that dense. The letters, the clues, it’s as if he never knew me.

The fact he never knew *me* hurts the worst. But no matter our past, I have to remember I’m in his friend’s house. Friends who regularly bench-press twice my weight.

He crosses his muscular arms over his chest, straining the button on his shirt.

Fuck. I’m a slut for his forearms. *Stay strong*, I remind myself. Between the visual and his familiar warm, earthy, and spicy scent, I’ll be lucky to leave with my dignity.

“You bailed on graduation night, and the next morning you were gone. Vanished.” He stomps his foot, but Mav’s a pissed-off teddy bear—cute as hell.

“So you didn’t get either of my notes?” I ask, assuming the worst, but not surprised.

“You left me a note?” His body sags as he leans against the wall in the office/gym.

“I’m sorry you didn’t get them,” I say truthfully.

“You changed your phone number!” His anger rises.

I bite the inside of my cheek, unsure if this argument is worth it right now.

Fuck it.

“Mav, what was my dream?” I bet he can’t remember.

“To be together in Boston, but you left me.”

“That was *your* dream.” I cross my arms to mirror him and wait. I’d given up hope long ago, but him not remembering causes a phantom throbbing in my chest. It’s all been for nothing.

“W-w-what?” he sputters.

“That was your dream,” I repeat slowly. “What was mine? Before Decision Day, before Draft Day?”

A bewildered, hurt teddy bear is hard to stay mad at.

“You wanted to be a dancer, not a stripper,” he growls, and murders the sliver of hope that I had left.

“Screw you!” I storm toward the door, but he blocks it.

I’m going to murder my friend Lo, who guilt-tripped me into taking this job. This is why I don’t work in person. No one can get to me through a video camera.

There’s a light knock. “Guys, I think there’s been a misunderstanding.”

I fling the door wide and Caleb Benz, the guy who arranged this shitshow of a night, jumps. He looks even more innocent than Maverick. A sweet cherub face and big green eyes.

“Nope, you wanted a dancer, and I’m a dancer.” I rush toward the dining room, willing anger to evaporate my tears.

“Hello, sorry for the delay,” I greet the drunk and restless hockey team. “My info says you’re a New York sportsball team throwing a bachelor party and you need a dancer for choreographing. Are we doing a team dance or just the happy couple? Don’t worry, I’m discreet and signed the NDA. Where are my grooms?” I cast a flirty glance around the room.

I purposely asked Lo if the team plays hockey, and he asked me if hockey uses balls. When I said no, he assured me this team definitely plays with some sort of ball. I got dragged into this because Lo went on a date and I’m the only one the agency owner trusts not to out these guys. He owes me big time for this. A debt so big it might never be paid.

I clock the visible relief when I mention the NDA and relax until my gaze catches on two familiar faces. Which brings the total to three people I have history with in this room. The only thing keeping me from fleeing is the agency’s reputation. It’s not their fault Lo is a terrible friend and hockey illiterate.

I’ll have to come clean before this is over, but one problem at a time.

“Benzy, you’re so thoughtful.” A man slightly taller than me steps forward, gushing. “I’m Trevor, one of the grooms, and this is my fiancé, Patrik Liska.” He beckons over an enormous man, and I recognize him from stalking Maverick. He’s the Enforcers’ goalie.

“Do you have music picked out, or do you need help?” I ask, keeping my back to Maverick. If I see his expression, I might cave, throw myself at him, and forget all the reasons I left him first.

“Ve have some ideas,” Patrik says in his Czech accent, and pulls out his phone.

Two hours. I'll be okay if I get through the next two hours.

"Could you help us vith both a team dance and our first dance as husbands?"

I paste a smile on my face. "Sure, be happy to. Are you envisioning an entrance dance where the groomsmen walk in and then the team jumps in? And then you're announced as a couple? Or do you prefer to keep the entrances and dances separate?"

"A walk-in dance sounds fun," Trevor says with heart eyes aimed at Patrik, who agrees.

I survey the room for space.

"We moved everything out of the way in the living room," Caleb Benz offers.

I defer to Patrik and Trevor, who agree. "Ve've got surround sound," Patrik says.

As we move out of the dining room, Mav appears at my side. "Can we talk?"

"I'm working," I hiss, unable to stop myself. There is only so much heartbreak I can endure in a single day.

"After?" His hazel eyes beg me.

"I have class." I exaggerate the time frame.

"You can skip a class for me," Mav huffs.

I round on him. "When would you ever skip something related to your job for me?" I hit him with my most judgmental once-over look. "I'm the teacher," I say, speeding away from him.

Some of the guys are talented dancers, and that makes my job easy. I keep it simple, and the team eagerly joins in. Jamal King is a fantastic dancer, but his boyfriend is rhythm deficient and tries to kill me with his stare.

I assume Jamal told O'Keefe how we met.

King is bulkier after being in the NHL for over a year. Go figure. But he has the same aqua eyes, brown skin, intricate braids, and bright smile.

King plays on Mav's line, and his boyfriend, Theo O'Keefe, is a defender.

Once the team has memorized the steps and can teach each other, I steel myself to approach the non-hockey group of friends, including Emmet.

"Hey, Lark." Emmet greets me with a hug I endure as air exits my lungs with a low hiss. "I want you to meet my husband, Jayce, and our wife,

Madyson.” He uses the name I chose for myself.

“Wow, look at you.” I grin at him, happy he found his way off the streets. “I wondered what happened to you when I returned to get another tattoo and you were gone.”

“Sorry.” He rubs the back of his neck. “They wouldn’t let me tell any of my clients. I’m at Unframed Art now if you want another one.”

“Maybe I’ll take you up on that. If you can keep a secret,” I tease. His husband, Jayce, is irked by my tone and claims him with a kiss. Emmet knows my darkest secrets, but no one else needs that info.

“Emmet’s not a big believer in secrets,” Jayce says firmly. I understand Emmet has told them details of our past. Emmet’s expression assures me he won’t repeat the story.

“Will you be joining the dance?” I ask to change the subject.

Emmet grabs his wife’s hand, nods, and gives Jayce a pleading glance.

“Go on. The old guys will watch,” Jayce says, and I notice a heavily tattooed man next to him with a man who resembles Trevor.

“You’re not old.” Emmet kisses him and follows me into the dancing mob.

Hours later, I leave with a promise to set up time for Patrik and Trevor to come to the studio to practice their dance.

I collapse against the elevator railing, thinking I’ve escaped, but Mav barrels toward me and forces the doors open.

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CHAPTER 3

Maverick Maher

“I have class.” Skylar sighs, giving the impression I’m a big inconvenience.

“We should talk,” I state the obvious. I’m so confused by his anger directed at me. *Me!* He’s the one who left. Even if he did leave a note, which I highly doubt, it doesn’t explain him dropping off the face of the earth.

“You have until my rideshare picks me up.” His eyes lock on to the descending numbers above the door.

The elevator’s too small for our tension, and the mirrors magnify it.

I used to read every thought that crossed his mind because his expressions gave him away. Now he’s stone-faced, and all I want to do is pick him up, bury my face in the crook of his neck and cry. I don’t understand what happened. Why he stopped loving me.

“I didn’t,” he whispers, and I’m startled because I must have said the last part out loud.

Sky checks the time on his phone, rubs his forehead, and faces me. “Here’s what’s going to happen. I’ll tell you everything, and you’ll let me walk away. After you figure yourself out, search my name and see what pops up.”

“I have. There’s nothing,” I insist, as my unease chokes me.

“My new name, from my dream job,” he clarifies, checking his phone again as the elevator doors open. Skylar drags me over to an alcove near the front but away from the doorman.

“I was at your house.” His voice sounds dead. “When you kissed me, I dropped the card you gave me, and I came back for it. I heard what you said

to your parents."

He's so close his sweaty scent of cedarwood and honey floods my nose.

"Which was…nothing. You lied." He pokes a finger at me. "They had no idea I was going to Boston, and they were happy we'd be away from each other and. You. Said. Nothing."

Every word pierces sharper than a dagger. He's right; I was silent, but what was the point of arguing if he planned on leaving?

Sky paces the tiny area. "It killed me, but I knew the life you promised was impossible. You'd never tell your parents about us and probably ask me to go back in the closet so your teammates at BU wouldn't make assumptions. I couldn't live that way." He holds his hand up when I try to talk.

It's on the tip of my tongue to deny it, but I can't.

"I was giving up everything for you. My dreams, my goals, my identity, and the only thing I wanted in return was to stop living a lie. I explained this in two letters." Two mysterious letters, I continue to listen, fuming. "But I did exactly what I dreamed of doing after graduation. I moved to New York City to pursue dancing and changed my name so my family couldn't find me." He knew he'd be a success and that his family would expect money from him.

I rub my sternum as distant memories flood in. Sky pushes past me, vaulting into a waiting car and taking my air with him. "What's your new name?" I ask into the empty space.

After I say it, I rack my brain to remember more. He had dreams of joining a prestigious dance company in New York, but I'd forgotten. Did I forget his name change too?

The sinking pit in my stomach becomes a cavernous hole.

I can't face my teammates and their questions. They mean well, but I accosted Skylar. I owe them an explanation, and if I figure one out, I'll tell them.

Liska's doorman hails me a cab, and the ride home is a blur.

Confusion and anger course through my veins in equal measure. Skylar left, but he never gave me the opportunity to make it right.

The silence in my apartment depresses me even more. I thought I'd love having my space and not worrying if someone ate my food, but today, I need someone with me to debrief that I didn't hallucinate Skylar.

It's common for rookies to live with veteran families, but since I was in the AHL for two years, I figured it'd be great not having a roommate banging around or worrying that I'm an awful influence on their kids.

Instead, my parents helped me find this apartment and hauled some of our old furniture from Illinois so it's homey. I scowl at the couch as I walk by. It's too small and as uncomfortable as fuck. Not one positive memory. In the offseason, I'll get something that doesn't scream my parents' hand-me-downs.

The place has no character, the equivalent of beige and neutral having a baby. It's a box with a small kitchenette and living room combo, with the bedroom and bathroom in the rear. It's a starter New York apartment. No amenities, and I've done nothing to decorate the place. I'm not sure if it's because I hate it or because I'm never here.

In bed, I scroll my favorite social media app. My teammates don't announce where they go and what they do, but the occasional nondescript picture will appear. I'm rewarded by Benz posting a pic of Skylar instructing Liska and Trevor. They're laughing, and Trevor is mid-spin.

Sky's so beautiful. His teeth sink into his plump lower lip, showing off the slightly crooked tooth. He hates it, but it gives him character. I should've removed his headband to see how long his hair is and find out if his curls are as soft as I remember.

He smells the same. I breathe deeply in a misguided effort to inhale him again. Skylar smells like home and safety and comfort.

I empty my mind and picture us lying between rows of corn in the field near my house. It offered cover for kissing and other things where no one could see us, but we'd hear them coming. We left a blanket in our favorite spot as the corn grew, before it was harvested.

His angelic voice is the same, soft and sweet, consistent with the rest of him. He'd trace my face or chest with his finger, always touching me. I remember dreaming of a life where we could touch openly without fear and not hide in a field.

We were so young and stupid, and I thought love lasted forever. No one can help you recover from losing your first love. Part of me has been missing for four years, seven months and five—no, six days.

Has he been avoiding me? He must've known I moved to the city. Unless he had forgotten me and stopped following hockey news. It's not my fault when he was right here and could find me in seconds. He could show up at a game, or send fan mail, or drop something off at the front office with my name.

A name I didn't change.

My phone rings, but I've face-planted in my pillow. Irrationally, I reach for it, thinking it could be Skylar. It's my mom. If I don't answer, she'll worry.

"Hey." I shake off my despair.

"Hi, honey. How was your little party?" she asks because I'd mentioned it days ago.

"It… I… Honestly, Mom, I had too much to drink," I admit, and close my eyes, waiting for the lecture.

"That's not you. Is everything all right?"

Part of me wishes I could tell her everything, but she never approved of Sky as my friend, let alone my boyfriend. My first love.

"The craziest thing happened on the way there. I swear I saw Skylar walking on a side street. Wild, huh?" I refrain from telling her the truth. None of it matters anymore. Obviously.

"You didn't talk to him, did you?" she asks urgently. "I haven't heard that name in years. I'd forgotten him. Have you been in contact with him?"

"No, it brought up a bunch of memories and things." That's the truth. "His parents expected him to become a plumber or an electrician." I bark a laugh. "He'd hate both. Thanks for letting me pursue my dream, even if it was a long shot."

She sighs. "Honey, sometimes we're not meant to understand why things happen, but have faith that everything works out for the best. You're a hard worker, and that made it easy to support you. We're so proud of you. Don't let the past drag you down."

It's strange that it's the first time she's said she's proud of me. Arguably, I've accomplished a lot for a twenty-two-year-old. I'm in the NHL playing on a great team that hopes to win The Cup this year. But her praise is a drop of water on a sheet of ice.

"You're right," I placate her. "I'm gonna sleep this off and talk to you tomorrow."

"Enjoy your day off. You should drink lots of water and sweat out any remaining alcohol tomorrow. Love you, honey."

The phone on my chest beeps when she hangs up. The conversation replays in my head, and something bothers me. Skylar didn't make the honor roll, but he got the lead in all our plays and was voted Most Likely To Be On Broadway. He worked really hard, but in a different way.

But I take her advice and drink a bottle of water.

My buzzing phone startles me an hour later.

Benz: Checking in. Things cool with you and Lark?

I bolt upright. My fingers shake as I type in my browser: Lark Angel.

A flood of information fills my screen. He’s been here the entire time, making his dreams come true and leaving me clues about his life.

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CHAPTER 4

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

“Hey, sleeping beauty, your work phone has been going off nonstop with the same number.” I open my eyes to Logan, my best friend, hovering over me. He’s alive, so no murder charges pending. Yay.

“You stayed,” I say, ignoring my phone and life. “Thanks, Lo.”

“I’d never leave my BFF crying enough tears to fill the Nile or denial.” He sits cross-legged on my bed. The bed is the first expensive thing I bought myself. It’s like sleeping on clouds. It’s my safe haven.

“You’re in it for the tea,” I say, heaving myself up against the cushioned headboard.

“Can you blame me? You keep your past locked with armed guards. I ain’t never seen you spare a second thought over a man, let alone shed a tear.” His voice softens. “Are you okay?”

“That’s a trick question. And this could have been avoided if you didn’t no-show last night’s job for a piece of ass. Or, or realize that hockey uses a puck, not a ball.” My eyes are dry, and I’d kill for a coffee.

As if reading my mind, Lo says, “I put in a delivery order for coffee and breakfast sandwiches. But that was hours ago, they’re cold now.” He rubs my shin. “Talk first or coffee?” he asks.

“I’m onto your tricks to get me out of bed,” I grumble, and throw off the covers, shivering from the cold air. My throw blanket is the perfect accessory on a wintry day.

Lo takes my hand and drags me downstairs to the kitchen. My brownstone still has original herringbone solid oak floors, and I spent many back-breaking hours restoring them. On mornings this chilly, I wish I'd put in a fireplace insert for more heat. It's freezy-frozey on my toesies.

A bag from my favorite breakfast spot sits on the counter, calling my name. I chug a quarter of the coffee before I give it to Lo to warm up. The smell alone has perked me up. "You should've eaten without me," I say instead of thank you.

"And what excuse would I have for hanging around and watching you sleep?" Lo flips his long brown hair over his shoulder.

"You've never needed an excuse before," I grumble, and put the sandwiches in the toaster oven.

"Do I need to go kick his ass?" Lo moves into a fighter's stance and punches the air.

"I doubt the two of us could take him at once. You heard he's on a hockey team, right?" I stare out the window above the sink into the snow-covered yard.

"What, some beer league bro? We got this." Lo hands me my warm coffee, and with a few gulps, it's almost gone. He shakes his head. "Get an IV."

"Don't tempt me." I avoid answering his question. As hurt as I am, outing Maverick isn't an option. I finish my coffee and sit at the island with my head on my folded arms, waiting for my brain to come online. The faint sound of my work phone going off upstairs drags a groan out of me.

"Do you think it's him?"

The idea shocks me. "I doubt it. He'd have to remember," I say into my arms.

"If he was so terrible, why the drama? Kick your memories to the curb and be done with him." Lo plants his skinny ass next to me.

"Because it wasn't all miserable, and I loved him. Thought he was the one," I admit, sitting up.

"Whoa, back up. You loved him? When? Why haven't you talked about him?" Lo fires rapid questions.

"He was in the closet, and I figured it'd get better. I believed that he loved me and could change. But when that didn't happen, I came here to follow my dreams." I gesture to my house and the dance studio space on the other side of the wall. I bought two out of the three floors of this walk-up

brownstone when I moved in. My original dreams didn't come true, but I have an amazing life.

"It was the type of relationship that once I took a step away, I had clarity. He cared for me, he's not a dick, but I took the risks and gave him my heart and lived off the scraps he was willing to part with." My therapist has helped me see the inequity of it and how I was the giver in the relationship and he was a taker, which is fine if you take turns. We did not.

"I hate him already." Lo bangs his fist on the counter.

"No, don't hate him. He's an only child." I glance at the clock on the microwave and realize it's time for my first class.

"BFF privileges to hate whoever I want. And being an only child does not excuse selfish behavior." Lo checks to see how much of my breakfast I ate. "Eat more, or you'll fall over."

"He has no idea that he's selfish. He's a big teddy bear who breaks into your house, eats your food, and destroys the fridge in the process. A clueless menace." I dutifully take a large bite so Lo will leave me in peace.

He kisses my temple. "Come find me if you need me."

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My dancers give me the third degree because I'm preoccupied during class. Lo can't compete with a bunch of eleven-year-old girls grilling me. They're brutal, telling me I had enough luggage under my eyes to fly to Paris. I pride myself on teaching them not only dance but snark. They're acing it.

I trudge upstairs to unbury my work phone. It's under a pile of my clothes from last night. I have thirty-three texts, ten missed calls, and five voicemails from an unknown number. I purposely didn't check it before

class. But it didn’t matter. The stupid phone haunted me like a wronged Victorian child.

I’m tempted to text Lo to come over and provide moral support, but it’s not Maverick. It could be some crazy person. I need my head examined because a crazy person seems less scary. What if he remembers? What do I do?

I read the texts first, and it’s him. He found me. Finally. After I spoon-fed him the biggest clue. My downy duvet provides comfort and a sanctuary as I scan them. Maverick’s mad. Big grizzly bear mad, not teddy bear mad.

This should be my cue to ignore him. I did the right thing because he hasn’t changed.

If I don’t respond, I’ll always wonder, so I pull up my silk panties and hit the call button.

“Skylar?” he answers breathlessly.

“Hi,” I say and wait.

“Hi.” There’s a long silence. “I wasn’t certain if you’d call me.”

“I work every weekend,” I say, pretending that’s the real reason it took me all day to call.

“Oh. Yeah. I saw you teach dance.”

“Hmm.” I won’t make this easy, and there’s no telling how deep he dug. If he found my page.

“Seeing you was a shock,” he says awkwardly.

After a beat, I ask, “Do you have something to say?” The distance between us could be a solar system, and my heart would still race.

“You should’ve talked to me before you left,” he mumbles.

“Why?” I sit up in bed. “Tell me how it would have been different from every other time? You created a fantasy where we could be together, but you could pass as a straight athlete. How long did you expect me to live as your cute dancer friend? Coming out was *not* a rainbow and roses party for me. I was taunted and shoved to the ground. Loved that. Loved being your destitute friend from the wrong side of town, being the pity friend. What could you say, Maverick? The truth wasn’t on the table. You LIED! You told me your parents knew I was going with you. You broke me.” My chest heaves as if I’d danced an entire play. Years of hurt and frustration land between us, and the silence is deafening.

“Disappearing was payback? A way to hurt me?”

“Truth: you stripped away little pieces of me every time you pretended you barely knew me or told your friends you didn’t get why I came to your games. We had to sneak around for *you*. You expected me to follow you everywhere when you weren’t brave enough to hold my hand. It wasn’t payback. It was self-preservation.” The quiet is painful as his breath saws over the line.

“Was it that bad?” he whispers.

“No. Worse.” I take a deep breath. “But sometimes it wasn’t. And those times gave me hope, but Maverick, I had enough self-respect not to become your doll you could play with, then shove in the closet when it suited you.” I sound strong, a miracle. I’m amazed I had the strength to leave. He was my entire world.

“I didn’t want that.” He makes a crying sound.

“I know.” Sighing, I flop onto my pillow. “But that doesn’t make it less true.”

We listen to each other breathe as the heaviness of our doomed relationship acts as an anchor between us, weighing us down so neither of us is free.

“How do I fix this? I miss you.”

A lump in my throat traps the words inside.

“Please,” Mav begs.

A biting remark sits on my tongue, but I hold it in. I clawed my way to a life I’m proud of, but he won’t accept it. My big girl panties are giving me a wedgie, but I force myself to send the link that will change everything.

“You thought I was a stripper, and congratulations, you were right. Click the link and call me in a week if you want. I won’t answer before that, so don’t blow up my phone. We’ll talk then.” I hang up and throw my phone across the room, where it’s out of reach.

A week?!? A fucking week. I’ve set myself up for a week of torture. Fuck my life.

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CHAPTER 5

Maverick Maher

“Have you been avoiding me?” Rhys Brant asks quietly, sitting on the locker room bench. Our teammates are celebrating tonight’s win by dancing to blaring hip-hop music. The smell of hockey sweat invades my nose, but in a calming way. The bass thumps in my chest, picking up speed with Brant’s question.

It’s Friday. The day Sky said I could call, and it’s been an agonizing week.

Not looking at him, I try to lie. “No. Not really. Not specifically you,” I admit.

“Is it because of our pact and then seeing the dance teacher, who shall remain nameless because if anyone asks, you turn bright red and run away?” He leans in closer so we’re shoulder to shoulder. “I haven’t told anyone.”

Air whooshes out of my lungs. “Thank you. It’s complicated.”

“Huh, I never would’ve guessed.” His shoulder shoves into me, trying to knock me off-balance.

This secret has me ready to combust, and Brant’s a vault with confidential info. “The thing is…him leaving…was my fault. Fixing it would require a time machine and balls I didn’t have back then.” The words burn my throat and have prevented me from calling Skylar.

“Didn’t he ghost you?”

“He had reasons for leaving the way he did, which were my fault, and if I’d thought logically for more than two seconds, I could’ve found him years ago.” I drop my head in my hands. What’s worse was acting like a brute at the party. Picking him up, demanding answers, and calling him a stripper. I could teach a class on how not to get a second chance with your first love. I made every possible mistake.

“That’s rough.” Brant claps my shoulder and leaves his hand there. “I’m the last person who should give advice, but if I were you, I’d decide on the best-case scenario and go for it.”

That seems impossible.

“Don’t hurt your brain thinking so hard. There aren’t that many choices. Don’t weigh the odds; that complicates it. You either take responsibility or you don’t. You either want him in your life or you don’t.” He shrugs and removes his hand.

“That easy?” My smile sits unnaturally on my face.

“Not easy, but where’s the fun in that? Come celebrate with us and figure things out tomorrow.” Brant stands and offers his hand to help me up. The ringtone catches me off guard.

“It’s my mom,” I say, and he nods and walks away. “Hi, Mom.” I put the phone to my ear instead of on speaker, which is ridiculous since she can’t see the naked men around me.

“Great game! You played fantastic.”

I pull the phone away to glance at the screen to double-check the caller ID. “Have you been kidnapped? Say ‘Enforcers win’ if you need help.” My playing could not be called fantastic, and I had a terrible game. My mom never makes excuses and always tells me to face my flaws.

“Don’t be silly.” She laughs. “It wasn’t horrendous, but there’s room for improvement,” she tacks on, and I roll my neck to release tension. “Anyway, Dad and I are planning to visit you. It’s been too long.”

“I saw you at Christmas last month, but I’m always happy to see you.” It’s not unusual for us to go a few months without a visit.

“We’ll keep you posted about a date. Are there any games that you promised your tickets to anyone else?”

“Who would I give them to?” I scoff.

“You never know,” Mom says cryptically. “I’ll tell you which game we choose. Love you.” She hangs up, and I stay motionless, unsettled by her

strange request and comments. She's never checked on my tickets before. Not in college or the AHL or since my NHL season started.

I skip the team dinner and go home. Last week I hated the quiet of living alone, but this week I'm thankful for the privacy. If Skylar gets a report on who visits his site, I'll have to own up to my newest obsession.

Shame should have me in a chokehold, but it doesn't. As soon as I got beyond the paywall and saw him, I was addicted. He dances and takes his clothes off for money. Almost naked, and he provides private sessions that might go further.

The anger that other men and women have seen him scantily clothed for years never comes. It's the opposite. I've jerked off more this week than in the last year. The idea of other people watching but unable to touch him gives me a raging hard-on.

Spitting the word stripper at him as an insult was vile and close-minded. Sky has every right to do what he wants with his body, and he exudes a sexy, joyous, vibrant energy when he dances. He loves it, and I judged him for it. Being ignored would serve me right.

I press on my erection, but images of Skylar rhythmically twisting and turning his body are too much. Before I lose my nerve, I dial his number.

It goes straight to voicemail.

What if he doesn't call? Ever.

I stretch out on my too-small couch, not bothering to take my shoes off. The raised floral pattern is scratchy and uncomfortable. I hate it more now, realizing it should hold naughty high school memories of me and Sky, but I was too chicken. Following Brant's advice to apologize seems like the best place to start.

I jerk, practically falling off the couch when it rings.

It's him. *Holyfuckingshit.*

"Hello?" I say, fumbling the phone.

"You okay?" Sky asks. "You sound like you're running."

"Nah, I'm good. Nervous you wouldn't call," I confess. My heart is in my throat, and I swallow uselessly. "Sky, can I see you?" I wince, starting off without an apology. "You're right. I treated you shitty, and I don't have an excuse except I'm a dumbass. I regret what I said."

"Did you follow the link I sent?" His voice gives no sympathy.

I scrub my hand over my face. "Yeah. I'm half afraid you'll file stalking charges."

A boisterous laugh I haven’t heard in years bursts out of him. “I’m surprised.”

“Surprised I apologized or that I’ve watched every one of your videos too many times to admit?” I kick my shoes off and turn the volume up high to be surrounded by his voice.

“Apologies were never your thing.” He takes a deep breath. “It doesn’t bother you? You understand it’s how I make my money. It’s what paid for my brownstone.”

“You own a brownstone?” The awe in my voice is clear as I glance down at my used couch.

“Two floors in Brooklyn. My upstairs neighbor is eighty-four, and I plan on taking over her unit after her death, but the woman will live to be over one hundred to spite me.” His voice rings with affection, then he clears his throat. “But don’t change the subject. I won’t stop dancing.” The hard edge returns.

“I swear I won’t ask you to,” I say in a rush, and he clucks his tongue. My heart gallops, eager for more with Sky. “I’d really like to make things right between us.”

“Why?” he asks with cool detachment.

“Umm.” A thousand reasons run through my head, but they all sound selfish. I settle for the truth. “I…we… You’re important to me.” I’m dying to prove I can treat him better and my actions can match my words. That he won’t be sorry if he gives us another chance.

“Am I, tho? Was it me, or that I willingly did whatever you wanted? Convenient and obedient.”

“Don’t say that,” I croak as the shame of the truth washes over me.

“Listen, I’m as much to blame as you. I taught you that you could treat me like shit and I’d stick around. Standing up for what I wanted wasn’t part of who I was. Even if you believe you cared for me, I’ve changed. I’m not the same person you knew.”

“Tell me about the new you,” I plead, greedy for any information. The years have been good to him, and he’s aware of his worth and won’t settle for less. He gives the impression he won’t let people take advantage of his kindness. His videos showcase his strong muscles and cut abs, and he moves with grace and confidence. Qualities he struggled with throughout high school.

“Lark would never put up with your shit. I made him an upgraded version of Skylar—smarter, tougher, and no one’s fool.”

“I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have called you a stripper. It was mean, and a me problem. I’ll admit I was jealous of anyone who got parts of you that I didn’t.” If I could reach through the phone and hug him, he’d be in my arms, except he’d most likely refuse me. He has a new aversion to touch, quickly moving away when someone gets near him.

“What do you want from me, Maverick?”

“You in my life.” I hold my breath, my heart beating under my Adam’s apple as I wait for his answer.

He exhales, and I picture his nose crinkling in annoyance. “I knew two of the guys at the party. One helped me become Lark, and the other only knows me as Lark. You won’t be able to pretend I don’t take my clothes off for a living. People recognize me. They expect things from me. Even if I don’t like them, I have to be polite. My face is my business, and I can’t afford to offend every guy who assumes my body is for sale.”

“That’s… That’s…” I fall silent, processing. I tamp down the urge to demand which of my teammates has seen him basically naked because he’ll never speak to me again. It’s a test of sorts to figure out if I can handle his life. I don’t want to fail, but my words aren’t worth much. Sometimes women throw themselves at me solely because I’m in the NHL. “It must be hard to trust people.”

Sky laughs derisively. “You have no idea.”

I close my eyes and steel myself for rejection. Looking back, I don’t want to regret letting my pride get in the way. Losing him twice is unimaginable. “Can we change that? We can start as slow as you want, calls or just texts to get to know each other.”

He’s quiet, letting the question hang there between us, an unpinned grenade.

“Maybe. I’ll think on it,” Sky says, and hangs up before I can respond.

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CHAPTER 6

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

I curl into a ball and stay that way for an eternity, sleeping on and off until it's time to teach the next morning.

The girls are rowdy, all glittery with the scent of fruit shampoos and syrup lingering in the air. They've had their sugar, and it shows. I'm strung out and showing weakness.

"You look like doggie doo," one quips, and her BFF piles on.

"Did you get hit in the face? You're really puffy."

"I have a secret." My shy student links her fingers and twists her torso.

"Secrets shouldn't be shared. They are between you and the person who told you." We stretch, keeping the focus on dance.

My mind drifts to Mav, and the girls call me out when I forget a sequence in their recital dance. A couple of moms give me the stink eye from the bench in the waiting room, aka the entryway. My focus needs an ass-kicking.

Old Mav would've never called me after seeing my site. I can't decide if it's a dream or a nightmare. There's no way I can pretend his betrayal didn't kill me.

Skylar has been dead for years, and I don't need him anymore. Which means I don't need Maverick. I'll block his number after class and be done with this glitch in the matrix.

“Okay, ladies. You worked hard, and your reward is to leave”—I extend my arm pretending to consult a watch—“two minutes and fifteen seconds early.” The girls cheer. “But you need to stretch before you leave.”

They groan, understanding that their leaving early was a ruse. The girls flop around, complaining about simple stretches. “See you next Saturday.” I wave both arms and laugh. These girls are the best medicine for my bruised heart. They’re so dramatic and put life in perspective.

“Mr. Lark.” My shy one stands behind me. “What if the secret is about you? Can I tell you?”

Her face is so innocent, but my soul leaves my body thinking she’s discovered my “other” business. Pushing the panic aside, I sink to my knees and offer her my hand. “Sure, sweetie, you can tell me.”

“Mom said it’s a secret unless you tell us.” Her petite fingers fold over my hand.

My head’s whirling, and I’m three seconds from passing out. “It’s okay, you don’t have to tell me.”

She leans in, smelling of strawberry shampoo. “You met Patrik Lisko.” She hides her smile behind her hand.

I put my finger to my lips. “I may or may not have met Mr. Liska,” I say, emphasizing the *A* at the end of his name. “What did you hear?” I ask, shielding my mouth, mimicking telling secrets.

“Mom saw a picture of you online with him.” She giggles.

I giggle too and close my eyes as my heart rate decreases and my soul returns. “It’s a little secret, not a big one. You can tell people.” You’ll never catch me turning down more business teaching adults how to dance. I’ve had a few DMs referencing the pic, asking if I choreograph wedding dances, which I’ve ignored. I peer over my shoulder. “Your mom’s waiting.”

“Byeeeee.” She throws her arms around my neck and runs off yelling, “You know famous hockey players.” Her mom turns bright red, and I salute her as payback for the stink eye she gave me earlier.

I collapse flat on the hardwood floor and glance at my pathetic self in the mirror wall. It shouldn’t bother me that my other job could damage the Enforcers. Someone had to realize they were hiring adult entertainment. There’s nothing for me to regret.

I’m a big fat liar.

There’s only one person I can call who will understand this and not make it more complicated. I dial before overthinking it.

“Hello,” says an unfamiliar, gruff voice.

“Ummm. I dialed the wrong number.” I check my contact, but he must’ve changed his number.

“You’re calling Emmet? This is his husband,” he says with a growl.

My memory for names serves me well. “Jayce? Hi, we met the other night at Patrik Liska’s bachelor party. I’m—”

“Lark,” he finishes for me. “Angel,” he calls. “Phone.”

There’s whispering, then, “Hello?”

“He calls you angel?” I ask before identifying myself.

“Funny coincidence, huh?” Emmet replies.

“Do you think of me when he calls you that?” I joke since he helped me fill out the paperwork to change my name.

“No! Never crossed my mind until you said it. Thanks, asshole,” he says without heat. “Should I call you Skylar or Lark? He/him or they/them?”

This is why I called Emmet. He can roll with whatever. We have that in common. “He/him and everyone calls me Lark, but…it’s up to you.” I surprise myself. So much for Skylar being dead and buried.

“I prefer to call you by the name you chose for yourself.”

“Thanks,” I say, and dodge the question because for the first time in years, I’m questioning who I am and who I want to be. “Listen, you probably figured out how I ended up at that party, and it wasn’t to teach dance. There’s a picture online, and I’m worried that people will reverse-image search me and…” I trail off, afraid of being too cryptic and also too obvious. My website isn’t connected to my name unless you’re privy to my past.

“As far as I know, the guys actually believe you were there to teach dance,” he bursts out with sympathy.

“But someone could identify me and cause trouble. I didn’t do my spiel about no pics and no posting online.” I cover my eyes.

“You met Mav before,” Emmet states matter-of-factly.

“We went to high school together,” I confirm. “I gave him my website info, so he’ll have the facts, but I don’t want this to harm the team.” It’s not Maverick’s fault my life took a hard left and gave me whiplash. “The gossip sites are brutal.”

“Yep, been there, done that,” he says, and there’s a story, a scandal that I purposely didn’t read because he’ll tell me himself. “What can I do?”

“Nothing. I’m worried I might ruin their wedding day with rumors or worse.”

“These guys live in the public eye. They won’t blame you. We’re a very queer organization, so it’s possible other people are already aware.”

“You’re smearing lipstick all over a pig’s snout,” I complain. “One of the guys on the team used to chat with me online.” A stab of involuntary guilt hits me.

Maverick wasn’t his teammate then, and Jamal King was one of my most innocent clients. In my opinion, he needed a safe space to ask questions, and we bonded over our love of dance. King was lonely, a queer, black man in a very white, homophobic sport.

“Sorry we lost touch. I should’ve been a better friend.”

“It’s a two-way street, Em, and life sometimes lifes at you hard.” Zero part of me misses the old days with Emmet while we were struggling. Our friendship was born out of common trauma. “Maybe we wanted to leave that part of our lives behind us.”

“Yeah,” he agrees softly. “But I’m glad you’re good.”

“And look at you, married to two people! A real adult,” I tease.

“Now don’t be accusing me of that.” He laughs. “Listen, I can talk to a couple of Enforcers to give them a head’s-up if it will help.”

Hesitating, I say, “I’ll think it over and see if anything breaks. No reason to freak out if nothing comes of it.” We say our goodbyes, and I’m still flat on my studio floor.

I clunk my skull on the hardwood to knock some sense into myself. When I shut my eyes, I’m flooded with memories of Mav, and I can’t stop them. A dam has broken and everything I tried to forget surfaces. Mav smiles with his entire face, and he lit up when he saw me. He was so focused, but I could make him laugh in record time. His hands could cover my back, and nothing bad could touch us. And his kisses. Fuck.

We were young and dumb, and our feelings were too big to handle. Reality stacked against us from the start. If I had followed him to Boston, I would’ve resented him. He wasn’t ready to come out, and I can’t blame him. Hockey players use homophobic slurs as part of their everyday vocabulary. Mav didn’t want to alienate his teammates or hurt his NHL prospects.

As a dramatic little shit, I'd absolutely have made a scene and made him choose: me or the team. We'd both lose if that happened, and I'd regret outing him for the rest of my life.

I did the right thing for both of us then, but it's like glitter. A solid decision with lots of regrets. He doesn't understand the complications of including me in his life now. Even if his current team is accepting, it doesn't mean others will be.

The best plan: do nothing. He got caught up in the memories of me and wants to reverse time to when we were innocent. It doesn't work that way.

I'll keep my distance, and hopefully the picture of me with his teammates gets buried before someone notices.

Mav is not my responsibility, and I'm not his.

Anything more than civil exes will lead to more heartbreak.

And I am not subjecting us to that.

Final decision.

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CHAPTER 7

Maverick Maher

Staring at my phone doesn't conjure a message from Sky. I sent him a funny meme to start a conversation, but he's left me on read. For five hours. It's not like I texted after we hung up. I waited a respectable three days.

Brant says I should take the hint, and I shoot him a glance as he gets his gear on. He's right, but I'm not giving up at the first stumbling block.

The noise in the visitors' dressing room seems unusually loud. There are rumors that teams do weird things, such as messing with their opponents' locker rooms and the acoustics to give themselves an advantage.

I stuff my cell away, uneasy about being creepy and entitled, questioning the line between fighting for him, for us, and crossing Sky's boundaries.

I sneeze, and Griff dramatically jumps away.

"Don't be gettin' sneezy germs on me." He crosses his forearms as a shield against the germs.

"I'm not sick," I retort.

"Mav, quit while you're ahead, for real. Stop talking 'cause you sound like 'I'b nod sick.' " King smirks.

"Keefer is rubbing off on you," I complain.

"I certainly am." O'Keefe waggles his eyebrows and thrusts his pelvis in King's direction.

"No kissy-face in the locker room!" Benz yells.

"Don't be jealous in the locker room," Brant sings.

“Benz, get the dance party started,” our captain, Ace, hollers.

The music blasts, but I can’t bring myself to dance. My head hurts, and dressing is such a chore that it’s taking three times as long. A pity party for myself is not on today’s calendar. I gotta get my shit together and show up for my team.

“Mav.” King shakes my shoulder. “Seriously, you okay?”

I’m sitting with my head in my hands. “Yeah,” I lie. “Trying a new meditation for focus.”

King’s face gives away that he doesn’t believe me, but he doesn’t push either. We’re hockey players. We skate with broken fingers, bruised ribs, bum knees, and strained muscles, so a little heartbreak won’t take me out.

I mentally stick Sky in the cubby with my phone and prep for the game.

My balance is off, and I’m slower than a toddler. The game flies by me, and Coach pulls me. Grayson Ward, our trainer and the captain’s fiancé, rushes over to check on me.

“I’m fine,” I say, before he can question me.

“Of course, but if I don’t do my job, they’ll have my ass, so humor me, eh?” He doesn’t wait for my answer as he takes my pulse. “It’s high, and you’re warm.”

“I just got off shift,” I grumble.

“A half a shift,” he argues. “Follow my finger.”

I do the best I can, but each time I blink, his finger has moved and it’s hard to find.

“How many fingers am I holding up?”

“It’s not fair to wave them around. Stay still and I’ll tell you.”

“Hmmm,” he answers, and takes my temperature. “Stay,” Grayson warns, and shuffles down the line to talk to our assistant coach.

The buzzer signals the end of the second period, and when I stand, everything gets wavy.

Grayson takes my arm. “You won a trip to the treatment room.”

“I’m not sick,” I say, but it sounds funny, like I’m talking underwater.

Grayson silently leads me to the visitors’ training room and instructs me to lie down.

“Fine, I’ll rest.” I keep my skates on in protest.



“He’s dead weight. Put him in the wheelchair.” Brant groans and I’m being carried.

“Guys, he might be contagious. Let the medical staff handle this. Coach will kick your asses if you get sick at the same time,” Grayson barks.

It’s a monumental effort to open my eyes as I’m plunked into a chair.

“Good morning,” Grayson says, as he puts my socked feet on the wheelchair footplates.

“Did I get hit?” I rub my face and can’t remember much of the game.

“We can go with that story.” He chuckles and pushes my chair. “We got you a special van to the hotel. I’ll help you pack so we can fly out.”

“We’re going home?” I don’t remember what day it is.

“Yup. Hold on.” Grayson rolls me onto a lift that sits me in the van.

The ride to the hotel is a nauseating whiteout. I keep my eyes shut because the snow flying at us in the dark makes me motion sick. My number one goal of sleeping is elusive because things keep waking me up. First, it’s arriving at the hotel, then the guys yelling because our flight is delayed, and after that, Grayson forces medicine down my throat.

The medicine helps me rally to walk myself onto the bus to the airport. Small victories count when my head’s full of bees. Grayson offers me earplugs and nasal spray.

“Use these now.” He supervises me and stuffs extras into my pocket. “Oh, and don’t forget to chew gum.” Gum goes in my pocket too, and I tune him out. Get me to my bed.

On the bus, Brant’s my travel partner and asks to borrow my cell. He said he’s going to get a nurse to pick me up and take care of me. When I argue that I don’t need a nurse, he asks, “Do you want to infect your teammates?” Since I don’t, I’m silent as he uses my phone to text. There aren’t any nurses in my contacts. He pats my head. “You’re all set. Thank me later. I got someone to take extra special care of you.”

Brant’s such a great guy. I love my teammates.

There’s a loud thunk, and the bus chugs to a stop.

“It’s too cold to stop,” I complain.

“Here”—Brant covers me with his jacket—“this will keep you warm.”

“K.” I close my eyes again, not caring that a zipper is pressed into my cheek. These meds are top notch. I’ll have to find out what Grayson gave me.

A second later, Brant’s pulling me up. “C’mon. We gotta get on the other bus.”

“What?” I stumble into the aisle and ping-pong along.

“We’ve been waiting for a new bus for over an hour.” Brant stands at the door, ready to catch me if I fall. We’re the last ones off the bus. It’s colder than an ice bath, and the wind slaps me in the face. I trip up the steps to the new bus and welcome the heat. Lying here in the doorway seems a reasonable place to rest.

“Don’t leave without me,” Brant yells, but he’s not behind me.

I don’t care about usual seats as I flop into the first open one and snuggle into the pile of coats.

My eyes are closed for exactly two seconds before someone’s shaking me. “Mav… Mav, where’s Brant?”

I blink at a panicking O’Keefe. He’s not the type to panic.

“Let me sleep. He’s fine. He gave me his jacket to keep warm.” I roll and look at the empty seat next to me. “Where’s Brant sitting?”

“Coach,” O’Keefe booms, and runs up to the rear of the bus.

The guys’ irate faces stare at me. “Did Brant get on the bus?”

“Yeah, maybe?” My head’s fuzzy, and my heart sinks. He yelled not to leave without him, but I was so happy to find a seat, I forgot.

Coach stands up. “We’re turning around, but we need to find a safe place so the bus doesn’t get stuck. It seems we’re missing Brant and Ari Dimon.” There’s a chorus of curses, and Grayson takes charge, barking orders and clearing out seats for Brant and Mr. Dimon to lie flat when we find them. Brant being stranded is my fault, but my confused brain can’t process why our GM, Ari Dimon, is out in the snowstorm.

We can barely see out the windows; it’s snowing so hard. It takes another few minutes for the bus to pull into a plowed parking lot and turn around.

Grayson’s standing in the door well with emergency blankets unfolded. I wouldn’t be surprised if he jumped out while we are still moving.

“I see someone,” the bus driver shouts.

Every minute takes an hour as we wait for them to return. Grayson carries Brant aboard with blue lips and fingers. Mr. Dimon’s hair is frozen, and he’s mumbling that he didn’t know.

The team doctor insists we stop at the local hospital to have Brant and Mr. Dimon checked out. There, I'm given more meds and a comfy bed for a nap. My congestion clears, and the smell of antiseptic is yucky. Time gets fuzzy, and we're at the hospital for a few hours or possibly days. O'Keefe grumbles it's the longest day of his life, so it has to be the same day.

When the plane lands in New Jersey, it's dark, but the sky is clear enough to see the moon. My ears are killing me, worsened by the argument between O'Keefe and King about whether they should send me home alone or take me with them.

They don't ask my opinion.

My angel appears to save me, and I throw myself at him. "Skylar!"

King steadies us so we don't fall over.

"Rhys Brant called me? Said Mav is in rough shape and needs a ride home?" Sky asks in a small, unsure voice.

"Perfect." O'Keefe slaps my shoulder. "No need for us to get whatever you've got."

"Where's Brant? I've been waiting for hours, and no one bothered to call me when you were delayed." Sky can't hide his annoyance.

There's more arguing, and Skylar agrees to take me home.

Finally, we get into a nice warm car, but he's muttering, "Spoiled hockey players."

"Don't be mad at me," I plead. "I'm so happy you found me," I say, falling face-first into his lap, but he pushes me over. "I'm sick."

He pats my head. "Yup, you are."

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CHAPTER 8

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

Mav's in my king bed snoring away, but at least his fever broke. It spiked again once we got home, and I had to call Grayson, their trainer, who gave me his number in case Mav got worse. Poor Mav kept mumbling in his sleep, calling out for me, asking me not to leave, and telling me he'll be better. He's so sick and upset; it's heart-wrenching.

I'm an idiot for putting myself in this situation. From the arguments, someone from the team would've taken him home last night. It didn't have to be me, as Brant insisted.

But that idiot had the nerve to become a human popsicle, so yelling at him was unsatisfying, and one of the important guys got pissy with me, a Mr. Diamond or something. I'm not on his favorite person list for sure.

Maverick's finally peaceful and not tossing and turning. I brush his hair off his forehead.

Stay strong.

My favorite lavender silk sheets are twisted around his torso. I have them in three colors because they feel amazing, help regulate my body temperature, and keep my curls from sticking straight up.

He's not mine and never really was. Once he gets over the shock that we live in the same city, he'll agree we're a disaster waiting to happen, best to be avoided. He smells sick, not his usual clean scent of sunshine in a forest after the rain. Thank heavens, because I can resist a hot mess.

"Sky?" he calls, and blindly reaches for me.

“I’m here, go back to sleep.” I drag my fingertips along the palm of his hand.

“Thought you were a dream. Tell me something only you would know.” He opens his eyes.

The first thing that pops into my head comes out with no filter or thought of consequences. “Our first kiss was at my house, and we were so nervous and turned on we attacked each other’s mouths. You almost cracked a tooth but said it’d be worth it to kiss me again.” The urge to punch myself in the face is real.

But he’s satisfied and closes his lids. “Still true.” He sighs, and sleep takes him under.

Turns out, I didn’t need to hit myself. The memory playing on a loop in my head is enough to crack my chest open as my heart bleeds out. We were in my musty basement wrestling for the remote control on the plaid couch. He’d gotten hard, and my blood did a mass exodus from the rest of my body to my dick. It’s the only explanation I have for asking if I could kiss him.

Mav turned bright red, and I was sure I’d ruined everything. If I could’ve stuffed the words back in, I’d have shoved those words down so they’d never be heard. I’d had a crush on him for ages, but he was straight. I opened my mouth to say “just kidding,” but he grabbed my nape and changed my life by kissing me and saying he’d wanted me since we met.

My head was swimming, and he tasted of warm bread and sweet cream with a hint of spice. Freshly baked bread reminds me of him to this day. We kissed and kissed and kissed until we heard my sister at the top of the stairs. She took one look at us and clocked our messy hair and kiss-swollen lips. In my family, there was an unspoken agreement that we didn’t talk about my sexuality. She sneered, turned around, and we never mentioned it.

With the memory of our first kiss, I accidentally tapped into my sentimental emotions for him.

That day I swore I fell irrevocably in love and found my person. The idea that he returned a fraction of my obsession was mind-blowing. Mav was the popular guy who would take the time in gym class to show the less athletic people how to improve. He didn’t tolerate someone being bullied, especially me. And he was so smart; he’d help me with my homework over the phone, late into the night, so I could pass. On top of being an absolute catch, he chose me. *Me.*

I guess everyone thinks their first love will last forever. Not everyone easily dismisses red flags the way I did. In my mind, he had no flaws, and all our

problems were mine.

Mav rolls over and snuggles into me. I should've kept my distance, at the very least slept in the spare room. But I've never made smart choices when it comes to Maverick.

Back in high school, I gladly snuck out of my house and met him in the cornfield so we could stargaze and make each other come. He'd bring a blanket and pillows. We made a dent in the crop, the width and length of two bodies. We learned the constellations and shared dreams. It never occurred to us that we'd lead separate lives.

With his magnetic personality, I never stood a chance. He was my world, and I danced around him, not caring if I broke a leg.

Until I did. Until I felt hopeless. That nothing would change.

I trace his dark brows; they've always been two shades darker than his hair. We had so many firsts together; I don't regret him. We didn't work, but I loved him as much as my teenage self was capable of.

Easing away from Mav, I flee from my bedroom, disgusted with that silly teenage boy who thought he had life figured out. Pathetic.

My work phone beeps with notifications, and I snatch it up, sitting down at my computer. Picking up Mav last night meant I had to reschedule some clients. I review them in order, so it's first come, first served on new times. After a few minutes of scheduling, I decide to film my content while Mav sleeps so I can be there when he wakes up.

I shake my head. We're not together, yet I'm still rearranging my life around him. Some habits are impossible to break.

Mav will be starving when he wakes up.

Me: I'm taking care of a sick friend. Do you have any get-better food?

Nonna Maria: Of course!

Me: I'm going to be filming. Can you leave it in my fridge?

Nonna Maria: Do pigs fly?

No, they don't, so logically that's her response, but she answers stupid questions with ridiculous answers.

I have three videos to film and edit. Usually, it takes me the entire day, but I'll have to put perfection aside to get it done. There's my weekly content video for all my subscribers and two personalized dances. Weekly content is easy because I put on a music suggestion from a fan and let the music guide me. It's spontaneous and fun, which inevitably leads to mishaps, and my clients eat that shit up with a spoon. And I have one of the other dances choreographed, so I should be able to knock them out in a couple of hours if I don't get in my head.

I put a ton of thought into my filming room, and I'm proud of it. I modeled the rear wall after a photography studio with twenty different backdrops plus the exposed brick wall. Some of them can be layered to create a unique look or texture. I film my weekly content in front of the brick wall so it's easily recognizable.

Switching up the music genre every week helps create a buzz, and my chat room enjoys making predictions. Reading their comments keeps me on the pulse of their desires.

Today is a classic rock day. I change into a black leotard with a tear-away skirt and use a vintage tie around my forehead to complete my '80s look. While I cue up the song and ensure my camera is set up, I internalize the lyrics so I can convey them through dance. My fans chose an angsty rock ballad, predicting that my nonexistent love life has become super complicated.

I start with my head hanging low and slowly lift it to stare at the camera. No smile, intense eyes, and I let the music flow from my body. This is when I'm the freest. The most like myself.

For four minutes and fifty-five seconds, there's only me and the music: haunting notes, despondent lyrics, and an Irishman's unmistakable voice.

I end with a sly smirk and a teasing wink, giving them a reason to visit my site again. Shaking out my limbs, I turn off the camera and pick up the skirt and all the tooling that I took off. It happens organically, and I don't notice when I'm taking things off.

Dancing returned me to myself, ready to tackle the world. I became Lark for precise reasons, and just because Mav is here doesn't mean I need to revert to being Skylar.

As I watch the video, I'm satisfied with it and post it after only cropping the length. No reshoots or special editing. It's early to drop it, but it goes live, and I turn off my notifications. If I don't, it will ding or vibrate through my next two videos.

Pride courses through my veins at being able to block out distractions to free my soul. My eyes blur and my breath freezes. Dancing my troubles away was Skylar’s best coping mechanism, not Lark’s.

Sky didn’t realize how cruel the world could be or how hard it is to achieve a dream. He could be fearless because he was totally innocent. So many years, I’ve been repressing Sky, but maybe there are some parts to salvage.

My mind races back to Mav. Nope. Not volunteering for that heartache.

But maybe things could be different now because I understand my deal-breakers.

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CHAPTER 9

Maverick Maher

My eyes are crusty as I pry them open to find myself in a stranger's bed. Bits and pieces resurface about the last couple of days. At least I hope it hasn't been more than two days.

I smell the sheets to determine if I hallucinated Sky or if I'm in his bed. His distinctive honey-and-cedar scent relaxes my body.

It's a shock that Sky would bring me to his home. He could've dumped me at my place or a hotel. But that's not who he is. Or was. Sky hates to see anyone suffer. Even when they deserve it. He covered for his nasty sister when she broke her finger punching him. Sky told his parents she tried to hit him, but he broke her finger instead. He's a living angel.

His room belongs in a magazine. The detailed woodwork around the doors and windows is beautiful. He told me he lives in a brownstone, and this big room with large windows fits the image I had. There's an exposed brick wall and well-kept wood floors. Everything has a place, and each piece of furniture looks selected especially for this room. It's home.

There's a flutter next to me when I lie flat. It's a note.

Mav,

I'm working. If you wake up, there's food

in the kitchen downstairs.

Sky

I press the note to my chest, hoping to at least be his friend. I'm so much worse than his family. Loving him means nothing if none of my actions show it. I'll do whatever he wants this time if he lets me in.

Slowly, I sit up. Two sensations happen at once: I need to piss, and I could eat the Meat Street buffet all by myself. The adjacent bathroom door is open, so that's first. It's not a pretty sight when I check myself in the mirror. My insides ache worse than if I'd taken a brutal hit against the boards on the ice with no pads, and it shows on the outside.

Peeking into the hallway, I'm unsure if Sky has roommates or if I'm alone. The house is warm, as in above seventy degrees, which is tropical for this hockey player.

"Hello?" I call out loud enough for someone to hear me if they're here. No one answers, so I lean on the railing for support as I go downstairs in my boxer briefs. Putting on clothes is way too much work.

I call out again after I open the door at the bottom. It's silent, so I tiptoe around like a thief who shouldn't be here. The ridiculousness of my situation makes me laugh out loud, and I jump at the sound.

Leave it to Brant to play matchmaker for me, get hypothermia, and forget to tell me. If I had any dignity, I'd get dressed and leave so Sky doesn't have to deal with me when he's done working. He didn't invite me here. From the arguing last night, Brant tricked Sky into picking me up. Fuck.

My stomach rumbles, and I open a cupboard and find gluten-free crackers. I'll settle my stomach with these and then go.

"I didn't realize it's a clothes-optional meal," a woman says behind me.

I whirl around, shielding my junk with the cracker box. A million questions rattle through my head as I stare at an older, stout woman with silver hair, an apron, and an arm full of food.

"Do you know me?" I ask. "I mean, do you live here? I'm not…" I trail off, at a loss for how to recover.

The woman cackles and takes slow steps to the island. “Larky said you would need get-better food.”

My brain processes Larky is Lark, who is Skylar.

“Here’s some pastina soup. One with egg and one without.” She separates the containers. “Some riso in bianco for an upset stomach and tea with honey.”

“You made all this for me?” The portion size is enough for five hockey players.

“Take home what you can’t eat.” She waves her hand.

“Thank you. I’m Maverick Maher.” I hold my hand out to shake.

She gives me the once-over and steps closer to embrace me, ignoring my hand. “My Larky needs more people to love him. Be good to him, okay?” She squeezes me tight, as if she can impose her will on me, even though she’s not as tall as my armpit.

“Are you his grandma?” I step away, unable to find a family resemblance and keeping my germs to myself. I wouldn’t hug me.

“Eat.” She points at the food, then opens a drawer to hand me a spoon and a fork. “I’m his nonna by choice. He’s good to me while waiting for me to die.” She laughs at my expression. “Call me Maria.”

I choke on the rice dish, and she moves me to sit at the island. The kitchen has been renovated recently. Whoever did it kept the charm of the old house while adding sleek countertops and a huge stove that looks shiny and new. The warm wood exudes coziness.

“This is really good, Maria.” I taste the soup with egg. “Your family is lucky to have you.” My mom has lots of skills, but cooking is not at the top of the list.

“Do you hear heavy footsteps banging around the third floor? No, you don’t.” She tsks me as if I were a child who should know better. “I live alone. So that’s why me and Larky are so good for each other.”

“Sorry for your loss.” I shove more soup in my mouth so I’ll shut the hell up.

“My poor Mario died years ago. No kids.” She shrugs like it’s not a big deal.

“That’s terrible. How did he die?” This soup is exactly what I need.

She shrugs again. “Doctor couldn’t say.” A smile spreads across her face. “He died after eating my pastina.”

I inhale soup into my lungs and think I’m drowning.

“Nonna.” Sky stands in the open doorway in loose gray sweatpants and a tight crop top with his hands on his hips. “We agreed to keep that a secret. Someone might call the cops on you. There’s no statute of limitations on murder.” He saunters over and hugs her.

Mercifully, Sky slaps between my shoulder blades and air escapes.

“You’re both certifiable,” I grumble.

“She’s my chosen family,” Sky says. “She will cut me with a comment or a paring knife. Whichever the situation calls for.” He kisses the top of her head.

“I’ll leave you boys. Be good. Or don’t.” Her cackle follows her out.

“You feeling better?” He sits on the stool next to me and scoops up some rice.

I nod awkwardly and strangely shy. “She seems great.”

“She’s one of a kind, for sure. And she gave you the fancy to-go plastic, she must like you.” He’s powering through the rice dish in the same way as a person who has never seen food before.

“Um, she showed up with this before she met me. I’m in my underwear. I met your nonna in this.” My hand flaps near my naked chest. “In my defense, I called out and thought I was alone.” I can’t look at him and risk getting hard. His smell is stronger with sweat, and I don’t trust myself not to beg him for another chance. “Sorry you got tricked into taking care of me. I was oblivious to what Brant was doing. He told me he was finding me a nurse, and I was too out of it to question him.”

“Why did he choose me out of all the people in your contact list?” he asks with surprise.

“I’ve talked about you with Brant. Not everything, but he knows I thought you ghosted me after high school and that it was actually my fault. His matchmaking skills need improvement.” My words cause him to scowl, so I take another bite of soup, gathering strength to leave.

He continues to stare at me with open-mouthed shock.

“I told the team I’m bi,” I admit.

He chews his lower lip. “That’s the first time you’ve said that.”

I roll my shoulders. “After years of lying and hiding, it was anticlimactic. My imagination equated coming out with the end of my world as I knew it, and reality was far less dramatic. My teammate told me he’s gay, and I blurted out I’m bi. It was the first time I told someone, and I wasn’t banished to hell. The guys were chill except for Benzy, who hired you. I

thought he might throw me a coming-out party. He didn’t, but he dragged his boyfriend Leo over and announced I was bi like a proud big brother.”

“I’m happy for you,” he whispers with a sad expression.

My eyes stay on my soup, willing my dick into submission after glancing at his warm eyes. All I have to do is get up and leave.

“I owe you an apology,” Sky says.

My brain short-circuits; I drop the spoon and make a strange grunting sound.

“Everyone should come out in their own time and how they want. I pushed you to do something you weren’t ready for. I’m sorry.”

“No, you had a right to be mad. It wasn’t fair that I told you I loved you in the dark but ignored you in the light of day. I was a coward.” I hang my head, determined to listen this time and respect him. Which means leaving his house and letting him decide if he wants to see me again. I can’t force myself into his life.

“Thanks again for taking care of me. It means a lot.” I slide off the stool on the opposite side of him.

“Are you going?” He jerks forward, then pushes the rice away.

“Yeah, I’ve taken advantage of you enough.” I train my eyes on the door because I won’t have the willpower to leave if he has an ounce of hesitation.

“You should at least shower first. You’d be doing the world a favor,” he teases, and touches my arm. His hand is warm, and I could melt into him.

I should refuse, but I say, “As long as you don’t mind.” He voluntarily touched me, and it’s irresistible.

“I’ll add the water usage to your tab. Nurses are expensive these days.”

A nervous laugh bursts out of me. “I’m good for it, but I’m still on my rookie contract, so I can’t afford round-the-clock care.” My eyes find his playful brown ones.

Sky laughs at either my joke or me. “I’ll put the food away and be right up. Go ahead and use the shower.”

I trip over my feet, running for the door to the stairway, which is ajar, so the locking mechanism didn’t engage.

There’s an open door at the end of the hall, and because I’m a nosy fuck, I peek inside. Big mistake.

The room’s a rectangle with a tripod at one end and changeable backdrops on the other. The floor has a spongy pad and a dance bar along

the side. Behind the tripod, there's a rack of clothes and costumes.

I'm drawn to them and touch a silky, pale-pink bodysuit. Images of Sky's lithe body dancing in it give me an instant hard-on. Now I'm curious if he pairs it with bottoms or wears it alone.

I groan and tip my head up. Fuck, I'd love to see him in this.

"You found my workroom."

Startled, I spin around but cover my dick too late. Boxer briefs can't hide my wood.

"Enjoying what you see?" He saunters over and takes the bodysuit I was touching off the hanger. "This one's new." He holds it up to his chest. "I'm not sure about it yet."

"I like it." My voice is rough and gravelly. "A lot." I glance briefly at my dick, and yup, it's still large with no sign of change with Sky this close.

"Thanks," he says, and tilts his head, seemingly unsure if I'm serious or not.

"Pink has always been your color." One night we met in the cornfield after he'd had rehearsal for some play, and I lost my mind, seeing him in a pink bodysuit and sweats.

"Much to everyone's disappointment." Sky snorts and rehangs it on the rack.

"You never let anyone dim your light. Not even me, and I did some truly terrible things." Those memories of pretending not to see him or looking at him funny when he'd wave at me flood my brain and kill my boner.

Sky's eyes get glassy, and he clears his throat. "We were young."

"Don't make excuses for me," I snap, angry at myself, not him. I'm lucky he's willing to talk to me and not treat me the way I treated him.

Sky nods. "Your duffle bag is in my room…for clothes…after your shower," he says tentatively, uncertain I understand. We stare at each other. Not in a standoffish way, but in a curious sort of way.

Before I do something reckless and kiss him, I spin around and stalk to his room.

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CHAPTER 10

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

My head's a mess. I expected more of the same from Mav, excuses and arguments about his reasons. But he surprises me by accepting responsibility. It's what I've dreamed of for years, yet I'm confused.

People change. I'm proof of that. It's highly possible Mav has grown up too. He's out to his team for the love of all Maria's food. A total no-go in our past.

When the shower sputters on and the pipes groan, I enter my room, flopping down on the bed. If I don't give him a chance, I'll always wonder, what if. The what-ifs in life hurt worse than rejections. Rejections are a solid sign that something isn't right. There's room for improvement, but never knowing leaves a hollow ache of what maybe could have been.

It's been lonely without him the past four years, though I made the right decision leaving then. But now it's different, and I can't spend the next few years crying over a chance I was too much of a scaredy-cat to take.

Mav enters with wet hair and a towel around his waist, going straight for his duffel. He doesn't glance in my direction, so it's unclear if he sees me.

He faces the wall as he unzips his bag and pulls out clothes. Mav's name dies in my throat as he takes the towel off to dry his hair. His muscular ass and torso ripple with his aggressive toweling. He's broader and more defined than he was. The perfect peach of an ass, more than I could squeeze in my hands.

My quiet whimper echoes like a boom, causing Mav to yell and drop the towel.

Sorry, fucking not sorry.

His hands fly up in a defensive stance as he blushes everywhere. “Sorry. I wasn’t trying to”—he grabs the towel to cover himself—“I didn’t… Fuck me, I’m so sorry.” Mav lets out a long sigh. “I’m used to locker rooms, and I didn’t think.”

I’m speechless but manage to nod. I shield my eyes and make sure I’m not drooling. “Understandable.”

“Making you uncomfortable is the last thing I want to do.” He dresses.

A damn shame.

“I’m going to quit while I’m behind and get the hell out of here before you throw me out.” He re-zips everything and stands. “Thanks again.”

“You don’t have to thank me,” I mumble, following him out into the hall. “I’ll walk you out.”

“Afraid I’ll get lost and take Maria’s delicious food?” He nudges me.

It’s ridiculous, but I don’t want him to leave. Like, if he goes, I’ll be missing my chance and won’t get another one. There are no foreseeable circumstances under which we’ll run into each other again. Not unless I ask.

“I’m kidding,” he says with worry.

“You should take the food. Maria made it for you, and she spoils me with her cooking more days than not.” I lead him to the kitchen and remove the containers from the fridge for him.

He’s changed in ways I haven’t given him enough credit for. Old Mav disregarded me when I said no. He’d blow up my phone or sneak over to my house when he needed to see me. But if I needed him and it wasn’t convenient for him, no was a solid no.

Since the bachelor party, he’s respected my boundaries, listened and apologized.

“That’s a lot to carry,” he says, as my shaking hand reaches out with the food.

“Of course you’re not going to carry this on the subway.” I roll my eyes at myself.

“Oh.” Mav shifts uncomfortably. “I’m calling a ride.” He holds up his phone with the rideshare app.

“Okay. Still, I’ll put this in a bag.” Our conversation is as awkward as trying to learn a new dance on stage, under the bright lights.

He’s leaving because it’s what I want. Only I’m not so sure.

We walk to my front door, and he turns to face me, setting his bags on the floor and shoving his hands in his pockets.

He opens his mouth, but nothing comes out and I break. I don’t want him to leave. Before I realize what I’m doing, I’m flying at him and he catches me with an arm around my back and the other under my ass. My legs link behind his waist, and I bury my face in the crook of his shoulder.

He rocks and brings a hand up to massage my neck.

“It can’t be like before,” I sob pitifully, determined to hold some ground.

“I promise, Angel, it won’t be.” He carries me into the dance studio, and my old nickname clouds my head, sounding so natural and right. “Do you have a couch?” he asks, spinning in a slow circle.

“Living rooms are so mid.” I wipe my tears on his shirt. “I don’t invite people over, but there’s a love seat in the pantry.” Unhooking my legs, I slide down his body and take his hand. My reading nook is the old pantry, since I don’t need it for food, so I converted it.

On one side, the shelves are lined with books, the tiny couch sits below a window in the rear, and I strung fairy lights around the crown molding at the ceiling. The other wall has textured wallpaper where the shelves have been replaced. The room is a warm hug.

“This is amazing.” Mav runs his hands over the soft wall.

“It’s my favorite room. Totally comfortable but low on function.” I gasp when he picks me up and settles me on his lap so my back leans against the arm of the sofa.

“I’d say the potential for fuc…function is unlimited.” He nuzzles my neck and inhales.

“Mind always in the gutter.” I curl into him, giving myself this luxury, even if it ends badly.

“I’m a hockey player; it’s our default. Naked and rude.”

I laugh but wish the hard conversations were already behind us. But pretending everything is fine is what broke us apart in the first place. It’s hard to find the right words when he’s so warm and smells like my soap.

“I want to date you,” Mav says into my ear as he holds me tight. “No sneaking around, go on a date with me out in public. You choose.” When I’m silent for too long, he says, “I won’t push to start where we left off.”

Everything in me screams yes, fucking date me, be proud of me, tell the world about us. But I made decisions that could hurt his reputation.

“I want to say yes.” I sigh, and his lips graze my hair. “But there are lots of reasons we’re a long shot. One of which is my job. I don’t want my website career to tarnish your image.”

Mav laughs so hard that he can’t speak. I don’t think it’s the least bit funny.

“Tarnish my image?” he asks, still laughing. “Am I a Victorian debutante or a stuffy rich bitch?”

“Both.” I nip his pec and he groans.

“You can’t expect me to control myself when you do that.”

“Oh, you like it?” I ask, remembering how sensitive his chest is. Although I didn’t plan on instigating anything, I’m not sad about it.

“Don’t change the subject. I’m serious. I’m asking to spend time with you, and you shut me down because my illustrious image as a”—he tips his head up to look me in the eye—“goddamn hockey player might be ruined.” Hurt clouds his hazel eyes and rings in his voice.

“Your career means everything to you, and some people are rude and judgmental. I wouldn’t forgive myself if I brought you bad publicity.” He’s never had to put up with people talking to his face in such a way that makes him invisible and saying vile things. I love my job, but it still takes a toll.

“Publicity is Finn’s job, and I don’t care. Our team has had so many scandals that Finn will barely break a sweat.” Mav reads my face and says, “He’s our PR director.”

“I highly doubt that. The poor man is probably a closet alcoholic from dealing with you guys and your scandals.” Not that I scoured all relevant postings of the team and got an eyeful after Mav got called up to the Enforcers. I’d fire myself to get away from them if I were their PR director.

“What’s the real reason?”

That you’ll break my heart again, and I won’t survive it a second time. “What do you say to getting to know each other again, just the two of us? We’ll take it slow before going public.” This protects both of us because if we fall apart again, we don’t need it to be in the public eye.

“Is that what you need?” He moves an arm under my legs to cradle me.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Okay, what are the rules?” he asks, chuckling when I make a face. “So I don’t accidentally break them. Let’s set up expectations beforehand.”

What I really need is a blood oath that I won't be his dirty little secret, but that's excessive. "Limiting texting to two hours a day? Or only video calling a few times a week?"

"Are you asking if I'm okay with that or something else?" His index finger sweeps a lock of hair out of my eyes.

Saying I'm clueless isn't the correct answer. "We can start there. Are there any deal-breakers for you?" I ask, and hold my breath.

"Tell me everything that's going on in your head. About me, my job, us, you, your job, your stance on owning a pet." Mav ticks the items off on his fingers.

I rear back. "Do you have a pet?" Some days feeding myself is a chore, and I can't have an innocent being relying on me.

"No, but I want one and can't have one because I travel so much." His smile flips my belly.

"Not to be rude, but is this a job interview for a doggie dad?" I laugh to show I'm kidding.

"I thought a cat first. Lower maintenance. Cooler status," he says without a hint of sarcasm.

"I'm not old enough for a cat." I lean into his hand on my face.

"But you're old enough to own a home?"

"Completely separate things. One requires money, and the other kindness, patience, and dedication."

"You've got all those things. But we're taking it slow, so tell me how you started your website and what you like about it." As if he senses I'll pull away, Mav's arms tighten on me.

"Why are you so sure I like it?" I ask defensively. Guys think they want to date me, but reality is less sexy than they imagine.

"You told me you won't stop dancing, and you were glowing when you came in the kitchen earlier. It didn't even strain my brain to come up with it." He kisses my temple.

If past me could see me now, he'd never believe Mav is cool with my job. It's usually short-lived, so I might as well get it over with. Prolonging the discussion will only delay the inevitable.

"Classic case of boy needs job so he doesn't starve because he thought he got his dream job, but it's a horror show. Fear of starving is real meets sexy content-creator mentor." Inhaling, I switch my story to first person. "I made a few videos for a website that takes a cut of the profits but eventually felt

safe to launch my website.” I watch his expressions as I leave out most of the details and give him the main points, not seeing a hint of disgust.

“Safe? Why weren’t you safe?” His voice rises in alarm.

“More like financially stable type of safe. Safe from starvation, homelessness… the basics.” My lips find his hand, and I change the subject. “Tell me about your teammates.”

We talk for hours, and it’s harder than it should be to let him go, but I don’t beg him to stay. Not yet.

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CHAPTER 11

Maverick Maher

"What's on your schedule today?" I ask Sky, plopping down in my seat on the bus to the airport. He squints and bites the inside of his mouth in what I call his thinking face.

"I've got four videos to film, one live session, and my drama babies class tonight."

I chuckle at the nickname he calls his high schoolers because it used to be a catty girlfest, but now two boys have joined, and he insists it's the best birth control in history, even though he can't get pregnant.

His hairline is damp, and a curl's flipped the wrong way on his forehead. When he sweats, he smells a little bolder and musky. My memory isn't as good as experiencing him in person.

"Busy day." I up-nod at Brant as he slides into the seat next to me. We've been video calling every day and texting for the last week. I missed two games being on IR, injured reserve, and if I had my way, I would've stayed with Sky. I never get that much time off.

"Regular." He shrugs, and I hope my face is normal. I haven't had the courage to ask him what he does in his live sessions.

"Hey, Sky." Brant leans over to get his face in the camera.

"Hey." Sky waves back. We discussed whether I should call him Lark, and he said no because that's too weird, which means my friends call him

Sky as well. Sometimes his birth name surprises him, but I've confirmed and reconfirmed he doesn't mind being called Sky.

"You gonna stay out of trouble while this one flies to Boston and LA?" Brant points his thumb in my direction and stabs me in the head.

"I guess that depends on your definition of staying out of trouble. There's a work party that's also an orgy, so there's that." Sky hides his smile, and Brant's jaw falls open.

"He's joking, you dumbass." I push Brant off-camera and into his seat.

"Listen, I'm not here to shame. Perhaps he calls you and you watch the orgy. Everyone has a right to their brand of kink." Brant shoves me against the window.

Sky giggles and can't stop, covering his bright-red face. "Sorry."

"For that, I'm starting a rumor that you two go to a sex dungeon and perform for the masses." Brant folds his arms across his chest.

"You been to a sex dungeon?" I ask.

"I'm not even twenty-one for another two months." He pouts.

"Aww, poor widdle baby," Sky coos, and straightens his spine. "I've got several lectures for you. 'Back in my day,' or 'by the time I was twenty-one, I…' but that year difference isn't worth making Brant cry." Sky holds up heart hands, and I show Brant.

"Forgiveness needs to be earned." Brant doubles down and turns away, but there's a smile on his face.

"We got rid of him," I stage-whisper to Sky.

"Nope, not today," Brant hollers, and pushes his head next to mine.

"Call me after your game?" Sky asks. "I should be done with my live before your game ends."

"Ooh, what's a live?" Brant asks, and I'm not sure if I should punch him or kiss him.

"A live video appointment with a client." Sky waves his hand absently.

"Video sex!" Brant booms, similar to answering a trivia question in a crowded bar.

Sky hits his forehead with his palm. "No." His weary eyes flick to mine as a way of saying "see what I mean?" I elbow Brant in the face.

"People assume since I have a paywall, I also sell my body for sex. I'm paid to show off naked bits, and my subscribers view it for"—he waves his hand—"whatever: viewing, pleasure, self-gratification."

My thoughts unspool with his explanation. It’s his job. Period. End of story. What other people get from his performances isn’t a reflection of him as a person. On camera he’s angeldancer4 for them, but in life he’s Sky. I get the true Sky, not the performance.

“Shit, I didn’t mean that!” Brant pales. “I just… That’s not… I wasn’t thinking of you… I’m a dick. Sorry.”

“Forgiveness is earned.” Sky throws his words at him.

“Ouch, I deserve that.” Brant falls into his seat.

Brant is what my mom calls an old soul. It’s easy to forget how young he is, and he’s not normally flustered. He knows shit about everything. He turned down Harvard for hockey. Harvard!

“We’re pulling up to the airport. I’ll call you tonight.” We say goodbye, and I face Brant, riding the high of Sky asking me to call him.

“On a scale of no-big-deal to run-my-face-over-with-a-skate, how mad would you be if I asked Sky to go to the charity gala with me?”

Brant’s face collapses, and he tries to hide it with a grimace. We planned to have a non-couple-y boys’ night out for the gala.

“He seems the type who loves to dress up and dance. Go for it.” Brant escapes from his seat and disappears into the airport.



“Great game!” Sky says, as the call connects.

“Thanks.” I get comfortable on the bed and bask in his praise. “Sorry it’s so late. I’m rarely interviewed in the press room.”

“But you are when you score the winning goal.” He grins, showing off his crooked tooth. It’s one of my favorite things about him.

“Brant’s goal tied the game, making the win possible.” I can’t take all the credit.

“Is he okay?” Sky asks. “In the press conference, he seemed really irritated for a guy who helped his team win against a big rival.”

“He won’t discuss it. But to say publicly that someone disrespected him so badly he changed his goal celebration is unfathomable. We’re superstitious and don’t change things that work. His after-goal salute is part of his game, and now it’s gone.”

“He said it publicly because he *wants* the person to hear him. Is he seeing anyone?”

“Just because he’s obsessed with your job does not mean he can have you!” I growl, and swallow my jealousy. Brant wouldn’t have disrespected Sky the way I have, and he’s popular with the fans and media. A total catch.

“Down, tiger.” Sky frowns. “I’m not interested in Brant. Could he be seeing someone who pissed him off? His reaction is betrayal level. Why would he need a press conference to get their attention?”

“Sorry,” I mumble, as guilt turns my stomach. “He’s into someone he can’t have, and we commiserated over our lack of action, so I don’t think so. I missed you.” I shrug, hoping not to scare him away.

“Maybe Mr. Unavailable did something wrong.” Sky taps his fingers against his lips. “You’re full of big words, mister. I let illustrious slide last week, and now you hit me with commiserate?”

“Hockey won’t last forever.” A life in the spotlight isn’t for me, so I’ll have to work after hockey. “More school in the future, with big words to finish my degree.”

“You were always the smart one.” His gaze drifts to the side.

“Not really.” Sky wasn’t the best student, but he’s always been talented. Something’s made him sad, and a good boyfriend could cheer him up. My dad says if you assume you’ll get the job, you will. And being Sky’s boyfriend again is my next goal.

Before I mention the gala, he speaks first.

“Ya wanna see my latest costume designs?” His face lights up with a smile.

“Hell yes. Will you model them?” I yell the last part as he leaves the phone behind to grab his clothes. Seeing Sky in his skintight, skimpy outfits will go directly to my fantasy bank and get me through the rest of the trip.

I want to ask him about the gala in person while holding him in my arms. Now, I appreciate how precious it is to have someone who loves you. Sky’s not there yet, but he’s hopefully headed in that direction.

My hard-on fights against my shorts to be seen on camera, but that’s not happening.

Sky rushes in breathlessly and dumps a riot of colorful fabrics on the bed. “I had a burst of inspiration. These are practical for my weekly videos because the chiffon tears away.” He demonstrates so fabric floats around him. “But this is my favorite, and I can’t decide what texture to use. Silk is

predictable, and I can wear it whenever.” He holds up a pattern of a corset with boning in the front and laces up the spine. The neckline will more or less cover his nipples, leaving his shoulders and arms bare.

My jaw drops and my throat goes dry. I’m speechless, not even able to say his name.

“You like it?” he asks.

I nod so fast my head is in danger of flying off my neck.

“It’s totally impractical, but I’d love to do this in crushed velvet, with a rose pattern. I’ve got nowhere to wear it, but it speaks to me.” He drops it in his lap.

“Do that. How you want it. I’ll take you somewhere to wear it,” I say without choking on my tongue.

Sky’s face goes gooey soft, and I want to crawl through the phone to be with him.

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CHAPTER 12

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

Yup, I'm a hypocrite. I'm owning it. I'm also a fool if I think not labeling my relationship with Mav is going to protect me. My heart was lost to him years ago, despite my denial.

The staff at the terminal in Newark, New Jersey remembers my name. Granted, it's a small section in a separate building for private planes, but they recognized me when I walked in. They were kind enough to give me updates on the arrival time when Mav was sick and hours late.

Picking him up in New Jersey is relationship behavior. I put the rules in place and chose to break every single one. Time seems endless until you run out of it, and I'm afraid I won't get enough of him.

I should've waited in the car. Most guys drive themselves or have a driver. There's only one other middle-aged man waiting. He's handsome in a rugged sort of way.

Mr. Dimon gets off first, and since there's no way he won't see me, I wave. The idiot welcoming committee. He gives me a curt nod in return.

The coaches and veteran players exit next. I stand on my toes to see if I can glimpse Mav when Caleb Benz barrels through the door yelling, "Leo!" and throws himself into the older man's arms. Not a dad. Got it. The boyfriend, Leo.

"Sky," Mav calls, and I restrain myself from jumping into his arms. It's hardly my fault his arms are so strong and comfortable.

“Hey you.” I wave again, acting the part of an awkward teen.

He has his bag over one shoulder, so I get a one-armed hug and I inhale his sunny, earthy vanilla scent. Mav follows me out to Lo’s car.

“Nice ride.” He whistles.

“Thanks, it’s my friend Logan’s.” I slide into the pretentious silver BMW and turn on the seat heaters. Lo would cuss me out for not remembering the class of his car.

“Angel, you didn’t have to borrow a car to pick me up. I can get a rideshare to you next time.” It’s the second time he’s called me by my old nickname, and I break out in a sweat and wipe my hands on my jeans before I reverse out of the parking spot.

“I don’t mind,” I say, but Lo might if this becomes a regular thing.

I pull out in comfortable silence. There’s snow on the ground, but everything is plowed and traffic should be light.

“You’re still coming to my place?” I ask stupidly, even though we’ve confirmed our plan, and tap the steering wheel like I’ll win money for being the fastest tapper. Guys expect more from me because I’m a camboy, and Mav and I have history. It’s not a leap that he expects sex.

“Can I hold your hand?” Mav holds his palm up.

“You don’t need permission.” I side-eye him and slip my hand into his.

“I do.” He intertwines our fingers and uses his other hand to trace my knuckles and veins. It’s such a sweet gesture that my pulse speeds up and a flock of butterflies gets loose in my stomach. Pack of butterflies? Horde of butterflies. *Focus!*

“I’m going to apologize in advance because I’m beat and sore and might start snoring as soon as we get to your place.” His fingers tighten around mine.

“You didn’t snore last time,” I say, reluctantly disconnecting our hands to make a turn. I miss the emotional connection through physical touch. It’s a luxury I haven’t allowed myself in years.

“I’m setting the bar low so I can exceed it.” Mav picks up my hand again. “Thanks for coming to get me.” He kisses my knuckles.

The truth spills out. “I didn’t want to waste the opportunity to see you.” Between his home game, my schedule, and his away games, it might be another week.

Mav’s face splits into a grin, as though I’ve said something fabulous. “I have a question to ask you. Don’t let me fall asleep before I do.”

“Ask me now,” I say harshly. It’s never good when someone has to announce a question or an impending conversation.

“You might require additional information and pictures, so…can you wait a little longer?”

“That’s not creepy at all.” I throw him an irritated glance.

He chuckles. “It’s not creepy, or a sex thing, but if you don’t enjoy crowds, it could be scary.”

“I’ll be breaking the speed limit to get home now,” I deadpan, but seriously can’t wait, so I change the subject. “According to ESPC, your team is on fire this year.”

“Are you checking out my highlights?” He kisses my hand again, and it relaxes the stiffness in my shoulders.

“No, ESPC is my favorite sportsball channel,” I lie.

“What is your favorite sportsball? I forced you to watch hockey, so what are your favorite types of balls?” He waggles his eyebrows.

“Balls are kinda my thing: basketballs, footballs, tennis balls,” I say proudly, delusional that naming sports is an accomplishment.

“Who do you think will make the basketball playoffs this year?” He calls me on my shit.

“Obviously, the New York and Chicago teams.” I turn onto my street, hoping the conversation will end here. There’s only so much I can fake before I crack and he knows it. “Shit,” I mutter.

“What?” Mav sits up straight, ready and fully alert.

“Lo’s here. Be prepared to be interrogated.” Lo stands at the top of the stairs in the cold, staring daggers at us.

“This is the emergency you needed to borrow my car for?” Lo quips. “Hello, hockey hottie. If you hurt my friend, I’ll gut you.”

“Mav, this is Logan. Lo, this is Maverick.” My hand gestures to both of them.

“My friends call me Lo; you can call me Logan,” he says, still towering over us.

“You’re all intimidating while on the top stair. What happens when we’re at the same level?” I toss him his keys.

Mav holds out his hand. “Nice to meet you,” he says, ignoring Lo’s insults. It’s easy to dismiss when Mav could do bicep curls with us.

Lo kisses me on both cheeks when I reach him, then gives Mav the once-over before shaking his hand.

“I would’ve brought your car to you.” I angle my body between him and Mav. I love Lo, but he’s a gremlin when he wants to be.

“Duty calls.” Lo rattles the keys above his head and heads to the car. “A certain club can’t get weeknight action without me and begged for my appearance. Tootles.” He gets in his car and zooms away.

“What was that?” Mav asks, watching Lo’s car until he can’t.

“No idea. Come inside before the wind picks up.” I key in the code and open the door for him.

He sets his bag down, and I step into his arms. “Hi. What’s your question?” I set my chin on his chest and look up at him.

Mav swings me around. “Let’s go sit.”

“You’re making me nervous.” I lead him to my reading nook, fearing I’ll need comfort.

“This is going to be a major letdown. It’s not that big a deal.” Mav settles me on his lap in the same position as last time. “Sooo…every year the Enforcers have a fancy gala to raise money for charity. It was supposed to be earlier this month, but it was rescheduled because of snowmageddon. Anyway, I’d love to take you, if you’re willing.” He rubs my leg, like his hands are on autopilot.

My brain went to seriously dark places and needs a second to catch up. “You want to take me to a charity banquet?”

“It’s a little fancier than a banquet. Most of the guys wear custom Trevor Fox suits. He’s the groom you met that night.”

“I know who Trevor Fox is.” Only because I searched the shit out of everyone afterward.

“It’s sort of last minute and you might have to work, but I really want you to come with me,” he says, but I’m still processing. “We can go with a group if you’re worried.” His hazel eyes cloud over.

I cup his cheek and exhale. “I’d love to go.” I’m going on a very public date with Maverick Maher.

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Chapter 13

Maverick Maher

Sky's sweet smile appears, and he actually agrees to go. I haven't told him the date, so it's not for sure, but he said yes. We video chat all the time, but he has a tendency to say no when I ask him out on a date, almost as a default. I didn't think he'd come with me because of the press exposure.

"Really?" I grin foolishly. "Can I kiss you?"

He doesn't answer me but leans in with his lips hovering over mine for a second that lasts an eternity before closing his eyes and kissing me.

I thread my fingers through his hair, holding him, but letting him set the pace. His mouth explores mine in an effort to relearn it. He's warm and tastes of decadent vanilla with a hint of sharpness, like salt.

Sky keeps our lips connected while he sits up and straddles me, cupping my face in both hands. I groan and he swallows it, smiling and taking the kiss deeper with his leverage.

I'm beyond exhausted, but I could kiss him until my lips sprout wings.

My hands work their way under his shirt and onto his shoulders. His muscles flex and ripple under my touch as he grinds on me.

I suck his tongue, and he melts into me, moaning. It takes my lust-drunk brain more than a minute to catch up and realize he's tugging at my shirt to remove it.

"Not yet." I flip him so he's under me.

"Seriously?" he asks indignantly.

“As a heart attack.” I let my weight pin him in place and trace my tongue along his jaw. “I’m so hard for you, but”—I pull away to see his fathomless brown eyes—“I want to start at the beginning, getting to know you as Lark before we fuck. Earn your trust. Hey, I’m not turning you down,” I say because he eyes me suspiciously. “But you’re too tempting, and if you take your clothes off, my eyes will pop out, and my heart will explode right after my dick. It’s a health hazard.” I bask in the glow of his grin.

Sky bites his lower lip. “I thought you’d want…” His face flushes.

“There’s nothing I want more than you, not even my name on The Cup, but let’s do this right and take it slow. Okay?” I press my lips to each of his eyelids, unsure if he’s disappointed or relieved. Sky was an open book, but Lark holds his emotions in check.

“Okay,” he whispers, and grips my neck to bring our mouths together.

Kissing him after all these years is surreal. Dreamy. Like I’ll wake up alone in my apartment after an epic dream from a high fever. Or if I stop, he’ll change his mind. I lose track of time, then Sky nudges me.

“Should I be insulted you’re falling asleep with your tongue in my mouth? Not enough to keep you awake?”

“So sassy.” I pry my eyes open. “Where should I sleep tonight?” I won’t make it upstairs if I wait much longer.

“With me?” he asks in a small voice.

“I didn’t want to assume.” I pepper kisses along his jaw and by his ear. “Do you have ice packs?”

Sky’s eyes widen, and he scrambles to get out from under me. “Are you hurt?”

“The usual.” I lift my shirt, twisting to see my back and ribs.

“Holy shit.” Sky’s touch is featherlight. “This is usual?” His face pinches.

“All part of the fun,” I deadpan. “If I sleep on a gel pack, it should look better in the morning.”

“If you say so.” He throws a skeptical glance over his shoulder and heads over to the freezer. “Will this work?” He has two blue cubes of cooler ice.

“Of course,” I lie, as if sleeping on those could ever be comfortable. “I told you I wouldn’t be much fun tonight.” I push a curl behind his ear.

“Don’t use my sympathy against me.” Sky spins on his heel and walks toward the entryway and the stairs. “Should I carry your bag?”

“I’ll manage,” I say, but he gets to my bag first and picks it up.

“This one’s free, but you’ll owe for the next time.” He keys in a code to the stairway. I must look confused because he says, “Since my business is downstairs, I keep this locked so no one can get into my personal space.”

“Makes sense,” I agree, but I don’t like the idea of someone being able to get into his place.

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My feet drag up the stairs, and I fight to stay awake. As we enter his room, I’m ready to collapse. “Which side of the bed?” I ask, as I remove my clothes.

“It doesn’t matter.” He goes into the bathroom to brush his teeth, and I sit on the end of his bed. When he finishes, he asks, “What are you doing?”

“Waiting for you to pick a side.” Brushing my teeth isn’t happening tonight.

“You’re impossible,” he chirps, but he gets in the side of the bed closest to the door, which surprises me.

I scoot up the bed and arrange the ice so I can snuggle him. “Thanks for tonight.” I close my eyes and kiss the top of his head. Sky laughs, but when I’m almost asleep, he tucks into my side and drapes my arm over himself with a satisfied sigh. I could get used to this.



I’m pulled awake by fingertips tracing the lines of my abs and Sky’s cedarwood honey scent surrounding me. It’s heaven.

“What kind of psychopath wakes up with a smile on his face?” Sky grumbles but presses his lips to my chest. He lifts his head, and I slap my hand over my mouth when he tries to kiss me.

“I didn’t brush my teeth, so my mouth is a toxic dump,” I explain. My breath might scare him away before we get started.

“Chicken.” He loudly smooches my shoulder, and his laughter showers us in sparkles. “Roll over and let me see your back.”

I dutifully roll onto my stomach. “Prognosis: I’ll live.”

“You’d better. No dying on my watch. Imagine the scandal and headlines: *Pro Hockey Player Dies in Sex Worker’s Bed*.”

“If I die and that’s the headline, I’m returning to haunt and torture whoever wrote it. You are not your job.” No one will demean him if I have anything to say about it. The line between his job and personality has grown. As a hockey player, I’m viewed as violent and stupid. I’m neither. He’s an amazing person, and I’m lucky he’s allowing me into his life.

“It doesn’t make it less true. My job doesn’t go away if you ignore it, Mav,” he says, as I nod because he’s right. “Your parents ignored your sexuality but couldn’t change it. I love what I do.”

“I’ll never ask you to stop,” I say confidently, positive I can treat him the way he deserves. For him. For us.

“That’s not what I’m afraid of,” Sky says, inching away from me. I roll closer to him, and he brings his knees up to his chest and wraps his arms around them in a protective posture. “We’ve always been great together behind closed doors. I’m nervous for when we go out in public and someone says something rude. You have to be able to keep your cool.”

I pick up his foot closest to me and massage it. “I’ve fucked up. Won’t deny that. It’s easy to make promises when the situation is hypothetical. All I know is that I *will* do better.” My honesty is met with pooling tears.

He stares for a minute, then scrunches his mouth and gives me an approving nod. With a half-grin, he smacks my boxer-covered ass. “Is there anything I can do to help your back? You have another game later, right?”

“I’m good, but we have a couple of hours before I need to leave. This is a rest morning because we have back-to-back games. What could we possibly do to pass the time?” I say with mock innocence. My vote is teeth brushing and staying in bed with our mouths exploring each other.

“I can show you what I do. You can help me sort through new requests, and I’ll show you how I put together content. If you’re not okay with my job, I’d rather find out now than later.” His brown eyes pleading with me is a gut punch.

“You bet. But if I’m late to warm-ups, I’m blaming you.” It takes a herculean effort to tear myself away from him. “And I’m brushing my teeth for the sake of humanity,” I tease, and he tuts behind me with amusement.

“Meet me in my workroom,” he calls as he leaves.

My reflection in the mirror offers me no answers. Sky sharing this with me is huge, and our relationship could hinge on my reaction. Am I being overly dramatic? It doesn’t feel like it. I’m lightheaded, my heart’s racing, and my stomach’s turning.

“You are not an insecure kid anymore. You can handle the job that makes Sky happy.” I pause and add, “And financially well off.” I believe my words and practice holding a smile when thinking of Sky with someone else.

Which is what will happen if I can’t get my shit together.

Shit unite.

That’s a terrible saying. Scratch that.

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CHAPTER 14

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

I'll draw blood if I chew my bottom lip any harder. This is Mav, and for all his faults, he's not an asshole. He'll never think of me as less, but the fear he might not want to deal with the reality of my job sits like acid eating away at my insides.

Mav saunters in with a perplexed expression that spikes my nerves. My workroom is designed for me, so he seems gigantic next to the dance bar and costume rack.

"Any questions, let's get them out of the way." There's no point in delaying the inevitable. We'll rip the Band-Aid off.

"It's a rude question." His hands clasp and unclasp in front of him, showing his discomfort.

The acid infiltrates a new chunk of my stomach. "No need to worry, I'm immune to rude," I say breezily, and congratulate myself on seeming unbothered.

Mav sits next to me against the wall where I have my laptop open and sighs. He scrubs a hand over his face and meets my eyes. "You must make a lot doing this to afford this brownstone. I'm terrified I'll get hurt and won't make it past my rookie contract. This"—he arcs his arm in a wide circle —"is way beyond rookie contract money."

He's right, and I fight a smile of relief. He's not stressing over me taking my clothes off; he's worried about our income difference. Not a place he's

used to.

“Don’t laugh at me,” he says, sulking.

“Never.” I rest my hand on his thigh. Injury can end a hockey player’s career without warning, but I’ll be there for him if it happens. “You’re right. My income is steady, but unpredictable. For real, I’m not sure why guys flock to my content. There are other better-looking guys who perform sex acts on camera regularly, but my page took off, and the money’s almost like stealing.

“I’m beyond grateful for my success. This isn’t exactly what I dreamed of, but I get to do what I love and get paid ridiculously well. To put it in perspective, the first six months after I launched my website were equal to a rookie contract. Since then, I’ve been making All-Star money.” I use hockey terms for reference without actual numbers.

“Fuck.” His mouth drops open.

“Yup,” I agree. “It’s insane.”

Mav sits up straight. “Does this mean someday you’ll be my sugar momma?” he asks with wide, curious eyes.

“Baby, you make your own money; you don’t need me to fund your lifestyle,” I quip, relieved at the direction of our teasing. My insides have turned to total mush. It could be his acceptance or the acid disintegrating everything. Time will tell.

“Especially since I’m terrified of being broke,” he says seriously. Unfortunately, I lived his fear, so I’m intimately acquainted with it.

Focusing on potential problems is a fast track on the pity/victim train. Mav’s not hopping on that if I can help it. Hopefully, humor will stop the train.

“Worst-case scenario, all your current money is poured into medical bills, and you never play hockey again. I’ll hire you as my assistant and let you stay in my cute reading nook,” I say with a straight face.

“You’d relegate me to the reading nook?” Mav knocks me with his shoulder. “I’d become a hunchback sleeping in that tiny space.”

“Whelp, stay healthy,” I tease. “Now, do you want to see this, or should I get you a copy of my tax return?”

“We can do a date night next week and show each other our tax returns. But you’ll win.” Mav rests his head on my shoulder to see my screen.

“It’s not winning.” I kiss his hair and dive in before I lose my nerve. “This email is strictly from my website, and where all the requests come in.

I sort through them and block anything hateful or suspicious."

"Wait, what do you mean?"

"Some idiots try to come on anonymously, and I learned fast that is a hard no for me. And Mav, I work in the sex industry. Some guys think consent doesn't apply. I get tons of dick pics and requests for insane sex acts." I pause for him to ask more questions, and he does.

"What's the craziest request you've ever gotten?"

We've jumped into the ocean without a life jacket. "There's the unimaginative asking to fuck me. Crude. Boring. Lifetime block. Simple. The creative ones are scarier. Asking me to use weapons or animals. Which, fine if that's your thing, I won't shame you, but they get creepy and cyber-stalk me and figure out where I live."

"Are you in danger?" He wraps an arm around my middle in a protective move.

"No. I've filed police reports, which was useless, but no one has come to my house. It helps to have the studio downstairs. One person couldn't possibly do both jobs." I let out a humorless laugh.

"Tell me what you love most." Mav changes the subject for me.

"My favorite thing to do is choreograph a new routine with a theme." I scan my requests and open an innocent one. "This person usually…" I read the email. "He's older and a classic rock guy. Here"—I point to the screen—"he wants me to dance to a Def Leppard song. It's one of his faves, and he's a regular so he picks which background he wants."

As Mav reads the request, I can't tell what he's thinking.

"Show me." His gaze meets mine, and the lust in his eyes makes me lightheaded.

"It's a live performance, so no rehearsal. I set it up and let the music decide where my body goes." I'm explaining it wrong, since I choreograph regular dance numbers.

"Pretend I'm him." He flips over and puts his head in my lap, upending my laptop. "I really want to see you dance." Mav pulls my bottom lip out from between my teeth. "Please?"

This is dangerous territory because none of the guys I perform for have a chokehold on me like Mav. Dancing for him and him alone is completely different. My stomach clenches, and the lyrics of him pouring his sugar on me play on a loop in my head.

"Are you embarrassed?" he asks.

“No, why?” I push his head gently and stand before my dick decides to wave at him.

“You turned pink.” He shrugs. “It’s kinda cute.”

“I’m not cute!” I huff and retreat to change the background. Heaven help me, I’m going to do this.

“Hmm, what about sexy…or delectable…or scrappy?” He comes up behind me and easily reaches for the backdrop and crowds against me.

“For someone who wants something from me, you’re skating on thin ice.” I push my ass backward and yelp when it hits his very large erection.

“I don’t want to take anything from you.” His hands glide up my sides, and I smother a moan. “I’m hoping you feel safe enough to show me who you are.” His lips graze my ear, and I shudder.

It’s hopeless; I’m never going to survive losing him a second time. But I steel myself and turn in his arms. “You can watch from over there.” I point to the spot to the right of my tripod. “No talking or touching.” I pat his cheek, then busy myself with finding a costume.

“Are those your general rules, or am I special?” he teases.

“One thing I love about being a camboy is the control. No one ever touches me, and I decide what they’re allowed to see.” I find what I’m looking for and motion for him to turn around.

“Really? I don’t get a sneak peek?” he asks, as he jumps to face the other direction.

“Not yet,” I sing playfully. It only takes a few seconds to change. “Be a good boy.”

Mav flashes me a megawatt smile. “I’ll be a very good boy.”

I have to take a few deep breaths and do a few stretches without looking at him. My goal is to dance as if he’s not here, and he’ll either love it or hate it. I tell myself over and over that figuring it out now is better, but it isn’t helping my nerves. I set my camera up to record so I’ll be able to watch it.

Mav’s silently sitting in the corner, but he tracks me. I can do this.

The music starts with heavy beats, and I’m grateful. No time to think. Only dance.

Since I’ve danced to this song before, my body anticipates every high note and pause and reacts in time.

They’re an ’80s hair band, so no routine is complete without air guitar. It’s the law or something. Mav’s eyes fixate on me like he’s touching me.

My attention leaves the camera, and I concentrate on Mav.

He licks his lips as my body rolls, and he tilts his head, leaning forward, his eyes on mine. I've done enough live performances to notice where a man's gaze falls. Mav sees me. All of me. Not a dancer taking his clothes off, but a man he cares about. This dance isn't a chance for him to see me naked; it's a way to share myself with him.

A thrill radiates from my head to my toes as his stare locks on mine. His hazel eyes burn bright green with yellow stars. Our eye contact becomes electric, seeing everything but his gaze steady on my face. A manifestation of our desire for each other.

As the song goes on, I shed my clothes, and he notices as an afterthought, not the main objective. I end in a skimpy jockstrap with my head down, catching my breath.

Part of me knows this changes things between us, and it scares me.

"Sky?" Mav's voice is rough and gravelly.

I dare to glance at him. His pupils are blown, he's flushed, and his cock tents his shorts.

"Can I kiss you?" he asks, but doesn't move a muscle.

I strut over and plant a kiss on his forehead. "Good?" I pretend to walk away, but he doesn't stop me. "Mav?" I ask, wondering if he's broken.

He holds his hand out, and I let him pull me on top of him. His fingers skim over my arms and back and legs worshipfully, with concern I'll disappear. He says, "Thank you," so reverently, my eyes sting.

I lean in to capture his lips, and I'm struck by lightning. The excess energy he's pent up flows out of him and through me in a pleasure loop. I'm basically naked except for a scrap of fabric, and his shorts are so thin, every vein and ridge drags against me.

I'm grinding on him, completely consumed with zero brain activity to stop me from coming all over him, a throwback to us in high school.

Until an awful sound blares from my room and Mav groans.

"Cock-blocking bastards," he mumbles. "It's my alarm to leave for the rink. We're doing a volunteer thing after the game and fly out tomorrow morning." He grips the back of my skull and kisses me again. "If your clients cancel, come to my game?" he asks with such hope.

"Go be a badass hockey player, and I'll be right here for you." I stand on shaky legs but sound convincing.

“I’ll miss you.” He straightens to his full height and takes me in his arms. “Can I call you after my games?”

“I’d love that,” I say into his chest, making a decision.

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CHAPTER 15

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

I buy Mav's jersey at one of the concession stands and buy Lo one too. Not that I'm thrilled to wear his favorite number—seventy-one. It's strictly an internal happy dance.

Ice hockey arenas have a specific cold smell, and it brings a flood of memories. Not all are good. The music is blaring, and the chatter of the crowd sounds thunderous.

"He won't even know we're here," Lo complains for the hundredth time.

"But I'll text him after and he'll be happy. Showing my support is more important than making a big deal about it." I check our tickets and figure out the best entry point to the stands. Did I reschedule my entire night to watch him play in person? Yup. Sure did. The jury's out on whether I'm an idiot or not.

Our seats are decent for last minute. It's early enough that season ticket holders sometimes sell their tickets. We're in the first row of the second level and have a great view of the opposing team's goal, well at least for the first and third periods.

"What's your man do?"

"He's the second-line center. He takes the face-offs." Never did I imagine explaining hockey to Lo. Lo does not look impressed.

I dragged him here early to watch the pre-skate and stretching.

“Okay.” Lo takes in the guys doing hip stretches. “I understand the appeal. You were holding out on me.” He side-eyes me with a smirk.

“It gets better,” I warn him, and he’s consumed with their warm-up.

“I didn’t give hockey a fair shot,” he says, as the players exit the ice. “Tell me more.”

I explain shift changes, face-offs, and the different zones in hockey. Before I’m ready, the puck drops. There is no reason to be nervous; Mav isn’t even on for the first shift.

Lo cringes as two players hit the boards. “Isn’t that a foul or illegal or something?”

“That’s standard.” There’s a shift change, and when Mav is out there, I can’t answer Lo’s questions. Mav has stolen my attention. I always thought he was great, but I’m in awe of him now. He has great chemistry with his linemates, and they work well together. He gets a shot off, but it’s deflected.

He’s on the ice right before the end of the first period, and he scores. I’m jumping up and down like a maniac and screaming. His team comes in for a group hug, and after, he does a half lap, pumping his stick at the crowd.

His eyes catch mine, and my knees give as I collapse into my seat. It’s surreal. Out of everyone in the crowd, he found me. Mav’s surprised to see me and loses his rhythm as he skates by, but then his face breaks into a wide grin and he blows me a kiss.

“What the fuck is wrong with you?” Lo asks.

“Not a damn thing.” I stand because the period is over and Mav’s team is leaving the ice. “We have almost twenty minutes before the game restarts. Do you want a drink or food?”

“Nah. Everyone will hit the concessions now. Rookie mistake.” He gives my shoulder a nudge.

I answer all his questions that I previously ignored and love how invested Lo is in the game, ignoring the fact that I dragged him here under protest.

“Excuse me, are you Skylar?” a well-dressed man asks, touching my arm.

I flinch with a yelp and instinctively grip Lo’s arm. It takes a second to recover and nod.

“Please follow me.” He leads us through the packed concourse to an elevator with security guards. “Sorry, we weren’t informed you were coming. I can show you where the family room is so you can meet Maverick after the game.”

“The family room?” I squeak.

“We call it that, but it’s also for significant others. All the WAGs use it.” I stare at him dumbfounded, so he clarifies. “You know, wives and girlfriends, or in this team’s case, boyfriends.” His smile drops. “Oh no. Are you the wrong Skylar? Mav said to grab his boyfriend.”

Lo speaks for me. “You got the right guy. Lar…Skylar thought he was going to surprise Maverick, but you got him first.” Lo laughs when he says my given name. “We’re going to the family room now?”

“Mr. Dimon, our general manager, asked me to bring you to his suite. If you ask me, he owes you an apology for the airport hangar incident, but you didn’t hear that from me. No one listens to the PR director,” he says cheerily. “I’m Finn, by the way.”

I swallow hard; my head’s a thousand pounds as I tip it forward and struggle to bring it upright. Mav told Finn I’m his boyfriend, and they’re going to give us access to private spaces with no questions asked? The weight in my head lifts, leaving me unexpectedly lightheaded, could be from being giddy, excited, or overwhelmed. Mav called me his boyfriend.

Finn seems nice, but Mr. Dimon will probably throw me out after my less-than-polite comments. My legs go numb.

We enter a luxury suite after the puck drops for the second period. There’s a drink station with a bartender and several tables of food with servers ready to assist.

“Help yourselves, and I’ll introduce you to everyone.” Finn gestures to the food tables.

“There you are.” Another good-looking guy approaches Finn, but he stops as his gaze lands on mine. “I recognize you from the bachelor party. I’m Trevor.” He sticks his hand out for me to shake.

I debate which name to give him but settle on what feels right. “Skylar, and this is my friend Logan.”

The night turns shocking as Mr. Dimon approaches with a smile and holds out his hand. “I want to apologize for the misunderstanding when you picked up Maverick when he was sick. Our delay was inconvenient to say the least, and we’re grateful you could drop everything to take care of him. I thank you, and the organization thanks you.”

I’m certain I’ve been cast on a reality TV show, but no one told me. They seem genuine but could be fucking with me.

For the entire second period, Trevor and I talk fashion, and he’s thrilled I’m coming to the gala. “Come by my shop, and we can look at jacket

options.” He hands me his business card and gives me a mischievous smile. “As hot as your outfit is, you will freeze.”

I shrug and turn my focus to the game. To Mav. He’s playing amazing and glances at the box I’m in every time he takes the ice. I’m the terrible boyfriend he couldn’t find in the second period.

They’re winning with three minutes left, and Finn asks if we want to beat the crowd and walk to the family room.

“Would you mind waiting until Mav’s shift is over?” I ask.

“I’ll take you,” Trevor volunteers. “Finn’s on press duty.”

The family room is luxury meets kids’ playroom. A gorgeous bar, with dark wood and upholstered furniture, and a glass wall with a door showcasing toys, plastic furniture, and foam flooring.

Trevor talks to the bartender as if they’re old friends while Lo and I try not to act suspicious but give off intruders-about-to-be-caught vibes. “You don’t have to wait with me.” I drag him to sit on the sofa.

Lo tuts like I’m being ridiculous, and I pretend I’m not stressing out. We haven’t discussed public displays of affection or even being boyfriends. I’m not sure how to act.

Lo gives me a stern expression, tapping my cheek as I chew the inside of my mouth. It’s swollen, but thankfully I didn’t draw blood.

The door flies open, and Mav barrels through. “You’re here!” He doesn’t slow down as he swoops me off the couch and spins me around. “I can’t believe you came.”

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CHAPTER 16

Maverick Maher

Sky's shocked, but I can't control my excitement. "What happened with work? Nothing bad?" I scan him for injuries, which is insane because dance injuries aren't obvious most of the time.

The bartender packs up for the night but gives me a questioning nod, asking if I need a drink. I shake my head. The family suite is almost empty, and Sky's nervous.

Sky's laugh fills the space in my chest where there should be air, and I bury my face in his neck. "Nothing happened. A perk of being my own boss is rearranging my schedule for important things."

My heart is ready to burst and gush all over him. It's been years since someone made me a priority. "Stay with me tonight. You can come with me to volunteer and spend the night before I fly out," I beg, and he's skeptical. "Scout's honor, I'll be on my best behavior."

"You were never a Boy Scout, but I'll come if Lo is fine getting home on his own."

"You can come too," I say to Logan. "We're going to The Q Solutions for their open house."

Skylar stiffens and slides down my body until his feet hit the floor.

"You won't accuse me of being a cock-blocker. You kids have fun." Logan sashays toward the door, and Sky flips him off.

“I’ll skip the volunteer thing?” I offer. Whatever’s going on in his head isn’t good.

“Nope, it’ll be good to be back.”

Sky doesn’t explain that comment and tells me to wait until we get there. I’ve only been one other time, so Sky gives our rideshare directions to the correct drop-off door.

Joanne, the director, meets us inside the old building. It used to be a school, but they’ve removed the lockers and updated it. Her eyes fill with tears, and she throws her arms wide open. “Lark! It’s been too long.”

“It has been. I should’ve been here more,” Sky mumbles as he hugs her.

“No guilt here.” She turns to me. “Maverick, right? The team’s meeting in the gym. Do you remember where that is?”

“I’ll take him.” He hooks his arm around mine.

“Don’t leave before we have a chance to catch up,” she scolds him.

Sky speed-walks us along the greenish gray linoleum hall. “Sorry, I didn’t think about the staff.” He turns away from the gym to the hall with all the offices. It’s lined with eight-by-ten photos of kids. “I’m there.” He points to a picture of himself.

“Sky?” My mind can’t make sense of his portrait here. But I’m more shocked to see a picture of Emmet, Jayce McKenna’s husband, next to him.

“We’re the success stories. The it-can-happen-to-you guys.” His fingers sink into my jacket until he grips my arm. “Emmet and I met through The Q Solutions, and we trauma-bonded.” Sky inhales, his chest expanding. “He helped me change my name to Lark. He’s seen my website, and also, one of your teammates used to be a regular client. I’m sorry.”

I’m slow to process what his words mean. “Sorry. Why would you be sorry? Sky, were you homeless?” My mind rejects the idea, but my heart already knows the answer.

His head barely moves an inch to confirm.

“Fuck. It was my fault,” I blurt out, and Sky drops my arm.

“You are not responsible for my choices,” he says emphatically, holding his head high. “I understand if this changes things between us.”

“No,” I yell so loud it echoes around the empty hallway. It takes effort to push my guilt down so I can be what he needs. “I’m the one who should be sorry that you had to go through that,” I say, raising my palms in surrender. “Can I have a minute to be upset? If it were reversed, you’d be…” I trail

off, imagining the hell he would bring to anyone he thought was to blame for my problems. My hand stretches toward him, and he takes it.

We sag into each other with unspoken promises.

“We’ll talk more later, after this?” I ask, hoping to understand better.

“Sure. Let’s show the kids how to pursue their dreams and become a camboy,” Sky quips with a tight smile and walks away with his spine rigid.

Sky and I are split into different groups when we reach the gym. The kids who come regularly are put into groups with us to talk to prospective newbies regarding the programs offered.

The night’s a huge success, and Joanne asks us to hang around for a minute to review the numbers.

I notice Sky lets King hug him, but Sky glances warily as O’Keefe towers over him with clenched fists. I’d bet every penny I have that King used to be Sky’s client because Sky doesn’t react well to strangers or acquaintances touching him. And there’s no other reason for O’Keefe to look murderous.

Something or someone made Sky anxious about hands on him.

My feet are moving before my brain decides the best way to approach the situation. I wedge myself between O’Keefe and Sky with a fake smile.

“You ready to go?” I ask, and step onto O’Keefe’s foot so he’s forced to give us space.

“Let me say goodbye to Joanne, or she’ll kill me,” he says, and I take his hand.

“I’ll go with you. See you in the morning, boys,” I say to King and O’Keefe.

“Careful, your jealousy is showing,” Sky says, but he looks smug about it.

Silently, I wait as Joanne and Sky briefly catch up and say goodbye.

Sky waits until we’re in the rideshare to say, “You know King’s a former client, don’t you?”

“It bothers me a shit ton more that you were homeless,” I say defensively. “I’m doing the best I can.”

We ride in silence, but Sky rests his head on my shoulder.

After I swing my apartment door open, Sky freezes in the doorway as he digests what he’s seeing.

“I should’ve warned you.” With my hand at the small of his back, I steer him into the living room filled with furniture he recognizes from my

childhood. “Say something.” His face doesn’t give me any clues into what he’s thinking.

My phone rings. “Shit, it’s my dad.” I lead Sky to the couch and sit next to him.

“Hi, Dad.”

“Great game, son! Soon you’ll be in the first line,” my dad bellows, and Sky shrinks away from me.

“Thanks, but Drake is an All-Star center, and this is my rookie season. Don’t go getting your hopes up.” My dad assumes if I work hard, I’ll be a starter. Period. End of story. He has no clue even though I’ve explained the process a thousand times.

He chuckles, dismissing my words as silly.

“Mom said you guys are coming out for a game soon. Have you decided on which one?” Sky stands, but I reach out and beg him with my eyes to stay. He does.

“Maverick, this is my busy season at work. There’s no way I can take time off to watch a hockey game.” He laughs at the absurdity.

“Oh, of course, but Mom said…” I trail off, feeling foolish.

“If you make the playoffs, we can definitely come,” he says, and another phone rings in the background. “That’s work. No rest for the weary. Talk to you soon.” He hangs up before I can say goodbye.

“I guess some things never change,” Sky mutters, and hugs me.

“He’s the same,” I admit, and wave my hand. “And they think I’m better off with their old furniture than buying new. I loathe this couch.”

“Loathe? Another fancy word.” Sky crawls into my lap. “Tonight was insane, but thank you for the special treatment.” He wraps his arms around my neck.

“Special treatment?” I’m preoccupied with my dad’s dismissal and my mom’s empty promise.

“You asked Finn to take me to the family room and brought me to The Q Solutions. That’s a big deal.”

My hands rub his back, and I shake my head. “That’s the bare minimum, bottom-of-the-basement treatment. I was such an asshole.” It’s hard to look him in the eye, understanding how badly I fucked up, leaving Sky homeless.

“Hey.” Sky cups my face. “Where did you go?”

“If I were you, I couldn’t forgive me. I’d have punched me in the face and walked out of the bachelor party.” I dare to glance at him, and his eyes are soft. “How do you not hate me?”

“Because I’m responsible for my decisions. I could’ve gone home, but I felt like I would shrivel up and die in that town. Homelessness was a better option than that, so I accepted the problems it came with. Ask me anything.” His palms caress the tension in my jaw.

“Where should I start?” my voice whines. “It’s so much to take in, and I’m also worried O’Keefe is planning violence. He’s not good at sharing.” I pitch forward and rest my forehead on his shoulder.

“I’ve taken self-defense classes, if that helps. O’Keefe is virtually a stranger, but King isn’t the type to be with someone violent.”

I shake with unamused laughter. “We’re all violent, Angel. Every one of us. You can’t make it to the NHL as a passive player. O’Keefe wants to take over as the team’s aggressor. Mark my words, that man has ice in his veins.”

“You’ll protect me.” Sky kisses my hair. “Besides, there really isn’t a reason for O’Keefe to be jealous.”

“Has King seen you naked?” I force the words out.

“A jockstrap. Does that bother you?”

I fill my lungs with air and lift my head as I exhale. His chocolate eyes fill with worry. “No, but not gonna lie, if he’d touched you, it’d drive me crazy. That’s not very progressive of me. I’m an ogre in a hockey costume, I get it.”

“You’re also smart and cuddly and not green. Total wins.” He plasters his chest to mine and rests his head in the crook of my neck. “I wouldn’t believe you if you said nothing about my job bothers you. I’ll take every one of your big words as long as you’re honest.” His fingers play with the hair at the base of my neck. “We don’t stand a chance without it. Which is why I need to tell you that your apartment creeps me out. We’ve time-traveled to high school, and no thank you. Been there, done that.”

“I’m afraid they’ll be disappointed if I get rid of it,” I confess.

“You’re willing to live with old, crappy furniture every single day of your life because there’s a chance getting rid of it might upset your parents?”

“When you put it that way.” I snort. “It sounds ridiculous. They haven’t been here since they moved me in, and Dad doesn’t have time for me unless

my team's in the playoffs." I attempt to stretch out on the uncomfortable couch with Sky on top of me but fail.

"Do what makes you happy. Not me. Not your parents. You." Sky cradles my head in his arms.

"Yeah," I agree. But I've never done that. I've always been the good son, afraid to upset my parents. I hurt Sky instead of them. That's some fucked-up shit right there. "I'm the worst."

"Nope. No pity parties here. You had a great game, your boyfriend came to watch, you impressed kids at The Q Solutions, *and* you got an 'atta boy' from your dad. A damn near perfect day."

"Are you agreeing to be my boyfriend?" I pick him up and walk to the bedroom.

"I'm reserving judgment. A little terrified you've got your twin bunk beds," he deadpans.

"Too small for me. I'm not sure where they are, but when I came home from college, I threatened to never come to their house unless they got a bed for someone my size." I set him on my king. His hands run over the fabric of the comforter my mom insisted on picking out. "I got myself a big boy bed."

"Proud of you." Sky pats the bed next to him, inviting me.

"Have I told you that my name across your back looks sexy? You should wear it more often." I remove my kicks and socks.

"How about we give the boyfriend thing a trial basis?" Sky blushes, and his request gives me hope.

"Are you looking for a money-back guarantee?" I pull off his socks and shoes.

"Trying to save us some heartbreak in the future," Sky admits, and lets me take off his jeans.

"There's no saving me now." The truth rings in the air. I cross the room and rummage through my dresser to find him an old shirt to sleep in, preferably one with my name on the back. Finding one, he has no choice but to wear it.

When I turn around, Sky's under the covers and sitting against the headrest.

"You look good." It's an effort not to swallow my tongue.

Sky runs his fingers through his hair. "Stop it."

“Here, I’ll help you put this on,” I say, and he respectfully refrains from rolling his eyes. Sky lifts his arms, and I remove his pretty shirt and replace it with mine. “Sooo.” I swallow hard and lie next to him. “Will you do me the honor of being my boyfriend?”

Sky giggles and slaps a hand over his mouth. Turning serious, he says, “We have a lot of things to talk about. I’m nervous about how my job and your parents will affect us.” He stops my protest with a stern glance. “Those are things we’ll figure out as we go. Forgive me.” He inclines his head to the ceiling, asking an unknown entity for forgiveness. “I don’t want to say no.”

“Then don’t,” I whisper, terrified he will.

“Okay, I won’t, but I’m not ready to say yes either.” He shifts, using my chest as a pillow. “You should sleep. You’ve got an early morning.”

“Thank you.” I tilt his chin with my forefinger to kiss his lips. I’ve been given the second chance I absolutely don’t deserve. My chaste kiss becomes more, and we lose ourselves in each other.

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CHAPTER 17

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

There's no reason to be this nervous. I swear that's become my new mantra. Mav and I have video chatted for hours while he was away, and he's been to my place before. I move the vase of flowers to the kitchen island where they're visible from the doorway.

I offered to pick him up, but there were flight delays and he didn't want me to wait. I've calculated how long his drive will be with traffic and wish I had his location.

Who am I right now?

My hairband is too tight, so I rip it out and fix my hair in the reflection of the fridge. I never imagined being the guy who wants to share his location with someone. Ridiculous. But it'd be great to track his exact arrival time.

I'm tempted to run upstairs to put product in my hair but realize Mav doesn't give a shit how my hair looks or if I have fresh flowers or shiny clean quartz countertops. I'm stressing myself out.

We've talked about my work, and King, and a little of my years in New York, but we decided to finish the conversation in person.

Mav has tomorrow off, and it's the fundraising gala, and we haven't seen each other in four days. I'm not freaking myself out and putting pressure on tonight's conversation as make or break. That's silly. We are more than our past, and he's changed in tangible ways.

He’s been a better boyfriend than he ever was in high school even though I didn’t say yes. He’s not afraid to introduce me to people, hold my hand in public, or tell his teammates to get lost when we video talk. All things I didn’t believe possible back then.

I pace in the front entrance, which is not easy to do. But I don’t want him waiting in the cold.

Who am I kidding?

I’d give my left nut to see him right now. To confirm I didn’t imagine us. That he’s back in my life and real.

I let out a surprise squawk when the doorbell rings.

“Sky?” Mav asks with concern.

“Hey.” I rip the door open and drink him in with my eyes. There are fat snowflakes in his hair; he’s wearing a suit and holds a bouquet out for me. He remembered my favorite flowers are tulips, and they’re arranged with Bells of Ireland instead of baby’s breath.

“Can I come in?” Mav asks, snapping me out of my trance.

“Yes, sorry.” I take the flowers and step aside so he can enter. “You didn’t have to do this,” I say.

“Wanted to.” Mav sets his bag on the bench and pulls me in for a kiss. “I missed you.”

“Missed you too,” I say against my better judgment. “I’ll put these in a vase.” I rush ahead to put my corner store flowers out of sight. “Are you hungry, thirsty? What can I get you?”

“Sky, what’s going on?” he asks, leaning on the end of the island, watching me open cabinets to find another vase. “It’s me. Why are you freaking out?”

I sag on the stove and admit, “I’m confused about how to do this. We’re a thing but not a thing because of me and…I’m me,” I finish.

“You’re pretty great as is.” He holds out his arms, and I crash into them.

“It’s so strange,” I say into his chest. “I know the core of you, and that you’re living your dream of playing hockey for a Cup contender. You want to travel the world. Kids make you nervous. But I don’t know where you’ve been and the places you still want to go. Do mushrooms still make you gag? Have you changed your mind about kids?”

Mav tries to untangle my arms from around him, but I can’t say the next part if he’s looking at me.

“And worst of all, I don’t know who I am. New York City decimated Skylar, but Lark survived and thrived. I’m not who you knew.”

He gives up separating us, hauls me off the floor, and carries me into the reading nook.

“Angel, I’ll call you Lark or whatever the hell you prefer. Don’t be the version of yourself that felt like a victim. But deep down, Lark and Sky are the same person, and you made it, no matter what you call yourself. You became a success.” He takes a deep breath and sags into the couch.

“Maybe I gave up on Skylar too soon. It does something to me when you call me Sky,” I admit.

“No matter your name, you’re forever my Sky. My angel.” He arranges me on his lap with my head tucked under his chin. “I’ll answer your questions. Are you ready?”

“Yes?” I’ll never actually be ready, so might as well get on with it.

“Younger me could never imagine being on any team that accepted and had openly queer players. My imagination didn’t have the capacity. Some days I can’t believe it’s real. I play for an openly queer team, and we’re mother-fucking great at hockey.

“All my travels have been centered around hockey, so I still have my bucket list. Mushrooms should be outlawed, and I don’t see myself as a dad, but I’m willing to negotiate.” His lips brush the crown of my head. “Comments?”

Silent tears run down my cheeks. I could’ve predicted his answers, but I’ve also followed his career.

“Mushrooms are amazing, but kids are not.” I smile despite what I have to tell him.

“Mushrooms are a deal-breaker,” he jokes.

“What else are hard noes for you?” I steel myself for his answers.

“Lying, disloyalty, a guy who thinks wearing sparkles is gay.” Mav’s large hand cups my ass.

“Objectively, unicorn sparkles are a gay accessory,” I fire at him to lighten the mood.

“Always with the sass.” He squeezes my butt.

“Are there things that I’ve done in my past that would be hard for you to get over?” My voice is small.

Mav’s hazel eyes convey compassion. “There are things that could’ve happened to you that are hard to get over, a relevant example: you being

homeless. But I'm not turning my back on you. I'd never blame you for that."

"What if I made specific choices that you disagree with?" I hedge.

His exhale washes over my face. "It's not my place to judge, but if you tell me you murdered someone or kicked puppies, I'm gonna reevaluate."

"So kicking children is fine?" My chest loosens incrementally.

"Tons of justifiable situations to kick them." Mav kisses the tip of my nose. "Seriously, the things you've done pale in comparison to the stories I've made up in my head."

"You didn't." I cringe. Mav has a knack for finding the worst of the worst-case scenarios.

"Angel, my mind goes to dark places, and finding out you didn't have a home, my mind went wild. You were kidnapped and forced into sex slavery, beaten and abused. Thankfully, you escaped."

"Wow, you outdid yourself with dramatic tales worthy of a Broadway show. I'm okay." I ghost my lips over his. "Would you rather know or not?" I give him the choice because damn, he goes dark.

"There's no pressure to talk to me. Only tell me what you're comfortable with." Mav rests his forehead on mine.

"I was a cliché case of big dreams and no plans. I severely underestimated the cost of living and my ability to find a job that can pay New York City rent. I was too old for the youth shelters but fresh meat with the adults. The Q Solutions probably saved my life, literally and figuratively." My body involuntarily shudders.

"Dance troops are cutthroat and political, and that's being nice." I'm not sure I'll ever fully explain it. "It took close to a year and a half before I made enough money to survive. I've never been shy about showing off my body, so stripping isn't a big deal. Didn't see camboy as my career choice, but here we are. I'm not stopping, Mav." I whisper the last words. I've said it before, but I've dated guys who assumed they could dictate what I do.

Mav's silence rings like a freight train in my ears.

"Did anyone ever hurt you?" he asks.

"Nothing permanent. I'm not sure it's possible to live on the streets and make it out without some injuries. The usual mugging type stuff." I downplay my experience so Mav's imagination doesn't conjure worse things.

“This is the wrong thing to say, but”—his hands grip me tighter, fearing I might get away—“I wish you could’ve asked me for help. I’m glad you found your way out, but it scares me thinking about the what-ifs.”

“I was a stubborn asshole and wanted to do it on my own. My parents weren’t an option, and going to you would have been admitting defeat. Please don’t blame yourself. I wouldn’t have accepted your help then, and I’d have ghosted you again.” The ragged truth leaves my mouth.

“But you let Emmet help you.” There’s pain in his voice.

“We were equals of sorts. But he had to take care of himself, his sister, and his mom. When I bought the brownstone, things had turned around for him, or he’d have been my roommate. I wasn’t leaving him behind. But life got busy, and we lost touch. He’s the guy I’d turn to if I needed to hide a body. Keep that in mind.” I smirk.

“Are you threatening me?” He tickles me but falls off the couch to get away from my fingers. He’s the ticklish one. “Okay, okay, you win.” He scoots away, not sure if I’ll come after him. “Do you audition?”

I freeze as memories assault me. “No. I don’t want to play the games necessary. With cam work, everything is open and honest. No backroom deals or holy attitudes while doing dirty work.”

Mav tilts his head sideways. “Was that a hard decision? If I could change anything for you, it would be that—a safe place to dance in a show.”

“You’re not in charge of fixing things for me.” I crawl toward him, remembering the times he fought classmates who bullied me for being gay. “What would you change for yourself if you could?” I ask, changing the subject.

Mav reclines on the couch and takes me with him. “I care way too much what my parents think. The only time I’ve stood up to them was when I was traded to the Enforcers. They thought I should refuse and find another team. One”—he holds a finger—“that’s not possible, and two”—“he holds up another finger—“I’m not turning down my dream because they’re uncomfortable with the team members’ sexual preferences.”

“That had to be hard.” I place my hand over his heart for comfort.

“It wasn’t nearly as excruciating as I pictured. In my mind, they disowned me, and I was an orphan. It worked out much better than I predicted.”

I kiss his neck and murmur, “Hockey players are sooo dramatic.”

“We are a crazy bunch.” His stomach rumbles. “Let’s go out to eat. What’s good around here?”

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CHAPTER 18

Maverick Maher

I chase Sky up the snowy stairs to his brownstone and press myself to him as he enters the code. Our breaths come out in white puffs, mingling together. His fingers fumble when I tug him against my erection.

"You already stuffed me full of food, so you're not stuffing me with anything else." He wriggles his ass, and I let out a low groan. "Payback," he sings, and finally opens his front door. "You should be more careful; eyes are always watching."

"True." I spin him around to kiss him after I shut the door. "Wouldn't want people to assume we're together because that's exactly what I'm hoping for." Adding to the pressure won't help, so I switch subjects. "Are you really not going to let me see your gala outfit until tomorrow?" I pout as we ascend the stairs.

"You've seen parts of it, and Trevor and I decided it's best if you get the big reveal." He waves jazz hands at me as he stops in front of his bedroom door. He's wearing leggings that should be illegal, given how delicious his ass looks.

I steer him by his hips into his bedroom.

Sky stands on his tiptoes and crushes his cold mouth to mine. He tastes of red sauce and garlic from our dinner, but underneath is his sweetness, like warm vanilla cake sprinkled with cinnamon.

My knees bend automatically to make up for the height difference, and he hops up to wrap his legs around my waist.

“You mount me, and I can’t be held responsible,” I warn.

“What would you do to me?” He smiles, brushing my lips.

“Undress you, stare at your naked body until I’ve had my fill, then taste every single inch of you.” I nip his bottom lip. “All night long.”

“Sold.” Sky pulls off his shirt and tosses it behind me.

“Sky”—I screw my eyes shut to muster self-control—“I’m serious about going slow.”

“Then slowly take me to bed and kiss me all over.” He peels one of my eyes open.

“You’re irresistible.” I stare into his sparkling brown eyes.

“Me? Who has been torturing me with forearms? Like you don’t know sleeves rolled up on a dress shirt is basically arm porn.” He unbuttons my shirt.

“Never heard of it.” I set him on the area rug to get us both naked. “But I don’t want you to regret this in the morning.”

“Ugh. Stop being so considerate. I will be extremely grumpy and blame you if I wake up with blue balls.” He sheds his pants and briefs at the same time.

My erection tents my boxers obscenely.

Sky grabs hold and leads me to his bed by my dick. “Nice handle,” he quips. He sits on the bed, still holding my cloth-covered cock, and traces his tongue above the waistband.

“I’m doing the tasting.” My cock leaks, leaving wet marks.

“We’re doing the tasting,” Sky corrects with a look that says he means business. He tongues the wet spot, and my eyes roll back in my head. He’s not even kissing my skin, and I’m on edge.

“I’m not going to last long,” I warn, letting him explore my head.

“That’s what round two is for.” He yanks my boxers down, but before he can get his mouth on me, I smother him with my body.

I’ve dreamed of him for years, and reality is so much better, so I’m not ruining it by nutting in three seconds. I suck his neck and move him closer to the headboard.

His nipples bead under my tongue as I switch back and forth. He’s saltier by his armpits, with a sharp sweetness similar to dark chocolate.

“Fair warning, if you don’t stop me now, I’ll become addicted.”

“Fair warning, if you stop now, your team will never find your body,” he counters.

“Why does murder sound so sexy when you threaten me?” I stretch my tongue out to savor as much of his taste as possible.

“Don’t hockey players get off on violence?” he teases, and grazes his fingertips along my side.

“Tickling is violence.” I raise my torso, which puts more of my weight on his gorgeous dick. His cock stabs me in the abdomen, desperate for attention. He’s long, with a perfect head and enough girth to fill my mouth.

Sky throws his arms over his head and thrusts up. “Punish me.”

Time ceases as the inside of his wrist is clearly visible. I’m hallucinating.

“Oh, um, about that…” Sky follows my gaze and covers his wrist with his other arm.

“Is it…” My throat seizes, and I reach for him, asking permission with my eyes. Sky nods but turns his head away.

“How come I haven’t seen this before?” I ask, rubbing my thumb over the image to confirm it’s permanent ink.

“No one sees it. It’s for me. Emmet inked me a couple of years ago.” Sky’s voice is thick. “I planned to tell you.”

“It’s incredible. Is it what I think?” I ask, not assuming, and he gives me a single nod. “Thank you,” I murmur, kissing the black horse running through blue and green waves with an image of a trident.

“You remember?” Sky asks.

“Being compared to the legendary Greek horse Arion isn’t something to forget. Did you know I had to look it up?”

Sky shakes his head. “You were so fast, and the ice seemed to bend to your will. All I could think of was Poseidon’s equine son running over water as the proclaimed fastest horse ever. You took my breath away.” He caresses my stubble.

This is the first tangible sign he didn’t give up on me.

“You take my breath away,” I state matter-of-factly.

I have every intention of making the most of my second chance by settling between his legs and kissing his entire torso. I lick his right cum gutter, then sit on my heels admiring his body.

“What are you doing?” he asks desperately.

“I told you that I’d stare at you.” I lean back and bring his ankle to my mouth. “You haven’t a clue how beautiful you are, do you? How your tattoo

melts my bones and makes me want to worship you? I didn't see it when you danced for me."

He makes a face of annoyance, and I'm determined to tell him he's gorgeous until he believes me. "I use makeup, especially when I dance, so no one notices my wrist. I cover it because I'm not willing to share that piece of me, and having identifiable marks isn't great for anonymity and security."

"After I treated you worse than shit, you still kept a piece of me." I'd rather rip my heart out than hurt him again.

"We weren't ready for each other." His face is apologetic.

"Are we now?" I ask, metaphorically standing on the edge of a cliff.

"We can answer that together." His smile takes over his face, exposing his crooked tooth.

I soar off the cliff and back to my Sky. "This time will be different. We'll be version two point a million," I promise with a kiss, drinking him in. Every word coming out of my mouth is the truth, and tonight is the beginning of showing him, giving him all of me. Of living the life I choose for myself and being an active participant in the queer community in every way.

"I love the freckles on your neck." I connect them with my fingertips. "This mole's so sexy." I kiss the brown patch on the left side of his ribs. "Your muscles are so strong." I trail along the ridges of his abs, but he makes another annoyed sound. "They are"—I hold my hand up to shush him—"don't compare your body to mine. Both are optimal for our sports. Yours is lean and flexible, and mine is hard, capable of hurting people."

"Come here." He hooks his legs around me and pulls me down by the nape of my neck. "You're too good for me." His fingers brush my nipple in the narrow space between us. There's a nerve-ending that connects my nipples to my balls, and my control slips.

"We're not arguing about this now." I pant and inhale his exhales. "Lube?"

Sky flings his arm out toward his nightstand. "Top drawer."

I pour cool liquid, but he wipes his hand on mine.

"Let me."

My dick jumps as his long fingers close around it. They're smooth, without callouses, and the pressure is heaven.

“Next time, I’m sucking you first, but I’m already close.” Sky coats himself, raises his hips, and holds his hand out for more lube. I oblige and moan when his hand closes around both of us. “You like that,” Sky says smugly.

I’m mesmerized by watching him jack our dicks together. When his crown slides over mine, every nerve ending lights up. It spreads through my body so I feel him everywhere, as if his hand on me touches all of me at once. I’m so giddy my excitement escapes in a laugh.

I meet his eyes, but our laughter turns to moans when he twists his wrist.

“Fuck, Angel, I’m—”

“Do it, Mav. Come on my dick. Show me how much you love being fucked by me.”

I spill into his hand with his name on my lips. My legs shake, and my brain floods with enough endorphins to drown me. It seems they’ve reduced my vision to his face. My heart’s pumping; its sole purpose is to carry those endorphins throughout my body.

Sky uses his legs to drag me on top of him.

He’s coming with me, and his face is stunning. We fooled around in the dark so much that this is my first experience seeing him clearly as he orgasms. Sky’s eyes are bottomless pools of pleasure, his mouth forms a perfect *O*, and the light from the hall gives him an ethereal quality.

The words “I love you” strain to get out, but I hold them in. This man is my forever, but he’s not ready for that yet.

Sky wrenches his fisted hand from between us and licks our cum. “Want some?”

I open my mouth, and he drops some on my tongue. “We taste great together.” I swallow, and his lazy smile stops my heart.

“So great together,” he agrees.



My gaze hasn’t left Sky’s closed spare bedroom door. He flitted in there almost an hour ago, telling me not to peek while he got ready. He insists there’s a bed in there under his pile of clothes, but I have my doubts, especially since he refers to the room as his walk-in closet.

The room has three full-length mirrors in a semicircle, his sewing machine, and more clothes than I've owned in my lifetime, plus fabric.

"Should be about fifteen more minutes," he calls from across the hall. I'm still in my towel, so that's my hint to get dressed.

Trevor made me a kickass suit. Even I understand it's cool, and I'm bewildered by fashion. It's classic black with a silver suit chain that goes well with my silver lapels. The vest is also silver with diagonal black buttons and a low neckline to show off my shirt. Trevor's explanation was Greek to me, but it fits great, so I don't care.

"You see where I put the new shirt Trevor has for you?" he yells.

Instead of a plain white silk shirt, there's a rosy, magenta one hanging on the closet door for me.

"Yes, dear," I sing, imitating some sitcom dad answering his wife to placate her.

"Be a good boy and wear what you're told," he answers in a stern tone but laughs.

I'm not sure about the new shirt, but I will go to my grave before I complain. The pants fit perfectly, and the shirt will complement Sky's complexion. I put the vest and jacket on in front of the bathroom mirror to ensure everything is straight.

"Spoiler alert! I look fantastic," I announce, walking over to his changing room.

"Oh my." He whistles and fans himself after finally opening the door.

My brain glitches, and my blood flows south as Sky stands before me as a gorgeous pixie god.

"Maverick Maher! Dayyyummm. That suit is the most magnificent thing I've ever seen."

His words don't penetrate my brain as I greedily soak in every detail of his outfit. The black fabric looks soft as hell and has magenta floral embroidery. My absolute favorite color on him. The boning shows off his slim waist, and he's wearing—I assume based on his beliefs—a fake leather-and-fur mini coat.

Sky's face shimmers with sparkles. His lids pop with color, and his lips are shiny and so kissable.

He fingers the deep *V* of my vest. "This cut is gorg on you. Turn around, handsome." He twirls his finger, but I'm frozen. And drooling.

“Sky,” I choke out, and my eyes lock on the thin strip of bare skin between his top and low pants. “I changed my mind. We’re staying home, and I’m taking that off you with my teeth.” I’m hard and aching for him even though we showered together and got each other off less than two hours ago.

“You can do that when we get back,” he promises. “Now show me what magic Trevor did to accentuate your ass.”

A grunting noise escapes my throat, and I spin fast to keep my eyes on him. “You’re a walking piece of art.”

Sky blushes and turns, taking off the coat. “Be a darling and give those ribbons a tug,” he instructs.

“You made this?” I ask, touching his bare shoulders to prove he’s real.

“Mostly. The coat is Trevor’s creation, and he helped me finalize the embellishments. I couldn’t get what I saw in my head to work with the fabric. That man is a genius.”

I run my fingertips over his spine, then pull the burgundy ribbons on the corset. “Don’t let Liska hear you gush about his man. He’s the jealous type.”

“Yeah?” He spins in my arms when I’ve successfully tied the corset as tight as possible. “Are you the jealous type?”

“Never have been before, and you are such a gentleman; you’d never provoke me.” My lips hover over his, fearing one kiss will derail us.

“True. If I’m provoking you, there will be naked time involved.” He sashays toward the mirrors to check out my tying abilities. “You did great, baby.”

“I did nothing.” I wrap my arms around his torso and rest my chin on his shoulder so we’re staring at each other in the mirror. My shirt matches the ribbons of his corset as if they were cut from the same fabric. “Your outfit should be illegal. It fits so good.”

“Did you see the best part?” He traces the hickey on his collarbone, and he hasn’t covered his tattoo.

“Omyfuckingod. I need to mark you every day.” I kiss his mark, and a primal instinct bellows, *Mine!*

“You’ll get zero complaints from me. We should go before one of us loses control.” Sky pecks my lips and glides by me.

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CHAPTER 19

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

The team provided a car and driver for the night, but we're backed up, leading to the drop-off point. There are so many flashes of light; at first, my brain thinks it's a strobe light.

But as we inch closer, I see the swarm of media and a carpet. "Mav, you didn't tell me there'd be a step and repeat." My voice goes up an octave with stress.

"What's a step and repeat?" he asks cluelessly.

"It's what they call the red carpet for the media. You pose and make your way down the line." My pulse ticks up, and I wipe my clammy hands on my pants.

Mav's completely unbothered. "Oh." He turns me to face him. "You're upset?"

"No." I use my cell to check my makeup and confirm the eyeliner is in place and not creating raccoon eyes. "It's too soon to go official. Your parents might see us." Forcing a confrontation with his parents is the fastest way to end whatever we have going on.

His warm palms cradle my face, drawing my gaze from the phone. "Sky, if you don't want to do the press line, I understand, but I'm proud to be here with you."

"You should drop me off here, or better yet, you can get out, and I'll get out around the corner," I strategize, and his face falls.

“I asked you to be my date, not a guy I sneak into the event. I’ll ask the driver to take us around the corner.” He leans forward, and the magnitude of this slaps me.

“Wait, you won’t do the carpet if I don’t?” My breath puffs out rapidly, and I forget how to inhale.

“No, you’re my date, and where you go, I go and vice versa.” His long fingers rub the tension in my nape.

“But you’re wearing a Trevor Fox original suit, and isn’t this event his best publicity?” I say, an octave higher still.

“Sky, I’m not leaving you, especially when you’re having a panic attack.”

“This is not a panic attack. This is five stages below that.” I shut my eyes and concentrate on getting air into my lungs. I’m living in the twilight zone where Mav’s unbothered by parading me around the media. He might not care now, but he will if they discover who I am.

“Hey, it’s fine. We can go home.”

I lean into his steadiness and calm. “Mav, what if someone connects me as your date to my website? You don’t understand how bad that will be for you,” I reason with him.

“You’ve mistakenly put me on a pedestal. We talked about this. I play hockey, and I’m bisexual, and I don’t care if people find out. You’re who I want to be with.”

My stomach does a triple flip, and his hazel eyes shine with hurt. It’s obvious I’m wrecking the night, but I can’t take it back.

There’s a knock on Mav’s window, and he lowers it. He talks to Finn, but the roar in my ears drowns out their words.

Our driver inches out of line and pulls over ahead of the other cars. My head swivels, trying to figure out what we’re doing.

“Are you worried about my parents or your job being a problem? Neither is an issue for me.”

“Stop saying all the right things when I’m being a dick!” I throw my hands up, my face getting hot.

“Should I tell you to get your shit together and get your ass out of the car? That seems harsh.” Mav gathers me in his arms. “I’m fine if we stay or go, but it’ll be together.”

“I’m being stupid,” I say, turning my face so I don’t get makeup on his stunning suit. “It’s everything, nothing, and an all-me problem.” I raise my hand. “Remember your draft night when we met in the cornfield? You were

ecstatic that your dream was becoming a reality, then it scared the shit out of you. You doubted yourself, your skating ability, and your hockey knowledge."

"But you were there to stop my insanity and tell me everything would be okay." He kisses my hair.

"But I lied! Nothing happened the way we planned. And you're here now, giving everything and more than I wanted then, but I don't trust it. I'm waiting for disaster to strike and hoping that happens behind closed doors and not in front of cameras." My shaky hand reaches for my hair, but I stop so I don't mess it up.

Mav shifts, holding my head in the crook of his arm. "I can't lie and guarantee us a happy ending, but I can promise to do everything in my power to make it happen." He's so sincere my heart aches.

"Let's go home," he whispers.

"No." I straighten up. "We came here to support charities and have a great time. The world would be a drearier place not seeing you in your suit." His suit's a masterpiece on his body, highlighting his broad shoulders and trim waist. And the man's ass in those pants should be sculpted and preserved forever.

Mav's right. There are no guarantees, but we have each other now, and there's no reason to invent possible reasons for a future breakup. Future heartbreak be damned, I'm going to enjoy Mav being my man tonight.

"You sure?" His hazel eyes search mine, and he smiles. Mav lowers his window again and gets Finn's attention.

"Please, work us into the line." Mav takes my hand.

"You'll be up after King and O'Keefe. I'll open your door when it's your turn." He walks away to join the controlled chaos.

"Is that okay with you?" I murmur.

"O'Keefe's a loose cannon. He blurts shit out and has a knack for offending people. I hated him when I first got here. But King has a calming effect on him and we're friends. That won't change because he met you at your job." He pumps my hand, and I believe him.

"Have I told you how much…" Mav trails off. "How happy I am you're here with me? The best-looking guy in the city, the state, the—"

"I'll settle for this car." I trace his lips with my forefinger. "Thank you for bringing me and putting up with my meltdown." I air-kiss his cheek so I don't get sparkles on his lips.

He tuts. “That was five levels below a meltdown.”

“How about you tell them my name is Sky and don’t give a last name. It might help,” I hedge.

The door opens, and I breathe deep before following Mav out. This night is a hundred times more public than I had imagined. I figured the team photographer would circulate and take a few pictures to release to the press. The chance of being in one of those was low. Now major news organizations and paparazzi will own photos of us.

Mav smiles and waves as the press calls his name. King and O’Keefe pause to take a photo with us, then we’re bombarded with questions.

“This is my friend, Sky.”

Lots of people want Maverick to explain how friendly of friends we are.

“If you have any tips on how to get out of the friend zone, hit me up.” He grins, and there’s a collective laugh.

I stay silent and smile. Mav tells them about his suit and gushes that I designed my outfit, except for the bolero jacket.

Mav steers me straight to the bar and orders us drinks. “Should we leave?” he asks, because I’m shaking.

“No, that went well. Don’t you think?” I’ve successfully lowered my heart rate, and my breathing is steady.

“Besides worrying that you would pass out, great.” He links our fingers.

“Yeah, sorry. That reaction was unexpected,” I confess. “Next event, I’ll do better.”

A slow grin takes over his face. “As long as you’re with me, everything will be brilliant. Griff and Brant are over there.” He points. “Let’s go say hi.”

I summon my powers of not being an idiot and go with him. Mav greets them with bro hugs.

“You clean up well.” Mav tips his glass at them.

“We owe our threads to Trevor,” Brant says, looking around. “Are they here yet?”

“He’s waiting to make a dramatic entrance,” I guess.

“Or had to do it one more time in the limo,” Griff snickers.

“Jealous?” Mav raises an eyebrow.

“Abso-fucking-lutely. Who doesn’t want someone who can’t keep their hands off you?” Griff replies.

“Cheers to that.” Brant holds his glass out, and Mav clinks it.

“Fuck yeah,” Mav says, slinging his arm around me as we clink too.

“Gentlemen.” Mr. Dimon approaches our group. “I hope you’re enjoying yourselves. Mr. Brant, I presume that’s nonalcoholic?”

“Ginger ale, sir. Excuse me.” Brant stalks away, grinding his teeth, and Mr. Dimon follows at a slower pace.

“Awkward,” Griff says into his drink.

“What’s their deal?” I ask, watching Brant disappear into the crowd and Mr. Dimon tracking him. “Weren’t they left behind in the snowstorm together?”

“Not ‘together’ together, but Brant’s been pissy at him since.”

I catch Mav’s eye and he shrugs.

Dinner is uneventful; there are a few speeches afterward, and Mr. Dimon informs us he’ll announce the silent auction winners at the end of the night, so the bidding is still open.

“Think we’ll win?” I rub Mav’s thigh. We bid on a week in Italy.

“Nah, rookie contract.” He points to himself. “No way the old-timers will let me win.”

“Bummer.” I hide my smile because I upped our bid.

“Dance with me.” Mav stands and offers me his hand. “Don’t be shocked. This team has indoctrinated me into dance parties.”

“Sweep me off my feet.” I drag him into the middle of the dance floor.

“Let’s hope I don’t knock you off your feet.” He spins me, then drops me into a dip. The guys around us whistle and stomp their feet.

Benz bounds over with Lucky, waving for Drake and Leo to join us. They begin choreographed moves, and Mav bops his head in time with the music. I catch on to the sequence after watching twice and join in.

“King,” Benz bellows, and he appears a minute later. “We got ourselves a professional,” Benz whisper-yells to King.

The team has done this before, so everyone can sort of do the steps. Mav’s face splits into a grin as he dances slightly offbeat, but he’s very proud of himself. The fun is contagious, and soon everyone in the ballroom either joins in or gathers on the edge to watch.

The guys align themselves in a line dance formation, and I step behind Mav with my hands on his hips.

“Follow my lead.” I sway his body to the tempo of the music.

“Always.” He glances over his shoulder and stops my heart.

I keep my hands on him for the next couple of songs, not because he needs correction but because it’s too difficult to let go.

The beat changes to something funkier and closer to hip-hop. My body moves seamlessly to the music, and Mav steps to the side. King’s doing the exact same viral dance a few feet away, and I catch his eye. Music is a language we both understand, and soon there’s a wide circle surrounding us.

Mav’s hazel eyes track my every move, and there’s unmistakable lust in his expression. My body flushes in response, and all I can think about is his hands on me.

This is a solo dance that we’re doing alongside each other, but the ending can be done with a partner. King tilts his head, asking if I’m game. Totally in for this. He sways into position behind me and, on the final notes, flips me backward over his arm, and I land in a split. Fortunately, the seams of my pants hold together.

The crowd claps and wolf-whistles in approval. I stand to take a bow, but O’Keefe is charging at us with clenched fists. Not in the mood for a jealous boyfriend, I disappear between bodies, but I’ve lost sight of Mav.

He’s tall, but so is everyone else except me. Okay, I’m not the only short guy here, but one of the few.

An arm wraps around my waist, tugging at me, and it’s all wrong. Practicing self-defense to get out of his hold is second nature. He lets me go but doesn’t move away.

“Your dance was outstanding. Thanks for performing it for me,” a stranger says with a sincerity that sets me on edge.

I’d love to punch him in the balls, but diplomacy is the safer option. My fear subsides, and annoyance takes its place.

“Sorry, I’m here with someone.” I step sideways, but he moves with me.

“But you were mine first, angeldancer4,” he says with total confusion.

“You have the wrong person,” I reply in a bright tone, as if I’m not afraid of him identifying me by my website name in such a public place.

“But I finally found you after such a long time.” His temper flares, trapping me in place.

“Please excuse me. I need to find my date.” I add steel to my voice.

“Sky?” Mav’s sharp voice provides an instant calming effect. “Who is this?” he demands, and the man steps back.

“He thought I was someone else.” I shrug, keeping my composure, since Mav’s furious.

Mav stares at him and gives him a slow once-over. I don't look because I'll lose it if I recognize one of my clients. "Keep your hands to yourself, buddy," he spits out.

"Let's go." I link my arm in his and walk a half lap around the ballroom. "Are you okay?"

"He had his grimy hands on you." His tone is murderous.

"He did, but I had it handled," I say with a certainty I don't feel. "Do you know who he is?" I worry he works with or for the Enforcers.

"An entitled prick, that's who."

I reach up, and my hands smooth over his shoulders. "Agreed. But Mav, you need to chill out. This is something that I live with, and it's a small price to pay for a life I love. If it's too much for you, I get it." I tried to warn him. It seems harmless until you watch it happen.

He draws me to his chest and rests his cheek on the top of my head. "O'Keefe was jealous, and I thought it was funny until that guy looked ready to grope you."

"But he didn't, and I'm good at getting myself out of sticky situations." Some of my glitter has rubbed off on his suit.

"The fact that you deal with that regularly enrages me."

"Why don't we go home, and you can focus that rage on something productive? Like my ass." I've been putting off penetrative sex, but I'm already half in love, determined to live in the moment.

"Don't you want to stay to see who wins the auction?"

Damn his memory. If we don't win the trip, I'll explode, blue balls and all.

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CHAPTER 20

Maverick Maher

“You are in sooo much trouble,” I growl in his ear as we get in the car going home.

“Who, me?” he asks innocently, batting his eyelashes.

“You are so guilty.” I haul him onto my lap and drag my nose along the column of his neck. “How did you increase our bid without me?”

There’s a line of cars bumper to bumper, so we’ll be here a while. I rattle off the address for the driver, and he turns up the music to give us privacy, but we whisper to each other.

“My quick trip to the bathroom was a detour to the silent auction table. Are you upset?” he asks, uncertain.

“Not about that! I can’t wait to take you away on a vacation you paid for.” I wedge my hand under his corset, but it’s too tight so I settle for the skin beneath it. “You also teased me all night. Kept waiting for a nip-slip, but your corset held tight.”

“My poor, Arion.” His warm lips press against mine, and my heart does a full pad hockey sprint with a backflip at the end as he uses the nickname he used to call me. I loved it then, but more now knowing he tattooed his body with the memory. “Did I work you up?” His hand slides down to my very hard cock.

“All you have to do to work me up is occupy the same space.” I clutch his hair to tilt him backward and suck on his Adam’s apple. That truth is the

same as comparing seeing the ink on his wrist to a photo of him. They're both great, but one is etched in my heart. I doubt I'll ever see it and not get turned on.

"Will you fuck me tonight?" Sky croons, and my cock jumps in approval.

"You're sure?" I ask, because I lost my shit earlier, turning into an ogre again, losing credibility with him.

"For real, seeing you jealous was a turn-on, and you took the high road. To be clear, if someone else touches you, I'm going ninja warrior dancer on them and asking questions later." He writhes in my lap.

"Hmm, I bet jealousy looks good on you." I nip his shoulder, removing his coat.

"Not jealous—possessive." He unbuttons my vest. "Totally different animal." His thigh rubs my dick with erotic friction. "I spent too many years pretending it didn't bother me when girls touched you. Now everyone will know you're mine, and no one… I repeat, no one touches what's mine."

"Angel, you're about to make me come in my pants like a damn virgin. And I don't want to ask Trevor how to get the stains out." I rearrange him on my lap for a reprieve.

Sky's hand snakes between us. "Scrape off the excess, rinse with cold water, then rub an enzyme-based liquid detergent in and let it soak for thirty minutes."

It takes my brain far too long to process he's giving me cum removal instructions.

"Every experienced sex worker has that info locked up here." He taps his head.

"How much longer?" I croak. Anything longer than right now is too long.

"It's not far. Your place was closer." His words warm my ear.

"My place sucks balls," I retort.

"A vast improvement if it actually did." He licks the seam of my lips, and I open for him.

Sky will be the death of me.

I've always known it.

Now I welcome it.

After delectable torture, the car rolls to a stop at Sky's brownstone.

"Get inside. Now," I order, and he bolts out of the car with a smug grin.

Once we're inside, I turn him around to loosen his ribbons. I tug at the fabric, but the ribbons hold.

"Don't ruin it. It's my new favorite," he chastises me.

"If I had my way, I'd cut you out and buy you a new one," I growl in frustration and toe off my shoes.

"Upstairs," he commands. "Lube and condoms are in my room. I'll watch your fine ass while I remove my corset so I'll be topless when we get there." He motions toward the door to the stairs.

"Deal." I take the stairs two at a time and shed my coat and vest. His bed is the best thing I've ever laid eyes on. I fall over yanking my pants off, but the bed catches me.

My gaze snaps to Sky as he struts in topless, as promised. My body freezes, unable to handle his otherworldly beauty. His curls create a brown halo, and his skin shimmers in the dim light.

He's more than I deserve, but I'm selfish enough to take it.

"I thought you were eager, but are you in there?" He waves his fingers in front of my face. "We should get tested; I'm on PrEP." He kneels and untangles my legs from my pants. "If that's something you're interested in."

"I'm in… I mean, yes interesting…" I slap my palm to my forehead.

"Me too," he confesses. "I was tested a couple of months ago, but I'll get a new one."

I dive for my phone in my pants pocket but headbutt Sky in the chest. "Sorry. Sorry. The team tests us, and I haven't been with anyone since." I fumble opening my health app. "Did I hurt you?" My palm lands lightly on his chest. "I've got a hard head."

Finally, my test results appear on my screen, and I show him.

Sky leans in to see, removes my hand, and kisses my palm. "I hope you're hard." He straightens up and sheds his pants so he's naked.

I flop onto the bed. "My brain short-circuited. Need a minute."

"Perfect. Don't move a muscle."

I hear him in the bathroom and don't move, not even when he comes back.

He crawls over me, giggling. "You've seen me naked. It's nothing new."

"Yeah, but it's not the same," I huff, as he covers me with his body.

His fingers trace my eyebrows, which relax for him. He wordlessly asks me to explain.

“First, we were dumb kids who thought first love lasts forever. Now I recognize deep in my soul how lucky I am to get a second chance, and I can’t fuck it up.” It’s more than sex with Sky. My experience is limited, and disappointing him isn’t an option.

“Mav”—he uses two fingers to tilt my head toward him—“you’re enough just the way you are. I’m falling for you, and you’re not screwing it up.”

My heart takes flight on wings. “Whelp, I’ve fallen, and I can’t get up,” I deadpan, because I’m so serious right now.

“Then relax. There’s no pressure. It’s us finding our way to each other again, even if we don’t have sex.”

I roll onto him and pin his wrists above his head in one hand. “You shut your mouth. Not have sex,” I scoff. “What world do you live in? I will shrivel up and die if I don’t get inside you.”

“Sounds dire.” He cants his hips into me.

“You up for saving my life?” I suck the mark I left to darken it.

“Arion, I’m yours to do whatever you want with.”

Our kiss is frantic and needy, as if we can’t get far enough inside each other’s mouths. I suck his tongue, and he whimpers. He tastes like dark chocolate, sweet with a zing of bitter, warm, and wet.

I lose myself in him. The world narrows down to the two of us in his bed with the entire night ahead. No stress. No worries. Only us.

He toys with my nipples, connecting that pleasure current from my chest to my balls. Every brush of his finger pads brings me closer to the edge. His fingers on my nipples are enough to make me come untouched.

Sky slaps the bed next to us.

“Where’s the lube?” His patting grows more frantic.

“I got it, Angel. You’re sure about going bare?” I check again, and he places his hand on my arm.

“I trust your results.” He blinks with heavy desire.

I close my eyes and bury my face in his neck. “I won’t last one minute inside you bare.”

“Breed me,” Sky pleads, and all my reservations vanish in a haze of need.

That phrase sparks something primal. A carnal urge to give him the world and fuck him senseless. “I’ve never done this,” I admit, drenching three fingers in lube.

“Me neither.” His voice is breathy, barely there.

“Fuck. Move up the bed,” I say, and haul him backward. Once he’s settled on the pillows, I arrange his legs on my shoulders. I’m ravenous to figure out how I can do everything all at once and fill him with my cum.

My lips touch his puckered rim, and I inhale as he softly squeals. I lap at him, swallowing his zesty musk. His legs fall off my shoulders to open wider on the bed. This angle gives me more room, and my tongue breaches him.

His flavor explodes in my mouth, and I moan, raw and needy.

Sky attempts to pull me up by my hair. “Mmmm,” he pants. “Need your dick.”

“I’m getting you nice and loose,” I say against his skin. “Working you open so you can take my big fat cock, and I’ll fill you with my cum.”

“Yesss.” He shamelessly drives up into my mouth.

The muscles around his hole relax, and I use a finger alongside my tongue.

“Eyes on me,” I demand, and add another finger.

His brown eyes are pools of black with gold sparks. His lips are red and puffy from my kisses, and his cheeks are pink. Sky nods in agreement, and I add a third finger. His eyes roll in pleasure, but they find mine again, mesmerizing me so neither of us can look away.

“Is this where you want me?” I rasp, surging up to kiss his mouth.

Sky seals his lips to mine as though I’m providing the oxygen he needs for survival. I twist my fingers and find his sweet spot. Sky keens off the bed and clenches.

“Need you,” he begs again. “Mav, breed me.”

Sky is mine. We’re forever this time. I will search to the ends of the earth to find him if he leaves.

I’m leaking precum but have enough brain cells to use more lube before I notch myself at his hole.

“Angel.” His name leaves my mouth in a low, blissful exhale as I sink into his heat. “You’re everything I’ve ever wanted,” I babble.

Sky arches up, offering me his nipples, which I suck and lick. My short strokes cause his body to give way, and he welcomes me in. I drown in him. It’s euphoric to be consumed by his body.

I’m extra sensitive as all his muscles flex along each inch of my cock. A heaven I never knew existed.

“Breathe,” Sky bellows, and it’s unclear if he’s talking to himself or me.

“You’re perfect, Angel. My perfect Angel.” I’m saying words, but they cease to have meaning.

His moans are a damn symphony to my ears. Our bodies are in sync along with our breathing. I cram him full on an exhale that he sucks into his lungs. I bottom out and remain still for a second.

“Please.” Sky works himself up and down my cock.

“I need…” I glance at Sky’s panicked eyes and can’t finish my thought. “You,” I finally spit out. I close my eyes because watching rapture cross his face is too much stimulation.

Sky’s ass clenches me relentlessly, and I count my breaths and imagine sitting buck naked on the ice. It staves off the immediate threat of my orgasm as I concentrate on dragging my balls along the frozen rink.

“I’m close,” Sky gasps.

“I’ll follow you over and fill your pretty little hole with *all* my cum.” With my words, he throws his legs around my waist, cleaving himself to me.

It’s exhilarating, akin to truly being Arion flying through the air with our bodies connected. But the physical connection pales in comparison to my love for him. Holding in those three little words is torture.

Sky starts to shake, and his inner muscles constrict around me, torturing me with extraordinary ecstasy.

“Come for me, Angel,” I plead, unable to hold out much longer.

Sky smashes his lips to mine as his inner muscles convulse around me. I let go and fill the first boy I ever loved, the man I love, with my cum.

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CHAPTER 21

Skylar Engelhardt/Lark Angel

Mav's words embed in my brain, and my body obeys him without question. He's stuffed me full and emptying his seed in me. Pleasure fries the synapses of my brain, and my vision goes white.

We're basically doing a complicated dance together that we haven't done before. Our bodies lead the way, and we're hanging on for dear life. His weight grounds me to the earth; otherwise, I'd swear I've been rocketed into paradise.

I've never felt so alive and conscious of my insides. Mav found a cheat code and inflicted the most delicious gratification. If sex could become an addiction after one time, that's where I am.

No rehab for me. I only require Mav to dick me down. Daily. More than once a day.

"Sky?" Mav asks, with a tone implying it's not the first time he's called my name.

"Hmmm." I'm clinging to him spider-monkey style. And see no reason to let go.

"Checking in." He presses his lips to my forehead and works his way to my mouth. "You still good?" His scruff is gone, shaved for the event, and I miss it. Beard burn over my entire body could add another level to this bliss.

“Good doesn’t cover it,” I say. He begins to soften, and I angle my hips to keep him in place. “You unlocked a new level of sex for me. Congrats.” I toy with his spikey hair.

“That was definitely you, Angel. You’re the new level or new galaxy, whatever that was. Thought you were gonna wrench my soul out after I gave you every drop of my cum.” He holds himself above me, but I collapse his arms to take his full weight.

“I saw stars and the Holy Grail.” I sigh contently.

“What does the Holy Grail look like?” Mav asks, amused.

“It’s flesh-colored and bears a striking resemblance to your magnificent cock.” My ankles remain locked around him so he can’t move.

“That’s going on my resume. My cock”—he motions above our heads to reveal an epic headline—“the Holy Grail, at the top, and under special skills will be ‘able to run on water as fast as Arion.’ ”

“What kind of resume are you putting that on? If you try a dating profile, you will have significantly less grail, since it’ll be full of holes,” I joke, but I’m also dead serious.

“Possessive Skylar is dangerous and sexy. My favorite combination.” He offers me his neck. “You can mark me as yours any time you want.”

I suck his pulse point. “How dark should I make it on a scale of is-there-something-on-your-neck to were-you-attacked?”

“Attack me. Show everyone you can’t keep your hands off me.”

“It’s true.” I groan as gravity takes over, and he exits my hole. “How could you?” I feign horror.

“I’ll get you a lifelike model of my dick in dildo form, and you can let me watch you play with it when I’m gone.” Mav plants kisses, traveling down my chest until he can lick my cum off me.

“Don’t think I won’t hold you to that. No fair. You get my cum, and I don’t get yours.” I revel in his tongue and grip his hair.

Mav cleans me up and goes lower with a smirk. His hands hold under my knees and push them to my chest.

“Your pretty hole is pink and leaking. What should I do?” he asks, but he doesn’t wait for an answer as he uses his tongue to push his cum back into me.

My moan is obscene. A guttural demand for more.

My spent dick perks up, needing a few more minutes before round two.

Mav's mouth cleans my thighs and balls. It's excruciating, running along the line of pain and pleasure. When I can't take any more, he pulls away, lifting my knees higher so my ass is off the bed.

I'm too curious to break the spell and ask what he's doing. He kisses the head of my cock, then trails his tongue down my balls.

I squeak as his lips latch around my hole and he sucks. It's shocking and exceptionally good.

Mav climbs up my body and pinches my jaw so it opens. He spits his cum from my ass into my mouth.

I swallow and sweep his mouth with my tongue. "That's the fucking hottest thing to ever happen to me."

"We're only getting started, Angel," he promises, and I'm hit with a sensation of my entire world turning topsy-turvy.

"You're going to kill me." I grin.

"Only if I survive you." He takes our kiss deeper.

"Something to look forward to in round two," I say, and he laughs, shaking my body along with his.



After round two, we shower and Mav washes me with tender care, running his soapy hands over me to clean every inch. He tilts my head into the stream of spray to wet my hair. He washes it while giving me a scalp massage, and he has to hold me up. I'm putty in his large, capable hands. After he rinses, he draws conditioner through my curls, leaving it in for a few minutes while inspecting my ass for any damage. He kisses my sore hole better.

Next it's my turn to wash him, and I'm every bit as thorough as he was. His nipples are so sensitive the slightest touch causes his cock to jump. It's a fun game to clean him and turn him on. His poor dick can't take the stimulation, and I stop.

Naked and in my bed, I don't plan on moving for days.

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“Thank you.” My voice is hoarse from yelling his name.

“If you’re thanking me for sex, believe me, it’s no trouble.” His hand lazily strokes my spine.

“Then you should thank me,” I quip, and nip his chest. “But I meant for tonight, the entire experience. I explained it horribly while *not* having a panic attack.” My index finger traces his abs. “But if you’d told high school Sky that you’d take me as your date to a fancy gala with press and paparazzi, and not break a sweat, I’d have cursed you and your descendants for lying. On top of that”—I forge ahead so we don’t get sidetracked—“you handled the guy who recognized me as angeldancer4 with shocking control. If the roles were reversed, you’d witness ‘petty, kick his shins and run’ Sky.”

“Really?” His eyes shine and I nod. “If we reversed roles, what would my name be?” he asks.

I lift my head to stare at him. “Who are you and what did you do with Maverick Maher?” Him kidding about being a sex worker himself is more than my brain can take.

“I want a cool name too.” He pouts. “I could be skaterdemon71.”

“Not bad, though using your jersey number might be too on the nose. And no one calls you a demon.” I rub my cheek against the faintest hint of his stubble. “Please don’t ignore my feelings.”

Mav sucks in a breath. “Sorry, I’m not ignoring it as much as kicking myself in the head. I set the bar so low in high school that it’s embarrassing. You should’ve dumped me long before graduation.”

“I knew you weren’t hurting me on purpose and that coming out would change your world. You might not have been drafted if you had outed yourself. It’s horrible but a reality. Even after tonight, if you want to stay in the friend zone, I understand. I’m not pressuring you to come out. We can keep doing what we’re doing.”

Mav sits up, taking me with him. “This is what I’m talking about. You deserve more, and you’re already preparing for less.” He growls. “Sky, I…” He looks panicked but continues. “I want to call you my boyfriend in

public. I’m not afraid of other people, including my parents, finding out. Don’t expect me to treat you worse than shit. It sucks.”

“I’m sorry,” I whisper. “Please, don’t do something you’re not ready for. I can’t be the guy who forced you out of the closet. But you’re right, most of it is based on my fear.” I kiss his jaw. “How about I make it up to you and take you to Italy?”

“What a great suggestion. Rome and the Amalfi Coast?” He lies flat with me on his chest. “We’ll have to plan it in the summer. After hockey.”

“Of course. Do you forgive me?” I ask. It’s difficult to understand when I’m being supportive of his choice and when I’m forcing my choice on him. If coming out ends up hurting us, I’ll never forgive myself. He doesn’t owe anyone details about his sexuality.

“There’s nothing to forgive except what a clueless dick I was in the past. It’s on me, not you.” Mav caresses my back once more.

“How about we each take blame for being young and dumb, but promise considerable improvement?” My pinky edges closer to his side, and he jumps.

“As long as you don’t tickle me. I’ll agree to anything,” he says, and his phone has the nerve to interrupt. “We’re ignoring it. It’s probably my parents, and they do not belong in the bedroom with us.”

“No argument from me. What time do you have practice tomorrow?”

“Just a lift in the afternoon. What’s on your calendar?”

“I cleared it for you. When you’re home, I want to be with you,” I say shyly.

“We could share calendars, and it might make it easier,” he offers. “But on one condition.” His eyes swing to mine. “You’ll agree we’re together, exclusive, and we tell people who ask.”

“Who ask?” I giggle, covering my nerves.

“Renting out a billboard is overkill. Don’t you think?” We dissolve into laughter. “Could you imagine the shit my teammates would give me?”

“You’d never live it down,” I agree.

“Seriously.” He gets out of bed and finds his phone. “I’ll share my calendar right now if you agree to be my boyfriend.”

“Don’t make me cry. Get over here and grab mine too, Mr. Bossy,” I demand, but my insides have turned to cannoli filling.

Mav does a hop-jiggy dance and dives into bed with both our phones. “Won you over,” he says smugly.

“Don’t pretend you doubted that.” I snatch my cell from him, open my calendar, and find the add calendar button. “Last chance to change your mind.” I sit across his legs, which if he did to me, he’d pin me down.

“Never. And let’s be clear, you’re the bossy bottom.” He’s already sent his workout, practice, and game schedule. “I’d add you to the team group chat to keep up on changes, but I won’t subject you to that.”

“Me? Bossy? You are mistaken, sir. But, yeah, let’s hold off on the group chat thing.” I send him my work calendar and get a slight twinge of apprehension versus panic. One step at a time, I remind myself.

“What should we do now?” he asks, raising an eyebrow.

“It’s late; we could sleep, or we could prove that being young isn’t wasted on the youth.” I toss our phones aside and wrap my arms around his neck. We’re both getting hard again.

“Is that a challenge?” His hazel eyes sparkle.

“Only if you’re willing.” I arch into him, bringing our dicks together.

“I’ll never not be willing to be with you. I’ll breed you so many times, you’ll need a doctor’s appointment to ensure you’re not pregnant.” Mav rolls, his weight pinning me.

“Yeah? I’m so into that. I’ve heard a myth that if you fuck me on my back on a full moon with my legs up, it might happen.”

“If there’s a myth, we have to prove if it’s real or not. Consider it a science experiment.” He takes my mouth in a searing kiss.

“For science,” I cheer.

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CHAPTER 22

Maverick Maher

“This isn’t a big deal,” I say for the third time, but Sky’s leg is bouncing next to me as if he’s ready to run from our corporate offices.

His side-eye effectively silences me. To him, this meeting with Finn is a huge step. I think of it as a formality. Finn wants our opinion on language about our relationship when we decide to go public. He said for once he wants to be ahead of the leak.

Finn’s office is at the end of the hall and has a large waiting area that is considered gossip central. This team keeps Finn busy for sure.

“Hey, come in.” Finn bustles out of his office. “Sorry to keep you muffins waiting.” He waves his arm for us to enter. “Skylar, it’s great to see you again. Have a seat. This shouldn’t take too long, and I really appreciate you coming in so I’m not forced into damage control later on.” Finn sits at his desk across from us.

Sky mouths, “Muffins?” when Finn glances away to wake his computer up. I shrug. Finn loves to call us food names, and I’m not about to argue.

“Give me an idea of how much of your relationship you’re willing to feed the machine. For example, you knew each other in high school, is that something you’ll discuss? Sky, you legally changed your name, what name should we use?” Finn’s manic energy isn’t contained today.

I’m going to defer to Sky and let him take control, since he’s so nervous.

Sky clears his throat and pulls his phone out. “There’s something else you should know.” He hits a few buttons and hands it to Finn.

Finn’s eyebrows swing up into his hairline.

“Sky,” I say softly, holding my hand out to him. “You don’t have to do this.” His privacy is something he’s guarded, and potentially jeopardizing that bothers me.

Sky takes my hand in a death grip but doesn’t look at me.

“My legal name is Lark Angel, and I teach dance and have my own pay-to-play type website. Most of my income comes from the website. If you refer to me as Skylar, it will put more distance between my website and your organization.” His back is rigid, and he stares at Finn unflinchingly.

“Mav, in the most respectful way possible—are you fucking with me? You’re Captain America, the boy next door, and there’s no need to invent a scandal.” Finn laughs as he shakes his head.

“I said we didn’t need to tell you because no one recognizes his online persona except people he’s told,” I retort, and rub my thumb along Sky’s hand.

Finn’s head snaps up in shock as his eyes ping-pong between us.

“I told him”—Sky’s shoulders curve in—“that for full disclosure, we need to tell you.”

Finn’s resigned eyes find the ceiling, realizing this isn’t a joke. “Why? Why are the cinnamon rolls out to break me?” He yanks his drawer open and sorts through a basket of chocolate.

I lean closer to get a better look, but he throws me a withering stare.

“No chocolate for a heathen who tries to make my job harder.” He holds the basket out. “Skylar, would you like one?”

“No, thank you.” He exhales but remains tense. “Also, two people in your organization are aware of my angeldancer4 identity.”

I squeeze his hand in support, although I don’t think we need to give so many details.

Finn hands Sky his phone. “The images available to the public are artistic and hide your face. It’s unlikely facial recognition software would track you.” He pauses. “But I assume once a person pays, there’s a lot more to see.”

“Yes,” Sky states unequivocally.

“It adds another layer that could bring you unwanted attention.” Finn types on his computer. “Once you go official, I’d give it four to five weeks

before the connection is made. Less if you're seen out on dates and curiosity is piqued."

"But no one knows," I object.

Finn stares me down. "Last year, a gossip site posted Grayson's college transcripts from the semester he blew out his knee. They also found King's original birth certificate and no marriage license. Do you really believe you can hide this?"

"No," Sky answers for me.

"But it's only his job." I throw my free hand in the air. "Who cares?" This meeting is getting off topic and pissing me off. Sky's work is no one else's business.

"People will care. There will be backlash, and pretending it won't happen is a terrible idea. There are small-minded people who think what I do is sinful and wrong," Sky whispers.

"It's not. It's beautiful," I disagree, sounding childish.

Finn cuts in. "I'm not here to debate Sky's chosen profession. But you have to be prepared for the headlines. They won't be kind. King and O'Keefe had to withstand the *Innocent or Incest* headline. People click for simple and provocative statements such as *The Player and The Prostitute*." I'm halfway out of my seat as Finn holds up his hand. "It doesn't have to be accurate. It's clickbait. Whoever wrote the headline for King and O'Keefe knew they don't share an ounce of blood but printed it anyway."

I fall back into my seat, wishing I could pull Sky on top of me. "You tried to tell me." I apologize to Sky. "I didn't think about how your lack of privacy and being with me could hurt you." My actions hurt Sky in the past, and it kills me to be the potential cause of his pain.

"I'm more worried about hurting you," Sky says.

"Listen, this meeting isn't ultra time sensitive. As of now, there aren't pics of you two from the gala. Go home, talk it through, decide how much you're willing to reveal, and I'll come up with strategic positive stories to drown out the negative. Don't wait more than a few days because things online move fast." Finn stands to dismiss us.

"Sky's on the wall at The Q Solutions as a success story," I offer, my head spinning on how to ensure Sky's okay without giving the impression I'll bail on him. I stand, needing to hold him, to protect and shield him.

Finn quirks an eyebrow.

“I needed their services and met Emmet there.” Sky walks into my waiting arms.

“Jayce,” Finn bellows, then yells his name again.

“You rang?” Jayce appears in the doorway, since his office is two doors down the hall.

“Your husband will vouch for him?” Finn asks, pointing at Sky.

“Hey, Lark.” Jayce gives him an up nod. “Hi, Mav. Yeah, he’s friends with Em, why?”

“For all the chocolate in Belgium, I’m getting ahead of a scandal before everyone finds out.”



“I can’t stand the thought of people going after you because you’re with me,” I grumble into Sky’s hair, mentally issuing threats to anyone who dares write negative shit about him. We’re curled up in his book alcove. With the fairy lights, the enclosed space feels like a safe haven.

The entire ride home, I schemed revenge plans on everyone who describes Sky in less-than-favorable terms. There’s no chance I could do it, but I bet Liska would know someone, and O’Keefe is the type to be in on a revenge plot.

I won’t let anyone get away with hurting Sky. Not even me.

“Mav.” Sky waits until I look at him to continue. “Anyone you’re with will be subjected to scrutiny, not only me.” He smiles and wraps an arm around my neck. “If you haven’t noticed, you’re kinda famous. You’re an amazing rookie on a great team in a city full of paparazzi. I can take it if you have my back, but if it’s too much, I understand.”

My jaw clenches as my fury rises, but I have no one to blame but myself. The best predictor of future behavior is the past, and I fucked that up. I’m mad that the universe is punishing Sky for my decision to stay in the closet and then claim to be queer when it’s safe. We wouldn’t be in this mess if I had been brave enough to admit my sexuality. “Am I allowed to be angry if someone says something untrue about you?”

“Behind closed doors, yes. Otherwise, no. You’ve had media training and know how this works. You’ll be goaded and taunted into giving a reaction. I’m your weak link.”

“Never.” I hold him tighter as I contemplate telling him our problems began when I didn’t tell my parents the truth.

“You’re my weakness too, but no one cares if the prostitute gets upset about gossip. The revered hockey player is a different story.”

“You’re not a prostitute,” I seethe through gritted teeth.

“These days, the truth has become irrelevant. The twenty-four-hour news cycle is a vicious beast searching for the newest and latest info. I’d be shocked if I’m not labeled a prostitute. Most people don’t understand that there are a variety of jobs in the sex industry which don’t involve sex.”

“It’s wrong,” I complain, and inhale his soothing scent of honey and cedarwood to remind myself this is about him and not me. About building a future, not wallowing in the past. I’ll be a man he can be proud of.

“It is, but there are far worse things we should fix before we tackle the sex workers.” He does a body roll and somehow manages to straddle me. “Big things: renewed racism and sexism and starving children.”

“I want to make the world a better place for you,” I say, and it brings tears to his eyes.

“You’re a good man, Mav. Please tell me if this becomes too much. If—”

I silence him with a kiss. “Please trust me not to let you down.” I search his eyes, and his smile lights up his face. I will prove myself by making it clear I love him and he’s my sole concern.

“Promise,” he assures me with confidence.

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CHAPTER 23

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

This time, Mav gives me and Logan his seats, and we're right against the glass. I'm cheering my face off and jumping up and down. We're close enough to see the players' expressions under their face masks.

"Thought you weren't a fan of sportsball," Logan drawls.

"This is hockey. Big difference. Huge." I fling my arms apart and almost knock the beer from the guy next to me. "Sorry!" I yell, and turn away. I've been riding the high that is the new Maverick. My Arion.

It's a fairy-tale version of what I dreamed possible. He's honest, communicative, and openly claims me in public. Everything I've ever wanted.

And that scares the shit out of me.

If it's too good to be true…it is.

Period.

My real life and impossible scenarios don't intersect.

Women carrying signs to get Mav's attention are all over the arena. My insecurities rear up and attack my brain.

The action's so close our seats vibrate when two players hit the wall.

Mav and I are most definitely on a collision course.

It took me a long time and lots of therapy to accept I love my current life. At first, I rationalized being a camboy to pay my bills. A way to ensure I'll never be homeless again.

My family didn’t accept my sexuality and would disown me if given the chance. I didn’t give them the chance.

It’s hard to break ingrained thoughts and opinions. Even with tons of support, the process took years. Most people don’t aspire to take their clothes off for strangers. It’s not on the top of anyone’s job list.

Mav has been nothing but supportive and has given me zero reasons to doubt him.

That’s not normal. People have opinions and judge others.

Doubt gnaws at my insides, begging me to be cautious and not hand my heart over to Mav. Too late for that.

But he’s so happy to see me and has practically moved into my brownstone. I crave the life he’s offering so much I’m afraid I’ll strangle us to death, with fear forcing me to hang on tighter and tighter.

Brant scores when he’s with Mav’s line, so they meet for a celly dance I helped them create. Mav and his wingers have a separate dance if Brant and O’Keefe aren’t on the ice.

It’s honestly incredible how much stability they have on skates. Some people couldn’t do the dance moves on a hardwood floor, let alone on ice skates.

Brant’s goal puts the Enforcers up by one, but there’s too much time left to take a win for granted.

Drake smashes the guy who hits Lucky into the boards and gets a penalty for tripping. He hugs Lucky and says something before skating to the sin bin. That’s my favorite term for the penalty box. Grown men getting into trouble playing a violent sport, and it’s a sin. Hilarious. Drake wasn’t subtle, and now the other team has a power play.

I grip Lo’s hand and stare at the puck, summoning the mental power to stop it from going into the goal. I’ve become a crazy fan. No regrets.

Benz is in goal tonight, and he’s playing with honed precision. He deflects it, but their forward swats it, and Benz makes a diving catch.

The next thirty seconds last a lifetime, and there’s still a minute and a half left on Drake’s penalty time. Ace gets the puck and sends it across the centerline to give them time to change lines.

Mav returns to the ice, and Lo wrenches his hand from mine, shaking it.

“I need this,” he says in a droll tone.

But I ignore him, keeping my eyes on the puck.

Mav has explained to me countless times how everyone has a role and it changes if there's a power play. I hear: blah, blah, blah. But now that info seems vitally important, and I wish I'd paid attention.

Griff gets the puck to Mav, and they race toward the opposition's goal. This is when they try to keep possession and run the penalty out instead of scoring right away.

My eyes flick between the puck and the timer. Mav keeps the puck on his stick near center ice, and he's not challenged. Time ticks along at an absurdly slow pace.

Mav fakes a spin, then shoots the puck with lightning speed over the goalie's left shoulder. The power play ends, and we're up by two instead of tied.

I jump around, hugging Lo. "They did it!" I whoop.

Lo squints at the jumbotron. "The game's not over."

"But we scored on their power play!" I exclaim.

"We." Lo barks a laugh. We used to make fun of fans who'd say "we" regarding their team. Irrationally thinking they had some part in the success. I'm all about the "we" when it's the Enforcers.

There's only three minutes left in the game, and Lo gives me the look.

"No, stay." I hug his arm and plead.

"Why? You go be with your man, and I'm getting out before the mass exodus. Text me when you're home or if you need me." He lifts me off my feet, then disappears as the Enforcers change lines.



My arms swing awkwardly as I follow Mav's instructions to the dressing room. My anxiety has taken over, and my body can't remember the coordination needed to walk normally.

I'm having flashbacks from high school of waiting and waiting for Mav only to be left behind. Logically, this has nothing to do with that. But in my experience, stress overrides logic every single time.

I've lost my damn mind.

The dressing room is boisterous after their win. Mav said, once the press leaves, I can enter. Before, no significant others were allowed in. Before two sets of players started sleeping together, before the captain and the team

trainer got together, and before the goalie coach quit to be with a goalie. Guess since half the team already had their partners in the locker room, the rules were changed.

I'm not brave enough to find out if the press is still there, so I wait, leaning against the wall a few feet from the door. I check my phone and see nothing from Mav, so I check my messages.

There's an unsettling message from an unknown former client, and the wording reminds me of the guy from the gala. Ugh. I should block him and be done with him. For some reason, I pity the guy. He's more of a lost retriever than an angry pit bull.

The door opens, and O'Keefe struts out, stopping to sneer when he sees me. "Press should be out soon," he spits out, but he continues past me into another room, not giving me a chance to respond.

Mav told me O'Keefe hates anyone touching or looking at King and not to take it personally. I don't, not really, but it'd be great to assure him I'm not a threat.

An attractive woman exits the dressing room with a press pass hanging around her neck. Her smile widens when she sees me, putting me on edge.

"You were at the gala the other night, weren't you?" She stands in front of me, waiting for an answer, but I don't give her one, and the silence is deafening. She shifts uncomfortably, but I'm not volunteering information. "You must be shy."

"Hey"—O'Keefe yells and grabs me from behind—"don't talk to him."

I let out an involuntary scream, causing O'Keefe to jump away and the woman to retreat down the hall.

Mav flies through the door with a murderous expression, ready to fight.

"Mav"—I reach out for him—"I'm fine. Startled."

O'Keefe's eyes are wide, and he takes another step back. "A reporter had him cornered, and I scared her off, but I frightened Skylar."

The rest of the team has filtered into the hall behind Mav, and Grayson appears next to O'Keefe, coming from the training room.

I'm nodding fervently in agreement as Mav takes me in his arms. "You sure?" he whispers in my hair.

"Yes," I affirm, kicking myself for my reaction. "I'm a drama queen," I joke.

"I'll change, and we can go." He kisses the top of my head.

“Don’t you want to celebrate? Isn’t the team going out? Congrats on your goal,” I say in rapid succession, holding him back from responding.

“We can celebrate together,” he says quietly.

It’s not clear if that’s what he’s hoping for or if he’s doing it for me. “Whatever you’re up for,” I say brightly.

With the distraction, the press has been lingering but leave as it’s clear that everyone is done talking to them.

Jamal King’s glares alternate between me and O’Keefe. I throw him a reassuring smile. It’s hardly O’Keefe’s fault I’m jumpy about people touching me. A normal person doesn’t scream, and they’d appreciate his effort.

“O’Keefe, sorry I yelled. Thanks for helping me with the reporter.” I lean against Mav as I speak, sending a silent signal that I’m glad he’s here.

“It was the woman who wrote the shit about us being related,” he says to King as a way of explaining. “If I had my way, she’d never be allowed in our dressing room again,” he fumes.

“Who shouldn’t be allowed?” Ari Dimon strolls up and asks.

The team nearly teleports into the locker room, leaving only a few of us in the hall.

Mr. Dimon stares us all down, expecting an answer.

Mav decides it’s his job to answer for us. “The lady from Sportsbuzzz tried to get information from Sky.”

“Lady, my ass,” O’Keefe mutters in disgust.

King grabs O’Keefe’s hand and drags him into the locker room.

“She wrote the trash piece about Mr. King and Mr. O’Keefe?” Ari asks.

“And the one about Grayson,” Brant says, and Grayson nods.

“I’ll get her press pass revoked.” He spins on his heel and stalks away.

“I’ll shower quick.” Mav leads me into the dressing room, and I’m in awe. I’ve seen their room from news clips, but they don’t capture the scope of it. The purple-and-black logo on the floor, the labeled cubbies with each player’s name, and the stench. Hockey stench is its own animal. It definitely has four legs and can kill you.

Mav gathers his shower stuff while I fake being a normal human, sitting on the bench by his locker.

“We can go out if you want,” I say, examining his face to get a better read on his emotions.

“You’re the boss. You decide,” he answers with a grin, but it doesn’t reach his eyes.

“Not me,” I disagree.

“Always you.” He lifts my chin and places a firm kiss on my lips.

“Hey, no kissy-face in—”

“Shut it, Benz,” Mav says in time with half the team.

Mav glares at Benz and kisses me again. Thankfully, I’m sitting, or my knees would give out.

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Chapter 24

Maverick Maher

“It’s a happy surprise, but don’t get grand ideas; it’s a little thing.” Sky tugs me through the brownstone’s front door toward the upstairs.

“We’re not going into the kitchen. Is it a sexy surprise?” I ask, blocking out his scream echoing in my head. I worry our relationship is more stressful for him than it’s worth. He pretends he’s not on edge and doesn’t confide in me.

“No.” He smirks at me over his shoulder. “You’ll have to disclose your kinks for that.”

I stop walking. “What?” I ask in alarm. I’m not sure I have kinks. Will that be a deal-breaker? What if I’m overbearing and worse—boring? By his expression, he sees my distress.

“Arion, it was a joke.” He uses my nickname, infusing the power of a Greek god, and plasters himself to my body with his arms around my waist. “What’s going on with you?”

“I’m fine.” The words tumble out, and I don’t dispute them.

“If you remember the code to the door, I promise not to call you a liar.” He stands on his tiptoes but can’t reach my ear, and his breath tickles my skin.

“You trust me with your codes? You haven’t changed them?” I pick him up under his ass and carry him to the door, balancing him so I can push the buttons.

“I won’t dignify that with an answer.” He fails to keep the hurt out of his tone.

Once the door is open, he directs me to the front room on the opposite side of his bedroom. “Another mysteriously locked room.” I turn the handle, and it opens easily.

“Not mysterious, a storage dump, and I cleaned it out when you were away. Now it’s ready for use. Enter.” He flings his arm out toward a living room. A fully furnished room with a comfy couch, two leather club chairs, and a double recliner covered in a soft gray fabric. He accessorized the room with an extra-large TV, vintage lamps, and funky area rugs over the hardwood floors. It’s eclectic but also fits the traditional style of the house while incorporating his bold personality. “Do you like it?”

I’m too speechless to confirm I love it.

“You’re disappointed.” He unhooks his legs from my waist and slides down my body.

“No.” I pull him back against my front. “How did you do this without me knowing?”

“I’ve been sorting through the junk in here to make it a proper living room for us, and I did most of the work while you were out of the house. The door is always closed so you couldn’t see the progress, but it took weeks from start to a proper room. The reading nook is crowded, and we can’t have people over.” He’s speaking fast, giving away his nervousness.

I spin him around and throw him onto the couch, smothering him with my body. The soft fabric molds us in its cushions. “I love it. You did this for me?”

He nods and says, “For us. I only ever had Lo and Maria over, so my lack of a living room didn’t matter.”

“Another room to christen,” I declare, and cover him with my body. Cupping his face, giving him space to talk about it. “Are you really okay? From earlier?”

“Yeah. O’Keefe was trying to help, and I freaked out.”

“You don’t scream for no reason.” I scan his face for clues, hoping mind reading becomes my newest skill. I replay the situations where people touching him made him uncomfortable. The idea that someone hurt him takes hold and shakes me up.

“Today I did.” His lips turn up, but he can’t manage a smile. “I was on edge from the reporter, and I’m jumpy when strangers touch me. O’Keefe

pulled my arm from behind to get me away from her, but it happened so fast, and I didn't register it was him, and my lungs decided to bellow before my brain got involved." Sky runs his fingers through my stubble.

"Are you sure that's it?" I ask carefully.

"O'Keefe might not be my friend, but he would never hurt me. That's a fact." He tilts his head to kiss my lips. "Sorry if I scared you."

It's impossible to be what he needs when shadows from the past haunt him.

"I need to feel you're real," I blurt out, hugging him close, daring any darkness to touch us now. I'd give up hockey to create a tether to bind us together. Forever.

"Last I checked, I'm a real boy with working parts." He laughs, and I duck my head. "Mav, talk to me."

"Don't worry. You're perfect." I open my eyes to kiss him.

"That's a damn lie." He giggles, and my jaw drops. "What? I'm far from perfect. You know it."

"You're brave enough to go after what makes you happy. I admire that." I heft him on top of me to bear his weight. My legs hang over the arm rest, and he snuggles into me.

Sky kisses me reverently, exploring my mouth as if it's the first time. I could spend my entire life kissing him and not get enough.

"Do you trust me?" he asks with lust-filled eyes.

"Of course!" I pant.

"Then we should christen this room. Break it in and all, doncha think?" His hand wedges between us to cup my balls.

"There's no situation in which I'd ever say no," I say, chasing his lips for another kiss. "Do whatever you want." It's tempting to put my arms behind my head in a gesture of submission.

"I'm starving." He takes one of my hands and sucks my fingers. "Craving cake actually."

My body flushes with heat as my blood cools, caught between nerves and desire. Sky is the only one I trust with the intimate parts of me.

"You stiffened." He removes my shirt and kisses along the column of my neck. "We can do something else." Sky looks at me from under his lashes, and I'm certain he'll take care of me.

"I'm all yours, Angel." And I am. "Even with that evil glint in your eyes."

Sky laughs, orders me to stand, then wrestles me out of my pants and underwear. Soon I'm kneeling on the sofa, facing the back cushions.

"Clothes are so unnecessary." Sky kisses one cheek and then the other.

"Totally," I agree. A shiver releases some of my tension.

"Have I told you I dream about your ass?" His tongue runs down my spine, and his hands cradle my hips. "So meaty. More than my handful, begging…no, aching to be touched."

My brain cells have left the building, and I nod, managing an incoherent moan.

"Has anyone else ever touched you here?" Sky's hand parts my cheeks while his index finger trails my crack until it finds my hole.

I'm trembling with anticipation and squeak out, "No."

"You saved this for me?" The pad of his finger circles my rim.

"Uh-huh." I push back so he'll enter me.

Instead, he kneels on the floor behind me and laps at my rim until my shoulders relax. He's warm and cautious and careful, and it's not enough.

"More," I growl, and he obliges by burying his face in my cheeks and sucking my hole. An animalistic grunt punches up from my gut, traveling out my throat while I vibrate. It's nothing I've felt before. Toys can't mimic Sky's tongue, lips, teeth, and sounds. He spears past my rim, pushing his tongue inside, enjoying me as his last and favorite meal.

We find a rhythm that brings us both higher. Wet sucking sounds punctuated with his moans and mine, creating the most beautiful music.

I need to come.

This should last forever.

My cock is weeping for attention.

Reading my mind, Sky strokes me, but I bat his hand away.

"I'll come," I threaten, uncertain if I should beg or draw it out.

His laugh fills my ears, akin to wind chimes tinkling in the breeze, then morphs into greedy groans.

Sky tongue-fucks my ass, and my arousal spreads with the speed of wildfire. I'm consumed by him with no regrets, aching to burn to ash at his command. I'm a raging inferno ready to explode.

I whimper.

"You're so good for me, Mav. Saving yourself so I can eat your pretty ass until we come. You close?" he asks, and I whimper again.

I’m choking on air, unable to get it into my lungs. My brain is static, and my body his to own. Sky swears, and with his face pressed against me, he fumbles for something in the table drawer.

My mouth opens to plead, “Don’t stop,” but they’re garbled sounds instead of words. My ass clamps around his tongue, and lightning strikes my veins. My vision blurs, and I’m only partially aware of Sky turning me over.

I whine as his mouth leaves me, but it’s replaced with a slick finger. Sky swallows my cock down his throat and gulps at the ropes of cum I feed him. There are so many simultaneous sensations, but when his finger caresses my prostate, he depletes my balls and my brain short-circuits.

Sky owns me.

Body and soul.

When I return to myself, I’m in Sky’s lap and he’s carding his fingers through my hair. I’m boneless and sitting up is a chore, but it’s time to suck all the sense out of him.

“Stay still. Pretty sure you blacked out.” Sky’s warm palm puts pressure on my chest, and I collapse on him.

“Your turn,” I slur.

“Arion, you gave me my turn.” I must look confused because Sky continues. “Your ass spasmed and your cum spurted out like a pressure washer. I came faster than a ballerina whirling at a Broadway audition.”

“Love your dirty talk,” I mumble, and pout because I didn’t get his cum. “It’s not fair; I didn’t taste you.”

“Make you a deal: When you can wiggle your toes, you can lick me clean.” He places an open-mouthed kiss on my forehead.

I barely move my toes. “Almost there,” I say proudly.

“Can’t wait,” he murmurs, and I flush with anticipation.

Our silence becomes an extension of a blissed-out haze, where time ceases and we only exist within each other.

My heart beats a steady rhythm of “Don’t leave me, don’t leave me, don’t leave me.”

“Mav?” Sky asks cautiously, and my eyes fly open. “Why would I leave you?”

A million answers slide through my brain faster than a puck on ice. I can’t lie, but the truth is so stupid. The silence stretches taut and fragile.

“It’s nothing. I’m babbling. Ignore me.” I pause, tucking my insecurities away so I don’t wreck his surprise and hard work.

“No, tell me.” He grabs my face so I can’t look away.

“Did you get me cum drunk so you can interrogate me?”

“Remember, I don’t play fair, I play to win.” He rubs a circle on my chest, titillating my brain.

“What are you winning?” I stretch to get my blood moving to satisfy him.

“Only the best prize in the universe. You.” Sky plants a chaste kiss on my lips. “But don’t change the subject. You’ve been off since we got home.” He holds up his hand. “And I’m fully aware I got you off.”

“You did. You’re more than I deserve after having my head up my ass for so long.” I crawl into his lap, pinning him down and shushing him when he objects. “I’m waiting for you to decide being with me isn’t worth all the complications. It’s not rational. I get that.” My voice rises with uncertainty. I’m not sure I’d be as forgiving as he has been or be selfless enough to carve out a huge section of a home for him.

Sky’s eyes fall shut. “I’m not keeping score or holding grudges.” He sighs. “Guess why I used this room for storage.”

I let him out from under me to straddle me, willing him to keep sharing his secrets.

“It makes no logical sense to use the front room with great street views for storage, but I was hiding. Mainly from self-judgment. I unlearned a shit ton of prejudice. I couldn’t eat and pay rent on a dancer’s salary. A hard fact of life is that most successful dancers have family to pay their bills or they find sponsors. I didn’t set out to be a stripper.”

“I’m an asshole for calling you one at the bachelor party. I apologize.” My chest aches worse than a full-speed hit to the sternum.

“I was desperate and figured I’d do it on the side while I kept auditioning. Through The Q Solutions, I got hooked up with a therapist who guided me to find acceptance in my beliefs and separate them from how we grew up and what other people think.

“Stripping isn’t dirty or shameful. Showing my body while I dance is exhilarating. It’s probably like a runner’s high. My website gave me total control over my creativity and clients. I’m self-made but felt society’s stigma. I piled junk in this room and created my studio in the back so that no one from the street would ever guess what I do. Self-condemnation had

me hiding instead of using the logical solution: blackout curtains.” His finger traces my top lip, lingering on the bow in the middle.

“Shame is a hard habit to kick, and it had a deep control over me. The thing about a horrible habit is that it pops up when you least expect it. I’m happy and love my life, but shame messes with my head and plants seeds that you’ll walk away.” He buries his face in my neck. “I renovated this room to face my demons and maybe, possibly, make it harder for you to leave.”

“I’ll never be ashamed of you. Debatably, I’m fucked up because knowing other people watch you, but I’m the only one who can touch you, is a spectacular turn-on. I’m out here worried you’ll realize some other guy is way less complicated.” The admission lifts the anchor weighing on me.

“What is wrong with us? Both scared the other will leave. Is it mommy or daddy issues?” Sky nestles as close as he can get without being in my skin.

“I can’t go back to a life without you. Mommy or daddy issues aside, since I probably have both. Losing you is the worst-possible scenario,” I say in a gross understatement. He’s part of me.

Sky slaps a hand over my mouth. “Do. Not. Invite bad karma in. Promise to talk to me if you—”

“If my people-pleasing tendencies and insecurities fuck up our relationship,” I cut in.

“Mav, your issues don’t scare me. You’re stuck with me. I’m not above velcroing myself to you. Could make hockey tricky, but we’ll work it out.” He laughs, and I suck the sound from him.

“You won’t be so cheerful when I find you a Velcro suit to wear. You can dangle off my chest all day long.” The mental image makes me chuckle.

“Worth it,” he sings at full volume.

“My toes have regained feeling, so it’s time for my cleanup duty.” I yank his pants off before he objects.

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CHAPTER 25

Maverick Maher

Sky's sweat gives him a shiny glow through the video app. He's on the new living room couch, but his computer is close enough he takes up most of the screen.

"What should we do for Valentine's Day? I have a game, but we can do a full celebration the day after."

Sky pulls his hair into a band off his head. "It's not a big deal. We can do whatever, but no pressure for it to be super romantic." He gags, demonstrating his view of the overly commercialized holiday. "Besides, we're keeping a low profile."

My smile falls, but I rub my scruff in an attempt to hide how much that low profile hurts. "No, we're not commenting or confirming we're a couple, which is completely different. If I had my way, I'd have a press conference the way Jayce did and tell the world you're my boyfriend." My light tone disguises my frustration. Sky doesn't want to be my secret but insists on not confirming our relationship.

"That's inviting the devil to dinner," he scoffs.

"I'm taking you to dinner," I rush before he can object. "It won't be on the fourteenth, so people can speculate, but they won't have inside information. We'll get dressed up and go out. Dinner and a club." I nod my head as if it's a solid plan, but I should pick a place and make a reservation.

All Sky’s stress bleeds away, and his gorgeous smile takes over his face. “You gonna wine me and dine me?”

“And dance you, in that order.” I lie back on the hotel pillow and hold my phone up.

“Dance me? Hmm, that sounds fun.” He rubs his sweaty neck, and I groan.

“I’d pay anything to be there and lick the sweat off you,” I murmur, because these walls can be thin and, as a rookie, I don’t need to add fuel to the team’s shit-talking flames.

“I have one more video. Should I save it until tomorrow, right before you come home?” He peels his shirt off, and I stare. “No, okay then.” Sky shrugs, pretending he’ll do either, but the glint in his eyes gives his lust away.

“I should land at 11:30 p.m., and I’ll get a car service to your house. You’d better be ready,” I threaten, pursing my lips so they don’t turn up.

“I’m always ready for you.”

Tomorrow night can’t come soon enough.



“Maher, reservation for two,” I tell the host. The guys were helpful in choosing a great place to take Sky. Everyone had their very strong opinions on the best restaurant. I chose City Steak because we’ll get a delicious meal, but it’s not overly pretentious.

“This place is great. It’s not what I pictured.” Sky swivels to get the 360 view.

“You doubt me? What did you expect?” I ask, as the host leads us to our table.

“Stuffy, white tablecloths, old people…” he lists and trails off. “These chandeliers are killer. I’d love something like them for my entryway. Very dramatic.” They provide subtle, intimate lighting along with wall sconces and table candles.

After the host leaves, I pull Sky’s seat out for him. The rich, dark wood adds to the upscale, cozy vibe.

“You’re so fancy tonight.” He flushes an adorable pink in the dim light.

“I put my fancy pants on for you.” I sit next to him.

“But I picked them out.” He reaches for my hand but stops.

I intertwine our fingers on the table, where everyone can see. “So for future dates… I should avoid white tablecloths and old people?”

“It depends on if Nonna is coming with us,” he sasses.

“On a date?” I raise an eyebrow.

“She could be our beard.” He fails at keeping a straight face.

“Maria would probably accidentally tell our secrets while she tries to feed the paparazzi.” In my peripheral vision, a server lingers near our table, so I open my menu.

“Truth.” Sky scans his oversized menu and needs both hands, so I reluctantly let him go. “Everything looks so good. It’s hard to decide.” His eyes flick to mine. “Hmm, but the escargot is tempting.”

“We could ask the server for recommendations or get that.” I take a deep breath and visualize the ice rink after the Zamboni has cleared it. He’s teasing me on purpose, but I’m more mature now.

“You turned green.” He cackles. “The bathrooms are that way.” Sky points.

“Someone thinks it’s funny to ruin a date.” I shoot him a scathing glance.

“Oops, sorry.” His hand covers mine.

“Gotcha,” I boom, and he slaps my arm. “You get what you give.”

“Fair.” Sky leaves his hand on mine. “Did Logan send you the VIP passes?”

“Yes,” I grumble because I don’t need his friend to get us into the club, but Sky’s so excited I couldn’t say no.

Dinner is fantastic, and Sky did not get snails.

“I’ll call a car, or we could walk?” I’m so full I need the walk before I dance.

“You might be part polar bear, but some of us freeze in this weather.” Sky’s face scrunches up. “We’ll take a few laps around the club before I drag you out to dance,” he promises.

When we arrive, we’re let directly into the club without waiting in line, and a wall of heat from hundreds of bodies slaps my face.

Sky fans himself. “From popsicle to flambee. Follow me.” He grabs my hand and shimmies his way through the crowd. Behind him, I make apologies for running people over, but I’m not letting him go. The bass vibrates in my chest as the combination of sweat and cologne assaults my nostrils.

We pick our way around the sticky dance floor until we get to a staircase with a bouncer. Sky says something I can’t hear over the music, and the bouncer steps aside.

There is a series of small rooms along a railing overlooking the dance floor. Sky steps into an empty one and throws his arms around my neck. “We made it.”

We sway to the music, and I pull him indecently close. That signals my dick it’s time to get lucky, and Sky moans his approval. He makes me forget where I am, what I’m doing, and who I am.

This isn’t a gay club, but it’s very liberal and is becoming more popular in the queer community. Sky’s friend Lo helped it relaunch after the new owners took over.

“Wanna drink?” Sky motions to a kiosk on the counter next to the door. “Or we could close the door for privacy.” His fingers tease my biceps.

“Everyone down there can see.” The floor below is a sea of bodies writhing and grinding on each other.

“Can they?”

Blood fills my cock. “What are you suggesting?” My arms band around him, pinning him to me.

“I’ve always wanted to do it in public where people can see but don’t *know* what we’re doing.” Brown eyes meet mine, and they’re the start and end of me.

I’ll give up breathing for that. “I can’t. Finn would kill me, but then he’d come after you, and that’s not acceptable.”

“Sweet, funny Finn?” Sky stands on his toes so our cocks align.

“You’ve never seen him hangry or pissed off when one of us has done something stupid.”

“If you bend me over that chair, everything will be covered and hardly anyone will notice,” he says, and I gawk at him.

“Hardly anyone?” I repeat.

“Yes, if you can be quiet and don’t attract the bouncer since I lied to him so we could be in this room.” His hand dips between us, grips my cock, and twists. “Also, FYI, I have a plug in so no prep necessary.”

My dick is fighting to get out of my pants. It’s a bad idea. Terrible. But it’s also a fantasy. Everyone watching Sky and wishing they were me because I’m the only one who experiences his body when he comes around my cock.

“You planned this,” I accuse without heat.

“Not this specifically, but what kind of boyfriend would I be if I didn’t do something naughty for our Valentine’s Day celebration?”

“Tell me you’re my boyfriend again.” I crowd him into the corner.

“You’re my favorite boyfriend.” He licks his lips and my brain malfunctions.

His glorious fucking pants are too tight for me to get my hand in to check if he has a plug. “Naughty boyfriends have to pay the price,” I growl, and nip his neck.

Sky’s head lolls, giving me more access. “I’ll pay whatever price.”

“You’re serious, aren’t you?” I suck his neck and unbutton his pants.

Sky edges away to read my face. “Really?” he whispers, then arches his back and pushes his hips into me.

I nod, not trusting my voice. He’s right, the chair’s solid, and unless someone has x-ray vision, they won’t be able to see. It’s a leather swivel chair with adjustable height.

“This plug has been in all night, and I’ll explode if you don’t get inside me.” He adjusts the chair’s height and locks it in place.

“The goal is for you to detonate once I’m inside you.” I ease his pants over his ass. “I’m gonna paint your insides with a load of my cum.”

“Hurry,” Sky begs, with his legs spread as far as his pants will allow him.

I tease the plug in and out. “Spit,” I order, and hold my hand up to his mouth. He’s well lubed, but I’m not. “My perfect, Angel,” I coo, and get myself ready.

This is risky, so I check in once more, and after he begs, I drive my cock into the hilt.

“Fuck,” I swear, and rest my head on his nape.

“Arion, you gotta move. I’m halfway there.”

“We’re doing this again as soon as we get home,” I state, and lose myself in his body. Short, shallow strokes help us keep our balance, and our bodies know the drill. They’re in sync and about to blow together.

“Mav, look up.” Sky raises his head, and I follow his line of sight to the bodies dancing below.

Only half of the lower level is visible from our position, but I’m fucking Sky. The fact that anyone could be watching sends me over the edge. Sky comes with me and milks my cock for every drop.

I’m higher than I’ve ever been. Drunk on Sky while a few people stare up at us. It’s obvious what we’re doing, but no one can see. His body has become one with the chair, and nothing compares to this. Not even winning The Cup is on par with being inside him.

One person’s jealous eyes lock with mine, but Sky shifts, stealing all my attention.

“Drink or go home?”

“Home.” I’m reduced to single words but reach for the cloth in my pocket to clean the love of my life.

“Where’d that come from?” Sky eyes me over his shoulder.

“My pocket, home, my grandfather? What are you asking?” I ease out and catch my cum. He has a fist full of his own, and I hand him a cocktail napkin.

Sky howls in surprise, sending a gush of cum from his ass. “You’re cleaning me up with a family heirloom?”

I stiffen, then laugh into his skin. “He’d be so proud of the way I take care of my man.”

“I love it.” Sky pushes off the chair, and we redress the best we can.

The bouncer raises his brow when we pass him, but Sky flashes his megawatt smile and pats his arm as if consoling him.

I’m relaxed and sated, pulling him onto my lap in the car. The driver doesn’t pay us any attention, and we should be home for round two in half an hour.

“Wish we were closer,” Sky says with a pout.

“Me too.” My ringing phone takes some repositioning to get it out of my pocket.

Finn’s name pops up, and he speaks as I answer. “Heads-up. Date night is hitting the gossip sites.”

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CHAPTER 26

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

Mav stands on my bed, holding a cookie over his head. The last cookie. My favorite, which Maria made, and I can't buy more of them. His grin reminds me of when he won an individual hockey trophy in high school.

"Someone got cocky." I feign disinterest, hoping to catch him off guard.

"Someone's been full of my cock, and I need refueling." He licks the cookie, assuming I won't totally eat it after. "It's not every day we get away with having sex in a club without anyone noticing."

"You don't fool me. The only reason you didn't shit yourself when Finn called is because you threw up in your mouth." Honestly, we both died in the rideshare. Until Finn told us someone sold pictures of us at the restaurant. We celebrated by having more sex behind closed doors.

"I'm feeling invincible right about now." He shimmies and his dick waves at me.

"You're a bad influence on me. I've never done anything that risky before." I stretch out and casually play with a nipple. Mav's eyes follow the path of my finger, and I subtly open my legs.

He snorts.

"It's true. Before you, I was a wealthy camboy who rarely had sex." My finger continues down my abs to my very light happy trail.

"That's hard to believe." He rolls his neck and it cracks.

“I’d never lie to you.” I crook my finger, then pat the bed next to me. Mav falls for it, and I wait until he’s in range. “But I’ll steal your cookie.” My mouth closes over half the cookie, and I munch, making yummy sounds.

Mav glances from the half-eaten portion in his hand to my mouth in disbelief. “Angel, whatever I have is yours. You don’t have to steal a thing.” He kisses me and tastes of sugar and chocolate and my Mav.

I melt in his arms, letting his bulletproof attitude seep into me as if my room is safe from the outside world and nothing can touch us here.

“You make me reckless. All I want is to claim you in front of the world.” Mav hugs me tight enough to fuse us together.

“See, you are the bad influence. Public sex is next level.” My heart’s full enough to burst, and I could chill here forever.

“Not what I meant.” He swats my ass. “I’m growing on you. Soon you’ll be begging me to make a public declaration.”

“No lie was detected,” I say sleepily, and it’s the last coherent thought I have.



Of course Mav’s on an away trip when Maria needs us. He couldn’t do anything but be here at the hospital. At least he would keep my mind from running through worst-case scenarios.

He’s positive the danger has passed that pictures will surface online of us having sex in the club. I’m not so sure, but that was last week’s news. To say we were relieved when only dinner pics surfaced is an understatement.

The social worker gives me another exasperated glance because I’m unfocused and this is taking longer than it should. Maria is my first priority tonight. The social worker has a right to be upset, but in my defense, I’m young, and Maria will live forever. Denial works for me.

“This one will have to wait until we have a notary available to sign with you.” She uses her pen to drag the document naming me Maria’s healthcare proxy to her. “You’re lucky your grandmother was conscious when she came in. Otherwise, we legally couldn’t let you make decisions.”

“We are both very grateful.” The truth with the lie. Hopefully, it won’t matter that I’m not her blood relation after the paperwork is signed. I

panicked, words flew out claiming she's my Nonna, and Maria agreed.

A video call from Mav pops up on my phone. "Do you mind if I take this? I need to tell people."

She agrees and leaves the room for my privacy.

"Hey," I answer, barely hanging on.

"What's wrong?" His hair's wet from the shower and sticks out in every direction. I've never been happier to see him.

My tears gush like they've been waiting for him to fall.

"Are you hurt? Are you in the emergency room? Sky, talk to me!" Mav is ready to jump through the phone.

I shake my head. "I'm fine. It's not me. It's Maria."

His relief causes a knot in my stomach and an irrational flash of anger.

"What's going on? Will she be okay?" His soft voice soothes my irritation.

"She fell and broke her arm, but they're running all these tests and won't tell me anything. I signed to be her healthcare proxy and will sign a power of attorney when a notary comes on shift." My spine straightens, and I wipe the tears away so I'm presentable when they let me see Maria.

"You should've called me."

My laugh comes out as a hiccup. "You were busy, and Maria needed my attention," I say with more snark than necessary.

"I'd be there if I could."

"You're the best, and I'm glad you called. Did you win?" I ask, needing to talk about something normal.

"No. I never thought I'd say this, but we miss O'Keefe. Don't tell him I said that because it'll go straight to his head." Mav leans in conspiratorially.

I bring the phone closer as well. "Your secret is safe with me." A noise steals my attention, and it's a doctor standing in the doorway. "Gotta go. Call you in a minute."



Maria sleeps peacefully, and I step out to the family waiting room to regroup. Slouching in a seat, I exhale slowly. The doctor assured us it's good news. Sorry, but in my world, fractures and blood clots aren't good news.

“Angeldancer4, is that you?”

I don’t lift my head or give any recognition to my screen name. The last thing I need is an interaction with a client. Not here. Not now.

Settle in with a love story.

Head to Lokepub for more romance novels.

“Hey.” He’s closer, and I freeze with vague recognition of his voice but stay silent.

“Angel, it’s me.” The guy rests his hand on my shoulder. “Buddy.”

“Please don’t touch me. I don’t know who you are.” My instinct is to flinch away and curl into myself. My pulse races, making me lightheaded on top of the stress. He seems harmless, but touching me sends my head to a messed-up place.

“You don’t have to hide from me.” He places his arm around me, then screams as his hand is ripped away. In the fight, flight, or freeze response, I freeze, which doesn’t say much for my survival in an actual emergency.

“He asked you nicely not to touch him. I’m telling you to leave, or I’ll call security.” My savior is none other than Theo O’Keefe. This is hell on earth. Fate should kill me now and get it over with.

I recognize him as the guy from the gala who touched me, and his eyes fill with tears. “Don’t do this to me again.” But he has enough sense to run away from O’Keefe. How could he find me in two crowded places weeks apart? The probability has to be low.

“Thanks?” I ask, confused. “What are you doing here? Problem with your finger?” O’Keefe couldn’t travel with the team because he broke a finger and will be out for a couple of weeks. Their trainer didn’t trust him to rest if he’s with the team. That seems valid.

“I wish.” O’Keefe throws himself into the seat next to me. “Here.” He tosses me a to-go bag.

I can smell the bacon, egg, and cheese before I open it. My stomach rumbles in anticipation of the BEC, which is on my favorite everything bagel. “Thanks.”

“Don’t thank me. Thank Jamal and Mav for beating me into submission,” he huffs with a smirk.

“Sorry you got the short end of the stick.” I bite into the sandwich and have to slow myself down from inhaling it and choking to death. “You must have more important things to do”—I pause—“and there’s the whole deal of you hating me.” I’m too exhausted to filter my words.

“It’s not you.” O’Keefe’s huge frame takes up so much space. “What can I say? I’m an only child. I don’t share.” He shrugs.

“Share?! I’m not sharing with you.” No matter if he means this food or Mav, I won’t share either. A piece of bacon gets lodged in my throat, and I cough.

O’Keefe thumps my back. “Glad we’re on the same page. As long as you don’t touch Jamal, we don’t have a problem.”

“I’ve never touched him. That’s not what I do,” I say straightforwardly.

“That’s what he said.” He scrubs a hand over his face, processing.

“I don’t do in-person sessions, and I dance 99 percent of the time.” I lick the bagel seasoning off the wrapper. Not that O’Keefe is entitled to an explanation, but him and Mav are teammates and it’s better to clear the air.

O’Keefe grunts, and we sit in silence for a minute.

“Thanks for getting rid of that guy.” I wave my hand in the general direction he left. “I’m not in the headspace to handle it.”

“A client?” he asks.

“Must be. But he doesn’t match any of the profile pictures. Imagine lying to a sex worker.” I gasp in mock horror.

“Stay away from him,” O’Keefe warns, but I’ve got no desire to interact with the guy.

“Roger that.” I salute him.

More silence.

“Sooo, I should go to my Nonna,” I say but don’t move.

O’Keefe nods and shoves to his feet. “I have specific information I need before I’m allowed to leave you. I will confirm you ate. Have you slept? How long do you plan on staying? What is Maria’s prognosis? How long before she can come home?”

“You memorized all that?” I stand and take a few steps away so he’s not towering over me.

“Sure did. I’m not facing Jamal’s wrath,” he says, and I snort in disbelief. “What? He’s got a hard side.”

My answers are enough to satisfy him, and Mav calls with the intuition of a man who knows Theo has rounded the corner out of sight.

“Thanks for sending him. I was starving,” I say as a greeting.

His brow unfurrows in relief. “Wasn’t sure if you’d speak to me again. He’s the only one I trust left in the city,” he apologizes. “I’ll fly home the second I’m able.”

“Your team needs you. Besides, he’s not so bad when King isn’t in the room.” I slouch in a waiting room chair since Maria should sleep an hour or two more.

“Yeah, he’s psycho-level possessive of King. He wasn’t my favorite person when I got here, but he grows on you.”

“Yuck, I hope not.” My joke lands, and Mav grins at me.

“I miss you,” he confesses.

“I miss you too.” I kiss my screen. “And no phone sex tonight,” I say with a pout.

“Oh, Finn says the rumors of our relationship are going more mainstream, and he needs to confirm we’re still going with ‘no comment.’ ” His eyes dull because this stance hurts him.

“For now. Once you’re home for a longer stretch, we can talk. It’ll be too hard being here alone and making the confirmation.” My words put a sparkle in his eyes.

“Should I rent a billboard?” he teases.

“I’ll research prices and prime locations,” I deadpan.

“You were made for me.” Mav sighs happily.

“Hmm, in that case, maybe I should take you on a trip to the bathroom,” I say, and his eyes pop.

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CHAPTER 27

Maverick Maher

Sky responds with a text to my call.

Angel: Meeting with doc call you later?

I reply with a heart emoji.

I've never hated away games more. I'm rethinking this career if I can't get Sky to come to some of these. No wonder half my teammates are sleeping with someone connected to the team.

I knock on King's door because he's suffering without O'Keefe. No tiny violins playing in the background here. He opens the door with his phone to his ear.

"I was right. It's Mav," he says, presumably to O'Keefe, and stands aside so I can come in.

"What happened in here?" The bed is wrecked, and the comforter is on the floor.

"Mind your business," O'Keefe quips.

"Sky's with the doctor," I whine.

King sits on the bed, back against the headboard, but I pace.

"Maria's doing much better. Should be discharged tomorrow or the next day." O'Keefe's voice floats over the speakerphone. He's been to the pulmonary floor the last couple of days, checking on Sky and bringing him food.

“I owe you, man. Anything you need, ask me.” I’d be a mess without confirmation Sky’s okay.

“You mean besides leaving my man’s room?”

Taking the hint, I cross to the door, but his next words stop me.

“Oh, and I haven’t seen that dude again, so good news, yeah?”

“What dude?” I spin around, and King’s dark complexion pales.

“We weren’t going to tell you unless it was a thing. It’s not a thing. It was a one-and-done weird client interaction at the hospital that Theo witnessed. But he’s kept his eye out and no sign of him.” King’s words hit me rapid-fire.

“Some guy tried to talk to him in the patient waiting room and grabbed his shoulder.” O’Keefe’s voice booms from the speaker.

“What! He touched Sky?” I’m snatching King’s phone without thinking.

“I took care of him, and Sky was very clear he didn’t want to be touched. Every time I go, I look for the weasel but don’t see him.” O’Keefe’s green eyes bore through the phone, willing me to calm down.

“Next time, tell me as soon as it happens.” I stalk out of the room and slam the door. It’s not their fault. Sky should’ve told me, but knowing him, he didn’t want to worry me. Returning to my room, I flop onto the unmade bed and wait for Sky’s call.

“Guess what?” His face appears on my screen. “Maria’s coming home tomorrow! Sorry I couldn’t talk, but I had to arrange a home aide for her.” He’s riding the subway home, which adds to my concern.

“You should’ve called a car. I’d pay for it,” I snap.

“Mav, I can pay for a car, but the train is faster.”

The silence hangs between us as I watch his train speed through the city.

“Do you want to hear about Maria? Or is this not a good time?”

“Sorry. Yes, please tell me.” I won’t win any boyfriend-of-the-year awards by impersonating an ass.

A blood clot issue is why they kept her for a few days. “She doesn’t have any symptoms, and they’ll monitor her, and insurance covers the cost of an aide. Nonna refused the help, but the doc gave her the choice of a nurse’s aide or a rehab facility. She picked home. Thank God! Should I thank the hockey gods as well?”

“Sure,” I say, but can’t stop the next word vomit. “Why didn’t you tell me how hard it’s been?”

“I wasn’t going to worry you for nothing. No sense in that. Are you mad?” His head tilts to the side as the train enters a tunnel.

“Would you tell me if you were upset or in trouble?” I ask, unable to keep my eyes off his gorgeous face.

“Of course! I should’ve told you all the details, but there’s nothing you could’ve done.” He scrubs his hand over his face.

“Except support you and be there for you when you need me,” I grumble. “That’s not nothing.” I take a few breaths because fighting isn’t the answer and I’m more upset about the guy he didn’t tell me about. “Sorry. I hate being so far away when you’re upset. I… You deserve someone who will be there, and making this about me is the opposite of my intention. Adding to your stress makes me an asshole.” The hotel pillow takes my punch better than a boxing champ.

“You’re amazing, and the best part of my day is talking to you. And you’re not making it about you. I’ve been on my own for so long; it’s default for me to handle things without help. But you supporting me means everything.” His face scrunches up, but I don’t jump in.

“My stop.” Sky stands and exits the train.

I’m thankful his house is only a block and a half away and in a good area. But tragedy only takes seconds and could happen anywhere.

I ask more questions about Maria’s condition and if we’ll need to make any adjustments for her.

“Not yet. At some point, she might not be able to walk up the stairs. That is a fight I’ll have to prepare for. She won’t leave her place willingly even if it’s down one floor to my place.” He climbs the stairs, but I won’t relax until he’s behind locked doors.

Sky goes directly to his bedroom, and I can’t decide how to bring up the guy O’Keefe scared off, but he beats me to it.

“Something else happened. It’s strange, but it shouldn’t be a problem. You remember the guy who approached me at the gala?” Sky lies flat and puts his phone on the pillow next to him.

“The one who touched you against your will?” I snarl.

“That’s excessive, but yes. He was here at the hospital the night I brought Maria in. He tried to talk to me, but I faked that I didn’t recognize him.” His voice softens in an effort to lessen the blow with his tone.

“And what happened?” I prompt, getting into a position to mirror him to create the illusion he’s next to me.

“Not much. Nothing really. He wanted to talk, but I wouldn’t engage, and O’Keefe showed up and ran him off. I don’t think he’ll bother me again.

Between you and O’Keefe, it’d be idiotic to come near me.” He sounds casual about it.

“Did he scare you?” I hold air in my lungs waiting for his answer.

“No, he didn’t. But it’s weird to see him in two places in such a short time that don’t have a connection to me. Like, if he showed up at my favorite coffee shop where I edit sometimes or my grocery store, I’d be afraid he was following me. The randomness makes it better, but somehow worse.” His heavy lids droop as he talks.

“Thanks for telling me. Can I help in any way?” The complete story is better and worse than I imagined, so I can relate.

He sits up on an elbow. “You knew, didn’t you? They told you.” He groans.

“O’Keefe ran his mouth tonight. They were only going to give me details if it became an issue. Don’t be angry.” My voice hitches.

“I would’ve told you sooner, but Maria needs me, and the loser isn’t worth either of our time.” He falls onto the pillow with sleepy eyes.

“As long as he stays away from you.” Sky’s lashes are so long, extending to his cheekbones. “I’ll let you get some sleep.”

Sky wrestles his lids open. “Charge your phone, and we can sleep together. You’re the first person I want to see when I wake up.”

“Anything for you,” I say playfully, but my heart has gone into overdrive. Again.



I’m being paranoid. There’s a simple reason Sky hasn’t answered his phone after he said someone was ringing his doorbell. He’s probably with Maria, and they’ll get a good laugh at my expense. Which I’ll happily provide them since nothing’s wrong.

My mom calls continuously, but I ignore her. She’s been overly interested in what I do in my time off. I’m too tired to deal with her. All I want is to collapse in Sky’s arms and sleep for days. This trip wiped me out, wishing I was home for Sky and Maria.

The first thing I hear after arriving home is loud voices echoing from the dance studio. No one gets to speak to Sky in that tone. I’ll throw them out.

“Whatever he told you, he lied,” my mother shrieks at me and points to Sky.

“That’s rude.” I’m not in the mood for her passive-aggressive games. “What are you doing here?” I ask, since Sky’s address is a secret as far as I’m concerned.

“They’ve been tracking your phone’s location on your family plan,” Sky explains. His arms are wrapped around his torso, his shoulders hunched.

“He’s lying to you about us,” Mom says, gesturing between herself and Dad. “I’d never hurt you by doing that.” Her panic increases my suspicion.

“We hardly ever talk about you. There’s no reason for him to lie.” My eyes narrow and replay all the strange things she’s said and done since Sky came back into my life. She’s absolutely trying to hide something and most certainly knew about Sky. Why else would she pretend she didn’t remember him and ask about my hockey tickets; she was fishing for information.

I’m about to lose my shit. “It’s time for you to go.” But my mother has the gall to smirk at Sky. “I mean you, Mom. You and Dad need to leave.”

“You’re not—”

“Kicking you out of Sky’s house because he’s too nice? Sure am. It’s late and whatever you have to say can wait until tomorrow.” My fury increases as I move closer to Sky and his trembling vibrates against me. “Don’t come here again unless you’re invited.”

Sky’s unsteady hand lands on my arm as he shakes his head.

“We think the rumors about the two of you have gone far enough, and you should put a stop to them.” Mom’s chin juts out. She’s never been so direct, and the change is staggering.

“You think I control the media?” I seethe. “What will happen? I’ll say Sky and I aren’t a couple, which is a lie, and everyone will take that as gospel, stop digging for information, and the topic will fade away?” She can’t be that naive.

“They called us for a comment,” she hisses, while my dad stands to the side, scrolling on his phone as though we’re taking up his time.

“Why are you here?” I pinch the bridge of my nose to stave off my headache.

“You weren’t answering my calls.” She throws her hands in the air.

“You were already in New York,” I retort. “Sky, how’s Maria?” I ask, turning away from my parents.

“She was sleeping and hopefully still is. An aide is scheduled to come at 8:00 a.m.” Sky has dark circles under his eyes.

“You’re exhausted. Let’s go to bed.” I fold him into my arms and inhale his honey cedarwood scent, but tonight it has an acidic bite to it.

“What about us?” My dad finally speaks.

“Did you fly here expecting me to ask you to spend the night at Sky’s house when you’re unkind to him? That is the nicest thing I can say about your treatment of him.”

“I told you! He’s poisoning our son against us.” My mom cries, but no tears fall.

“Sky has never said a bad word about you.” I cling to him as panic rolls off him. “I’m not going to deny Sky’s my boyfriend. I’ve loved him since high school, and if our relationship makes you uncomfortable, that’s a you problem.”

“No,” Mom says forcefully, willing her truth on us. “He deserted you.”

“I never said that.” I stiffen with the awareness that she’s hiding something.

“Yes, you did.” She waves dismissively.

“No. When Sky left, it broke my heart, and it was even harder knowing you were happy about it. You made your opinion of him clear, and I wasn’t going to add to my pain with your gloating.” I keep an arm around Sky but step to position myself between him and my parents. “I never spoke Sky’s name again, so there was no reason for you to think he deserted me.”

Her cheeks redden, and she turns to my father for help, but he’s silent, unable to put the pieces together.

“I notice when my son is hurting, and he hurt you,” she spits out.

“Enough.” I stride to the front door, towing Sky along because I’m not leaving his side. “Bottom line: Sky and I are together in a romantic relationship. I’ve told the team, and we’re working with the PR director regarding coming out. Do not come back until you accept us. Sky and I are a package deal.”

“You don’t mean that, Son,” my dad says, placating me the same way he did when I was five.

“You would be one of those kids who maliciously goes no contact with your parents?!” My mom clutches her necklace the way women of a certain age cling to a set of pearls.

“If my parents can’t accept who I am and who I love, yes.” I open the door and motion for them to leave.

Sky’s breath hitches, but he doesn’t say anything. Once my parents are gone, I pick him up to take him to bed. I need him close because he’s so far away, even in my arms.

“I’m sorry,” I say, which is woefully inadequate for what my parents pulled on him. On us.

“Mav,” he says, and I nearly drop him. It sounds like the beginning of a goodbye I’m not ready for.

“I need you tonight,” I admit. “It’s been torture being away from you. Can we have tonight, and we’ll talk tomorrow?”

Sky agrees with a chaste kiss, and my heart starts breaking all over again.

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CHAPTER 28

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

The sunlight creeps through the windowpane and paints Mav in warm light. He slept restlessly all night. He clung to me, which makes this even harder. This is my nightmare coming true, and I'm eighteen years old again, faced with an impossible choice.

Mav's hand flings out, and I lace our fingers together. His eyes flutter open, and his smile is the best thing I've seen in days.

"Don't cry." He sits up in alarm and brushes my tears away. "Are you leaving me?" His voice cracks, and I cry harder.

"No," I say, and he tackles me flat on my back. "But this is important."

I wiggle out of his arms and sit against the headboard, gathering the courage to say the things that must be said.

"Arion, I missed you so much. More than anything, but I need you to listen for a minute." I brush the tips of his spikey hair.

He takes my hand and kisses my palm as a sign of agreement. His lips linger on my tattoo. My tribute to our past. My undying hope for our future, painted on my skin like a plea.

"These last few days have been brutal. Nonna has been stoic but reevaluating her choices. She let me believe she didn't have any family, but she has a sister, nieces, and a nephew. She has a family she's been estranged from for decades. She asked me to find her sister for her. The health scare

put their differences into perspective. She hasn't told me the details, but I promised to find her sister."

Mav's confused but nods along.

"You could say I've seen the regret of a lifetime of chosen separation. I don't want that for you." I gather his hands in mine. "Choosing will hurt everyone."

"You're not making me choose." His voice spikes two octaves.

"We were kids, and you needed your parents. Running off together and trying to survive on our own would've been a disaster." I doubt we'd have parted on good terms, making our second chance hopeless.

Mav grumbles but reluctantly agrees.

"Your parents are a big part of who you are and your success." I shush him when he starts to argue. "You need to think about what cutting them off means. They won't be there when your team makes a run for The Cup. They won't be there to celebrate birthdays, Christmases, and when you get married. You'll be losing your family. Your family, Mav. From personal experience, it fucking sucks, and I'd never wish it on my worst enemy. And what happens when you're Maria's age and you don't have any family? I can't be the reason you lose them." I pull his head onto my lap and curl around him.

"This is a big deal. You can't make this decision out of anger or hurt. You have to do what's best for you," I murmur into his shoulder.

"You're what's best for me. Now. And in the future. You, Sky." He kisses my stomach, and the thought of him leaving hurts. "You inked me into your skin, don't tell me this is one-sided." He caresses the inside of my wrist.

We stay cuddled together forever and then longer, until my legs cramp and his stomach rumbles.

"Plan as follows: breakfast, shower, make-out session, then you go back to your place and talk to your parents." I push cheer into my voice.

"I'm not leaving you." Mav grips me tighter. "I promised Maria I'd check on her."

"I'll get her wrath if you don't keep that promise," I joke. "You're not leaving me. You're going back to where you live for some quiet time to think and hear what your parents have to say. They love you."

"Do they?" he asks sincerely. "Sometimes I'm not sure if they love me or their version of me. If I don't fit their mold, then they can't or won't accept me."

His doubts slash my nerves, and pain rockets through me. “Don’t make a decision yet,” I say with a confidence I don’t have.

“Sky, I need to tell you—”

I cut him off with a kiss. He can tell me later if it still applies. It’s better if he doesn’t say something he’ll regret.



“You’re an idiot,” Lo scoffs.

“Not helping.” I bend my arms and rest my head on them. The kitchen quartz is cool and soothing. I asked Mav to give himself twenty-four hours before making a decision. It’s been five, and it’s hell.

“You know I love you, right?” he asks, eating a rice roll.

“Oh shit.” I hide my eyes. “This is gonna be brutal.”

“You didn’t invite me over to blow sunshine up your ass,” he deadpans and keeps going. “What you said is totally valid. It’s admirable that you’re trying to salvage his relationship with his mom after she tried to erase you from her son’s life.”

“But…” I wait for the blow.

“But, you’ve got to tell him you gave her the letter you wrote in high school. You can’t lie to him.” He pauses. “And you need to be sure you’re protecting him and not yourself.” He pats my head. “If you can’t forgive yourself or him for the past, cut him loose. He can’t make up for things out of his control or that were kept secret from him. Is this really about giving him space or testing him?” Lo’s gentle voice prickles my skin.

“You’re a fucking asshole.” I lift my head to glare at him.

“Sometimes we do stupid things. Not me, of course, but mortals have that problem.” He shoves my shoulder.

“Is that what I’m doing? Testing his loyalty?” It’s not what I meant, but… it’s easier to leave than be left. At least that’s the premise I’ve lived by.

Lo shrugs. “Only you can answer that.”

“Dickhead,” I grumble, but the truth hits like a broken big toe. So small, yet it affects everything a dancer can do.

“He’s given you everything you said you want, but you’re still doubting him. You can give me the evil eye, but tell me I’m lying. This is exactly where you knew this would end up eventually, but you haven’t been honest

with him. He'll be furious if he finds out I knew and he didn't." Lo finishes his rice cake. "This isn't terrible." He examines the package.

"Eat the rest," I say and duck my head.

Lo's right and I hate it. Holding back from telling Mav my feelings doesn't lessen them. My broken heart won't heal faster if I don't say the words out loud. I should've let him speak this morning. Now I might never find out because I'm a stubborn dickhead.

I don't want to come between him and his parents, but that isn't in my control. I'm so worried that maybe someday he'll regret his decision that I'm not fighting for what I want. This mature version of Maverick is better than any fantasy.

Letting the man I love walk into a fight where he could be blindsided causes my lungs to deflate. Only a fool would let that happen.

"Breathe," Lo instructs. "You could call him."

I fumble the phone and dial, but it goes straight to voicemail. I send an emoji of a bear blowing heart kisses. "Someone should put me out of my misery."

"Nah. We hang in there till the end. That elusive happy ending or…" he trails off.

"Or a life doomed to heartbreak and loneliness." Sliding out of my seat, I pace the kitchen.

"He told his parents he's loved you since high school."

"Yeah, loved, past tense." I collapse against the fridge.

Lo throws his hands up. "I can't fix stupid."

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CHAPTER 29

Maverick Maher

I don’t trust my parents, but I won’t cut them out of my life yet. They’ll either prove me wrong or prove my point. It’s up to them now.

My head reels from the ridiculousness of the situation. Sky calls and texts. My heart jumps as I get off the elevator on my floor. I call him back, but he answers with a text.

Angel: Are you at your apartment?

Me: Almost why?

Angel: Don’t leave

If Sky hadn’t asked me not to leave, I’d be at a hotel. This apartment is the most depressing space. It’s the opposite of Sky’s cozy brownstone. It’s furnished with fabricated wood cabinets, low-quality rugs, and cheap appliances.

And my parents’ old furniture reminds me of my failings. If I were brave enough, I’d ask Sky if I could move in with him. But it’s so soon and he’s not ready for me twenty-four seven. I debate opening the team chat to see if anyone is going out, but there’s a knock at my door.

It’s either Sky or my parents, and I need to brace for either.

My heart rockets as fast as a puck shot on goal when I see Sky. I'm so relieved and furious and frustrated.

"I'm an idiot." His arms wind around my neck, and I lift him up. "I got scared and I'm stupid. Maverick Maher, I love you. I love you so much it's terrifying."

I growl and shut the door. "You're making it hard to be mad at you." I sit on the worst couch in the history of furniture.

"I deserve it. Give me hell." He braces for my reaction.

"You love me?" I ask, nuzzling his neck.

"Should have told you before. I'm so in love with you."

"Good thing I love you too and will forgive you." I arrange him on my lap, but no position is comfortable.

"You don't have to say it because I did." He stares into my eyes. "I couldn't hold the truth in any longer."

"I've wanted to say it for weeks but thought you'd bolt if I said it out loud," I say, and he laughs but sobers, realizing I'm serious. "Sky, no one compares to you. I was a stupid young kid, afraid to be different. I am different, we're different. You're all I think about when I'm not on the ice. You're not getting rid of me." I lower my lips to his and kiss my boyfriend.

"I love you more," he argues, but I silence him with another kiss. He has no idea how in love I am and that I would do anything for him. "Did you figure out—"

"That you gave my mom the letter you wrote when you left? Yes. I told her if she didn't tell me everything, she'd never see me again. Which is not your fault, it's hers." I stare into his soulful brown eyes and see our future.

"I left the other one in the cornfield." Sky massages my shoulders.

"It must've blown away. It's the first place I went to find you. Promise me you'll never do that again." I'm off-balance, craving his constant presence, afraid if I turn around he'll be gone.

"How did you leave things with your parents?" he asks softly.

"My mom cried actual tears, but my dad is hard to read. Granted, he's been totally oblivious. He's in shock that he could have a gay son." I hug Sky closer when he pulls a face. "I'm bi, but he doesn't understand the difference because I'm with you. Mom claims she only wanted the best for me and being an out hockey player would've complicated my life."

"Do you trust that explanation?" Sky blinks up at me.

I sigh. "She's not wrong, but I also think it's bullshit. I'm giving them a chance to make it up to me." My mom provided guilt to convince me to

remain in contact. “But I’m second-guessing myself.”

“You’re doing the right thing. They’ll show you that either you have supportive parents or people who couldn’t put their feelings aside for their child.” Sky proves why he’s my favorite person. Not many people could get past the way my mom treated him. I resent her more than he does.

“This is a torture slab disguised as a piece of furniture.” He moves but can’t get comfortable.

“I don’t want them to hurt you again,” I whisper into his hair.

“They won’t.” His lips peel up, fighting a grin, and revealing his crooked tooth. “You’re really fierce when you defend me.”

I hold back from saying that I let him down. We could’ve avoided all of this if I had been braver.

“Hey, no grumpy face. We can’t change the past, but I truly believe things worked out for us to have a future together. We had to grow up and find our place in life before committing to each other. Old men, we are not. We gots lots a good years ahead of us.” He cups my neck and slides a hand under my shirt, pressing in to relieve my tension.

“I’m holding you to that.” I breathe in his sweet, warm scent. “Today marks the beginning of our new life.” I pull up the sleeve of his shirt to reveal his ink. “Every day, I’ll strive to be a man worthy of this tattoo. To be strong and brave and whisk you to safety if a war breaks out or, the more realistic option, if my parents are thoughtlessly cruel.”

“In that case”—Sky slides to the floor, kneeling between my thighs—“we should make things official.”

“With a blowjob?” I ask, down for however he wants to celebrate.

“No, silly.” He clears his throat, holding my hands. “Maverick Maher, I’m asking you to love me, be my partner, and move in with me.” He glances around. “Ditch this dreadful place.”

I hear him, but my brain scrambles, and my speech malfunctions.

“Did I break you?” he asks playfully, without real concern.

My head moves in a motion between a nod and a shake.

Sky’s face splits into a wide grin. “My Mav, struck speechless. Are you going to say yes?”

“Hold on.” My head spins, and I crack a joke, pretending to type on my phone. “How do I change my address in New York City?” I say, controlling my excitement. “Actually, I’m offended you expect me to move in with you without a ring.” I clutch my shirt the same way my mother had her necklace. “I’m not that kind of guy.”

“Right. You’re the kind who will fuck me senseless in a club in view of the dance floor. Play your cards right and a ring can be negotiated.” He cups my face in both hands and kisses me to prove he’s serious and loves me.

“This can’t be real,” I mistakenly say out loud.

“Why not?” His brown eyes bore into mine as if he sees into my brain and extracts my thoughts.

“Because this is everything I’ve ever wanted, and something terrible is going to happen.” *Balance*. I take a deep breath. The truth, snuck in between jokes, helps to stop my thoughts from spiraling.

“Doom and gloom is my thing.” Sky wraps around me, koala-bear style. “Let’s make a deal not to waste time anticipating bad things. Crap happens on the daily, and worrying about it won’t help.”

“Agreed.” I nuzzle into Sky’s hair, my stubble catching his neck. “Nothing better than seeing your face every day, permanently.”

“We’ll still have jobs and need to sleep.” He tilts his neck, humming as my stubble rubs his collarbone.

“Don’t ruin my fantasy with facts.” It’s hard to concentrate with him in my arms. “Planning ahead is overrated.”

“Let’s smash and leave a positive mark on this dreary place.” Sky rips his shirt over his head.

“Best idea.” We strip each other, and Sky leads me to the kitchen island. I lift him onto the counter, but his head hits the sink. Laughing, I flip him over and kneel behind him, but he yelps at a loud cracking noise and yells, “Kiwi,” as he dives to the floor. The countertop has a gigantic crack.

Nothing else in the kitchen looks any sturdier, so we try again on the washing machine.

“Rumor has it, spin cycles are the best.” I grip him under his knees.

Sky can’t stop giggling. “It sounds like someone’s taking a very loud piss.” He pats the washer.

“Fine, we’ll be boring and do it in the bedroom.”

We don’t make it to the bed. I pin him against the wall, and he jacks us together with the enthusiasm of two teens not sure when they’ll be alone again instead of two men who agreed to live together.

He pants into my ear as we catch our breath. “Sorry for the boring hallway sex.”

“I take it back. Sex and boring don’t belong in the same sentence for us. It’s more of an adventure.”

Sky's cheek caresses my stubble. "Exactly why we need safe words. Mine's kiwi. Obviously. I don't want to be liable for collapsing cabinets. Two short syllables to stop what we're doing while not killing the vibe. You pick one."

"What?" My limbs tingle, and I carry Sky, flopping on the bed. "Too many words. Not enough brain cells."

His face is bright red, and his brown eyes dance. He composes himself and gets serious. "I want safe words for sex. It's the responsible thing to do if we're going to experiment. I shouted kiwi out of fear for our safety, and we should establish words for our boundaries *before* things happen."

"What do you mean?" I'm surprised he's literally serious.

"Some people use the stoplight method: green for go, yellow for caution, and red for stop. Other people make up uncommon words that you wouldn't normally say, such as kiwi; it's not common and hard to use accidentally." His fingers scratch my scalp and I moan.

"Focus. Pick a safe word." He grips my hair to get my attention.

"Kiwis." I humor him.

"We can't have the same word! I say kiwi, it means slow down, or I'm not comfortable, or I've been tossed into an unmarked van and come rescue me," he says with a straight face. "Pick something funny. Something you could say without everyone staring at you."

He's not giving up, so I take a second to think.

"Ball sack. Not common but no one will flinch if I say it," I declare. He's not impressed, so I give examples. "Smells like a ball sack. No smelly ball sack for me today. You try to work kiwi into a normal sentence." I kiss the tip of his nose.

"I'm craving kiwi. Let's have kiwi with lunch. I'm the type of guy who everyone believes is into kiwi." His tongue laps at my stubble.

"Is that code for a sex thing?" I'm not up on queer lingo after years of pretending to be straight.

"No." Sky crawls out of my lap and offers me a hand. "Let's get the rest of your shit and bounce. If I never come here again, it'll be too soon."

"First, we're sharing locations." I stalk to the living room for our phones. "You can't put unmarked vans and shit out in the universe! It's irresponsible if we don't do something to balance it out," I growl.

"Oh Mav, talk dirty to me." Sky tackles me onto the couch. "Sharing locations is so boyfriendy. Sexy. Whisper your safe word."

He's teasing, but I do, and it takes us hours to leave my old apartment behind.

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CHAPTER 30

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

"I'm good. Really." I give him duck lips over video. The pose is so cliché and overdone, but it makes him laugh. I shift on the oversized pouf chair I got for my workroom. It's for Mav, but I use it when I'm on my computer.

"Seriously, it's no trouble to stop and pick up dinner for us and Maria. Text me an order, or I'll go rogue," Mav yells over the noise in the locker room. We hang up and I text.

Me: I'm craving your meat

Mav: What will Nonna eat?

Me: Fine. Get the non-spicy Indian food for you and Nonna, and I'll take madras curry

Mav: As you wish

Mav: I love you **heart emoji**

Me: I love you more **pulsing heart emoji**

I text Maria we'll bring her dinner, and I'll edit a video before Mav gets home. He practically lived here before, but now we're settled. We're where we're supposed to be.

His parents came over the day Mav moved in and apologized to me. His mom was nervous, and his dad his usual aloof self. Considering everything, it went well.

Mav set clear boundaries when his mom wanted to characterize our years apart as an unfortunate mistake. In his eyes, she needs to take responsibility for her actions before she's forgiven. He's been clear: My need for love and acceptance is more important than their comfort, and my heart skips a beat every time I think about it.

One sticking point was what will happen to the furniture they brought him from his childhood home.

Mav suggested paying to have it shipped back to them, and suddenly donating the items was the best solution. Crisis averted, and they seem genuinely invested in building a relationship with me and us.

There's an insidious voice that randomly pops up and agrees with Mav's concern that something bad is going to happen. Which is inevitable. He could get hurt, or I could, or one of us could be in a car accident, or a million other things. I'm not good at math, but I'm sure the odds aren't favorable for living a life without pain or tragedy.

I roll my shoulders to rid myself of useless thoughts. Worrying increases the chances of it happening; it's the principle of manifestation or something.

My goal is to remain optimistic but cautious. I'll take the peace offering from Mav's mom but hold her at arm's length.

I finish the edit and check Mav's location. It's actually super convenient to know how far away he is. He's left the restaurant, but it'll take a bit in traffic, so I open my email, scanning it for anything that could be related to Maria's family.

Lo has a tech friend who can navigate public records because of course he does. Maria's sister hasn't filed taxes in two years, and I'm afraid the next thing we'll find is a death certificate.

I hear the door and meet Mav on the landing to go up to Nonna's floor.

"Hey there, sexy. Going my way?" I lean against the wall.

"I'm always going your way." He pulls me in for a kiss, and I climb him like a tree.

"What if I'm going the wrong direction?" I ask.

"Nothing matters as long as I'm with you." Mav swats my ass as I ascend the stairs in front of him.

"Nonna," I call as I use the code to open her door.

“Guess what?” She claps her hands together. “I got a call from my nephew! I’m going to meet him on Tuesday.”

“That’s fantastic.” I kiss her cheek but frown at Mav. Lo’s guy has been searching for descendants without luck. Her husband died five years ago. “How did he find you?”

“On one of those genealogy websites. He’s shyer than a cat in a room full of rocking chairs but very polite.” She sits while I distribute plates and silverware for us around the coffee table. She has a formal dining room, but that’s for special occasions. Nothing has qualified since I moved in.

“Didn’t think you did one of those tests.” I scoop food from the container onto her plate as Mav fills glasses of water for us.

“I didn’t, but they can fill in the blanks when the people related to you send in their info. He’s thirty-five and comes to the city for business at least twice a week, so we’re going to meet for lunch.” She’s too excited to eat.

“I’d love to meet him too, if you don’t mind,” I say absently, planning to follow her wherever she goes.

“Oh, I’d love my boys to meet each other. Maverick, will you be in town?” She takes a bite of food.

“No, I leave Tuesday morning for another series of away games. You could wait until I get back,” he suggests.

“Nonsense. Only a ninny would make an old lady wait on you.” Nonna takes a bite of her food and Mav mouths, “Ninny?” with confusion. After a few bites, she turns to me. “You’re set to take me to my doctor’s appointment tomorrow?”

“Ready and waiting.”

Mav and I share a glance that says we’ll be talking about this later.



“Fuck me sideways,” Mav swears, tossing clothes out of his new antique dresser. We hit antique thrift stores for him to find furniture for the house. Once he let himself enjoy the experience, he picked out some cool pieces.

“Sure, Mav, but I don’t want to make you late.” I’m holding the clothes he needs, but he doesn’t glance up. Organization isn’t his thing no matter how hard he tries.

“I forgot to wash my base layer so I need my backup stuff.” He’s flustered in a way I’ve never seen.

“Mav, I’ve got it washed and dried and ready to be packed.” I hold it out, and he sinks into the club chair.

“You’re legitimately my total dream man. You spoil me.” His earnest hazel eyes peer up at me.

“I love being able to help you. You’ve got a stressful career. I’ll be happy to charge you for my services in back rubs and foot massages.” Spreading his thighs, I sit on his lap and rest my head on his shoulder.

“I’m abandoning you, and you’re taking care of me,” he laments.

“You’re going to work. There is zero abandonment here. I mean, if you ditch me, I’ll burn your stuff on the front lawn.” I nudge him with my elbow.

“I’d take that threat seriously, but you’d be too afraid of scaring Nonna, or the fire spreading.” He presses his lips to the top of my head.

“What’s got you worried?” I toss a few of his shirts into the drawer. “Score,” I say, holding my arms up in triumph.

“I really wish I could be there to meet her nephew. I would hate for him to be a scammer,” he admits.

“We’re taking lots of precautions. Meeting in a public place, not going home afterward, and I’ll try to pump him for more info that Lo’s guy can use to verify his identity. But you’re free to miss me like hell.” I stand and pull him up.

“Will miss you an obscene amount.” His fingers feather over my cheek.

“We’ll spicy video chat and then poof, you’ll be here in a flash. But if you keep touching me, you’ll be late. It’s a short trip, and you’ll be back tomorrow night.” I stand on my toes and kiss him. “What else do you need?”

“My suit. I’ve got to change.” He glances frantically around the room.

I don’t say a word. I simply close the bedroom door to reveal his hanging suit. We spent a bunch of time working out systems so he can find everything he needs. “I’ll call you as soon as you land. We should be finishing up meeting with Maria’s nephew, Paul. Hopefully he’s as boring as his name.”

Mav changes into his dress clothes and closes his bag. “Don’t forget to call me. I love you.”

“Love you more,” I say, and walk him downstairs. “Good luck,” I yell, as he gets into the rideshare.

Mav blows me a kiss, and I stand in the cold watching his car disappear. I shiver with the sensation that someone is walking over my grave, not from the temperature. No bad thoughts, I scold myself.

On my way to Maria’s, I grab my coat and wallet so we can leave when she’s ready. She wants me to drive her car, and although parking will be a

bitch, it'll give her a sense of control, not being at the mercy of public transportation.

We arrive a few minutes early since traffic is light. "Will you be okay if I drop you at the door and find a place to park?"

"I'm not an invalid who needs special treatment. I've spent most of my life in this city without your help," she snaps.

I double-park at the entrance to the restaurant and help her over the snow to the sidewalk. "I'll only be a minute," I say and she gives me a grateful smile.

She's been nervous about meeting Paul and snapping with unusual bite. It takes fifteen minutes to find parking, and I send Mav a quick text.

Me: Walking to restaurant now

When I enter the restaurant, Nonna stands up and waves her arms, acting as if seeing me is unexpected.

"I can't believe we ran into each other here," she exclaims, and holds out her hand, which I take and play along with her.

"I'm having lunch with my nephew. Paul, this is my housemate, Lark. Lark, Paul."

I turn my attention to the man, and my soul leaves my body. He's not here by coincidence, and Maria realizes he's an impostor too.

Before I sit, I covertly send Mav a one-word message.

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CHAPTER 31

Maverick Maher

Seeing Sky's text helps me relax.

Me: Send juicy details

I tuck my cell away and board the plane, not expecting an answer for hours. I've been wound up for no reason and hope to nap on the plane. Brant takes his seat next to me, and I'm tempted to ask him to come clean with what he's going through.

When I met Rhys Brant, he was a fun-loving jokester. But as the season has gone on, he's become surly. I'm not good at getting people to spill their secrets, so I offer him a fist bump.

"I got your back if you need me." We touch knuckles, and his shoulders drop an inch.

"Thanks, Mav." He turns his body at a weird angle away from the aisle. "I'm fine. Getting my head on straight to kick some LA Stars' ass."

"On board for that plan. Blow in with a winning streak and go home."



This can't be happening. The dance party around me is in full swing, but one word on my screen has all my attention.

Kiwi

He sent the text hours ago, but I didn't check because, because… FUCK.

Before I panic, I call Sky and get sent directly to voicemail. I dial Maria and get her voicemail as well.

"Dude, get dressed." Brant clamps my shoulder and studies me. "What the fuck happened?" he asks, sitting.

"This will sound crazy, but Sky texted his safe word, and we jokingly said we'll use them in an emergency." I breathe in, and to his credit, Brant doesn't dismiss it. "His word is kiwi." I turn my phone so he can see it.

"Fuck." Brants stares at it. "Did you call him?"

"Him and our upstairs neighbor. Both went to voicemail." My throat closes, and it's hard to get the words out. My head is so messed up; the game is the last thing on my mind.

"Okay. Don't panic, there could be lots of explanations. Does he have security cameras you can tap into?"

Thankfully, I remember I have Sky's location. The dressing room disappears as I wait for the app to show me where Sky is.

His phone shows he's home, so I call again.

Straight to voicemail.

I call Maria, and someone picks up but hangs up.

There are a billion rational reasons they are home but aren't answering. There are several keypads, so it's not as if someone could randomly get into his house.

Sky picked kiwi because it's not a word he uses in normal conversation, but he could've typed it by accident. That's the story I'm telling myself so I don't hop on a plane home.

Home.

Sky went out of his way to make his brownstone ours, and it feels like home. But it's not home without him.

"I'm sure he's fine." Brant slaps the back of my head, and I snap out of it.

Sky sent the message hours ago and would follow up if he actually needed me. So I send a message that will get his attention.

Me: Kiwi sounds better than ball sack

Me: Calling to get my kiss and I love you

There’s nothing I can do from this far away, so I finish dressing and focus on hockey.

We each have our roles on the team and work well together. Drake has been the team’s bully for years, and if anyone touches his boyfriend, Lucky, he’s feral. This year, O’Keefe fought his way to being our backup enforcer. Most teams have one guy willing to put his body on the line, but we have two.

I’ve never been a fighter. It doesn’t appeal to me. But today is the exception. I channel all my frustration into making the other team suffer with unnecessary slams into the boards, hard hits, and dropping my gloves.

I end up in the sin bin twice and receive worried glances from my teammates. Coach pulls my line and Griff and King sandwich me between them.

“Everything okay?” King asks, keeping a gloved hand on me so I don’t respond to the taunts from the other team.

“You’re not yourself,” Griff chimes in.

Telling them I’m happy to bash on the other team would only add to their worry, so I shrug them off. Our trainer hands me a drink. “It’s the magic juice.” He waits for my reaction, but the game demands my focus.

During the intermission between the second and third periods, there’s an uneasy tension in the dressing room, and I’m getting covert stares.

Before Coach gives his lecture, Ace, our captain, sits next to me. “You’re on fire tonight. Great goal.”

I nod, barely remembering I scored.

My cell haunts me from my locker, torturing me with indecision. Checking it could bring relief or terror. I’m not prepared for the existence of the second option. Sky’s fine, and to prove my point, I stalk away from my locker so I can’t check it.

Ace follows me. “If you need anything, I’m here for you. Text or call whenever for special rookie treatment,” he says, looking straight into my eyes.

“ ’Preciate it.”

In the third period, O’Keefe shadows me, keeping the LA players away from me. He defends me so closely, it leads me to score again with another assist. It’s one of my highest-scoring games, but I’m not here.

I’m in New York City, tearing around our place to find Sky asleep after being so worried. He’s snuggled up next to me, fitting his body flush with mine because we’re meant to fit together.

After the game and once the media has left, I lunge for my phone to see Sky has responded and my heart leaps.

Sky: Kiwis and balls sacks have a lot in common *winky face emoji*

Sky: *kiss emoji* Back at ya, my muffin man

“Did you hear from Sky?” Brant asks, causing me to yelp.

I show him. “This isn’t good. Ball sack is my safe word, and Sky never responds with ‘back at ya’ and has never once called me food. Something’s wrong. This isn’t Sky.”

Brant locks in and remains steady, calming my rising fear.

“Don’t panic. We can call the restaurant and see what time they left. Is he still home?”

Liska overhears us, and Brant fills him in.

“I’ll make some calls. By the time ve get to the hotel, ve’ll have video of the restaurant, surrounding area, and your place,” Liska assures me in his Czech accent.

“Thank you.” I stare at him, nervous but ultimately unbothered by how he’ll accomplish it.

Benz chirps so Liska can’t hear. “Mafia ties.”

Fuck if I care. All that matters is Sky.



Liska turns a hotel conference room into a command center. We have personal and team computers downloading links to security footage. I’m on the verge of hysterics. If I laugh or cry, I won’t stop, and would instead be curling up into a ball waiting for Sky.

I foolishly told Sky I’d whisk him away from any danger as if I possess magical powers or have any business comparing myself to an immortal horse. My nickname is a lie, and I can’t keep him safe. I’ll give every cent I own to bring him back to me and glimpse his tattoo as he dances around me, laughing and full of life.

This is not my real life.

I’m a boring people-pleaser from Illinois who happens to be good at hockey.

Logan has been to the house, but neither Sky nor Maria answered the door or the phone. He tried to get a wellness check from emergency services, but there’s no actual evidence of foul play and a few hours out of contact isn’t suspicious.

My mom calls, and since it’s a distraction, I answer.

“What’s wrong?” she asks immediately.

I robotically recite everything and wait for her ridicule. “Technically, he’s not missing or injured, so we have to wait,” I answer her question, and she believes me, and I’m grateful for her support.

“I won’t keep you. Call me when you get news.”

I agree and hang up because it’s the only way to deal with this.

“Here ve go.” Liska projects footage onto the large screen. Sky’s driving and stops in front of the restaurant to let Maria out, help her inside, and then drives away. “Time stamp?”

We piece together Sky texted me while he was walking hurriedly into the restaurant, and not a minute later he texted me his safe word.

There are several camera angles from the restaurant, the adjacent buildings, and across the street. None of them catch a suspicious person lurking around until…

Sky flies out of the restaurant and returns minutes later with the car. He helps Maria into the passenger seat, but before he pulls away, a man slips into the backseat. His hat is pulled low and his collar turned up, shielding his face. From the video, he looks taller than Sky, with a fair skin tone but no other distinguishing characteristics. The room erupts with theories about his identity.

Liska’s on his phone, speaking rapidly in Czech.

Brant and King guide me to a chair and prop me up.

“Sky has to be okay,” I hear myself say.

Liska guarantees me his friends will be at the brownstone within the hour to check on Sky and Maria.

“Who were they meeting?” Mr. Dimon asks from the corner of the room.

I give a bullet-point explanation of Maria’s family estrangement and her nephew finding her out of nowhere.

“Who do you think is the target: Sky, Maria, or you?” Mr. Dimon asks, detached.

“Me?” I flinch.

“This happened while you’re away, so it could be a coincidence or not. We have to assess this logically, and the most common motives for committing a crime are money, love, or drugs.”

“Fuck. None of those make sense. Sky has money, but so do most of the people in this room. He’s not into drugs, and Maria is…old,” I say lamely. I’ll never forgive myself if this is my fault.

“Until we have more facts, I suggest you act normal. Don’t give away something is wrong. Text him again, and hopefully he’ll give you more clues.”

“Shit, I’m fucking this up.” My phone swims in my vision, and O’Keefe squats in my personal space.

He holds my screen to my face to unlock it. “Tell me what to type.”

“I can do it,” I say, taking my cell and responding. Saying texts out loud sounds dumb as hell.

Me: Two goals and an assist!

Me: Can’t wait to celebrate when I get home

Me: Be home soon for kiwis and ball sacks

My hand clutching the phone goes numb, waiting for three dots to appear. “It doesn’t say delivered. What does that mean?” My voice squeaks.

“Phone’s off.” Ace pats my shoulder.

I scroll to the location apps, and Sky’s location was from thirty minutes ago. Thirty minutes, and he could be anywhere. I surge to my feet and get a head rush from all my blood plunging south.

“I have to get home!” I’m ready to bolt.

Mr. Dimon steps into my path. “We’ll get you home, I promise. But you need a plan and help.”

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CHAPTER 32

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

I convince “Paul” or whatever his name is that I have power of attorney for my Nonna Maria, and the paperwork is in my apartment. That we’d completed the paperwork in the emergency department in case something happened to her. I have the unsigned documents, but getting this lunatic away from Maria is my priority.

Maria will be smart enough to lock her door behind us and call 911.

Mav may or may not have understood my cryptic messages, but he’s hours away on a plane and hopefully the police will be here in minutes.

“Your boyfriend hasn’t texted.” Paul stares at my sparkly case.

“He’s working,” I fume, pretending to go through the stack of mail on the island. It’s Mav’s, and I’m not paying attention to it.

“He doesn’t seem to miss you the way I do.” Paul’s grip on reality is minimal, but I’m confused about his endgame.

“What happens once I find her power of attorney?” I ask.

“We’re taking a trip to her lawyers and making sure I can live here.”

Maria would’ve opened her home and given him whatever he wanted to reconnect with her family. But he’s avoided questions about his mom, Maria’s sister, and I highly doubt he’s really related.

Police lights reflect in the dance studio, and I pretend not to notice.

“We’re leaving.” Paul yanks me by the jacket to the back door. It hasn’t been used in years, so he has to slam into it. The frame around the door

cracks, and he kicks it open so we can get through. His strength scares me because he looks malnourished and frail.

“She called the police,” he mutters.

“Nope. She doesn’t trust them at all. She has a fall monitor that brings police or EMTs or the fire department. She trips so often they’re on a first-name basis and won’t even blink if she talks to them through the intercom,” I lie.

“We need a place to stay for the night. Tomorrow we’ll get the paperwork and go change her will.” He speaks as if he has a solid, workable plan and is not clueless.

“I have an idea.” I’m not sure if this is brilliant or stupid as hell, but it’s too cold to spend the night outside. The wind stops, and there’s a muffled, desperate noise.

“Do you hear that sound?” I crouch outside the door.

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CHAPTER 33

Maverick Maher

The team plane stops in Anaheim, and the guys file past me, offering supportive words and taps.

Mr. Dimon and I will continue to New York, without an announcement.

The team roster for tonight will show me as a healthy scratch, and hopefully no one notices I'm not at the game until after I find Sky.

Mr. Dimon hangs up the phone and motions me to the back. The seats face each other with sturdy tables between them. He often uses the plane as his office when we travel. He's a hands-on GM, and I've never appreciated him more.

He launches into the middle of the conversation, taking me off guard. "Emergency services responded to a call at your house. Mrs. Russo reported Lark Angel missing and has been taken to the hospital for observation, due to high blood pressure. It's the safest place for her, and we have a guard at her door."

"This doesn't seem real. I must be hallucinating or trapped in one of my mom's crime drama shows," I blurt out, and hide my face in my arms on the table. "Sorry," I mumble.

"Understandable. I've been talking to my friends at the police department, and they don't believe this is a professional job or the work of a gang. It's probably one guy after something specific or with a vendetta.

Why did Skylar change his name? Was he running from someone?" he asks gently.

"Only me." Logically, blaming myself won't help, but it's the easiest thing to focus on. Mr. Dimon steeples his fingers, waiting for me to continue. I spill the ugly truth between us, letting the words flow until Mr. Dimon knows my sins.

"So he wasn't actually running but following his dream and cutting contact with his family," I finish with a sigh.

"Is it possible his family found out about his success and got angry?"

The question sends a jolt through me. "Maybe? They didn't have much, and they might resent that he's making more money than they could dream of and feel entitled to it," I admit. "But why now?"

Mr. Dimon gives me a pointed look. "He's been in the gossip columns and on media sites lately. It's one of many possibilities. I'll ask law enforcement to check out his family. And have you seen Paul or have any information about his past?"

"No. Sky's friend Lo has a computer guy friend who couldn't find any information to connect him with Maria Russo."

"A friend of a friend with dubious qualifications. We can do better than that. We're unfortunately landing after dark. Officers will meet us at your house."

"You're coming with me?" I ask incredulously.

"You shouldn't be alone, and I'm not letting you run around New York City in a panic."



The house is eerily quiet, as if warning us things aren't right. First, we go up to Maria's place, but I'm uncertain if things are out of place. She told the first responders, who took her to St. Mary's hospital, that Paul let her go up to her apartment by herself and didn't follow her, but she was badly shaken.

Dread threatens to numb my limbs as we descend the stairs, but I focus on tightening my muscles to maintain forward movement. Sky isn't there, the police checked, but I can't shake the unease. We start in the practice studio where he teaches lessons. The room has a wall of mirrors broken up by a practice bar but is otherwise empty.

My feet take me to the kitchen, and everyone follows. “Someone went through the mail,” I comment and survey the envelopes strewn over the counter. Sky wouldn’t leave it a mess. He keeps everything in order.

Crossing the room, I fling open the pantry and stare at our little love seat. Nothing has been disturbed. When I turn around, my eye catches on the back door because it’s ajar. Sky told me he hasn’t used it since he moved in.

“This shouldn’t be open.” I reach for it but am stopped by an officer.

“We’ll print it.” She opens it with her gloved hands.

There’s a small porch with another door that has been kicked out of its frame.

She motions for another officer, who takes pictures. “A clear boot print. They were probably here when the first responders arrived. They can’t have gone far.” She glances at me. “Does your friend have a car or use public transportation?”

“My boyfriend,” I correct her. “Maria has a car, but it’s still here.” I point into the dark at the outline of the old car.

“Does he have an OMNY account?” she presses and clarifies. “A metro account for the subway?”

“Yeah, he pays with his phone.” I’m fixated on the broken door, open wide enough for two smaller men. I’d never fit through the opening.

“I’ll go with you through the rest of the apartment. Are you on the same phone plan?” she asks. When I say no, she asks for his phone carrier. “His carrier is helpful to law enforcement,” she assures me.

Each step closer to the bedroom kicks my heart rate up another notch. Knowing someone came in here and took Sky is the worst invasion of privacy. We need to get a full security system with cameras and alarms.

We start in the living room, and since everything is new, it’s easy to see nothing is out of place. Our bedroom is a mess, but that’s my fault. My clothes are everywhere. “Packing mishap,” I explain.

She nods. “Anything missing?”

Sky owns some expensive jewelry and watches, but they’re neatly tucked away in the appropriate boxes. I own nothing of value. “He has a system in the next room, but I can’t name more than ten items.”

We cross the hall to the spare bedroom, aka Sky’s closet. She inspects the room but doesn’t push me for more information.

She peeks into the hallway bathroom, and I glance at the door to Sky’s studio. A sense of betrayal hits me, letting someone see it without his

consent.

“This is where he works.” I swing the door wide, and her face doesn’t change as she surveys the costumes and changeable backgrounds.

“The camera’s on.” She strides over and examines it. “Where does the feed go?”

“His laptop.” I point it out, a foot from the camera.

“Password,” she barks at me. I rattle off my birthday and pray. I’m not religious because my parents’ views have soured my perception, but if there’s a higher being, I pray with all my might. “In,” she says.

Air rushes to my lungs, and I sink to sit on the matted floor.

“Your boyfriend is a genius.” She grins over her shoulder.

The next couple of hours are a blur as law enforcement officers take fingerprints from each door handle, surface, and the mail. A computer specialist watches hours of video from Sky’s recording.

He high-fives the cop who found the camera, and she brings me the laptop. “Do you recognize this guy?”

I stare, stunned. “He’s… He was at… He’s stalking Sky.” They’ve given up confirming I’m talking about Lark Angel, his legal name. “He tried to get Sky alone at the Enforcers’ charity gala and again at St. Mary’s hospital. The guy didn’t call Sky by name. Only his screen name.”

“Are you sure it’s the same guy?” She prods because his hair’s disheveled and his clothes don’t fit right.

“I saw him at the gala, and Sky said the same guy found him at the hospital. I wasn’t there, but my teammate, Theo O’Keefe, was. It made Sky nervous that the guy found him in random places.”

“We’ll run facial recognition software, but he’ll only match if he has a criminal record.” She spins and pulls out her phone.

Our home is a full-blown crime scene complete with cops in shoe booties and fingerprint powder. I check my cell out of habit rather than hope that Sky’s messaged. Nothing. I check his location for something to do and see his phone isn’t active but had a ping since it was turned off.

“Hey,” I yell, holding up my phone. “His phone was on at…the subway station a few blocks away.”

The computer expert takes my cell and hooks it up to his computer.

“They got on the subway, heading into the city. Where would Lark go?” he barks.

“I…I have an apartment in the city, but he hates it.” I crack my neck, my mind spinning with possibilities.

“Address?”

Rattling off the address, I add, “But it’s the last place he’d go.” He flat-out said he never wants to set foot in the place again.

“We’ll check to be certain.”

A set of feet thunders on the stairs. “I got a partially filled-out power of attorney form.” He waves it as he enters the kitchen.

Computer guy gives me a questioning glance.

“It’s not mine.” I hold up my hands, suddenly afraid I’m the prime suspect. They always suspect the boyfriend or significant other first.

“Relax.” The cop smiles. “It’s giving power of attorney to Lark Angel for Maria Russo. It’s not valid because it’s not notarized. You have any knowledge of her assets or bank accounts?”

“None,” I answer honestly. “He told me they talked about who could make decisions for her if she can’t,” I offer as if I’m giving relevant information.

“You should get some sleep. We can take you to a hotel,” she offers.

Mr. Dimon stands from the island. “I can take him to the team’s suite at our downtown hotel.” He rattles off the name and address for the officers, taking a card from the woman in charge. “I’ll have him call you with a room number.”

A Town Car waits, running and warm at the curb for us.

“I’m sorry,” I apologize for ignoring him and staring at my screen.

“Mr. Maher, no one is blaming you. Law enforcement will find him.” His tone assures me as much as his words.

“Do they think I had something to do with it?” My voice is small as I verbalize my fear.

“I doubt it. You weren’t home at the time, and you handed your phone over for the detective to copy. They’ll have your records and determine if there’s any suspicious activity. Before we signed you to the team, we did a background check for DUIs, fights, and other criminal acts.”

“Wow.” Processing that they duplicated everything so fast sticks in my brain. “Glad I never got arrested.”

“We all are,” he says wryly.

“Bet you didn’t have this on your bingo card,” I word vomit and cringe.

“I’ll let you in on a secret; this team is one of a kind and often involves me in situations I’d rather avoid.” He steeples his fingers.

“Fun.” I push too much enthusiasm into the word.

“One way to put it.”

“My phone pinged!” I hold it aloft, a lifeline. Sky’s phone is on and near us.

I swear, I’m ready to charge out of the moving car.

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CHAPTER 34

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

Paul paces Mav's mostly empty old apartment and continually scratches his skin, leaving red lines behind. He smells strange, and his movements are chaotic.

I found an abandoned kitten outside my house and convinced Paul to let me save him. The kitten watches him with suspicious eyes and hisses every time he gets close.

"Are you okay?" I ask, hoping to create some sort of bond so he won't freak out when he realizes I don't have the paperwork to be Maria's power of attorney.

"Fine. Need my meds soon," he mumbles, but doesn't look at me.

"What are we doing, Paul?" My voice is soft, since he's unraveling. As time goes by, he has flashes of lucidity, but he's clearly overwhelmed and suffering from a mental disorder.

"I figured it out." He grins, showing unbrushed teeth. "Most of it, anyway, of how we can be together again."

"Again?" I repeat.

"You made me believe I'm special when you picked me. I want to do the same for you. Plan what comes next." His hand hits his thigh manically as he paces.

"You can tell me the plan now, right? We're here alone, and no one else will hear," I offer. He could be in withdrawal from meds or worse, but my

gut says he won’t hurt me.

“Not in *his* place,” he hisses.

I glance around Mav’s generic apartment and, for the first time, consider that Paul is after me. He knew my screen name. But I got distracted by him presenting himself as Maria’s nephew. *Am I his end goal?*

“You said you needed somewhere safe and Mav—”

“Don’t say his name!” he yells, and holds his head, and I wonder if it hurts or if he’s hearing voices.

I swallow hard, uneasy about how far this guy will go to have me. “And no one lives here,” I finish, ignoring his interruption. “What kind of medicine do you need? Can I help?”

“You enjoy taking care of others, don’t you? Maria, that guy, me.” He flops onto the ugly couch and scares the kitten, who runs behind the kitchen counter. My cell slips out of Paul’s pocket.

I freeze in place, losing my opportunity to retrieve it. He leans forward, and it falls between the cushions.

“You didn’t answer me.” His meek voice has a hard edge.

“Sorry. I thought you were stating a fact, not asking a question.” I center myself to keep talking. “What sort of things would you ask me to do for you?”

“Take care of me,” he pants.

“That’s different for everyone. Nonna needs me to take her to appointments and organize her medication. My…” I choke on the word boyfriend. “My sister had me wash her clothes and do her chores.”

“I’m going to the bathroom.” He sprints to the open bathroom and slams the door. I seize the opportunity to fish around in the cushions for my phone and turn it on.

He flushes, and I shove the phone into the cushion where it was, hoping Mav sees my location. We can forget lives as spies since I’m not sure he got any of my clues about Paul. He could assume I’ve been talking shit as usual. Personally, I’d prefer if this were a nightmare.

I lean against the couch and put my head between my knees.

“What’s wrong?” Paul shouts. “What’s under the sofa?” He marches over and I scoot away. As he lifts the dust ruffle, the couch overturns. The kitten screeches, and I coax them to me.

“You’re scaring the baby.” I coo at the cat. “It’s nothing to do with the couch. It’s just hard. You’ve got a plan for what we’re doing, and I don’t

know if Paul is your real name.” The truth is my best option.

“You’re worried.” His demeanor changes, and he reaches out to pet my arm. “I’m sorry. I’ll never hurt you.”

“Is Paul your name?” I ask again.

“No. But you knew that, didn’t you, Angel? You saw the real me from the beginning. From our very first time.” He sits cross-legged in front of me but retreats when the kitten hisses again.

My mind fills in the blanks of information. “We met on my website.”

“You danced just for me and sent me messages. But then it all stopped. I tried different names but couldn’t get to you.” His temper flares.

“I’m so sorry,” I lie. “My business manager handles access to my website. I was wondering what happened to you. I thought I did something wrong.” Sign me up for acting classes ’cause I need an Oscar for this shit. His mood swings vary by the second, and I can’t keep track.

“Oh no, of course not. I knew whatever happened wasn’t your fault.” He reaches for me but stops short, eyeing my feline protector. “You’ve been amazing, Angel.” His dull eyes come to life. “Remember the day we spent at Bagels and Coffee Inc? You were working so hard and so focused; you spilled your iced latte, and it almost got your laptop, but I had enough napkins to save it. You thanked me by name, Buddy. And you call me that in the videos.”

“I remember that day. Thank you.” I’d been so focused on editing videos that I didn’t notice the stranger who gave me napkins. I used to call my anonymous clients buddy. It’s not too personal but has familiarity. “Tell me your favorite part of the day we met.” So far, he’s been pushy and demanding in a non-threatening way, but he’s also delusional and sporadic. *Could he be dangerous if the illusion is shattered?* The kitten purrs and I relax.

“You were everything I dreamed of. Your smile lit up your face, and I knew I could make you happy. Since that day, we had our weekly date, and you never missed it. Not even when you had that terrible cold and your nose was bright red. You said you picked your skirt to match your nose.” He sighs dreamily, but then his mouth presses into a thin line.

Mav got me into true crime shows, and I swear at the beginning of each episode, the deceased is described as lighting up a room and being everyone’s friend. I need to be smart, so I don’t end up as a footnote candidate for those shows.

“Then you went away. All I got was an email stating that you would no longer accept subscriptions from anonymous accounts. But I wasn’t just anyone… I was yours. We were special. I’ve been waiting for over a year to find you again, camping out in your favorite places. Then, I randomly saw you in a picture with the Enforcers. I bought a ticket to the gala, hoping to see you.”

“You found me,” I state the obvious, growing more concerned about how I’ll get away without one of us getting hurt.

“But those brutes tore you away from me. I don’t blame you. You must’ve been so scared they’d hurt you. I couldn’t let that happen, so I followed you.” He admits this as if it’s normal behavior. “It took me a while to figure out a plan, and after I saw you at St. Mary’s, it became obvious. I overheard you talking to Maria about her sister and nephew. The stroke of luck I’d been waiting for.”

“Did you follow me there?” My steady voice soothes the sting of my words. I should’ve figured out he couldn’t be her nephew. Not unless Maria’s sister gave birth in her late sixties.

“No! No, I live with my nan, and she had one of her episodes, so I was already there. Again, fate brought us together. But those guys on the team act like they own you, and I had to act fast to keep you safe.”

I nod to fake my agreement. “So you came to get me? I’m confused why you want me to go to the bank with you.” His thought process is as incoherent as going through a blender.

“To live with you of course!” He raises a hand, and my body responds, reeling back to dodge him. “We’re going to be so happy. I’ve researched remodeling the three floors to restore it to one big house,” he announces with glee.

“But two other people live there.” My heart stops, wondering how he plans to get rid of them.

“Maria needs to be in a home, same as my nan. They can go together and be friends. And then the other guy can move into my nan’s if he needs a place to stay or his place here. Easy!” he says with the joy of a child who doesn’t understand how the world works.

“And at the lawyer’s office we’ll…” I prod, searching for logic in his plan.

“You’ll transfer the third level of the brownstone from Maria to me so we’ll be co-owners,” Paul says in a condescending tone, indicating I’m

slow.

“How will you pay for it?” I wince. This could be the breaking point of his delusion.

“You’re in charge, silly, just sign it over to me.” His laugh dies on a wheeze. “My head hurts, and it’s making me dizzy.” He pitches sideways to lie on the floor.

“Where’s your medication? It has to be time to take it.” Paul’s unhinged, and hell only knows how bad his symptoms will get.

“My last dose is at my nan’s. I don’t have insurance anymore to get a refill.” His eyes close and he drifts off.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I jump a mile at a buzzing. I’d be the first to die in the apocalypse. Zero self-preservation. Instead of running, I stay locked in my mind on the floor. The buzzing persists from the couch, and it’s my phone.

I ease up, but Paul shoots awake, sitting abruptly. “What’s that noise?” he demands.

“No clue. I was going to check so you could sleep. Seems you need it.” My hopes sink as the buzzing stops. Mav can’t return until after his game tonight. I missed my chance.

A pounding on the door startles us. His accusing eyes swing to my wide ones.

“Hello? It’s Refurbish Removal here for the pickup,” a voice hollers from the hall.

“This isn’t a good time. Can you come another time?” I raise my voice.

“Listen, man, I got a schedule to keep, and if you want this to go to”—we hear pages flipping—“The Q Solutions, I gotta grab it now.”

“It’s for charity,” I plead to Paul, tucking the kitten into my coat, ready to run this time.

“I’ll answer the door.” Paul stands, striding away, and I follow.

My skin prickles with the awareness that something isn’t right. Last time I talked to someone about a pickup, they were scheduling a month out and Mav explicitly requested the couch go somewhere people could sit on it before they take it home. He hates the thought of someone being stuck with it.

Paul grips the door handle, and I tug him backward as the door opens to a detail of police officers in riot gear with guns out. Paul needs help, not punishment.

“Don’t—” The word “shoot” dies in my throat as Mav yells my name.

“He’ll ruin everything,” Paul screams, ignoring the officers. He lunges toward Mav’s voice, and I fall on his legs.

I lie half on Paul, checking the kitten who glares at me with angry eyes.

Black pants and boots enter my line of sight right before hands reach for me. “Please don’t touch me,” I beg and roll off Paul.

“We need to get you out of here. I’m going to take you to your boyfriend, okay?”

“He needs his medication. Help him.” I gesture to Paul, who is pinned to the floor and being cuffed.

The officer helps me to my feet and directs me to the hallway and Mav. I burst into tears, and the kitten escapes, running up Mav’s body to perch on his shoulder.

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CHAPTER 35

Maverick Maher

The hospital chair doesn't fit my large frame, and everything smells like antiseptic. I'm losing my mind with our inability to leave. Sky hit his head when he recklessly tackled Paul. There were trained men and women with guns, and my boyfriend thought it was necessary to defend me. I love him, but I'd get satisfaction from knocking some sense into him.

It's almost dawn, and he's been under observation for a concussion. Even though he's been medically cleared, we haven't been able to leave yet.

The police haven't left either, asking the same questions over and over. Sky confirms the guy's name is Paul but doesn't know his last name or what type of medication he needs. From what we've overheard, Paul is in this hospital too, being psychologically evaluated.

Sky shivers again, and the only thing keeping me out of his bed is the IV attached to him because his nurse gave me a stern warning not to move it.

I rest my head on his thigh, and he pats my head to comfort me.

"You're the one who needs to be taken care of," I mumble, rubbing my cheek along his sheet-covered knee.

"Is the kitten okay? I hope I didn't hurt him." Sky tenses at the thought.

"Raven needs medical attention from being outside and away from their mom, but the flying tackle didn't hurt them," I assure him, squeezing his leg.

"Raven?"

“It’s a gender-neutral name, and Raven seems perfect for a flying black cat. They’re wily and didn’t want to let go of me. Poor baby was terrified.”

“Hmmm.” Sky bites his bottom lip in his thinking pose.

“What?”

“You left your game, your team, to come home,” he says with genuine awe.

I lift my head, bewildered by his confusion. “You were missing and in trouble. There’s nowhere else I’d be.”

“Doing your job and telling someone qualified, the police are an excellent choice,” he says with flailing arms.

The movement shifts the IV, and I slide into bed with him. “Believe me, LA took the brunt of my frustration. But I couldn’t think about hockey after you typed kiwi.” I slot myself sideways next to him, careful of the tubes. “I’m never leaving you again.” Skin-to-skin contact will be the only thing to satisfy my nerves. Stupid hospital.

“Never seems extreme.” He fights a smile.

“Nope. Perfectly reasonable. I can shoot videos with you, quit hockey, and we can be together all day, every day.” I sound insane and should keep my mouth shut, or I’ll be on the receiving end of a psych eval.

“You’d last a week.” He chuckles.

“Excuse me! You doubt me?” I sift through his hair.

“I don’t doubt your intention, but you caged in a house for long periods of time with no physical outlet? You’d lose it.”

“You could teach me your dance moves. I’ll work up a big sweat.”

His lips turn up as he glances at me from under his lashes, and I brace for his sarcasm.

“What will get you sweating?” My mom looms in the doorway, her face pinched.

My first instinct is to leap out of bed, but I’m not making her comfortable at Sky’s expense anymore. “Dancing,” I answer.

“Less dangerous,” she says neutrally, and takes my seat. “Sky, are you okay? When I saw the news, I jumped on the first plane to get here.”

“The news?” Sky squeaks.

“The bodycam footage was on the national news.”

“Mom, if you’re here to bully Sky into denying our relationship, you can go home,” I warn.

She hangs her head. “I’m sorry for all the things I’ve done to hurt you. I wanted you to have the best life possible.”

“The life you planned for me, not what I wanted,” I retort. Even though she’s clearly trying, my anger takes over.

“You’re right. I talked to our pastor regarding my dilemma.”

I snort, shifting better to see her.

“He said some enlightening things. He asked me if I preferred a fractured family and an absent son over accepting who he loves. I thought I was living by the Church’s teachings, but he said the Church never shuns love. Love is meant to be celebrated, not denied. I’m trying to reframe a lifetime of prejudice. I can’t claim to be reformed, but I’m working on it.”

“Thank you,” Sky whispers. He’s more compassionate than I am, but we can discuss it later.

My mother stands and leans over to hug Sky. “After watching you tackle that guy to prevent him from getting to my son, I know how wrong I was.” She wipes the tears from her face. “When can you go home?”

It’s unrealistic to expect her to change overnight, but she seems genuine and I appreciate that.

“The doctor cleared him hours ago, but the nurse hasn’t unhooked his IV or mentioned a discharge time,” I grumble.

My dad enters the room as if he’s being chased. “The crowd out there is crazy. It’s a media circus.”

“Fuck.” I slam my head back on the pillow.

My mom clears her throat, and Dad frowns. Nervous energy races through the room.

“Thank you for coming,” Sky says earnestly. “We could be stuck here for a while.”

“Oh, here.” Mom hands my phone over. “The charge nurse said a policewoman gave this to her for you. I told her I’m your mom.”

A novel for your next quiet moment.

Find something to read on Lokepub.

There are tons of missed calls and texts, but I dial Mr. Dimon's number immediately, putting it on speakerphone.

"Mr. Maher," he answers in his formal tone.

"Yes, sir. Thank you. Anytime," I ramble.

"Any idea what you're saying?" he says evenly.

"No." I rake my hand over my face. "Thank you for all you did to help get Sky back. Not many GMs would've taken me seriously."

"From the day you stepped into our practice facility, you've given one hundred percent to your job and this team. I reward loyalty with loyalty."

"You went so far beyond. Thank you." The anxiety that I'd be punished for missing a game vanishes.

"Have you talked to Finn yet?"

"No, I called you first."

"He's coming up with a diversion to distract the media while you and Sky leave. I told him not to fly back, but his strategy involves a press conference, which leaves me and Jayce McKenna. Neither of us jumped to volunteer."

"I'll do it. I'm his mom," Mom interrupts.

"Talk to your family and call Finn." Mr. Dimon disconnects the call.

"Mom," I pause, deciding the best way to say no.

"She can do it, son. She's never been shy around cameras."

"Besides, what could they possibly ask me I'll bungle?" She swipes her hair out of her eyes.

Sky cups my face so I turn to him.

"They should know. Everything. Not for the media, but for you and me and our future. We can't lie to them." His brown eyes implore me, but I'm not ready to tell my parents and risk their scorn for Sky.

"I'm a sex worker," Sky says in a rush. "I have the dance studio and teach classes, but most of my income comes from dancing and taking my clothes off."

My dad clears his throat, and my mom clutches those nonexistent pearls. I should buy her a necklace so she has the real thing.

"The guy who took me met me on my website and imagined an entire relationship with me. So all this is my fault."

"It's not," I bark, and watch my parents' faces.

My mom blinks rapidly, and my dad continues to clear his throat.

“I understand if I’m not what you want for your son. But you deserve the truth.” Sky’s hand rubs my arm, grounding me.

“He’s my choice. The only one for me.” My voice is rough.

“It must be hard to make enough money as a dancer, right?” Mom asks Sky.

“It is, but financially, I could stop.” Sky offers more than is necessary.

My dad stands behind my mom and massages her shoulders. She shudders as if to let go of her tension.

“We are here to support you, both of you.” Mom straightens her spine. “If you don’t want me to talk to anyone, I won’t.”

I exhale. Her one-eighty is a shock in the best way. I’m hesitant to trust her, but Sky speaks again.

“We trust you. It’s up to you.” He grips my arm for support or to calm me; I’m not sure.

“What would they ask me?” We spend the next few minutes talking, then I call Finn.

Finn asks her rapid-fire questions, and she gets flustered. “Actually, that’s what we want, Mrs. Maher. We don’t want a seasoned professional. You’re Maverick’s mom, and those questions are highly inappropriate.”

“I’m stealing that line,” Mom quips.

We coordinate our exit with their willingness to stop and answer questions, then we’re finally alone.

“Another truth bomb,” Sky says.

“We need sleep first.” I kiss his lips lightly.

“I told the police not to hurt Paul, but to help him.” His voice gets higher with his stress.

“I was outside the open door, Angel.” I snake my arm under his body to hold him. “Think I’d be mad?”

“I felt sorry for him. He created this entire relationship that doesn’t exist. He thinks we’re meant for each other because from the first video, I called him buddy.”

“I called him buddy at the gala.” My head’s fuzzy and I need a nap.

“Well, you weren’t the duck he imprinted on,” he jokes.

“The things I love most are your heart and your compassion. I’ll never be mad at you for that. I might try to rearrange a guy’s face if he touches you, but you can show empathy.” Our lips meet in a smile, and we kiss until someone clears their throat.

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CHAPTER 36

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

I've been tracking Mav's location so I could have a home-cooked meal ready for him, but I failed. The kitchen resembles a comedy set where toddlers went wild throwing things around. My idea seems ridiculous. I'm not a cook and can't fool Mav.

"Angel? I'm home," Mav calls from the front hall.

"In here," I yell back, and stuff the bigger bowls in the dishwasher to clean up.

He stops in the doorway, his grin fading as he takes in the disaster. "What's going on?" he asks in a light voice.

"Your mom sent me another recipe. She thinks you'll starve if I don't learn to cook." As if proving her right, the smoke alarm blares, but Mav's tall enough to take it down and put it on the open windowsill.

"Give me a hug." Mav picks me off my feet and wraps me up tight. "You're exhausted; I got this," he says, and my inadequacy pops up imitating a ballerina after a standing ovation.

Tears sting my eyes. "Sorry about your dinner." I'm incapable of doing the smallest thing to make his life better.

"If you were making meatloaf surprise, I'm glad it's ruined. It's terrible, and you're saving me from faking enjoying it." He cups my head and swings me gently. "Sit."

He plops me onto an island chair and throws the meatloaf, still in the pan, into the garbage. “Don’t listen to my mom. She has good intentions, but she’s an awful cook. Besides, we have Maria, who cooks to win contests.”

I bury my head in my arms. “What if something happens to her? We’ll never eat healthy again,” I wail. Keeping my mouth shut is smart, but I’ve never been that.

It’s been two weeks since Paul and I had our journey, and I haven’t slept through the night since. Mav’s worry is painted on his face. It’s better when he’s home because the safety of his arms calms me and I fall asleep.

He’s been on a road trip, and it annoys him that I won’t stay on a video call until I fall asleep. He has a job to do, and I refuse to be the reason he can’t sleep. Backsliding into an emotional death spin won’t help either of us.

“Angel, what’s really bothering you? It’s not me eating healthy because my daily intake has vastly improved since living with you.” He sits in the seat next to me.

“Nothing.” I’m so mixed up; the truth isn’t clear.

“I have a surprise for you. Reading nook or living room?” He stands and offers me his hand.

“You’re too good to me. I should be giving you a surprise,” I grumble, but take his large, warm hand.

“Living room. Excellent choice. Are you walking or need a ride?” He opens his arms and turns on the spot.

I jump on his back, feeling lighter than I have in days. He bounds up the stairs two at a time, not stopping until we’re in the living room and he sits on the couch, squishing me.

“If suffocation is my surprise, we need a serious chat.” I nip his shoulder.

“No teasing me.” Mav effortlessly hauls me around to sit in his lap. “Listen, it’s been a roller coaster since Paul kidnapped you.”

“It wasn’t like that,” I argue hotly. Since I took Paul to Mav’s apartment voluntarily, everything was my fault. I have to be responsible for my actions.

“How did your session with your therapist go?” He changes the subject.

“Fine,” I hedge, hoping to rid him of his guilt for leaving.

“Hmm, well, I’m worried,” he says by my ear. “Don’t tell me you’re fine.” He rearranges us to lift my chin, so I have to look at him. “I’ve been brainstorming what I could do for you. I’d love to take you on a vacation,

but that will have to wait until the season is over.” His purple Enforcers’ thermal brings out the green in his hazel eyes.

“But you need a break. Something fun, and I was talking to Brant—”

“Not about me?” My voice squeaks.

“Regarding doing something here in the city.” He pulls out his phone. “I live here now and can’t freeload off my boyfriend. It’s tacky.” He smirks. “And if I’m not freeloading, it could give you more time to pursue the dream you put on hold. It’s not Broadway, but there are a ton of small theaters, and some have open dance auditions.” He shows me his phone, and my body reacts before I can process.

Leaping off his lap to put as much distance between us as possible, I shout, “No! That’s a kid’s fantasy, not an adult goal. I won’t do it again.”

Mav’s face crumples and he reaches for me. “I’m sorry?” he asks in complete confusion.

“I should’ve told you it’s not something I want to do. Ever.” Me and my panic have hit crisis level. “I have to tell Maria my dinner was a bust. It will only take a minute.”

“I’ll go with you.” He stands, but I’m already exiting the room.

“No,” I say with too much force. “I’ll be right back.”

As I flee, Mav mutters, “What just happened?”

I sit on the stairs, breathing hard and clutching the railing for my sanity. If I had told him, he’d have known not to do this. Mav has been so amazing and understanding. No other guy is willing to accept the job I love. There’s no way to keep this from him now. It’s the terrible thing looming over our shoulders, waiting to break us apart.

The urge to lash out and accuse him of trying to change me festers below the surface. It’s why I had to leave our apartment. I’d say something ugly and hurt him.

The last thing I expected was for him to show me that dance troupe. It took me years to sort through the guilt and shame. Paul triggered not only my self-doubt and blame but my anger and resentment.

My therapist assures me that feelings don’t have to be logical, but they need to be dealt with.

Hanging my head, I admit none of this is Mav’s fault. In his eyes, I’m a crazy person. My stomach knots, fearing this will be the final straw for him. He’ll see I’m not worth his time or love and certainly not his energy.

I force myself to trudge upstairs to Maria’s to say hi because she’s already eaten.

Cooking and me should not be in the same sentence.

I’ll face Mav, the minute I figure out what to say.

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CHAPTER 37

Maverick Maher

After Sky goes upstairs, I call Brant.

“Hey, how’d it go?” he asks excitedly.

“Not good. Terrible.” I rub the stubble that Sky loves so much. “It was a gong show, blown tire and yard sale all rolled into one.” Recapping our conversation, I exhale. “He’s upstairs with Maria. Hopefully, he’s coming back.”

“He owns his apartment; he’s not going to abandon it. Don’t be an idiot. This has nothing to do with you,” he says, his temper firing up, so I shut the hell up.

“I’m not a relationship expert. Never had a long term, but men aren’t that complicated. We get mad as a default when we’re hurt or afraid. Figure out what hurt him or what he’s afraid of.”

As I unpack his declaration, he allows me the silence to come to my conclusion. “Okay.” I concede he’s right.

Brant talks to me until Sky’s footsteps echo on the stairs. I’m in the kitchen, cleaning the evidence of his meal debacle. Shit is off the counter, and as long as he doesn’t open the island cupboards, it seems tidy. Burnt meatloaf has a particularly obnoxious smell.

“Forgive me?” Sky asks, as he takes a seat at the counter and hides his face in his arms.

“I’m not upset with you,” I declare, and reach across to take his hand.

“You should be. I didn’t plan on telling you. Ever. I dealt with it and moved on. Except it slams into me, and boom, I’m in the past. Retreating, going numb, and pushing everyone away because emotional detachment is easier.”

“You’ll tell me when you’re ready,” I say, infusing the statement with optimism despite my racing heart and doomsday projections.

Sky lifts his head, and his eyes are red and shimmering. “I came to New York certain of who I was and what I wanted. New York was gonna be my bitch. I found an apartment with a group of artist types and got a part in an off-Broadway production so fast that I skipped my interviews with a nightclub and a cruise line.”

If I could, I’d protect him and make the bad things go away because from his expression, this story is taking a nasty turn. Unable to stop, I sit next to him and drape an arm over his shoulder.

“I burned bridges before setting foot on them.” He rubs his forehead with his palm. “A victim of the saying that if it’s too good to be true, it is. My roommates stole most of my life savings, and the director of the show was an abuser.” Sky searches my eyes for understanding.

Words fail me, but I bring our foreheads together as if I can pour my love into him.

“If I said no, he could fire me or worse, ruin my career. I let him put his hands on me and told myself it was the price to pay for success. That it would only be one or two times and after he got what he wanted and gave me a leading role, it’d all be over.”

“What do you want to do about it?” I ask, shoving my rage into an impenetrable box.

“There’s nothing to be done. It’s over.” Sky rests his cheek on the cool island. “I got the part and two weeks later, I was fired and replaced by the understudy I found letting the director fuck him. That dancer has a few more years in prison for killing the director. I believe he did it in self-defense, but the prosecutor argued excessive force and won. The director is gone and got what he deserves.”

“But your mental health suffered.” I massage his scalp, focusing on his well-being and shoving down my turmoil.

“Oh, that old thing.” Sky tries for a joke, but it falls flat. He tells me about what he went through and the help he received. “I’m so happy with you it scares me. I expect something brutal to happen, and I’m out here

manifesting it.” He shrugs. “Those feelings of being powerless and a pawn were buried deep. I lashed out at you, and I don’t ever want to do that again. I’ve talked to my therapist and try not to misplace my anger, but it’s hard to get revenge on a dead guy.” He raises his torso, and I drag him onto my lap to curl around him in protection mode.

“Fury without an outlet sucks.” I kiss his hair and tug him closer to fend off my anger.

“Give me the tea of who’s on your list?” His lips graze my neck as he speaks.

“There are two people, possibly three, I’d love to unleash the kraken on, but nothing will make anything better.” The truth loosens my chest, and his arms wrap around me.

“Yeah? I’m not on that list?”

“No, Angel. But my mom, possibly with my dad’s help, kept us apart for years. She’s been on her best behavior lately, and her press conference made Finn proud. Needless to say, her lies are hard to forgive. She destroyed the letter you wrote me.”

“I’m glad.” Sky winces. “I could paraphrase it for you, but I was heartbroken and bitchy. I said hateful things I didn’t mean, so maybe she did us both a favor by destroying it.” He covers my mouth when I try to argue. “Imagine me back then, spewing every insult at you to inflict as much pain on you as I felt. Believe me, you’d hate me, and we wouldn’t be together now.”

Sky bats his long lashes, exposing the hurt in his soul. “I’d go through it again as long as we are together now and in the future.” My imagination can supply the resentment deep in my bones if I’d read his letter.

His arms squeeze my middle. “Anyone else need to steer clear of you?”

“Don’t get me started on Paul. His delusions weren’t his fault, but he took you from me. He touched you when you said no. Part of me wants to get him alone and only one of us is walking away. That rage has nowhere to go, but acting on it would make it worse for everyone.” I shudder. My internet investigation found that people with delusions often don’t respond well to medication or therapy.

Sky cups my face and kisses my lips gently. “Crazy thought, you work in a sport known for violence.”

“I tried that when you were missing. Spent more time in the sin bin in that one game than in the rest of my NHL games combined. It felt great for

two seconds, and then…emptiness.” I slide off the stool, guiding him to his feet and into the book nook.

“Bummer. I thought we could go break things and, bam, we’re better.”

“I will take you to one of those places, but in the long run, it’s not the answer.” We sink into the comfort of holding each other, but I’m compelled to make a confession.

“Your honesty and love have made me proud of who I am.” I kiss his hand to stop his protest. “Shame and fear kept me in the closet for too long, and when I told the team I’m bi, I didn’t feel worthy of their support.”

“Mav,” Sky cries in alarm.

“It was partly from my denial and partly embarrassment for receiving allyship I didn’t earn. It was as if I skated backward and tripped into a brotherhood where I didn’t belong because I was a total fraud,” I say, and Sky shakes his head in disagreement.

“That’s not how it works,” he insists.

“I lied about us and didn’t pursue other men out of fear,” I admit.

“Sexual activity doesn’t define your sexuality.” Sky rearranges himself in my lap. “There are religious sects that require a vow of celibacy. Those who devote themselves don’t become asexual. They place their calling above their sexuality. You were annoyed at your dad for not understanding you’re bi, right?”

“What does that have to do with anything?” My big, confused teddy bear is back.

“Being with me is a choice, but it doesn’t make you gay. Your partner choice doesn’t change your sexuality. Your acceptance into the queer community isn’t based on your sexual activity. You’ve deserved support since you understood you’re into guys.” Sky pokes my side.

“You’re the smart one.” I sink into the couch, with loose limbs and a quiet mind. He puts the acceptance of sexuality and the practice of sexuality in two different boxes.

I place my ear over his heart, and the steady rhythm is a tangible sign he’s physically fine. That we’re where we belong.

The trauma won’t be an easy fix, but we’ll face it together.

Sky falls asleep but wakes up when the delivery person rings the bell. I steer him toward the front door, where the smell of our takeout food is strong.

“You think of everything.”

“Nah, I’m selfish and hungry.” I swat his ass to get him moving faster.

Walking upstairs while kissing and taking clothes off is more complicated when I’m holding our food. I dart into his spare bedroom, aka his closet, and remove a beach towel from the top shelf to spread on our bed.

“Comfort food.” Sky claps as I unload the chicken, biscuits, and potatoes with gravy.

“I figured you were in the mood for it since you tried to cook meatloaf.” I hand him a container and sit across from him.

“How do you put up with me? I’m a mess,” Sky says with a teasing lilt, but dim eyes.

“You said you were sorry, but I should apologize too. It’s my fault for not creating a space for you to disclose your past. And not clarifying that my mother thinks you should cook, but I don’t give a shit. She’s still stuck in heteronormative roles for us. You know what would be hilarious?” I dig my fork into the mashed potatoes.

“We should show her our tax returns from last year. See if she hounds me to cook and clean.” I laugh at my joke, but Sky barely smiles. “I love you the way you are and don’t want to change a thing. Your past is a part of the man you’ve become. In my eyes, you’re perfect. I’d rather eat takeout in bed than see you stressed out cooking a meal. I’d rather help you fight the demons that keep you up at night than be in the dark. If anyone is a mess, it’s me.” I gesture around the room to my belongings spread out over the floor, even though I have enough room in my dresser.

“But you don’t lie to me. You don’t have a past that could freak you out at any moment.” Sky hangs his head.

“You didn’t lie. You weren’t ready to talk and give me all the details. Same as I wasn’t ready to come out of the closet in high school or college. I didn’t lie about wanting a future with you. I couldn’t fathom a way to have you and hockey.” I stretch my leg so my foot skims his shin. “Neither of us is blameless.”

“We eat later, right?” He throws a leg over my hip. “You could fuck me all the way better instead.”

I hesitate, not because I’m unsure, but because he might not agree with my timing. “What if we switched things up and you fuck me?” I stare into his rich brown eyes.

“Why now?” he asks without anger.

“Honestly?”

“Always.” He tightens his leg on my waist.

“Lots of reasons. One, I want you to be my first. Two, I’ve been waiting for the right time to ask, but something inevitably goes wrong. Three, if you’re up for it, put me out of my misery.” I grin and act exasperated.

“So it’s not you giving me control?”

“Plausibly, a tiny bit. But have you met you? You’re a bossy bottom.” I press my lips to his forehead.

Sky dissolves into giggles. “You good to prep?” he asks between laughs.

“I’m not useless.” I smash my lips together so I don’t sulk.

“Arion, not knowing how to do something doesn’t make you useless. I’m offering my services or supervision.” He rolls off the bed and extends his hand.

“I can’t say no to that.”

Sky takes his role as supervisor very seriously. I’ve never been so clean, and he inspects my work with his tongue. After he’s had his dessert, he leads me back to bed.

“It might be easier for your first time if you ride me.” He settles into the middle of the bed with his erect cock pointing at me. “You’ll have control of pacing and depth.”

I crawl over him, threading fingers into his curls. “What if I don’t want control? I’d rather be at your mercy.” I suck the pulse point on his neck and reach for the lube.

“I’ll fuck you upside down or sideways.” Sky pushes me onto my back and takes the lube. “Hold your knees,” he instructs.

My heart hammers faster and faster with no rhythm. Sky kisses my lips slowly and sinfully. He breathes air into my lungs and pulls my spiky hair. The sound I make can only be interpreted as frustration.

“I’m going to fuck you so good once you relax,” he says against my lips, and my shoulders drop, releasing tension. I’m on the verge of begging him when his hand skates along my body, teasing my cum gutter.

I moan and arch up into him. He rewards me by kissing my torso and opening the bottle of lube. His tongue traces one side of my *V*, then the other. My cock is leaking and jumping as if it can get into Sky’s mouth. His fingers gently trace my rim, and I thrust so he’ll breach me.

“I need you,” I rasp, letting go of my legs so I can touch him.

“Your bossy bottom has not said you can let go of your legs. Is this what you need?” He dips his index finger and fires up nerves from my balls to

my spine.

I melt around his touch and am so thankful he's the first person to be inside me.

"Your ass squeezes my finger like it's not enough. You want more, don't you?" Sky hovers over me, and I spread my legs as wide as my hockey thighs will allow. "You're the music to my dance," he coos, and I'm on edge already.

He adds another finger, stealing my breath until he works me loose. "Please," I beg.

Sky kisses me and adds a third finger. I crave the pressure and wince at the same time.

"Are you going to let me fuck this juicy hockey ass? Are you going to take all the cum I give you? Scream my name while painting your abs with your cum." His voice has dropped a seductive octave, and I mentally do a hockey drill to stave off my orgasm.

Sky leans his weight on the back of my legs and lines himself up.

"Okay?" he asks.

"Please," I plead again.

He sinks into me slow and steady. "You're mine," he purrs. I said I wanted to be at his mercy, so I let him set the pace. Sky holds still when he bottoms out, and his balls rest snugly against my ass. "You ready to experience what your body can do?"

I nod, sure my words will come out garbled.

"Stay with me," he says, and it's the only warning I get before he swivels his hips. I expected hard thrusts, but this is so much better. His dick is taking a tour of my ass and hellbent on finding every pleasure point.

"Fuck me, Sky," I beg unnecessarily.

He finds my prostate and caresses it with stroke after stroke. My eyes roll up into my head, and the only working brain cell wonders if it's possible to die in a state of sexual nirvana.

"Look at me when you come," Sky pants, and as our eyes meet, I explode. He's my anchor in the storm, tethering me to reality…to him.

He stiffens as he comes, and his face takes on the angelic quality I love. He's always been otherworldly, but he's the most beautiful when he comes. Big brown eyes that let me into his soul, red-kissed lips, and a pert nose.

My heart bangs in my chest to be closer to him. I take his nape and lower him to me, my release sticky between us.

“Can we sleep now?” I cuddle him on my chest.

“No,” Sky murmurs. “I’ll clean you up in a second.” He sets his chin on his fist resting on my chest. “Was it good for you?”

“Umm, I’m paralyzed with pleasure. Is that a thing?” My hand covers his ass so he can’t pull out.

“You ain’t seen nothing yet.” He nips my nipple. “Being with a flexible dancer has its advantages. Wait until I suck you while I fuck you.”

“I’ll die,” I moan, and my dick twitches with interest.

“And I’ll bring you back to life.”

That’s a promise for the ages.

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CHAPTER 38

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

The bed's still warm even though Mav left for practice, and it's so comfy I ignore my phone. I've been fucked and fucked again within an inch of my life. Every part of me desires to stay here until Mav comes home, and we can do it over and over again.

The constant text beeps have stopped, but whoever is trying to reach me calls twice in a row. It's my personal phone that few people have the number for, so irrational thoughts propel me out of bed to answer Lo's call.

"Hey." Lo drags out the word with uncertainty.

"What's up?" I flop back onto the bed, irritation ringing in my voice because this doesn't sound very emergency-ee.

"I got a call from a friend of a friend, but he's a reliable source." He hesitates.

"Lo, spit it out, or I'm hanging up." I should be in a better mood after all the sex, but my gut tells me reality is ready for a fistfight.

"A reporter, or more accurately a gossip whore, got through hospital security to talk to Paul. They've sold the story that you're a sex worker to a major news organization. This is spreading faster than a computer virus. I can be there in ten minutes to help you figure this out. Recheck your doors are locked and close the blinds."

If I weren't lying down, I'd collapse. This is my worst fear coming true. My life is going to ruin Mav's. I'll be infamous and drag him into hell with me. He's too good a man to let me face this alone.

“Are you there?” Lo asks.

“Yeah. I’m gonna call Mav first and let you know.” We hang up, but I get sent to voicemail on Mav’s phone. No surprise, he’s probably watching film or in the weight room.

My mind is an endless loop of disasters for me and Mav. I can’t see a future where he doesn’t resent the bomb I tossed into his life.

I dial the last number I expect. Mav’s mom. Warning her is the right thing to do. This is our worst nightmare coming true.

She greets me with cheer but sobers as soon as I explain the situation.

“Doesn’t the team have people who do that stuff? That nice man, Finn, handles the press and talks to the media, right? Can he help in this situation?”

“You’re not ready to toss me to the wolves?” I’m now dressed because it seems more appropriate when speaking to Mrs. Maher.

She pauses, and I have a heart attack while waiting for her answer.

“I’m upset for my son. No parent can stand their child suffering, but I’m also seeing red on your behalf. I thought I could protect him from this type of situation. But I went about it the wrong way. Maverick loves you. And that Paul man doesn’t seem to have all his knives in the drawer, and it’s despicable to take advantage of him.”

I eye my bed, tempted to curl up and soak in her acceptance, but retreating and licking my wounds accomplishes nothing.

“Thank you.” I swallow and raise my head, so tears don’t fall. “I’ll call the PR director and see what advice he has.”



Mav yells my name from outside the brownstone, getting louder as he gets closer.

“Someone needs a candy bar to find their zen,” Finn drawls.

“Yeah, I’ll talk to him and we’ll call you.” We hang up, and I intercept Mav in the hallway to bring him into the living room.

“Sky.” He’s out of breath and wheezing like he sprinted home. “I’m so sorry. I ruined everything. I couldn’t keep my mouth shut, and now it’s everywhere, going viral.” His pupils are wide and fearful.

“I saw it, and Finn thinks it’s a good thing. Sit.” Patting the cushion next to me, I reassure him. “Seriously. It’ll be fine. Believe me, I spiraled down the doom and gloom rabbit hole, but there’s a plan, if you agree.”

Mav sits on the edge of the couch, bouncing his knee. “What do you mean you saw?”

“The clip of you saying ‘it’s safer than being an off-Broadway dancer’ has gone viral.” I straddle him, caging him in so I’ll have his full attention. “Yes, it’s out there, everywhere, that I’m a camboy.” He tries to stand, but I won’t let him. “My biggest fear is hurting you. But Finn had another idea. You can say no and I’ll do it myself, or we can do it together.”

“Together.” His fingertips dig into my waist, and his hazel eyes are curious and wary.

“There’s no pressure, and you can change your mind. I love what I do, and it took a lot of soul-searching to rid myself of shame. Denying my job is a little like hiding in the closet, a big step backward.”

“I agree,” Mav cuts in, which eases my tension.

“The best defense is a strong offense—”

“Did Finn teach you that?” he says, and I arch an eyebrow. “Go on.”

“Instead of reacting or doing damage control, Finn booked a spot on a national morning show to tell my story. All of it, and why I chose camboy work over other options. What do you think?”

Mav stands with me in his arms and spins us around. “Does that mean I can take out a billboard in Times Square to announce you’re my boyfriend?”

“No.” I swat his shoulder, and his face scrunches in disappointment. “Maybe as an anniversary gift in a few years.”

“Years!” Mav shouts with mock horror.

“Are you saying yes to the morning show with me? They need to prep us both if you’re coming.”

“Where you go, I go.” Mav kisses my forehead and sets me down. “Are you sure you want to do this? You don’t have to. The headlines will blow over in a few weeks, and a new scandal will take its place.”

“You stole my lines.”



“Wave when the camera pans to you in three…two…one.” Mav and I smile and tilt our heads toward each other. His hair is crunchy with product, and I have enough spray in mine that if a tornado blew through, it wouldn’t budge.

“I’ve changed my mind. How do we escape?” I swipe a stiff strand of hair from my brow and notice the makeup on my hand. “Shit.”

“You’ve got this. Getting up before the sun was the hardest part,” he whispers.

“Promise?” I whine, and Mav reaches for me.

“Don’t touch each other.” The makeup artist appears out of nowhere. “You’ll ruin my hard work,” he teases, and swishes the makeup brush over my forehead.

“Finn undersold this idea. We’re being interviewed by the most beloved TV anchor in America, and I’ve got swamp balls,” I grumble.

“If you think that’s a turnoff, you’re wrong.” Mav readjusts himself.

A producer comes over to guide us to the interview chairs, and we’ll meet the host during the next commercial break.

I take Mav’s arm to hoist myself up into the barstool-esque chair. No wonder they seat us before the segment. A vision of face-planting from the chair on camera creates a bubble of hysteria in my throat. “A billboard was a better idea.”

“I’m quoting you on that.” Mav easily slides into his smooth leather chair.

We meet the anchor, and as a gay man, I’m tongue-tied by her beauty.

Time hits warp speed, and I’m almost above myself watching instead of sitting in the chair. She introduces us and gives the viewers some background, smiling brightly.

Then her face morphs into serious mode as she leans in. “What brought you here today, Skylar? Or should I call you Lark?”

Next to me, Mav straightens, ready to defend me, but I offer him my hand and he relaxes.

“That’s a complicated question, Andrea, one I’ve asked myself lately. Skylar is on my birth certificate, but I legally changed it to Lark when I moved to New York City. My friends call me Skylar, but I’ll keep Lark as my professional dance name.” My smile is firmly painted on my face, and Mav’s hand in mine helps me stick to the plan. I steer her toward my narrative and begin with the facts of my relationship with Maverick, starting in high school.

I keep my story of moving to New York short and to the point.

“Let’s return to something you said.” Andrea leans in and I freeze so I don’t recoil. The studio smells of disinfectant, and her floral scent is too sticky sweet. “You mentioned Lark is your professional dance name?”

“Yes. My off-Broadway production and my dance studio are under Lark Angel, and it would be confusing to explain my credentials if I change my name.” I plow ahead without taking a breath, otherwise I might not reveal all the truths that could be used against me. “I felt lucky to land a part as a

dancer in a new production. Being fired from that job changed the direction of my life, but I'm actually grateful." My cheeks flame under the hot lights, and Mav laces our fingers together.

"Grateful isn't the word that usually comes to mind when you've been fired," Andrea prompts.

"It wasn't immediate for sure. I went through a lot before I came to that realization." A bead of sweat forms at my nape.

"Are you open to discussing it?" There's a gleam in her eyes, and I can't tell if she's baiting me or if it's the lighting.

"I have nothing to hide, and I'm hoping to be part of a positive change for my current career." The lights burn my face, but Mav's body warmth is soothing. "Disastrous things tend to happen all at once. My roommates stole a significant amount of cash from me and kicked me out when I couldn't pay rent. I was homeless with no job, living in my car until it was towed away. As you can imagine, I met a lot of people who wanted to 'help' me." I use air quotes.

"That must have been a traumatic time," Andrea says into the camera, instead of to me.

I fight the urge to downplay my experience. I'm proud of who I've become.

"Chance meetings led me toward positive changes. I met a social worker from The Q Solutions who helped me find temporary work and housing. The organization focuses mainly on at-risk queer youth but helps the community as a whole. They saved my life, and they rely on grants and donations. If you need help or want to make a contribution, search 'theQSolutions.org.' " This time I stare into the camera, hoping to boost their income.

"How hard is it to get a job after you're homeless?" she presses.

Her perfume causes my eyes to water, but I blow out a breath and continue. "Extremely. There are short-term obstacles like having clean clothes and showers before an interview and enormous obstacles such as not having an address or phone number." Mav shifts closer, leaning on my chair. I couldn't do this without him.

"I understood that anyone I met on the street was more liable to harm me than help me. Luckily, I happened to be in the center when a pay-for-play content creator came in hoping to find an assistant. I introduced myself and got the job."

"Did you worry for your safety or if the job was real?" Andrea's face scrunches with fake confusion.

“Searching an online creator is easy, and then verifying their metrics on their page decreases the likelihood of falling for a scam if you meet the person or do a video call. The creator I worked for encouraged me to make my own content.

“I love the control my job affords me. I can dance and connect with people without the fear of physical danger. My mentor introduced me to people and helped me start my online business.” A trickle of sweat runs the length of my spine.

“The fear of physical danger must have been very real for you after being homeless.” Andrea glances at the large clock indicating how much time we have left until the commercial break.

“No, I was sexually assaulted on a dance production. That’s where I met Lance Perkins.” There’s a gasp of recognition from the studio.

Andrea covers her surprise, and says, “For those of you who are unaware”— she stares into the camera—“Lance Perkins was a promising young dancer who is serving time in prison for manslaughter.”

I power on, ignoring the lightheadedness. “I won’t rehash the sordid details, but the director of the production forced himself on me and promised me a lead part. A part he later gave to Lance, after which he fired me.” My voice quivers at the end as I release the burden of my past and hope for a better future.

“For the record, Lance tried to get help but was denied a restraining order against the director,” Mav says sharply.

“We’ve received some backlash pertaining to your interview today, with critics claiming you’re only here to distract from the fact that your career is national news. Comments?” she grills me, and my brain registers her smile as baring her teeth.

“I’m here to shed light on people like Lance who played by the rules but were let down by the justice system because the man he rightfully accused had more power. We think we’ve made great strides since the Me Too movement and the women’s gymnastics scandal, but the truth is that innocent people are still being hurt and held accountable for their abuser’s actions. I intentionally chose my profession because I have a creative outlet, I make great money, but most importantly, I feel safe.”

“But you were the victim of a kidnapping by a fan of your website. That doesn’t seem safe.”

“I’m a survivor of a situation that never should have happened. The man who allegedly took me is a casualty of a healthcare system that is more

interested in profits than people. His story is similar to Lance's in that they were failed by people who should've protected them." I'm careful not to confirm Paul's involvement, but I sound defensive, and it's a mistake.

"Many people suffer from mental illnesses but don't kidnap other people. Do you agree your profession puts you at risk?" Her smile hides the gleam in her eyes.

"Andrea, do you mind if I interject?" Mav leans in but gives the camera a great angle of his face.

Andrea's eyes flicker in annoyance, but she concedes. "I'm sure everyone is interested in your opinion."

"Let's not lose the plot. The reason we agreed to this interview is because other news organizations immorally received information from a mentally ill man to expose Sky's career as if it's dirty and he should be ashamed. He's not, and I'm proud to call him my boyfriend. We have an unnatural tendency to victim-blame. The news details horrific acts but dismisses them because the victim brought the harm upon themselves. 'News outlets' "—he uses air quotes—"regularly use dishonest or illegal methods to get information to create clickbait with no ramifications. It's disappointing that you question Sky's career when both you and I are more prominent in the public eye."

"Journalism and hockey are far different from someone who takes their clothes off for money," she retorts.

"Have you seen online content for hockey? Romance readers are rabid. The number of naked torso dressing room shots has exploded, as well as videos of our stretching routines. Dancing isn't inherently sexual." Mav lets his statement sit as a mic drop, and I've never loved him more.

"Which is why I specifically chose a career as a camboy. As a dancer, I was touched inappropriately by hundreds of people. As a sex worker, a delusional man thought he was my boyfriend, but he didn't harm me. His crime was running from the police. My current career is objectively safer."

"Such fascinating topics, but my producer is waving me to commercial. We'll be back after this." The camera light goes off, and her smile fades.

Mav immediately stands and offers her his hand. "Nice meeting you, thank you for your time."

"Will you stay for another segment?" She straightens the mic pack.

"Unfortunately, we have a full schedule today. Thank you for the offer." Instead of shaking her hand, I take Mav's. "Have a good day," I say with the lilt of a cheerleading squad.

Finn meets us at the stage door and speed-walks us out of the building. “Great job. Skylar, you can have a job in PR anytime,” he praises.

“I’ll pass. Terrible hours and low pay,” I quip.

“You tell no lies, little muffin. Can I drop you at your next appointment?” Finn has his phone in hand.

“My next appointment is right here.” Mav wraps his arm around me.

Finn stops to glare at us. “Take that home. I’m not in the mood for a sex tape.”

“When are you ever?” Mav asks.

“When it’s mine.” Finn exits into the chill without a backward glance.

“You heard him. Let’s go home.” I’m blinded by a flash of light, and Mav dips me into a kiss.

“That’s all you get.” He salutes the photographers, and we hurry to our rideshare.

My phone pings and I show Mav.

Mrs. M: I’m so proud of both of you

“She’s really hoping you’ll forgive her,” I say.

“I will. She’s even volunteering at a crisis hotline inspired by The Trevor Project. Only by proving herself over and over will she help me trust her not to hurt you. And Dad has to be involved in our lives and can’t claim ignorance anymore. They don’t understand everything, but they’re making an effort.”

“Fair.” I drag him out of the car and into our house to forget about his parents and the outside world.

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CHAPTER 39

Maverick Maher

“Sky?” I call with concern, since the air smells of someone’s cooking. Hopefully Maria’s here. Being away has turned me into a neurotic mess, with Sky being lonely. I’ve got a bright surprise being delivered that should add a wow factor to cheer him up.

Even though the aftermath of our morning interview has been positive, he’s been cautious. Almost cagey, as if he’s keeping a secret and running off to do errands but coming back without purchases. I’m not worried there’s something wrong with our relationship because we’ve gone fully public this week, dating in plain sight.

Sky skips to meet me and drags me into the kitchen. “I’ve got a couple of surprises. Big and small. Which do you want first?”

I exhale with a grin. We enjoy spoiling each other. “Hit me with the small one.”

“Ta-da,” he says, and my phone pings with incoming pictures.

“What am I looking at?” I rub my eyes, examining the pictures of airline tickets.

“I’m traveling to your away games. There aren’t more than a few weeks of the regular season left, but I’m coming to all but two of your games. The plane tickets for your next game are outrageous, but once the playoffs start —”

I sweep him up. “You’re coming with me?” I kiss every inch of his face that I can reach.

“It’s not that big a deal.” He hops up on the counter and lays himself out for me. “Before you freak out, the next thing has terrible timing, so we can do it on a trial basis.”

I nuzzle his crotch and he giggles.

“Oh, I’m in for more than a trial.” I nip at his waist, but a pathetic sound echoes in the pantry. “What’s that?”

Sky holds my shoulders as he hoists himself up. “Don’t be mad, but I went to check on Raven, confirmed girlie kitty, to make sure she’s okay. She was dehydrated and hungry, but in great shape for what she’s been through. The entire time I was with her, she kept peeking around, expecting someone else to show up.”

He slides off the island and has an adorable pink flush. His eyes are locked on mine as he slides over to the pantry door. “In my humble opinion, she was looking for you.”

I force down the surge of excitement that pulses through me. Sky has been anti-pet as long as I’ve known him.

He cracks the door open, and a black ball of fur rockets straight at me.

“Raven.” I cuddle the kitten to my chest, and she purrs. “We can keep her?” I ask.

“She’ll only stay if we keep her sister too.” Sky holds up a fluff of orange with wary amber eyes staring at me with a flick of her tail. “This could be your other daddy.” He buries his face in her belly.

My heart leaps and then plummets as I tally the things it takes to keep kittens alive and happy.

“My last gift seems ridiculous, but I’ve got it figured out. The first time I fly out, the kittens are scheduled for their next round of shots. They can stay at the vet’s overnight. Maria will be healed in a few more weeks, and Lo said he’d stay here with the babies on my next trip. What do you think?” His brown eyes plead for what I already want.

“You really thought this through.” I allow myself to consider Raven as mine. “You’re fine with two kittens shedding and clawing furniture?”

His mouth drops in horror at the thought. “They are perfect babies, not destructive monsters. He didn’t mean to talk bad about you,” Sky coos, and in response, the orange kitten takes a swipe at his hair, catches it in her paws, and chews on it.

“What’s her name?” Raven crawls around my shoulder but can’t reach the other side yet so settles to lick my ear.

“This is Amber. She’s Raven’s sister by choice. Two cuties bonded by abandonment. Watch.” Sky saunters to the doorway, and both kittens yowl as if they’re being tortured. It’s heart-wrenching, and I silently vow to do anything to stop it. “Don’t worry. Baby, I’m not leaving without your sis.” He steps toward me, and they lower their volume to a raspy squawk.

I gingerly remove Raven’s claws from my shirt and hold her next to Amber. Both their tails go straight up and they boop noses.

“So cute.” I reach to scratch between Amber’s ears.

“Wait until you see them play. Pro tip: clothes on around them.” He lifts his henley to show me tiny scratch marks across his stomach. “It’s my fault. I thought skin-to-skin contact would be good for them, similar to babies. Don’t do it. It’s a cuteness trap.” Sky closes us in the pantry with the kittens. He sits with Amber and pats the space next to him.

I sit gingerly so as not to frighten them. “What do they do now?” Raven digs in her claws and scales me to the top of my head.

“Whatever they want.” Sky lets Amber sniff around. She decides her sister can’t have all the fun and scurries up to Sky’s head.

“Kitten hats were not on my bingo card today, but it’s the best gift ever.” I duck my head to kiss Sky while balancing the kitty. Raven digs her claws into my scalp and lets out a tiny hiss. I pluck her off my head and bring her nose to nose with me. “You might be more fun than a league win, but no hissy fits for kissing daddy. It’s a deal-breaker.”

“I’m Papa. You’re daddy.” He brings Amber to his chest and lays his head in my lap.

“Reeeeally?” I set Raven on his chest and kiss him properly, sinking a hand into his hair, but the cat party going on his stomach is too enticing not to watch.

“They’re going to do it.” Sky holds still.

A second later the kittens go up on their hind legs, showing their bellies and front toe beans as they waddle to each other and take swipes.

“They’re drunken baby bears acting tough with their murder mittens.” They tumble over, then bounce up with arched backs and flattened ears.

“I could watch them all day,” Sky says with a giggle.

“How are we ever going to get any sleep?” I brush Sky’s hair and kiss his forehead.

Sky’s face morphs into horror. “They’re not sleeping with us!” He sits up and sets the babies on the floor. “They’ve never slept with humans, so we aren’t spoiling them by teaching them it’s an option. Daddy and papa sleep in the bed while baby kitties sleep in their own space.”

“That’s not fair.” I gather him in my arms, riling him up as foreplay. “Not even for my birthday?” I snake a hand under Sky’s shirt to tease his nipples.

“It’s not close to your birthday. But speaking of birthdays”—he arches into my touch—“we need to figure out a present for Brant. Twenty-one is a momentous occasion, and he deserves more than a bunch of hockey bros pouring liquor down his throat.”

“What do you have in mind?” I pull him onto my lap, and the kittens use my leg as a climbing wall to get between us. “Some people say black cats are crazy, and others orange cats are unhinged.” They’re still so tiny I can stretch my palm out and scratch both their heads.

“We can be the definitive cat expert on that. Right, babies?” he murmurs to them, then returns to the subject. “You’re a great gift giver. What’s on his dream list?”

I crack my neck. “We can’t get Brant what he wants, which is some mystery dude who’s off-limits.”

“We don’t have to decide now. You’ll think of something.” We cuddle the kittens, and I lose track of time.

The doorbell rings, and I jump up, taking him with me. “Shit. The babies have to stay in here. We can’t risk them getting out.” They follow me to the door. “What do we do?”

“Calm down, Daddy. They have a playpen.” He scoops them up and deposits them in a large cardboard box with blankets and water. “Who’s at the door?”

“My turn.” I take his hand and head for the entryway. “If you don’t love it, and I mean really, truly love it, we can get something else,” I preface, and open the door. One delivery guy is in the doorway while the other waits with a moving dolly at the bottom of the stairs.

“Delivery for Maher?”

“That’s me,” I say. “One second, before you bring it in, he’s got to approve it.” I show Sky a picture of the chandelier I bought.

He gasps and covers his mouth. “Shut up, you did not.” His eyes glisten, and he shoves my arm.

“On our Valentine’s date, you loved the ones in the restaurant so…” I gesture to the huge box. “Ta-da,” I repeat what he said earlier. “It’s not kittens, but we can return it if—”

“It’s gorgeous.” He leaps in my arms and wraps his legs around my waist. “Will they install it?”

“I didn’t get you a half-ass gift.” I back up, holding him under the ass and motioning for the delivery guys to bring it inside. “Installation included.”

The guys bring it in and carefully remove the chandelier and packing material.

Sky bounces on his toes with his hands intertwined in front of his chest. “I feel like a real adult.”

“Angel, you’ve been adulting for years. This is an accessory for the house.” I stop him from running over to the chandelier. It has a black circular base with eight light bulbs and a swirl of crystals that amplify the light when on.

“Best accessory ever! This is the second-best gift I’ve ever gotten.”

It’s hard not to take that personally, so I ask, “What’s the best?”

“You.” He kisses my lips.

One delivery guy says to the other, scoffing, “Young love.”

It takes over two hours for them to install it, so Sky heats Maria’s meal for us. He asked her to join us, but she declined. Sky joked she’s afraid we were going to parade around naked but assured her we wouldn’t do that to the kittens.

Now we’ve brought out the love seat cushion to lie on and stare up at the light.

“The kittens are obsessed.” The dangling crystals throw light on the floor, and Raven and Amber chase it, pouncing with their tiny paws.

“Me too.” Sky kisses my temple. “But it’s getting late, the babies need their sleep, and I need to thank their daddy properly.” His breath fans over my ear. My face must show my trepidation because he smacks my arm. “They’ll be fine. I set up an iPad, and we’ll feed them while their blankies get warm in the dryer. Our babies will pass right out.”

“And then we get naked time. Lots and lots of naked time,” I assert.

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CHAPTER 40

Skylar Engelhardt/ Lark Angel

I've given the tiny terrors more freedom to play by closing off the kitchen. It's with some sort of kitty-twin telepathy that they closed themselves in a cabinet, dangled from the bar stools, and raced around skidding into the island.

Lo's bringing dinner later since Mav said he'll be late, not to wait, and get ready. Their plane landed two hours ago, and I've forbidden myself from checking his location. It might spoil the surprise.

My phone alarm dings, and I gather up my sweet babies to corral them into the book nook for my class. They're changing every day, and I video chat with Mav so he doesn't miss anything. Mav's relationship with the kittens hits me in unexpected ways. He's so gentle and ready to do whatever they need. He's learned their meows and can anticipate what they need better than I can. I thought I'd be doing all the work, but Mav's so in love he wants to clean their litter. No arguments from me.

Of course, Raven tries to escape, but I've perfected the toss and drop to shut the door fast. Just in time, because my twin students are arguing on my front steps.

One of my biggest fears after going on the morning show was that I'd lose my dance studio business. Didn't think many people would want to take lessons from a gay sex worker whose name is linked to one of the city's biggest sex scandals, and that's sayin' something in this town.

The queer community has rallied around me, and although I lost half of my students, new ones took their places immediately.

“I’m not stereotyping. I’m stating my opinion.” Andrew, the older twin, says to Anthony.

“You just want to be right,” Anthony retorts. “But there isn’t a way to prove it.”

Their father motions to me to say “they’re all yours.” These two will argue about anything.

“Who can do perfect heel-toe combinations across the floor the fastest? Warm up first.” I clap my hands, and the kids run into the studio, dropping their bags. I smile at the dad who is taking a seat in the entryway.

Andrew and Anthony remind me of kittens who need lots of playtime to get their energy out. Their dads were looking for a place for them to run and jump while being contained, but the kids have talent. Their music teacher gave them dance parts in their school play, and I help them rehearse.

Every ten minutes we do a free-dance style break to music they choose. Their creative freedom fuels their desire to learn new dances.

Class is almost over when Mav whisper-yells in the foyer. “Shhh! Quiet, Lark has class. I’ll open the door with another code.”

I’m curious, and the kids won’t focus with all his noise, so we sashay over to the doors and fling them open.

Mav’s walking on his tiptoes with his finger to his lips. Brant’s following him with his arms out as if he expects Mav to fall. King and O’Keefe are trying not to laugh.

“What’s wrong with him?” Andrew asks.

“Nothing!” Mav straightens up and hides an arm behind his torso.

“We can end early,” the dad offers.

“NO!” the twins cry in unison.

“How about we show these guys your routine? You think hockey players could do it?” I ask.

“No way! Never!” they say at the same time. “I’ll start the music,” Anthony shouts.

I motion for the guys to come into the dance studio and sit along the wall. “We’ve only got a few minutes left,” I assure them.

The twins put on a Broadway-worthy show, hamming it up, and the guys give them a standing ovation. They high-five each other, and their dad asks them to get their shoes on to leave.

“We should have a dance-off,” Andrew declares, like it’s a usual thing for him.

“Time to go, guys,” their dad says, but they beg until he relents.

“I’m in.” King removes his shoes and spins into the center of the floor. The twins decide they’ll take on me and King.

“That’s a bad choice,” Mav mumbles. He’s slouched over, still hiding an arm.

“Is he drunk?” I ask King.

King shrugs, but the music cuts off what he was going to say. The twins pick hip-hop music, probably assuming since I teach ballet and tap, I won’t have moves.

Ten beats into the song, the twins realize King and I *can* dance and synchronize our moves in seconds after we do simultaneous aerials. Brant jumps in to spot the twins for flips, but they sulk and revert to doing the Dougie.

The twins talk smack on their way out and demand a rematch in a month.

“You’re going down, lil dudes.” O’Keefe slings his arm around King, taunting them.

Once they leave, I turn my attention to Mav. “What’s going on with you?” I saunter over and squat in front of him.

“Who knew a big, strong hockey center would be such a baby in dealing with pain?” Brant hefts Mav off the floor.

“Are you hurt?” I reach for the arm he’s been hiding.

“Nope, surprise!” Mav grins and shows me his bandaged wrist. It’s not a cast or a full wraparound.

“What am I looking at?” I ask, but Brant smacks my hand away.

“This deserves a full reveal with commentary, and I was promised kittens,” Brants says seriously.

“Dinner upstairs with our babies.” I stride toward the keypad to the door upstairs. “Take the food upstairs and make sure he doesn’t fall down the stairs.” Unlocking the door, I motion to Brant. “O’Keefe, help me carry the kitten stuff.”

“You got your shit locked tight,” Brant comments.

“It’s because I teach middle schoolers and high school heathens. Those bitches wouldn’t think twice before pilfering my makeup and clothes. And that’s just the boys,” I quip, and supervise Brant and Mav as King carries the food behind them.

“Is this a keep-your-friends-close-and-your-enemies-closer situation?” O’Keefe follows me and stands by the pantry door, waiting for instructions.

“Only from your perspective,” I say. It doesn’t take a genius to connect the dots that he’d hate King and me being alone. “Careful, they claw their way up your body.” I open the door, and my devil sweeties race into the room, around the island, and stop in front of O’Keefe to hiss and sniff. “Their affection is the true test.”

Raven and Amber circle him at a safe distance, taking turns getting closer for another smell. Their hackles have settled, so I gather their dinner and supplies from the pantry to take them upstairs.

O’Keefe’s rigid with his arms at his sides and a kitten dangling from each leg. “What do I do?” he asks without moving.

“You could hold them, put them on your shoulders, or pick them off you. Only one action will cause you to fail.” I smirk at his uncertainty and hold out their kitten bed, in case he wants to put them in it.

His posture relaxes, and he tries to pet them. Raven jumps on his arm and claws her way to his shoulder while Amber yowls at being left behind. O’Keefe uses one hand to steady Raven as the other one hovers over Amber. His eyes dart to mine, and I give him an up nod. He places Amber on his other shoulder, and she purrs loudly in his ear.

Any lingering reservations I had about O’Keefe vanish. My babies are excellent judges of character.

When we get upstairs, I carefully close the door behind us. “Meet Amber and Raven.” I say their names as I remove them from O’Keefe’s shoulders.

“Why aren’t we cat dads?” O’Keefe nudges King.

“Because we travel together. All. The. Time.” King pushes Mav out of the way to pet Amber, who is closer.

She leans into his hand for pets but then follows her sister under the couch.

“They’ll hide for a minute, but if we ignore them, they’ll be all up in our business,” I assure Brant, who’s craning his neck to see under the couch. “Eat fast,” I instruct as I get the kitten dinner out.

“No, my surprise.” Mav throws himself on the couch, holding his wrist with his other hand. “I endured pain for you.” He holds his arm up as proof.

“We downplayed the pain, not understanding he has the pain tolerance of a toddler,” Brant chirps, and King nods in agreement.

“I’m all out of guesses.” I place a dish under each end of the couch so Raven and Amber don’t fight over food.

“Have I told you today how much I love you?” Mav asks.

“I love you more.” Hugging his neck, I flop into his lap.

“This torture proves my love. I had to do something forever…” he trails off.

“Did it require liquid courage?” I ask, and the only thing that makes sense is a tattoo.

“You get me.” Mav raises his arm over his head as if I’ll peek before he’s ready. “This is my you’re-my-forever and I-was-a-dick ink.” His hazel eyes lock on mine, and I kiss him. “I’ll never stop loving you, especially knowing how much it hurts to get tattooed on the inside of your wrist. You did that when I was an asshole.” His heavy head tips forward.

“Will you show me?” The suspense is driving me mad.

“Voilà.” Mav rips off the gauze, and I tear up, taking in the details of an in-flight lark with large white angel wings and a halo. “It’s the best parts of you. My Angel and my Lark. I looked it up, and larks symbolize new beginnings, joy, and freedom.”

“It’s gorgeous,” I choke out, the sentiment overwhelming me. It’s our past, present, and future all in a tattoo. They unbelievably match when I hold my ink next to his. My horse on the waves could be running next to his flying lark. It’s incredible.

“Emmet did it. I asked him not to tell you. Did he tell you?” he asks, and I shake my head.

“The guys at Unframed Art are amazing. We’re thinking of getting a team tattoo,” King says, and Brant groans, throwing his forearm over his face.

Mav shakes his head at my questioning glance. “Let’s eat before it’s ice cold.” I hand out plates from the to-go box, and everyone serves themselves except Brant. Mav and I settle on the couch, and King and O’Keefe each sit in a club chair. Brant doesn’t move from the floor even though the double recliner is unoccupied.

We eat in silence until my phone buzzes and the doorbell rings. “Shit, I forgot Lo.” I jump up, carefully close the door, and sprint downstairs.

My apology starts before my front door is open. “I’m so sorry. The twins were in rare form, and they challenged us to a dance-off, and something is going on with Brant because he needs kitten time but won’t talk, and I forgot to text you. The guys also brought dinner.” I drag him up the stairs as

I ramble. “Don’t let the fur babies escape.” I crack the living room door open and enter sideways to catch a cat if necessary.

“I only heard half of what you said.” Lo swings the door open, and Amber scampers out from the couch, beelining for the door.

I scoop her in one hand and slam the door with the other. “Usually, Raven is the first to escape.”

Lo holds up his bag. “I’ve got Top Notch Noodles if anyone is interested.”

“Pick me.” Brant sits up, and Lo bypasses the love seat to cross the room and sit on the floor by him.

We eat and Mav shows Lo his tattoo while King and O’Keefe give us the tea on how Mav did shots to calm himself and numb the pain.

I gather the paper plates and pack up the food when everyone is done. I’m too lazy to take them downstairs, so I set them high on a bookshelf, hopefully out of the kittens’ reach.

They also ate dinner and sniffed every body part their little noses could reach. King tries to cuddle them, but they want to explore. After a while, Raven lies across Brant’s throat, and Amber curls up over his heart. He’s motionless on the floor with his forearm once again covering his eyes as they purr on top of him.

“Cat therapy,” I whisper to Mav.

“I’m never leaving or stealing your cats. You pick,” Brant says from under his arm.

The guys give each other worried glances, and I make a joke. “FYI, you’re taking my babies over my cold, dead body.” When he doesn’t respond, I offer, “Lo and I can powder our faces if you need hockey bro and kitten time.”

“I’m fine,” Brant says.

“You’re not,” King huffs.

“But we won’t force you to talk.” O’Keefe sternly eyes his boyfriend.

“The trade deadline is next week,” Brant says, and everyone glances around with questioning looks.

“So?” King prompts.

“I was told in person by a very reliable source that my trade to this team was a mistake.” Brant scratches the kittens’ heads. “And I pissed off the person in charge of my fate.”

O’Keefe opens his mouth, but King shakes his head at him. He shuts his mouth for a second. “We’re one of the top defensive pairings in the league. Only a shithead would break us up.” O’Keefe scowls, and I doubt that’s what he was going to say.

“I might not be here on my birthday.” Brant sighs as if he’s already been traded.

“Makes no sense to let you go,” King reassures Brant.

“You’re right,” Brant says in an unconvincing tone. “I’ll keep my head on straight and do my job.”

“Hardly any D-men available could keep up with O’Keefe or not murder him,” Mav says to lighten the mood.

I’m not a hockey expert, but I know teams depend on compatible defensive pairs to play in unison. We change the subject, and Lo tells us smutty stories from the club opening he hosted.

We offer Brant to stay over, but King tells us they’re kidnapping him to sleep at their place.

Once they’ve all left and the kittens are in bed, we stumble up to our bedroom.

“I need to hold you.” Mav strips and gets under the covers, holding them up for me. “Thank you,” he whispers, when I slot into his arms.

“For what?” I ask, basking in his warmth.

“For being you, for giving me a second chance, for loving me, for the kittens, for this life—”

“Staahp, you’re making me blush,” I lie.

“Seriously. I was more miserable than Brant before you.”

I roll flat onto my back and tug him on top of me. “I was living, but not alive. Who could’ve predicted the camboy and hockey bro would get a happy ending?”

“Me. I’m waiting for my sugar daddy to put a ring on it.” He feathers kisses along my jaw and I laugh. “The babies can’t be bastards.”

“You’re a nutcase. We’re way too young.” My voice is breathy.

Mav shrugs. “Hockey players get married young. It’s part of our DNA. I’m ready, so when you are, ask away and the answer will be yes.”

“But we’re only twenty-two.”

“And the luckiest dudes on the planet to have found our way back to each other so young.” He seals his words with a kiss.

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EPILOGUE

Maverick Maher

“Not here,” Sky hisses, but negates his words by pushing his ass against me. I told a fib that my tattoo is throbbing and needs to be looked at. My tattoo isn’t what’s throbbing.

“We can be quiet.” I curse his tight pants because I can’t get my hand down them to play with his plug.

“They already assume,” he counters, hands splaying on the sink, meeting my gaze in the mirror. “And Maria wears earplugs the nights you’re home.”

“Who cares? And we should enjoy what they assume we’re doing.” I’m mesmerized by the lust pooling in his chocolate eyes.

King and O’Keefe’s small guest bathroom is right next to their living room, full of my teammates. We’re pre-gaming for Brant’s birthday, and he’s soaking in all the attention. He didn’t get traded but still believes he won’t be returning next season, no matter how much we hype him up and set him up to score.

“You’re insatiable.” He groans as I rub his erect cock.

“You love it.” I undo his button and zipper.

“I love you,” he corrects.

“I love you more.” I say his phrase to him and yank his pants with all my might.

“That’s my line and I’ll help.” He wiggles, and his pants are around his knees.

“You’re magic.” I suck his ear and caress his plug.

“You got me so dick drunk I’m spreading my legs like a whore.” He arches into my touch.

“Will you be my little whore?” I twist the plug and cover his mouth to muffle his sounds.

He’s nodding frantically and talking against my hand, so I relax my hold.

“Only for you. Always for you,” he gasps, and pushes my hand firmly over his mouth.

“Are you going to watch me breed you? Watch how I look when I fill your ass with my seed? Again. And again. Look how impatient you are.” I chuckle after he stamps his foot. He has a point; we gotta hurry.

I use the excess lube from around his plug to slick myself up. Sky’s eyes are hooded, and he pulls his cheeks apart for me.

“You are my sexy angel.” My hips punch forward so my cock bottoms out in one thrust. I pant on his shoulder, adjusting to his fluttering walls and heat. “Put your dick in the sink so I can see you come,” I instruct, then work him on and off my cock.

“Your nipples are so pink and poking through your shirt. You’re good enough to eat. I changed my mind. Hold off and after I fill you, I need to drink your release.” We’re both close, and I’m asking too much.

Sky whimpers in response, and I find his spot, hammering it until his muscles tense and his neck arches.

“Please,” he begs from under my hand, and his expression triggers my orgasm. The world fades to me and Sky and our connected bodies and the deep knowing we’re meant for each other. Forever.

My legs tingle, and Sky will have fingertip bruises on his hips from me. Not the first time and certainly not the last.

“Angel, if I don’t pull out, I can’t suck you off.” I apologize because he hates it when I pull out. But we’re not exactly in private.

His head tips and I ready the plug. His walls clench in protest when I ease out and my cock protests too. But I insert the plug quickly and spin him around.

I’m on my knees with his cock in my mouth before my mind catches up to my body.

Sky explodes in my mouth, biting his cheek to stay quiet.

My low moan is unstoppable as I swallow his delicious cum. Sky’s sprawled with his elbows on the sink, hair sex-messed, and looking fucking

satisfied.

My smug grin says it all.

Until there's a knock on the door. "We're leaving. Get dressed."



The music's pumping and the guys are dancing, so it should be a good time, but the birthday boy's mood tanks as soon as he sees his old teammates, and he's itching to fight.

We have a private room, but the doors are open and we're mingling with the bar patrons. This is typically an Enforcers bar, but members of the other New York hockey team are here, and Brant's taking it as a personal insult.

The drinks are flowing too fast, and Sky's trying to get Brant to dance with him, but it's not working, going by Brant's clenched jaw and dark stare across the bar. If Sky didn't have an ass full of my cum with a plug, I might be jealous. But he's fucked out and distracting Brant.

King and O'Keefe have joined Sky and put Brant in the middle of their dance party. I get fresh drinks and join them. It's a toss-up if the drink will mellow Brant out or give him whiskey courage. The type of bravery that ends in disaster.

Brant slams his drink and throws his arms in the air, swiveling his hips so he turns in a circle.

Someone yells, "Ride that cowboy!"

Brant grins and loses himself in the music. Ace, our captain dad, has clocked Brant's tension and shuts the doors to our private room. Benz brings us all shots for the birthday boy, and we knock them back. When the tempo changes, Brant and Benz strike poses, and we form a circle to give them room to strut walk.

"Dance with me," I whisper in Sky's ear.

"I am." He pushes his ass against my groin and throws his arms up around my neck.

"I want everyone to see you're mine." My hands on his hips guide our grinding.

"There isn't any doubt." His body shimmies against mine.

"Coincidentally, the night of Liska's bachelor party, I was thinking of you before I saw you."

“Really? Tell me.”

“I thought about you being in New York with me and how much you would love it. I dreamed of dancing with you and showing my teammates the true meaning of dirty dancing.”

“I’m so happy your dreams came true.” He turns and we kiss, the rest of the bar fading away until there’s only us.

Can't get enough of Sky and Mav? Me either! Check out their epilogue five years later and get my latest news and releases from my newsletter.

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EXTENDED EPILOGUE

Rhys Brant

If only dematerializing could be an option. First my dickhead former teammates show up, and it's not a coincidence, since Benzy posted our location. Although I love him, I could punch him in his innocent face right now. Leo made him delete it, fearing all the Enforcers fans in the city would crash. But now Mr. Dimon's here to remind me of everything I stand to lose.

My face hurts from keeping up the happy facade, and my temper is about to blow. Spinning around, I intend to find the bathroom or the exit, whichever is closer.

But my guys are right there, checking on me, ready to jump in if necessary. They are the best teammates and friends, a rarity I'll miss when I'm forced to leave.

Thoughts of the future are a stake to my skull, and I dip out before things go sideways. I'm almost clear when the asshole of the year grabs my arm.

"Happy birthday, bitch." My former teammate laughs.

"Thanks, asshole." I wrench my arm from him. There's a pause, the perfect time to escape into the crowd and leave these motherfuckers behind. But being smart and doing the right thing has gotten me jack shit, so I stand my ground.

It's my birthday. My teammates have my back, and I'm not letting these fucktards disrespect me. This seems to confuse them as they stare blankly.

Whoever is using their collective brain cell must be in the bathroom.

"You came across town to call me a bitch on my birthday? Are you sulking because statistically you'll never make the playoffs? Calling me names makes you big men? You're not. You're—"

"Excuse me, gentlemen. Mr. Brant, the team is requesting your presence." Mr. Dimon, fucking Ari, tries to extricate me from the shitshow.

Not today, Satan.

"Go ahead without me. I'll be right behind you," I lie. I'd rather fight these guys four on one than go anywhere with Ari.

"Sorry to interrupt, but I must insist," he says in his formal, fucking smooth voice.

"I must decline," I say politely as my former teammates disappear in the crowd. If they're smart, they won't start something in front of Mr. Dimon. Only if they value their careers.

Blood rushes in my ears, and I clench my fists behind me so I don't pummel someone. Especially since Mr. Stick-up-his-ass Dimon is the closest person.

"Good night." Leaving is by far the best option.

"You're too drunk to leave alone. I'll take you home." Ari pulls out his phone.

"No, thanks." I bolt as if hellfire is chasing me, but the goddamn elevator thwarts my escape.

Mr. Dimon saunters up. We're around the corner from the club, alone in the hallway. "We should talk. Clear the air."

"Fine. You want to do this? Here? Now?" Words tumble out faster than I can retract them. "There's only one thing I need to know." He raises an eyebrow, and I plow on, giving in to my redheaded fury. "When will you stop?"

Calm, cool, and collected, Ari is visibly shaken. "Stop what?"

"Stop punishing me for a mistake I made when I was eighteen. It was draft night, and I was drunk. There has to be a statute of limitations on stupidity." I curse and watch his face absorb my direct question.

"I… That's not…" he croaks, trailing off.

"Bullshit. I'm the only player you dislike and dismiss, which you wouldn't do if you truly thought I didn't remember trying to kiss you!"

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Book 2 - Caleb Benz (Baby Benz) and Leo Griffin
The hardest thing to defend… is my heart
Caleb's obsession with his best friend's dad started years before they met, and he's kept it a secret. But now he's working with the object of his desire, feeling Leo's amber eyes like a physical caress. Leo Griffin's blindsided by his attraction to a submissive Caleb and the risks he's willing to take. But for the sake of his son, he can never truly possess Caleb. If miracles existed, Leo would gamble for one.

Scoring Zone

Book 3 – Austin (Ace) Lapointe and Grayson (Gray) Ward
Love was never the game plan
Austin wakes up after the best night of his life only to find his worst nightmare come true—he hurt the one person he can't live without: Grayson. Vegas unlocked Austin's craving for Gray, but something he fears alongside it. If Austin tells Gray the truth, he could lose him. But by staying silent, he already has.

Enemy ZoneApril 3rd 2026

Book 4 – Jamal King and Theo O'Keefe
Enemies to teammates—with one shot a love

Jamal and Theo grew up with mutual resentment and hatred. Each believing the other got what should've been theirs. As teammates, they have to learn to play together. As men, it's much more complicated because a past full of lies hinders their forever.

Dirty ZoneComing October 2026

Book 5 – Maverick and Skylar
Maverick lost his first love, unsure if Skylar left him or if something worse happened. He's spent years searching, and now Skylar reappears, looking better than ever. Skylar has only ever wanted the best for Mav, and leaving him felt impossible the first time. Check out if their second time's a charm.

Forbidden Zone coming March 2027

Book 6- Rhys Brant and Ari Dimon
Forbidden love cracks your soul without leaving a scratch
FACT: Ari and Rhys can never be together REALITY: Love knows no bounds

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About the Author

Heather Leighson has been a book addict since childhood. Books are her escape. Her TBR is always over 420 books, no matter how many she reads. A self-proclaimed book dragon. She pretends not to lose track of things but needs to be reminded to shower and eat when she's in a writing groove. Or reading a particularly long book, lol.

She has proudly passed this love along to her children. They are now adults and cheer on her dreams even though they are not allowed to read her books. Her and her husband call Central New York home.

Heather is in love with love and writes about finding the person who fills your soul and heals your hurt. Romances that unbreak hearts. She finds there is something satisfying about overcoming the obstacles and struggles to find true love. Of course, that journey involves lots of spice and a bit of kink.

When she's not writing or editing, she's reading and planning her next adventure.

Sign up for my newsletter for updates, releases and sales! Click hereor go to my website www.heatherleighsonwrites.com

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This book put me through it. I love Sky and Mav so much, but their story became unintentionally very personal. My writing reflects my experiences, opinions, and feelings. Usually, one character embodies that in each book. In this book, every character has a piece of me.

Shame is a worthless emotion, and we spend our lives avoiding it or pretending it doesn't exist. I'm working on ridding myself of the shame from my younger years. I no longer carry that shame, but shame exists for feeling it in the first place. Yup, my therapist has her work cut out for her.

I suspect many of you harbor shame in your heart as well, or have done a lot of work to undo it. These books are my way of creating a world where shame doesn't exist. I can't master that until my shame is gone. But I appreciate you coming along on this journey with me.

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Author CZ Reeves has been with me from day one, and she's my go-to when I'm stuck on scents or tastes or setting. Her series has curvy FMC's with attitude and lots of love. Find her books here https://www.amazon.com/stores/author/B0CP15F3CH?ccs

Author TG Ramsey is my safe space, my gay sensitivity reader, and family. I love his snarky feedback. His book Utterly Yours is a beautiful own voice MM romance. Read it here https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0D8GL48D4

Kate is my expert on hockey and catches my mistakes like players on opposite teams being in the same sin bin verse adjacent naughty timeouts. She has incredible book reviews if you're looking for your next read. Check her out on Instagram here https://www.instagram.com/pawsandbooks_kate/

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Happy Reading!

All my best,

Heather

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