
MIRACLE IN THE 34TH Minute
45
GENEVA MONROE
A SEASONS OF NORTHSPIRE NOVEL

Contents

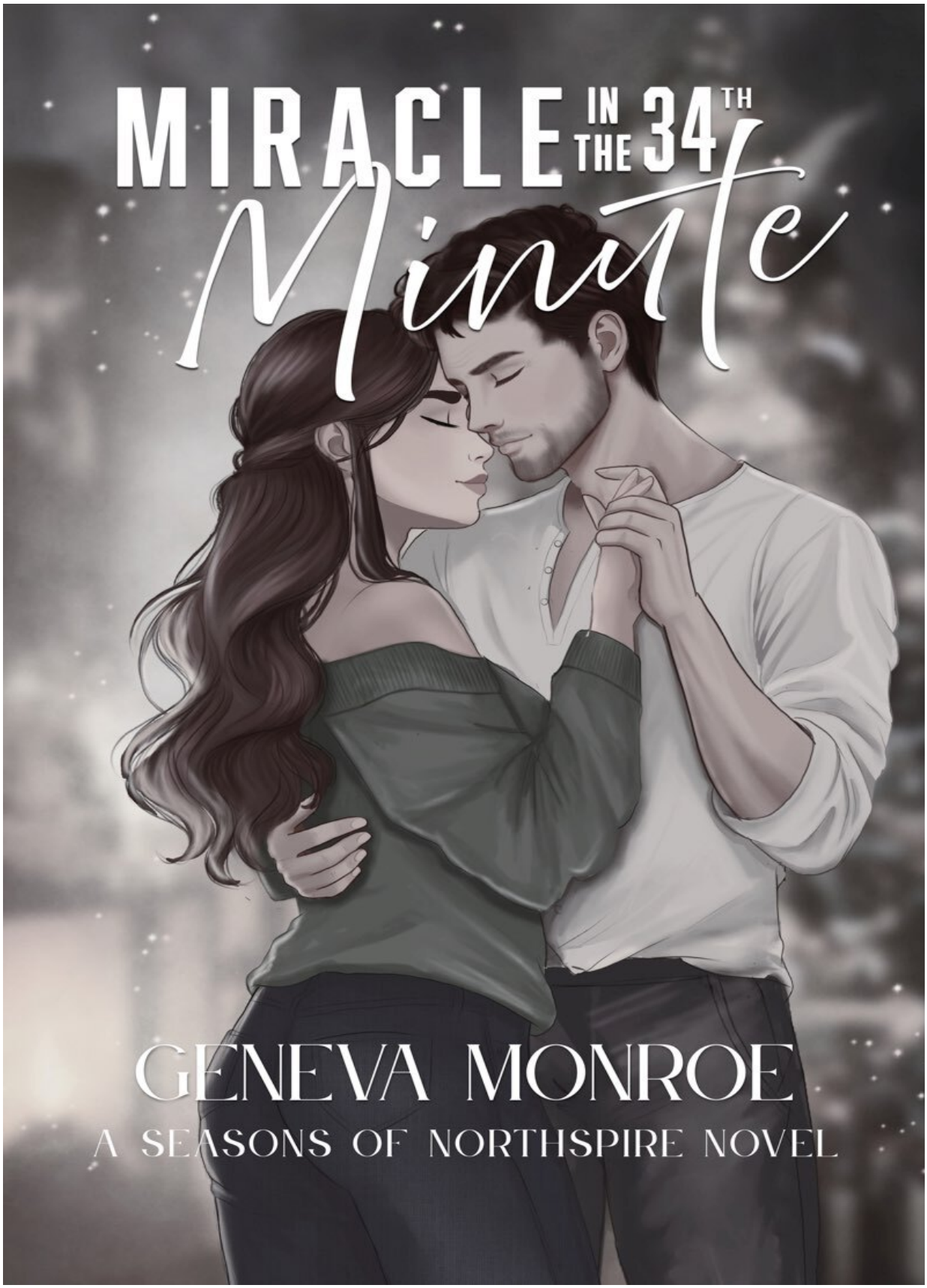
Glossary of Hockey Terms
Playlist
Not a Content Warning
Northspire Roster
1. Chapter 1
2. Chapter 2
3. Chapter 3
4. Chapter 4
5. Chapter 5
6. Chapter 6
7. Chapter 7
8. Chapter 8
9. Chapter 9
10. Chapter 10
11. Chapter 11
12. Chapter 12
13. Chapter 13
14. Chapter 14
15. Chapter 15
16. Chapter 16
17. Chapter 17
18. Chapter 18
19. Chapter 19
20. Chapter 20
21. Chapter 21
22. Chapter 22
23. Chapter 23
24. Chapter 24
25. Chapter 25
26. Chapter 26
27. Chapter 27
28. Chapter 28
29. Chapter 29
30. Chapter 30
31. Chapter 31

32. Chapter 32
33. Chapter 33
34. Chapter 34
35. Chapter 35

Epilogue

Acknowledgments

OceanofPDF.com


MIRACLE IN THE 34TH
Minute
GENEVA MONROE
A SEASONS OF NORTHSPIRE NOVEL

OceanofPDF.com

Published by Purple Phoenix Press

Copyright © 2026 by Geneva Monroe

Cover Design by Gopika La Berge @pika.draws.what

Edge Design by Gopika La Berge @pika.draws.what

Character Art by Katherine Macdonald @authorkatherinemacdonald

Paperback ISBN: 9781960352323

All rights reserved.

No part of this book may be reproduced in any form or by any electronic or mechanical means, including information storage and retrieval systems, without written permission from the author, except for the use of brief quotations in a book review.

The story, all names, characters, and incidents portrayed in this production are fictitious. No identification with actual persons (living or deceased), places, buildings, and products is intended or should be inferred.

OceanofPDF.com

Glossary of Hockey Terms

Barn: An ice hockey arena
Beauty: A great teammate both on and off the ice
Biscuit: The hockey puck
Chirp: Trash talk
Dirty: An outstanding play where the offensive player fakes out their opponent
Hat Trick: scoring three goals in a game
Ice Girls/Ice Crew: The people who clean the ice during intermission
Light the Lamp: Scoring a goal
Sin-bin: The penalty box
Slapshot: A powerful and fast shot made by winding up the stick and hitting the puck with a high amount of force
Sweater: Jersey
Tarps Off: Taking off your jersey
Top Shelf: The top area of the net between the crossbar and the goaltender's shoulders
Wrist Shot: A quick shot made by flicking the wrist and using very little windup

OceanofPDF.com

Playlist



Trouble Maker - Weezer
Hey Cowboy - Devon Cole
Run Run Rudolf - Kelly Clarkson
Christmas Pjs - TeYo
Mistletoe and Holly - Frank Sinatra
Starving - Hailee Steinfield
Santa Claus Is Coming To Town - Kelly Clarkson
R U Mine? - Arctic Monkeys
Somebody To Love - Queen
Troubled Waters - Alex Warren
Under the Stars - John Legend
Into You - Ariana Grande
Coastline - Hollow Coves
No Control - One Direction
Training Season - Dua Lipa (Live from the Royal Albert Hall)
Middle of the Night - Elley Duhé
Man I Need - Olivia Dean
A Nonsense Christmas - Sabrina Carpenter
What A Difference A Day Makes - RAYE
Auld Lang Syne - Green Day

OceanofPDF.com

Not a Content Warning

In the most Uno-reverse writing of my career, this book requires no content warning page. Colton Gailey, our MMC, is a green flag, albeit a spicy green flag. Dirty-green. Is that a thing? It is now. This book is guaranteed to make you happy. In fact, if I should be warning you about anything, it's that you will laugh out loud at the most inappropriate time. There's no diabolical cliffhanger coming. Everyone gets their happy ending, and I'm not mad about that.

Happy Reading.

… I mean that this time.

OceanofPDF.com

This book is dedicated to everyone looking for some Christmas magic

… and hockey boys.

OceanofPDF.com

Northspire Roster

Forwards

#77 Elijah “Lucky” Stevens (C)
#13 Mikael “Mick” Olsson
#39 Bentley “Roo” Stevens
#45 Colton “The Pistol” Gailey
#54 Carson “Little” Stevens

Defensemen

#14 Édouard “Pet” Pelletier
#18 Sean “Smokey”Ashburn (A)
#41 Aaron “Cowboy” Tremblay
#86 Yuri “The Tank” Volkov

Goalie

#30 Leonardo “Leo” Rochat

Team Staff

Alexander Vangelt, Owner
Carlton Prescott, General Manager
Jim Johnstone, Coach
Mike Andrews, Equipment Manager
Miller Madsen, Frostbite Mascot
Kris, Zamboni Driver

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 1

HOLLY

14 Days Until Christmas

"I don't care what you have to do. Fix it! Now, before the media figures out what the fuck he's up to." Tiny crackles of static hissed as spittle hit the microphone. The coach's angry voice reverberated against the wood of the hotel dresser as I pulled my coat over my pajamas, already knowing what he was going to say next. "And Walker, you bring Gailey's ass straight to my room. Do you understand me? Straight here."

In the background of the call, the video he sent seconds before he called played on repeat. I scowled down at the bright green eyes of Colton Gailey as he gave the camera a stupid, boyish smile. I was going to kill the fucker. We could just add homicide to my CV right below pro-athlete wrangler and failed center for a now defunct hockey league.

"Walker?!" Coach Johnstone barked. "Walker!"

"Yes, Coach. I hear you. I'll bring his dumb ass straight to you, fix it, and pay off anyone who might be hanging around."

"Good. You have fifteen minutes."

Biting down on the inside of my cheek to keep from saying anything, I hung up the phone and stepped into my Crocs. At least we were in the balmy Texas winter and I wasn't walking out into the icy Alaskan air in my pjs. That was something, at least. How considerate of Colt to pull this PR nightmare while we were in such an accommodating climate.

I slid my key card into my pocket and stalked toward the elevator. Fortunately, the hotel where the team was staying was in the same complex as the arena. With some luck, I might make it there before the rest of the world caught on to “Colt 45’s” latest stunt. Then I could deliver him to his moment of reckoning and get back to the new Christmas novella I’d been waiting all night to start.

Ten minutes later I was staring at the idiot through the glass wall of an aquarium. Not any aquarium, but the tank that housed Finny, the Houston Hammerhead’s mascot.

“Get out,” I seethed and pointed at the surface. “Now.”

Colton shook his head and held up a finger asking for another minute. Then resumed swimming around the bed of the tank and pawing through the sand lining the bottom. Another man swimming in the water beside him pulled on his arm and pointed at one of the coral formations. Luckily, this wasn’t one of my guys. No, if the long hair flowing behind him and the sheer bulk were any indication, I’d say this was one of Houston’s defensemen.

The game had long since been over. Only, Houston’s arena was attached to an entertainment complex that stayed open late. Games here were always something I looked forward to because it meant I could go from game to bed in record time. There was no waiting for a bus or irresponsible hockey boys keeping me from fuzzy socks and a good book. Unfortunately this ideal location also meant that a massive crowd would start forming should your star player decide to take a dip in a shark tank.

Fuck, were hammerheads endangered? I think I watched a Shark Week special about it. What am I saying? This is Colton Gailey, of course they are. Goddamn it, I’m going to have to figure out a way to spin his impromptu dip with an endangered species.

“I told them it was a bad idea.” Andrews, our equipment manager, walked up to me clutching Colton’s suit jacket and shoes. He had another couple of players in tow with him. They’d been a few drinks deep in post-game libations if Mik Olsson’s glassy eyes were any indication.

Mik shook his head with a hearty laugh. “Good luck with that.”

Andrews nodded in agreement. “Exactly. You try convincing The Pistol not to do something.”

I glared at him, and then at the two Northspire men laughing beside Andrews. “I see that you had no problem holding onto his shit for him.” I

focused on the light fixtures mounted to the upper scaffolding and took a deep breath through my nose.

I mumbled to myself, “This isn’t even my job. I do PR. I shouldn’t have to be a babysitter. I could have been working for the fucking Olympics, but no, I just had to take the job that would put me next to the game.”

“I sent Coach the video, didn’t I?” Andrews remarked petulantly. “It’s not like this is my job either.”

No, this was most definitely a Holly Walker problem. Andrews was responsible for blades and sticks, not players. Somehow Northspire’s leadership had decided it was my job to run interference along with damage control.

The youngest of the men standing beside me scoffed, “I don’t see why you’re so upset. It’s only a fish tank. It’s not like he hurt someone.”

“Bentley Robinson!” I pointed my finger at him. All laughter died as soon as he realized that I’d lasered in on him.

Mik whistled. “You’re in for it now.”

The team was already riding my ass to clean up after one hockey stud, I didn’t need him flapping his trap for anyone passing by to hear. Even the most benign things could be spun out of context. “If you don’t want a piece of what’s coming next, then you will shut your mouth, and walk your ass back to the hotel.”

Ben snapped his mouth closed and his ears flamed bright red. He was 19, but in moments like these, the man looked twelve. “Yes, ma’am. Sorry.”

“Come on, Roo,” Andrews clapped Ben on the shoulder, using the team’s nickname for their youngest player. “We really don’t want to be here when the Ice Queen decides to start dismembering Colt.”

Ice Queen. When I first started at Northspire, the hot shot players had each made an attempt at getting into my skirt. One by one I shot them down and in the process earned myself a new fancy title. At least now they knew better than to fuck with me.

He handed me the suit jacket and dropped Colton’s shoes at my feet. “Remember to leave those million dollar hands intact, they’re the most expensive thing on the team.”

I looked down at the navy blue fabric. Its designer sheen caught on neon lighting that ran around the entry way. I squeezed it tight like it was Colton’s neck. *How was this my fucking life?*

“Ma’am are you responsible for the young man in the tank?” A security officer asked, his hands on his hips. *Fuck. So much for, “before anyone notices.”*

Colton kicked off the ground, back toward the surface with the Houston player beside him.

I sighed. Thank god, he was finally coming out.

The onlookers gasped.

I blinked at what was playing out before me. Colton hadn’t kicked off the ground, he’d kicked off the *shark*. The large hammered head knocked into the glass of the wall, his fin tipping to the side and churning up the sand as he snaked awkwardly over the bottom of the tank.

“Did he just kick Finny?” someone asked. A camera flashed brightly off the glass.

Shit. Shit. Shit.

The shark turned like he was dizzy, raking his dorsal fin against an outcropping of coral and bumping his large protruding eyes back into the glass for a second time.

Oh god, no.

“He did. That’s Gailey. He broke into the tank and tried to kill Finny!”

Fuck.

A handful of arena employees were gathering closer, everyone trying to get a look at the poor fish. More claims of what was happening, each more imaginative than the last, started to be voiced.

I looked up at the security guard. “Take me to him. Now, please.”

The Houston player was the first one out of the water, climbing up a side-mounted ladder and onto a catwalk. The tank itself had an upper viewing platform where anyone in the arena could walk by and view the shark along with the couple of rays and a sea turtle.

The Houston Hammerheads were partnered with the Gulf Marine Conservation Association to help with rebuilding the local ecosystem. In an effort to raise funds, a small aquarium and learning center were added to the arena. Along with Finny, it was home to several species while they were rehabilitated. Fans and fish lovers alike were allowed to visit the tank year round for a small donation. Kids in particular loved visiting the old sea turtle who was missing a fin after a run in with a speed boat.

It was a brilliant bit of marketing on the team’s part. Not only were they bringing in millions of dollars a year for the organization, but it created

good will with the fans and gave the team a rallying point beyond the game itself. The people of Houston were proud of their team for more than just putting pucks in nets.

It's what Northspire Stags were missing, heart.

The Hammerhead defenseman reached down and helped my pain in the ass right wing out of the tank. Colton smiled up at me as I tapped my foot against the metal catwalk. His eyes dropped from my glare to my feet and back up. "Hey, Queenie, nice Crocs."

"Don't Queenie me, Gailey," I ground through my teeth. "What the fuck were you thinking?" He had exactly two seconds to explain himself or I would feed him to that shark myself.

One of the arena attendants reached forward, handing Colton a towel. Behind him the other man was already drying off his long hair.

"Thank you," he said, giving the young woman a congenial and altogether too flirtatious smile. "My eyes are burning. I don't know what they put in that wat—-"

"No." I ripped the towel from his hands just as he started wiping his face.

"Hey. I was using that." He pushed back the soaking wet strands of hair.

Colt was lucky that was all I was doing right now. "You don't deserve a towel after this nonsense. Do you have any idea what you've done?"

The poor hammerhead. I could already see the headlines. There was no containing this, now. Tomorrow it'll be the top story on Sports Break. "Finny Got Run Over By a Reindeer" and "The Nightmare Before Finnmas." How the hell was I supposed to spin this?

"Yeah, I do." Colt held up his hand and a diamond engagement ring flashed on his pinky. "I saved a proposal."

"What?" I took a step back. "You were proposing? To who?" As far as I could see I was the only woman on the platform.

He took off the ring and held it out to me. "Who do you think? What do you say, Queenie?"

"Me?!" I held up the towel and jacket like it could protect me from the question. "Are you out of your damn mind?"

His friend bellowed a laugh. "That's mean, man."

I looked around Colt to hit this equally moronic man with the same eye-daggers I'd been throwing Colton. He held up his hands in defense. "Sorry … Ma'am."

Barking out the breath he was holding, Colt folded over, hands on his knees as he failed to breathe over the laughter. “Oh my god, you actually thought I was serious.”

I ground my teeth, making my jaw ache as I took two slow breaths in and out through my nose. Turning him into shark food was sounding better and better by the second.

“You should have seen your face.” Colt walked to the railing and waved at a couple standing on the ground in matching Hammerhead jerseys. As far as I could tell, they were the only non-hockey personnel left in the lobby area. At least the arena had pushed the public back. He flicked the ring, and in a shining streak of light, it arced perfectly down into the man’s waiting hands.

“Thank you,” he yelled and dropped to one knee. I couldn’t hear his declaration of devotion, but I saw her adamantly nod her head and leap into his arms.

“See? Isn’t that sweet?” Colt said, wrapping a very wet arm around my shoulder. Water dripped down my side, soaking through the collar of my jacket straight to my skin. “Can I have the towel now?”

“No and get off of me. You smell like a fish tank.” I pushed away from him and wrapped my arms tight around his towel and jacket.

“Look,” Colt smiled like that wide grin was the answer to all of his problems. “The man was so nervous that he fumbled the ring and it fell into the water. I’ve always been a strong swimmer. I knew that if we were quick, then we could maybe find the ring before it became buried in the sand. What did you want me to do, stand there and do nothing?”

“Yes, that!” I waved my hands at the water. “They have people here whose jobs are to do this exact kind of thing. What you didn’t need to do was jump fully clothed into a tank and assault the other team’s damn mascot.”

“That was an accident. I didn’t know he was there. Besides, the shark is fine. See? He’s swimming right there.” Colt pointed at the dorsal fin skimming the surface. Even if Finny was fine, it didn’t make any of what happened here less horrific.

“Do you know that outside people are already saying that you were committing mascoticide?”

Colt snorted a laugh. “That’s not a thing.”

“Well it is now, thanks to your—” I smacked him in the arm with his jacket and towel to punctuate each word. “impulsive, reckless, and juvenile antics.”

“Wow, Queenie. Please tell me how you really feel. Don’t hold back.”

I growled in frustration.

Colton unbuttoned his shirt and started pulling it off.

“What are you doing?” I looked around. Luckily, security had cleared everyone else away from the platform.

“In case you missed it, I’m soaking wet and someone won’t give me a towel.” He dropped the dress shirt on the ground so that it slapped loudly off the metal, then reached behind his head and pulled off the undershirt that was beneath it. His stomach flexed as he stretched. His smile got wider as he caught the way my eyes snagged on his abs.

I rubbed at my temples. *Do not ogle the beautiful man. Do not look at his damn muscles. It’s a trap.*

Colton started undoing the buckle of his pants.

“Stop! Stop right there 45. The pants stay on.” I thrust his jacket at him, launching it at his smug expression. As if attacking a mascot wasn’t bad enough, now he was stripping too. Sure, the man was built like he walked straight off the cover of a romance novel, but still, one set of headlines was enough to manage.

Colt shrugged into the coat leaving it open so that golden skin contrasted against the dark blue wool, and the lapels cast the perfect shadow against every hard earned curve. It was far too good of a look on him, and he knew it. “Where are my shoes?”

I waved toward the two leather loafers still sitting where Andrews had dropped them on the tile in the lobby. “Not my problem. Come on. Coach is waiting for you and I’ve got to figure out how to fix this shit.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 2

COLT

12 Days Until Christmas

I walked through the elegantly decorated lobby of Northspire's home office. The historic building was one of the oldest multistory buildings in Alaska, and one of the few buildings of this size to survive the 1964 earthquake. Dark brick and Nouveau iron details made the lobby a work of art. Through the windows, the Alaskan skyline was a snow covered silhouette against a bright blue sky and the nearby skyscrapers of Anchorage glittered like treasure.

A deep sense of pride always glowed through me when I walked through this lobby, especially at this time of year. Stags maroon and navy decorations for the holiday draped along the walls, with a large tree in the corner featuring this year's signature ornaments. Sitting right in the center was a small blown glass version of me, holding a stick with a glittery 45 on tiny me's back. It was a surreal thing to see.

Fame was weird.

Sometimes it would sneak up on me, and there would be a large advertisement on a billboard waiting to give me a jump scare of a reminder. It was as if I wasn't actually that person on the promos and was still the kid in the group home struggling to find the cash to pay team dues. But that little guy glittering on the Christmas tree? That guy had his shit together. That guy had people bidding to get a jersey with his scrawling signature over the number 45. Sometimes I didn't know who that guy was.

There weren’t many people in the building. Most of the team was home with their families after two weeks on the road and Friday was largely a day off for most of the organization. Unless, of course, you were about to have your ass handed to you for accidentally wounding a rival team’s beloved mascot.

My cellphone rang, playing a rock version of Run, Run, Rudolph. I liked to think that the tune was a holiday anthem for the team. The ringtone usually made me smile, but this time it was my agent’s face on the screen and I knew whatever he was about to tell me was going to hurt.

“Hey, Randy. Make it quick, I’m about to get on an elevator.” I hit the button, silently hoping that if I didn’t have to hear whatever he was about to tell me, then it wouldn’t come true.

“Colt, I know you're on your way in to meet with the man in charge, so I’ll be quick. I just got off the phone with Fuel.”

I swallowed hard and closed my eyes. This was something I’d been working my whole life toward, a big five endorsement. Partnering with a sports drink was the kind of deal that changed lives.

“They saw what happened in Houston, and well …” Randy sucked in a breath through his teeth making them whistle.

“Jesus, Rand, the suspense is killing me, just spit it out.”

“There was a video of you tossing an engagement ring to a pair of Hammerhead fans. They liked seeing you and Striger working together. Inter-league cooperation is very marketable.”

I blew out a breath. Holly had done that. While I was dripping in Coach’s hotel room, she was pulling footage and recording interviews with the happy couple. Shit, I owed her an apology.

Holly had been adorably angry waiting for me on the platform. She was wearing these cute dragon pajamas and a pair of black glittery Crocs. There was no make-up to hide the way her cheeks flushed when I caught her staring. I’d never seen her as anything other than immaculately put together. The pencil skirts were hot, but seeing the Ice Queen thawed out smoldered something in the center of my chest. I smiled at the memory as I hit the button to take me to the top floor.

Randy continued, “I’m not going to sugar coat it for you, Colt.”

The warm feeling fluttering behind my ribcage sank like a lead weight to the pit of my stomach.

“The footage of you kicking that shark isn’t good. The fans and the league are pissed. Fuel said that maybe in the future they could work a deal, but they didn’t want to risk any possible blowback.”

“Fuck,” I cursed and slammed my palm into the glass wall of the elevator. Outside, the Chugach Mountains provided a backdrop far too beautiful for the kind of news he was delivering. The bell dinged and the elevator doors opened. “I’ve gotta go, Randy. I’ll call you when I get out of the meeting and let you know what they say.”

Waiting in the seating area outside the boardroom, Autumn Vangelt scrolled on her phone while blowing a massive pink bubble out of gum. She looked up at me, and her expression brightened with a loud pop of the bubble. Autumn was the owner’s daughter, but this year she was interning under Holly. I gave her a small wave, but couldn’t really bring myself to return the smile.

Randy continued chirping in my ear, “Call me while you’re still in there if they start talking contracts. They can’t just trade you.”

I stopped walking. They wouldn’t trade me over a damn shark, right? No, I was their top scorer. Shit, I had a hat trick an hour before the stupid fish swam under me. They couldn’t afford to lose someone who delivered like I did.

“Did you hear something?” I asked. My heart was pounding out of control. I didn’t want to move. The stags had been my team since I was a kid. I wanted to wear maroon for as long as I could remember. That barn was my home. This city was *my* city.

“Maybe …” Randy blew out a breath. “It’s probably nothing. One of the other guys at the firm mentioned that Northspire was looking into Conyers.”

“Aaron Conyers, the asshole left wing for Philadelphia?” He was good, not as good as me, but still, he couldn’t be cheap. Even more insulting, Philly’s been on a winning streak with five straight wins. Unlike the hit our standings took this past November.

“Like I said, it’s probably nothing, but call me if he gives you more than a slap on the wrist.”

I nodded even though he couldn’t see me. Behind the glass door of the G.M.’s meeting room, shadows moved like someone was getting ready to exit. I took a deep breath, ready to face my fate. “Thanks, Rand. I’ve gotta go.”

Things would work out. They always did.

The door to the office opened with a hard push. Holly rushed from the room with her eyes firmly locked on the carpet. I stepped to the side, just as she veered to walk around me and slammed face first into my chest. I wrapped an arm around her waist to keep her upright. The portfolio tucked in her grip slipped, sending a few of the papers flying. I managed to snatch the folder from the air before the entire contents emptied onto the floor.

“Woah, Queenie, where’s the fire?” I joked, helping to steady her. Her eyes were the prettiest mix of blue and green. I didn’t think I’d ever been close enough to notice before, but they were brilliant. Their color shined bright with a sheen of glassy moisture, like at any moment she could burst into tears. “Hey, wait. Are you okay?”

Her cheeks pinkened as she used a free hand to smooth back the sides of her updo where her face smooshed into my sternum. “I’m fine.”

Yeah, she looked anything but fine. I should be worrying about myself. After all, I was the one about to stand before a possible firing squad. I couldn’t help myself from staring at the way the lines of her mouth were tight, and her brows were knitted so closely together that it was like a single thread was the only thing keeping her composure together.

“Where were you going in such a hurry?” I asked, bending down to pick up the couple of papers that slipped free. The top page had a logo for the children’s center where I’d tried on my first pair of skates. Beneath it was a long list of kids' names and pictures, almost like a roster. What was she up to?

“Nowhere. Lots of work to do before tomorrow’s game is all.” She truly looked like she might start crying any second.

I handed her the remaining papers. Guilt churned in my stomach over the possibility that she’d been chewed out for the shit that went down in Houston. Which she shouldn’t have. Holly saved the day back there. “Listen, I didn’t get the chance to say—”

“Gailey, get in here,” Coach barked from beside both the General Manager, Carlton Prescott and Alexander Vangelt, the owner of the Northspire Stags. Fuck, now that was always a bad sign. And yet, as I looked back down at Holly’s devastated expression, I couldn’t think of anything but how I was the cause of all those worry lines.

Holly tried to push past me, and I grabbed her arm to stop her. “Holly, if what happened in there was because of me—”

“It wasn’t.” I didn’t believe that for a second. There was too much venom behind the hurt in her eyes.

“Gailey,” Coach Johnstone repeated.

“Actually Jim, I just had an idea,” Prescott said. “Holly come back in here for this, will you?”

She looked over her shoulder, as confused as I was. Was asking the head of PR to be present during my meeting a good or a bad thing? Any vulnerability that was just perched on her expression melted away as she edged back into the room.

We sat opposite the men at a table that was big enough to hold the entire board of directors, even though it was just the five of us here.

“Mr. Gailey, do you want to tell me how you ended up soaking wet on the lead story of Sports Break, IHL Tonight, and every other news outlet?” Vangelt began, pushing a print out of the Sports Break homepage across the table at me. It showed me in my open sports jacket, bare chested with dripping hair. I had an arm around the newly engaged couple as we posed for a quick snapshot. The woman looked up lovingly at her fiancé, flashing a shiny diamond at the camera. Seeing that expression was all the reassurance I needed. Jumping after that ring was the right thing to do. I didn’t regret it, consequences be damned.

I smiled up at the team owner, channeling every bit of lovable energy that saved me in the past. “It was raining?”

Coach growled, “Now isn't the time for jokes, 45.”

“I disagree,” I said, chancing a glance at Holly. Her jaw hung agape and her eyes were wide like I’d lost my mind. “I find the times when jokes would be the most inappropriate are when they’re needed most. Take now for instance, what this room deeply needs is some levity.”

“No, what I’m in need of is a right wing who doesn’t cost me more in league fines than his annual salary,” Prescott clipped. “Do you realize I could have two players for the amount that you are costing this team every year in your quest for *levity.”*

“Yeah, but with respect, sir, nobody lights the lamp like I can. The fans love me and you can’t argue that I don’t deliver.”

“Nobody is debating that. You’re a good player, quick on your feet, and your stick handling is some of the best I’ve ever seen. That top shelf goal last night was particularly dirty.”

I puffed up my chest. It was probably one of the best shots I'd ever taken. Somehow, I'd managed to snake the puck out from under one of the Hammerhead defensemen. I tossed it off the blade on my left, redirected the shot right, and snapped a wrist shot into the upper corner of the net. Everyone, including the goalie, lurched left to stop a puck that was never going in that direction. It was the kind of shot that a player only made once in his career, the kind that only happened when a bit of magic was on the ice, and everything fell perfectly into place.

Prescott clasped his hands resolutely before him. "I just wish you could deliver it without the side helping of misconduct."

The pride in my chest curdled, rising up to tighten my throat.

"I had to spend over an hour on the phone with Houston's manager. You're lucky that shark is okay and there was one of their players with you. Houston is willing to accept that the incident was an accident, and while you might have been well-intentioned with the ring retrieval, the league still sees what you did as inappropriate. It was disrespectful to their team and many in Texas are still clamoring for your dismissal."

The team owner shifted in his seat. "I have it confirmed that I could trade you to Philly for both Conyers and a future draft pick. We could do a lot with two draft picks next year."

"But …" This wasn't happening. Randy said it *wasn't happening*. My heart thumped hard in my ears and the room closed in around us.

The owner held up his hand. "I'm not doing that. Not yet anyway."

I blew out a breath.

Prescott added, "Gailey, you're suspended for the next 12 days."

"You like the holidays, right?" Johnstone, chuckled. "Think of it like the 12 days of Christmas to get your head on straight to finish this season." In a surprisingly on pitch tenor, he added, "*Five Stanley Rings.*"

"That's almost two weeks!" I gawked at the decree. "The league is suspending me for jumping in a fish tank?" It was only a week's suspension when I laid out that chirping moron in Vegas, and he'd gone off the ice on a stretcher. Twelve days was absurd.

"Not the league," the G.M. clarified, "Me. The league slapped us with a fine, and we have to cover the cost to clean and treat the aquarium. All of which will be coming out of your end-of-year bonus."

"But …" I repeated, not knowing what to say. I should call Randy.

Picking up the manager's lead, Coach added, "You'll still attend practices and games, however you won't be playing again until the Christmas Eve game."

"But …" I said again, because apparently it was the only syllable I knew anymore.

"Of course, I don't pay for you to sit on your ass and look pretty from the bench. So you'll be singing for your supper, so to speak." The G.M. shifted his attention to Holly. "Ms. Walker, you said you wanted players to help with your Santa Series. You can have Gailey."

"*What?*" we exclaimed in unison.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 3

HOLLY

12 Days Until Christmas

No. No. No. This couldn't be happening.

"Congratulations, Ms. Walker, you just gained the league's most expensive assistant. Use him however you see fit." The General Manager sat back, crossing his arms with authority. "Smile, Holly. I just gave you what you asked for."

"Yes, Sir…" No, this *wasn't* what I asked for. I never asked for Colton Gailey. I tried to smile but couldn't manage anything beyond shock and a sprinkle of undiluted panic. My emotions felt all distorted from the sudden stretch and snap of the past half hour.

When I walked in here today, it was with the intention of convincing them to accept my plan for the Santa Series. It was a beautiful plan, one I'd kept secret for fear of it being shut down by the owner. Ever since Autumn introduced her father to Banana Baseball, the man was obsessed with the idea of using the same carnival tactics to bring back the fans. While fun to make, the truth was, I didn't think I could stomach my mother's condescending sneer at another dance challenge video.

The owner shifted in his seat and rubbed at the empty spot he left on his right ring finger. It was the space Vangelt kept for the day his team wins the cup, and a constant reminder of how close they'd come once before. Every time he rubbed the naked finger, I swallowed my pride and did whatever

ridiculous thing he asked for in the hopes that one day the fans would return to us and give our boys the boost they needed to bring back their spark.

“Northspire used to be top of this league,” Vangelt said with a long look at Coach Johnstone.

Before becoming coach, he and some of the old guard on the team played in the race for the cup seven years ago. They’d come one game away from wearing a championship ring. It was a loss that hit everyone on the team hard, followed shortly after by three consecutive years of not making playoffs, and finally a full turn over in the coaching staff. Last year they started fresh with a new coach who remembered the taste of final game ice and a fresh PR head to champion the team back to greatness—me.

“A team is nothing without the support of their fans,” Vangelt continued. “Miss Walker, you seemed very sure this Santa Series is what we need to change the direction we’re headed.”

I clutched at my presentation portfolio, and felt my heart beating against the projections and logistics held within. After a year of prep, I had two teams of children all ready to be coached by professional athletes. Based on some of the conversations I’d had in Houston and Boston, there was a potential to grow the program across the league so that every professional team had a youth program for under-privileged kids.

Forcing strength into my voice, I said. “It is. I’ve already prepared everything we need to move forward. All that was left was to get your final approval. I know we can create something magical.”

Everyone deserved to have the chance to be part of a team, even if they couldn’t pay the dues or afford the equipment. There was nothing like the positive influence group sports could play on the life of a kid who feels alone. Nobody understood that the way I did. Once, hockey had been my entire world and being on the ice felt like home.

I continued, “Nothing brings people together like acts of charity mixed with kids, a bit of competition, and a whole lot of Christmas spirit.” The Santa Series was Northspire’s chance to make headlines in the league for doing something right in the world. If it was successful, then next year we could expand into league-wide games. We had the power to improve the lives of the people living in our communities, all while giving them a team worth rallying behind.

Last week, I’d gotten Vangelt to give me everything but his signature on the final line. All I needed was a few team volunteers and some ice time

during second intermission …

And then Colton happened.

The Hammerhead stunt brought in a lot of attention, some of it was bad, and yes, it did cost the team, but also sales for tomorrow night's game were up by 25%. While I came to give a final pitch for a new campaign built on integrity, the team owner shot it down in favor of schemes that relied on stunts. The new press attention on the team was all the proof Vangelt needed. He didn't care if the team drove right off a cliff, if it meant people tuned in to watch it crash. It was all about the bottom line and seizing a title by any means necessary. Well, I refused to be the one behind the wheel.

An hour ago they told me no. If they were seriously giving me a second chance, then I wasn't going to waste it. I swallowed hard and looked between the men sitting across from me. There was no way I was pinning all of my hopes on Colton fucking Gailey. Putting him in front of this campaign might be about ensuring that he's under their control, but I was under no illusions. Nobody could control that man. He couldn't even control himself.

Straightening my spine, I said, "I don't think Gailey is the right player for the job. We need someone the kids can look up to. Someone the city will respect."

"*Hey*," Colton balked. "People respect me."

"It needs to fill seats," Vangelt added.

"It will," I confirmed. "The people will be invested in the outcome—"

"Sorry, what outcome?" Colton interrupted. "What am I doing?"

"Anything she tells you," Coach clipped.

Vangelt leaned forward, looking down his nose at Colt. "I don't care if she puts you in a reindeer costume and lets kiddies throw snowballs at you. You're to say thank you and smile for the camera. Understand, son? We own you, and if you don't want to be on a plane to Philly this spring, then you'll do as you're told and make sure the barn sells out every night."

"What about Pelletier or Ashburn?" I suggested, already knowing the answer. "Give me one of them."

"I need my players with heads in the game. Those intermissions are vital time for the team to reset and strategize. I'm not putting that in jeopardy so you can play Mrs. Claus. This is what you're getting. Make it work Miss Walker." Prescott stood up and gestured at the door.

Apparently, we were done here.

Colt and I slowly walked out of the office. Just as the door was closing the owner added, “I need to see a sold out arena by the end of the year, or we’re going with my plan, and Ms. Walker, you don’t need to be the one running it.”

The door slammed shut with a dull thud.

“You!” I turned on Colton, feeling blood rise up my neck and flame against my cheeks. I hit him in the arm with my folder with every ounce of strength I possessed.

“Me?”

“You ruined *everything*. I’ve spent a year planning this.” I hit him again for emphasis. “Months and months and months.”

It was hopeless.

This was *never* going to work.

“Sorry, how did I ruin whatever this is, because I still don’t actually know what I’m doing, other than being your apparent bitch for the next twelve days.”

“You just had to go and jump in that tank. And then I’m the idiot who fixed it for you and made it the kind of stunt that makes people get hearts in their eyes.” I turned and walked toward the elevator. “I’m such a fool. This is what I get for being good at my job.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 4

COLT

11 Days Until Christmas

My phone buzzed, rattling off the bench and onto the locker room floor. From the ground I saw Holly's name and the picture of Elsa that I set as her profile picture after she forced me to program her number into my phone.

Ice Queen: Meet me at Reception an hour before game time.

Ice Queen: Don't be late.

Ice Queen: I mean it.

Ice Queen: We have VIPs to welcome. Real ones, not the usual puck bunnies waiting for you outside.

I shook my head and tightened the laces on my snow boots. The nerve of this woman. To think I'd been concerned that I might have made *her* life harder by jumping in that tank.

Practice today was particularly brutal. It was like the entire coaching staff decided to collectively take out my suspension on me. I haven't ached this badly at the end of a practice since my rookie year.

Ice Queen: Stop leaving me on read.

Ice Queen: I mean it, Colton Gailey. Answer me.

Ooo my full name even. I stifled a snort. She must really be mad. What was she wearing right now? For some reason the image of her in those adorable pajamas and sparkly Crocs popped into my head, how the glitter caught the light with her impetuous stomp. It was so much realer than all those suits and pencil skirts she was always rolling into game nights wearing.

Ice Queen: Confirm that you'll be there. I can't afford for you to fuck this up.

See, if she knew me at all, she'd know that a comment like that just made me want to mess with her more. Riled up Holly was too big of a temptation not to take the bait. If I was going to have to spend the next two weeks at her beck and call, then I'd be damn sure to have some fun while I was at it.

Me: Already taking the gloves off, are you? Are you sure you want to go a round with me?

Ice Queen: Please. I've handled men twice your size.

Me: Lies. You have no idea what size I am.

Tiny dots scrolled across the message bar. I pushed my tongue into my cheek and waited for her response.

"What are you smiling at?" Stevens asked, opening his locker and pulling out a pair of joggers.

"I'm not smiling." I directed my grin at Eli Stevens, our team captain. At 38, he was the oldest player on the team.

"You're always smiling at something."

Rumor had it that this was his last season with the Stags. Selfishly, I didn't want him to leave. He started with Northspire my freshman year of high school. I'd torn out his Rookie of the Year spread in Sports Illustrated from a copy in the school library and had it taped on my wall right up until the Stags called my name at the draft. The year before I started on the team,

“Lucky Sevens” scored two goals in game seven of the Stanley Cup. I could still feel the anxiety sitting in the common room of my college dorm and watching the seconds tick down during overtime.

Speaking of my youth, I looked at the time. The first professional goal that I ever scored was after having lunch at Hanover with everyone. Ever since, one of my pre-game rituals was to stop by the home to check on things and to make sure they didn’t need anything. As I saw it, this home was my lucky charm.

The tiny dots continued scrolling in the text bubble, before disappearing and then reappearing again like Holly deleted her message only to start again. Whatever she was typing, it was going to be good.

I leaned against the locker. “Hey, you want to make a trip over to Hanover House with me?”

Eli pulled on his shirt. “Yeah. Actually, that’d be nice. Think Aunt Francine will have any of those cookies around?”

“You mean those god awful fiber biscuits?”

He lifted a shoulder. “I like what I like.”

Ice Queen: I’m sure it's smaller than you imagine and less than I need. But as I was told, this is all I’m getting, so you’ll have to do.

This woman. Why was that so hot? Maybe I had an undiscovered degradation kink. I pictured Holly looking down on me with a riding crop in her hand and the idea didn’t seem to fit right. Hot, yes, but it wasn’t right. The image morphed to her beneath me after wrestling the crop from her hands, and that—fuck. Yeah, that was a mental image to file away for later.

Where the hell had that daydream come from?

Stevens leaned over my shoulder to look at my screen and whistled, popping my fantasy bubble. “Damn. She’s texting you commands now?”

I scratched at the scruff on my jaw. “Yeah, Prescott loaned me to the Ice Queen for the length of my suspension. She’s got me doing some kind of PR campaign during the game tonight.”

Me: Have you ever seen how pink your cheeks get when you’re angry? Like a little elf.

Ice Queen: I do NOT look like an elf.

Me: I bet you’re all kinds of adorable right now.

I pocketed my phone, then smiled wider when I felt the notification vibrate. “The kids at the house are going to be so excited to see I brought you along.”

Eli slammed his locker shut. “You should text Miller and invite him to join us. Remember the last time he came along and they ended up jumping Frostbite?”

The kids loved my best friend. The last time I brought Mills along with me to Hanover House, he’d surprised them dressed as Frostbite, the team’s mascot, then the kids all dogpiled on top of him. The lovable idiot enjoyed every second of it. “Yeah, actually, that’s a great idea.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 5

HOLLY

11 Days Until Christmas

A *n elf?*

I tightened my grip on my phone and internally growled. Why couldn't he reply with a simple, "Yes, Holly. I'll be there?" Why did the jackass have to make everything a joke?

I walked into the hotel restaurant, spotting my parents sitting at a corner table.

"Holly!" My mother saw me and instantly rose with a painted smile. She gracefully stepped around the table and wrapped her arms around me. "Goodness, child, you feel so soft. Have you put on weight?"

She dipped her eyes down my body with a frown.

"Hi, Mom." I gave her a peck on the cheek, ignoring the slight jab at my non-existent weight gain.

"I think she looks beautiful, Henrietta." My father stood and pulled me into an equally awkward hug. "Just like her mother."

"Oh, you." She waved him off and took her seat.

"Thanks, Dad." A waiter filled my water goblet, and a cold splash of ice water hit the back of my hand. When I reached for a napkin, he'd already picked up his phone and was scrolling through the comments on their newest socials.

"Can you bring her a glass of this fabulous pinot grigio?" Mother gestured at her glass. "The woman at reception told us their rockfish here is

the freshest in the city."

"It's Alaska, Mother, the fish is fresh everywhere." I put my hand on the waiter's arm. "No wine, thank you. I'm fine with the water."

"No, you'll want white wine with your fish," she said matter-of-factly and handed the waiter her menu.

I knew this meal was going to be as pleasant as a root canal, but she was delusional if she thought I was going to sit here for a long drawn out meal. "Can I just have a side salad? I'm not staying long."

"Of course," the waiter said and moved on to take my father's order.

"I don't see why you can't stay and have a nice meal with your father and I. We hardly ever see you anymore," she said, sniffling into her napkin like she was a victim in all of this.

There was a good reason I moved to the farthest possible end of this country. The only reason they were even here was because they'd been asked to sit as commentators for the Figure Skating Pairs qualifiers being held at the Olympic Park outside Anchorage. With the Winter Olympics ramping up, every media outlet in the country wanted America's Ice Sweethearts sitting on their panels.

"I have a game tonight, and an important meeting to attend after this." I looked down at my watch. God, I'd only been here for five minutes. "Tonight is the start of the Santa Series. It's a big deal for me—"

"You're always working." She cut me off like I wasn't about to tell her about the campaign I'd spent a year putting into motion.

"Stop pretending you're some kind of saint. How many hours a day did the two of you put in at the rink again?"

My mother and father had been the American All-Stars of the Winter Olympics for the better part of two decades, and my younger sister, Ivy was proudly following their example. I couldn't count the number of things I'd given up while attending either my parents' events or my sister's.

The year they were featured on the cover of Sports Illustrated, the photoshoot had been in New York during the weekend of my Senior Prom. Ivy's first medal as part of the Junior Olympic team was put around her neck on the same day I should have been playing in my first regional championships. I missed that game and the loss the team took that night still tugged at my conscience. My life was one never ending timeline of sacrifice and politely clapping from the sidelines.

“Well, if you had just taken that job in the PR department for Team USA, like we’d arranged for you,” She emphasized that last part, like she deserved a Medal of Honor for having her agent pressure the team manager into offering me the job. “Then you’d have the weekend off like the rest of the working world.”

“No, I wouldn’t.” I threw my hands up in exasperation. “I’d be on the road with that team, just like I am with this one. Not to mention the fact that *I don’t like* figure skating. I spent too much of my youth listening to the same Tchaikovsky song on repeat. I don’t want to waste my adulthood on it too.”

“Because watching a bunch of brutes swinging around sticks and calling it a sport is so fulfilling?”

Don’t take the bait, Holly.

Do. Not. Take. The. Bait.

I dug my nails into my palms and focused on the bite of pain to keep from saying something I wouldn’t be able to take back.

My father never even looked up from his phone, instead squinting at the line of text in front of him and smiling to himself over whatever he saw.

“This is my fault,” my mother continued. “I take full responsibility. We never should have allowed you to sign up for that hockey team. We should have left you in figure skating. Look at how far your sister has gone. That could have been you.”

“I liked hockey, Mom. I was even good at it.”

“And where did that get you? I saw that last video series you posted, what was it that they were doing? Pole dancing?”

“The limbo. You know full well the difference between pole dancing and limboing.” I took a slow breath in through my nose, and held it. Maybe if I held my breath for long enough I would pass out and I wouldn’t have to listen to her. My father was no help. He never was. They’d be competing in hell before he said anything against my mother.

She drummed her nails against her wine glass, causing ripples like the coming of a dinosaur to travel over the surface. Maybe I should have taken that offer for a glass of wine after all. It was feeling very tempting right now. I hate pinot grigio, so its acidic taste would’ve fit right in with this table conversation.

“I thought when you signed a contract for that women’s league that maybe then you might make at least some kind of a name for yourself. Not

a big one, of course, nobody takes hockey seriously, much less women's hockey." She laughed like this was some kind of common joke. "That's why the league collapsed. No ticket sales. Now, your sister's last exhibition performance sold out in five minutes. Of course, it was the top ten skaters in the world, and it was for charity." She took a sip of her wine. "Where was I going with this again?"

To the grave. She would be chirping in my ear right until her dying day and then she'd probably come back to haunt me just to be really sure that I knew what a failure I was in her eyes.

Glancing dramatically at my watch, I feigned surprise, "Oh, shit."

"Language. You spend too much time with all those boys."

"Yep. I just remembered that I want to be anywhere but here." I stood up, pushing my chair back forcefully enough that it hit the woman sitting at the table behind me. "I mean, I have a meeting to be at on the other side of town."

Mother sucked in a breath through her teeth and hummed a nasally sound of disapproval. She wasn't offended. Sharing a meal with her eldest was just as much of an obligation to her as it was for me.

Forcing a smile at my father, I added, "Thank you for coming. Be sure to stop by the big Christmas tree while you're still in Northspire. It's really beautiful with the big mountain backdrop and the skating rink."

"We'll be sure to do that." He nodded in agreement, finally putting down the phone long enough to beam up at me with complete ignorance. "Sounds lovely. I wish it didn't have to be so short. You should come out to Virginia for a visit sometime soon."

"I'll get right on that."

My dad stood up for a hug, and I couldn't bring myself to fake anything else. Instead, I turned for the exit and walked away from them both as fast as my legs would carry me. At least I could look forward to making some children's day.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 6

HOLLY

11 Days Until Christmas

The steps of the old house creaked as I ascended the stairs. From beyond the front windows kids squealed with joy. It sounded like an army of children were in the middle of an all out brawl.

I sat the giant box of jerseys beside the door and rang the bell.

An elderly woman with tight pin curls opened the door. Her hair was a rosy hue, like she'd been using the same boxed dye for the past sixty years, and now that it was laying over white hair it had turned more pink than red.

"Hello, Ms. Baker," I said with a smile.

"Psh, child, I told you to call me Aunt Francine. Everyone does." She waved me in. "Come in. It's cold enough to freeze the nuts off a polar bear."

Francine stepped back. "Don't you have a proper pair of snow boots and winter coat? Darling girl, this is Alaska, not the Riviera."

"This is my winter coat. You don't have to worry about me, Aunt Francine. I can handle the cold." I bent down to pick up the box while she held the door open. Why was this woman always fretting over me? My peacoat was more than warm enough. Last time I came to the house she tried to give me a hat and gloves. The time before that it was a wool sweater.

"Hmmm." The old woman scrunched up her face. "I'll see if I can find a spare pair of boots at least."

“I have boots …” My voice trailed off as two twin boys with matching blond curls came tearing past us. In unison they hollered a massive battle cry. A second later, I knew I must have been hallucinating, because Miller Madsen stalked after them with what looked like the Nerf version of a gatling gun. He threw back his head and gave a crazed laugh that reminded me far too much of Jack Nicholson in The Shining.

“Francine, why is—” As I stepped into the house a red and white striped foam dart sniped me square in the cheek. I screamed in surprise and dropped the box of jerseys on my foot. I barely halted the string of curses as I hopped back and locked eyes on my assailant.

Colt gave me a small wave from his hiding position behind the dining table. His long blue sniper rifle pointed right at me before he lowered his eye to the sight and fired a second one directly into my left nipple.

“Bullseye!”

Aunt Francine pointed an angry finger at him. “Colton Gailey, I did not raise you to shoot defenseless women in the breast.”

Raised him?

My jaw dropped as I took in the way he sheepishly stood and bowed his head. “Yes, ma’am.”

Colton grew up in Hanover House. How did I not know that?

“Good boy,” she laughed. “Now be a gentleman and at least get her a gun to defend herself with.”

“Wait, what?”

A tiny girl with long brown braids slid across the hardwood and handed me a six shooter. “Here you go.”

“You walked into World War Nerf, girl. I’ve learned it’s better to ride with these kinds of things, than to try to get in the way of them,” Francine said, pushing the box of jerseys into the corner beside a massive coat rack.

“My name is Susan.” The girl took my hand. “Come with me, Miss. You can be on my team with Mr. Eli.”

“Eli Stevens? He’s here too?” I blinked in question at her tiny pink face and then up at Francine.

“He comes around with Colt every now and then. He has a way with these kids. Not like that one.” She pointed at Miller, who now had one twin pinned to the ground, while the other was on his back beating him in the side with a miniature foam bat. “All these guns were his idea. He might be built like a man, but he’s more child than they are.”

“Come on,” Susan repeated. “While the twins are distracted.”

Colton pulled back on the cocking mechanism. “You’ve got to the count of 10 and then I’m coming after you, Queenie.”

The little girl tugged me up the stairs. “This way.”

We sprinted, two new darts flying past my side and into the railing as we ran. So much for the head start. I could hear Colt’s evil cackle from here. On the stairwell landing there was a massive wall of bed pillows blocking off the second floor from the downstairs. Built into the wall were several tiny holes for them to shoot from, and the entire thing was bracketed in place by several heavy blankets. It was actually an impressive fortification.

Eli stood from behind the wall, his look as equally shocked as mine. “Holly, what are you doing here?”

I showed him my gun. “Fighting in the war, apparently.”

“Come here, Susan.” He leaned over the pillow barricade and lifted the girl over the wall. “Did you get what we needed?”

“Yes, Captain.” She unzipped her sweatshirt and a massive waterfall of darts spilled onto the floor.

“Nice work, private.” He lifted his hand for a high five. Her tiny one slapped into the center of his mammoth one as she gave him a big toothless grin.

They dropped in unison to take up their positions back on watch. Eli grinned at me, looking far more at home than I’d ever seen him look on the ice. “Get moving. If you’re here, then I’m sure Colt will be up here any minute.”

“Wait.” I put my hand on my hips, the pistol digging into my side as I gawked at the little girl. “Susan, was I bait?”

With the ice cold surety of an assassin, she said, “Sacrifices must be made. Better run.”

Who was this kid? Eli chuckled, and gave her braid a tug. “Atta girl, take no prisoners.”

“I’m beginning to think you’re a bad influence on these kids.” A small plastic ball soared up the stairs and rolled across the landing. “What the—”

“Take cover!” Eli yelled, and threw himself over Susan. A second later the thing popped open and a dozen darts went flying in all directions.

As I flinched away from the impact of repeated strikes, Colt came soaring up the stairs. His shoulder tackled into my side and we went flying

into the wall of pillows. His weight came down hard on top of mine.

“My bunker!” A taller boy cried.

Colt pulled a small gun from the back of his pants, then leaned an elbow on my chest to fire several times at the boy behind us and then shifting to ping Eli for a couple more.

“Ow,” I moaned and slapped his broad chest. “Get off of me. It’s bad enough they made me their bait, you didn’t need to turn me into a human battering ram after setting off what I can only assume is a Nerf grenade.”

Colt shifted his weight, but it wasn’t to release me. Instead, he used it to pin my legs in place and captured the wrist of my gun hand. I wiggled to try and free myself, but somehow only ended further under him.

Jesus, the man was huge.

How have I never realized just how big Colton Gailey was?

“I have one shot left. Saved it just for you,” he cooed, aiming a tiny single shooter at the center of my breast bone. “Surrender.”

A gun cocked above us. “Release the girl and I might let you live.”

I craned my neck to the side. Susan held a gun to Colton’s head. Her adorable braids swayed as she hovered over him.

“Is this what it’s come to, Susan?” Colt released my hand and pushed up onto his knees. Hands raised, he said, “I thought we were friends.”

Cold as ice, she raised an eyebrow. “We were never friends.”

With a definitive click the gun fired, leaving a bright red spot in the center of Colt’s forehead.

“Damn kid, that was chilling,” Colt said, rubbing at the spot.

“That’s my girl,” Eli cackled from beneath the mountain of pillows.

Wickedly, Susan shouted, “Aunt Francine, Colton cussed at me!”

“Colton Gailey, don’t make me come up there!”

He held a hand over his heart. “First she shoots me, then she rats me out. Lucky, you’re a bad influence.”

Susan stuck out her tongue and spun for her escape. Or she would have if Eli hadn’t hooked her arm. “Not so fast, killer. Grab that bucket over there and start gathering up the darts.”

“Lunch is ready,” Francine called from the bottom of the stairs. “Clean up. If I find a single dart in this house, I’ll tell the shelter down the street that you all volunteered to help with kennel clean up. That goes for you hockey boys, too. I’m sure they’d love to have a little celebrity volunteer time.”

Eli gathered an armful of pillows. “Johnathan, help me put all these pillows back on the beds.”

“I can help,” I said, taking a few of the comforters that were used to reinforce the pillow walls. Colt grabbed the remaining pillows.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 7

HOLLY

11 Days Until Christmas

There were four bedrooms on the floor, each with a bunk bed and a third single bed in them. I never had to share a room with my sister unless we were staying in a hotel. When we did, I wanted to murder her in her sleep. I could only imagine what it must be like growing up in such close quarters with so many other kids.

Colton followed me into the first room and tossed a pillow on each, while I attempted to fluff out the first of the blankets. Seeing my struggle he took the end of a comforter and together we laid it out on the bed.

"So you grew up here?" I asked when the quiet felt too uncomfortable.

"Yeah. It's um..." Colt cupped the back of his neck, and looked slowly around the small bedroom. "The room next door was mine, until I was a junior in high school."

He climbed up the side of the bunk beds and put a pillow in place.

"Oh?" Was that when he was adopted, or emancipated and he moved out? I had no idea how any of this worked. Not really. Yes, I'd been working with Hanover House and the local Children's Center to figure out the logistics for the Santa Series, but I hadn't asked much about the workings beyond our immediate needs.

"Blanket, please. Making the upper bunk takes practice. I did this enough times that I think it's imprinted on me somewhere." He held out his hand for the next comforter and tossed it over the upper bunk with an

effortless flick. “Aunt Francine let me turn the attic into my bedroom. Now, the kid in the house with the highest grades at the end of the school year gets it. Kind of a badge of honor. I think Johnathan has had it three years in a row now.”

I wanted to ask him why he grew up in a home like this. What happened to his parents? But, if he’d kept this part of his past away from the public eye, then it was for a reason.

“She seems pretty great,” I said, doing my best to smooth a blanket over the bottom bunk.

“That’s because she is. Aunt Fran’s been doing this a long time. She started Hanover House back when she was a social worker in the 80’s. At first it was just a couple kids. Year after year, it grew. I think she doesn’t have the heart to turn away a kid in need. Honestly, I don’t know what will happen to this place if she ever decides to retire, or worse.” He gave me a sad smile, and cleared his throat. “Want to stay for lunch? It’s not much, just spaghetti. Fran always makes me spaghetti on game days. She read about carb loading somewhere and I haven’t had the heart to tell her that pasta before a game isn’t necessarily what they were talking about.”

A small laugh bubbled out of me. The protein bar I ate on my way over probably didn’t count as lunch, especially since I didn’t stay with my parents long enough to actually have a meal with them.

“Maybe, I have a lot to get done today.” I tugged the hair tie from my wrist and pulled back my hair. Before being thrown to the ground and rolling around in a mound of pillows, I managed a nice blowout and curl for seeing my mother. Lord knew I didn’t need to give her permission to find fault with my looks. Now I was sure it was a hot mess, so ponytail it was.

Colt leaned against the frame and watched me. It was far too intent of a look to be innocent. It made my stomach flip in a way I wasn’t entirely comfortable with.

“Aren’t you going to ask me why I’m here?” I released the elastic with a snap.

“I know why you’re here. Francine told me everything earlier. I figured you’d be by. I like you like this.” He waved up and down at me.

What was I supposed to say to that? I tugged on the bottom edge of my top. It wasn’t anything special, just a hunter green sweater over a pair of dark jeans. The choice was a gamble meeting my mother, but nothing I did

was ever going to please her, so what was the point in trying. I might as well be comfortable.

“I think the casual version of you is my favorite.” Colton took my hand from where I was fiddling with the hem of my sweater. He held my arm out and took a long look at me, letting his eyes slowly travel from my boots all the way up to where I’d tied my hair. “Green is a good color on you. Pretty. It makes your eyes brighter. You have beautiful eyes.”

I sucked down a thinning breath. His free hand settled against my hip, reeling me closer. Without meaning to, I arched into the embrace until my body was flush with his.

What was happening right now?

Warmth bloomed in the center of my chest, making my cheeks flame and the tips of my ears burn. Why was my body reacting for him like it was lighting up thrusters and preparing for take off? My heart was practically screaming, ‘go for launch’ with every beat.

“Do you always say whatever you’re thinking, the moment you think it?”

He gave me a knowing smile, because of course he did. If I looked up his birth certificate, it probably had impulsive listed as his middle name. “I bet you’re always prettiest at Christmas when it’s *time for* —”

“Don’t say it,” I groaned, hearing the notes sparkle in his voice.

“Mistletoe and holly.”

I groaned. The only song worse than “Mistletoe and Holly” was “The Holly and the Ivy,” or “Holly Jolly Christmas.”

“You’re dead to me if the next words out of your mouth rhyme with ‘oh by wash, by dolly,” I said, keeping my voice as flat as possible.

“Don’t be silly, everyone knows the next line is *‘oh, by slosh, by single.”*

He tightened his hold on my hand and forced me to spin away from him and back like we’d been dancing this entire time.

He kept humming and misquoting the bizarro version of the song until I almost liked it. Almost.

“It’s time for a feral kiss and mingle.”

“Please stop.” I said, somehow cringing and smiling at the same time, as we spun around the small space. The smell of his cologne circled with us, something I’d never noticed before. He smelled like Christmas, woodsy

snow, and cinnamon. There was no way a hockey player should smell this good.

I squealed as Colt grabbed my waist and lifted me into the next turn. Where had he learned to dance like this? Hell, I'd seen my father pull less complicated moves, and he was a professional figure skater.

"And strokes feeling a kiss with you."

He slowed our spin, bending me into a low dip. Our faces were close enough that his breath drifted over my neck, tickling the small hairs that didn't stay pulled into the ponytail. My chest rose and fell against him as my heart decided to take off without me. The word kiss lingered in the space between us.

Colton lifted me back up, his hand against my lower back holding me to him. His lips brushed against my ear as he softly whispered the final line, *"Berry Listmas, to blue."*

For several long seconds there was only the sound of our breathing. His hand slid down my spine. It hooked into the loop at the back of my jeans, anchoring me to him while the other, still held my hand hostage. His thumb caressed over my wrist in a slow pass that I felt all the way down to the soles of my feet.

I sensed the kiss coming, licking my lips just as his eyes focused on them. I lifted my weight onto my toes, closing the space between us.

"Lunch is ready," One of the twins said. "What are you two doing in my room?"

I pushed away from Colton like we'd been caught doing something naughty. Colt simply grinned, completely unashamed of the way he'd just Frank Sinatra'd me into his arms like he was casting a love spell. For some reason, I fell for it right down to convincing myself that I wanted him to kiss me just then.

Which, obviously, I didn't. Probably.

"We'll be right there." He held his hand out to me.

I looked at it. There was no way I was taking that thing again. Hurrying out the room, I sped down the stairs and scrambled for my jacket on the rack.

"Holly, where are you going? I'm sorry. I was just having fun and got caught up in the moment," Colt said, following after me. "Stay for lunch."

"Is Holly having lunch with us?" Eli came in with Miller beside him. The goofball had a boy with long dark hair hanging piggy back off of him,

and another younger girl wrapped around his calf like a leg warmer. Francine was right, Miller really was living with his inner child out loud. No wonder the kids loved Frostbite.

“I can’t stay for lunch. Lots to do. Lots and lots. Just—” I blew out a breath. It was possible that I hadn’t taken one since Colt released my hand. My heart might even be beating harder now than it was then. “Can you make sure the kids all get their jerseys and remind Francine that the team bus will be by the children’s center at five thirty to pick them and the others up.”

“Holly, stay, please,” Colt repeated.

“No. Sorry, I—” I looked from him to the guys and over to Aunt Francine who was watching everything from the dining room. “Lots to do.”

“Yeah you said that already.”

Eli turned to Colt, his eyebrows pinching together. “What did you do?”

“He didn’t… We didn’t. I’m fine. I’ll see you all at the reception later. Go, Stags!” I lifted my fist with a little, “woo-hoo,” that nobody reciprocated. They all looked at me like I’d lost my mind.

“How many times did you shoot her, Colt?” Miller added, “I think you broke Holly.”

“Nope. Not broken, just very busy. Lots to do.” I backed into the door and fumbled with the knob. They all blinked dumbly at me. And why wouldn’t they? I’d apparently morphed into a manic, babbling chaos goblin. “Okay. Bye.”

I turned and fled the house before I could do anything else that would haunt me for the rest of my days. As I strode down the path, one thought drowned out all the others: I almost kissed Colton Gailey.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 8

COLT

11 Days Until Christmas

Miller leaned to the side, shaking his furry leg out, causing Frostbite's antler to knock against the side of my head. "I'm just saying that if you get to have an entire team of kids, I should be allowed to have one junior mascot. Or two, the twins would make awesome little helper elves."

"You're pleading with the wrong person," I said, watching Holly help one of the younger kids. She kneeled down, deftly maneuvering the straps on a set of shoulder pads before pulling the jersey over the young boy's head. She really went all out on them, basing the Santa Series uniform on the yearly maroon and green holiday sweater edition the Stags wore. They were only on the ice for fifteen minutes, but Holly ensured that each kid had a shiny new, red and green kit.

That was the thing about Northspire, the town claimed the holiday season in a way few places did. Being this far north, it was hard not to buy into the possibility that this could be the real North Pole. When the sun set early and the stars were eclipsed by the auroras, it felt like there was magic living among the tall mountains and evergreens of Alaska.

Or at least, that was why *I* loved this time of year.

The kids clacked their cherry red sticks against the ground, banging out a terrible rendition of Jingle Bells as they waited for the end of the second period. It killed me not being able to be out there with the team. The crowd

roared and then collectively sighed in that way they always did when we missed a shot. I'd heard that far too much this season.

A horn blared three times and a loud *"Lets Go Stags!"* was shouted in response, before repeating the call four more times.

"I should be out there," I said watching players zip past the tunnel entrance. Roo slid into the boards, hip-checking the LA center and taking off with the puck to swing around the back of the net. He was young, but Bentley had footwork that made it impossible to stay on him sometimes. Hell that was why the boys called him Roo, because he was the baby of the team and was always putting them in the pocket. I know that the team hired him hoping that Bentley Robinson would grow into being the next Eli Stevens. He had real potential to shine if we could get our team working better as a unit. As it was, all that fancy footwork meant nothing if there wasn't a stick waiting for him when he passed the puck.

Susan slipped her hand into mine. Her long pigtails splayed out from beneath her helmet in two curly poofs. Eyes wide, the usually unshakable kid looked terrified.

I gave her my most reassuring smile and attempted to distract her from the intensity on the ice. "You excited to see Santa? I heard he brought presents."

She shook her head. "He isn't the really real Santa."

"What? Of course he is." I dropped my jaw in outrage. "You live in the North Pole, who else would he be?"

She pouted her lips in disapproval. "There *is* no Santa, Colt. It's just something grown-ups tell you so that you behave."

Susan was too young to be so jaded.

"That's not true."

"It is. Last year, Santa--" She made tiny air quotes with her free hand. "—brought Victoria Albertson a collectors edition Elizabeth doll."

"Elizabeth?"

"Yeah, like the American Gal." Her eyes got all dreamy. "She's only the best one, she writes stories, and this version came with a copy of her own book that she could really read."

"That was really nice of Santa to bring her that. She must have been really good last year." I said trying to understand the phenomenon that was American Gal. They were just dolls.

Susan raised an eyebrow in a way no six year old should. “She’s not. Victoria is a bitch.”

“Hey, don’t say bitch,” I corrected.

The miniature cynic rolled her eyes. “She’s mean to everyone, and she cheats on every single assignment we get. She waits until the teacher has her back turned, then throws little pieces of crayons at the back of her head so that Mrs. McConnell will yell at Spencer instead.”

“Wow, she *is* a bitch.” I said, and then quickly looked to be sure Aunt Francine wasn’t close enough to over hear us. I wouldn’t put it past the old broad to still swat at me for using profanity.

“It isn’t fair. Santa brought *her* a $500 doll, with *accessories*. I know because Victoria showed us how much everything was worth.” Susan nodded her head with authority. “Do you want to know what Santa brought *me?*”

I cringed, already knowing where this was going. Hanover House relied completely on toy donations for Christmas. I usually helped Aunt Francine with wrapping them. Sometimes people gave nice things, but usually people donated junk so they could pretend they were generous while still being cheap.

“Santa gave me a knock off Barbie with the Dollar American sticker still in the corner. Her shoes and dress were painted on, Colt. If Santa was real, then bad kids wouldn’t get fancy gifts just because they live in fancy houses.”

She was right. Where was the justice in that? The kid was too damn perceptive for her own good. I made a mental note to get Susan the showiest American Gal Elizabeth doll that I could find. I’d even have a tiny Stags jersey made for her.

A horn blared with lights flashing in every direction beyond the tunnel exit. Susan’s entire little body flinched from the sound and she clapped her free hand over where the helmet covered her ear.

“Oop, that’s my cue.” Miller hurtled himself up onto the scaffolding of the lower seats, hooking his leg into the bars and waving a giant Northspire flag for the cameras.

Bending onto one knee, I squeezed Susan’s hand tight. “It’s okay. You hear those people cheering? Someone on our team scored a goal.” Good thing too, because we were already down by two and I didn’t know how to get out of the Santa’s not real conversation.

Over the loud speaker, the announcer proudly stated, *"Goal in the thirtieth minute, #13 Mikael Olsson, Assist #41 Aaron Tremblay."*

The crowd bellowed as one, "Fear The Deer!"

Fuck, I loved this game.

The announcer continued as carols played and bells jingled, *"Remember when the buzzer sounds, don't go anywhere because Santa is coming to town!"*

Susan peered around me to watch the players set up for the face-off. "There's a lot of people out there."

"There is, but you know what?"

"What?"

"They're all here to cheer for you." That was a lie, the crowd could turn on you like a mob with pitchforks. One minute you're Dr. Frankenstein and the next you're the monster, but Susan didn't need to know that. They were going to gobble her and her giant chipmunk cheeks up. I booped her on the nose, right over a line of freckles.

"Mr. Gailey?"

I rose, turning to see the old Zamboni driver worrying his hands over and over again.

"Kris, what's wrong?" I asked, scanning the tunnel for Holly and not seeing her anywhere.

"It's about Santa, and not something we want to discuss in front of present company." He pointedly looked down at Susan. Kris was such a wonderful old man. I hated seeing this kind of concern lining his already weathered face. He loved this city more than anyone I'd ever met. I couldn't imagine a night in this arena without his steady presence standing back in the tunnel waiting for his turn to take the Zamboni out for a spin. "Do you know where Ms. Walker is?"

"Don't worry, Kris. I'll find her." I snagged Johnathan's sleeve, the kid I'd chosen to be team captain. "Hold onto Susan's hand for me, will you? She doesn't like all the noise from the crowd."

"Sure thing, Coach." Johnathan's goofy smile was a great reminder of why we were here, and how far I'd come. If I wasn't able to play tonight, then being here with these kids was a hell of a consolation prize.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 9

COLT

11 Days Until Christmas

"Colt!" Holly came speed walking back into the tunnel, waving as her heels clicked down the concrete. "I can't find our Santa Claus anywhere. We're six minutes from the end of the period and he's supposed to be riding out on the Zamboni."

Kris gestured back to the garage where he kept his pride and joy. "He's in there, but Ms. Walker, he can't go out there with those kids."

"What do you mean?" She asked, following toward where he was pointing.

"I was in here adding some of the decorations to my rig so that it was done up properly for Santa to ride on it, and that's when I saw him," he said, shaking his head in disappointment. "He's a disgrace to the suit."

Slumped over on the floor, Santa Claus laid in a passed out heap. I could smell the whisky on him from here. "Shit."

Holly gasped and covered her mouth with both hands. "No. This can't be happening. I need him to be able to be on the ice with the kids. This man can't walk, much less skate. We have a whole *Santa Claus is Coming to Town* number planned, for—" she looked down at her watch. "Oh god, I think I'm going to be sick."

She grabbed onto the sleeve of my jersey. Her wide eyes pleaded with me for a solution. "Colt, what am I going to do? We can't have a Santa Series WITHOUT SANTA." Her words came in an anxiety driven rush.

“Vangelt is going to fire me. I had to go and make a big deal about tonight’s game to my parents. What if they’re watching? What am I saying? I’m about to epically fail, of course they’re watching.”

“Breathe, Holly. It’s going to be okay.” I wrapped an arm around her, feeling her cling tighter to me as her panic attack spiraled more out of control. Her entire body was trembling. I grabbed her chin and lifted up on it to force her to focus on me. “We’re in what, the 34th minute of the game? We have time, we just need to find someone who looks the part.”

“You’re asking for a miracle, Colt. Where am I going to find a Santa who can skate in the next six minutes?” she asked, voice dropping off as she saw what I saw.

Kris picked up the drunkard’s hat from where he’d discard it and slipped the red velvet cap on his head. With his thick white beard and maroon Stags jersey he made for a more than reasonable Santa. “Don’t worry, Ms. Walker. I would never let down the children of Northspire, not at Christmas.”

She licked her lips and bounced on her toes with anticipation, reminding me so much of a player right before the puck dropped. “Okay. Let’s do this. Kris, you go tell the equipment manager that you need a pair of black skates.”

“Of course,” he said, rushing down the hall.

She closed the door behind the old man, locking it and then turned on the disgraced St. Nick. Drunk Santa snored loudly as Holly tugged off the jacket, then she moved on to the belt.

“What are you doing?” I asked, watching in surreal amusement as Holly, in her perfectly styled maroon suit and pinned back hair, stripped down Santa Claus.

She glared at me and fumbled at the man’s buttons. “What does it look like? Kris needs a suit and I don’t just have a spare one shoved up my skirt. Now get over here and help me take off his pants.”

“And you say I’m the naughty one. Pretty sure stealing Santa’s pants puts you on the naughty list for life. In fact, I think I saw a porn that started that way. Let me tell you there are some filthy reasons for how St. Nick got so jolly.”

She pulled on the waistband and snorted a laugh, “Can you not talk about porn when I’m so close to this man’s groin?”

“Have a—”

“I will murder you if you keep singing.” Holly pushed at the guy’s hips, trying to wiggle the red fabric down one inch at a time. “Ugh. Seriously, Colt, get over here and help me.”

“Fine. For the record this entire insanity is your doing,” I said, dropping to my knees and fumbling with the laces of his skates. Truth was, I’d do anything so that I didn’t need to see that kind of panic in her eyes again. “You need to get these off first. Don’t know how you were planning on removing the pants while he was still blades out.”

I tugged off his right skate and then his left.

Holly rolled her eyes. “Don’t pretend you’re above this. You’ve been on the naughty list for so long, we should be calling you Cole.”

“Oh ha, ha,” I said, grabbing hold of the left side of his pants while Holly took the right. “Because all I get is coal in my stocking?”

“Exactly.” She moved to his foot, changing tactics to try and pull the pants down one leg at a time.

The metallic sound of a key in the lock clicked and the garage doors rattled open.

“What are you two doing?” Kris asked.

Holly screamed with surprise and tumbled back, taking Drunk Santa’s pant leg with her in a loud riiiiiip, and landing face first in my lap.

“As lovely as this unexpected turn of events is, we really don’t have the time to start reenacting scenes from *Jingle Bell Cock*,” I said with a laugh.

Pushing off my thighs, Holly whipped the scrap of pant leg at me, then stared at the torn fabric in horror.

“Jingle Bell *what*?” Kris tsked with displeasure. “Young man—”

“Sorry, Kris. That was out of line,” I said, trying to force the remorse past my amusement.

“Even Kris knows you deserve coal in your stocking.” She sat back on her knees.

“Like *Hung By the Chimney*,” because that was an entirely different film.” Seriously, she made it too easy. I could play this game all night.

Finally getting back on her feet, Holly gaped at the old man. “What is that?”

Kris looked down at the deep maroon velvet and white fur trim. His skates were a shiny black that matched the belt circling his round belly. “My Santa suit. Can’t have Santa without the suit.”

She stood up. “I can see that. Where did you get it?”

“I had it.” Bells jingled as he climbed up behind the steering wheel of the Zamboni sleigh.

“Where did they come from?” she asked, pointing at the pair of resin Reindeer to hitched to the front.

“Santa needs reindeer to pull his sleigh.” Kris shooed her away from the door. “Well, come on. The buzzer is going to sound any second.”

“I swear those weren’t there before, and you changed so quickly. How did you change so quickly?” She leaned forward and squinted. “Do you have *glitter* on your cheeks?”

The game clock mounted on the wall of the tunnel clicked to zeros and a loud buzzer sounded. Kris fired up the engine of the Zamboni.

“Come on,” I said to a still very stunned Holly, and took her hand to guide her back to the tunnel. “You wanted the kids out there first, right?”

That seemed to knock her out of it and we hurried back to the waiting children. A red and green lights display streamed over the crowd to a rock rendition of Carol of the Bells.

“You guys ready?” I yelled to the kids, and they slapped their sticks with excitement.

“Mills, get out there,” Holly said.

“Yes, Ma’am.” Frostbite skated onto the ice at full speed to a huge crowd applause. He made a lap of the rink, Miller doing what he did best.

On the Jumbotron, a video began playing a montage of kids playing at the Northspire Children’s Center over the past several decades. At one point I was sure I caught a glimpse of a younger, more gangly version of myself. Seeing kid after kid made my chest tighten. Just when I didn’t think my heart could take any more, Aunt Francine came on screen.

Her kind face looked out proudly at her kids skating on the ice. “*The children of Northspire are our future and our city’s greatest source of magic. Hanover House and the Northspire Children’s Center are so grateful to be partnering with the Northspire Stags this holiday season to spark up a bit of Christmas magic for us all.”*

Lights flickered like glitter over the ice. My own voice and face came on screen, having recorded my bit only an hour prior to the game. When it did the crowd cheered to rounds of “45!” and “Pistol!”

“That’s your cue, Colt. Take ‘em out,” Holly said, her electric eyes locking with mine for a long second. She took a deep breath. Everything

was going to work out exactly as it was meant to. I could feel it in the very center of my soul.

On-screen me continued, *"This holiday season, I'm working closely with twenty-four amazing kids to bring you twelve nights of Christmas excitement, including a series of four games where the teams are coached by your very own Northspire Stags. There are no losers here. When the children benefit, we all win."*

I took Susan's hand in mine and guided her to the ice. We carefully stepped out, she wobbled for a second and clung terrified to my sleeve.

"Colt!" she said in a panic. "I can't!"

"I've got you, short stack." I reached down and scooped her up onto my shoulder, holding tight to her legs as she lifted her red hockey stick into the air with a loud whoop of excitement. We soared over the ice, each kid following behind us as we circled the rink. They raised their sticks one by one. As they did Miller got the crowd to play along so that the children were able to conduct an arena size wave that rippled over thousands of people, just for them.

"Look, Colt! Look! They're waving back!"

"They sure are, kid," I said, taking a second to truly soak in what this moment meant for these kids, imagining what this could have meant for me, if someone like Holly had come along twenty years prior.

On the Jumbotron a stream of second long videos played, giving out the Santa Series roster one kid at a time. Susan's smiling face stared out to the crowd from the large screen, freckles and all.

"Ladies and gentlemen, put your hands together for the inaugural class of the Santa Series," the announcer proclaimed. The kids all waved proudly at the thousands of fans cheering back at them from the stands.

The instrumentals for *Santa Claus is Coming To Town* started playing, and a spotlight focused down on the upper box where Marina Star, Alaska's very own homegrown pop sensation waved up at the crowd. Her maroon and navy sequin dress sparkled in the lights swinging around the arena. In her hands she held a microphone covered in red rhinestones.

"Whoa," I whispered.

The crowd lost it, screaming and hollering for Marina louder than I'd ever heard them cry for me. How in the hell did Holly pull this off? There weren't many stars born in the last frontier. When someone amazing came

out of this state, the people claimed them and loved them fiercely. Especially when they had the Grammy award winning pipes of Marina Star.

“Merry Christmas, Northspire!” Marina said and snapped her hand in time with the booming sounds of a full house band and belting out the opening lines. The kids clacked their sticks to the beat of the song as the Zamboni rolled onto the ice. Kris waved up at everyone.

“Ho, ho, ho, Merry Christmas!” he bellowed, his voice carrying magically to every corner of the arena, even over the rocking band. “Merry Christmas!”

“When did Holly manage to get a mic on him?” I said to myself, looking back at her still standing at the entrance. She looked just as perplexed as I was but clapped because this could only be a good thing. Behind the Zamboni a streak of fresh ice glittered in a wave that looked like pure magic.

“Is that really him?” Susan asked, and for a minute I thought he very well might be.

Marina continued, singing the tune like the song had been written just for her.

“I love her.” Susan squealed excitement and clapped with the crowd.

Kris climbed down from the Zamboni, skating a second circuit of the rink with Frostbite and waving hello to every kid he saw in the stands. Every now and then he’d pause to laugh heartily with his hands on his belly.

I put Susan down on the ice, dancing her in a circle and singing loudly with everyone, “Santa Claus is coming to town. Santa Claus is coming to town.”

The entire arena and Marina finished the final line of the song as one. She lifted her hands and a rainfall of glitter scattered over the ice.

She lifted the microphone; it glittered red and green in the swirling laser lights. “Oooooh. Yeah! Thank you, Northspire. It’s good to be home for the holidays! Merry Christmas. Make sure to come back for more of this year’s Santa Series.”

The kids followed Santa off the ice, Kris driving the Zamboni back into the waiting garage.

Holly waited at the tunnel entrance, giving each of the kids a high five as they stepped off the ice. “You all did so well. I’m so proud of you. Who wants presents and cake?”

The kids jumped up and down with resounding whoops of excitement.

The Ice Crew entered the rink from the other side, quickly clearing away the debris.

“Alright, you lot, let’s get this gear off, and we can all go partaaaay!” Aunt Francine corralled the children toward the makeshift locker room.

As I stepped off the ice, I slapped my hand into Holly’s. “That was amazing.”

She reached up and dusted the confetti from off my shoulders. “We don’t all get coal for Christmas.”

The smile lighting up her face was full of so much pride and excitement that I knew my twelve-day suspension was a blessing in disguise, if only for this moment right here.

“Maybe this year you will,” I said and reached up to brush a bit of falling glitter from her cheek.

Her mouth popped open on an “oh,” making the red gloss staining her lips shine like cherries. If we weren’t standing amid several thousand people, I would be tipping up her chin to taste them for myself. She’d probably deck me, but it’d be worth it.

Instead, I threaded my fingers between hers, and we followed the children out of the tunnel.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 10

HOLLY

11 Days Until Christmas

The upper club level was reserved for The Children's Center kids and staff. They were joyfully stuffing their faces with roast chicken and watching our team fight for their lives on the ice. The third period was almost over and the score was tied, 3-3. Even better, we were currently on a power play with only four minutes left on the clock.

Maybe there was magic in the ice Kris laid down after all, because the team was playing better than this and last season combined. It was one beauty of a pass after another, and Pelletier hit a slapshot that could have burned a hole through the net.

My phone vibrated for the third time and I annoyingly swiped it open just so the notification would say "read" and she'd know I was ignoring her on purpose.

Ivy: What did you say to Mom?

Ivy: I have qualifiers and she just spent an HOUR bitching about how you blew off brunch.

Ivy: You know how much pressure I'm under. How can I be focused on skating tomorrow, when I'm listening to her squawk about you?

I pinched the bridge of my nose. No: ‘Hey Holly, I’m in Alaska at Olympic Park this week. No: ‘Do you want to watch me skate?’ Or whatever the fuck functional families said when they traveled across the continent and were a grand total of 40 minutes away. Nope, not Ivy. Instead she’s focused on how I’m ruining her chances at Olympic gold.

The tiny hairs on the back of my neck tickled with awareness. I clicked the phone closed and stuffed it into the pocket of my blazer. Heat warmed my side as a tall shadow blocked the fluorescent lights lining the left side of the glass. I hated that I could sense Colton’s eyes on me, even before he opened his mouth to announce his arrival.

“Not being out there is killing me right now.”

“What, you don’t like sitting in the luxury-level penalty box?” I asked, not looking up at him and pretending my focus was on waiting for the game winning shot. “Rethinking your little swim?”

“This is worse than sitting in the sin bin.”

Carson Stevens, Eli’s younger brother and Northspire center, chased the puck across the ice, barreling neck-and-neck with the LA defense. My heart rate kicked up like I was living this moment alongside Little Stevens. I swear, with every step he took, I could feel the exquisite tug of blades digging into the ice. Tremblay came at them from the left, rolling over the LA d-man like an out of control freight train. The player went down hard, his stick sliding across the ice and creating an opportunity for Carson to claim the puck on a beautiful breakaway. He passed it back to his brother who was waiting for this exact moment to take a shot.

I could taste the win coming, putting my hand to the glass so that I could be a part of the action when it did. The puck pinged off the cross bar and ricocheted back to the ice. I let out a slow breath.

That was so close, but there was still a minute left. The game wasn’t over, *yet*.

“Although …” Colt reached forward, and tucked back my hair from where it covered my face. “The view is definitely better up here.”

The puck slid over the ice directly to where Roo was waiting for it like he’d been satellite tracking its trajectory. The arena rose to their feet for the final seconds of the game, the ice demanding the full attention from everyone … but Colt. I could see him studying my reactions in my periphery, felt the heat of his body as he shifted closer. Even though I knew

every move and line he made was textbook swoon material, for some reason a swarm of butterflies were fluttering in my stomach.

“You’re going to miss it,” I said in a whisper.

“I’m not missing anything that matters.” There were those butterflies again.

The room erupted with cheers. The club lighting flashed along with the arena in an alternating red and blue. The kids started chanting “Let’s Go Stags!” that quickly got everyone joining in.

The announcer’s voice bounced off the glossy surfaces of the club, filling the small space.

“Goal #39 Bentley Robinson. Assist #77, Elijah Stevens. Northspire takes the lead, 4-3.”

The arena shouted as one, “Fear The Deer!”

Pride blossomed like a warm glow in the center of my chest. God, it felt good to hear the fans showing up for our boys.

I finally turned to Colt. He was still staring at me, a look of awe in his expression that made no sense to me whatsoever. It was the kind of look people got watching an opera singer belt out an aria, not a girl casually watching a hockey game.

“Why is your face doing that?” I scrunched my nose, which somehow made his expression light up even more. The beautiful idiot had dimples. How had the universe graced this man with so many perfect features? Where was the cosmic balance if he was allowed to look both adorable and sinful? “Stop it.”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“You keep staring at me. Don’t you want to watch the replay? This is the Stags first win in almost two months, and you missed it.”

“I don’t need to. Watching your face light up as you experienced it was enough for me. It was like you were there, holding a stick with them, your blade kissing the ice. I didn’t realize you loved this sport so much.”

Understatement of the year. I shrugged a shoulder in a terrible attempt to seem nonchalant. “What’s not to love?”

Colt licked his lips and rotated so that his back was to the glass. Gripping my shoulders, he managed to slide into the narrow space in front

of me. Leave it to Gailey to find an opening and take it. “Come skating with me sometime.”

“What?” I craned my neck in an attempt to ignore the way he’d managed to fill my entire field of vision. With twenty seconds left in the game, there was very little chance of LA scoring, but I also couldn’t stand the weight of his attention on me and had to do something, *anything* but acknowledge the way his palm was currently sending tingles into my fingertips. Or how his thumb was resting against the exposed bit of skin above my collar.

“I said …” His hands coasted down my arms in a slow glide until he could lace his fingers in mine. “Come skating with me. Tomorrow, between team practice and when the kids show up.”

“I’m not skating with you.” I tried, and failed to tug my hands free of him. Amazingly, attempting to extricate myself pulled me even closer. We were practically on top of each other now, so much that I had to tip my head back just to maintain eye contact. “God, Cole, did you wash your hands with super glue?”

His eyes sparkled with mischief that spelled all kinds of trouble. “It’ll be fun. You *are* familiar with the word, right?” His voice was teasing. Usually that tone made me want to throw things at him. *Usually.*

“I’ve heard of it.” The corner of my mouth hooked up, betraying my amusement. My traitor of a heart started beating out of control. It did know that we don’t actually like Colton Gailey, right? My brain needed to clue in my heart that we’ve always found him irresistible—no, that’s not the right word, irresponsible? Damn it. Now even my thoughts were going rogue.

“I’ll let you hold my stick.”

I rolled my eyes. “No thanks. I’ve seen first hand how many people handle your equipment.”

“Yes, but I’ve never asked any of them to come skating with me.”

“I …” Shit, what was I supposed to say?

I hadn’t been on skates since my former league folded, since the day I sealed away my hockey dreams, and settled for being a spectator. Sure, there were community leagues that allowed coed play, and last spring a new women’s professional league was announced. Its maiden season was still two years away. They were off to a solid start. Their board was already working with the men’s teams to help with the launch. It showed so much promise, and it made me happy to know that other young women would

have a dream to aspire to, but that didn't change the fact a thirty-year old woman didn't begin a hockey career after six years off the ice.

I couldn't tell Cole that as much as I missed the sensation of flying, or how I loved the feeling of cold air against hot skin, I couldn't bring myself to lace up again. It hurt too much. Hockey was the love of my life, but we broke up and now I got to watch from a distance as others lived my dream.

"I …" Heat sparked in the center of my chest the longer he stared down at me. He looked so damn confident, but also, when was the last time anyone looked at me with genuine interest?

"You?" Colt gave a lopsided grin, like he could see the cracks forming in my hardened shell. "You … can't resist the idea of being with me on the ice, but are afraid this chemistry between us will ignite, causing you to lose all of your self-control, and jump me?" His brows pulled together as he nodded thoughtfully. "I was afraid of that. It happens."

"Chemistry? Colton Gailey—"

"Ooo my full name even. Say it again, I kind of love it on your lips."

I huffed a breath of false annoyance. "If your ego gets any bigger, it might pop. This has nothing to do with you. I just … don't skate, is all."

"That's not a problem. I can teach you." He saluted like he was a Boy Scout. "I promise not to take a hand off you the entire time." Then he wiggled his brows and the shell guarding my heart cracked a tiny bit open.

My right hand was free. I could have tried to escape. Running for the door would be the sensible thing to do, better than opening myself up to someone who was guaranteed to be careless with anything you gave him for safe keeping. Instead, my other hand tightened around his like he was a lifeline in a storm. "You don't understand, Cole. I don't skate … anymore."

"So you *can* skate."

I nodded. Fuck, was I shaking?

His eyes softened with understanding. "But don't."

"Not in years." I licked my dry lips, swallowing hard against my suddenly parched mouth.

"What if—"

Jingle bells chimed loudly, shaking over and over. "Ho ho ho, Merry Christmas." Kris, accompanied by half a dozen of the players, entered the club. "I hear there are some very good little girls and boys who like to play hockey."

The kids hopped and screeched with excitement. We probably shouldn't have given them so much sugar. Kris sat a large sack of presents beside the throne we'd rented for him. I puzzled at the massive red bag, then looked at the stack of packages I'd spent a whole afternoon wrapping. Especially the hockey sticks which I swore were designed to make wrapping them impossible.

Autumn followed them in, and quickly scurried over to me. Her red curls swayed as she bounced with excitement. If sunshine could be a liquid, I was sure it was what pumped through her veins. "You should have seen him after the game. Everything went perfectly. Kris is a natural Santa."

I pointed at the bag. "Did you give him that?"

"No, he had it with him already." Autumn waved my comment off, completely unbothered by the mysterious sack of presents. "We walked the entire arena. He met with every kid who came up. I watched him speak three different languages. *Three*, Holly. He even sang a song in Dutch!"

"But where did he get it?" I asked, tilting my head to the side as Kris reached into the sack and withdrew a shiny red firetruck for one of the younger boys. "I didn't buy that truck."

As if I hadn't said anything, Autumn continued, "Who knew old Kris tooling around on the Zam would be such a perfect Santa Claus. Why did we even bother hiring that drunk idiot from the agency."

That blinked me out of my confusion. "Security got rid of him without any issues, right?" Shit, I should have stuck around to make sure he made it off the premises. Instead, I let Colton work his swoony magic and forgot about all of my responsibilities. This was exactly why being with him was dangerous. I had a job to do, and he was only going to pull the entire endeavor off course.

Autumn smiled. "Oh yeah, although they did have some questions about his state of undress."

Colt snorted.

"I guess the guy didn't remember stripping or something." She giggled at the face Colt was making. I glared at him. Luckily Miller entered the club, still dressed as Frostbite, and stole the attention off the topic of how I'd tried to take off Santa's pants.

A very happy looking Eli walked over to us, unbuttoning his suit jacket and putting his hands in his pockets. His attention was focused on the

children waiting to talk to Santa. “The kids look like they’re enjoying themselves.”

Colt clapped him on the shoulder. “Beautiful assist out there earlier.”

I shook my head. He didn’t even watch the damn play.

Eli shrugged. “Yeah, Roo really showed his potential tonight. That’s largely thanks to you, Colt.”

Colt tilted his head in confusion. “How so?”

“With you being benched, he saw almost double the ice time. There was an energy to him tonight that I’ve never seen out of the tyke.”

“Not just him,” I said. “The whole team was on fire. I’m surprised there’s any ice left.”

“Johnstone named him Player of the Game,” Eli said.

“No kidding.” Colt chuckled and placed a hand over his heart. “Our little guy is growing up.”

“He’s out there right now, doing his first professional post game interview.”

“Damn, I’m not there for it.”

I never understood the appeal of hazing rookies. One of the team’s most notorious traditions was to celebrate their big wins in the best way possible: a good old-fashioned pie to the face on live television.

“Don’t worry. Mik Olsson already has a pan of cream ready to go. They’re gonna get him right at the end of the interview.” Lines crinkled over Eli’s brow, his expression shifting from happiness to concern. “What’s our littlest Stag doing?”

I followed his gaze to where Susan was sitting alone, crosslegged in the corner and looking out at the empty rink. All of the other children were either playing with their new toys or waiting to whisper wishes to Santa Claus for a gift of their own.

Not Susan.

She was staring aimlessly through the window and weaving one of her pigtails in and out of her fingers as she thought. A child so young shouldn’t look like they’re pondering something that deeply.

“I don’t know,” I said slowly, trying to figure out what could have upset her between living her best life on the ice to now. “I’ll go—”

“No,” Colt put a hand on my arm to stop me. “It’s probably better if I talk to Susan.”

“Or I could,” Eli said, sounding more concerned by the minute.

Colt shook his head. “Earlier she was saying something about Santa and how she didn’t think he was real because the poor kids always get cheap gifts.”

“She didn’t.” Eli looked like he might run out of the rink and buy that little girl every toy in Northspire.

“You mean well, Stevens, but for all your good intentions, you don’t know what it’s like. You and Carson had a legacy to follow, and I’m not saying that didn’t come with its own pressures, but it’s not the same as feeling like you’re being abandoned over and over again.”

My heart squeezed both in sympathy and recognition. I might not have been orphaned, but my parents also never showed up for me. They didn’t talk to me for the entirety of my rookie season in the WHLA, and only decided to open their arms after I had nowhere to go but back to them. Even then, I was sure it was because it gave my mother the opportunity to prove she was right about my choices from the beginning.

“Oh, Colton. That’s so sad,” Autumn lamented with instant sympathy. She was such a sweet girl. Someday she’d make some lucky asshole very happy.

Eli chewed on the inside of his cheek.

“I’ve got this, Lucky.” Colt directed him toward the buffet. “Why don’t you see if you can convince Holly to eat something. I’ve tried three times now, and the woman refuses everything I put before her.”

The ass winked at me, because we both knew he wasn’t talking about food.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 11

COLT

11 Days Until Christmas

I crouched down low. “Hey there, small fry. I need your help with something.” Lowering my voice to a whisper, I added, “A secret mission.”

Susan looked out of the corner of her eye at me, but didn’t turn away from the window. “How secret?”

“*Top* secret. You in?” I held out my hand knowing she’d take it. Susan never resisted a mystery or a chance for a bit of spy action.

“I’m in.” She put her tiny mitt in mine, giving it a slow shake. “Tell me about the mission.”

Someday this kid would be the real 007. I waved her closer. “You see Miss Holly over there?”

“Yeah,” she whispered back and climbed onto her knees to look at Holly over my shoulder.

“She thinks that Santa Claus might be a fraud.”

“Colt.” Susan pouted with disapproval. “I already told you he was. They’re all fake. Santa isn’t real.”

“How can you believe that after seeing the magic ice, and then we won the game? Plus, I know for a fact that he has a magic toy sack over there. We just need to find the evidence to prove to her that Kris is the real deal.”

“I don’t know.” Susan scrunched her nose.

“Let’s just go over there and take a look.” I tugged her up to her feet. “Don’t let Holly know about your mission though.”

“Affirmative,” she said with a nod.

Susan avoided all eye contact as we walked past Holly, Eli, and Autumn. It was adorably awkward. Nothing was more suspicious than a child attempting to be covert. I gave the three of them a thumbs up. *Nothing to see here. Just a guy taking a kid to say hello to Santa.*

I walked Susan to the front of the line. Jacob was next, but I knew all the kids at Hanover had a sweet spot for little Susan. His big brown eyes lifted in recognition and I gave him a fist bump. “You don’t mind if we go next, do you Jake?”

“Nah, Colt.” He smiled down at Susan. “What are you going to ask Santa for, Suz?”

I didn’t know it was possible for a child to look so stern, but here we were. “It’s a secret. Top secret.”

Jacob gave me a beaming smile and puffed up his chest to appear taller. “I’m going to ask him for a new Phantom Ray goalie stick. Mr. Eli says that if I put in a bit more time on drills, then he’ll put in a recommendation for me at the summer youth clinic. I’ll be old enough this year to play on the 14+ league.”

“Yeah, I guess you will and going to high school next year, too.” I nodded. Of course if what Aunt Francine told me was true, Holly already had much bigger plans for restructuring the youth leagues of the city to be more inclusive. Jake might not need to rely on having a player vouch for him if she received the funding she was hoping for. “You’ve definitely got the build to be a goalie, and the reflexes. Probably need to work on your flexibility though. I’ll talk to Eli about getting some extra stretches added to your routine.”

“I really like Eli.” Susan looked wistfully back toward where I knew he was watching us.. “Do you think he’s what it would be like to have a Dad?”

Old wounds in my heart flexed a bit. How many times as a child did I watch adults and wonder what it would be like to be their kid?

“Oh, for sure,” Jake said enthusiastically, his ear length twists bobbing with every movement. “I bet Mr. Eli would be a really fun Dad. The kind that builds a rink in the backyard, with pretty string lights to keep playing during the long winter nights.” Then he shifted his attention to me. “What about you, Colt, think you’d ever want to adopt a kid?”

“No,” Susan said matter-of-factly. “Colt and Miss Holly will get married and have ten babies.”

I spluttered at the unexpected declaration. “Who said anything about babies?” I mean, she was gorgeous and the making bit would be fun. Holly was probably a knock out in bed, the kind of woman who made you question the divine. But babies? Nobody said anything about those. Who had time for an infant when you were shackled to a professional player’s schedule? Not that I wanted to settle down, or move on to something serious … with a woman who made smiling easy, and never backed down from a challenge, or watched hockey like it was the cure for everything bad in the world. I closed my eyes seeing a slow-motion replay of Holly smiling as we spun together in a quiet bedroom.

“Yeah, you’re probably right. They’re in love,” Jake said, making me splutter a second time. “They were holding hands earlier.”

I pointed at Santa. “Oh look, Susan, you’re up.”

She nervously put her hand back out for me to take it. “Will you come with me?”

“Sure.” I followed her up to the dais. Sometimes Susan acted like a six-year old going on sixty. It made it hard to remember that she was barely older than a baby herself. Kids on their own have to grow up far too quickly. That was the point of what Holly was trying to do, right? Make sure that every child gets the chance to be a kid and have some fun.

Kris gave her a jolly welcome, “Hello, Susan! I know you’ve been a very good girl this year.”

He knew her name? I guess it was displayed during the presentation, but so were the other twenty-three kids. Did he know all of them?

Susan leaned forward and squinted at Kris. “Can we cut to the chase?”

Cut to the chase? What kid talked like that?

“I know there’s no such thing as Santa.” Susan looked over her shoulder at the couple of kids waiting in line. She motioned for him to draw closer, holding her hand up to hide what she was saying. “But I’m on a mission to find evidence proving you are who you say you are.”

“Oh,” Kris said.

“Yes, and I’m sorry,” Susan whispered.

“Sorry?”

“For this.” She yanked hard on Kris’s beard.

The old man rubbed at his jaw, but didn't look the least bit surprised. I was pretty sure there was glitter in his long white beard too.

"Thank you," she said and hopped down from the dais. "Here you go. Proof positive. If he was like the other fake Santas, his whiskers wouldn't be real. Case closed. Mission accomplished."

My eyes went wide at the several long white hairs she dropped into my hand. I swear my chin throbbed in sympathy. "You shouldn't have done that, Suz."

"Sacrifices must be—"

"Susan …" Kris called.

She snapped her mouth shut, cheeks turning bright pink as she slowly turned back around.

"You never told me what you wanted for Christmas," he continued and patted the empty spot on the throne beside him.

With great trepidation, she walked back and took the offered seat. "I'm really sorry, I just—"

"It's okay, child, you aren't the first." He reached into the bag and pulled out a giant doll. Her hair was a glossy brown and in her hand she held a book.

Susan sucked in a gasp. "For me?"

"For you." Kris handed her the doll. It might have been a priceless artifact from the way she gingerly received it.

One at a time she examined the smaller features, from her shoes to the ribbon in her hair. This had to be the Elizabeth doll she'd told me about earlier. I didn't know Kris had been around to hear her tell me about it, but he must have.

"This doll is one of a kind, she's writing a new story about you." He tapped on the book, which read, "The littlest spy."

Susan slipped the book out of the doll's hand and read the first page. With every word her jaw dropped further and further.

"For the first time ever, I think she's speechless," I said.

Kris winked at me and tapped his nose. "Now, Susan. Tell me what you really want for Christmas."

Susan tore her gaze from the book and looked into Kris's warm expression.

"Go on, you can say it," he encouraged, like he already knew what she would say.

Tears glazed her eyes. “A home, with a family, like the forever kind, not the just-for-now one.”

Air seized in my chest, my own tears burned behind my eyes. Kris could never give her something like that. Maybe he found a way to get her a ridiculously expensive doll, but finding the right family to adopt a kid took a long time, sometimes that right family never came. Nobody knew that better than a kid who bounced from house to house, before he was lucky enough to find Aunt Francine.

Kris wrapped an arm around Susan. “I’ll see what I can do.”

She looked down at the doll and back up at the kind old man soothingly rubbing her back. “Thank you for the doll. I love her … and I’m sorry about the beard.”

“Now, why don’t you go over there and show Elizabeth to Eli? He looks like he could use a friend.” Kris pointed to Stevens, who was worrying a napkin between his hands as he watched the entire interaction. When Susan looked at him, he put his hands behind his back and tacked on a wide smile. “Oh, and Colton, Lake Lorraine is really lovely this time of year. The perfect place for a quiet, starlight skate.”

I blinked in confusion. “Lake Lorraine?”

Kris lifted his chin toward Holly, a twinkle in his crystal blue eyes that said far more than his words did. There was no way he could have known what we were talking about earlier. Right? No way.

Susan hopped down, then turned back to Kris. “Merry Christmas, Santa.”

Santa. He wasn’t … he couldn’t be.

Before Kris could say anything more, she ran off with the widest smile I’d ever seen on her face. She held the dolly high. “Look, Eli!”

“Wow, wow. Is that her?” he asked, picking them both up. “Is that Elizabeth?”

I slowly walked back to Holly, rethinking through everything that had happened today. When I stole a glance back, Kris waved at me like he could hear every question running through my head. Maybe he *was* magic, after all.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 12

HOLLY

10 Days Until Christmas

"Ew. Why does hockey gear smell so bad?" Autumn pinched her nose and held a hockey glove the size of her head at arms length. Her nasally voice sounded a full octave higher as she said "Tell Rochat to clean his gloves before donating them next time."

"The right person would probably bid more for them this way," I said, taking the goalie's blocker and catcher from her with a grimace and sticking a numbered tag on them.

"Oh my god," she laughed. "Never mind that's worse." She picked up the game winning puck from the night before and smiled at Bentley's autograph.

Autumn sat the puck in the lightbox and snapped a couple of photos while I uploaded the gloves onto the bidding site.

"Your smile is awfully large for someone taking pictures of smelly hockey gear," I said, peering up at her from behind my laptop.

"What, me? I'm always smiling and why shouldn't I be? We're about to pull a massive payday for the Children's center with this haul." She tossed me the puck, and I snatched it backhanded from the air. "But you're one to talk. For someone called *Ice Queen*, you sure have been very moony-eyed lately." Autumn gave the kind of giggle I thought only cartoon princesses could do. Next thing you knew some birds would come flying through this window and help set up the viewing cases for the silent auction.

“If by moony-eyed you mean being driven slowly to insanity, then you’re right on the money.” I tacked on the number tag to the puck and added it to the cart with Rochat’s gloves and Carson’s stick. “Gailey has been making it his job to be extra annoying since his suspension. I’m certain being his babysitter is a ring of hell, or maybe this is purgatory. I don’t know, I never finished reading Dante in school.”

Autumn blinked at me, moving her hands in slow motion as she reached for a jersey. “Sure ...”

“Sure? What’s that supposed to mean?” I pulled out my phone and flicked through a mile-long thread of videos. “Look. This idiot has been texting me gifs of hot dogs all morning.”

“Hot dogs? Like dick jokes?”

“No. That would make sense. Colton is absolutely the kind of guy who would do that, but these are just videos of dancing hot dogs.”

“Random.”

“No, it’s my fault. I made the mistake of telling him that the LA coach’s nose looked exactly like the end of a hot dog in a bun.”

She cackled, laughing hard enough that she choked on her spit. “Oh my god it does! Ew, why is that accurate? I don’t think I’ll ever be able to look at a hot dog the same way again.”

The gif of a man in a hot dog costume running across a field to another man in a bun costume played on a repeat of them chest bumping and falling over. I snorted a laugh. “Now, I’m getting a video every ten minutes like clockwork. It’s like he’s going for M.A.P, the Most Annoying Person award.”

Autumn rolled her eyes. “Yeah, I don’t think annoying you is why he’s been giving you extra attention lately.”

My phone dinged.

She giggled again. “I’d bet anything that’s him.”

> Puck Boy: You owe me dinner if I can get this on the lobby tree without anyone noticing.

My phone dinged again with a picture of him holding a hot dog ornament outside the team’s office. I squinted and pinched the screen to zoom in. “Where did he find a blown glass hotdog?”

Me: Not happening.

Shit. *Stop smiling, Holly. The man is not funny, or charming, or anything you want to waste your time with. He's trouble with a capital T.* I put the phone down and deliberately tried to focus on listing the next item in the auction, even if the holiday jersey made me think of how Colton had looked coming off the ice, calling what I'd done amazing.

Amazing.

When has anything I'd ever done before been called that? Never.

It *was* amazing.

Marina had gotten everyone out of their seats, singing as one, glitter falling like magic. I still couldn't believe her agent answered my email. We've had dozens of calls for interviews and Wednesday's game was nearly sold out.

I'd done that, me. Not my perfect sister. Not my parent's connections. Me.

Autumn continued babbling, but I wasn't really listening until she said, "You know I saw you holding hands last night."

I gaped at her. "More like my hands were being held hostage." My phone vibrated against the desk. Then continued vibrating as more messages came in. God, what was he sending me now? I was almost too afraid to look.

Puck Boy: Fine, if it stays up all week without anyone noticing, better?

Puck Boy: But then I want dinner and a movie.

Me: I'm not going out with you.

Puck Boy: Doesn't have to be anything recent. I like the classics.

"Say what you like about Colt," my young and probably too naive intern said. "But I've never seen him give this kind of attention to any other woman, and there have been plenty over the years."

Puck Boy: How about “All Hot Dogs Go To Heaven?”

Puck Boy: “Reservoir Hot Dogs”

Puck Boy: “Some Like It Hot Dog”

Me: Please stop.

Puck Boy: wait wait…

I bit down on my lip to keep from laughing, all too aware that Autumn was watching my reactions like this was a one-woman matinee performance.

Puck Boy: Wet Hot Dog American Summer. TBH that last one is even on brand for the movie. Wrong time of year for a summer camp flick though.

Puck Boy: How about Snow Hot Dogs?

Puck Boy: No. I’m ashamed of that one. It’s gone too far now. The hot dog is no longer funny.

Me: It was never funny.

Puck Boy: Then why are you smiling?

My lips immediately dropped. A cool feeling of relaxation hit my facial muscles, reminding me of how hard I’d been grinning. My cheeks ached from it.

The phone buzzed again and a selfie of his stupid, beautiful face filled my screen. Behind him, the new ornament sat nestled between two smaller glass versions of himself.

Puck Boy: I’ll pick you up at 6 on Saturday.

Me: I didn’t agree to this.

In response he sent a gif of a hotdog eating another hotdog at a fancy restaurant. That probably qualified as some degree of cannibalism.

Puck Boy: I take it back. The hot dog is still funny.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 13

COLT

10 Days Until Christmas

"Pistol! Cutting it a bit late, aren't you?" Volkov, Northspire's center, said. His Russian accent softened the insult. He tossed a roll of tape into the top of his locker and slammed the door shut. "I hope she was worth it. Coach is going to roast you over the coals."

"Rake you over the coals, Yuri. If you're going to insult me, do it in your own language so you get it right." If only I'd been with Holly this morning. The idea of waking up with her was more appealing by the second. I bet she was the kind of girl who pulled off her bra the second she walked through the door.

The Northspire center rose an eyebrow and spoke slowly, "Chtob u tebya hui vo lbu vyros." He looked so serious, I couldn't help but laugh. Saying it slower wasn't going to make me understand a word of it, but it was still hilarious. On his way out, he clipped me in the shoulder to knock me into the lockers. "See you in there, mudak."

Still laughing, I dropped my bag on the bench and pulled my phone out of my pocket. Holly's name was resting at the top of my notifications. I rubbed my finger over the new photo I'd changed her profile to. I snapped it last night when Holly was too busy chatting with Autumn and Mills to notice me watching. The arena lights put an alternating blue and red highlight over the graceful slope of her cheekbones. It looked like something straight out of a fashion magazine. In the picture, she was

laughing at the way Bentley had tripped over a chair when he spotted the three of them. It was hilarious that someone so sure on his feet when they were in skates, could constantly be tripping over them when they were on firm ground. Or maybe it was the girls that threw him off his game. It did seem like he became exponentially clumsier when Holly and Autumn entered a room.

Queenie: We'll see. 😉

That felt a hell of a lot like an open door. This game I started shouldn't be so satisfying. Sure, taking a detour to the Christmas tree had made me late for morning skate, but if it got Holly to go out with me this weekend, then it didn't matter. I'd decided the moment she walked into Hanover House that I wanted to see how far this electricity between us went.

One comment at a time, I slowly chipped away at the Ice Queen's layers and I was finding that beneath all the ice was a woman who surprised me by the second. Uncovering more of the *real* Holly Walker was quickly becoming an obsession.

Besides I was already benched, what else was Coach going to do to me for being late, other than force me to run extra drills? I scrolled back through the morning's messages.

Maybe I should have Dash deliver hot dogs to the office while she's in there working on the auction. *Genius*. I bet Holly likes chili on her dogs. I should order one of everything just to be safe. Today, lunch is on me, babygirl.

The Dash app was sending my order in when Randy's face filled my screen and *Run Run Rudolph* echoed around the concrete room. Flicking open the call, I started pulling out my workout gear from the bag. "Hey Rand, tell me something good."

"You sitting down? You're gonna want to sit down for this one."

"Fuck, they're trading me. I can't live in Philly." I dropped to the seat and ran my hands through my hair.

"What, no. Northspire would be fools to trade you now."

My head popped up. "Wait, why? What happened?"

"What do you mean what happened? You and pigtails."

"Pigtails?" I'm not growing my hair out to pigtails.

"Have you been under a rock for the past 24 hours? You're everywhere."

“Huh?” I opened up the app on my phone. I usually tried to stay as far away as possible from this stuff. Big things tended to find their way to me regardless of my online presence. Except, all morning I’d looked at nothing but dancing hot dogs, and trying to think up ways to make Holly give me another one of those blinding smiles.

Immediately every video and picture was of Susan on my shoulder or us dancing on the ice. Comments on the posts said everything from “Hockey with Heart” to “All I want for Christmas is Colt 45.”

This had to be a good thing. If the videos of last night were going viral across all of HockeyTok, then that meant Holly would have a better turn out for the Series. This was what we wanted, right?

“The media loves it and they aren’t the only ones. Fuel’s C.O. called me this morning. They want to reopen talks.”

A stampede of horses set loose in my chest. “Fuel? But I thought they blew us off.”

“Yeah, but then, this lovable idiot we know put an orphan on his shoulders and danced with her to a mega-popstar singing about Christmas. They noticed and they want to snag you up before Hydrade gets to you.” Randy chuckled. “I bet we could get a bidding war going.”

This was unreal. A bidding war?

“That’s not all. I didn’t even tell you the good part.”

Not all? How could he top that?

“I got a message from Victory Athletics. They’re branching into hockey branding and looking for someone to be the face of their new line.”

My vision went hazy on the edges. Victory athletics were responsible for endorsing the largest athletes in the world. A Victory sponsorship would change *everything*.

“You hear me? Victory, Colton. Agents go their whole lifetime without seeing their name on a docket. This is big, and if you can pull a couple more of those tear jerking moments, we could probably ensure that we get you that gig. When’s the next Santa Series appearance?”

“Tomorrow. Holly has a thing planned at the slopes for sledding with Santa.” I ran my hand through my hair, picturing Holly in a cute snow bunny outfit with cheeks pink from the cold.

“Great. You find a way to get yourself in front of a camera and I’ll get Victory on the phone.”

I couldn’t process that sentence. I knew every word he said, but somehow I couldn’t wrap my head around it. Victory wanted me, a worth nothing kid from Alaska whose only strength in life was not knowing when to stay down.

That made the vision of tomorrow shift from Holly to the Hanover kids. This campaign could help futures for more than just them. Holly said she wanted to take this nationwide. I had to claw my way to where I am now. It didn’t have to be that way for them too. Not if I could do something about it.

“Rand, I don’t know that I’m okay using the kids like that. This Santa Series, it’s not supposed to be about me,” I said, already seeing him shaking his head even though this was a phone call.

“Those kids are a selling point for everyone. They’re selling the team, they’re selling the charity, and I don’t see how it’s a problem if they’re selling you, too.” When I didn’t say anything he sucked in a breath and added. “Just because you’re using them to make people pay attention doesn’t make it wrong. Everyone is winning here, Colt.”

“I don’t know. It *feels* wrong. Keep pushing with Fuel and I’ll make sure to get something from tomorrow. I’m a good player. If they don’t want me for my skills, then I don’t want their endorsement.”

“Damn, kid. When did you grow a pair of morals?”

“I never had the luxury of morals before,” I said. “When we started this it was career by any means necessary. But, we’re better than that, Randy.”

“We’re talking millions of dollars, *tens* of millions. You realize that, right?”

Randy and I had been through a lot, but if he couldn’t see what I’m saying then maybe this was where our journey ended. “If people are paying attention, then I’m going to make sure it stays where it should be and right now, that’s not on me. Let me know what you hear from Fuel. Thanks for calling, Randy. I’ve gotta go. I’m already late for practice.”

I hung up the phone before he could stroke my greed enough to think what he was saying made sense. Just because everyone else had an angle didn’t mean that I needed to have one too.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 14

COLT

10 Days Until Christmas

I grabbed my towel from the boards and dried the waterfall from my face. Officially, there was, in fact, a *lot* Coach could do to me for being late—and all of them eventually made my stomach feel like ground zero at Chernobyl.

All of it was quickly forgotten as the clatter of kids tumbled into the rink with the grace of a tornado.

"Colt!" They hung on the boards waving at us. "Lucky!"

Eli sent a spray of ice at the kids as he skated over to say hello. "Hey there, partner. Wanna go for a spin?" He reached over the boards and lifted Susan up like she didn't weigh any more than the doll she clutched tightly in her arms. Setting her back down on top of his skates, Lucky spun in a circle. Suz squealed with joy.

Behind it all, Aunt Francine gave me a small wave. I was about to wave back, but snagged on her expression. The lines of her face seemed deeper, the stress of a lifetime weighing down her features in a way it rarely did. Francine was a force of positivity. When things got bad, she wrapped her knuckles for a fight. I didn't think I'd ever seen her look so defeated.

"Okay, everyone back up if you want to keep your toes." I pulled open the door and stepped onto the rubber matts, careful with my blades to avoid the many little feet crowding me. "Eli, you staying to help the juniors with practice? I'll let you coach half-pint's line."

Stevens spun to a stop. Susan rolled her head with an exaggerated display of dizziness. “Yeah, that sounds like fun. You take the teens.”

That worked for me. I didn’t have the patience to teach elementary kids. Teens on the other hand, that was a language I could speak. Those kids loved me. I already had half of them eating out of my hand.

“Skates on everyone.” Holly’s firm voice commanded. She pointed at the fresh bags of gear waiting for them. Instead of her usual suit, she was in a pair of leggings with a puffy vest over a Northspire thermal.

I followed the long lines of her body, up her legs all the way to how her hair was pulled high in a ponytail, exposing the column of her neck. Stray wisps that had been missed swayed in the air current. She pulled a knit headband from her pocket and pulled it up over her ears. The dark blue made her eyes look electric. A weird territorial pride filled me when I realized she had on the same alternating snowflake and reindeer pattern that matched the holiday jerseys, *my jersey*. Which was absurd because this was as much her team as it was mine, but even the notion of her wearing one of our sweaters lit something hot in my chest.

A new goal slowly formed in my mind. Before this arrangement of ours was up, I needed to figure out a way to get the number 45 on her back and my name over her shoulders. Even if it was just one time on a bet. I needed to see that fantasy come to life.

Holly briefly looked up at me, her beautiful smile lifting the corners of her eyes until they crinkled. That single expression sent a jolt straight into my heart. I pressed my palm to my sternum to try and alleviate the pressure. This had to be what it felt like to be hit with a defibrillator.

Apparently, I was alone in that, because Holly continued giving instructions like her eyes hadn’t just hit me with a visual taser. “I want the over 12s in the red sweaters. Littles get the blues.”

“I really like this look,” I said to her, suddenly aware that I was a sweaty ogre next to all her softness. “It suits you better than the … err … suits.” *Suits you better than suits?*

She raised an eyebrow in question. Since when did I have a hard time coming up with words. Jesus, I was beginning to sound like Roo. “Okay, that sounded dumb. What I mean is, you look comfortable.”

“Thanks?”

Comfortable? That wasn’t better.

I scrubbed my palm over my face. “I mean relaxed. Which is a good thing. You look good. This whole leggings and vest thing is definitely good. Cause you’re in an ice rink and ice is … um cold.”

“Are you feeling okay?” She reached up and put a palm to my forehead.

There went the last brain cell that I was hanging by. That touch obliterated what was left of my common sense. That was the only explanation I had for what came out of my mouth next.

“Because your ass in those looks really good, I mean no. Not your ass, it doesn’t. I mean it does, but that wasn’t…” *FUCK.* “I meant the … Northspire on your…” I waved at her chest like an absolute moron with a death wish. Holly’s eyes bulged wider in surprise. “Um. Pretty. I meant to say you look really pretty today, Holly. Not that you don’t look pretty every day, but—”

“Colton, dear, can I talk to you?” Aunt Francine interrupted.

“Yes. Thank god.” I let out a breath and thumbed over my shoulder. “I mean. I’m just going over there now.”

“Okay, Cole.” Holly held back a laugh. “Good talk.”

She called me Cole.

“Colton?” Aunt Francine repeated.

Holly pointed at her. “You should probably go see what she needs.”

“Right .. I was leaving.” I blinked hard. What the hell was wrong with me?

“Okay, lover boy. That’s enough embarrassment for one day.” Francine tugged on my arm, forcing me away from the mountain of babble that had just spewed from my mouth. I stumbled a step or two over my skates, watching as Holly covered her mouth to hide her laughter, but not enough to block the peach blush staining her cheeks.

“I like her,” Francine said, eyeing Holly behind me. “Don’t muck it up.”

“Huh?”

“You deserve a girl who can withstand your full attention, but can also make sure you’re putting that focus where it deserves to be. The two of you could be great together.”

“Thanks. I think.”

Aunt Francine was always doing that. She was the only woman I knew who could make a compliment turn into life advice.

“Hey, what do you mean ‘Don’t muck it up?’ Women love me.”

Francine smacked the side of my head. “Were you just in the same rink as me? Or did I imagine that little verbal meltdown? Is it really so hard to give a girl a compliment? You look pretty. It’s *three words*, Colton, and then you stop there.”

I ran my hand through my hair and gave it a tug. “I don’t know, France. Holly is different.”

“You don’t have to tell me. I’ve been shooing away your fan club for decades. This one isn’t fawning over you and that’s probably why you don’t know what to say to her.”

Fuck, she was right. “I just don’t know wh—” I paused, noticing for the first time that red was rimming her eyes and they were puffy like she’d been crying. “What’s wrong?”

“Not anything you need to worry about.” She shook her head and fiddled with the zipper pull on her handbag.

“No, tell me. Is it the bank again, because I made sure they understood you weren’t interested?” I hated that the bank had been riding Francine hard these past couple of years. Urban developers were looking to cash in on how Anchorage was pushing further west. In a few years Northspire would be little more than a burrow of the city. It made Hanover House’s location the perfect place to begin putting up luxury townhouses. Already the eastern side of our coastal town was blanketed with them. Twice people tried to buy out Francine’s mortgage from under her.

“It’s not that. We got a notice this morning. The federal agency that helped with operations at the house was defunded. At the end of the year all of our grants will be cut.” Francine popped open her purse and pulled out a silk handkerchief to dab at some tears. She turned away from the kids so they couldn’t see her crying. That was Francine, always putting the kids' wellbeing first. “I don’t know what to do, Colt. How am I supposed to feed everyone, keep the heat going, and pay the mortgage without any funding? And the pharmacy just increased the cost of the twin’s insulin.”

“What about the money the Santa Series is bringing in?” I suggested hopefully, already knowing that what would be sent to the home was pennies. The real funding that was raised was going to the youth programs and starting a fee free league.

“If I can’t keep things within regulation, they’ll take the kids, Colton.” Her lip shook as she tried to keep back the dam of emotion.

“Okay.” I pulled her in for a hug. Her face tucked into the center of my chest, her pink pin curls flattening as she let out a deep breath. With my skates on, she was practically child sized. I could still remember the first time I realized I was taller than her. I was eleven. Not that it was hard, Francine was barely five feet tall. “It’s going to be okay. I’m not going to let them shut down Hanover. We’ll figure something out.”

After a minute, she stood upright again and straightened her jacket.

I wasn’t the highest paid professional athlete, but I’d put back about half my salary for the past six years. It could have been more if the federal taxes hadn’t eaten away almost half of my salary every year, and for what? To cut the funding and force orphans on the street?

“I don’t like asking for your money.” Aunt Francine bit her lip and looked up at the ceiling. “But things cost so much more now than when you were a kid. I was already stretching the budget as far as I could. Things haven’t been the same since the pandemic.”

“You should have said something.” I thought back to all the scraping we’d had to do over the years, all the times I’d been told no whenever I asked for anything extra, and how it always seemed like it broke Francine to deny me. “I wouldn’t have any of this if it wasn’t for your support.”

“It goes faster than you might think with twelve kids,” she said with a sigh. “Or more, Shelley at DSS was just asking me if I could fit another temp placement for a family of four kids. She’s trying to keep them together, and it breaks my heart telling her no.”

I could cover it for now, but what would happen when my savings ran out? What would we do after I retired? I had, at best, another ten years. More like five if I was being honest. What would happen if I got injured? I could go on the ice tomorrow and it could be my last. Hockey was a dangerous sport even when you weren’t brawling.

“What we need is something that could be a lasting endors—” My voice dropped off. I knew how we were going to fund Hanover. How much had Randy said Victory was offering, millions? “Francine, I think I know how we can replace those funds and more. I’m going to need your help.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 15

-COLT-

9 Days Until Christmas

Sitting in the passenger seat of Miller's SUV, I watched the live feed of Northspire's away game in Phoenix. I shook the knee that my phone was resting on as we made three back-to-back attempts on goal. No good though, The Firebird's goalie had the crease locked down.

The tall mountains grew bigger as we drove out of the city and toward Cascade Park. It was part of the large park that was left when Anchorage hosted the Olympics a few years back. The entire complex was beautiful. A wide variety of ski trails cut through the mountainside, and old bobsled runs were converted into snow tube racing lanes. The kids were going to have a blast this evening.

Mills leaned over the center console to try and sneak a look at my screen.

I snatched my phone back. "Will you please keep your eyes on the road?"

"Yeah, I just never miss a game. Why did I have to drive again?" Miller pouted.

"Because my crossover isn't big enough to hold all this gear and your Frostbite costume. Would it make you feel better if I turned it off?" I clicked my phone closed. "We could listen to the radio broadcast."

"No, I'll just watch the replay on the IHL app when I get home. Don't tell me what happens though? You know I hate spoilers."

“On my honor as a right wing.” I drew a cross over my heart. “May I never score again.”

“Sounds good in theory.” He slid me a side eye. “If only we hadn’t been friends our whole lives, then maybe I’d believe you.” Miller flicked on the radio and began drumming along to “Somebody to Love” by Queen.

Together we belted out the chorus. I swear, in another life, Mills and I were rockstars. I held an arm out, clutching my imaginary microphone, and nailed the final line … mostly.

Still laughing at my terribly pitchy rendition, because let’s face it falsetto was not made for a man of my size, Miller said, “I know you hate being benched, but it’s been nice getting to see so much of you during the season. Usually, I’m waving at you from up in the stands or we’re running in opposite directions in the arena.”

“It’s definitely different looking at the game from the outside. I said, looking out the window at the approaching landscape. As I did anytime I approached Cascade Park, I took a deep breath and appreciated the sheer beauty that nature could wield.

Lake Lorraine sat at the foothill of the mountains, with the twin peaks of Mt. Bastion framing either side of the crystal clear ice. A glacial cascade ran down the center between the two mountains creating the look of an ancient waterfall frozen in time. Thanks to its resident glacier, Lake Lorraine was famous for its pure waters. Every winter the surface turned to glass, so translucent that you could see all the rainbow colored pebbles on the lake bed and fish swimming beneath the surface. With the early setting sun of winter, it would only be another hour before the sun set. At night, that shining surface reflected the starry skies and snowcapped peaks in a way that was pure magic.

“It’ll all be worth it if we can bring in the funds Holly is working toward.” Holly and I posted some pictures of the kids team playing with a few of our players on the Stags’ media accounts after practice yesterday, followed by a full schedule of events for the Series. She sent me a screenshot later that night. Wednesday’s game was officially sold out. Northspire hadn’t sold out the arena in nearly a decade.

“Holly, huh?” Mill’s shit eating grin could probably be picked up by the international space station. “Interesting.”

“What?” I twisted to face him.

Mills pinched his lips together to keep back whatever he was itching to throw in my face.

“No, you obviously have something to say.”

Miller tossed his head from side to side. “At first I thought it was just the thrill of the chase for you—a classic Colton Gailey never backs down from a challenge.”

“It’s not like that.”

“I agree. That’s why I find it interesting how invested you’ve become in this project.”

“It’s for Hanover House, why wouldn’t I do everything in my power to make it work? I told you about the grant funding being cut. They need this win.”

“Yeah, yeah, and maybe I’d believe that too, except then there’s the smiling.” He could have been a detective laying a damning piece of evidence before a guilty man from the finality he put in that statement.

I threw my hands in the air. “Why does everyone keep pointing that out? I’m a generally happy guy. I smile all the time.”

“Not like this, you don’t. These are … *glowy*.”

“Fuck off. I do not glow.”

“You do when you’re thinking about her. I’m just saying, if it was simply the chase, you’d have banged and moved on already.”

“It’s not … I’m not … this isn’t.”

“See! You can’t even say it. Just admit you’ve got it bad for the Ice Queen.”

What was the point in lying to a man who knew you better than you knew yourself? I played with the edge of the paneling on the door handle to try and distract myself. “And if I do?”

“Then you’re not trying hard enough. If this truly is about more than seeing if some deep-dicking will thaw that icy exterior of hers, then you should go all in. Holly is a good person. She doesn’t deserve some watered down version of you.”

I stared out at the turquoise lake. It was big enough to fill my entire field of vision. What did Kris say? Lake Lorraine is a lovely place for starlight skate. I turned that idea over and over in my head.

“Hey, what time did that schedule say we’re done here?”

“That’s my boy. What are you thinking?”

* * *

“Wait, you did this?” Holly looked at the rink backdrop and table of hockey gear. Her hand rested against her chest as she took it all in.

Today she was done up in a bright red peacoat. Not one that was the slightest bit appropriate for an Alaskan winter, but against her dark hair and bright eyes the rosy hue of her cheeks looked like old paintings of baby angels. Every time I saw Holly she became more beautiful. There had to be a mathematical impossibility happening here. No one person should be this alluring.

Holly tilted her head to the side, as if the angle might change what she was seeing. “Like, on your own?”

“Well, yeah, the gear didn’t walk itself in here,” I said, pulling my jersey on.

“No, that would be me.” Miller dropped a pile of old sticks in a loud clatter at the foot of the table.

She pointed at the pile. “Now that I believe.”

“Aunt Francine and I came up with this idea together. We thought the families joining us for Sledding with Santa might like being a Stag for a day.” I dug a baggie of stickers out of the duffle and tossed them to her. “I had Office Place print these “newest member of the herd” badges for the kiddies.”

Holly turned the bag over and smiled wide enough to make all this worth it, even if this photo station was a flop.

“My friend, Alex, does sports photography on the side. He’ll be here to shoot some action shots. Since it’s for Aunt Francine, he agreed to comp the entire day for us.” He was also going to take slice-of-life shots of me with the kids that we could use to help promote my new image.

“Action shots.” She pointed at the backdrop of the rink. “So they dress up and you pose with them like you’re facing off.”

“Me too.” Miller leaned in between us, giving a small wave. “I’ll be posing too. Ya know, people love Frostbite.”

“That’s…” Holly never so much as glanced at him. Instead her attention remained solely focused on me. The hand over her heart tightened in her jacket. “Cole, that’s brilliant.”

Heat warmed the center of my chest despite the chill in the air. Fuck, I loved when she called me that. Her pink lips made the cutest pout when she said my name, her tongue lingering a bit extra on her upper teeth in the most enticing way.

“Me too.” Mills waved his arms then threw them down in a huff, talking under his breath as he stomped away. “Where’s the ‘Miller is brilliant?’ I helped, too, ya know. Let’s see you haul half a dozen hockey sticks, gear, and a mascot uniform up from the parking lot.”

“I don’t know what to say.” She wrapped her arms around me in a big hug. It was the first time she’d ever initiated something like this. Holly was so reserved with her physical affection, unless you counted smacking me with whatever was in her hands. “Thank you. It means more to me than you can know.”

If she thought this was a lot, then I couldn’t wait to see her face when she saw the surprise I had set up just for her after the sun went down. I curled my arms around her, dropping my cheek to the top of her head. She fit against me so naturally. Taking a deep breath, I inhaled the lavender and vanilla scent of her shampoo. A man could get addicted to this.

After a long second she took a step back. The blush staining her cheeks perfectly matched the red shade of her coat … and so did her nose. Actually, she looked freezing. Today was warm for December, but this was still Alaska.

“Is that your only winter jacket?” I asked, and pulled the collar as close together as it would go.

She frowned. “What’s wrong with my coat? I’ve worn this for years. It’s my favorite.”

“You look adorable, very corporate snow bunny. However, you also look cold.”

“I’m fine. The cold never bothers me. I’ve spent my life either on or adjacent to ice. This is nothing.” She tugged on my sleeve. “Besides, you’re not even wearing one.”

“The jersey doesn’t sit right over a jacket, but I’ve got on enough layers to make up for it.” I ticked them off on my fingers as I listed them. “A base layer for wicking, two layers of wool for insulation, a fleece, and a water resistant down layer in case it snows. It won’t help the jersey, but that thing dries quickly enough on its own.”

She shook her head. “You have all of that under your jersey?”

“Oh.” I tugged a Northspire knit cap from my back pocket. “And a hat.”

Kris strode toward us with a hearty, “Ho, Ho, Holly. I believe there’s a song with your name in it.”

Today he was in a Santa suit inspired jersey. Fur lined the collar and cuffs, and a bright white Kringle was splayed across his shoulders. He tapped on his chin as he hummed the opening notes to *Mistletoe and Holly.* Kris winked at me like he could somehow read the memory of our dance in my expression.

Holly looked between us, brows furrowed together in confusion.

Clearing my throat, I reached out my hand for him to shake, and said, “That’s a good looking sweater you’ve got there, Kris.”

“Oh, I’ve had this for years.” He said with a wave. “Had them make it up for me during the inaugural season.”

Inaugural season, as in the first season of the Northspire Stags? Back then Northspire was the main city of this part of the Alaskan coastline, more so than Anchorage. It was why the team had been established here over the downtown city to our south. I did a little mental math. That was almost seventy years ago. How old was Kris? He didn’t look a day over sixty-five.

“Kringle isn’t your actual last name though, is it?” Holly asked with as many questions in her eyes as I had bouncing around my head.

“Of course it is. What else would it be? Smith?” He put his hand on his belly and gave another classic Santa laugh.

“Your name is actually *Kris Kringle*?” I said, knowing that he had to be messing with us.

“It’s the only one I’ve got,” he said, giving his nose a tap.

“And you live in Northspire, the self-proclaimed North Pole?” I looked at Holly for back up here. There was no way any of this was true. She smiled pleasantly, but didn’t let any disbelief color her expression.

He turned to the crowd of kids. “Who wants to sled down the hill with me first?”

Susan ran up and took the hand he held out. “Me, please, Mr. Santa, sir.”

That was quite the turn around. Susan leaned in, her pigtails peeking out from beneath her winter cap. Tucked under her arm was her Elizabeth doll. She had a tiny parka all of her own that matched the one Susan was wearing. In a whisper she said, “Thank you for sending Elizabeth her coat. She loves it.”

Kris winked at her, but didn't say anything back. Instead they took off toward the inner tube conveyor belt that hauled each of them to the top of the hill.

Holly pointed at them as they walked away. "Did she just say, Kris gave her dolly a set of winter clothes? When did he do that?"

"That's your question, not that the man's actual name is Kris Kringle?" I said with a laugh.

She scrunched her face up. "I'll admit, that's a bit suspect, but weirder things have happened."

"Since Alex hasn't arrived yet, do you want to take a run down the hill with me?" My heart lodged in my throat as I waited for her answer.

"I'll stay here with the equipment," Miller offered helpfully. Get that man a medal. Wingman of the year. He was about to be impossible to live with. I'd never hear the end of it if she said yes.

Holly deserved to have more fun. The need for it showed in the stiff lines of her body. It was like there was a cord wrapped around her that kept her in the exact position she believed the world expected her to be in. It kept her from ever relaxing and she never looked comfortable. Instead she looked tired, all the time.

"Umm…" She bit down on her lip and looked longingly at the slope.

A high pitched scream soared toward us, followed by a jolly laugh. A two person inner tube arced off a jump and into the air. Susan sat in front of Kris, Elizabeth tied in place to her stomach with a scarf, and a look of pure delight painted across her features. They came down in a poof of loose top snow and a second squeal of joy.

"Come on." I said, bumping her shoulder with mine. "There's no harm in letting yourself enjoy life from time to time. Things will stay on the tracks if you loosen your grip on the wheel for a bit."

The side of her mouth lifted into a cute spark of mischief. "You're a bad influence."

"Go on. I'll stick around and pose for pictures with anyone who comes by." Miller said, zipping up the body of his Frostbite suit. "We all know they like me more, anyway."

Holly looked over her shoulder at Miller. "Seriously?"

"Seriously. You two kids go have some fun," He popped the reindeer head on, his voice muffling a bit. "Just have her home by ten."

“Yes, dad,” I said with a laugh and latched onto Holly’s hand before she could protest. “We need to get you some ski clothes. Two years in Alaska and for some reason you still don’t own a proper winter coat. One roll in the snow and you’ll be soaked.” I gave her my most classic grin and wink. The kind that usually melted panties and set fires between thighs. “If you get wet tonight, it shouldn’t be from the snow.”

“It’s amazing you get laid as often as you do with lines like those.” Holly scowled, but didn’t fight me tugging her toward the gear shop. She also couldn’t hide the bright red blush staining her cheeks. “One time down the hill and then we both have work to do.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 16

-HOLLY-

9 Days Until Christmas

The bell over the door of the gear shop jangled and a blast of warm air hit me in the face.

"Cole, this really isn't necessary." I said, looking at the over priced gear hanging from the racks. "Everything in here is going to be marked up to top dollar. It's not worth it to go down a hill one time."

"What about me makes you think I care about the cost of a snowsuit if it means you'll be smiling the whole way down that hill." He grabbed a pair of mint green and pink bibs from the rack. He closed one eye, making the dimple on that side pop. Internally I groaned at how cute the expression was. "Do you think this has a matching jacket? What are you, a small?"

"Ha." I laughed. I haven't been a small in a decade. "You're adorable and I'm not letting you buy me a coat. There's nothing wrong with the one I'm wearing." Snatching the hanger from him, I dropped it back on the rack.

"Fine, but at least get snow pants. You're in leggings, Holly."

"They're fleece lined." It was one time down a hill. Why was he being absurd? Why did he care at all?

"Wait! Wait!" The girl behind the counter said with an unreal level of enthusiasm. Her bright blue and teal braids swung forward as she leaned toward us. "Oh my god, it is you."

"Huh?" I spun in a circle to face the registers.

“Sorry,” Colt said. “This happens sometimes.”

“This is so cool.” She jumped up, hopping her ass onto the counter and swinging her legs over to get to us in the most direct path. “What are the chances you’d walk into my shop of all places?”

Colt stuck out his hand to her, “Colton Gailey. It's always nice to meet a fan.”

The girl bypassed him completely and half tackled me with a hug. “I can’t believe *the* Holly Walker is standing in my shop.”

I stared at Colt over the girl’s shoulder, subliminally asking him what the fuck was happening. After a long and terribly awkward minute, she pulled back. “Sorry. That was rude. You probably have people accosting you everywhere you go.”

“Um, sorry?” I squinted at her freckles, pretty sure they were drawn on. Her sparkly white eyeliner and mascara made her look like she’d been frost kissed. Without a doubt this girl was cooler than I’d ever been in my entire life. “Do I know you?”

“Me? Goodness, no. Why would you know me?” She laughed. “I grew up in Boston.”

“Oh.” My heart rate ticked up. I went to college in Boston, played for a year before being snatched up for my very brief hockey career.

“I love Beantown!” Colt said, “Man, I could murder a roast beef sandwich from Kelly’s right now.” His wide smile fell when he caught my reaction. “Why do you look like someone just kicked your puppy?”

“Well, if it was a terrier …” The girl gave a self-satisfied chuckle, but that direct reference to Boston University’s mascot made ice trickle through my veins. This was a conversation I wasn’t prepared to have. The shock of being so completely blindsided turned my limbs numb and frozen to the spot, I was powerless to stop the on coming collision.

“The day you signed with the Banshees was one of the most inspirational moments of my youth. I was a sophomore in high school.”

“Banshees, why does that sound familiar?” Colt pulled his phone from his back pocket.

“My dad got me Banshee season tickets for my sweet sixteen. I went to all of your home games. You were, no *are*, my hero.”

I stared dumbly at the girl. The battery on my brain had officially run out. I couldn’t blink much less formulate an appropriate answer.

“This is seriously such an honor. You were a massive part of why I had the courage to form an all women’s snowboarding team. There’s almost a dozen in our league now. We compete on a circuit across the Pacific Northwest.” She pointed to a flyer taped to the glass counter top.

Colt sucked in a breath. I was almost too afraid to look at him, but at the same time I couldn’t help myself. I braced for the ridicule or the disappointment. His eyes popped wide open like he’d been hit with a shot of adrenaline.

“This is *you*?” He held up his screen to an action shot of me in a bright green Banshee uniform.

I nodded.

“Damn, look at your numbers. You played center?” He flicked his screen like he was going for a speed reading record. “Holly, this is amazing. Your stats were better than mine, but you only played for a year?”

“Hell yeah, they were. This is Holly Walker. I mean you’re good too, Colton. Go Stags, but nobody puts the biscuit in the basket like The Baker.”

I hadn’t heard that name in years.

Words got caught half way up my throat every time I tried to say something. This poor girl was apparently meeting her hero and I couldn’t make myself say so much as a thank you.

“I can’t believe you never told me you played professionally.” He took a step back and gazed at me in astonishment. I hated that he would never look at me the same way again. Now, he’d only see Holly, the failed center who lost her chance to do the one thing she was good at. This was why HR were the only people in Northspire who knew about my years in Boston.

“I … um.” I looked down at my nails, playing with the edge of my finger where the polish was chipping. *Don’t cry, Holly. Not here.*

“Wait, hey, hey.” Colton’s hand rubbed in a gentle caress down my arm. Finally catching on, he said, “Kara, right?”

Her voice brightened, “Yeah, it is. How did you—”

“It’s on your name tag.” He pointed at her chest.

“Oh, right.” She smacked the side of her head.

“Could you find Holly a bottle of water? She looks a little faint.” I didn’t look up to see him smiling at her. I kept my focus on my hands, feeling the room collapse. My head swam as I failed to inhale over and over again.

“Of course. We keep a case in the break room. I’ll be right back.”

Her sparkly pink snow boots trotted away with a hop.

As soon as she was gone, Cole whispered softly, “Let’s go sit down, yeah?”

He took my arm, guiding me to the bench for people to try on the various ski boots for sale.

“I don’t think I can breathe,” I said, folding over and propping my head in my hands.

“You’re talking, so I’m going to go out on a limb and say you can breathe just fine.” His hand rubbed in soothing circles across my back.

Why was he being so nice?

Pain lanced across my chest. “Or I’m having a heart attack? Can you actually die of embarrassment?”

“It’s a panic attack, Holly. This will pass in a minute or two, keep breathing.”

“Can you just leave me to my miserable self?” My voice cracked on a breathless sob, and then there was no stopping the tears. They flowed freely, dripping between my fingers as I pressed my palms to my face in a poor attempt to shield myself from the embarrassment of this entire situation. “Please, Cole, being nice to me is making this worse.”

He barked a laugh. “No can do. I’m afraid I’m the kind of asshole who won’t ignore a sobbing woman.”

I groaned, laughing through my tears from the sheer absurdity of this situation.

He sat beside me, his warmth blanketing me in calm reassurance. “I’m going to go with–you don’t get recognized much?”

I shook my head while it still rested in my hands. Fuck, this was mortifying. Why was I freaking out? It’s not like he’d laughed at me. In fact the whole thing was largely positive. So why was I crying like a child with a skinned knee?

“Do you want to tell me about it?” he asked in a gentle voice that you might use on a puppy to avoid spooking it.

“Not really.” My voice came out all muffled from where my lips were pressed into my palms.

“Okay, twenty questions it is.” He wormed his fingers under my chin and pried my face from my hands. There was so much understanding in his green eyes and not an ounce of judgment. I didn’t think I’d ever given in to

a moment of weakness that wasn't immediately met by disapproval. His thumb stroked over my wet cheek. "Were you injured?"

"No, it's nothing like that," I said with a deep breath, knowing that I'd never survive an inquisition. It would be so much easier to just tell it all at once. "My first year with the WHLA was also the last year of the league. It folded due to lack of funding."

Colt drew in a slow breath. "Holly, that's … I don't know what I would have done if the entire league folded after making it here. I'm so sorry."

"The Banshees recruited me after my second year playing for Boston University. When I went to college, I promised my parents that hockey was only a hobby. I had every intention of finishing my degree and then probably working for the Olympic board with them."

"Wait, the Olympics?" A flash of recognition flitted across his face. I'd seen that look plenty of times. His eyes scanned all the features that I shared with my mother. Now that I'd said it, he'd never be able to unsee just how much I looked like her. "Walker. Oh, damn. How have I never put that together? You're like skating royalty."

I flattened my mouth into a thin line. Colt wasn't the first person to say that. Nepotism was alive and well in my parent's circle. It was no surprise that the kids of gold medal athletes got gold medal trainers, to produce a new generation of awards for the country to hang its reputation on.

"Does Aunt Francine know?" He cracked a smile. "She used to always make us watch the championships when they came on, and she took us to go see that movie they made based on your parents. We used to have this VHS from when she recorded it off the free cable trial. It used to skip in the exact same spot every time. Right when Henrietta rushes onto the viewing platform at the Eiffel Tower. I'm telling you, Francine would birth an entire litter of kittens if she knew you were their kid."

I pushed my tongue into the back of my teeth to keep from saying all the things I wanted to say. That movie was the entire reason I hated watching romcoms. It was made all the worse because it was mostly true. My parents had the kind of love affair that inspired sonnets. Love like that, the kind with grand gestures featuring once in a lifetime meteor showers at the top of the Eiffel Tower weren't reality, even if I'd heard the story of my father's proposal at every banquet for as long as I could remember.

Adding salt to the wound, the closest I'd ever come to romance was a college boyfriend using our relationship as a way to get a leg up with the

editors at Sports Illustrated. He never cared about me, only that his connection to my family was enough to get him an otherwise unattainable interview.

“It’s not something I tend to advertise.”

His nostalgic smile fell and transformed his boyish looks into something more sheepish. “Right, sorry. That was—”

I waved him off, already over the apology. “It’s fine. Believe it or not I’ve been their daughter my whole life.”

“Holly, I … shit.”

Ignoring him, I continued the sad and disappointing story of how I’d come to Northspire. “One day this recruiter came and told me hockey could be my life. The Banshees played on the same ice as the Boston Bears. The pay was better than I stood to make coming out of college with a marketing degree, not to mention—”

“You love it.”

“I love it,” I said resolutely. “You really don’t want to hear this. We can talk about literally anything else.”

“Of course I do. Why would you say that? ”

“Because you grew up with real challenges, Cole. Then here I come, some poor little rich girl whose mommy and daddy didn’t want her to play hockey, and so they remind her every chance they can that she’s not keeping up with her absolutely perfect sister.”

“Holly, that’s—”

“Just stop with the apologies already.” I held up a hand and shook my head. Whatever he was about to say right now didn’t matter, because as much as I hated it, this was the truth of my reality. No, I hadn’t grown up with financial problems or an empty belly, but that didn’t mean it had been easy either. I’ve felt alone every single day of my life.

“Ivy, was the graceful one. She was made to fly and I, quite frankly, wasn’t. I’ve always been the fighter and I’m skilled at waiting in the wings for something to happen. To my mother’s complete displeasure, the youth hockey camps would run in the same complex where my parents trained. I used to skip out of my figure skating lessons to sneak in to watch the camps.”

Kara silently handed me the bottle of water and a pack of tissues. With a sad smile she crept back to the other side of the shop. I gave her a wave of thanks, then proceeded to down about half the bottle of water. Cole

remained quiet the entire time, giving me space to take what I needed. The break and drink felt clearing, like hitting an emotional reset button. The words came with a lot more ease when I resumed my story.

“Hockey was fast and brutal. There were no frilly skirts and sparkly tights. It was too fast to have room for anything but honesty, and I loved it. When I was ten, I begged my mother to let me enroll in one of the camps. Despite always complaining about how the hockey teams tore up *her* rink, she let me play—a decision that she repeatedly reminds me was where she went wrong.” I rolled my eyes. “Her one great parental mistake.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me?” His jaw dropped in disgust, which might have been the most endearing expression I’d ever seen on his face. “They know that thousands of women play hockey, right? I played with some all through college, incredibly skilled women who have no problem putting men in their place. Shit, there’s women coaching on a couple of the men’s teams.”

This wasn’t anything I hadn’t told them a dozen times. “The league folding was the ammunition my parents needed to leverage me into the version of something they approved of. I didn’t have anywhere to go. I laid my hockey dreams to rest, finished my sports marketing degree online, quietly graduated with my MBA, and applied for every job I could.”

I picked at the label of the bottle, grabbing the corner and slowly unraveling it one narrow strip at a time.

“One day, my dad walked in with the manager for Team USA. He offered me a position working under him, managing the social media feeds for the figure skating teams.”

“That’s a hell of a starting position for a new graduate.”

I huffed a sarcastic laugh under my breath. “They didn’t care about me, they just wanted the notoriety of having *the* Nikolai Walker’s daughter on staff. Gag me.” I stuck my finger down my throat. “I’d rather gargle with hydrochloric acid than deal with that pack of sycophants every day.”

“Well that’s an image.”

“When Northspire offered this position,” I gestured to the air around us. “I didn’t care that it was on the other side of the hemisphere, or that there would only be 5 hours of daylight for the majority of the season. I ran my ass to the airport as fast as I could.”

“And skating? You said you don’t skate anymore.”

“Not since I walked off the ice with the Banshees.” I blinked through tears that burned my eyes, using the back of my hand to push them away. “It’s like having someone you loved with all your heart leave you for someone else. You can’t stay friends without tearing yourself apart every second you’re with them. How could I ever skate again knowing I’d never feel the heat of competition burning in my blood or the pride of sinking a winning goal? To hear the sirens go off and know that *I* did that.”

“Or maybe, instead of pining over the past, it’s time to move on and find a new love.”

I didn’t mean to, but my eyes lifted to his on the word love.

“What about the new North American Women’s Hockey Association? I heard they were planning on partnering with the men’s teams. That’s starting up next year, right? We could petition to start a sister team in Northspire, and—”

“I’m almost 30. I haven’t been on the ice in over six years, Cole. My professional days are behind me. I don’t even want to think of what it would be like to put on skates with all those eyes on me. I’d probably fall flat on my face.”

“What about managing, or coaching, or even …” His eyes opened wide with the spark of an epiphany. “What if we used some of these funds we’re raising to create a *girl’s* youth league.”

My heart flipped at the notion. I knew other cities had similar programs. Suddenly a new host of ideas started flooding my brain. A professionally-endorsed girl’s league could do so much to help build the sport from the ground up.

“I mean,” He gestured back toward where Kara was pretending not to notice us from the other side of the room.

I was grateful that she’d recognized my need for space. It really wasn’t fair that she met her idol only to have said hero crack faster than an egg under a steamroller. Which was exactly what my insides felt like right now.

“You’ve seen how powerful seeing one woman realize her dreams can be. You’re one of the most amazing people I’ve ever met, Holly. Think of what you could accomplish when you tried. That’s something I learned early on in this field. You’re someone’s role model whether you want to be or not, so make it count.”

“Says the man who dropkicked a shark,” I deadpanned.

He lifted the corner of his mouth into one of those heart melting smirks. “Just think about it.”

Colton pulled me into his frame for a hug. I wrapped my arms around his middle and let my face sink against the hard planes of his chest.

How had I never realized how easy things were with Cole? Maybe it was because I told myself that his opinion didn’t matter, that I stopped pretending. Now despite all odds, he’d become the one person in my life whose opinion shook me to my core.

“Thank you, Cole.”

In answer, he pressed a kiss to the top of my head. My muscles melted, and for perhaps the first time in my life, I let someone else hold me up.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 17

HOLLY

9 Days Until Christmas

Sticks clacked against the concrete as Colt faced off against a pair of rosy cheeked boys. The camera flashed, and they smiled wide to show a matching set of missing front teeth. Their mom beamed at her kids, thanking Colton over and over again for letting her boys dress up with him.

"Ms. Walker," Maurice Aldecott, the manager of the resort, tapped me on the shoulder. "I don't want to rush you, but we received a notification from the local weather station about a shift with the storm front up north. It looks like there might be some heavy snowfall tonight. I know you had your kids brought in by bus, and the switchback up the mountain can be treacherous in the right conditions."

"I'll talk with the youth leaders and start packing the kids up. We'll save cocoa by the fire for a different night. Thank you so much for agreeing to sponsor our event."

He took my proffered hand for a solid shake. "The honor is all ours. Enjoy the rest of your evening." Mr. Aldecott strode away, pausing only briefly to say something to Colton that I couldn't hear.

I pulled up my weather app, and looked at the radar. The storm was still hours away, but to be safe, I told Aunt Francine that it would be best to cut the evening short. The kids all helped Miller to load the hockey gear and snow equipment, then left on their merry way back to Northspire.

“Hey, Miller,” Colton said as he slammed shut the back hatch of the SUV. “Why don’t you head out without me. I have something I want to show Holly.”

Miller, who had his keys jangling in his hand, gave him a befuddled look.

“I can get a ride back with Holly, right, Queenie?” Colton said with a too-wide smile.

I narrowed my eyes on him. “Why does everything with you always feel like a set up?”

“I’m offended.” He held his hand over his heart. “I don’t *always* have ulterior motives.”

“Yes you do,” Miller and I said in unison.

Pursing my lips, I asked, “You’re not going to surprise me with more hot dogs are you? We’re not going back into the lodge to find a weenie eating contest or something equally perverse?”

Miller snorted. “There could be weenie eating involved. Depends on how good—”

Colt slugged his friend in the shoulder, shutting him up completely. “I promise there are zero hot dogs involved, and the only weenie eating will be completely consensual. No surprise wiener attacks.” That mischievous dimple flashed, and he added, “Not tonight anyway.”

“I’m going to regret this.” I waved Miller off. “Go on, Mills, I’ll bring Colt home after he shows me whatever is hiding behind door number two.”

“Good girl,” Colton professed and latched his hand around mine, something I was starting to notice was a trend. The moment I agreed to anything he always grabbed my hand like he was afraid I might change my mind and bolt in the other direction. “Come on, it’s this way.”

Waving goodbye over my shoulder Colt dragged me back toward the resort, but instead of heading up the stairs toward the lodge he turned toward the lake.

“You know Kris reminded me of something at the party the other night.” He loosened his hold on my hand enough to weave our fingers together. “And it got me thinking.”

“About what?”

“That’s the surprise.” He subtly winked. Of course he didn’t need to tell me anything. I was already hooked, and he was reeling me in.

“Do you think it’s strange how he always seems to pop up right at the exact moment he’s needed?” I asked, thinking of the way he seemed to conjure items from thin air.

We followed the decorated railings up the staircase that lead to the small cafe overlooking the skatepark. At the top of the stairs it opened to a full view of the lake, with the twin peaks behind it. The lights from the lodge were behind us, but the view ahead was blissfully tranquil with twinkling stars and … I paused in my steps.

“Oh my god, Cole, it's beautiful.” I let go of his hand and leaned on the railing.

I’d seen the northern lights plenty of times since moving here, but never like this. Usually the sky was obscured by buildings, or dulled by the light pollution of the city. Tonight, color splashed across the inky vastness of the sky, bleeding in bright streaks of green and purple light. Hints of pink undulated in waves of pure magic. Bright twinkling stars punctuated the display like tiny specks of exploding light. Behind them the silhouette of the mountain carved away the horizon, met by the sparkling ice fall of the glacier and the mirror black surface of the lake.

Normally the skatepark was fully crammed with people all the way until the resort closed, but tonight the lights were off and only the faint glow of the resort remained. Even the lights on the slopes were clicked off as each trail was closed one at a time. Slowly, the night darkened, the colors growing more intense like a symphony warming up for the main performance.

“I’ve never seen anything like this,” I said in an awed whisper.

“The manager mentioned to me that they’d be shutting down the slopes early tonight, and that it would make for perfect aurora viewing conditions. I asked him for some privacy and he promised me that we would have the lake to ourselves, for whatever you’d like to do for the next couple of hours.”

Colton stepped behind me, resting one gloved hand beside each of mine, and enveloping me in the warmth of his body. A chilled breeze licked over the ice. I didn’t feel an ounce of the cold. As Cole pressed closer, all I felt was heat rising in the center of my chest, up my neck, and spilling onto my cheeks.

“You arranged all of this.”

“I did.” He pulled the hair sitting against my neck to one side and nuzzled his cheek just above my ear. The simple gesture kicked my heart into high gear, sending it thundering against my ribs.

“For me?”

“I would do a lot more for you.” With an exhale that caressed the newly exposed column of my throat, he groaned so that his chest rumbled against my back. The sound traveled straight between my thighs, causing my muscles to tighten in a needy pulse.

His lips brushed over the top of my ear as he spoke in a low whisper. “You always smell so good. It’s like a damn aphrodisiac, forcing me closer every time I catch a hint of your scent. You have no idea how hard it is to resist the temptation.”

Temptation.

The word resonated in the silence that followed. It was the perfect way to describe the tension growing in the vanishing space between us. As the seconds continued to linger, my heart pounded harder, heating blood and making my skin feel like it might combust. None of it was flowing to my brain. Of that I was certain. My sense of logic was long gone. She walked up and out of here the second Cole stepped behind me.

I tilted my face into his. The bristle of his light beard brushed the delicate skin of my cheek. It was a delicious feeling, one that made me imagine that same sensation against other more intimate places.

My chest rose and fell with increasingly heavier breaths. “Temptation to do what, Cole?”

He swallowed, the muscles of his throat shifting against mine. “Honestly?”

“Mhm,” I said with a nod, unable to voice much more than a hum.

“Holly, since the day you walked into Hanover house, being near you and keeping my lips off your body has required near impossible willpower.”

“Impossible?”

Colt banded one arm around my stomach, holding me tightly pinned to him. He popped the upper buttons of my jacket until he was able to pry it away from my shoulder. His lips ghosted over the juncture of my neck and a gasp slipped from me the moment he made contact. The heat of his mouth sent goosebumps tingling over my skin in a silent request for more.

“Impossible,” he repeated, moving up the length of my neck with one chaste kiss at a time. Each one was like an electrical charge priming my

skin. Reaching my jaw, he tilted my face towards his so that I could see the lust burning in his eyes. “The question of what you would taste like, how your skin would feel against my lips, what kinds of sounds I could coax from you … It’s all I think about.”

My nipples pebbled against the lace of my bra. Suddenly the many layers of my sweater and partially unbuttoned jacket felt like too many. The air touching what had been exposed wasn’t cool enough to tame the feeling surging in me.

His lips hovered over mine, so close and yet far enough away to make me ache. “Do I dominate your thoughts as much as you’ve ruined mine?”

“I don’t know if dominate is the word I’d choose.” I rotated in his grip, circling my arms around his neck exactly as I’d envisioned. His hands dropped to my hips as I turned, and he lifted me onto the railing, guiding my legs around his waist. “It’s more like you’ve infiltrated them.”

How could this feel so damn right?

Colton’s eyes dropped to my mouth. “I would very much like to kiss you right now.”

Reflexively, I licked my lips and tightened my thighs around his hips. “That’s handy, because I would very much like to be kissed.” I leaned around him, pretending to search the empty platform. “But, since it’s just us, I guess you’ll have to do.”

I had to bite my lip to tamp down my smile.

“Naughty little thing.” Colt cupped the side of my face, using his thumb to pry my lip from between my teeth. He left the pad of his finger against my mouth, slowly caressing the curve of my pout. “God, you are tempting. But if I kiss you, like this. I don’t think I’ll be able to stop.”

He rolled his hips into mine. The hard ridge of his erection rocked against me. I arched my spine, attempting to bring him closer. Though I tugged on his neck, the man might as well have been made of brick. He was definitely hard enough to be.

“Why would we have to stop?” *Who was I?* We were outside at a public resort and it was a balmy 30 degrees. None of that seemed to stop the words coming out of my mouth or my hands from working under his jersey. “Look around, Cole. It doesn’t get more romantic than this.”

Since when was I looking for romance? Lust was one thing. I could explain that away in a heartbeat. Colton was charming and his body was built for long nights of sin. The only thing soft about him was the way his

eyes melted when he looked down at me. The end of what I should want is the weight of his body pinning me to this railing, not for him to woo me like an Edwardian courtier. I really needed to stop watching all of those period dramas.

“You’re really going hard for that spot on the naughty list.” Cole tenderly pressed a kiss to the corner of my mouth. “And I really—” Groaning, he pulled my hands free from where I’d almost managed to make it beneath his thermals. Why was he wearing so many damn layers? “*Really* like where your head is at, but I have something else for you first and I don’t want to waste this time on something we could be spending all night doing indoors.”

Reaching between us, Colton righted my jacket and frowned at the buttons. “I wish you would have let me buy you a new coat.”

“But …” I took a deep breath. “Wait, seriously? You’re not going to kiss me?”

“Seriously.” Cole took a step back, lowering me to the ground. “You’re going to like this. I think. I’m pretty sure.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 18

HOLLY

9 Days Until Christmas

I followed Colton down the walkway toward the skating pavilion. Beyond the decking, the lights of the massive Christmas tree glowed, framed by the painted sky of the auroras. I was so busy watching the magic unfolding above us that I hardly realized where we were actually headed until Colt was jiggling the handle to the rental hut.

"What are you doing?" I hissed. "I didn't add 'breaking and entering' to my end-of-year bingo card."

He flashed me a mischievous smile, but didn't explain anything. This was so classically Colton Gailey. Would it hurt his brain to think before acting for once? I understood that his impulsive reactions were part of what made him such an intuitive player, but moments like these were a PR nightmare. By morning, headlines would be covering the news reels about yet another Colt 45 scandal. Nothing inside that hut was worth whatever he was planning.

"The manager of this resort is the uncle of a guy I went to school with. Last year, I hooked their whole crew up with one of the Northspire Suites."

"Okay?" I said cautiously. "And you think this will make him look the other way for breaking into one of his buildings."

"Not at all." He pulled a key card from his pocket and held it to the magnetic lock. The light on the pad turned green, and the door swung open. Instantly a puff of warm air blew against my face.

“Did you steal that off of the poor girl in the pro shop?” My jaw dropped at the audacity. This was even worse than I imagined.

“Your faith in me is very reassuring.” He flicked the light on. Shelves of ice skates lined the room, along with several other racks of equipment and the walkers that they gave to beginners. Another row of pushable child seats shaped like a variety of winter creatures lined the opposite wall.

“Can you blame me? Pocketing a key card isn’t exactly out of the realm of possibility for you.”

“Maybe not, but asking an old friend to repay a favor is much easier than a bit of light thievery.”

“Oh.”

Colt looked at my feet and pursed his lips. “I bet you were an Apex skate girl.” He walked the racks, running his fingers along the different types of skates.

I narrowed my eyes on him. “What are you playing at, Cole?”

He stopped before a pair of boxes sitting on the counter. A ribbon tied the top one along with a folded note card. Colt drummed on the top of the box and slid it toward me. “This one is for you. Consider it an early Christmas gift.”

A massive lump formed in the center of my throat. I circled my hand around it, and swallowed against my palm in the hopes that the contact might ease the pressure and remind my lungs to resume functioning.

“The other pair are for me. I had Maurice pull a set since I didn’t bring any of my actual gear with me.”

I tugged on the bright red bow and let the satin fall to the counter in a pool. Flipping open the top, the silhouette of the footwear peeked through tissue paper. I peeled them back one at a time and revealed the classic lines of black leather and camel stitching. The steel blades were protected by a black set of guards. I picked them up and shook my head with disbelief.

Size 6, Apex Nitro skates. How could he have possibly known that was the exact pair I would have chosen? Even the size was correct.

“They’re already sharpened and ready to go, so is the ice. I asked Maurice to clear out the rink early so that we could have fresh ice and the place to ourselves.”

Finally tearing my eyes away from the skates, I took in the lines of worry in his expression. His brows were lifted in a soundless question. *Will you skate with me?*

I took a deep breath, using the seconds to figure out how I felt about this. The answer was, I had no fucking idea. Excited, terrified, angry, vulnerable. It was all there. I could see each of them reflected back to me as Cole waited for a response.

When I didn't say anything, he continued. "While we were doing photos, I kept thinking about the way you looked while watching the game that first night of the Series. You love skating, and as much as I know losing it hurt you, I don't think you should have to continue punishing yourself. I thought that maybe if it was just us and the stars as witness, you might be willing to let go of all that pain you've been harboring and create some new reasons to fall in love with the ice again."

He placed his hand over mine, the same one still resting against the skate. An entire marching band was running inside my chest, complete with horns and a full drumline.

Cole's fingers tightened against mine, lifting the hand to his lips and dropping to one knee. If I thought my heart was seizing before, it had nothing on the image of Colton Gailey kneeling before me. "Holly Walker, will you do me the honor of skating with me tonight?"

I blew out the breath I was holding. "Do you the honor?" I repeated with a giggle. Apparently I wasn't the only one who needed to lay off the regency dramas.

He shrugged. "It's a big moment. It felt like the appropriate thing to do."

A memory played through my mind of holding my sister's hand the first time she went out on the ice. Mom was on one side and I took the other, but it was me she looked to for courage. I felt that same twisted mix of fear and eager anticipation that I'd seen in her tiny face that day.

"Okay," I said with a voice that felt far too small for all the feelings churning in my chest.

"Really?" Cole's smile burned bright as he rose back to standing. He palmed my cheek, using the pad of his thumb to run a line against the length of my cheekbone. "I'll be honest, I was only 20 percent certain you'd say yes."

I licked my lips, letting my eyes drop to his and leaning into his touch. "Well, I'm only 20 percent certain I just made the right choice, so …"

He pressed a kiss to my temple above where his thumb was stroking. "I promise we can take this slowly and we only continue for as long as you

want.”

Was he talking about whatever this was building between us or skating? No matter how hard I looked for the answers in his eyes, I couldn’t tell. What was worse, I didn't have any either. This entire night felt like I was standing on the edge of a building, ready to tandem base jump and pinning my entire survival on Cole deploying his chute.

Guiding me to the bench in the corner, he brought the box with the skates to the ground with him as he kneeled before me. He lifted my foot to his thigh.

“I can do my own skates,” I said as a wave of tingles followed the line his hands took from my knee to my ankle.

Pulling the boot free, he said, “But this is so much more satisfying.”

“Mmm.” I hummed. “You on your knees for me does hold some appeal. I could get used to this view.”

The nail on his index finger scored the underside of my right foot. Even through my sock, that single touch sent a corresponding pulse between my legs. I let out an unexpected gasp, closed my eyes, and tried to focus on anything but how every place he was touching me felt like a beacon glowing in the night.

While my eyes were still closed, Colt slipped the skate on. The leather hugged my arches in an embrace that felt all too familiar. One tug at a time the hold tightened, first at the toe and working its way over my ankles. With each pull the jagged missing pieces of my soul stitched back into place. It wasn’t the feeling of my foot in a skate, but the blade transforming into simply an extension of me. I’d been missing this for far too long.

“Is that okay?” He asked, lowering my foot to the ground. “Not too tight?”

I leaned back against the wall and shook my head, unable to open my eyes for fear that I might chicken out if I saw what was coming next.

“Good.” Repeating the action with my left foot, he tightened this skate to match the first. He didn’t make small talk or tease about how unnerving the experience was, or how tears were gathering between my closed lids. I loathed the idea of doing anything that made me appear weak, especially to Cole.

He quickly shuffled around, while I listened to the sounds of him swapping out his own footwear. All the while, I tried to visualize the fantasy of what awaited us. Dark lake, painted sky and stars, his hand in mine as we

moved in tandem across the ice. After what felt like a small eternity, Colton put a finger beneath my chin and lifted my eyes to his. “Ready to go greet the night, beautiful?”

A smile forced its way through my trepidation.

“Hold on. One more thing.” Cole pulled a Northspire knit cap from his back pocket. He tugged the cap over my head, being sure to secure it over my ears. “Better.”

“You can’t be serious,” I deadpanned and adjusted the loose strands of hair. The brushed wool was soft and the fleece lining was already making me feel warmer.

He flicked the pompom. “It’s cold out there. I can’t have my girl freezing.”

His girl.

“Of course, if you’d have let me buy you a coat…” Cole lifted me to standing. The familiar weight of the blades weren’t as unexpected as I’d imagined. Rather, this was one more piece taking its place beside the last.

I followed him out the door. The frost on the air was stronger than when we’d entered the building. I was glad for the hat, although I refused to admit that he was right about the jacket.

In the time we’d spent getting skates, the sky had come completely to life and the resort lights had all been shut off, save for the Christmas tree in the center of the rink and the glow of the lodge up on the hill.

“Cole, this is … I don’t have words.” Streaks of purple and green reflected off the black mirror of the lake. The ice was a fresh sheen waiting for us to leave our mark in it. Stars twinkled like glitter around the undulating color in the sky. The snowcapped peaks of Mt. Bastion sat against the horizon like they were trying to reach up into the heavens.

He unlocked the large wooden gate to the skating rink. Holding it open, Cole said, “For tonight, all of this is yours.”

A small ripple of fear that I might step onto the ice and fall flat on my ass tightened in my stomach. Swallowing my anxiety, I tossed my blade guards to the side and stepped onto the ice. A frisson of pure elation rippled up my spine as I pushed off. My blades gripped the surface of the lake. The hiss of the steel cutting into the ice sliced over the pounding of my heart until it was the only sound.

My reflection on the ice blended with the melting colors of the sky. I remembered that girl, and damn I missed her. An effervescent joy flowed

through me making the world richer. Colors looked brighter. The air in my lungs felt crisper. The sound of my skates rang out like a symphony. Laughter bubbled out of me as I spun in a circle.

Why had I denied myself this feeling?

I let out a battle cry that felt like every anguished cut against my heart being loosed into the sky. Good fucking riddance. Cole was right. I didn't need to harbor that pain like it was the only thing keeping me tethered to my memories.

He leaned against the railing, content to watch as I made several laps of the rink. Each time I passed him his satisfied smile grew larger. On my last tour around the tree, I picked up my speed and turned my blades in a stop I hadn't done in nearly seven years. Ice sprayed up, momentarily making him disappear in fan of white. My cheeks ached from how hard I was grinning.

"That felt good," I said. "My feet and all these muscles will be on strike in the morning, but damn, I missed this."

"Is it okay if I join you?" he asked, brushing away the shaved ice from his chest.

There was no demand in the question. If I told him that I only wanted to skate alone, he would be content to stand here all night watching me. Colton gifted me back my sense of agency. I could see it so clearly. My pain was holding me hostage. All I needed was the permission to let it go, and he gave me that without the expectation of getting anything in return.

That bubbly joy from before rose again. It made me feel light, like I could float away at any moment. Only this time, it wasn't for the freedom I felt reclaiming the woman I once was, but for the man who was willing to be the person I needed.

I held out my hand. "I would love nothing more."

Cole's eyes traced over the features of my face. Each long second making his smile wider and wider. His fingers laced in mine. For the first time, it felt like my hand belonged in his. He gave it a squeeze, and I felt that connection right through the center of my chest.

"One last surprise." Rather than head back toward the lights of the tree, Cole aimed toward the mountains and the small gate in the barrier that opened out to the whole of Lake Lorraine.

The lake had long since frozen over. There was no threat of breaking through the ice, especially this late in the winter, but it still felt forbidden.

The warmer day had caused a fresh layer of mirror-like ice to form. Simply the suggestion of cutting across the pristine wild ice was enough to make a wave of adrenaline course through my veins.

Slowing my pace, I pulled back on his arm. “We’re definitely not allowed out there.”

Turning back into me, he put his hand against the small of my back to guide me against him. His breath drifted over my face in a white puff. “Where did my naughty girl go?”

I bit down on my lip. There went my damn heart.

“Look at all that perfectly smooth, crystalline ice. I told you, tonight, everything you see is yours.” He released me and stepped through the gate. “There’s no one here to stop us, but you.”

My eyes drifted down the length of his body, from his wavy brown hair that sat tousled in an effortless mess, along his hard muscles and toned thighs, down to the skates sitting against colorful ice. His jersey hung loosely off his shoulders. Without the pads to fill it out, it clung to each curve of hard-earned muscle. The thermal shirt beneath them was pushed up his forearms and displayed the toned line of muscle that could only be honed by years of stick handling. It promised a firm grip that conjured images of his hands on me that were salacious enough I had to check that I wasn’t drooling.

“Everything I see is mine?” I asked, letting the innuendo lift the end of my question.

He licked his lips. “For as long as you can take it.”

I followed him through the gate. As I pushed forward, he coasted backwards, keeping pace and out of my reach. Crossing one foot behind the other I never gained on him, even when I sped up.

“Of course, I’m not sure you can keep up with me.”

“Oh, I can keep up.” I put on a burst of speed, sprinting at him with enough momentum that I watched the wheels of his brain fail to process my sudden proximity. Rather than claim my prize, I blew past him and deeper into the virgin ice of the lake. “But can you keep up with *me*?”

The sound of Colt’s blades chased after mine, reminding me exactly why they called him “The Pistol.” It was more than just a clever play on his name and number. Colton Gailey was a bullet on the ice. He was able to suddenly accelerate at levels that rivaled any Olympic speed skater, only he did it on a pair of hockey skates.

Within seconds he was on me. His hand hooked my hips, capturing me in the cage of his arms. Rather than crashing to a stop as any normal person would, he kicked off, taking me with him at the same time his lips crashed down on mine.

The moment we connected, it was the lifting of a flood gate. The intensity of the moment and the adrenaline of the chase washed over me in a tidal wave of need. I took fistfuls of his jersey, clinging to him as we continued to soar over the ice.

Stepping in tandem, our bodies moved as one. Being with Cole was an effortless dance. His lips moved like his mouth instinctively knew mine. There was no awkward clash of teeth or sloppy lips. His hand delved into my hair, angling my head back so that he could deepen the kiss. I opened to him, teasing my tongue against his and taking just as much as he gave.

Eventually, our steps became slower and our momentum eased to a stop.

I panted against his lips as I battled to remember how to breathe. The aurora reflected off his irises, making the greens look electric. Snow fell in fat flakes around us as I soaked in the feeling of being in his arms.

The next kiss was softer than before, but somehow this gentle connection made my heart pound harder than it had while in a full out sprint. Each time he pulled back and then came in for more, it was like he unearthed pieces of emotion I refused to acknowledge until this moment.

Beyond all odds, I was falling for this man. Hard.

“Holly,” Cole whispered my name in prayer. He pulled back with the same revelation sparking in his eyes from behind snow dusted lashes. I felt it down to the finger tips pressing into my lower back and heard it in the reverence behind each syllable.

“I don’t want to end this moment, but …” He brushed the snow melting on my cheeks. “We need to start heading back before too much of this snow falls on the ice and it starts sticking to our blades.”

“Yeah,” I agreed. The once glossy surface was now coated with a layer of fresh snow. We’d traveled so far into the center of the lake. It would take twice as long to get back if we had to fight against a layer of snow. “Yeah, we really do.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 19

COLT

9 Days Until Christmas

Nearly an inch of snow had fallen by the time we made it back to the rental hut and swapped out our skates for our boots. I couldn't bring myself to care. I hadn't planned this with the idea of seducing Holly. I simply couldn't see her sullen resignation when she told me about giving up skating and do nothing. Skating beneath the aurora was a soul affirming moment for anyone, but I had to believe that for a skater it would be enough to heal old wounds.

Most people probably would have counseled to respect her decision to retire her skates along with her career. It *was* her choice after all. I heard her words, but the toll this loss took on her rang true beneath them. Everything in my gut told me that she only needed the right moment to reclaim her passion. I just hadn't expected that passion to sweep me up with it.

As we climbed the stairs up to the lodge, Maurice hurriedly met us on the landing in a winter coat fluffy enough to keep a person warm on an expedition to the North Pole. "I was about to go looking for you. Come inside where it's warm."

Holly's teeth chattered and her arms were wrapped tightly around her middle. In the past half hour, as the snow started soaking into our clothing and the wind picked up. What should have been a mild winter evening, had quickly turned into bitter one.

We followed the resort manager into the blessed warmth of the lodge, stomping our boots in the doorway. The main room featured a massive fireplace with a roaring fire. Gear was stacked against the walls. Dozens of skiers sat around the open space, sipping on steaming mugs.

It was a lot of people.

Clearing his throat, Maurice said, “We had to close the pass.”

Holly’s spine stiffened, alarm turning her face a pale white. “Oh my god. The bus.” She wrangled her phone from the inside pocket of her jacket and held it up in the hopes of gaining a signal.

“The kids made it down okay—”

“Oh, thank god,” she said on a heavy exhale.

“But we have a lot of people who are going to have to sit out this storm. It came in faster than any of us were expecting.” Maurice waved at the very crowded room. “The pass should be clear by tomorrow night, maybe the morning after. This happens sometimes. You know what the weather around here can be like.”

“Yeah,” I said, trying to figure out where Holly and I could carve out a corner for ourselves among all the other stranded skiers.

Maurice continued, ushering us toward the front desk. “I kept one of the guest rooms open for you. I figured you wouldn’t want to spend the night sitting up in the lounge. You know we’ve always considered you like family, Colton.”

That was a bit of an overstatement, but I wasn’t going to argue when we were getting the last room in the lodge.

“So long as it’s warm, I’d stay in a linen closet.” Holly let out a full body shiver, peeling off her wet jacket and hat. She shook her hair free. I loved the way the long strands were beginning to curl as they dried. It made her look softer. Not unlike that night at the aquarium when she came huffing and puffing in pajamas and glittery Crocs, this felt like I was being offered a piece of her that she never gave the public. It was distracting.

Before I knew what I was doing I brushed the errant strands behind her ear and let my hand drift down the slope of her neck on its way back to my side. Holly shivered again, and this time I knew it wasn’t the chill responsible.

“Give me your jacket.” I said, pulling it from her hands before she could protest. Holly frowned like that might make me reconsider. As I had predicted the synthetic fibers of the peacoat had been as good as a sponge.

Holding on to that thing was only going to soak the mostly dry sweater she was wearing. My clothing was designed to keep me warm regardless of the condition. She should have let me buy her a new one.

Maurice pulled a set of key cards from behind the counter. “It’s the only room we still had. The resort was almost booked to capacity before the storm hit. I hope you don’t mind.”

“I’m sure it’s fine. Wait—” Holly’s face flushed bright red. “One? As in singular.”

“Yes.” Maurice looked sheepishly between us. “After Colton asked me to clear the rink for your date, I’m sorry, I just assumed.”

“It’s fine, Maurice. This is …” *Perfect?* “new.”

The manager frowned at the crowded room. “I’m afraid I can’t give you another. We were already mostly booked from all the athletes in town for the qualifiers. Now, with the storm, we’ve put someone in every possible place. I even wheeled cots into the break room for the staff.”

“Thank you.” I took the keys from him and gave one to Holly. I was going to owe Maurice more than suite tickets for this one.

As the doors of the elevator closed, Holly leaned against the rustic planks and mirrored glass. I pressed the button for the top floor and pretended not to notice her touching her lips in the reflection.

“Holly,” I began, not actually knowing where I was going with that. Outside, being with her was easy. Now, a thick tension had taken the place of all that electricity.

“We probably shouldn’t,” she said bluntly, but the way she was chewing on the corner of her nail said she wasn’t exactly certain of that claim.

“Probably?” I moved closer. With every inch I closed, her pulse ticked faster in her neck.

“You’re one of the players and I do PR. I wasn’t thinking before and what if—”

“There are no rules against it. If that’s what you’re worried about,” I said, pressing my palms flat to the wall on either side of her head. “And I know you felt what I did out there on the ice. What we have sparking between us, it isn’t like anything I’ve ever felt before.”

I nuzzled into her neck, inhaling the lingering smell of snow on her skin.

“Cole.” She arched into me and gripped my waist to hold me to her. My smile broke against her neck. In the end Holly was just as weak as I was.

The two of us were inevitable. It'd be easier to stop the sun from rising.

With a ding the doors opened.

"This conversation isn't over," I said and pushed off the wall. Taking her hand in mine, I followed the numbers down the hall.

Holly slowed before the final door. "Oh my god. That isn't what I think it is, is it?"

A big heart was carved into the wood. Fighting back a laugh at our good fortune, I pressed the card to the lock. We followed the line of fresh rose petals from the door of the suite all the way to the bed. "Yes, I'm going to confidently say that I think it is. I guess now we know why it was the only room not booked."

Beyond the bed, floor to ceiling wrap-around windows looked out at the mountain vista. The northern lights still flickered against the indigo sky. Where the lake was once a mirror, now a fluffy white blanket coated her surface. Snow continued to fall in thick flakes, creating the perfect illusion of standing in the center of a snow globe.

Holly picked up a remote and clicked on the gas fireplace in the corner. It flickered to life as she held her hands in front of the blower and sighed. The low, breathy sound was something straight out of my fantasies. It sent heat rushing through my body in a silent demand for more.

It was exactly that. I wanted more of *everything* from her. I wanted to peel her apart layer by layer and discover everything there was to know about Holly Walker. I was addicted to this woman. She trusted me enough to give me her truth when, as far as I could tell, nobody else was given that gift. It was enough to make insane images of the future to spin through my mind in a kaleidoscope of possibility.

The firelight reflected off the glass, casting a warm glow over the gentle slope of her cheeks. It highlighted the still pink tip of her nose and the golden tones in the long lashes that fanned out as she soaked in the warmth.

Any moment now she'd open her eyes and catch me staring. Not that this was something new. She'd already caught me gazing at her more times this week than I could count. What was I supposed to do when I swore she was becoming more beautiful with every passing day? Holly had always been the kind of woman that drew the attention of every man in the room, but this week a switch flipped that made her radiant.

I pressed my palm to the center of my chest trying to ease the way my heart was twisting itself into tiny pretzels. Right up until this moment, I'd

thought the phrase “so beautiful it hurts” was a euphemism. I knew better now, because Holly Walker might damn well kill me where I stand without lifting a finger. I swallowed hard and let my focus drop to where her sweater had slipped off one shoulder. The memory of my lips touching the indent of her collarbone made a new rush of blood surge through me, something that would make itself very known once I stripped out of the damp athletic pants.

To distract myself, I peeled off the soaking wet jersey and made quick work of hanging it and my pants on the rack beside the fire. It was designed to hold discarded snow gear but in this case it would work for drying out our clothes.

One at a time, I pulled off the different layers of clothing.

“This is the longest strip tease ever. I’m sure you’re breaking some kind of a record here.” Holly’s voice went breathy at the end and she gripped onto the collar of her shirt like she was looking for something to keep her tethered in place.

I pulled my arm out of the sleeve of my second wool layer and hung it on the rack beside the first. “Yes, but I was warm. Your lips, while very fucking kissable, were turning blue.” Grabbing the hem of my final base layer, I pulled the collar over my head in one fluid motion.

Holly made an adorable squeaking sound.

Well, this was a delightful switch.

Her wide eyes took their time mapping each inch of my exposed torso. I was never more grateful for all the grueling hours I’d spent in the gym and the regulated diets given to us by the nutritionist, because Holly Walker looked seconds away from going full lioness on me.

She pinned her lower lip between her teeth as those beautiful eyes unabashedly dropped lower. The base layer pants I’d chosen for today clung tight enough she wouldn’t need to use any imagination to see every inch of how she affected me. The way she was serving up eyeful after eyeful certainly wasn’t helping. At this point, she could probably see each vein and ridge that was currently testing the structural integrity of lycra.

With one eyebrow raised, I asked, “Problem?”

She sucked in a breath and took two tries to squeak out a denial that sounded three octaves too high for her.

If I were a better man, I’d have gone to the closet and pulled out the robe that was waiting there, stretched out on the couch, and kept myself a

respectful distance away from her. Unfortunately, right now I was feeling particularly selfish.

I crossed the small amount of space separating us and cupped the back of her neck. The skin there was still chilled from the night air. By contrast, it felt like a raging inferno was pumping through my veins.

I pulled her close enough to breathe her air. “No more games.” My lips brushed hers as I spoke. “I want you, Holly.”

Her breaths became shorter and more punctuated as she leaned into my hold. The cool palms of her hands fell to the exposed ridge of muscle circling my hips. Taking that as my cue to push further, I took a chance and laid all my cards on the table.

“Tell me to stop. Right now, tell me, or this ends with me throwing you on that bed, stripping you out of these damp clothes, and making you scream my name until the sun peeks over the top of that mountain.”

Holly licked her lips, causing the tip of her tongue to also brush where my lower lip rested against hers. I groaned at the taste.

“How long do you think you could hold out before you begged for me to fill you?” I tugged back on her neck and lowered my mouth to the hollow of her throat.

The muscles shifted beneath my lips as she spoke in a low rasp. “I don’t beg.”

“Oh, babygirl, you will. Your voice will be so hoarse when I’m done with you that you won’t be able to do anything but whimper your pleas.” I fisted the hem of her sweater and tugged until her hips were pressed flush to mine. She squirmed at the feel of my cock pressing against her stomach, but she wasn’t going anywhere. “You’re not telling me to stop, Holly.”

“I … I …” Holly stammered, closing her eyes as I rocked against her. “God damn, you’re so hard.”

“If you’re surprised then, maybe I’m not being clear enough for you.” With purposeful steps, I edged her back toward the window. “I want to fuck you, not once or twice, but all damn night. I want to take you in every position a body can bend. I want to lick your pretty pussy until you’re coming on my face, and then, while you’re still spiraling down from that high, I want to slam back into you and do it all again. Do you understand? I want to keep you in a state of ecstasy that does—not—end.”

“I’m so screwed,” she whispered.

I dropped my hands to her ass and hauled her into the air. She let out a shriek when I pinned her against the cold glass. Her thighs tightened around my waist, pushing back against me so the warmth of her pussy radiated through the thin layers of fabric separating us. I couldn’t wait to sink into her and feel all that slick heat gripping me. She rocked in a counter motion to me and the friction was good enough we both groaned. We were going to be so good together.

“I’m so far gone for you that once I start, I don’t think I’ll ever be satisfied enough to stop.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 20

HOLLY

9 Days Until Christmas

There was a critical circuit in my brain and it was shorting out, because when I opened my mouth to say stop the only thing that came out was a moan that sounded a hell of a lot like “I want that, too.”

The way Cole was rocking into me was making my vision go hazy. How could a man feel this good when we still had clothing on?

His mouth dropped to the spot on my neck that he somehow figured out made me weak. That was the end of any protests that might have been lined up to make an appearance. He could start fucking me right here against the window and I’d be thanking him for the ride.

I circled my arms around his neck, holding on to him so that he was able to free a hand. He fisted the bottom of my sweater and it was goodbye shirt, hello cold-as-fuck glass. He pulled up on my hips, leveraging my shoulders against the window so that he could lean back far enough to get a good look at my chest. My head fell back to the glass, and I let him take his fill.

With a low hum, he tracked my rising and falling breaths with the same predatory gaze I’d seen him use while chasing down the puck. He reached behind me and with a single brush my bra popped open. The straps fell away and my breasts met the cool air, feeling heavy with need.

“Perfect.”

I huffed a laugh. “Of course you can do that fuckboy trick.”

A lazy grin stretched over his features as he stroked the outline of my breast. “I regret nothing.”

With a twirl, he spun us away from the window, his mouth colliding with mine in a dizzy blur of movement and sensation. Just like our last kiss, each movement was brimming with emotion, but now there was a demand for more. I could barely breathe around it. We crashed onto the plush mattress in a puff of rose petals.

Cole’s hand sunk into my hair, cradling the back of my head and guiding me so that he could dive deeper into the kiss. He rolled us so that I remained wrapped around him, his weight pressing me into the mattress.

“Tell me you’re on birth control.” He peeled one of the petals away from where it clung to my jaw, and pressed a kiss in its place. “Because I didn’t exactly plan on being snowed in a hotel with you, and I don’t know how long my self-control will hold out.”

I curled my finger nails into his bicep–his very hard and large bicep. “I have an I.U.D. and I know you get tested—”

He moved from the first petal, to a second resting against the upper edge of my breast. The velvety surface trailed over the curve of my chest. My voice broke against the sensation. Every brush made my skin feel hot and tight. Goosebumps rushed in a silent scream over my skin as he worked his way lower. “Do you have any idea how many times I’ve imagined these perfect tits.”

He drew my nipple between his lips, lathing the tip with his hot tongue. The fingers of his right hand dug against my ribs to hold me in place while his other kneaded my breast.

“Cole,” I said, arching into the pressure of his mouth in a feeble attempt to ease the mounting need. Hearing the plea in my voice, I snapped my mouth shut.

“Begging already, baby?” He asked, hooking my leggings and peeling them, along with my panties, down my thighs. He climbed off the bed, tossing away the remainder of my clothing and taking several steps back to get a full view. He ran his palm over his face and rubbed thoughtfully at his beard. A series of what I could only imagine were devious thoughts played across his expression.

“No,” I denied and tried not to squirm beneath the way his eyes devoured my now naked form.

“Crawl to the edge of the bed, right here.” He tapped the corner opposite where I laid. “Nice and slow so I can watch that luscious ass of yours sway.”

I climbed up to my knees and sat back on my heels. “Crawl?”

He couldn’t be serious, even if the suggestion made my cheeks flush with curiosity.

Was I into that?

“Would it help if I said, please?” He slipped his hand beneath the elastic of his base layer, gripping the length there. The head of his cock pushed above the band.

Shit, maybe I was.

Colt taking command was spiking the temperature in the room enough it felt like I might combust. My mouth watered as I imagined pawing my way over to him, then feeling his hand cradling my jaw, and sliding the rosy head of his cock between my parted lips. Reflexively, I ran my tongue over my bottom lip.

I wanted him badly enough that I could taste it.

Cole tracked the movement and grinned, “Or did you need incentive?”

He slipped off the remaining pieces of his clothing and crooked a finger. “Come here, gorgeous.”

My jaw hung open as Cole shuttled his hand up and down his cock in slow, even movements. It was one thing to see the outline of his dick pressing into the seam of his pants. It was something else entirely to be kneeling at eye level with every glorious inch. Fuck me, he was beautiful. Every masculine line was carved to perfection. Muscles and tendons in his forearm flexed with each stroke.

I was dead. Gone. May my self-control rest in peace.

Before I knew what I was doing, I dropped my hands to the mattress and did exactly as he asked. I’d never in my life crawled for a man—until right now.

“You are so fucking stunning.” Any embarrassment I might have been harboring vanished as he reached forward and caressed the line of my jaw. “Tell me what you want.”

Cole’s thumb ran along the crown of his dick. The firelight gilded each hardened curve of muscle as his stomach flexed. God, to think this man was mine for the taking. My eyes traveled over all that was on offer.

What did I want? There was only one word that I could think of.

“Everything.” I climbed up his torso, pulling his lips to mine. At the same time, I pushed the hand gripping his length away and replaced it with my own. The groan he made into my mouth made my core ache.

Cole’s fingertips trailed down my spine. I rolled with the touch, causing my breasts to press into him. My free hand steadied myself by holding onto his shoulder. He could have been carved from granite with how much he yielded to my touch. The power lying dormant in those muscles promised of a long and fulfilling night.

His mouth broke from mine, traveling down the column of my neck. At the same time his hand reached between my thighs. Long fingers stroked through my center, dipping deep enough to make my body shudder.

It was a teasing touch, one designed to make me ache. All of my focus pulled toward my center, to that one far too brief point of contact. An impatient cry for more built in the chest. Another brush like that and I really would be begging for him to fill me.

“My naughty girl is so wet for me.” Cole lifted his fingers so I could see my arousal glistening on their tips. He swiped their surface over my lips. The featherlight touch sent a pulse throbbing between my legs.

In the single most erotic moment of my life, his tongue flicked out, licking away the coating. “I knew you’d be sweet.”

A carnal growl rumbled at the back of his throat before diving fully into the kiss. His other arm banded across my lower back, pinning me to him. Cole’s other hand lightly circled my throat before slowly coasting south. Tortuous seconds passed where I forgot how to breathe.

He nipped at my lower lip while continuing to explore the curves of my body like he was memorizing a map of every spot that made me shiver. Starting first by caressing the curve of my breast, dragging his fingertips along the hollow of my lower stomach, and then further until gentlest of pressure stroked against my clit in tight circles.

“Soak my hand, baby. Show me how good you take it.” Keeping that contact, he added two fingers, sinking them deep enough to force a moan from me. Cole’s thumb slid against my clit in tandem with the curl and pull of his fingers.

“Oh my god.” My entire body melted until it was only his strength keeping me upright. If he wanted to play, then he could make me his toy. The things this man could elicit from those hands was turning my whole world upside down.

“Yes. Give me more of that.” Cole put one knee up on the bed, easing us into the mattress. He continued to pump his hand as we shifted so that his weight settled over me.

I gripped the stony bulk of his bicep and rocked my hips into his hand. What he was doing felt so fucking good. It wasn’t enough. Every moment, every word from his filthy mouth, it all made me want more.

Cole’s super power had always been being able to read his opponent and know what they wanted before they moved. It was laughable how quickly I went from drooling over his cock to feeling fireworks exploding against the backs of my eyelids.

“Cole,” I panted. I was hungry to feel him stretching me with that thick cock of his. All I could think of was how badly I needed that connection. “Please.”

“No, babygirl, you can give me one more.” He licked a line along my breast, unrelenting in the way he continued to pump his hand. He didn’t give me the chance for my heart rate to slow or for me to catch my breath.

He raked his teeth over my nipple, biting hard enough to cause a hot flare of ecstasy to shimmer over the surface of my breast. The maddening feeling was altogether too much and not enough.

“Cole. Now I’m begging. Fuck me.” I kicked my head back, pushing against his weight and also hooking my legs around his to pull him closer. Heat clawed its way up my spine. My toes curled, and I dug my hands into the comforter. “Oh my god.”

“That’s it, baby. Right—” Just as my orgasm spiked, his hand was replaced with the head of his cock. He pushed into me as my moan shifted into a scream of ecstasy. “There.”

The curl of his fingers had nothing on the punch of his hips into mine. All at once my vision blacked, leaving me with the floaty feeling of him filling me. Cole wrapped his arms around my torso and pulled us up so that I was sitting in his lap. A wave of dizziness swirled around me as my orgasm-drugged brain tried to catch up.

He was big, thick, and so damn hard. God, Cole was everywhere. He consumed every one of my senses. Stretching, filling, surrounding. There was only him. The world we were currently living in ceased to exist. All that was left was my body connecting with his.

Cole thrust up, tightening his grip and guiding me to rock against him. The pressure radiated deep and flashes of light speckled my vision. He did

it again and again, each harder and faster than the last. It drove the breath from my lungs to make space for him.

Every nerve ending in my body sizzled with the need for release.

I curled my fingers into his hair, holding his mouth to mine and refusing to yield an inch of space between us. He moaned my name into the kiss. I'd never felt this burning need with another person. It resonated through me like a second pulse.

Cole pulled down on my shoulders, slamming up with a roar of pleasure. My own climax hit hard and with it, one irrefutable fact became clear: This was only the beginning.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 21

COLT

8 Days Until Christmas

The thing about Alaskan winter is that you get long nights, but during the day the sun tries twice as hard to burn out your retinas. This was especially true when you fell asleep in a room lined with windows. By fell asleep, I mean passed out from sheer exhaustion from a night buried in your dream girl.

Speaking of said girl, Holly groaned and curled deeper into my chest. “Tell the sun it’s trying too hard.”

“I’ll get right on that.” I chuckled, pressing a kiss to her temple, and pulled the fluffy comforter over our heads.

Trailing my fingers up and down her spine, I reveled in the unbelievable softness of her skin and how perfectly her weight draped over me. I’d never had an early morning with a woman before. Usually whoever was sharing my bed didn’t stay long enough to see the sun. This experience was new, and damn, I really liked it.

Holly made a tiny mewling sound as she fought the pull of sleep. The adorable kitten-like noises tightened the grip she had on my heart and squeezed. Her lips pursed in a pout that demanded to be kissed away. I bent low to claim the rosebud pout. I simply couldn’t stand the sight of Holly frowning, even if it was because of the morning light.

She melted into me, then slowly smiled against my lips as her awareness returned.

“Hi.”

“Good morning, gorgeous.” I pecked her nose. “I don’t know how you do it, but every time I think I’ve found my favorite version of you, there’s something new that I love even more. Sleepy Holly is definitely my favorite, followed closely by well-fucked Holly, and angry PJ Holly.”

“Angry PJ?”

“Oh yeah. You’re damn near irresistible when you’re angry.” I slid my hand up her side, pulling her arms over her head and rolling us so that I was on top of her. “Especially when you impatiently tap those glittery Crocs. So hot.”

I rocked my hips into her. Mostly joking, but morning wood had demands of its own and she was so damned soft beneath me.

“Colt!” Holly barked with mock indignation. “Make fun of me again and see what happens.” She tugged helplessly on her arms and I used her prone position to start nipping my way down her chest.

“What will you do, naughty girl?” I teased and pulled her nipple between my teeth.

Somewhere beyond the serenity of our comforter cocoon a swarm of angry bees buzzed to a rendition of *Run Run Rudolph*.

She lifted her head. “Are you going to check that?”

“Fuck no.” I released her arms and slid down her body, trading her wrists to lift her thigh over my shoulder. “I have everything I’ve ever wanted right here.”

The sound cut off and then promptly returned.

Holly’s beautiful pussy was waiting, pink, slick, and mine … God, she smelled delicious too, the sweeter undertones of everything we’d done last night reminding me of just how good I had it.

I ran my fingertip up the length of her slit watching her body roll with the touch. I pressed in, thrusting only to the first knuckle and back. She gasped my name in protest, not Colt but Cole. I fucking loved that too, almost as much as I knew she loved being teased.

The phone rang for a third time.

“Fucking hell,” I groaned, drawing her clit into my mouth for a small taste. Holly’s thighs tightened instantly against my shoulders. I gave her thigh a last love bite before climbing out from under the blanket. Holly was spread open with her dark hair splayed over the pillows. I took a mental

snapshot for the next time I was stuck alone on an away game. “Don’t move.”

She started to push up onto her elbows.

“Uh uh.” I snapped and pointed at her. “I mean it. Stay put and just keep thinking about all the things I’m about to do to you.”

Run Run Rudolph started blaring for a fourth time. It was Randy. I didn’t even need to look to confirm it. He was the only asshole who cared enough to call back until I answered.

I pulled on the shorts laying discarded on the floor. “Make it quick. I had my face two inches from heaven and you’re interrupting.”

Holly’s cheeks flamed bright red. I sucked on the finger I’d just been using to stroke her and closed my eyes. God damn. You’d think with how much fucking we’d done in the past twelve hours that I’d be sated, but no, my Holly addiction was alive and well.

“*Well, tell the pussy in the bed to hit the road, because we have a video call with Victory in less than half an hour. I’ve been trying to reach you all morning.”* Randy said with that cocky tone that proved he was worth every cent of his 10% commission.

I spun away from Holly and straight for the bathroom sink. I sat the phone on the counter and splashed two handfuls of water on my face, blinking myself out of the love-drunk haze that was clouding my mind. “Say that again, Rand.”

“Victory, Colt. Fucking Victory wants to talk numbers.”

It actually worked. We cast Aunt Francine’s idea into the world and caught us the biggest, juiciest fish in the pond. I was going to owe Alex big for this one. Those photos were about to save us. Hanover wouldn’t have to close and with Victory behind me we’d be able to ensure a home for kids far into the future. Shit, maybe even a life for them that didn’t mean scraping the donation bins.

Holly stopped in the doorway, a goddess with the sheet wrapped around her as a toga. “Everything, okay?” she whispered.

I pushed the phone to my chest and leaned in to give her a kiss on the cheek. “Better than okay.”

We walked out of the bathroom and into the sitting area.

Holly’s eyes sparkled as she looked up at me and I swear I could hear angels singing as the sunlight from the window formed a halo. How did I get this lucky?

Running my thumb over the apple of her cheek that was formed from her wide smile, I added, “I have to jump on a video call. Why don’t you soak in the tub for a bit and then afterwards we can order room service?”

“I’m on to you, Colton Gailey.” She poked the center of my sternum. “You’re hoping I’ll be all slippery and wet when you get done with your call.”

I grabbed her chin and tilted her face up for a sinful enough kiss that I almost forgot the need to breathe. “Guilty.”

“Colton! Colton!” Randy’s muffled voice cried.

“That sounds important.” Holly pointedly looked down at the phone I’d all but forgotten. “A bath sounds wonderful. My muscle aches have aches.”

She sashayed away. I watched every dip and rise of her hips until she disappeared into the bathroom. Except, it wasn’t her peach of an ass making my heart beat faster. It was the realization that this slice of perfection was real life.

“Hey—” I coughed to get the words to stop sticking in my throat. “Hey, Holly.”

She poked her head out from behind the door. “Yeah?” Fuck, she was so beautiful when she let her smile reach her eyes like that.

I traced a knot in the hardwood with my toe, feeling unusually vulnerable all of a sudden. The need to tell her how I was feeling tugged from the center of my chest on a line directly connected to hers.

Wrapping my hand around the back of her neck, I dropped my forehead to the top of her head. I drew her lavender and vanilla scent into me like an addict in need of a fix. “Last night was the best of my life. I just wanted you to know that.”

Her cheeks stained scarlet.

“Not just the sex, and the sex *was* amazing, but everything ... it was perfect.”

She pushed the loose hair behind her ear and peered up at me through her lashes. “Me too, Cole. Is it weird that I’m glad we got snowed in? Or that it looks like an avalanche fell outside so we have an excuse to blow off everything we had planned, and instead we get to spend the day in here?”

I pressed a kiss to her cheek. “Not at all, babygirl. This is my idea of heaven.”

“Nah, if this were heaven, there’d be more ice cream.”

“It’s 20 degrees outside.”

“And?”

“And … ice cream sounds great?”

Holly chuckled and booped my nose with her finger. “Good boy.”

“Good boy? Hey, I will not have you tarnishing my naughty list status with any of this good boy nonsense. Now go before I have to make you.” I gave her ass a swat as I redirected her back toward the bathroom. She yelped, but she also added a bit of a bounce to her step. Damn, of course she liked that. I swear this girl was made for me.

My phone vibrated in my hand, the ringtone blaring angrily.

I swiped it open and looked down at the video feed of Randy annoyingly drumming a pencil against the desk.

“Yeah, yeah,” I admitted. “I’m sorry. If you could see what I was seeing, you’d have stopped everything too.”

“Get your head in the game and pay attention to what matters. Eye on the prize.”

Holly was prize enough, but he was right. My personal satisfaction wasn’t the end game. “Rand, there’s something I wanted to discuss with you.”

“I swear to god, Gailey, if you’re about to tell me you want a new agent after all—”

“What? No, it’s not that.” Did he really think I’d fire him after he got me a dream endorsement? I would have thought he respected me more than that. “After you take your cut of the Victory deal, I want the remainder put into a trust for Hanover House, the group home I grew up in.”

“Do you realize how much money we’re talking about? This is your retirement plan.”

“A trust, for whatever the length of the contract is. I want it all going to them. I’ll do whatever Victory wants, but they get it all. There’s always another endorsement, but only one Hanover.”

“Oh,” He scratched at his beard. “I see what your angle is. That’s brilliant. We could—”

“No, there’s no angle. I’m not doing this for my reputation or anything like that. They need this and I’m making it happen. Pure and simple.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 22

COLT

7 Days Until Christmas

"Well, that settles it." Holly sat her phone down on the coffee table and flopped onto the couch with a heavy sigh. The oversized Stags shirt I'd given her from my gear bag hung loosely off one shoulder. She looked damn good in my clothing. "The team is grounded in Arizona until they can clear the runway in Anchorage, and tonight's Jingle Bell Mingle is officially cancelled."

"Not that we could get off the mountain if we tried," I added.

Four of our five daily hours of sunlight had already passed. Holly and I checked in with Aunt Francine to make sure that everything in town was okay. Of course, Francine was stocked piled enough to survive the end times when they came, so they were fine being snowed in.

"That means you're all mine until the game Wednesday night." I patted my lap and crooked my finger at her, only about fifty percent certain she'd take the cue. Holly was just as likely to make me crawl to her. Which I would, and I was fairly certain she knew it.

Holly smirked and rotated on the couch, my shirt riding up her naked thighs as she laid her head back in my lap. Not what I intended, but who was I to complain? She purred like a kitten when I ran my hands through her long dark strands. They'd dried in waves after her bath, another glimpse at the unguarded version of her that I was quickly becoming addicted to.

“So what now?” I slipped beneath the collar of her shirt and stroked down the center of her sternum. “I mean, I could spend days simply running my hands over this soft skin.” I scooped lower and pinched her nipple. “or … other things.”

“Hey!”

She swatted up at me, but I caught her wrist and pinned it over her head.

“Yes?” Moving to the other breast, I gave that nipple the same attention as the first. Goosebumps pebbled over her arms and Holly’s lips parted on a soundless ‘oh’. “That protest would be a lot more believable if I didn’t know how much you love being played with.”

I rotated out from under Holly, resting her head back on the seat cushion.

“What are you up to?” She asked, warily watching me prowl over her in the most direct path to what I wanted.

The couch wasn’t terribly wide, but I was able to get my knees on either side of her waist and managed to maneuver myself into a 69 position. Pulling back the hem of her shirt — no, *my* shirt— I grinned hard enough to make my cheeks hurt. I forgot she was bare beneath the worn cotton. Her abdomen clenched in anticipation of whatever I had planned.

Fuck, I was lucky.

Stags branded across her tits, my name on her back, and a slick pussy laid out for me like an all-you-can-eat buffet. I was pretty sure I’d just landed in the middle of a wet dream.

“Cole …” she warned, slapping away the leg of my shorts that dangled in her face.

Ignoring her protests, I rubbed my nose along the lower swell of her belly. My stubble scraped her side, making her wiggle beneath me with a laugh.

“Cole!”

“Shhh,” I admonished, licking and nipping along the crease of her thigh. “Be a good girl, open wide …” I pushed her legs apart, watching as a patch of soaked paradise revealed itself to me. “And say…”

Sinking two fingers deep, her muscles clamped around them tight enough I could barely curl them and pull back. When I swirled my tongue against her already swollen clit, Holly let out a loud ‘ahh’ right on cue.

“Why …” Holly broke her sentence, pushing her hips into my mouth with a labored breath. “Why do your lame jokes make me—” I sucked hard

on her clit. “Fuck, Cole. Oh my god.”

Her arms thrashed, pulling hard on the back cushions of the couch. If the way she was squeezing the hell out of my hand was any indication, she was right on the edge.

Then to my delight, Holly yanked down the shorts I was wearing. She took the hard length of my cock in hand and gave it a slow stroke.

I adjusted my position to better straddle her face. If she was going to start this, then who was I to deny her. I added a third finger to show her just how much I liked this idea. After all, a girl with initiative deserved to be rewarded.

Her fingers dug into my hip, pulling me down at the same time that her mouth closed around my dick. My hips involuntarily rocked into the motion. She swallowed against the invasion, the head pressing against the confines of her throat. A moan vibrated against my shaft as her orgasm began cresting.

The pressure continued to build as she sucked hard. Holly tipped her head back, tugging my hips down, so that I slid deeper. She felt so fucking good. I could barely think about what I was doing around the heat and warmth of her mouth. I never would have forced a woman to take me this deep, but with every inch she swallowed Holly’s moans grew louder.

The walls of her pussy tightened in faster, needier pulses until she was screaming her release around the cock filling her mouth. Wetness coated my face, and I was fairly certain I’d forgotten to breathe in all of this. None of that mattered as stars flitted in the corner of my vision.

Holly cupped my balls in her hand and gave them a gentle tug. That was it, I growled out my release, spilling jets of cum down her throat while she swallowed greedily around me.

I slipped from her lips and tipped sideways as the world spun. I landed on the ground, the hardwood stinging against my bare back. I threw my arm over my eyes and tried to get my lungs to remember how to work. “Fuck, I can’t remember the last time I came that hard.”

“I do.”

I peeked out from under my arm.

“It was last night.” A scarlet flush painted her cheeks and her lips were swollen as she smiled over the edge of the couch at me.

“Come here.” I grabbed her arm and hauled her down on top of me. “You’re so fucking perfect.”

Gripping the back of her head I kissed her hard. At some point this bubble we were living in was going to pop, but damn, I didn't ever want this feeling to end. Maybe it was the way I'd stopped breathing, but being with Holly made me feel light. There was a floaty happiness that felt impossible to ever go without again.

Straddling my hips, she sat up and laughed. My shirt fell loosely over her. "And your jokes are terrible."

Her pussy was hot and slick against my still exposed cock. Would I ever get enough of this girl? Unlikely. I took her hips in hand and guided her movements. A few more minutes of this and I could be sinking back into her, especially if she kept rolling with the motion like she was. "You love my terrible jokes."

"*Nobody* loves your terrible jokes." She said, tilting her head back with a mixture of laughter and a moan.

"Keep telling yourself that, babygirl." I licked my thumb and pressed it against her clit.

"How do you feel so good and you're only half hard?" She bit down on her lower lip, propping her hands against my chest to push harder.

A hard knock rapped against the door.

"Ignore it. It's just housekeeping. I'm pretty sure I put the do not disturb on the handle," I said, gripping the base of my dick and willing the thing to get hard enough to ease that taste of heaven over me. "Probably."

"Probably?"

I propped myself upright with one arm and fisted her shirt with the other. The fabric pulled taught, arching her tits right into my face. A man could die without complaint this way. Smothered by perfect tits was a hell of a way to go.

The tip of my cock pressed against her the throbbing heat of her entrance. Her muscles tightened around me, begging me to push up. "Please, Cole."

"My dirty girl is always so hungry to be filled." I rocked up into her in small motions, each one making me harder until I was aching with the need to thrust deep.

The door rapped again. I cursed, finally feeling the bliss of her fully seated atop me.

"What if they try to key in?" she asked, but didn't stop moving either.

“Then I guess they’re getting a show.” I pulled down on the knotted shirt, and Holly’s eyes rolled back.

“Fuck, that’s good,” she moaned. “I’m going to take your cock home with me after this. It’s mine now.”

The knocking rapped louder this time and a beeping at the door heralded someone entering the suite. “Mr. Gailey?”

Holly froze, every muscle in her body squeezed tight.

I whispered in her ear. “Relax, baby, or you’re going to make me pass out from blood loss.”

“Mr. Gailey, Miss Walker? Are you in?”

“It’s Maurice,” I whispered.

Holly scrambled off of me, pulling down on the T-shirt to ensure she was covered. I pulled up my shorts and popped up like mother-fucking jack-in-the-box. Not guilty looking at all.

“Hello, Maurice. We were just um … napping. On the couch.” I scratched the back of my head. The room probably wreaked of sex.

He smirked. “Of course.”

“Yes. That’s why we didn’t hear you.”

Holly swatted my calf. I glanced down at her, no idea how I was so bad at this?

Maurice continued, “I came up to tell you that the kitchen has prepared a buffet in the cafe for dinner. The kitchen manager and I decided that it would be easiest on the staff to feed everyone at once. They haven’t had much of a break. I hope you understand that there will be limited options, but if you have any dietary concerns I will see that they’re accommodated.”

He waited expectantly with his eyebrows raised.

I looked back down at Holly. “You don’t have any allergies, do you?”

“No.” She sat up and gave the hotel manager a small wave. “Hello, Maurice.”

“Good afternoon, Miss Walker. I trust your stay has been a pleasant one.”

Why did this feel like being caught in the act by your father? From the way Holly’s face turned two shades darker, I wasn’t the only one.

“It’s lovely. The view is unparalleled, if a bit bright in the morning.”

“Oh, there’s a button on the remote to drop the shades.” He walked forward to grab the small black box that was sitting on the coffee table a foot from Holly’s naked ass.

“That’s okay,” I said, vaulting the back of the couch. “We’ll figure it out. Thank you for letting us know about dinner.”

“Serving will be open for one hour between 5:30 and 6:30. I’ll be sure to reserve you both a table.”

“Thank you, that’s very kind.” Holly awkwardly waved goodbye as Maurice made a swift exit.

With a groan she flopped backward onto the couch. “We need to find me pants … and you need to stay at least five feet from me.”

“What?” I asked with a laugh. “Why?”

“Because your dick is magnetically locked on my pussy. If you come any closer, we’ll end up slamming back together again.”

“And that’s a problem?” I hopped back over the couch and she sprinted to the other side of the coffee table.

“I mean it, Cole. At least go put a shirt on over all those muscles.” She waved her hand up and down, letting her mouth hang open just a bit as she raked her eyes over me.

“Nah. Why would I when you so clearly like the view?” I slowly rounded the table, reveling in how weak this woman was for me. She wasn’t even running away.

Cupping the back of her neck, I breathed her in for a kiss. Against her lips, I said, “we’ve got an hour.” I scooped an arm under her legs and lifted her into the air. “I always did like having dessert first.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 23

HOLLY

7 Days Until Christmas

I fidgeted with my hair in the elevator's reflection. This morning's bath had turned my hair into a riot of curls and waves.

"Stop messing with it. You look beautiful." Cole said, nuzzling into my neck.

If two weeks ago you'd have asked me if I thought Colton Gailey was clingy, I'd have laughed in your face. On the contrary, this man was made of velcro. At any given moment, some part of him was attached to me. Hand on the back of my neck was a personal favorite, and he was always doing it to reel me in. Which like the dumb fish I was, I swam right to him.

"I much prefer you like this," He pulled down on one of the waves that had managed to form into a coil.

I barked a laugh. "Right. Because who doesn't love messy hair and a missing face of makeup?"

"I'm serious." He palmed my cheek, running his thumb along my cheekbone. "You're prettier without all that. You're gorgeous. It takes the breath right out of my lungs sometimes. This is the *real* Holly Walker and I'm rather fond of her."

My heart squeezed.

Fighting back the goofy smile that was trying damn hard to break free, I said, "So would now be the right time to tell you that I also wear reading glasses?"

“Fuck, don’t tease me.” He grinned wide in a classic Colton Gailey smile. “I’ve always had a thing for the sexy librarian.”

I leaned my cheek into his hand. “Of course you do.”

The elevator doors dinged. Threading our fingers together, we walked into the lobby. The space was teaming with people. Each had plates of chicken, potatoes, and salad. Entering the cafe, the hostess greeted us with a warm smile.

“Good evening, Mr. Gailey. We’ve been expecting you.” She led us to a small table overlooking the ski slopes. They were the only part of the resort that appeared to be operational. Beyond the mountains, the sky was painted with a sea of colors and the inky blackness of night was already seeping into the horizon.

She poured several goblets of water, telling us about the chosen menu for the evening and the drink options. Chicken made sense, as it was the meat with the least amount of dietary restrictions on it. There was also a fish option and a vegetarian entree that sounded like eating refined cardboard.

“Do you like red or white wine?” Colt asked. “Or something else?”

“Red, but we can drink whatever you want.”

“We’ll take a couple of glasses of your house red.”

It always made me want to gouge something out when my parents ordered for me. But for some brain defying reason, it was endearing when he did it.

I don’t know how I hadn’t seen his need to take care of someone before. It came so naturally to him and he thrived on it. His most genuine smiles always came after seeing the reactions of those he provided for.

Returning with a large salad and chicken, Colt asked me about the youth league I’d played on, then he regaled me with the story of how he and Miller became friends. Mills’s parents had covered all of Colton’s league fees all the way up to college. Seeing the glassy way his eyes looked up at me as he talked about the generosity he’d received as a child tugged on something sensitive in the center of my chest. The feeling of loss was an open wound that ran all the way down to my heart.

I still didn’t know what had happened to his birth family or how he ended up in Aunt Francine’s care. With every story he shared, it became clear that the woman was a gift to this world. The wheels in my mind were already turning in an attempt to figure out how I could adjust what we’d

raised to help Hanover House more than we were currently doing. Covering a few athletic fees and providing gear wasn't enough.

I was about to ask him if he thought there was anything we could do, when the high-pitched sound of my name cut through the dining room. A human sized ball of spandex and a track jacket leapt at me. "I can't believe you're here!"

"Hi, Ivy," I peeled myself away from my sister, trying to make sense of how and why she was standing before me … in her Olympic warm ups. "Fuck, the qualifiers. I forgot."

Colton was taking up so much space in my thoughts that there wasn't room for anyone else.

"Yeah, nice to see you, too." Any cheer and faux-nicety that had graced her expression melted away to the disdain that always lived just beneath the surface. She crossed her arms, transferring her weight to one leg and resting the sole of her foot against her calf. "Mom didn't tell me you came in to watch the qualifiers. Did you see me skate, because honestly that triple wasn't my best work. I didn't get to do my regular prep because I was on the phone soothing our mother's broken ego."

"Well don't worry, I didn't see your half-assed extension or whatever minor detail you're berating yourself for. I was running a fundraiser as part of the Northspire Santa Series." I took a big sip of my wine, eyeing Colton in the hopes that he could telepathically sense the mayday I was giving out.

It took him several seconds longer than it should have to catch on, but eventually he cleared his throat and held out his hand. "Where are my manners? I didn't introduce myself. Colton Gailey, I play for—"

Ivy looked at his hand, but didn't take it. "Hockey player. I can tell. You've got that … whole hockey thing about you." Ivy clucked her tongue and under her breath added, "Does Mom know you're screwing the players now?"

Rude. True, but still rude. In an equally low breath, I hissed, "I don't know, have you told her what a judgmental bitch you've become?"

"Hockey thing?" Colt scrunched up his face. "I have all my teeth if that's what you're talking about. I mean, I did have to have a cap put on this one." He pointed to one of his incisors.

"It wasn't enough to abandon the family legacy for that stupid game, now you have to bring one of them home too?"

Colt sat up straight. "Now, hold on."

“Ivana, who is your friend?” A tall blond man walked up beside my sister holding two plates of food.

“Ivana?” Colt asked quietly.

“It’s her full name.” I replied, scrutinizing the man adding two plates of food to our table.

Despite the sharp accent, his matching red, white, and blue warm ups clearly identified him as part of the American team. The man was handsome, but his forehead was a bit too big for his face, although his hairstyle hid it well. The curls hung low over one side, so perfectly coiled that I wondered if he put them up in rollers when he slept at night. It would be just like my sister to fall for a man as prissy as she was.

“Hello,” Colton said, rising from his seat to meet the man eye to eye. Or rather, chin to eye. Colt was at least six inches taller than him. “I’m Colton Gailey, I play for the Northspire Stags.”

He nodded curtly, and at least was better than my sister by not outwardly insulting him.

“Dmitry, this is my sister, Holly,” Ivy finished for him. “Holly, this is Dmitry Vasiliev, my fiancé.”

“Fiancé?” I spluttered. “You’re engaged?”

My sister pursed her lips, clearly that wasn’t the response she was looking for. Although, now that I was looking, she had a rock visible from space mounted to her ring finger.

Donning a fake as hell smile, Colton said, “That’s exciting. Isn’t it, Holly? Congratulations.”

“Yeah, and unexpected.” I pushed my tongue against the back of my teeth. I didn’t even know she was seeing anyone. Not that we were close, but if she was serious about a relationship that would definitely have been ammunition our mother would have loaded into her pistols.

Our waitress returned. “Can I get the two of you chairs?”

I held up both hands to wave the server off. “Oh no—”

“That would be great, thank you.” Ivy said over me. The waitress smiled and almost immediately two chairs materialized next to our table.

I gave Colt a hard kick to the shins, begging him to figure us a way out of this particular ring of hell. As if my sister didn’t need more to brag about, now she was both team USA and engaged to an Olympian. Fucking gag me.

Colt winced, but still managed to maintain a congenial air. “So, I’m assuming the engagement is new?”

“Yes.” Dmitry scooted his chair in. “I asked Ivana to be my wife after they announced the teams. Today she belongs to the country, but tomorrow she will simply be mine.” His Russian accent wasn’t quite as thick as I was expecting. Many of the Russian figure skaters emigrated over after the collapse of the Soviet Union. He was probably the son of one of the coaches, or perhaps another Olympian. What had she said his family name was, Vasily? Vasilev?

His words finally clicked. “Wait, tomorrow?”

“Not literally.” Ivy rolled her eyes. “Dmitry likes to be poetic. We won’t get married until after the Games, maybe a spring wedding would be nice.”

Dmitry nodded. “Before the post-season tour begins.”

I wanted to like him. My sister was a narcissistic bitch, but maybe if he’d asked her to marry him, then there was a part of her heart that wasn’t completely rotten.

“And you both made the team. That’s impressive.” Colton gave a tiny round of applause to them. He was so much better at this than I was. I was still reeling from her sudden appearance. How had I let the detail of Olympic qualifiers being hosted on the same campus as my fundraiser slip my mind? That wasn’t even it. I knew there were athletes crawling all over the mountain. I was so preoccupied that I never considered Ivy to be among them.

“Thank you,” Ivy said, delicately spearing a chunk of tofu with her fork. Even the way she ate looked like a performance.

Taking another sip of wine, I asked, “How long have you been seeing each other?” If we were going to continue with this farce of a meal, then I could at least get myself some answers.

“Off and on for the past two years. Dmitry’s and my schedules don’t always line up.” Ivy turned in an attempt to flag down the waitress. “The service here is terrible. I didn’t even get a drink.” After a minute she huffed and returned to facing us.

“The staff here just pulled back-to-back shifts. Would it kill you to show a little grace?” I pushed my water goblet in front of her. “Here.”

Ivy took the glass, held it up to inspect the rim before giving a sniff and drinking.

“How long are you staying in Alaska for?” Colt asked around a mouthful of potato.

“The entire team is flying out as soon as they open up the mountain pass.” Dmitry dabbed at the corner of his mouth with a napkin.

“Hopefully, we won’t be delayed much longer. I’m supposed to be having lunch with the First Lady on Thursday.” Ivy didn’t look up as she delivered this gut punch of a comment.

“Wow, the First Lady?” Colton sat up, turning to me. “I didn’t know your family was friendly with President Scarborough.”

I shook my head.

Ivy covered her mouth with her hand and gave that stupid fake laugh she’s been giving her entire life. Somehow she’d managed to perfectly capture the ability to be both condescending to me, while also appearing innocent and sweet to everyone else. “We aren’t–well, not Holly anyway. I don’t think she’s ever had the honor.”

“What?” Colt looked between us like that might somehow answer something.

“I met the First Lady when the President was Governor of Virginia. That’s where our family’s estate and practice facilities are. She’s a fan of figure skating and always takes a box at the national championships. She’s been inviting me for the State Christmas Dinner ever since I took gold in the Junior Olympics. Only now, it’s at the White House.”

“Don’t act like you’re best friends. You didn’t even vote for him.” I finished the last of my wine and held up the glass, praying that our server noticed. Maybe, if I could drink the entire bottle by the end of the meal, I’d stop caring about the words coming out of her mouth.

Ignoring me, she continued, “And Mother and Father were guests of honor for their Inauguration Banquet.”

“One of,” I clarified. “They had something like seven of them, and our parents were among fifty other record holding athletes. The President was there for all of fifteen minutes.”

God, I hated her narcissistic ass so much sometimes. This wasn’t small talk. This was Ivy parading her accolades like it was Mardi Gras. Next thing you knew she’d be asking Colton to show her his tits. At least now she was engaged, so I didn’t have to worry about her trying to snake him out from under me. Not that Ivy would lower herself to sucking hockey cock.

“Has the team ever been invited to a State dinner?” Ivy leaned forward, placing her hand over Colt’s. Her thumb stroked in a small arc and my jaw just about hit the table. Never mind, I guess she wasn’t above it. Dmitry

didn’t seem to notice at all, too busy carving away at his fish to realize his fiancé just tried to put the moves on a man I was clearly with.

Colt slipped his hand from hers. Luckily, being able to politely put women down was something the hockey guys were all well versed in. Rather than insult her or say anything disparaging, he wrapped his arm around the back of my chair. Colt’s palm rested warmly against my shoulder. A tremor, I hadn’t realized was vibrating through my body eased with the touch.

“Did you see the replay of the start of the Santa Series. Holly put together a really inspirational project this year.” Colt turned his attention to me, and the plastic smile he’d been using lifted into one of genuine admiration. “When she’s done, Holly will have revolutionized the opportunities available for under-privileged children across the country. She’s doing it for them, not personal recognition. I think that’s really admirable. Don’t you, Ivy?”

I’m sure my sister’s look of indignation was legendary, because nobody ever put her in her place, but I couldn’t see it. My vision had blurred too much from the welling tears. I refused to cry in front of my perfect sister and her equally perfect fiancé.

Colt’s hand on my shoulder tightened. “Ivy, I hope you realize how lucky you are to have such a truly extraordinary sister. I’ve never met anyone so selfless and kind.”

Ivy rolled her eyes.

“I think we’re finished here. I wish both of you luck in the coming Olympics.” He rose from his seat, extending his hand down to me. “Holly, would you like to join me for a drink by the fire?”

“You’re leaving? You didn’t even finish your dinner.” Ivy protested, although I don’t know why she cared. She obviously didn’t want to discuss anything but herself. Ivy never did.

“That sounds lovely. Things are a bit chilly in here.” I took his hand and looked back at my sister. “I wish I could say it was nice seeing you, Ivy. Enjoy your dinner.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 24

COLT

6 Days Until Christmas

"Later today? That's great." Holly spun the telephone cord around her finger while she talked. "Thank you, Maurice. Your staff has been outstanding."

I settled into the corner of the couch and played my favorite game–staring at Holly. What had I done to make the universe reward me with the past two days? Waking for the second morning in a row with Holly in my arms was the best Christmas gift.

"Yes, I'll tell him." Holly glanced up and gave me a soft smile.

I was beginning to think that she liked the way I watched her. Which was handy, because I could be happy doing nothing but staring at her for hours.

We spent a large part of the evening settled in by the fireplace, sipping on hot cocoa. All I could think about was how perfect life would be if this was how we spent every evening. It was the wildest thing to start picturing your future with another person in it. Two days snowed into a hotel room, and my entire world had shifted off its axis. It was becoming harder and harder to imagine any version of my life without Holly in it.

How fast would she start running if I asked her to move in with me?

The very fact that I was thinking this after only two days was insanity. I was never the man to daydream about being in a committed relationship. Up until Holly, I liked the freedom that came from living alone. Years of

having to share my space with eleven other kids made me crave a place to call my own. The condo was one of the first things I purchased when I signed a professional contract. It was a gorgeous, corner apartment with a view of the mountains and an open concept living space. It had everything a man like me could want, except it was missing one crucial element—her.

The sweet haven of this lodge was coming to an end. All that was waiting for me at home was my usual boring dinner and on-demand television. I used to think that was a great way to wind down after a day of practice. Now, the very idea filled me with an empty feeling in the center of my chest.

“Maurice says they’re clearing the pass now. We should be able to leave by this afternoon.” Holly hung up the phone and walked to the mini-fridge. There was a weird tilt to the way she was walking, almost like she was favoring her left leg. “Oh and I’m supposed to tell you that he and Celeste, who I’m guessing is his wife, are having a holiday dinner party on Saturday. You’re invited.”

“Are you okay? It looks like you’re limping.” I asked.

She pulled out a bottle of water and cracked it open. “I’m fine. I think between skating and all the other … um… activities, that I pulled something. It’s fine. It’ll work itself out.”

Like hell it will. Nobody who says they’re fine twice is actually fine.

“Or I can help. Lie down on the bed.” I hopped up and grabbed the lotion from the bathroom before she could come up with any kind of a protest.

Holly narrowed her eyes at the bottle. “This really isn’t necessary.”

“It is when it’s about your comfort we’re talking about. I’m not going to let you limp around this room when there’s something I can do.” I pointed at the bed. “Now, get over there.”

She hobbled her way across the living space and onto the mattress. Now that she wasn’t trying to hide it, the limp was even more pronounced. I probably shouldn’t have let her skate so hard without stretching the other night. No wonder she’s hurting today. Between that, new skates, and the punishment I’d put her body through the past two days, I was lucky all she was doing was limping.

“Where does it hurt?”

“My right ankle and calf. It happens sometimes. It’s seriously not—”

I pressed my fingers to her lips. “Shh. Let me take care of you.”

She let out a long breath of resignation and rolled onto her stomach.

I squeezed a handful of lotion into my palm and rolled the heel of my hand from the back of her foot, to the top of her calf and back.

Holly groaned, and the tension left her spine so that she fully collapsed into the pillow.

“My achilles gives me trouble all the time. When I was a kid, I used to have to ask Aunt Francine to do this for me.” I chuckled at the memory. “The first time I pulled my achilles it was bad enough that I could barely walk. It was my first season in a truly competitive league. I was playing like I had something to prove and got the injuries to show for it.”

“Shocking.”

“Behave.” I gave her ass a playful swat. Holly yelped a laugh. “Aunt France got a book on therapeutic sports massage from the library, then used the pictures to try and figure out how to relieve the pressure. I was in middle school at the time, maybe thirteen. It was weird for all of us, but I was in so much pain that I was willing to try anything.”

“She really loves you.”

“She’s the closest thing I have to a mother. I call her aunt, but that’s only because she doesn’t ever want to try and replace a parent. Instead, she sees herself as a person to care for and love you in whatever way you need.”

“I completely see that. She’s the most accepting woman I’ve ever met.”

Explaining my relationship with Francine was always so hard to do. The novelty of meeting an orphan usually had people jumping to ask questions. It was either that or I was met with some version of insta-pity.

Not Holly. She hadn’t pried into my past at all. Not that she didn’t care, but I knew it was that she was giving me the space to tell her in my own time. The beauty beneath my hands probably had no idea how much that meant to me.

“My birth parents died when I was six.”

Holly sucked in a breath. I was grateful for her silence. An unexpected tug of emotion pulled at the center of my chest. I’ve told this story many times, but it was always with a rote kind of detachment. Something about telling Holly made the loss feel monumental in a way it hadn’t since I was a child.

“I can barely remember them. My most vivid memory is of the day at school when they told me they were gone, and the subsequent ride with the

social worker to my first foster family. I've read the police report, though. A drunk driver lost control of his vehicle and drove over the curb. He made it two blocks, cruising 50 mph down the sidewalk before wrapping his car around a streetlight. My parents were two of four people who were struck down that day."

"Cole, that's … god, I'm so sorry." Holly tried to turn, but I increased the pressure on her hips to make sure she stayed flat. This was hard enough to discuss without having to see my soul reflected back to me in her eyes.

After a moment, she wiped away a tear before laying her cheek against the back of her hand.

"It was a long time ago." I put more lotion into my palm and started kneading my fingertips on either side of her ankle and into the tendon. She sighed as I worked my thumbs into the sore muscles and I felt myself relaxing with her. Taking care of Holly soothed me almost as much as it eased the pain in her. "I had ten foster homes. The first couple were emergency placements while they tried to figure out what to do with me. My parents didn't have a will that stated who would have custody if they both died, and the only living relative was an uncle that my father hadn't spoken to since they were kids."

I rotated the heel of my palm into her upper calf. Even with the tight muscles, she was as soft as velvet. The citrus and sage smell of the lotion blanketed the room with a calming fragrance that suited the mood.

"I bounced between placements every few months. The unknown of where I was going next was hard on me. I acted out … a lot. It was easier to be the clown than the orphan. All I really wanted was for someone to pay attention to me."

"That explains why you're always using humor to deflect."

"Yeah, I suppose it does." I lightly brushed the sole of her foot. Holly's screech of surprise was muffled by the pillow. I held on to her leg and did it again, barely managing to dodge her other foot as it kicked back in defense.

"Colton Gailey!" She wriggled free of my grip, not a hard task since I didn't want to add to her muscle strain.

I held up my hands in surrender. "Okay, okay! I promise. No more tickling. You're going to hurt yourself flailing around like that."

"I don't flail." Holly glared in faux warning over her shoulder. She was failing miserably at hiding her joy. I loved it.

“The future has a way of working out, so I try not to worry too hard about the present. That’s what I learned in all of this. If any of those other homes had stuck, then I never would have ended up with Aunt Francine. If I hadn’t been so fucked up from the instability in my life, she might never have found the motivation to start Hanover House.”

“Francine started Hanover with you?”

“I was her first. She read my record and realized just how starved the system was for long-term placements. The year after she took me in, she signed the mortgage for our house. Aunt Francine’s heart was never going to let another kid bounce around when she could be that safe space for them. ”

“She really is an amazing woman.”

“She really is,” I repeated. This was what Randy didn’t understand when I told him I’d do anything to save Hanover. Victory called at the right moment for a reason. “For as bad as things might seem, I have faith that the future will always end up right where it should be. It always does.”

“You really believe that?” This time when she tried to rotate, I let her. Holly’s questioning eyes searched mine like she was waiting for the punchline to kick in.

I bent over her and stole a soft kiss from her bewildered lips. “You’re here with me right now, aren’t you? If that’s not things working out as they should, then I don’t know what is.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 25

HOLLY

5 Days Until Christmas

"You spent the weekend with Colton … in the honeymoon suite?!" Autumn squealed, hitting a pitch only dogs could hear. "Tell me everything, and I mean everything. I bet that man fucks like a god. Or maybe the energizer bunny. All that stamina." She held up her arms and started rapidly humping the air.

"Oh my god, would you keep your voice down," I hissed. "And who said anything about fucking?"

She flapped her hand at me. "Please. The Pistol has had his sights aimed at you for a *loooong* time."

"What?" I sat down my stack of messages. Everything from Victory hoping for a team statement about the Series, to Marina's agent looking for another guest appearance before she flew back to L.A.

"Well yeah," Autumn laughed like this was common knowledge. "Your first week here he was fishing around to try and find out if you were single. He offered me a fifty to get him your number."

Fifty dollars for my number? Colt said all of three words to me my first year here. I don't even think he knew my first name. The boys on the team never called me anything but Ice Queen. Besides being absolutely absurd, that was so long ago. There was lots of time to make a move. "But that was over a year ago."

“Yeah, did you not hear when I said *loooong* time? Like *looooooooooooo*—” She took an exaggerated breath.

“Okay I get it.”

“—*ooooooong*—”

I clamped my hand over her mouth in an attempt to silence her. When I finally eased my hand away, Autumn finished with, “time.”

She laughed, snorting like an adorable baby pig. Someday she wouldn’t be my intern anymore, and she was going to make the heir to some fortune very happy. With her luck, she’d probably walk right into a Disney movie and fall madly in love with a prince. The animals would all talk to her and help her clean, too.

“So spill.”

I mentally flipped through the past 72 hours. It felt like an entire lifetime had passed. I was honestly finding it hard to remember what it felt like to not have Colton in my daily life. A pang of sadness beat through me as I realized this time next week, Colt would be free of me.

“He did this really sweet thing, where he got the skating rink closed down for everyone but us.”

“Awww.”

“We skated under the aurora.”

“Awww.”

“Can you stop that?”

Autumn mimed zipping her lips, but it was a lie. Nothing silenced this girl. She’d talk to a rock if there was no one else in the room.

“It was …” I sighed, and instantly scolded myself for sounding so love sick. “Nice. He was really nice.”

Autumn grimaced. “Nice is when the person in line ahead of you covers your bill. Nice is when the grocer double bags your canned goods. That wasn’t nice, Holly. That was A+ level romantic.”

“It wasn’t.” Lies. It was the single most romantic thing that had ever happened to me. “Listen, can we talk about anything else?”

“Hell, no. So then it snowed, and …”

“And we …”

“Fucked like a pair of snow bunnies?”

I could feel my cheeks flaming red.

“You did!”

I shrugged. “It’s not a big deal. A one-time just for fun thing.”

That sounded like a lie even to my ears. Cole texted me about a thousand times since we returned to Northspire and last night had been particularly lonely. Now that the kids were off school for the holidays, they had practice earlier in the day. My heart had been tap dancing all morning with the thought of seeing him again so soon.

It didn't mean anything. I must still be suffering from some kind of a hormone overdose. Cole had drugged me with too many orgasms and now my heart didn't know which way was up … because I couldn't actually like Colton.

Right?

I was finding it very hard to drum up a single reason why anymore. I used to think he was careless and selfish. Now that I'd spent more time with him, it was clear that he wasn't careless at all. Cole was spontaneous. He threw all of himself at making the people around him happy, regardless of what trouble it might bring down on him. There was something very admirable about that.

Then there was the way he didn't flinch when facing down my sister. For someone who appeared to lack situational awareness, he was particularly good at sensing the shifts in my demeanor. Which was saying something because I'd spent an entire lifetime honing my mask and building up armor thick enough to withstand anything.

"Uh huh." She pointed at my phone. "And you've been checking that thing like an addict in search of her next fix, because …?"

I shoved her sideways. "Shut up."

"Ooo I have a great idea. Let's head down to the barn early and watch the end of practice."

"I don't know." My mouth was denying her, but my heart was already galloping out the door. This was ridiculous. Sweet memories of Colton's goodbye flowed through my mind like honey. Colt didn't just kiss, he moved with such purpose that the moment resonated through me for hours. My lips hadn't stopped tingling and the touch of his hands was branded on my skin.

"I need you to prep and make sure all the Christmas tree costumes are ready to go," I added.

"Which we can do there. Come on, Holly." Autumn plumped up her lips and combined them with the largest puppy dog eyes I'd ever seen. "I want

to see a loved-up Colt's face when you walk in. I bet he skates straight into the boards."

Like the Grinch, a devious plan stretched through my mind. I would do her one better. Opening up my phone, I sent Andrews a text asking him to pull a set of size 6 skates and a helmet.

On our way out the door, I dropped the note for Victory off with the department's secretary, telling her to set up the interview and to send a list of future home games to Marina's agent. The pop star was a large part of why this Series had earned so much attention. She was welcome any time as a personal guest of the team.

* * *

Arena ice had a distinctive smell that I've always loved. It was calming, like coming home. I took a deep breath the moment we stepped through the doors. It was something about the alkaline levels that made it have a scent unlike anywhere else in the world. If they could make a candle that was actually able to capture the aroma, I'd burn it in every room of my apartment.

Autumn lugged a trunk full of inflatable Christmas trees behind her. Vangelt wanted us to do a Christmas tree flash dance during first intermission tonight. I'd bribed a couple of the ice girls to do it for us.

"Holly!" Andrews shouted as we rounded the bend into the lower tunnels. "You're here early."

"Autumn wanted to watch the end of practice." I leaned in like I was sharing a secret. "Between you and me, I think she's got a thing for Roo."

Behind me there was an exaggerated and fully indignant huff. "Don't listen to her. I do not. We're here so that Holly can make heart eyes at Colton for the next hour."

I gasped. "I have never in my life made heart eyes. Not like how Roo tumbles over himself every time you enter the room."

"Lies! Bentley has barely even looked twice at me. Besides, we both know Daddy would never let me date one of his players."

"Ohhh kay." Andrews said, looking at the live grenade that we were passing between us. "I've got your skates and a helmet just like you asked

for, and I pulled all the backup supplies for the kids when they get here. Text me if you need anything else."

"Thanks, Andrews." I glared at Autumn. She mouthed back 'sorry' and her eyes refocused on the arena behind me.

I turned in time to see Colt slide past the door, barreling into little Stevens with a spray of ice and then taking off in the other direction. My heart took up acrobatics in my chest with the mere chance of him looking up to see me.

"See. Heart eyes." Then with a grin that could paint the ice red, she winked and started hauling her Christmas trees away.

Shit, maybe I did get heart eyes when he was around. I couldn't believe that I was that transparent, but maybe. I dropped my bag on the bench and made quick work of swapping my pumps for the skates.

A whistle blew on the ice and Johnstone shouted for everyone to bring it in. I forced myself to take slow breaths. This was no big deal. Arena staff joined players on the ice after practice all the time. I secured my hair into a low pony with an elastic. Nobody would probably even notice.

I tossed the blade guards on the bench and made my way to the door just as the first of the players exited.

"Woah." Carson, Eli's little brother, slapped the defenseman who was exiting behind him. "Smokey, get a load out of Cinderella here."

I put the helmet on, keeping my glare steady on Carson as I did. There was no going back now. I secured the chinstrap and with it my confidence settled into place. These guys only knew the take-no-shit PR woman who cleaned up after them. They didn't know the professional hockey player who could cut you down with more than words.

Holly Walker wasn't hiding behind a clipboard anymore.

Smokey gave me a kind smile. "Be careful out there."

"I will." I gave him a wave, then directed my fake smile at Little Stevens. "Wouldn't want to make you boys look bad, or anything."

"Ice Queen! Looking good." Mik Olsson whistled, stepping onto the rubber mats. He dramatically lifted his hand to his mouth and shouted down the tunnel. "Hey Andrews, do we have any ice-walkers?"

The rest of the boys, who had all gathered around us, laughed. He thought he was so damn funny. It was all fuel in my fire. I'd never wanted to prove myself more. The old me woke up with each jab and line.

I tapped Mik on the cheek and spoke with my best baby voice, “Why, princess, do you need help staying on two feet?” I gasped and held up my finger like I’d just been struck with an epiphany. “Wait! No, that was you last week against Boston.”

The men gaped at me like I’d grown a second head. Sure, I never took any of their shit, but I also didn’t trash-talk like I was one of them either. The left wing beside Mik said, “Is this *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*?”

It probably looked that way, except, I’d never felt more like myself than I did right in this moment. It was freeing.

Why had I spent all those years caring what people thought?

Mik pushed his tongue into his cheek. “You keep chirping like that, I’m going to stop calling you Ice Queen and start calling you Birdie.”

It was an insult, and also the nicest, most accepting thing he could have said. Mik’s expression broke into a smile wide enough to see his missing tooth.

“You can try.” Lifting up as far as I could in my skates, I pressed a kiss to his cheek. “Now, be a good boy and move out of my way.”

“Hey!” Colton yelled, finally catching on that I was here. “Ols, back the fuck away from my girl.”

My heart stopped cold in my chest. I lied and told myself it was because this was my moment of truth, and not because Colt declared me his to the entire team … or how damn much I liked it.

“His girl?” Someone murmured.

The group once again went mute, looking between Cole and me like they were waiting for one of us to explode. Ice sprayed into the air as Cole stopped at the door to the rink.

“Holly, what are you—” His eyes went wide as realization settled in. His gaze slowly slid from my helmet to the blades strapped to my feet. He exhaled a breathy, “Fuck, yes.”

Keeping my eyes on him, I held out my open hand. “Somebody stick me.”

Mik extended his toward me tape first.

I rolled my eyes. “You *would* use a composite. Maybe it’s just me, but I’ve always preferred a good, solid, *hard*wood.”

Carson punched Mik in the arm. “That’s definitely not Ols, then.”

I flicked the massive ring of tape at the end of the stick. “And Jesus, look at the size of that knob. Compensating much?”

Fuck, this was fun. Why hadn't I come down here to mess with the boys earlier? They were all reindeer in headlights.

Before Olsson could clap back, I lifted my chin to Yuri who was hiding in the back of the group. "Volkov, you're the shortest on the team. Lend me yours. I promise to give him back in one piece."

The d-man stepped forward and handed me his stick. His accent was thick with laughter. "The stick or my boy?"

I took the wood in hand, smiling with the feeling of rightness that zipped through me. "Remains to be seen."

Licking my lips, I said, "Puck me, Cole."

"Jesus fucking Christ. You're my god damn wet dream right now," Cole said, skating over to the bucket holding the practice pucks.

I pointed the stick towards the goal at the end of the rink. "One on one, best two out of three."

Carrying the puck to the red line, he asked, "What do I get when I win?"

"You mean when I win?"

He huffed out a laugh. "Never going to happen, babygirl."

Babygirl.

One word shouldn't make my skin feel hot. "Fine. I'll come tonight in your jersey."

He went deathly still. "Nope, I was wrong. That's my wet dream."

A chorus of laughter came from the bench where the entire team was now congregating. It was damned hard to keep my smile down.

"When I win—"

"Still not happening."

"When *I* win," I repeated. "I want you to dress up as Rudolph for the game tonight. Nose and all."

"Not a chance, but sure. Nose and all."

"Cream him good!" One of the boys shouted, causing a new round of laughter and cat calls.

"I usually do." That last comment was more for Cole's ears, but from the snickers, I knew it wasn't quite the private joke I'd intended it to be.

I squared off against Colt. Tapping the toe of my stick against his before settling them on either side of the puck. His green eyes were positively alight with anticipation.

"So, I guess this means whatever is happening with us is out in public?" I said, trying very hard to sound nonchalant. The craziest part of all of it

was that I wasn't sure I even cared. However, that didn't make being in a relationship less terrifying.

Cole's expression softened. "I'm not a good enough liar to keep this a secret. I'm sorry. I wasn't thinking. They were all up on you and then, I don't know, it was a primal instinct or something. Are you mad? You don't look mad."

"No. An unexpected part of me kind of loved being claimed by you."

"Good. Because I'm dying to do this." He reached forward, grabbing the collar of my Northspire fleece and pulling my mouth to his.

Public displays of affection, on the other hand, were new.

Cole wore his emotions out loud and for the entire world to see. Being with him meant being a part of that. There was never going to be any pretending.

What harm could come from embracing it and enjoying myself? We weren't breaking any rules.

I hummed against the way his tongue caressed mine and the slight bite of his teeth raking over my lower lip. Cole was barely able to maintain contact over his giant grin. If anyone else was still in the arena, I didn't know it. A buzzy elation filled my ears with static and my vision narrowed until he was all I could see.

Cole moved from those drugging kisses that he was so damn talented at, to a peck at the corner of my mouth and then again against my cheekbone. "Besides, the rager I'm sporting would likely give the game away. The thought of you in my jersey later is … *very* satisfying."

Sound slowly filtered back in. The guys were whistling and banging on the boards.

"They act like they've never seen a man kiss the woman of his dreams on the ice moments after she agreed to play him one on one before." Cole clacked his stick against the ice and shouted back at the team, "One of you morons wanna drop a puck for us?"

Woman of his dreams. My heart did a tiny cartwheel.

"I've got it." Eli glided onto the ice from where he and Coach Johnstone were reviewing the play binder.

Cole kicked the heel of his stick along the puck, scooping it up and handing it to Lucky.

Eli shook his head. "Coach says if she wins, you have to do a double set of line-to-line intervals next practice."

Colton shrugged. “She isn’t going to win.”

“Who knew you were so good at lying to yourself,” I scoffed.

“Are you sure you know what you’re doing?” Eli’s brows knit together with genuine concern. He had no idea that I was once the face-off queen of Boston.

I bent low into position. “Just drop the puck, Lucky. Let me show you how to play hockey like a woman.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 26

COLT

5 Days Until Christmas

I should be watching the puck. I shouldn't be watching the way Holly licks her lips. I shouldn't be noticing her already flushed cheeks. I definitely shouldn't be picturing her reverse cowgirl, bouncing on my cock while I hold her in position by my jersey. Fuck, definitely not that. This cup was uncomfortable enough without the stiffie.

Holly shifted her weight onto her right leg at the same time Lucky dropped the puck. Her stick snatched it away. She was fast. I'll give her that, especially given how rusty she must be. The puck continued traveling to the right, sliding outside her skate line. She looked ahead, directly to where she thought she could move around me. I pushed back, moving to intercept. She honestly was making this too easy.

I slid my blade into position, ready to feel the weight of it making contact. Only it never came. Holly tapped it behind her at the last second, and in the opposite direction. Her skates sprayed snow up in a full stop. The broadest smile I'd ever seen stretched across her beautiful face, before rotating completely out of view.

It took me too long to realize what she was doing. I was still seeing the ghost of that smile, when she spun away, skating in the opposite direction. I turned like a fool, too slow and woefully unprepared. I felt like one of those cartoon characters whose feet move in mid-air and yet they get nowhere. I stretched forward, already knowing I was too late to intercept. Holly

redirected the puck with a classic 10-and-2, pulling it back in the other direction before snapping a backhand right into the net. The ping of the puck rang out like tines on crystal.

The guys on the bench roared with enthusiasm, making as much noise against the boards as any other front row spectator we'd ever had. They must have forgotten that they were on my team.

Holly leapt into the air with a wild cheer. "Fuck, that felt good!"

I should be angry, except her joy was infectious. When she laughed, it was impossible not to laugh with her.

"Come on. Again." Holly tugged my arm back to the red line.

Lucky bit back a grin. "Well aren't you just full of surprises."

"Beginner's luck." She tapped the ice. "Drop it, old man."

"Old man? You realize I'm only four, maybe five years older than you." Eli huffed, but again, it wasn't possible to scowl at this woman. My girl was a force of happiness right now, sweeping the entire arena up with her.

My girl. She was definitely mine.

"I'm going to paint on some freckles to go with your new nose," she said.

I licked my lips watching Eli's grip on the puck loosen, "and I'm going to enjoy the way your ass bounces under my name while you're riding–"

Eli coughed, and the rubber dropped. I snatched it away while Holly was still processing my comment.

She was immediately on me. I dug in, shifting direction and putting on a burst of speed. From the way she swore when I took off, I knew she was pissed she hadn't anticipated it. I was always going to be faster than her, or at least I was faster than out-of-practice Holly. In her prime, she must have been something to watch. Even now, she was keeping up. Not enough to steal the puck back, but enough that she wasn't lagging behind. I knocked the puck into the top corner of the net.

"Okay. New rule," Eli said. "You're not allowed to make me partake in whatever this hockey foreplay is. It's making me feel all kinds of dirty, and not the good kind."

"Talk to *him*. He's the one discussing positions."

"Holly, you said, "wood, long, hard, and solid" in the span of a minute."

"I was talking about hockey sticks. I can't help it if your mind is always on your dick." She batted her lashes. Fuck, she was too pretty to argue with. How was that a thing?

“No dick jokes. That’s a rule now too,” Eli chided.

“Yes, Daddy,” I said mimicking how she’d just flashed her eyes at him.

“No. Nope.” Eli pointed at the penalty box. “Two minutes for misconduct, 45.”

“What!”

Holly cackled. “I’m definitely winning now.”

“Don’t you start,” I snapped at her before shifting back on Eli. “On what grounds?”

“Abuse of officials.” I would have believed him, except I could also see the shit-eating grin he was trying to hide. “Plus, I like her more, and you’d make such a cute reindeer.”

He tried to pinch my cheeks, but I swatted him away. “Get the fuck out of here. We’ll start cold.”

I tapped the ice, signaling the beauty with a stick to get up here. Of course, she fell right into position. There wasn’t a single crack in her confidence as she looked down at the puck.

“On three,” I said.

Together we counted. “One… two… three—”

Holly fought hard for the puck, eventually digging it out from under me. Then it was a matter of speed and stick handling. She tried another fake, kicking the puck into the air and catching it with her stick, but I didn’t let it get much further than that. There was no way I was falling for another classic redirect. The first time was a shock, but I was awake to her real potential now.

Holly was slippery. She moved quickly and tried for dirty plays. I wouldn’t want her to play any other way. Honestly, she was my perfect girl.

A gaggle of kids started chanting. “Holly! Holly! Holly!”

The guys on the team caught on and started clapping and stomping along. “Let’s go Holly!”

Nice to see anyone cared about *me*. I was a man who was about to have his dreams come true, didn’t that mean anything? And I was. Holly was my dream, and I was never more certain than as she looked over her shoulder at me. I wasn’t the cartoon character spinning his legs in place, I was already in free fall.

I cranked back, ready to rocket the thing all the way across the ice. Holly slammed shoulder first into my side, knocking us into the boards with a hard oomph. She wasn’t wearing any gear. The best she had was a helmet.

I was about to call “time” on the whole thing, but she hooked the puck and took my snapshot for me. It hit the net with a dull swish.

The rink erupted with cheers.

Holly barreled at me full speed. I braced myself for the hit. For the first time in my career, the opposing player launched herself into the air, looping her arms around my neck, and straddling my hips. Our helmets clashed as she went in for the kiss. When she couldn’t get the connection she was looking for, she unlatched my chin strap and threw my helmet to the ice.

“Thank you,” she said between kisses. The audience of people cat-called and whistled, not that she cared at all. “You have no idea how badly I needed this.”

“Multiply it and it’s about half as much as I need you right now.” I pulled back and directed her face from my lips to the couple dozen people watching us. “And we have an audience.”

“Oh my god. When did they all show up?” Her face turned scarlet.

It wasn’t just the team and the kids, half the office and rink staff were watching from the boards too. In the middle of all of them was Kris. He tapped the side of his nose and winked.

“Unless you want to add exhibitionism to the list of things on today’s agenda, I’d suggest you stop climbing me like a tree.” I gave her one last peck and dropped her back on her skates. “Let’s go prep these kids for tonight’s game.”

“Holly!” Susan was the first on the ice, pigtails flying as she attempted a hockey stop. It was more like a ‘keep sliding until you run into something heavy’ stop. “Can you show me how you did that turn?”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 27

HOLLY

4 Days Until Christmas

I scrolled through the social media feeds from the past couple of days, tapping my toe to the bass beat reverberating from the stands above. A gooey sense of pride warmed my center as I saw repost after repost of the pictures taken on the sledding day.

The link to the donation portal on the team's website was almost going as viral as the ones of Cole posing with different families. Our donation counter already surpassed the numbers that were pre-programmed into the display. I was probably going to need to ask the tech to adjust them for a third time.

Through the concrete walls the crowd was a dull hum of energy. For the first time in over five years, the barn was full. Even the terrible 400 level seats were sold out. The first period close out churned the stands into a wild creature, hungry for goals. The boys down on the ice were feeding right into it, taking what the fans gave them and serving it back one puck at a time.

The goal horns blared and the flashing lights colored everything a deep red.

Goal: # 54, Carson Stevens. Assist: #13, Mikael Olsson.
Northspire leads 4-0.

“Fear the Deer!”

Goose bumps prickled over my arms. We were going to win. I could taste it in the air.

I clicked on the most shared post. Cole was ruffling the hair on one of two twin boys. Their service dog, a smiling chocolate lab, grinned up at the camera from the middle of the pack. The one boy was smaller than his brother and leaned on a set of braces. He was dwarfed by the jersey and helmet. Not that it stopped him from mean mugging the camera like it owed him a win. It was probably the cutest thing I’d ever seen.

Dimples pierced the side of Colt’s cheek as he doted on the boys. Cute kids, a puppy, and one doting hockey star. My heart couldn’t take much more. It was already melting like ice cream smothered in fudge. Another one of these and they’d be scraping me off of the concrete.

The first comment under the photograph was from Victory Athletics, “We love an athlete whose heart is as legendary as his skills.”

That might be the truest statement I’d ever read. Cole was exactly that. More. No wonder they’d asked for a post-game interview.

I scrolled to the next photograph, one of Kris sliding down the hill in a neck and neck race with two other kids. Snow sprayed behind them in a wave. I pinched the photo to zoom in on Kris’s sled. It was an old fashioned toboggan made of cherry red wood, not the standard snow tube that everyone else was riding.

I squinted at the photo and tilted my head to the side. Was that glitter in the snow? No. It had to be an after edit to make the shot seem magical.

“Ah that’s a picture from my good side.” Kris held a hand to his rosy cheek. “Isn’t that what the kids say these days?”

“Do you carry a jar of glitter with you?” I asked, not taking the time to consider my words before I said them. But seriously, the man sparkled at the oddest times.

“What glitter?” He blinked at me in earnest.

“Kris, your cheeks have tiny sparkles on them right now.” I scrolled up to photos from the start of the Santa Series and tapped on the glitter trail following the Zamboni. “And this.”

“Trick of the light.” Kris smirked and sat on the bench beside me, crossing his leg so that the fur lined cuff of his red velvet pants sat across his knee. He pushed up the sleeves of his jacket and held his hands out to me expectantly. “May I see?”

He scrolled through the Northspire feed and stopped on a picture Autumn posted in the stories earlier. It was only a snapshot taken from her phone, but it was a beautifully framed shot of Cole and I facing off. Eli stood over us, a half second after releasing the puck.

“Ah now this is a good one,” he said, handing me back the phone. “It’s nice to see you skating again.”

“It was fun.” I smiled at the look of absolute focus on my face. I could still feel the buzz of competition in my veins. “Hang on. What do you mean by again?”

“You know how the song goes.” He tilted his head and hummed a line *Santa Claus is Coming to Town*. “I know everything.”

This was preposterous. Santa isn’t real.

“I’m not one of the kids. You don’t have to pretend,” I declared, then flicked the very plush suit. “Even if you are *very* convincing.”

With a wink, Kris tapped the side of his nose. “It’s almost intermission. The children will be here any moment for their game. Eli really seems to have taken to working with them.”

“He has.” I nodded. Flicking to photos we’d shared of him with the littles. Eli had been showing up an hour early to work with a few of the boys, but it was the tiniest member of the team that had stolen his heart right out from under him. “Little Susan especially.”

“You might want to see if there isn’t something more he wants to help with. He seems like a man who needs to find his purpose.” He got up from the bench and adjusted the large leather belt holding his jacket closed.

“Purpose?”

“It’s the drive that keeps you putting one foot in front of the other. As we grow that purpose changes, but sometimes we get a bit lost along the way. Eli is looking for his purpose.”

“What about hockey? He gives everything he has to the team. He loves Northspire.”

The clatter of children in the tunnel announced their arrival. I turned just in time to see a blur of maroon and navy tumble into the space.

When I looked back to Kris, he was gone. I spun in a circle. The only sign he’d been here at all was a small smudge of glitter on the bench beside me.

I ran my finger through the dust. An opalescent shimmer gleamed off the tip. “I knew it.”

“Knew what?” Colt asked, walking through the kids and snapping a bright red ball over his nose. He bent down and pressed a simple kiss to my lips like it was the most natural thing in the world.

My stomach tumbled in somersaults. I liked how easy this growing thing between us felt. I didn’t even care that the children had all oohed when he kissed me.

The team accepted our relationship with surprisingly little push back. H.R. only cared that we filed the correct paperwork. Coach Johnstone made me promise not to interfere with the game and threatened to send me with the rest of the W.A.Gs. I don’t know how he expects me to do my job from up in the suites, but the message was received all the same.

The guys decided to claim me as one of them after yesterday’s face off. If I had known that all it took to win them over was handing their star player his ass, I’d have done it two seasons ago.

Colton pressed a button and the red ball flashed. “How do I look?”

I smiled up at him. The red glow lit up his long lashes. They were dark and curled, matching a warm glow to his cheeks. I squinted. A layer of foundation looked like it was airbrushing his skin. “Why are you wearing makeup?”

Cole palmed the back of his neck. “Autumn snagged me at the end of the kids’ practice. The rep from Victory Athletics came to the game tonight and wanted an interview. Since I’m not on the ice, they asked if their social media girl, Heidi McMoore could go live while the game played in the background. Autumn didn’t tell you?”

“Oh yeah. I must have forgotten…” Nodding, I looked down at the half dozen missed messages. Had I really been so engrossed with looking at photos that I missed her contacting me? Of course I knew Victory was here. I’d been the one to approve the interview. They’d been very insistent about wanting to talk with Cole about his involvement with the team and the Series. Northspire would be foolish not to. We needed every ounce of press we could get. The attention Victory would bring to what we were doing could be a complete game changer.

Still …

The entire thing made me nervous. Usually questions were presented to the team prior to putting one of our players in front of a camera. There was too much in the balance to be playing anything fast and loose.

“How did it go?” Maybe this was a blessing, and they were showing all this interest because they wanted to become a sponsor of the Series. Or even better maybe Victory would be interested in becoming the sponsor for something bigger and more lasting.

What had Cole suggested, starting a girl’s youth league? We could be making a real impact in the lives of kids. With Victory money behind us we could set up something without the barrier of pay walls or gender exclusion. No kid would ever have to feel the sting of omission by circumstance again. For the first time ever the future felt completely full of possibilities.

“It went …” Cole grinned. “Really, really well.”

The buzzer rang, flooding the arena with blue light, and signaling the end of the second period.

“Game on, kids. Get out there and show them how it’s done!” Aunt Francine shouted.

“I’ll tell you about it after the game. There’s actually a lot I want to tell you. I didn’t want to say anything until it was final, but—”

Was this it? Had they offered something to him?

“Come on, Colt.” Susan grabbed his hand and dragged him toward the ice. “I’m gonna score a goal tonight and you can’t miss it!”

“Later. Whatever it is can wait.” I shooed him onto the ice just as the Santa Series jingle played and the slapping of sticks rang around the rink.

As I watched Susan and Colt slide onto the ice hand in hand, the mental image of a sad girl watching hockey from the sidelines poofed away. A new picture stood in her place, a woman who helped to form a future she could be proud of.

My phone dinged with an incoming message. Followed by another and then another.

“What the—?”

A ball flipped in the pit of my stomach. Notifications were scrolling over the top of my screen faster than I could read them. This was never good.

It was the final one that caught my full attention.

Ivy: I knew he seemed the type. Just another fame chaser.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 28

HOLLY

4 Days Until Christmas

I clicked on the link in my sister's text message. A Buzzgram video played of Heidi McMoor laughing with Cole. On the top of the screen text read: Love on the Ice: A Victory Athletics Love Story

"The world is buzzing about you and Miss Walker."

The acid in my stomach soured. Why the hell was he talking about us in the Victory interview?

"The eldest daughter of our nation's most famous ice couple."

Images of my mother and father from old news reels played while Heidi continued to talk.

"The whole world watched Henrietta and Nikolai's romance play out on the ice. Not to mention, the movie of their love story was my favorite as a kid."

Heidi squealed with joy. Tiny hearts filled the screen.

"Is this romance the Walker family legacy we've all been hoping for? Because we saw some rather interesting photos of the two of you out on the ice this morning."

No. No. No. This wasn't happening. A video of me leaping onto Cole, throwing his helmet to the ice, and kissing him played in slow motion. I was going to be sick. From the angle it must have been one of the rink staff recording us.

"Care to give the world a peek behind that curtain?"

Colt flushed, looking to the side of the camera and grinning one of those classic Colt 45 grins that seemed to always win people over to his side.

"Word is you know her very well."
"I do."

Another photo of the two of us on the outer deck of the ski lodge popped on screen. Colt's hand was wrapped firmly in mine and I was looking up at him like he was god's damn gift to women.

I squinted at the watermark in the corner. This was one of Alex's photos. Why was Alex photographing me and Colton, if he was there to record the kids? Unless he was asked to … Every glowy memory I had from that day dimmed.

"If Santa gave me any gift this year, it was Holly Walker."

45 was dead. I was going to strangle him.

“Get ready world because Santa is coming to town.”

“One present at a time.”

“That’s right. Gimme Santa. Gimme all you got.”

Victory didn’t give a shit about the Series or charity. They were giving him a fuckton of money to sell our romance in some second-rate sequel to my parents. At least they actually loved each other. At least when they sold out to the media it was as a unit.

“Thank you for sharing that with us. Victory is lucky to have you on board.”

Victory’s video already had more than a million views … and Northspire reshared it to their stories. Damn it, Autumn.

“Autumn!” I shouted, jumping to my feet. I needed to get ahead of this before the video ruined my life.

I closed the video. More and more messages were popping up, along with interview requests from every major sports and media outlet.

That was it. Nobody cared about the Series. All they would remember was a “romance for the ages.” I was currently starring in my worst nightmare.

I typed my name into the search bar. Hundreds of hits came back: Videos of me on the ice in my Banshee uniform, photos from sledding with Santa, and each of them playing the audio clip. *“Gimme Santa. Gimme all you got.”* Some clever asshole remixed it and put it to catchy music that made me nod my head in time with it. How had they managed to do that so quickly?

Autumn came rushing down the tunnel, her red curls bouncing with excitement. “Guess you two are officially public now.”

“All that’s going to happen is me publicly kicking his—”

Anything else I said was drowned out by the sound of the crowd. The holiday music that played over the game cut off and the people in the stands were clamoring.

I turned to the glass, leaning over the door to try and see past the line of players circling someone. My heart stopped.

“Out of the way, miss.” The EMTs on stand-by pushed past us, carrying the stretcher.

I had to get out there. Was it one of the kids? Colt? I couldn’t stand the anxiety ricocheting around my chest. Luckily, Autumn snagged me before I managed to do something foolish, like trying to run on ice in pumps.

“Holly, what happened?” Aunt Francine asked, clutching onto my arm hard enough to make my fingers tingle.

“Up there.” Autumn pointed up to the Jumbotron where the camera was zooming in on an unconscious Eli Stevens. A pool of crimson was blossoming out around his head.

Autumn gasped, her “oh my god” muffled by her hands over her mouth.

“Aunt France, take them.” Colt ushered the kids toward us.

He was holding Susan in his arms. She fought like a wildcat to stay on the ice, sobbing, “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. Mr. Eli!”

Francine bent low hurrying the children off the ice and prying Susan away from Colton.

Colt’s eyes met mine, and he shook his head slightly. This wasn’t good. “Back to the locker room, everyone. Mr. Eli will be okay. Everyone back.”

I grabbed Johnathan as he passed me. “What happened?”

He dropped his eyes to the ground. “Mr. Eli gave Susan his helmet. We were done with the scrimmage and he said he had a backup. Except the teens were still playing on the other side of the ice. One of them hit a slapshot that went wide. It hit Mr. Eli right in the side of his head.”

“What was he doing on the ice without a helmet? He knows better.”

The EMTs rolled Eli onto the stretcher.

“He wasn’t on the ice. He was with the littles on the bench; he fell over the wall when he was hit and cracked his head pretty good on the ice. It was a real double whammy.”

Coach Johnstone stormed out of the locker room and barked at everyone to move out of the tunnel.

Everything was simultaneously happening too fast and in slow motion. I couldn’t keep up with it.

“Walker, what the hell did you do to my captain?” Barked Johnstone. “I told you not to fuck with my game.”

“I … I …” Fuck. *Eli.* This was all my fault. My heart was pounding too hard. The walls of the arena started fading to grey. The world swayed like the rocking of a ship. I was going to faint.

Colt's hands came down on either side of my head, his palms cupping over my ears to quiet the chaos around us. "Breathe, baby. He's gonna be okay. Breathe."

Breathe. Right. Breathing. That should be simple.

I took a slow breath in. Followed by another. And another. The whole time Colt maintained eye contact with me, keeping me grounded in the feel of him surrounding me until my panic subsided.

He pressed his lips to my temple. "That's good. You're doing so good."

The back doors opened to a waiting ambulance. The flashing of their lights mixed with the lights of the arena. Slowly, Colt lowered his hands. By the time I was fully registering what was happening, Eli was transferred onto the gurney.

"He took a hard hit, but it looks worse than it is. He's breathing and semi-conscious. You know how it is with head wounds. They bleed like a motherfucker." Colt's eyes tracked over my features. You'd think I'd been the one hit by the concern on his face. "Eli will be okay. He's probably gonna be down for a couple of days, but he'll be okay. He was lucky it was one of the kids and not a professional puck to the head. He should know better than to take off a helmet while pucks are still in play. The boys will probably give him shit for weeks about being taken out of the game by a tween."

The ice crew went out to begin clean up. There was still an entire period to play. It would be okay. It wasn't like this was hockey's first ever casualty. It was just the first on my watch.

This would probably mean the end of the Santa Series. The poor kids. Someone should go check in with them. They were almost certainly terrified.

Coach shouted down the tunnel, "Gailey. Suit up. Your suspension is officially over. I need you on the ice."

Colt didn't look up at him. Instead he stayed focused on me. "Are you going to be okay? Do you need me here?"

Somewhere a camera flashed, followed by another and another. All at once the onslaught of everything that happened in the past hour hit me. The video. His interview. That damn song played in the background of my mind like a bad soundtrack.

I blinked several times. "Yeah. Yeah. I'm fine."

"You're sure?" Colt leaned in to press another kiss to my temple.

On impulse, I leaned out of reach.

“45! I said get your ass on the ice,” Johnstone bellowed.

Colt’s face scrunched in confusion as I took a step back.

He used me, used my family, used the Series to secure a dream endorsement. Even now, this act of concern was in front of a lens. Everything happened so quickly that I didn’t have a chance to really process what had happened. Now that we were face-to-face … I couldn’t do this. Not here. Not where so many eyes were paying attention.

“You should go.” I took another step back. “And I need to get up to the office. There’s a lot to manage right now.”

He nodded. “Okay. I’ll find you after the game.”

“No.” I held my hands up between us like it could actually be a barrier to my feelings. “Don’t. I’ll just … I’ll … you need to go.”

“Gailey! Gear. Now!” Coach grabbed the back of Colt’s jersey and shoved him toward the locker room. “Andrews, get Gailey suited up before the third period starts.”

“Holly?” His voice carried down the tunnel, but it didn’t matter. I was already running for the stairs.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 29

HOLLY

4 Days Until Christmas

This was a nightmare.

I held my face in my hands as the audio for a reel droned on about the origin's of my parents' love story and the parallels to my own epic romance.

The internet was full of so many hot takes that you could have baked bread in that oven. The photos went on and on. I reluctantly continued scrolling, moving past a video of Colt talking with Heidi to one of him holding me in a loving embrace during the middle of a goddamn crisis. I flicked to the next picture: Colton Gailey holding my hand at the Christmas party. How they managed to find that was beyond me. Of course the man had to hold my hand every chance he could get. There was apparently no shortage of pictures of it.

And then there was the video that found its way into every single post: Me, with my legs wrapped around Northspire's favorite right winger while he skated us across the rink. Why, for the love of Christmas, hadn't I thought about the optics of riding a professional player across the ice? Of course people took photos. Of course every single phone was out to record me handing Gailey his ass. Did anyone share *that* footage? No. Why would they, when they could show me climbing him like a tree instead?

The game ended an hour ago. What should have been an on-fire win did a complete 180 in the third, causing the game to end in a tie. In addition to

fielding the press asking about my relationship, I was also handling an onslaught of inquiries about Eli Stevens and the impact the Santa Series made on tonight's game.

We were probably canceling the remainder of all the game-centered events that I had planned. The GM already told me that at the very least the players were out for the remainder of the Series. It was too much of a risk to have their focus split.

Which, he wasn't wrong. Without the campaign, Eli Stevens would never have been near the ice during intermission. He never would have removed his helmet. Now look at what my bright ideas had gotten us: our Captain out of commission for the remainder of the year, if not more.

My phone buzzed, despite putting my phone on Do-Not-Disturb. I had exactly three people designated to reach me, no matter my status. One of which I couldn't think about without my heart aching so badly I forgot how to breathe.

I stared at the magical, snowy photo on the screen, a quick selfie from under the Northern Lights. I held my breath until the call shifted over to voicemail for the fifth time. He must have tried calling me within minutes of getting off the ice. The stupid muscle pounding away in the center of my chest wanted to believe that it was because he genuinely cared about me.

But then there was that video. *Gimme, Santa* …

The phone rang again, only this time I could hear it ringing from the other side of my office door. There was a single knock before it pushed open. "Holly?"

"Go away, Colt." I held up my hand, keeping my head down. I couldn't look at him. He would smile or something, and then my resolve would crumble. Getting involved with Colton Gailey was a mistake.

"So your phone *does* work." Colt dropped his duffle bag on the ground and hung up the call. His steps were surprisingly light, given how directly he walked to me. He tucked a finger under my chin and forced my face up. "Talk to me."

I took a deep breath and prepared for the inevitable shootout. Colton had a lot to answer for. "And what would you like to talk about, 45?"

Colt winced from the cutting edge of my tone.

"About how my idea just cost the team their Captain, or I don't know …" I took a step back, throwing up my arms. "How about how you used my

family and played me so that you could score a career changing sponsorship?"

"What?" Colt had the damned gall to look confused. "You mean the Victory deal?"

Anger bubbled over, so that the only thing I could do was laugh. It was either that, or start screaming.

"I was going to tell you about it after the game. I wanted it to be a surprise. Victory gave me an amazing offer. I took it right before the interview."

"And this?" I opened up my phone. I didn't even have to search. The very first video to pop up was the remix song of him telling Santa to give him more, laid over a video of the two of us.

"Baby, I don't kn—"

"Call me baby one more time," I seethed through gritted teeth. "I fucking dare you."

"Holly—"

"Do you know what it feels like to be turned into a tool for someone else's success? Fucking used. You used me, Colton. You used the Series. Those kids. My family. I told you things I've never told anyone before. Was my trust really worth so little to you?"

"No. Holly, you're everything to me." He shook his head. "That video is not—"

I scrolled to another Love on the Ice video, straight from Victory's feed. "*If Santa gave me any gift this year, it was Holly Walker."* The Gimme Santa song played in the background.

"I never said that." He grimaced. "Well, not exactly that."

"I don't know why I'm so surprised. You might have sold yourself as the hockey boy with the golden heart, but in truth, you've only ever been a selfish ass. So long as Colton Gailey is happy, then none of the rest of us matter. Your life is just one party after another and damn the consequences. I've spent the past two seasons cleaning up after you." I held up my hand, ticking off all the times my PR magic skills saved his irresponsible ass. "Tampa, New York, Vegas, and that other time in Vegas. Oh, and lest we forget, Houston. Why should this be any different?" I crossed my arms over my chest.

This time it was Colt who took a step back. He looked me up and down. "Are you really that naive to think that I would sell out everyone I care

about for a contract?”

I lifted my chin. “It doesn’t matter what I believe. That’s what happened.”

The video timed out and rolled into the next one in the feed. *“Is this romance the Walker family legacy we’ve all been hoping for?”*

My glare stayed steady on Colt as two girls squealed with joy over the pivotal Eiffel Tower scene from the movie about my parents. I didn’t need to look down to know Nikolai was spinning Henrietta in a circle beneath the lights. The crescendoing music cued their kiss, this time overlayed with the scraping of hockey sticks on ice and my own laughter.

Fuck him. I deserved more than to be the sequel to someone else’s love story.

Colt pursed his lips, spine lengthening and something cold glazing over his expression. “Well then, I don’t know why I’m still standing here. I have all this new hockey star money to spend.”

“You sure do.”

“Might as well book myself a penthouse and fill it with a few puck bunnies.” His words were as good as a sucker punch to the gut. They stole the air right out from my lungs. “Throw a real *party* for all my fans. Since apparently that’s all I am.”

“Go right ahead, although the bunnies might ruin the whole *love story* angle you’ve sold. Wouldn’t want to clue the world in on how you’ve been faking this thing between us for the cameras.”

“Faking it?” He shook his head. Blood flushed his cheeks red as his anger rose. Good. He *should be* angry, because I was fucking furious.

“Yes, Colton. I don’t know which hurts more, that you used what we had for a payday, or that you engineered the entire thing. Fuck, you even brought in your own photographer to ensure you captured every touch and smile on film. I’m surprised you didn’t have secret cameras stashed out on the lake too. Hardly seemed worth all that trouble to take me skating without proof.”

I tapped my foot and looked at the ceiling to keep the tears at bay. That pain gnawing at the center of my chest grew stronger. I hated that I let him burrow his way into my heart enough that tearing him from it hurt this much.

“I never should have trusted you.”

“Wow. Just. Un-fucking-believable.” Colt spun toward the door and took two steps before facing me again. I shouldn’t have looked at the hardened edges of his expression. The resignation on his face would haunt my dreams until the end of my days.

“I always thought the ice queen act was a shield. Turns out it never was an act; you really are cold hearted. At least I can get out now before the frostbite gets a chance to set in.”

I opened the door to the office for him. “Don’t let me get in your way.”

“For the record…” He stepped into the doorway, using his hand to force the door to stay open. “I’ve never faked a second with you. Including this one.”

The door slammed behind him, sending a shockwave of sorrow around the room and echoing in my ears. I collapsed to the ground and curled into the pathetic mess that I always knew I was.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 30

COLT

4 Days Until Christmas

"Randy!" I banged on the hotel room door of my agent. I so rarely got to cuss him out in person, and right now I was ready to eviscerate someone. I spent the entire taxi ride watching the footage from the interview that Victory posted. The entire thing was a gross display of the power of editing. It looked and sounded completely genuine.

No wonder Holly was so angry. I'm pissed at me right now and they weren't even my words.

A groggy-eyed Randy opened the door. I could smell the whiskey on him. He probably spent the night celebrating the biggest win of his career. "Hey, kid. Saw you got back on the ice. Guess they didn't want to keep their top star from the game."

"What the actual fuck happened with that interview?" I shoved the video clip that Victory shared in his face. "Those aren't my words. That's not what I said. Where's all the stuff about the children's home and the good we're doing?"

"Yeah, Victory might have mentioned wanting to do a romance angle. It was the picture of you and that chippy facing off that did it. Heidi McMoore said it would make a great launch to the new promo. You know how hot the world was for the Walkers. That kind of opportunity doesn't come around every day."

“And you approved it? Without talking to me?” Could Randy feel the fire pouring from my eyes. The rage was so intense that it was threatening to burn me from the inside out.

Randy shrugged and scratched the back of his head. “You weren’t around. Love stories are good press. You’re dating goddamn ice royalty. It was a no brainer. We’d be fools not to capitalize on that. Plus, you said you didn’t want to use the kids to sell your brand. So I didn’t.”

He headed back into the room and began pouring himself another drink.

“This is not better. My relationship with Holly was *not* a bargaining chip.” I ran my hands over my face. This wasn’t just Holly’s parentage being thrown around. The world was digging up her entire history. They’d already found pictures of her with her first team and were pairing them along with photos of my youth league. She’d never know peace again.

I took the glass from his hands, tearing it away just as he was about to take a sip. “I need you to get Victory to post the entire interview. Those weren’t my words.”

Not bothered at all, he grabbed a second glass. “Yeah, yeah. I’ll get on the wire in the morning.”

“No. Call them now. I have rights. If they’re going to manipulate every bit of footage they have of me, then I don’t want to be partnered with them.”

Letting the amber liquid settle in the bottom of the glass, he said, “Let’s not be hasty. I’ll talk to them, have them add an addendum about editing footage.”

“Good.”

He took a sip. “It was one social media post, Colt. In a week no one will remember.”

“I’ll remember.” And I knew damn well Holly would never forget.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 31

HOLLY

3 Days Until Christmas

I stared at the giant pile of memos sitting on my desk and sighed. Vangelt set a meeting for the morning. He was going to fire me. I knew it. He'd already called down an end to the Santa Series. They were very clear when we started this endeavor. Either it worked, or I was out. Well, nothing about the past 24 hours could be classified as *working*.

"It's not as bad as it looks," Autumn said hesitantly. "It's mostly people wanting an update on Eli. Mostly."

She was sweet for lying to me. We both knew this was more than that. I tried asking our G.M. for the rest of the week off, but there was too much happening right now to fully ignore my responsibilities.

The light on my desk phone glowed with a lovely 73 missed messages. I redirected all the calls that normally went to my cell to go straight to the office voicemail.

"Holly, do you think that maybe Colt–"

"Don't say it, Autumn."

She needed to leave and take all that sunshine she was trying to spread with her. Ever the optimist, she stepped closer. Next thing she'd be attempting to hug me. I could see it in the weepy lines of her face.

"It's not like he said anything bad."

"I know what *he said*." I tried very hard to force the sound of his voice from my mind. Every sweet thing he'd whispered to me echoed in the

silence of the office. He'd called me amazing. Colton made me believe that I mattered in this world.

I picked up the pile of memos and started dropping one message after another into the wastebasket. They looked like falling petals.

He loves me. He loves me not. What a fucking joke.

"But he cares–"

"About himself." I cut her off before she could start needling at my self doubt. It was such a sweet and pretty lie. The problem was that I was so desperate to believe it that I'd been blinded to what was really happening. I never questioned how good it was. Being with Colton was *too* easy. Real life wasn't like the movies. I knew that and yet I'd still fallen for the cheesy smiles and smooth lines like the gullible sap I was.

Autumn's expression crumpled. I was the heartbroken one, so why did she look like she was going to start crying? "I just know that he made you happy. It was nice seeing you happy."

I took a long breath in. It was nice *being* happy for the 2.2 seconds that it lasted. "It was a lie, Autumn. Colton was lying for the cameras. He sold our relationship, just like every other person who has bothered to take the time to get to know me." My voice cracked, and I hated how weak it made me feel. "It was never real."

"I don't know." She lifted a finger. As if anything she said right now could change a damned thing.

"It doesn't matter. What matters is that we recover what we can of the Series and make sure that the fans know Eli is going to be fine. " I kicked off my heels and plopped into my desk chair. "We have a long day ahead of us. How about you go get us some coffee? My treat."

I pulled a credit card from my wallet and handed it to Autumn. I just needed five minutes to reset.

"Okay." The normally bubbly girl looked so defeated. It was like watching this relationship implode was ruining her belief in love. She moped her way out the door.

My phone vibrated with an incoming message.

Mommy Dearest: I keep getting your voicemail. Call me. It's important.

How many of those messages were actually my mother? I pursed my lips. Whatever strength I'd been pretending to hang on to bled from me the second I saw my mother's name. Important was a very broad term for Henrietta Walker. This could be anything from life threatening surgery to asking me how to download a video off of youtube.

Despite knowing better, I dialed the woman who gave me life. It rang only once. "*Good. You do have a working phone. I was afraid living out there might have affected your ability to get reliable service.*"

I gripped the edge of the desk to keep from throwing the phone. Why did I do this, again? Sure, my heart is breaking and my biggest professional endeavor is probably going to end up getting me fired. Why don't we top it all off with a healthy dose of motherly mind-fuckery while we're at it? "Cell service is actually very good along the coast. Which you know. You were just here."

Even over the phone I could hear the dismissive way she sucked in a breath. "*Your father and I saw the videos posted by that young man you're seeing. It was very smart using Victory to promote the story. Although, you should have talked to us first. Our agent could have helped to broker a deal. You know those contracts are a tricky thing. I wish it had been someone other than a hockey player, but we can work with it.*"

I was going to be sick and/or commit matricide. With the way I was feeling, it could go either way. Possibly both.

"I had nothing to do with the Victory deal." Acid flipped in my stomach.

She continued prattling on as if I had said nothing. "*Ivy said he was nice, and the man is very good looking. He has that going for you. She's engaged to the Vasiliev boy. They would have made a better choice for a "Love on the Ice" sequel, but we're here now. So let's make the most of it. You should both plan to come to Virginia so we can do a photoshoot. The estate the Carlisles' have on the Potomac would make for a perfect backdrop. Too bad it isn't a little later when the cherry blossoms are in bloom.*"

I sat the phone down on the desk, making her voice smaller and less seizure-inducing. I massaged my fingertips into my temples in a poor attempt to block this conversation out.

"*I'll call up my photographer and we can see if they can do a feature in Sports Break.*"

“We’re not coming to Virginia. There’s not going to be a feature or photos … or whatever fairytale nonsense you’re picturing in your head.”

“*But Holly, darling.*”

“NO, mother. I have a lot to do right now. I can’t talk about this.” I hung up the call before she could say anything else.

Spots flitted in the corner of my vision as I tried and failed to take in a breath. The first time my mother has ever cared about me, and it wasn’t even something I’d done. It was Colton-fucking-Gailey. It was always Colton.

I turned off the power to my phone and dropped it in the drawer of my desk. Fuck it. Fuck all of it. That phone and I were now enemies.

Rustling sounds of a paper bag filtered through the office door. Before Autumn came bounding back into the room. I dropped to the ground and scooted myself completely beneath the desk.

I was officially done with people for the day. Vangelt was probably going to fire me anyway. What did any of it matter?

The office door opened.

“Holly?” Autumn paused, humming a Christmas carol to herself as she sat my coffee on the desk. Of course it wasn’t any carol. It was the very same one Colton had sung to me. I clapped my hands over my mouth to stifle the sob that tried to escape.

What the fuck had I let him do to me?

I used to be a woman who, at the very least, looked like she had her shit together.

Now, I was hiding under my desk, afraid of a phone.

* * *

“Holly? I need you to sign off on this release form.” The door to my office thunked against the wall. “Damn. You’re not here.”

I jumped, smacking my head on the side of my desk. “Ow.”

“What in the …” Miller pulled the chair back. My feet, which were propped up on the wheels, thunked to the ground. “Why are you sleeping under your desk?”

“Oh, you know, it seemed like a good idea at the time.” I rubbed at the sore spot on my head. My eyes burned. Somewhere in the middle of my

pity party I'd managed to sob myself to sleep; unsurprising given I wasn't able to rest at all the night before.

"And you've been crying." He squatted down and pulled the half eaten bag of chips from under my leg. "Come on. Get out of there."

"Nope. I'm good right here. I've decided the world can fuck on off. I'm done." I readjusted my position in the small space. "However, this floor is very hard."

He reached in and dragged me out of my hidey spot.

I dug my feet in, but somehow the lovable idiot was strong enough to manhandle me back into my chair. "Don't make me do it, Mills. Autumn will come back here trying to happy up the place."

Miller picked up one of the discarded memos–or what was left of it. I'd decided to make half of them into tiny ninja stars and had chucked them at the wall, imagining each brick was Colton's face.

"Should I be concerned that you've origami'd a small paper arsenal?"

"No. Be concerned when Colton comes back in here and I start throwing the real thing."

"You have real ninja stars?"

I shrugged. "You can buy anything on the internet."

Miller propped himself on top of the desk opposite me. "So what exactly did Captain Charming do to earn all of this ire and your tears?"

"That video Victory released." I said with a sigh. "I know he's your best friend, and to you he can do no wrong–"

Mills snorted a laugh. "We both know that's a lie. Colt fucks up all the time. He's just a lucky bastard who figures out ways to make it work in his favor."

"Not like this. He was playing me. He used me to get that deal with Victory."

Mills shook his head, already denying the claim. "That's not right. Holly, Colton really cares about you … like… more than hockey."

I rolled my eyes. "You know it's naughty to lie so close to Christmas. Santa won't bring you any presents."

"I'm serious. Colt was suspended and didn't even complain, because he was spending his days with you. Coach put him back on the ice, and he was more worried about what was happening with you than the damn game. You should have seen him, Holly. He was a mess. That's not our Colton. None of that was fake."

“He’s not *my* anything. We ended it. He walked right out that door.” I pointed at the office door.

“No.” He was going to get whiplash if he kept shaking his head like that.

“Save your denials. It’s nothing he didn’t already say. The truth is, if any of this mattered to him, then he’d be here making it right. Not you.”

“That’s a great idea.” He clapped his hands and rubbed them together like he was getting ready to perform a magic trick.

“What is?”

“I’m going to make it right. ”

“That’s not what I said.”

“Yes, it is. There’s a correct answer here and I’m going to find it. First, I’m going to go kick Colton’s ass for being dumb enough to walk out on you.” Mills leaned in and gave me a big hug.

I awkwardly patted his back. “Can we not do the loving friend thing? It’s freaking me out.”

“Just sit tight. Someday you can name your baby Miller as a thank you for saving your relationship.”

I blinked at him. “There’s nothing to save, Mills. It’s over.”

He waved on his way out the door. “And yet, Miller is still going to save the day.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 32

COLT

2 Days Until Christmas

"Well, well, well, look who's vertical." I held the door open to the weight room to let Eli walk in with me. "Nice of you to rejoin the living."

He looked good. There was a green bruise discoloring his left temple, but otherwise he seemed normal. Well, except the sunglasses he was wearing indoors. That was new. I got it though. My one and only concussion made me cuss out every light in the house. That had been hell, and I still would have taken it over the thrashing I'd taken from Holly.

"You should be thanking me." Eli pushed on my shoulder hard enough to send me into the wall. "Ols told me Coach cut your suspension short."

That should feel like a good thing, and yet, like everything else, it felt like a punishment for something I had no control over.

"I think it's more of a stay of execution than a reinstatement." I plopped onto one of the leg presses and swung my legs up into position. "You should see how Coach was riding my ass today in practice."

Which was fine. I'd rather be thinking about how running sprints was making me want to throw up versus the alternative of sitting at home with heartache strong enough to turn my stomach. It was why I was the only player currently here instead of at home resting up for tomorrow night's game.

Eli leaned against the rack holding the different plates. “Better than what I’m looking at. The med team is grounding me for the next two weeks. The trainers met with my doctors to come up with a recovery plan. I’m just here to see how much I’m gonna hate it.”

I laughed while grunting through my next set of reps. “It’s your own damn fault for taking off your helmet.”

“I’m well aware. The headache that’s been keeping me company serves as one hell of a nice reminder.” Eli pulled his phone from his pocket and laughed at whatever photo popped up. This was completely new. Did he finally have some girl in his life? Eli was always game first. Everyone largely suspected this would be his last season, but maybe he was starting the hunt for his future Mrs. Stevens early.

“Are you going to come out for tomorrow’s Christmas Eve game?” I asked. The fact that this was supposed to be the final night of the Series was something that had been itching at the back of my brain. Vangelt put an end to most of Holly’s plans. I was trying very hard to avoid the temptation to ask her if she needed anything. The big finale was something she’d been really excited about. Everything between us aside, this must have gutted her.

“I thought I might go up to the suite and watch with the Hanover kids. Show them I’m okay. Aunt Francine brought Susan in to see me while I was in the hospital. The little tyke was pretty worried.” He flicked to his photos and held the screen up to me. “Look at this. She’s been having Aunt Francine send me videos. This is the fifth one today.”

He hit play and Susan proceeded to flip through page after page of drawings she’d made showing the two of them playing. Eli beamed down at the screen. A glowy look of contentment filled that expression.

“Here, and then there were these.” Lucky reached into his back pocket and pulled out a few letters written in messy crayons. Each had a drawing of a hockey player on the back, one of which was playing alongside Santa.

“Guess her stance on Santa has changed.”

Eli nodded. “Oh yeah. Ever since he gave her that doll, she’s been going on about being really good so that her Christmas wish comes true.”

I dropped my legs, making the weights rattle. “Fuck.”

I used the sleeve of my shirt to wipe away a bead of sweat from my forehead.

“What?” Eli looked confused, glancing over the machine to see if it was broken.

Rolling to my side and resting my arms on my knees, I asked, “Did Susan tell you what she asked Santa for?”

He shook his head. “I asked, but she didn’t want to jinx it. Seeing as you know who is always watching.”

I blew out a breath. “She asked him to find her a home, someone to call family.”

Eli let out a matching breath. “Shit.”

“Yeah, shit. I’m going to have to figure something out. I just wanted her to believe in Santa so she could get some of her youth back.”

He scratched at the beard growing in. “Weird thing was that when Kris was at Hanover last—”

“Kris stopped by Hanover?”

“Aunt Francine invited him for casserole night.”

“And you were there too?” Sometimes Eli would come with me before games for lunch, but dinner on his own was a new one.

“I just told you it was casserole night. What part of that sentence aren’t you understanding? Aunt Francine knows her way around a baking dish.”

I rolled my eyes at him. “Dude, we seriously need to find you a woman.”

“Shut up. She puts those crunchy onion things on top. It reminds me of what my grandma used to make. I’m not going to apologize for eating good food when it’s offered.”

“Fine, fine. Back to whatever Kris was doing on *casserole night*.”

“When Susan asked him how her gift was coming along, he said things are shaping up nicely and winked at her.” Eli swiped to a selfie he’d taken with Susan. “*Shaping up nicely*. What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I don’t know. Maybe someone out there has been thinking about adopting her. She’s adorable, and the team did use her in a lot of publicity for the Series. Probably some person out there looking for a kid to fill a hole in their heart fell in love with her. The cute little ones always go first.” It was a sad truth. I tried not to think too hard about how many times young me had to swallow my disappointment.

“You really think Susan is getting adopted?” His brows knit together. For some reason he looked worried by that statement.

“I mean. It’s possible. I don’t know why Kris would know about it. I feel like Francine would have said something if there were papers in motion, but yeah, maybe.” I tilted my head in confusion. “Why do you look like you just got jump scared? It’s not like you were thinking about adopting her.”

“Yeah…” He barked out a breathy laugh. “I mean. I wouldn’t be opposed to it.”

I blinked at him in surprise. Adopting a kid was a big step, especially for a single guy in our line of work. The hockey schedule was rough on rock solid families. I couldn’t imagine how hard it would be to try and go it alone.

Eli looked down at his phone. It buzzed with an incoming call from Aunt Francine. He smiled, and then some thought clicked in his head to make him smile wider. “I’ve gotta take this.”

I wiped down the press while he chatted with Aunt Francine.

“Of course I’m coming tomorrow,” he said, eyes shifting over to me. “Yeah, he’s coming too. I’m looking right at him. No. He wouldn’t miss lunch. It’s tradition.”

Damn, did she really think I was so in my head that I would miss a game day lunch? I hated that she was concerned enough that she was now recruiting Eli to look after me, even if he didn’t understand that was what she was doing. Francine never could leave me to my devices.

“Noooo.” Eli’s eyes bulged out of his head. “I didn’t know that. No, he didn’t say anything.”

I spent the night pouring out my heart to Aunt Francine, and this was how she repaid me.

He lowered the phone and whisper-hissed at me. “What did you do to Holly?”

“Why does everyone assume it was me?” *Cause you’re a fuck up, Colt. That’s why.* First Mills, now Eli. After Miller stumbled on Holly crying in her office, he took it upon himself to put me through the inquisition. He was supposed to be my best friend, just like they were supposed to be my team. But then today at practice everyone was taking shots like they were trying to take a chunk out of me.

I wasn’t the one who was too stubborn to check her facts. She was so quick to assume the worst of me. That hurt more than I was ready for. “Ya know, maybe I left her.”

Not a total lie. I did walk out of the room on my own.

Although, I'm still not entirely certain that was the right choice. Especially when Miller told me how he found her. In truth, I did sell our love story. Because I wasn't a knowing participant didn't mean I wasn't in some ways complicit. I think that was what made me so angry about all of this. I couldn't blame her for being pissed.

Eli chuckled at whatever Aunt Francine said. He turned, slugging me in the shoulder. "Yeah, I've seen the movie. It's one of my favorites, too."

"What the fuck?" I rubbed at my arm.

"You deserved that," he hissed, before smiling into the phone, "I agree. He'd be a dumb ass to let someone like her get away. No, there's a song?"

Fuck my life.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 33

HOLLY

1 Day Until Christmas

Bells jingled along with heavy footfalls. I looked up at the ceiling. There was no way someone was walking on the roof of this building. My office was on the top floor. It was almost 4 on a game day. Most of the office was already over at the arena.

I knew it was Christmas Eve, but this was too much.

The sound grew louder, the steps thumping against the metal of my fire escape. Whoever it was, they were coming this way. Outside my window a smiling face waved at me.

I screamed. It wasn't pretty. It was a blood curdling "I'm about to be murdered by a serial killer" kind of scream. My heart leapt into my throat cutting off the embarrassing noises I was making.

It took several seconds for my brain to catch up with what was happening. He gave three quick knocks against the glass and rolled his hands for me to let him in.

"What in Christmas is happening right now?" I asked the empty room, still not entirely believing what I was seeing. I threw open the window of my office and leaned over the fire escape. Cold wind snapped at my face and pulled my hair free from its careful twist. Small flakes of snow floated down, sticking to my eyelashes.

"What are you doing out here? It isn't safe. These escapes haven't been in use for years," I asked as Kris stepped up to the window. The giant silver

bells jingled from where they were strapped to his boots.

“Pretty sure you just took a couple years off my life.” I hastily backed up to make room for him to climb over my windowsill. He was in his full Santa regalia, complete with a big red hat lined with thick white fur.

“Busy night. I thought I’d check in before you headed down to the arena for the game.”

“I don’t know how busy tonight is going to be now that we have no events to manage. Which, shouldn’t you be prepping the ice, and more importantly, *why were you taking the fire escape*?”

“You don’t have a chimney.” He brushed away the snow from the front of his jacket, which had small dark streaks of soot on it.

“What?” I asked, watching in confusion as the snow melted and some of the smudges disappeared. This was a joke, right? Someone with a camera was about to jump out and shout “got you!”

“It’s easier to park the sleigh on the roof.” Kris clapped his belly and gave a hearty laugh. “You try finding an open spot large enough for a sleigh and eight reindeer on the street during rush hour.”

“Right,” I said slowly and leaned back out the window to try and see the roof. “Makes total sense.”

He gently placed a hand on my shoulder and pulled me back into the office. “It would seem this is the only way to reach you. Aunt Francine said you aren’t answering your messages.”

“Yes, well. Um…” I toed at the rug with the point of my shoe. “My phone died and I thought it might be easier to leave it dead for a few days.”

Lies. I was lying to Santa. Fuck, I really was going on the naughty list this year.

Kris’s pocket jangled. The “Gimme Santa” remix chimed as his ring tone. “Oh, sorry.”

He clicked a button to try and silence the phone. Which proved to be an impossible task with his thick driving gloves on. Instead of turning it off, the volume on the song slowly increased. The EDM undertones thumped in what I hated to admit was a catchy beat. Kris continued to fumble, humming along to it the entire time, until right as the song clicked off he dropped the phone. It slid under the tall bookcase.

A second later the song started up again.

I groaned.

“Did you know that’s our Colton singing?” Kris dropped to his knees and tried to wiggle his fingers under the bottom shelf. His massive red bulk rolled back and forth like a toppled bowling pin.

“I’m aware.” I shooed him away and grabbed a ruler from my desk. Laying down on my side I shimmied against the shelves and tried to get my arm far enough under the shelf to reach the phone.

“You don’t like it?” Kris sounded genuinely surprised. “It’s a song about charity and giving back to the children. I think it’s quite lovely.”

“Lovely isn’t the word I’d have chosen. That song has very little to do with love and even less to do with charity.” The ruler tapped the screen. A rush of near victory tightened my nerves. I grunted and gave the phone a hard hit. It slid across the tile, knocking into my hip. “Success!”

I clicked the side button to turn off the ringer. Blissfully, the song stopped.

“Are you sure?” asked Kris. Something twinkled in his eye. It was that same sparkle from the last time we talked, like he knew more than he was letting on.

“Out with it. What do you know?” I handed him his phone and hit him with my best questioning glare.

We can just go right ahead and add interrogating Santa on Christmas Eve to my resume. I might not be going to the Olympics, but I got to give a fictional man the third degree. So suck on that, Ivy. With your perfect life, parents who think the sun shines out your ass, and your glossy new fiancé.

Kris chuckled. “I know everything. I keep trying to tell you. But, my dear, you need to work on hearing what someone is saying when they speak to you.”

What was that supposed to mean? There was nothing wrong with my hearing.

“Sorry for interrupting your evening and scaring you. I must be going. Busy, busy night.” He grabbed his belt and adjusted it on his belly. “Thank you for fetching my phone for me. I don’t know what I’d do without the GPS. It makes this job so much easier.”

Kris climbed over the windowsill and back on to the fire escape.

“Wait, Kris.” I clambered to my feet and rushed to the window. “What did you need to tell me?”

How did an old man climb stairs so quickly? By the time I made it there, Kris had already climbed onto the roof. Talk about commitment to the

bit.

Kris leaned over the brick and waved down at me. “Oh, I already said it. Merry Christmas, Holly.”

I closed the window and slowly made my way back to my desk. The sound of sleigh bells and shuffling scraped over the roof. I was certain I heard a jolly “ho ho ho” before everything went quiet.

I pulled my phone out of the drawer I’d hidden it in. My blacked out screen stared back at me. It was going to win this contest because the urge to power it up was twitching in my fingers.

Why would Kris say that about the song?

He never mentioned the kids in the video. Not once. Charity? I was lucky that I hadn’t snorted in disbelief.

The question taunted me. Everything I ever wanted to know was waiting on the other side of that shiny black abyss. Problem was that everything I *didn’t* want to know was waiting right next to it. My heart was already too bruised to take another hit.

I needed a distraction.

Sitting in the corner of the room were two giant tote bags filled with presents. My guilt went shopping last night and bought the Hanover kids half a toy store. It was more than I could afford if I was honest with myself. That didn’t matter. I hated that kids who had been given so little had their final game taken from them.

Maybe bringing a bit of joy back would help. At the very least the chaos of that house would for sure keep my mind busy. I could drop off presents and then ride over to the game on the bus with them. Plus, I could use a reason to smile.

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 34

COLT

1 Day To Christmas

“And then Mr. Eli said that he’d take Elizabeth and me to the fair this summer, and we could ride the rollercoaster, and get cotton candy.” Susan bounced happily in her seat and pretended to give her dolly a bite of the spaghetti.

“Is that so?” I asked, side eyeing Eli. He hated rollercoasters and crowds.

“I don’t trust those traveling faire rides.” Aunt Francine tsked. “You don’t know who put them together. You want me to strap myself into something that was hauled into town last week on the back of a truck. I’ll take a big ole helping of nope with that one.”

“Hey, that rollercoaster is an icon.” I pointed at France with my fork. “Thinking you’re about to die is an Alaskan kid’s right of passage. Don’t take that away from them.”

Eli laughed. “Fine, fine. Maybe we’ll hop a plane to Disneyland or something instead.”

Susan dropped her fork and gasped.

“That was a mistake,” I said under my breath.

She held up her doll in both hands. “Did you hear that Elizabeth? We’re going to Disneyland.”

“Hey, when do we get to go to Disneyland?” The twins asked in unison.

“You’re doing that creepy twin thing again,” I said, wagging a finger between them. “But maybe, MAYBE, we can figure out a home trip or something during the off season. Maybe.”

I had Victory’s endorsement now, and already other corporations had been reaching out. What good was the money if I couldn’t share it with someone, or in this case, someones?

Aunt Francine dabbed at the corner of her eyes. “Colton, you’ve already done so much. That’s not—”

“France, do you know how many times I wished to go to some place like Disneyland as a kid? If I can figure it out, then we’re doing it.” I held up my glass. “Churros for everyone.”

“Churros for everyone!” They cheered together and clinked glasses.

The doorbell rang. Aunt Francine pushed back from the table. Before she could make it there, the door opened and Miller shuffled into the house … dragging a snow-covered Holly behind him.

The cold had turned her nose and cheeks bright red. It made her eyes brighter. Her red coat was almost white from the snow, and her long hair was peeking out in icy curls from beneath her hat. In a word, she was gorgeous.

Miller waved at everyone and dropped a massive tote on the ground. “Look who I found trying to carry two of the largest bags ever through a snowstorm.”

“Holly!” Susan screeched. “Are those presents!”

“Oh my.” Francine hurried over to them, pulling another bag from Holly’s shoulder. “Goodness, child did you have to bring the entire blizzard into the house with you?”

Holly pulled off her gloves and unwrapped the scarf from around her neck. I didn’t think she’d noticed me yet. “Sorry, my driver said he couldn’t make the turn at the end of the road since the plows haven’t gotten to the side streets yet. So he had to drop me off by the round about.”

France helped to pull off her coat. “Come in and warm up. I’ll make you a nice cup of something warm.” She leaned in and winked. “I’ll add a little something extra to it if you want. It is Christmas after all.”

“Thanks—” Her eyes finally met mine. I didn’t realize I’d risen to standing. “Actually, I should—”

“Nonsense.” Miller grabbed her arm and tugged her out of the foyer and into the dining room. “Aw, nice! We didn’t miss spaghetti. Traffic was

awful. I was afraid I wouldn’t make it in time.”

She wasn’t listening to him. I don’t think she blinked once. Instead, she stumbled as he towed her along and deposited her beside me.

“Well, I’m done.” Eli got up and grabbed his plate. “Holly, you can have my seat. Francine, there was something I wanted to talk to you about. Think you could give me a few minutes in private?”

“Sure.” Aunt Francine untied her apron and hung it on the hook beside the kitchen door. She pointed down the long table. “You kids be good. You know who is watching.”

Holly slowly lowered into the vacated seat.

“Here you go, miss.” Jake handed her and Miller a plate.

“Thanks.” Holly smiled at him. Something in my chest twisted. Up close I could see how the snow had darkened her lashes. The freckles on her cheeks were vivid against the reddened skin. I knew she was stunning, but the smile was a shot to the heart I wasn’t ready for.

“I tried calling you this morning,” I said quietly.

She didn’t look at me. Instead she took the bowl of pasta from Mills and started heaping a spoonful onto her plate. “Yeah. I’ve had my phone turned off for the past couple of days. The calls and notifications were overwhelming.”

Because of that stupid video. Not only would the media be hounding her for an exclusive, but then the hit Eli took was probably also bringing in the sports columnists looking for a team update.

“Because of the interview.” I kept my voice low.

She sighed and twirled a fork aimlessly through the spaghetti. “I told Prescott that I needed to check out for a few days. I was only in the office today because there’s a game tonight.”

I cursed Randy for what must be the millionth time in the past three days. He promised me he’d fix it, but I wasn’t sure this was something that could be fixed. You couldn’t put the genie back in the bottle.

“Oh.” Miller got up dramatically with a goofy fucking grin. What was he up to? I’d known him my whole life. He was acting classically suspicious. “That reminds me. I have something we should watch.”

I glanced nervously at Holly. She sat with her mouth hanging open and eyes wide like Miller had just suggested viewing someone’s execution. It was probably mine. Whatever he had planned definitely was going to kill me.

“Yes. The kids should see this. It’s about them. I watched it quickly, but then had to get over here for our pre-game lunch.” He hurried into the living room and started messing with the remote.

“Mills, maybe this isn’t the time.” Anxiety crept up my spine.

He snorted. “This is, in fact, the perfect time.”

It was pointless arguing with him. The kids were already scrambling to snag the best seats in the living room. That was the thing about living with 11 other kids. There were only seats for about half and if you weren’t fast enough you’d find yourself stuck on the floor.

I was frozen in place, completely helpless as the kids tried to guess what he was putting on. This must be what the deer in headlights felt like moments before the car hit him.

“I saved it so we could all watch it together.” The grey circle spun on the screen and then a perfect mirror of his phone appeared. He looked over his shoulder at Holly. “Go on. Sit down.”

She inched closer and leaned against the archway into the room. “I’m good here.” Knowing her, Holly probably wanted a clear view of all the exits.

Eli and Francine reemerged and came up behind me. She put her hand on my arm. “What’s going on? Why is Miller commandeering my television?”

“This is Mills we’re talking about, could literally be anything. My money is on claymation cage fighting, but Christmas.” Eli laughed. “Rudolph versus Santa.”

That was an oddly specific guess.

“Please god, not another one of those claymation videos.” Francine groaned. I’d kind of forgotten about Mills’s brief side quest into stop motion videography.

I pointed at the twins. “Up. Let Aunt Francine sit down. You two can sit on the ground.”

“That’s not fair,” they said in unison, but they immediately vacated the easy chair in the corner.

I half perched on the arm of the couch. It was the closest seat to where Holly was standing, close enough I could smell her perfume. It felt unbelievably comforting, like that scent was the key to everything I was missing.

The gentle slope of Holly's jaw was set in a hard line that matched her narrowed eyes and furrowed brows. It was such a contrast to the gentleness of the way she'd looked at me that morning in the lodge.

"Damn storm has my knees feeling like they're made of broken glass." She grunted as she settled into the chair. Pointing at the TV, she added, "Let's get this over with."

Miller hit play, and a rock dropped into my stomach. The camera panned out to show the entire Victory interview room. We were chatting as a tech worked to get my mic hooked up. This must have been the raw footage.

"Where did you get this?" I asked, completely shocked.

Heidi adjusted herself in her seat, fluffed her long hair and smiled big for the camera.

Holly's voice broke as she said, "I think I'm going to go. I don't—"

"You park yourself right there, missy," Aunt Francine's you're in trouble voice commanded. She pointed back at the nook Holly had sequestered herself in. I hadn't heard Francine use that tone in a long time and never with a guest. "I have not sat through three days of listening to that one crying over you, for you to weasel yourself out the door just when things start getting good. You're going to stay and watch this video."

"I haven't been crying for three days," I grumbled.

Holly's mouth snapped shut, and she took a step back into the room. Quietly, she added, "Yes, ma'am."

"Good girl." Aunt Francine nodded her head in the direction of the T.V. "Hit play, Miller."

I held my breath and kept my eyes on Holly as Heidi McMoor started introducing us. We chatted about Victory and the sponsorship deal.

"The greatest in every sport have been named by Victory. Wearing Victory's wings on my chest is an honor."

The kids cheered excitedly and the pride that wanted to rise in me remained tamped down by Holly's still tight expression.

Heidi flicked her hair over her shoulder and asked about the Santa Series. In retrospect, it was obvious that she was setting me up to talk about Holly from the very beginning.

"I don't know that I can take credit for being anything more than eye candy. All of the planning has been the hard work of Northspire's PR team and their head of operations, Holly Walker."

Heidi's pitch rose with excitement, *"Yes, the world is positively buzzing about you and Miss Walker."*

Holly clutched the collar of her shirt, her chest rising as she held her breath.

"They are?" On screen, I looked off camera to where Randy was urging me to continue. The confusion in my expression was clear. I didn't spend time on social media, so I hadn't yet seen any of the photos that were already circulating of us.

What I did know was that Holly wouldn't have wanted our relationship discussed on camera, especially in comparison to her parents. Holly was spectacular. She deserved a spotlight for what she was doing in Northspire.

Heidi continued, *"Absolutely. What's not to love? The eldest daughter of our nation's most famous ice couple. The whole world watched Henrietta and Nikolai's romance play out on the ice. Not to mention the movie of their love story was my favorite as a kid."*

"Oh that movie is my favorite, too," Aunt Francine said in a whisper.

"Is this romance the Walker family legacy we've all been hoping for? Care to give the world a peek behind that curtain?"

Holly tightened her eyes like she couldn't bear to watch. This was what I was trying to tell her, the response she's expecting wasn't coming.

"That curtain isn't why we're here tonight. Holly is one of the most amazing women I've ever had the privilege of knowing. The Santa Series is proof of that."

"Word is you know her very well."

"I do. I know that she was once a pro-hockey player herself and now she's using that passion to make this sport more inclusive. I know that she cares deeply that every child has the opportunity to feel like they belong to something bigger than themselves. I know that there isn't anything she wouldn't give to see that dream come true. It's inspiring. If Santa gave me any gift this year, it was the chance to get to know Holly Walker."

Her eyes flew open, but they weren't directed at the screen. Instead she was looking right at the core of who I was. It felt like my chest was cracked open and my beating heart was there waiting for her to take it. She had to know that she was more than a tool. She had to.

"Many people don't know that I grew up an orphan, or that I was only able to play hockey because a very generous family paid my dues for me. I was lucky in a way that so many other children aren't. It was by chance that

I ended up the face of the Santa Series, but it's a cause that hits close to my literal home. I grew up here. In fact, I'm donating the entire proceeds of my Victory partnership to the Hanover House Children's Home here in Northspire."

"Mills, pause the video," Eli said. "Colton, is this true? You signed over that entire contract to Hanover? That must have been millions of dollars."

"It's true." Francine beamed up at me with pride. It seemed that everyone in the room but her had gone speechless. "We've been working behind the scenes to try and get something going. Colton's agent told him that Victory was interested in what you were doing with the Series on the same day that the government took our funding."

I cracked a half smile and turned to Holly. "So we decided to lean into it a bit. *That's why* we did the impromptu photo op on the sledding day. Alex was trying to capture the heart of the team."

Aunt Francine added, "That endorsement is saving this home."

Mills hit play again. Holly's eyes went glassy, this time she gave the television her full attention.

"That's a very generous gift."

"It isn't. Hanover was my home, and it's home to a dozen other kids, too. It's a travesty that funding for these types of organizations continue being cut. I'm doing what I can to help one home. There's a much bigger need out there than any one person can solve. I was very lucky Victory called when they did so I can do this for them. Other homes out there aren't as lucky. That's why programs like the Santa Series matter. We need more of them. When programs like these thrive, the children win. That's the real gift."

Holly's hand covered her mouth, hiding whatever emotion was visibly brimming in her expression.

"Next year will be bigger. Hopefully the Santa Series will grow beyond our borders and across the league. Get ready world because Santa is coming to town."

"One present at a time."

"That's right. Gimme Santa. Gimme all you got."

Holly silently crossed the room. She took my face tenderly in both hands and leaned down to press a chaste kiss to my lips.

My arms wrapped around her waist and I stood, lifting her into the air. I deepened the kiss, turning us so that my back was to the children. They

hooped and hollered, but my girl was in my arms and right now that was the only thing that mattered. This was where she belonged.

When she finally pulled away, her hands curled into the collar of my shirt and she dropped her head to my chest. “I’m so sorry, Cole.”

Cole. Fuck, it felt good to hear that name.

“I said some awful things. I don’t …” Tears soaked into my shirt.

I lifted up her chin, making those beautiful eyes focus on me. “Stop.”

“But—”

“No. You were right to be mad. I was mad too. People say and do things when they’re angry. I said many things. You should have heard what I said to Randy. I threatened to fire him.”

“You did? After he got you Victory?”

“I did, because if that was how Victory was gonna play it, then I didn’t want it. I never gave them permission to sell our relationship like that or to manipulate my footage. The video they posted blindsided me just as much as it did you.”

She shook her head. “But all that money. What about Hanover?”

“Hanover is fine. Randy got Victory to change the deal. They already took down all the *Love on the Ice* footage. I’m supposed to be giving them an entirely different interview after the game tonight. As reparations for the last video, Victory is going to fund next year’s entire Series or whatever community based project we want to lead.”

“What?” Holly’s jaw dropped.

I pressed my forehead to hers. “I love you, Holly.”

Behind us, Aunt Francine made a high pitched, uncharacteristically girly squeal. “I knew it!”

Ignoring them, I kept talking. I’d already started this confession, and I wasn’t stopping now. I’d thought a lot in the past few days about what I would say to her when I got the chance.

“Kicking that shark was the best thing to ever happen to me. Working with you and this project has made me realize a lot about my priorities and what I want my future to look like. That future is you. I want to be the man who stands by your side while you change the world.”

Holly licked her lips. “I love you, too. I don’t … I don’t have the words for all of this. I just know that I don’t ever want to feel that empty and alone again. I didn’t even realize how much having you with me meant, until you

weren’t there. I’m not sure I have the capacity to change the world. That’s a pretty tall order. But I do want to make it better.”

I blinked at her dumbly, still caught on those first three words. Holly loves me. I tightened my hold on her. There was no way I was going to let her run for the door again.

Cracking a crooked smile, I added, “Of course, if we could play a little hockey every now and then, that would be great too.”

OceanofPDF.com

Chapter 35

HOLLY

1 Day To Christmas

"Now that showtime is over, who wants a present?"

"Me!" The children descended on the totes like a flock of vultures.

I leaned into Cole, letting his sturdy frame support me as we settled into the newly vacated couch. His arm circled my shoulders and held me close. The stress of the past several days evaporated and in its place was a warm feeling of contentment.

Johnathan was already dragging over the first of the two bags. I still couldn't believe that I trudged all the way down the street dragging two of those things through the snow.

The kids passed the different boxes around the room. Shopping for them was so much easier now that I knew the kids better. Paper flew into the air. I said a silent lament for the hours I'd spent wrapping them.

The twins held up identical foam battle axes. "Yes!"

"If you look, the top of the axe is also a double barrel gun for darts." I pointed out the holes in the head of the blade.

"Wicked!" They said in unison, swinging the new weapons, ready to attack.

"Ah, ah, ah!" Aunt Francine snapped. "Not in here. Go upstairs. If you're going to act like animals, it can be in your own room."

Not needing to be told twice, they scampered up the stairs along with some of the other boys who got bright new guns. A couple candy cane darts toppled down the stairs as they attempted to load and run at the same time.

Johnathan pulled the paper from an engineering kit. “Woah.”

“It’s a remote controlled trebuchet, but the designs let you mod it out in a dozen different ways. I thought you’d appreciate the customizations.” I knew he’d love a STEM kit. Something told me after he engineered the headquarters during the house war that building siege weapons was right up his alley.

“Miss Holly, this one is for you.” Susan held up a red present with a gold bow.

“What?” I sat up and tilted my head trying to take in the completely unfamiliar package.

“You wrapped yourself a present?” Cole asked, laughing.

“Stop laughing at me. That’s not one of my presents.” I looked at Miller accusingly. “And you, stop trying to get me in trouble.”

Mills held a hand to his heart. “I didn’t put that in there. Honest.”

“Susan, sweetheart, where did you find this?” I took the present from her and turned it over. Tiny specks of glitter clung to the paper.

“At the bottom of the bag.” Susan took the present with her name and walked to Eli. He lifted the little one up and sat her on his lap. I’d gotten her a new accessory kit for her Elizabeth doll. It was wild how expensive those things were.

“Did you do this?” I tilted the present at Cole.

He held up both hands in surrender. “Not me. I’ve never seen that before.”

“Well then, where…” The glitter from the paper sparkled like living starlight. I looked down at my hands. Sure enough, there was iridescent gold dust coating my fingers. “That sneaky old man.”

How in the hell did Kris get a present into my bag? The bottom of the tote, even. I was 99% certain he didn’t climb through the window holding a present. I would have seen it.

“What sneaky old men have you been spending time with?” Cole asked.

“Kris.” I tore the paper down the center, tossing it and the bow to the side. Northspire’s logo was stamped on the outside of an oversized shirt box.

I flipped open the lid and blinked several times in confusion. Inside was a maroon jersey with a familiar navy stag in the center. Snowflakes in a brighter red were woven in an interconnecting pattern that caught the light. “This is the specialty jersey the team had made for tonight’s game.”

The shoulder had a navy blue number 45 sewn in gold thread. I quickly turned the shirt over. This much larger 45 had white snow flakes matching the background pattern. The contrast was striking, as was the large “Gailey” stitched across the top.

“Shouldn’t these be with the equipment managers?” Cole asked, taking it from me. “No, wait, this isn’t mine. It’s too small.”

“That’s because it isn’t meant for you to wear it,” Aunt Francine said with a wink.

I took it back. “But where did he get it?”

“Maybe he snagged one from the team store?” Eli suggested, as Jake handed him a similar box. “What’s this?”

“I don’t know. It has your name on it.” Jake pointed to the “Eli” written in gold ink.

I shook my head. “We aren’t selling the game jerseys. The plan was always to auction off the team jerseys after the game. There’s a game day set for each player, but no extras.”

Eli opened the box and pulled out a matching jersey, only this one was much much smaller. It had a 77 on it. He swallowed hard.

Jake laughed. “I think someone needs to check Kris’s eyes because you couldn’t fit your right arm in that.”

Aunt Francine covered her mouth with a gasp. “It isn’t for him.”

“No, it isn’t.” Eli nodded and slowly a massive smile crested his face. “Susan, there’s something I wanted to ask you.”

Cole and I exchanged similar questioning looks.

“Me?” She twisted in his lap.

“Yes.” Eli took her little hand in his. “What would you say if I asked to be your daddy?”

From his spot on the ground, Miller snorted. “I’m so calling him that from now on.”

Cole kicked him in the side. “Not the time, man.”

Susan’s response was very barely loud enough to hear, “You mean it? Not for pretend, but for really real?”

“As really real as it gets.” He squeezed the hand holding hers. “I’ve been thinking about it for a long time now and I already asked Aunt Francine. If you want this, then I’ll submit the papers tomorrow. It’s not a quick process, but Susan, I very much want to be your father.”

Susan pounced on him, wrapping her little arms around his neck and toppling them both backwards. “I told Santa, and he did it.” She swung around and beamed back at the room. “Did you hear, Colt, I’m going to have a forever and ever home. Just like I asked him for. You were right. He really is real.”

Cole looked just as dumb struck as I was.

“I’m pretty sure this jersey is for you, short stack.” Eli flipped the jersey around to show off the Stevens in big letters. “It has our last name on it.”

“That’s right,” Cole pointed at the jersey in my hands. “It’s got our—”

“Watch it, 45,” I said with a laugh, but yeah. I wasn’t entirely opposed to the idea.

“Susan Stevens.” The little girl turned her dolly to talk to her face to face. “You can be Elizabeth Stevens. You can have a little jersey with your name on it too. We’ll be the Stevens family.”

“Yes, we will.” Eli pressed a kiss to the top of her head. Then he hopped up and hoisted Susan onto his shoulder. Throwing a victorious fist into the air, he proclaimed, “I’m gonna be a dad!”

He looked like a man who just had his dreams come true. I always thought that would be what he looked like holding the cup. Turns out, all it took was a child to steal his heart.

“Good thing I’ve had all this practice wrangling hockey players. One kid is—”

“One little girl,” Aunt Francine corrected. “They’re a whole different beast.”

Eli gulped.

“How did Kris know?” I asked. Looking down at my own jersey. “Colt, you don’t think he’s really… no. That’s absurd, right?”

He shrugged. “Does it hurt anything to believe in a bit of magic?”

Aunt Francine clapped her hands. “Speaking of magic, you kids need to get to the arena. You have a game to win.”

I pulled the jersey on. “Fear the Deer!”

“Fear the Deer!” The room shouted back.

Cole sucked in a breath through his teeth, kissing behind my ear. “Damn, baby, you look good with our name on your back.”

“*Your* name,” I corrected.

He pressed a kiss to my temple. “For now.”

OceanofPDF.com

Epilogue

HOLLY

New Year's Eve

"Five."
"Four."
"Three."
"Two."
"One."
"Happy New Year!"

Confetti cannons fired from the corner of the room. Balloons dropped on the heads of all the partygoers. In a matter of seconds the room had transformed into a colorful mix of chaos and unbridled joy.

Cole tugged my face up to his as the string quartet strummed the opening bars to Auld Lang Syne. He tasted like champagne and promises. I could, and have, kissed him for days on end. I'd be chasing this feeling to the ends of my days.

He spun me around in a quick twist until laughter was screeching out of me. Tiny bits of glitter and confetti stuck out of his hair in crazy angles.

In a word, I was happy. Maybe happier than I'd ever been. Celebrating tonight felt like opening a new book. Anything could happen. I loved that freedom.

“You kids enjoying yourselves?” Vangelt asked. His wife had an arm looped in his. She was a perfect likeness to Autumn, or what I imagined Autumn would look like in another twenty years. She wore an elegant silver gown that matched her husband’s cravat. It was adorable that after all the time they’ve been married, they still matched when heading to an event.

“Happy New Year, sir, ” I said. “This is a lovely party.”

Vangelt wanted to celebrate our two week winning streak right. Our team had never looked better on the ice. The barn was packed for every game. The remaining season’s tickets were already selling out. It was everything he’d been praying for for years.

He rented out the ski lodge and we counted down the New Year under the beautiful vista of Lake Lorraine. The entire Northspire family was here. Players danced beside everyone from the trainers to the guys who slung beers in the stands.

“Holly, I was hoping to talk to you about something.” Vangelt directed us to a quieter corner of the room. “The North American Women’s Hockey Association reached out to me. They want to try and bring a sister team to Northspire and I’ve agreed to come on as part owner.”

“Sir, that’s fantastic news.” I grinned up at Colt. Everything I’d read about the new organization’s structure sounded promising. The industry was learning from the mistakes of its past and women’s sports was coming into something of a renaissance.

Vangelt continued, “It’ll probably be another year or two before the team can launch, but I thought you might want to be the one to spearhead this endeavor. My people tell me you have a degree in Sports Management.”

“I do.” My heart sped up fast enough that I might have been having a heart attack. “I have an MBA in it, with a Bachelor’s in Marketing.”

“I have a feeling that with you at the helm, this city would welcome a women’s team with vigor.” He made a fist and victoriously shook it into the air.

“As manager?” I must be hearing him wrong. “Sir, that’s … A professional women’s team in Northspire.”

Vangelt held out his hand. “You have a good eye for these things, Holly. You know the sport, and more importantly, you know the people of this city.”

“The team … and you want me?” It was like the English language had completely evaded my tongue, leaving me with only fragmented sentences.

When I still hadn’t moved, Colt took his hand and gave it a good shake. “That shock should wear off in a second. I’m pretty sure what Holly’s trying to say is, thank you.” Colt turned to me. “This feels like the perfect time to tell him about your proposal.”

“A proposal?” Mrs. Vangelt brightened, her eyes immediately dropping to my left hand.

I waved away her attention. “No, nothing like that. Part of Colton’s deal was that Victory will sponsor next year’s charity.” Taking a deep breath, I continued, “I want to start a girl’s youth league. Not just a team, but an entire league, one with no dues or roadblocks based on financial need. I want it to be something that anyone who has interest can participate in.”

Colt chimed in, “Professional players will come in to lead clinics and host scrimmages.”

Feeling the excitement already growing within me, I added, “I’ve already reached out to a few former players that I know from my own professional days. There are opportunities to start a similar endeavor in each city in the league. My dream is to take this national and build the infrastructure for women’s hockey from the ground up.”

Cole grinned with pride. “Think of how much more you could do with a professional women’s team in town.”

“I could,” I agreed. “Mr. Vangelt, where do I sign?”

“Excellent.” He smiled wide. “I’ll have the lawyers send you something next week.”

He snagged a couple of glasses of champagne from a passing tray. “To a new year filled with new opportunities.”

“Here, here,” Cole said, and we clinked glasses before Vangelt guided his wife back onto the crowded dance floor.

As soon as he was gone, I downed the entire flute of champagne. The bubbles tickled my nose as I gulped hard. *Manager.* I was going to be manager of a professional team.

Cole opened his mouth to speak, but before he could say a word, Autumn filled the space her father vacated.

“Did he ask you?” She asked in a hurried whisper.

“About the proposal?” I asked, my mind still fuzzy with the realization that I was about to be manager for an entire team.

“He proposed!” Autumn shrieked. The entire room turned toward us and started clapping.

“Will you keep your voice down,” I hissed. “You’re going to start a whole new rumor.”

Autumn’s glowing smile fell. “So you’re not getting married?”

“Don’t look so depressed.” Why was everyone suddenly so invested in our marital status? Autumn was officially the fifth person this week to assume Cole and I were getting married. “We’re taking things slow … Sort of … for now.”

Autumn’s eyebrows rose in question. “Sort of?”

I pointed to the other side of the room where Bentley was talking with Vangelt. “Hey look, there’s Roo.”

“Shit. Really?” Her gaze followed my hand while trying to smooth down her hair.

I grabbed Cole's arm and hurried in the exact opposite direction. “Come on, now while there’s an opening.”

We hurried to the patio door, and slipped out of the noise and bustle of the party. It was quieter outside and with how warm it was in the party, I welcomed the much cooler air. The aurora was in full blast. The sky looked like a spilled painter’s palette of greens and pinks.

Colton started laughing.

“What’s so funny?”

His joy was contagious. He grabbed my hips and drew me to him so that we could dance cheek to cheek. The music from inside was barely audible out here. Not that something as silly as there being no music would stop Colton Gailey.

“I’m going to need to get you a new set of sneakers if you keep running like that.” He took my hands and looped them around his neck. “Move in with me.”

“Move in with you? Cole, we've been dating for barely a month.” Hadn’t I just said we were taking it slow?

“And you’ve been at my apartment for every single night of that month. I want it to be you waiting for me when I get off a late plane home from a game and I want it to be you who I share a bowl of Cinnamon Toast Crunch with in the morning. You can take however long you need to warm up to that realization that I came to weeks ago. If it isn’t love, then they need to invent a bigger word. I’ve been yours from day one.”

“Okay. I’m probably crazy for saying this, but let’s do it.” The electricity of the night was turning me bold. If he had asked me to marry him just then, I might have even said yes. Maybe. Probably. Fuck, what was with me lately? Was there such a thing as overdosing on serotonin?

Cole turned us in a slow turn, extending his arm out and then reeling me back in. The colors of the sky spun around us. I kissed him with all the emotion that I didn’t know how to express. Time slowed until our past mingled with our future in that kiss. It was everything I didn’t know I was waiting for and simultaneously everything I wanted.

“Happy New Year, Cole.”

“Happy New Year, naughty girl.”

The End

OceanofPDF.com

Acknowledgments

Writing a romcom was a plot twist I didn’t see coming, even if other people in my life have been waiting for me to diverge into yet another genre. I didn’t expect how refreshing writing this book would be. Miracle renewed my love of writing and was the brain reset that I desperately needed. My burn out after completing Silver Shard was legitimate. I pushed through it to complete Down The Rabbit Hole, but it was a slow process. Then, last December, I paused edits to take my husband to a hockey game. It was a holiday party themed matinee game, and while sitting in the stands, the idea for Miracle in the 34th Minute was born. Suddenly all the ideas were flowing faster than I knew what to do with them. It was exciting. This was so unlike anything else I’d written, but right in line with my chaotic tastes. So, while DTRH was with my editor, I figured, why not try to see if I could write it? It started just for fun and now I have plans for four more of these.

I want to thank my husband for creating the time and space I need to continue pursuing this dream of mine. He picks up a lot of the adulting slack so that I can have the opportunity to put more of myself into the author life. He’s the first person to rally behind me every time I say I want to try something. I love you.

Everyone should be lucky enough to have a friend like LOE LevEndusky in their lives. This girl keeps me level and doesn’t blink when I call her during second intermission, while I’m waiting for chicken tenders, to tell her about this wild idea I have to write a hockey romcom. Pretty sure I’d be lost without you being my North Star. I’m so grateful to have your Stray Kids and Diet Coke obsessed ass going through this insanity with me.

Gopika LaBerge, sometimes you need someone who creatively brings out the best in you. Thank you for letting me text you at any hour to bounce

ideas back and forth. Without you we wouldn't have Puck Boy … or the world's most beautiful cover.

Rebecca Howard we need to have margaritas more. Apparently, it brings out our best ideas. I should have made you part of my beta team years ago.

Sierra Cassidy thank you for pushing to get this to me. I swear at some point I won't be cutting it close to a deadline. Also, thank you for ensuring this book has the appropriate amount of cheesy goodness to it. I don't know how I keep landing in areas that you have a weird amount of knowledge in, but I'm so glad I do.

P.s. I hope the extra 2K of spice I added makes you proud.

Rebecca Antoszewski and Sarah Konieczny, my beta team is the only reason my books are what they are. When they check my hockey knowledge and send me real time reactions to my jokes. Extra big thank you to Melissa Maxwell for lending me your player experience and for fixing all my "arenas" 🫣.

To my readers, know that I wouldn't be able to have the confidence to write something this different if I didn't have you cheering for me on every step of this journey. Your videos and messages keep me going. Meeting you at signings and hearing your stories gives me life. Never stop.

Lastly, to author Elizabeth Briggs, Susan's Elizabeth doll is for you. I hope wherever you're watching from that she made the light you shine on us just a bit brighter. You are missed.

OceanofPDF.com