

# One

## Gemma

Gemma Stanton stared down at her newly released first novel and told herself—for the hundredth time—that the kilted Highland laird on the front did *not* look like Mason Moretti and absolutely *no one* would realize she'd used the pro hockey player as her inspiration. While she was sure many sports stars had inspired romance heroes, in this case, it was not a compliment.

Fucking Mason Moretti.

She shook her head, set the book on her lap, and looked around the tiny green room. In the corner, a TV was tuned to *Vancouver This Morning*. The cheery title card showed a skyline backdrop of a ridiculously blue ocean and a blinding sun that reminded people November would not last forever.

Gemma's interview would open the show...which wasn't stressful at all.

She took a few deep breaths. She'd do fine. Just fine.

If only she could stop fretting about her dress. She should have worn jeans and a sweater. That's what she'd picked out and paired with a new pair of boots, and it'd looked good, damn it. But then the doubt crept in, and she'd grabbed a dress instead. Now she fretted that she was filling a stereotype—the romance author in a flowery dress and heels.

She hated this anxious version of herself. She'd written a romance? Deal with it. The book had sex scenes? It sure did. If she risked being labeled a lonely middle-aged divorcée who

poured her most torrid fantasies into a book, she didn't give a damn. Anyone who'd spent a decade married to a two-minute champ was entitled to a stockpile of unfulfilled erotic fantasies.

“Gemma?”

She instinctively tensed as a woman slipped into the room. Ashley Porter. Head cheerleader and certified mean girl—

No, Gemma mentally corrected. That had been high school. Ashley was now host of Vancouver's hottest morning show, where she was renowned for being a total sweetheart. When Gemma's publicist asked about local media contacts, she hadn't dared include Ashley on the list. It'd been Ashley who reached out and offered this. The prime morning show slot on Gemma's release day.

Now Ashley breezed in wearing jeans and a cashmere sweater that could have been the twin of the one Gemma almost wore. Ashley's sable hair gleamed under the lights, and her tan whispered of a recent trip south. The sapphire sweater perfectly matched Ashley's eyes, and the boots had to have cost triple Gemma's bargain bin find. Also, Gemma didn't fill out her sweater like that. Or her jeans.

Yep, switching to the dress had been a very good call.

As Ashley enveloped Gemma in a hug, the sweet scent of apple and water lily washed over Gemma, and she tensed so hard it was practically a spasm.

Princess by Vera Wang—the same perfume Ashley wore in high school. The same scent she'd worn on the last day of school, when she'd cornered Gemma and leaned in to whisper, “*You really thought Mason would look twice at you, Gemma? Mason Moretti?*”

Present-day Gemma gritted her teeth and admitted that she hadn't exactly been a ray of sunshine at that age either. All teeth and attitude, as one boy had muttered when she'd flipped him off for smacking her ass.

Ashley released her from the noxious cloud of perfume. "I am *so* happy for you, Gem. I remember what an amazing writer you were. I always knew I'd see your name on a book someday."

Gemma tensed again, braced for some snarky comment slammed in on the knife point of a cheerful chirp. Twenty years ago, she'd have been ready with a comeback. But she wasn't that confident and smart-mouthed girl anymore, as much as she was desperately trying to find her again.

Ashley continued, "I'll admit I couldn't believe you'd written a *romance*." Here it came... "But I'm so glad you did. I love historical fiction, and Laird Argyle is..." Ashley made a swooning noise, hand to her forehead.

Huh. Apparently her writing group had been correct. Readers did go for asshole romantic leads.

The first romance Gemma had written featured the kind of guy *she* liked—sweet and considerate. When it hadn't sold, her writing group had talked her into penning what the market seemed to want. An alpha asshole. A self-absorbed, egotistical, inconsiderate, talks-with-his-fists asshole. So she'd dipped into her past and pulled up exactly the right guy for the role.

Mason Moretti had been her school's golden boy. The kind of athlete who comes around once in a century. He'd gone on to play enforcer for the Vancouver Growlers, because of course he did. To be an enforcer, you had to be an asshole, and Mason was the best. Or the worst, depending on how you looked at it.

The worst. Mason Moretti was definitely the worst.

## Mason

Mason Moretti didn't need anyone to show him to the TV studio green room. Ashley wrangled him on her show every chance she could, and his damned publicist wouldn't let him say no. But this time was different. He smiled to himself as he reached for the green room door.

“Whoops!” Ashley appeared from nowhere and held the door shut. “Gemma’s in there. Let’s take you down here.”

Ashley led him down the hall, chattering away. Mason would never say he liked Ashley as a person, but she was useful, and she knew it and used it to her full advantage. He couldn't fault her for that, because he used her right back. Not like *that*. Never like that. Oh, Ashley had been letting him know *that* was on the table since high school, but you don't grow up in the spotlight without being able to smell a baited trap at a hundred paces.

Speaking of baited traps, this whole interview felt a little...unsettling. Suspicious. Ashley said Gemma knew he'd be here, but what if...?

“How's Gemma?” he asked. “Is she—?”

“She's fine. Just fine.” Ashley steered him into the makeup room. “Stay in here. Makeup will be in shortly.”

After Ashley left, Mason glanced around the tiny room, with its three salon-style swivel chairs and massive mirrors. He settled into the middle chair and shrugged off his unease like an ill-fitting shirt. Worrying didn't suit him. In this case, it only reminded him of all those years he'd spent worrying that Gemma Stanton hated his guts.

But she obviously didn't hate him, because she'd written a romance novel with him as the hero. If Gemma had been pissed off, she wouldn't have hesitated to let him know—with both barrels.

Gemma Stanton...

As Mason propped his feet on the adjoining chair, he remembered the first time he'd spoken to Gemma. Kindergarten. The cloakroom. It'd been October, the little room overflowing with Halloween decorations. He'd arrived late, after an early morning lesson, and he'd been hanging up his skates when Gemma walked in from the classroom.

She'd looked from the skates to him. "You skate?"

Under her level gaze, he couldn't help puffing up. He knew who she was, this little pixie of a girl with freckles and eyes the color of fresh grass and hair that reminded him of a wheat field in fall.

"I play hockey," he said.

"You any good?"

"I'm the best."

She'd rolled those green eyes and taken something from her cubby. She'd been about to walk away, and he'd been struggling for something to say, when she turned back. Her gaze dropped to his shoes, and she lowered her voice.

"Miss Wang's sick. We have someone else, and she made Jay sit in the corner for tracking in dirt."

"Oh. Okay."

He reached down to switch to his indoor shoes and then looked up to thank her. But she was already gone, leaving him hanging there, wishing he hadn't been so flustered that he'd forgotten to say *thank you*.

Gemma had always been nice to him. Even when he didn't deserve it.

He shook that off. The point was that she didn't hate him. You don't write a romance novel about a guy you hate, right?

"Mason Moretti," a voice said from the doorway.

He looked to see a young woman carrying a makeup case. Late twenties, with a jet-black bob and powdered white skin. She always did his makeup. Which meant he should know her name, but he was so fucking bad at that. Too many names, he told himself. Too many people who flitted in and out of his life. He couldn't be expected to remember them all...and yet he was expected to, and when he forgot, it made something in his stomach twist, and his brain shout that he needed to fix this *now*.

He knew he had had the woman's name in his contact info for Ashley so he could refresh his memory. It was one of his many tricks for coping in a life where he briefly connected with endless people. But he'd been so focused on seeing Gemma again that he'd forgotten to check his notes.

He glanced at her. When he hadn't responded, she'd started taking out the little pots, snapping each down with a clack.

He tried to fix it with a broad smile. He might not be the hottest player on the team, but he had all his teeth, which was kind of a miracle, all things considered. The smile always worked.

The woman's eyes narrowed. "You don't remember me, do you?"

“Of course I do. The best makeup artist in Vancouver.” He smiled again.

“If you don’t remember my name, just admit it.”

“I—”

“It’s Nadia,” she said. “Not that it matters to you.”

Mason’s gut twisted. He *did* remember her. He’d just temporarily forgotten her name.

But it was too late to fix that. It was always too late.

*Do better.*

They were finishing up when someone rapped on the door. “Two minutes,” a man called.

Nadia studied Mason, hands on her hips. “Can’t work miracles with that mug. How many times have you been hit in the face?”

“It adds character.”

She sighed. Deeply. “It does, damn you. Get up. Let’s go.”

Nadia ushered him into the hall, where a woman waited with a printed photo, pen outstretched. Mason reached for it automatically, only at the last moment remembering to confirm it was a photo of him.

“My daughter is such a fan,” the woman gushed. “She plays hockey, too.”

“Good for her.” He signed the photo as he walked, the woman jogging along beside him.

“Maybe she’ll be the first woman in the NHL.”

He always said that. He meant it, but the words sounded hollow, a sentiment repeated too often to have any meaning. The woman beamed, though.

“Hey, Moretti,” a voice called.

Still walking, Mason turned and lifted a hand in automatic greeting.

“I hear Denny is still in the hospital.” A middle-aged guy appeared, face set in an expression Mason knew only too well these days. “You got anything to say about that?”

Mason shrugged. “Hockey’s a rough game.”

He hated the words even as they came out, but that’s what he’d been told to say. *Don’t apologize. Don’t get flustered.* Mason wasn’t the one who put the Growlers’ young star center in the hospital. Not his fault the kid got hurt.

Not his fault...unless his actual job was protecting his teammates. Unless he’d seen the guy going for Denny and...

*And what, Mason? What happened out there?*

He pushed the thought aside as staff members elbowed his accuser away. The guy would get a talking-to later. This was supposed to be a safe space for Mason. No one would mention the incident with Denny. No one would ask what happened out there.

Which was good, because Mason had no damn idea what happened.

He only knew that he hadn’t done his job, and a brilliant young player went to the hospital. People were pissed off.

And he didn’t blame them.

Didn’t blame them at all.



# Two

## Gemma

The set was arranged like a café, with a love seat and chair to the left and a little breakfast counter to the right. When Ashley had led Gemma in, Gemma had eyed the love seat longingly, only to be directed to one of the ridiculously high stools at the counter. As she waited for the show to begin, she perched on the stool, keenly aware of how her legs swung like a toddler's. She went to cross her legs, only to feel her skirt ride up.

*Do not flash the audience, Gem.*

Might sell more books.

*Mmm, no, that's not really your target audience.*

Focus on her target audience. Women like her, a lifelong romance novel reader. What would convince her to pick up *A Highland Fling*?

The hot guy in a kilt.

Except the hot guy...She glanced at the cover filling on the floor-to-ceiling screen. When she'd completed the publisher form, she'd thought her description of Laird Argyle was vague enough. Dark, wavy hair. Square face. Wide forehead. Strong jawline. Rough looking, as if he knew his way around a bar brawl. An average face but with a body that meant your gaze never rose above his neck. Broad shoulders. Bulging biceps. Perfectly defined pecs and abs. All that...in a kilt.

She hadn't specified eye color, let alone mentioned dark beard scruff and a nose that'd been broken a few times. Maybe the last part seemed obvious to the designers. It was a romance trope after all—hot bruisers always had crooked noses.

The designer took all that and...Gemma glanced at the cover again. Damn. It really did look like Mason Moretti.

The only reason Gemma saw it was that she knew who the inspiration had been. No one else would spot any resemblance between a Scottish Highland laird and a Canadian hockey player.

The camera operator counted down as Ashley hopped onto the adjoining stool. Not only did *her* feet touch the ground, but wearing jeans meant she could cross her legs.

Gemma focused on keeping her knees closed and prayed she didn't get carried off by nervous enthusiasm and start swinging her feet. Although that might win her the pity vote. She'd totally buy a book from any author who made a fool of themselves on live television.

She should have asked her publicist about that. As marketing strategies went, how many sales could she win by making a total fool—

“Happy Tuesday!” Ashley trilled as the cameras rolled. “We have *such* a treat for you today. Get ready for a morning jam-packed with goodies. Later, I'll introduce you to a man who trains capuchin monkeys as seeing-eye pets. Monkeys! They are the cutest things ever! And I promised to share that recipe for nonfat sugar-free caramel corn. First, though, local author Gemma Stanton's debut novel came out today.”

Ashley spokesmodel-waved. Gemma straightened, ready to say hello, when she realized Ashley was indicating the screen instead. They'd taken down the book cover during the intro. Now, out of the corner of her eye, Gemma saw it return. And when it did, peals of laughter rang out from the crew.

Gemma froze.

Romance covers had always been a source of mockery, but this wasn't one of those old-school clinch covers with the heroine practically humping the hero's leg. Sure, Laird Argyle had apparently lost his shirt in battle, but it happened.

"Oh, I don't think that's the right one." Ashley's voice took on a tehee singsong. "Someone in the art department seems to have done a little facial reconstruction."

Oh, shit. Gemma turned to the screen...and saw Mason Moretti's face over the cover model's. And just to clarify who Mason was, they'd replaced Laird Argyle's sword with a hockey stick.

"Hmm," Ashley said, with a thoughtful finger to her lips. "Let's see the real cover."

Both versions appeared side by side.

"That is a *striking* similarity," Ashley said. "Now, I should mention that Gemma and I went to high school together...the same high school as a certain local star player."

The blood drained out of Gemma as the temperature in the room plummeted.

*Play along. Just play along.*

Gemma forced a laugh. "I guess that does look a little like Mason. I'd love to take credit for giving our old classmate a shout-out, but authors don't design their covers or pick their cover models."

"But they do write the book, and that looks an awful lot like the guy you describe."

Ashley picked up the novel and started to read, her words drowned out by the crashing in Gemma's ears.

She'd been set up.

Was she actually shocked? In school, Gemma and Ashley had always sparred—the polished cheerleader and the smart-mouthed valedictorian, circling each other. Now Ashley was mocking Gemma on live TV? What a surprise.

But they weren't teenagers anymore. Gemma hadn't seen Ashley in over a decade. Why would she do this?

Because she could. Because some girls never get past high school.

Ashley closed the book and wagged her finger at Gemma. “Sounds to me like someone had a crush.”

Gemma opened her mouth to laugh it off, to say something, anything, salvage this—

“Oh!” Ashley gracefully hopped from her chair. “Look who just walked into the studio.”

Ashley threw open her arms, and Gemma turned slowly as the piped-in hockey announcer's gravelly voice rolled out a familiar intro.

“And here he is, folks, the one, the only, the Growlers' not-so-secret weapon. Give it up for...the Mace!”

#

Gemma patiently waited for the nightmare to end. It was fine. Just fine. A bad dream, that was all. A bad dream where Ashley invited Mason Moretti himself to join them, plunking him and Gemma both down on that cozy little love seat, with his arm around her shoulders and that grin on his face.

Gemma hated that grin. Always had. She'd even told him so, after his English teacher said he could earn a passing grade by volunteering for the school paper, where the editor would write his articles for him. Except the editor was Gemma, who sure as hell was not writing

Mason's articles for him. He'd shown up at the tiny newspaper office an hour before he was due to deliver his first article and said his computer ate it, while giving her that ridiculous grin.

*"Does that usually work?" she said.*

*"Does what usually work?"*

*"That smile."*

*"What smile?" he said, managing to keep grinning while saying it.*

*She sighed. "That is not your real smile, Mason."*

*"I don't know what you mean." Still grinning.*

*"I've known you since kindergarten, Moretti. That is the smile you use to get what you want, and what you want is for me to write your article. I'm not. I know you're failing English. I know you're dyslexic. I also know that only means you need some accommodations, which I am willing to give. The problem isn't your dyslexia. It's that no one makes you do shit because you're a star."*

*She leaned over her editor's desk. "You are capable of writing that article, so you'll have it to me by morning. Got it?"*

Now, as the interview rolled on, Mason had that smile firmly in place. He also had his arm around her shoulders. Well, not exactly around them. It would look that way to the viewer, but his arm was resting against the love seat back, with his fingertips not quite touching her shoulder. Seemed he remembered her well enough to know that he risked losing any fingers that touched her without permission.

This wasn't a nightmare, was it?

This was actually Mason Moretti sitting beside her with his shit-eating grin, certain that she'd based her romantic lead off him because he was such an amazing guy and she'd never

gotten over him. That one kiss they shared had obviously been seared into her brain. As for the utter humiliation that came after it, well, that was water under the bridge. Didn't stop little Gemma Stanton from secretly pining for him, writing smutty scenes about the two of them—

Oh God, she was going to puke.

That's what he'd think, wasn't it? That's what everyone would think. That she'd published a sex fantasy featuring herself with her high school hockey star crush. It wouldn't matter that her heroine bore no resemblance to Gemma—in appearance or personality—and was just a character she'd created who seemed a good match for someone like Moretti, a starry-eyed simpering girl who took his bullshit and told herself she was special when he stopped aiming his asshole her way.

“So what do you think, Mason?” Ashley waved at the screen. “You're on a romance cover.”

He gave a hearty laugh that Gemma knew was also fake. “I'm flattered. Kinda makes me want to run out and buy a kilt.”

Tittering laughter from Ashley, who continued with “And you're a romance hero between the covers, too.”

“So I've been told.”

Ashley slapped her hand to her mouth, eyes widening, just in case anyone missed the double entendre.

Ashley reached out to rap Mason's arm. “You are so bad.”

Was Gemma really sure this wasn't an actual nightmare, with her trapped as Ashley flirted with Mason on live TV?

“But seriously, Mason,” Ashley said. “Gemma based her romance-novel hero on you. What does that feel like?”

“Great. How else would it feel?” He aimed that inane grin Gemma’s way. “It’s really flattering.”

“Yes, but Gemma isn’t just a random author writing you as a hero. We knew each other in high school. Seems *someone* had a secret crush.”

Gemma stiffened. She was very aware of how she must look right now, frozen under the studio lights, unable to flee the locomotive bearing down on her.

“Speaking of high school,” Mason said. “Gemma was always a great writer. Editor of the school newspaper.”

“But she obviously had a crush—” Ashley pushed.

“And you did the video announcements, right?” he said to Ashley. “So we all ended up where we were heading. Me with hockey, you with TV, Gem with writing. That’s cool.” He turned to Gemma. “When did you start the novel?”

Her brain spun, frantically searching for the trap. This must be a trap. But it wasn’t. Mason might be an ass, but he wasn’t Ashley. He’d never been vicious or mean-spirited. He didn’t need to be.

Gemma realized what he was doing. Throwing her a life preserver. Acting like a decent guy. Because he could be one, when he wanted to. The problem was when you started believing he *was* a decent guy and lowered your defenses, and then he reminded you what he really was, what he’d been all along.

Not a slithering snake, but king of the jungle, master of all he surveyed. Even a king could be magnanimous now and then.

She found her own fake smile. “I stopped writing after university, but I got back into it a couple of years ago and remembered how much I loved it.”

Ashley opened her mouth, but Mason plowed on.

“So you’re making up for lost time now?” he asked.

“I am. I’m working on book two, which is due out next year.”

He asked what it was about, and she relaxed and joked that it was a secret, and they continued on like that, Mason taking over the interview and Gemma gratefully letting him.



# Three

## Mason

Mason was *not* lying in wait to ambush Gemma. Sure, it felt a bit like that. Sure, he was just outside the building exit, tucked behind a pillar, waiting to hear the click of her heels—

“I can see you there, Mason.”

He peeked out at her.

She shook her head. “If you’re trying to hide, you need a bigger pillar.”

“I was just getting some air.”

Damn, she looked good. He hadn’t known what to expect, whether he’d even still recognize her, but that was silly. No matter how much she’d changed, he’d have known her in an instant. And he had.

In the studio, he’d taken one look and seen the Gemma who’d rolled her eyes at him in the kindergarten cloakroom, the Gemma who’d told him she was not writing his school newspaper article, the Gemma he’d kissed behind the school just before graduation.

Oh, she was older now. They both were, but she wore it a hell of a lot better. Eyes like summer grass. Hair like autumn wheat. Teeth that could snap you nearly in two and a tongue sharp enough to finish the job.

Okay, so the last part wasn’t quite so poetic, but he remembered how it felt when she’d give him a look that said she saw right through him and wasn’t putting up with his bullshit.

He used to look back, remember how that felt, and think it’d been hot. Maybe a little bit “schoolboy and teacher.” Except now, seeing her again, it reminded him that he’d liked it long before he’d been old enough to even think like that.

He'd liked that she'd called him on his bullshit because it meant he didn't need it around her. She looked at him and said, *I see you*. And what she saw wasn't a kid on his way to stardom. It was just a boy with a girl. A girl he wanted to be with. A girl who'd sometimes seemed like she wanted to be with him too—be with *him*, not “the Mace.”

He shook that off. He was getting sentimental. Too much going on in his life, upsetting the smooth flow he fought so hard for. Seeing Gemma again was good. Great even. Seeing her again when she clearly didn't harbor any ill will? Fucking amazing. But that was all. No need to analyze it and get all maudlin, like he'd lost something all those years ago. They'd connected, briefly. It hadn't worked out. They'd moved on, him to his career and...

His career. What more did he need? An incredible career, good friends, women when he wanted them. Life was a little rocky right now, but in general, it was all anyone could want. Right?

He pulled away from those thoughts and focused on the woman in front of him. He'd moved on to his hockey career, and Gemma to being an author. What had she been doing with her life? He suddenly felt desperate to know.

“I'm sorry about all that,” she said. “Ashley clearly thought it was hilarious. You shouldn't have gotten dragged into it.”

“There's no such thing as bad publicity, and being the inspiration for a romance hero is definitely not bad publicity. I really am flattered. I can't wait to read the book.”

She hesitated. “You don't need to do that.”

“No, seriously, I want to.” And he did. He'd just need to wait for it to come out in audio, which is how he read, never having really gotten comfortable with words on a page.

A look flitted over her face. Something almost like panic. “Really, Mason. Don’t read it, okay?”

He smiled. Gemma Stanton, nervous about people reading her stuff? That was new. Or was she just nervous about him reading a book where she was the heroine and he was the hero?

“We should catch up,” he said. “Let’s go grab a coffee.”

She shook her head. “Thanks, but I’m under deadline.”

“All the more reason why you need coffee. Or brunch? There’s a little place just around the corner.”

“I really can’t.”

“It’s literally on the corner. We can see it from here.” He smiled. “My treat.”

“It was great seeing you again, Mason, and I appreciate that you were decent about this whole mess.” She looked up at him. “Really. Thank you.”

A bead of sweat trickled down his temple, despite the autumn chill. He was doing this wrong. *What* was he doing wrong? He needed to figure out what she expected and change course.

“You don’t like coffee? There’s a bubble tea place just—”

“I really need to go, Mason. Again, it was good to see you, but the deadline for this second book is kicking my ass. I’m already late.”

Ah, that was it. Gemma had always been super responsible, and the missed deadline was stressing her out.

“Give me your number then,” he said. “I’ll call later, and we can celebrate after you finish the book. Go for dinner. Catch up.”

“That isn’t necessary, Mason.” Gemma reached out and squeezed his forearm. “Again, thank you. It’s good to see you, and I’m glad to see you got where you wanted to be.”

He found his grin. “Was there ever any doubt?”

That slight roll of her eyes, the old Gemma surging, and then she turned and walked away, and it was only as she disappeared that he realized what he should have said.

*I’m glad to see you got where you wanted to be, too, Gem.*

#

Mason skated backward as fast as he could and then executed a perfect stop, feeling a rush of satisfaction at the shower of shaved ice. That never got old.

He had most of the suburban rink to himself, a weekly treat. It wasn’t about practice. It was about just getting out and skating, like he had when he was a kid. He’d barely been old enough to lace his skates before he was sneaking out of the apartment at dawn to skate alone on the pond behind their subdivision.

At thirty-six, Mason had hit his NHL senior years. Hell, for an enforcer, he was a freaking dinosaur. “Enforcer” wasn’t his formal position, of course. After the 2004 lockout, the rules changed to emphasize speed and scoring, and there wasn’t as much room for guys whose primary role was fighting. Also, the game had changed—for the better, Mason thought—with less of the dirty play of slashing, hooking, checking, high-sticking and the like. Oh, Mason liked a good brawl, but he’d always been exceedingly careful with his health and safety, terrified of ending up like the old-school enforcers, with CTE from too many blows to the head.

Mason didn’t mind spending time in the penalty box if it helped his team. Nor did he mind getting cursed out by fans of the opposite team. He was supposed to be an asshole. That was his job description. A professional asshole who’d do whatever it took to protect his team and

help them get the goal. It meant he was one of the lowest scoring players on the Growlers, but he had a wall full of MVP awards to make up for it, and when it came time to meet the fans, he had the longest line for photos and autographs.

Or he used to have the longest line. For the past month, he'd been skipping those meet and greets, at the coach's insistence. No one on the team blamed Mason for what happened. Not even Denny.

Except...

He heard his coach's voice. "Maybe you should speak to Dr. Colbourne about this one, Mace."

That'd been three weeks ago. When he'd ignored the hint, the coach obviously took the direct route because Mason now had two voicemails from Dr. Colbourne herself.

Two unreturned voicemails, which really wasn't like him. He might be the designated asshole on the ice, but in real life, he didn't do shit like ignoring calls from someone who was just trying to help. That was rude.

But it's also exactly what he was doing.

Mason shook it off and skated faster. He had no problem speaking to the team shrink, but he didn't need her this time. He'd get past this on his own, and he'd tell her that. Soon. When, you know, he remembered to return the call off-hours so she wouldn't pick up and he could just leave a message.

People thought Mason had intentionally failed to protect Denny because he was jealous of the young and popular player. Dr. Colbourne would know that wasn't like Mason. At all.

You didn't agree to be an enforcer unless you were a team player. Mason liked Denny. The last thing he wanted was for the kid to bounce on and off the injury list until he finally had

to quit hockey. That happened too often with the rising stars, and Mason didn't want it happening to a good kid—and a good player—like Denny.

So what had gone wrong that night?

Mason had seen what was coming, started to intercede and...froze. He still didn't know why.

Mason pushed into a hard skate, and his right knee whimpered. He glared down, as if he could shame it into submission. After thirty years of hockey, he pretty much *had* to expect a bum knee, but it still frustrated him.

A girlish shriek pulled his attention to the far left. He always shared his ice time with a figure-skating group who couldn't afford the rental. The kids were wee ones, none coming past his waist, all of them zipping around, shrieking and giggling. He was glad to see a few boys in the group. There'd been a time when he'd wanted to figure skate. Hockey was his passion, but he'd seen girls whirling and zigging and zagging in figure skating, and it had always looked like fun. He'd asked his dad, who nearly had a heart attack.

*"You want to do what?"*

His father had given Mason that same look when Mason had said he wanted to go to college.

*"You want to do what?"*

*"Get a college degree. Maybe kinesiology. Something to fall back on when I retire from hockey."*

*"And how the hell will you get into college?" his father said. "You're barely passing high school."*

*“The recruiter said they can get me in. On a scholarship even. I could get my grades up, if I tried harder—”*

*“No, you couldn’t.” His father planted his hands on Mason’s shoulders, though he had to reach up to do it. “I’ve said it before, and I’ll keep saying it until it gets through that thick skull of yours. God gave you one gift. One incredible gift. That is what you are good at. Focus on hockey, and don’t embarrass yourself by trying to do more.” Dad shook his head. “College. You can barely read.”*

Mason skated faster to banish the memory. He executed a perfect set of crossovers, and that helped lift his mood.

*Yep, still got it.*

He moved into position for an explosive start and then took off down the ice and pivoted fast, his signature move against guys who figured Mason was too big to skate with any speed or agility. One of the little figure skaters whooped and shouted, “Swing that mace!” and he lifted a hand to a round of cheers.

*Yep, definitely still got it.*

“Mason!” This voice came from his side of the rink. He looked to see one of the staff gesticulating wildly.

“Your phone’s ringing!” the guy shouted. “You left it over here!”

“Yeah,” Mason snapped as he skated closer. “You know why I left it over there? Because it rings.”

The young man colored and stammered, “I-it keeps ringing. It might be urgent.”

Mason grunted and reached out a gloved hand. The guy lifted the cell phone gingerly, as if afraid of smudging the screen.

*You don't want to piss me off? You let me skate in peace. That's why I pay a fortune to rent the whole ice. Because the only sound I want to hear is those kids having fun.*

He answered the phone with a growled “What?” as the staff member slunk off.

“It’s Terrance,” said the caller.

“I know. I’ve got this fancy feature on my phone. Call display. Ever heard of it?”

“Have you checked social media today, Mason?”

“I never check social media. That’s why I have you.”

“You really are in a mood. Well, maybe this will help. You’re trending.”

“Yeah, that’s exactly what I want to hear. My name is trending, again, because I’m the world’s biggest asshole, who let a kid get put in the hospital. And if you say all publicity is good publicity, I will—”

“It’s not about Denny.”

Mason went still. “What’d I do now?”

“It’s about your appearance on *Van This Morning*. People loved it. You and the writer were adorable. That Ashley is a world-class bitch, and you deflected her like a pro. Better yet, you did it in defense of a lady.”

“Yeah, yeah. I just didn’t like seeing her do that to Gem.”

“*Gem*, is it? So you do know her.”

“It’s been a while, but yeah, I know her. She’s good people.”

“Better and better. You like her?”

Mason’s hand tightened on the phone. “What’s this about?”

“Do you like her well enough to go out with her? On a date? With some specially chosen media there to snap pics? People loved seeing that side of you, Mason, and they loved the idea of



a classmate basing her romance hero on you. They're hoping this is the start of something.

So...maybe it could be? On paper?"

"You want me to go out with Gemma as a promo op? To polish my rep at her expense?"

"She's a brand-new author with a brand-new book. She'll appreciate the buzz."

"So I'd come clean with her. Tell her it's for publicity."

"Uh..." Terrance cleared his throat. "I don't think that's necessary."

"Yeah, it is. Like I said, Gemma's good people. I'm not doing anything that might hurt or embarrass her." *Been there, done that.* "I know her. We were friends." *Bit of a stretch...* "I'll put it to her straight up. She'll see how it benefits her."

"If that's what you think is best."

"It is. I just need her number. Get it for me."

Mason hung up without waiting for an answer. Then he smiled to himself. Part of his bad mood had been about Gemma turning him down for coffee. He hadn't known how to ask again without sounding creepy. Now he did.