HEARTS ON THE FLY
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TONI SHILOH

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To the Author and Finisher of my faith,
and to my first hero, Granddaddy.
Thank you for always being there!

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear Reader,

Hearts on the Fly is one of the first stories I've written that is very personal to me. You see, my grandfather was diagnosed with macular degeneration at the age of forty, though he experienced symptoms well before the disease even had a name. As a man who had four children to depend on him, he could've buckled under the weight of the diagnosis. Instead, he went on to have much success in his career and in his family. I've always looked up to him and thought his impaired vision was just a part of him. It wasn't until I learned of all the things he initially went through that I saw how much he overcame.

As I talked to my grandfather and did more research for the story, I realized that some medical issues would need to be changed to fit with my idea. So if you're in the medical profession and realize that some of the details aren't factual, please remember this is a work of fiction. I tried to remain as close to reality as I could, but I also gave myself the grace to make the story what it needed to be.

I hope you enjoy Jabari and Val's journey to each other. Theirs is one full of joy, heartache, and triumph. Thank you so much for reading.

Blessings,
Toni

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1 Jabari

Two minutes left in the game, and we're down by one. I race toward the goal, keeping my eyes out for my left and right wingers. Our rivals, the Pittsburgh Emperors, are leading our division halfway through this season. We're right on their heels, hoping this game can put us on top.

The Emperors' goalie has been on point all night. If I can sneak the puck past him, we'll tie. Just as I set up to aim a shot, one of their defensemen slams me into the boards. Pushing back, I scan for the puck, but he slams me again, pinning my face against the plexiglass.

"Got it," Pascal, our left winger, yells.

The Emperors' defense players race after him. Finally free, I follow them. I need to get in an open position in case Pascal needs to pass the puck back to me. But one of their guys blocks Pascal's shot and heads down the ice, back toward our goal. Tae, our right defenseman, checks him, but another Emperors player takes possession and takes a slap shot right at our goal.

Raimo Karvonen, our goalie, catches the biscuit in his right glove, and the crowd roars with approval. I glance at the clock. There's a minute and thirty seconds left to play. Raimo slides me the puck, and I pass to Sanchez, who takes it down the ice. Our

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line keeps forward progression, eyes on the prize. Pascal blocks an Emperor, and a prime position for the goal awaits me. Sanchez sees the opening and passes the puck my way.

I pull my stick back. Swing. Connect.

It sails right over the goalie's shoulder and into the net.

The crowd cheers as the goal horn blares. I throw my hands into the air. Pascal and Sanchez quickly flank me, slapping me on the back. Tae and Trevor, our two defensemen, skate behind me and pat my shoulders. I grin as we break the huddle, then skate over to the bench and high-five the guys on the bench. Our line sits as the next enters the ice.

Whew.

According to the scoreboard clock, I've been playing a total of fifteen minutes. The coaches keep each line on around two minutes, trading us out here and there to keep our legs fresh and our spirits high.

My attention turns to the game. All Raimo has to do is ensure the Emperors don't score again before the clock runs out. If we end up in overtime, I know we can win.

Fifty-seven seconds left.

Coach calls for a switch, and Sanchez is back on the ice. He's clutch in the last second, which is why he gets called out more often than not. One of our guys rams an Emperor forward up against the boards. Sanchez shoves his stick along the sides to gain possession of the puck. His skates cause a spray of ice as he sprints toward our rival's goal.

"Come on, Sanchez, come on."

"Make the goal," Tae mumbles beside me.

I let a small grin cover my lips, but I don't lose focus on the puck. My breath hitches as Sanchez attempts an impossible shot. The horn blares and I cheer. Game over, but we've made the goal just in time. It's a win for us.

The whole team flocks to the center of the ice, sticks held in the air in celebration. Our fans give us a standing ovation. There's

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nothing like a win, and one against our chief rival is even sweeter. The whole team lines up, waves to the fans, then circles around the rink before exiting into the player tunnel leading to the locker room.

I take off my helmet and pop my neck side to side. I hate to admit it, but my body feels every jab, every hit, every single movement I make. At thirty-three, I'm considered old by hockey standards. At least I'm not as old as Jaromír Jágr was when he played for the Calgary Flames back in 2017. Bro was in his mid-forties. Still, my knees are probably at least fifty years old.

Which is why I let the PT assistant wrap the joints as soon as my pads and uniform shorts come off. Someone plays Queen, and "We Are the Champions" fills the locker room. I throw a fist in the air and let out a loud cry of jubilation.

I can't stop the grin from forming. Tonight was our night. Sanchez making that last goal was peak. Granted, the kid's only twenty-four and has endless amounts of energy.

As the song ends, Coach motions for us to quiet down. I lean forward, wiping the sweat from my brow with the towel hanging from my neck.

"Y'all played one heck of a game."

The locker room fills with cheers once more.

"All right, all right." His hands splay out downward. "I don't want to keep you. I know y'all got families waiting for you." He looks at the sheet in his hand. "Sanchez, Karvonen, and Hall, I need y'all out with the reporters. Sanchez, obviously they'll want to talk about the game-winning goal. Raimo, good job on that block." He turns toward me. "And, Crank, they'll want to talk about the shot that tied us up and allowed Sanchez to get us that W."

"I'll be out there, Coach." Unlike Sanchez and Raimo, I don't have anyone waiting for me in the family room. My dad is a non-entity, and my mom lives in Ohio.

Oh, and a wife? Yeah, not for me.

I grab my white Warriors hoodie and throw on some matching

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sweatpants. I'm not required to dress up for the interview, so I won't. I still need a shower, but the reporters want us fresh from the rink, not necessarily smelling fresh.

Sanchez and Raimo meet me in the hall leading to the conference room where the reporters wait. We each represent the Warriors' colors, with one of the guys wearing all blue sweats and the other all red. We're repping our nation's capital well.

Sanchez and I exchange a fist bump, then walk into the media room. Flashes go off as the three of us take our seats. Soon, the questions begin.

"My question is for Jabari Hall. Crank, you're thirty-three years old. Do you feel like your days in the NHL are numbered, or do you think you still have a future with the Warriors?"

Why does someone always comment about my age after games? Don't they tire of the same ol' questions? If they see any flaws in my performance, my age is always brought up. If I do something right, it's a credit to me because obviously I'm an old man who keeps his body at peak performance. Their standards are impossible.

I quirk my lips into my trademark smile and speak into the mic. "You saw the game. Do you think I play like I'm ready to retire?"

The reporters laugh, including Julie Adams, the one who asked the question in the first place. Julie likes to flirt with me, but I refuse to date a reporter. She probably sees me as a meal ticket instead of a potential bae.

"You were on fire tonight, but surely this level of play won't last?"

I shrug. "There have been plenty of people who have played into their forties. I'm not a phenomenon."

Sanchez answers questions about his last-minute shot, then Raimo talks about his one-glove catch. Finally, we're dismissed as Coach takes over. I get up from my seat and stroll to the door like I don't have a care in the world. Truly, I don't, but the high is easing, and fatigue is beginning to set in.

"Man, this night's been crazy," Sanchez says.

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I slap him on the back. "Maybe so, but you did good out there, kid."

"So did you, ol' man."

I bark out a laugh.

"Are you two going to the celebration tonight?" Raimo asks, his accented English a nod to his Finnish ancestry.

"Nah. Yas has been asking for a night out, so I already made a reservation at Jônt," Sanchez replies.

My brows raise. "Taking her to a Michelin restaurant? Is tonight special?"

Sanchez clears his throat. "I bought a ring."

"A ring?" Surprise fills Raimo's voice.

We all stop in front of the locker room.

"Bro, you're only twenty-four." I scratch my chin, but my mind can't come up with anything else to say.

At his age, I dated every single woman who thought hockey players were hot. Now I avoid jersey chasers when possible. I'm not interested in settling down. In my experience, women aren't honest about what they want, and I'm not making promises to someone who isn't genuine.

"Yas has been my ride or die since high school. She's always been the one. I'm just worried this life's not for her."

Truth. But is that my cynicism speaking?

I've never seen his girl flirt with any of the other guys like I've seen some of the other players' wives do. Those players are now divorced and working on their next marriage, but that's beside the point. On paper, Yas looks perfect, and Sanchez seems hopeful.

"Good luck, man."

"Yeah, good luck," Raimo echoes.

"Thanks, Crank. Thanks, Raimo."

I nod. Most of the guys call me by my nickname, which I earned in my first two years playing with the Warriors because I *crank* out the goals. Even the coaching staff use my nickname more than my

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given one. Coach Turner is the only one who seems to remember my first name is Jabari.

I make quick work of a shower and change back into my game-day suit. After grabbing my duffel bag, I walk out to the players' parking garage, where my SUV waits. Unlike the other guys, my ride isn't a truck or a high-powered sports car. There's too much traffic in the DC area for me to want to pay tons in gas—not that I can't afford it. But I pair my practicality with the desire to show off, so I went with Lamborghini's latest dip into the SUV world. The SUV is more of a crossover and came in a blue that perfectly matches the Warriors' primary color. Add on an NHL license plate and my fandom is perfectly displayed.

I drive down Constitution Avenue toward I-66 and soon find myself on the toll road to McLean, Virginia, where I lay my head. A lot of the guys have homes in the area, and I almost went the route of the huge mansion, but that seemed impractical since I live alone. So I purchased a penthouse in a high-rise building. The three bedrooms are enough for someone to stay over if one of the guys needs a place to crash or my mom comes to visit.

My keys clang into the bowl sitting on the foyer cabinet. I toe my shoes off and step into the slippers waiting by the door, then drop my duffel next to the foyer table. My stomach rumbles, reminding me I need a postgame meal to replace the two thousand calories I just burned in the two-and-a-half-hour game. I open the fridge and choose one of the meals my personal chef left behind, a chicken-and-sweet-potato dish. After heating it up, I wolf down the food in no time. Though I have a dining table *and* a kitchen table, I usually eat at the kitchen island. The barstools hold me just fine. There's no reason to sit at a table all by myself.

Am I a little lonely?

"Jabari, you are *not* lonely." *Crap, did my words just echo in here?*

I look around as if visual evidence of an echo can be found, but all I see is the furniture my interior designer used to decorate the

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space. The monochrome colors aren't very personable—it almost looks staged. There are no family pictures displayed on my living room walls. The only thing that has my true mark is my office.

Pictures of big wins from high school through my professional career decorate the walls. It's probably why I'm in that room the most, even though I don't really have any work to do in there. Usually I spend time posting on my social media sites, reporting anything the Warriors pass to us, and answering fan mail that's been forwarded to me by my assistant.

My days are pretty straightforward. Workout. Practice. Play in the games. Come home. Rest and repeat. I haven't been on a date in maybe a year and have no plans to go on one anytime soon. Why would I? All women want to know is when can I see myself settling down and how much money I pull in per season. It doesn't help that the world loves to report on NHL players' salary. The gold diggers know how much I'll bring home after taxes before I do. Because of that, I'm giving dating a break, which means the only people I hang around are the Warriors.

Crap. Maybe I actually *am* lonely.

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2 Val

You know those days—the ones where anything and everything can and will go wrong? Yeah, today is turning out to be just that epic.

I set the cardboard coffee carrier down on Stella's desk.

"*What* happened to you?" she asks.

"DC pedestrians." I stare down at my freshly stained white blouse.

She snorts, then covers her mouth at my glare. "I'm sorry, Val, but you have to admit that's a little funny."

I raise an eyebrow.

"Did you at least bump into a handsome guy? That could've been your meet-cute."

I fake a shudder. "Please no. It's not cute getting hot coffee all down your *white* blouse, especially when it's freezing out."

Of course my drink would be the only one to spill. Guess I should've waited until I got to work before trying to drink it. How the coffee managed to find the perfect opening in my buttoned peacoat and splash all down my front is a mystery.

"Do you have a change of clothes in your office?"

I nod. "Going there now."

"I'll hand out the rest of the coffees."

"Thanks. You're the best."

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I stroll down the hall toward my office. I'm not a sports agent like my dad, sisters, brother-in-law, and the other two agents in-house, but I still get my own office because of my title as project manager. Being one of the boss's daughters probably helps too.

"Val," Jackie yells for me from her office.

I hold up a finger for her to give me a moment, but my sister motions for me to get my rear in gear. *Bossy older sisters.* I blow out a breath and stop in her doorway.

"Yes, Mac," she speaks into her cell. "We can make that happen. DeVante will continue at the same level of performance."

I mentally scour our list of clients and pull up the player information that belongs to DeVante Smith. He plays for the District's baseball team and is currently in negotiations for the upcoming season. However, that doesn't explain why Jackie flagged me down. I tap on my smartwatch, and she holds a hand up, mouthing, *Wait a minute*.

Can I stick my tongue out at my older sister? Doesn't she know this coffee on my shirt turned cold a couple of blocks away from the office? More than likely she's oblivious to the brown stain more horrendous than a newborn's first bowel movement. I still remember when my precious nephew granted me that terrible short straw. Why do aunts have to be hazed by way of dirty diapers?

I shift on my feet, and Jackie's gaze darts my way. Her gaze freezes.

"Uh, no, sorry, Mac. Yes, I'm listening." *What happened to you?* she mouths.

I motion toward my office, and she nods. *Finally.* I have a dusty-pink silk blouse hanging in my office closet from the Christmas party. Dad brought matching Christmas shirts for us all to pose in, and my silk top never saw daylight. It's remained in my office ever since. I'll have to drop the soiled top at the cleaners when I get a chance because no one has blessed me with a personal assistant.

After closing my door and turning the blinds, I take off the offending item, using the shirt to wipe any excess liquid off my skin.

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Thank goodness the tank I wore beneath took the brunt of the treatment. I don't need my bra staining my clean blouse.

As I finish buttoning the last button, a knock sounds on my office door. I twist the knob and flick the blinds back open. Jackie walks in and plops right into the chair in front of my desk.

"What do you need?" I ask.

"First, what happened to your shirt?"

I tell her the story of the too many pedestrians and what happened when I made the coffee run.

"Was it your coffee that got ruined?"

"Yep." I pop my lips.

"I'm sorry, sissy."

"Whatever, Jackie." I make a show of rolling my eyes, knowing that patronizing tone she uses is her charming—but entirely manipulative—way to gain something.

She pokes out her bottom lip.

It's too early for this. I rub my forehead. If she's using all her bags of tricks up front, she has a *very* big ask. "What?" I say quietly.

"I need you to arrange travel for me and the crew to LAX."

My head snaps up. "The crew? Isaac and Ollie?" I love my brother-in-law and nephew. They don't often travel with Jackie, only when her husband's schedule allows it as he's a partner in the agency.

The request is hardly difficult and not worth all the manipulative energy she's throwing my way. "Sure. When?"

"Tomorrow," she drawls out, ending on a lilt. Her face curls into a wince.

"Jackie Elliott Harper." I throw her maiden and married name together since none of the Elliott girls actually have middle names.

"Val, I know you can work your magic and get us tickets."

"I can, but they'll cost you a pretty penny." More like lots of pretty Benjamins.

"Daddy said I could charge the company account."

Of course he did. Jackie is the firstborn and gets away with

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murder. And Francis, the baby, gets anything she wants out of him. As typical of middle children everywhere, I get the short end of the stick on a repeated basis. Instead of complaining, I let my lips curve into false cheer.

"Thank you, Val," Jackie squeals, as if the digits of her age of thirty years have been reversed.

"Now shoo so I can get some work done."

"Certainly." She stands, smoothing her black pencil skirt down. "Wanna do lunch?"

"Can't. Dad has that lunch meeting and tasked me to assist." Which means I'll have to use my excellent memory to recall the key details Dad will want noted afterward. Unlike the assistants working at Elliott & Harper, I don't have to take notes in the moment.

"Fine. But when I get back, we're going out."

I barely nod, my gaze focusing on the available flights leaving out of Reagan tomorrow. If she has to leave tomorrow, I need to find tickets now.

By the time Dad taps on my doorway, I've gotten a mountain of tasks down to a shorter, more manageable stack. I still have plenty to do after lunch, but at least now I won't cringe when we come back to the office.

"Where are we going?" I grab my purse.

"Told them we'd treat them to The Spot."

Yes, that's really the restaurant's name. My brows raise. "Fancy. Are they going to give you the terms you want to make the price worth it?"

Dad laughs. "Maybe not, but Hunter's paying our meal ticket, not them."

True. All our agents earn top dollar from their players so courting new players will eventually be covered by signing the new client. It's why Dad doesn't mind charging his credit cards—the players are worth the upfront costs. Dad prides himself on owning one of the most sought-out sports agencies in the nation.

I follow him out into the hall.

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"Make sure you take all the mental notes possible," he adds.

"Will do."

When Jackie graduated from college, she immediately joined the firm as an agent. So did Francis upon walking across the stage. Me, on the other hand, I'd been deemed too soft from the get-go. I went with the flow and never attempted to work as an agent.

Not that I really mind. I don't like the salesmanship part of the job. I'm perfectly happy being introduced as the project manager, or assistant when my dad wants to downplay my presence.

Occasionally talent tries to flirt with me, but I'm more than capable of putting them in their place if need be. Sometimes I'll even accept their invitation if I think they're worth the trouble. Seeing Jackie's happy matrimony these past four years has me a little envious. However, when she gave birth to Ollie almost two years ago, that envy shot high enough for me to ask forgiveness from the Lord.

At twenty-seven, I'm only a few years younger than Jackie, but still I want what she has. Sadly I keep kissing frogs, so the past year I put myself on hiatus. I'm not sure when I'll dip my toe back into the murky dating pool, but my heart is getting that familiar ache. Maybe I should end my non-dating streak.

"How's your morning been?"

I turn to Dad after buckling my seat belt. "I spilled coffee on myself."

"'Course you did, kid."

"Then Jackie told me to book her travel . . . for *tomorrow*." I emphasize, but Dad doesn't even blink.

"Yeah, I gave her the okay this morning."

When Jackie said Dad told her to charge the account, I figured it was a while ago, not this morning. Guess, he's the one I should blame for the hassle. I ended up calling the airline since their system gave me issues, and I *knew* they had tickets for tomorrow. They're a favorite for a reason.

"Why are you sending her out to LA?"

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"New talent. He wants me as an agent, but I assured him Jackie's a better choice. Plus, your stepmom doesn't want me to take on any new clients."

Yeah, because then he'll be even busier than he already is running his own business and representing select clients.

"How is Ann?"

"Good, good. Hey, why don't you come over for dinner? You haven't been in a while."

"Maybe." I give a noncommittal smile.

It's not that I don't *want* to have dinner with my dad and his wife. Ann is nice and all, but I still feel loyal to Mom. It seems wrong to enjoy hanging out with Dad and his wife of ten years. Especially considering he'd been married to Mom for twenty-one years. The ink had barely dried on their divorce papers before he made vows to another woman. We'd done the math and knew what that meant, but none of us girls had the heart to ask any questions.

At least, I don't.

The driver pulls up to The Spot, and Dad opens the door, holding a hand out for me. I take it, steadying myself on my heeled feet before following him into the restaurant. The maître d' greets Dad by name, then grabs a couple of menus.

"This way, please."

I trail behind but stop when someone calls my name.

"Val?"

I scan the premises. Raimo Karvonen waves from a few tables over.

"Dad, I'll be a sec."

He glances at his watch, then nods. Dad usually arrives to a meeting fifteen minutes before whomever he has to negotiate with, so I have enough time to chat with the Washington Warriors' goalie.

Raimo meets me off to the side. "How have you been?" he asks in his Finnish accent.

"Good. You?" I give him a side hug.

"Fantastic. You saw we are leading the division, yes?"

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"I did. Congrats." Hockey is my first love.

Blame it on hockey players being my dad's first clients or simply how fun it is to watch the guys give it their all on *skates*. Whatever the reason, I'm a huge fan. I glance at Raimo's table and see his wife waiting for him. She catches my eye and waves, so I return the gesture.

"What are you doing here? Business?" Raimo asks.

"Yes, Dad's meeting someone to discuss potential terms."

"You never have fun, Val."

I laugh, but the move is forced. Raimo isn't wrong. I can't remember the last time I've gone out with that intention. Usually one of my friends has to drag me out of the house, deeming me an incorrigible hermit when I grouse the whole night.

"Maybe this weekend I'll do something." Probably read a book. That's all I do most evenings.

"Do you want to come to a game?" Raimo watches me expectantly.

Do I? When's the last time I saw the Warriors play in person? "Y'all are home this Saturday, right?"

"Yes." He motions to his wife. "Steff will be there."

That actually sounds amazing. "Are you sure?"

"Yes. It's not a problem. We will take care of the ticket."

"Thank you."

"Anytime." A mischievous glint enters his brown eyes. "Should I find you a date too?"

"Ugh, please don't. I just want to have fun."

"I understand. If you change your mind, I know plenty of guys who would be perfect for you."

"Appreciate that." *Not*. I hook a thumb over my shoulder. "I need to catch up to my dad."

"Sure, sure. See you this weekend."

"Tell Steff I said 'hey.'"

I make my way toward the back of the restaurant. My steps feel lighter, and I smile to myself. Maybe going to a hockey game

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this weekend will chase the blues away. Not that I'm depressed or anywhere near that level of hurt, but lately I can't shake a certain melancholy. Maybe the turn of the calendar and a promise of new beginnings has me wanting a different outcome. Or I simply hate feeling like the odd man out. Yet I have no clue on how to leave the mundanity.

Jackie goes home to her husband and toddler every night. And though I share a condo with Francis, she has a better social life than I do and is rarely home. Something has to give, and it's probably me and my routine. Hopefully attending the game this Saturday will help me shed whatever sadness insists on clinging to me.

Please, God, let it be a good night.

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3 Jabari

"Seven Nation Army" drums through the arena speakers as we skate around the rink waiting for the game to start. Soon they'll have us line up in the neutral zone to listen as a local sings the national anthem. Until then, I continue my pregame ritual.

I stop my forward trajectory and begin skating backward, making sure no one is behind me. The guys are all in their own zones as we ready for tonight's game against the Utah Mighty Five.

Coach motions for us to get back on the bench, so I slow to a stop, then hop over the boards, not bothering to enter through the door.

"You ready for this?" Liam, one of the assistant coaches, asks.

I nod.

"Good. Bring your A game because Utah's bringing theirs."

Don't I know it. They haven't been in the league very long, but they're already an explosive team and on the watch list.

Soon the announcers give the indication for the anthem, and we skate to the center line. I hold my helmet in my hand, and as soon as the last notes ring out, I raise it in the air. Game time.

I strap on my helmet, then snap my mouth guard on. My line is starting, and we're prepared to crush it. For one last time, I skate around the rink before positioning myself at the center for the

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face-off. The ref holds up the puck, and I give a nod in acknowledgment at the Utah player. We bend at the knees with our sticks at the ready. The ref drops the biscuit.

My stick slams against the black circle, shooting it toward Utah's goal. Sanchez immediately takes possession, and I race behind him, blocking where need be. He passes to Pascal, who aims and misses.

The crowd groans, but I push the noise to the background. Now isn't the time to take notice of their expectations or even the music blaring over the speakers. (They're playing that '70s rock band Scorpions. Three guesses on the song choice.) Utah gets the puck, and our defensive players do their best to aid our goalie in keeping the biscuit out of the net.

Back and forth, I move around the rink attempting to make a goal or ensuring the other team doesn't. When I hit two minutes of play time, I get the signal to hit the bench. The second line comes out, eager to keep up the momentum. The exchange is on the fly and, for the fans watching, probably not obvious if their gaze is on the puck and not us.

A water bottle's thrust into my face, and I pop out my mouthpiece, squirting the cold liquid right down my gullet. I exhale slowly in an attempt to bring my heart rate down before I go back out on the ice. Keeping quiet, I let my gaze follow the game. Sometimes we chat on the bench, but times like this, we're too focused as we wait to get back out on the ice.

"Hall, you're next."

I give Coach a thumbs-up, then check the game clock. We've been playing for almost six minutes now. When Preston skates toward the sideline, I hop over and glide toward Utah's goal, where one of their players tries to gain possession from our defender. I slam him into the boards so that Tae can escape.

"What the—" Charles North glares at me as he spits out an expletive.

I smirk, then chase after the next guy. He ends up with the

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puck despite my best efforts. Before I make it three feet, my feet go out from under me. With a grunt, I quickly turn to land on my back and slide across the ice. A whistle pierces the air, and I watch as Trevor pushes the Utah player who tripped me. Trevor loves a good brawl.

Sanchez helps me to my feet. "You all right, man?"

"Yeah. North is just ticked I checked him before." I crack my neck.

"Loser." Sanchez sneers and tilts his chin toward the ref. "They'll put him in penalty box for tripping."

"Good." Tripping is one of the worst things you can do to another player. Throw a punch, fine. Trip with a stick or your skate, and you're lucky the whole team doesn't come after you. I'm surprised Trevor didn't throw down.

We continue the game, yet neither team makes a goal. Two minutes later, and North is out of the penalty box, gunning for me. Apparently, his time in there hasn't cooled him off. It's all I can do to evade him. If he keeps trying to check me, I'll make good and well sure *he* gets an accidental tripping.

Sanchez passes the biscuit to me, and I shift to the side of the rink to gain the perfect angle to sail the puck behind their goalie. Before I can prepare for a swing, an explosive force shoves me in the back. Falling forward, I'm slammed into the boards, and I drop to the ice. *Oof.*

Sound dulls as I lie still, too stunned to do anything else. I don't even hear the whistle, though judging from the face peering above me, the ref has called for a time-out.

His lips move, but I can't hear a sound.

Do I have a concussion? I resist the urge to shake my head as a wave of nausea brings my stomach to my throat. I battle the sensation back as the ref raises a hand in the air. Before I know it, the team doc is in front of me.

My fists clench as I try to steady my breathing and beat down the panic skittering up my spine. A concussion can keep me out

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for at least two weeks. That's about six games depending on our schedule. If it's more . . .

I groan.

"Let's get you to the locker room for concussion protocol," Doc says.

I breathe a sigh of relief at the sound of his voice.

"You need help walking?" he asks.

"Nah." I attempt a swallow against my cotton-mouth.

But with my first step, my whole body wobbles, and Doc grips my arm. Liam steadies me on my right and helps me back to the locker room.

"We're gonna get a CT of your noggin, got it?" Doc asks.

I almost nod, but the jolt surging through my head halts the movement. "Yeah," I rasp.

"Don't worry. It'll probably show nothing or a slight concussion, but since you blacked out for a few seconds, we need to make sure everything's okay."

"Yeah, I don't like the look in his eyes," Liam adds.

You mean the fact I see two of him? Yeah, I'll keep that factoid to myself. "Understood."

"All right. Hang in there, Crank," Liam says. "We'll get you squared away."

"Thanks."

The medical staff will do everything in their power to get me feeling as good as new, but being nauseous and seeing double has me worried. I'm not a doctor, but the fact the world went silent and my vision is off screams concussion.

One of the assistants brings a wheelchair to me. My attempt at a glare is countered by an arch of the brow. Obviously, I'm not fooling anybody, and they know I'm hurt. I grumble under my breath but slowly sink into the chair. As they push me forward, I close my eyes hoping to keep my stomach contents secure. Only they churn faster than an ice cream maker.

"I'm going to be sick," I grit through my teeth.

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"Here."

A barf bag's shoved under my chin just in time. Humiliation hits me wave after wave as I empty my stomach contents. *Great*. I hold my head as we enter the CT room. The tech helps me onto the table, and relief finds me. I'm thankful they won't have to stick me in an MRI machine. No way I can handle that level of noise right now. Even their talking is too loud. As if realizing this, the techs lower their voices as they inform me to lie still.

"Crank," someone whispers.

I open my eyes to see Doc and his double peering at me, a look of concern creasing his forehead wrinkles. Slowly, I move my head left, then right to get a sense of my bearings. It's dark, except for a soft lamp lighting the back of the room.

"What happened?" I croak, mouth dry.

Doc hands me a cup. "You fell asleep while being wheeled into the room. We brought you in here and have been monitoring your vitals." He points to a machine.

I peer down at my body and notice a blood pressure cuff on my left arm. "What's the verdict? How long will you recommend they bench me?"

Doc's mouth turns downward. "It's not good, Crank."

Just what I'm afraid of. "Give it to me straight."

"All right. You've got a bad concussion, son. There's some swelling and some kind of lesion on the occipital lobe. We're waiting for an ambulance to transport you to the hospital for observation and further testing."

What in the world? Half of that sounds like gibberish and the other half, well, I'm afraid to ask clarifying questions. "No," I groan.

"Sorry, Crank. That swelling needs to be monitored in a hospital setting."

"And then what?"

"We take it one day at a time. You need to let your brain heal."

Yeah, but for how long? "Best guess, how long will I be out?"

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Hockey is everything to me. I don't often get injured, and this is my first serious concussion.

"At least a month."

No. What will I do for a whole month? How will the team fare without me? Yet I keep my questions internal. "After a month, I'll be back on the ice, right?"

"We gotta monitor your noggin. It's the only one you have. We don't want to mess around with TBIs."

My body goes cold. Traumatic brain injuries? I've heard the term before but usually related to football players and military members who've been in traumatic accidents. Those words aren't often spoken in the hockey world. Not that we don't get concussions. We're known for our fights and obviously wear helmets for a reason. But the jokes are always about our lack of teeth, not brain injuries.

"We'll fix ya up, Crank. Promise."

He can't guarantee that. TBIs are *nothing* to mess with. I want to will my body to shake off the double vision and nausea, but my brain is hyperfocused on the idea of not playing hockey again. Will this truly only be a month's rest? Or . . .

Don't think like that.

There's nothing I can do about this today. I'll let them bench me for a month before I'm begging them to put me back on the ice. It's where I belong, my whole reason for existing. I don't have a lot of skills, but hockey is where I shine. If they take it away from me, what's left?

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