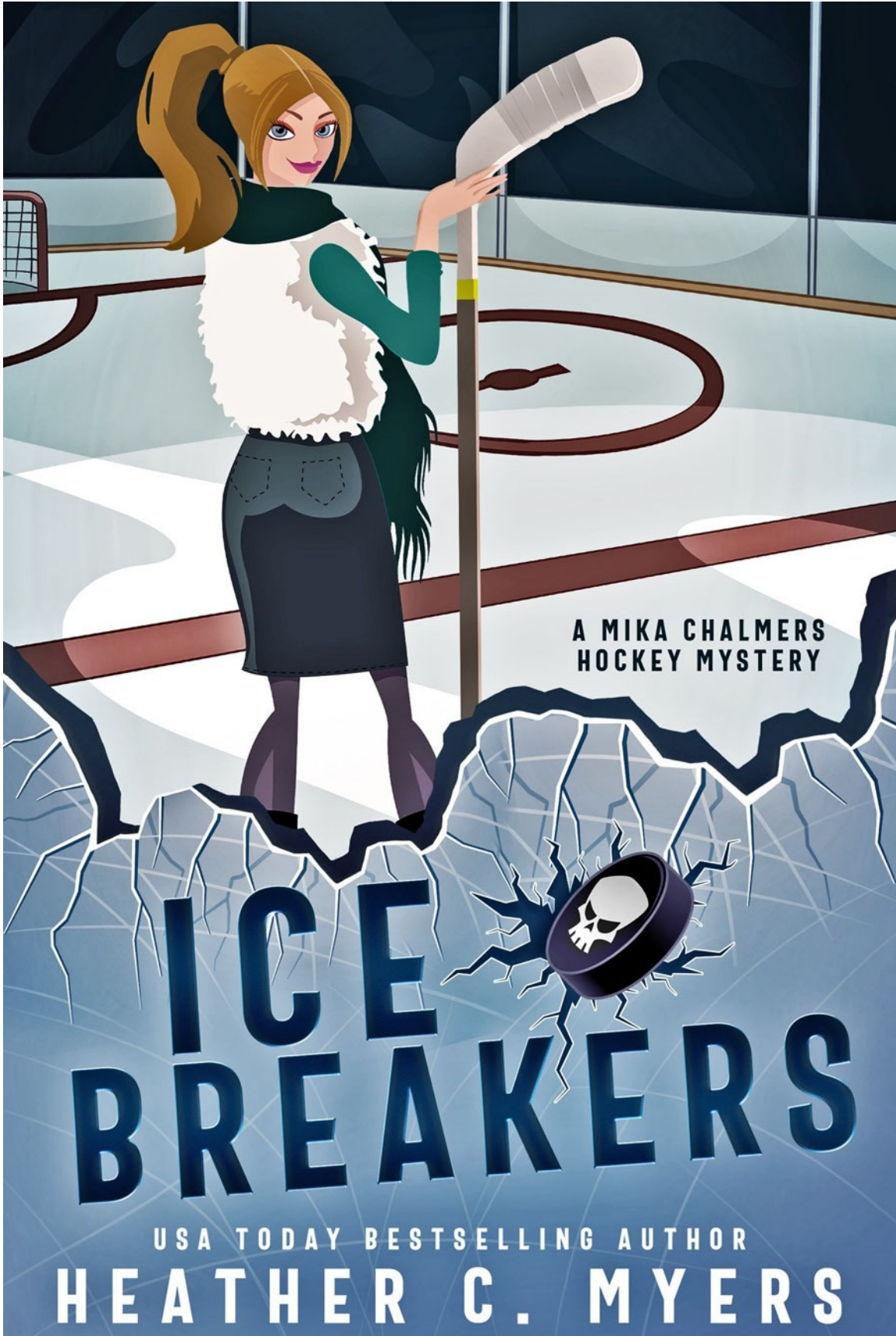


A MIKA CHALMERS
HOCKEY MYSTERY

ICE BREAKERS

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
HEATHER C. MYERS



■

Ice Breakers

A Mika Chalmers Hockey Mystery

■

Heather C. Myers

Contents

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Chapter 19](#)

[Chapter 20](#)

[Chapter 21](#)

[Chapter 22](#)

[Chapter 23](#)

[Chapter 24](#)

[Stay updated!](#)

[Did You Like Ice Breakers?](#)

[Acknowledgments](#)

■

Chapter 1

■

I hated running. It was the one part of my job I absolutely loathed and one that was absolutely necessary. Maybe it was a good thing because my car was acting up, and for it to stop working in the middle of a chase, I'd never hear the end of it. My reputation as a competent private investigator would be ruined.

My hair flew in my face. I cursed internally, side stepping a couple that happened to stop in the middle of the sidewalk in order to hash out their argument, not bothering to care one way or the other if they were blocking people from their destination. I had just straightened my hair, and already I could tell my locks were going back to their wavy, frizzy selves. I wasn't sure if I was going to have the time to do it after I caught my target and still be on time for my date.

My target darted left, crossing the street in the middle of traffic. He expertly dodged cars, ignoring the blazing honking that followed. Irvine was definitely not an urban city like New York or Los Angeles, but it was one of the biggest and most diverse suburban cities in Orange County in terms of population, so his decision to do that was dangerous as it was stupid.

"God dammit," I muttered under my breath. I rolled my eyes and stopped on the corner of Barranca and Culver. If I wanted to keep up with him, I needed to cross.

Now.

If I didn't want to get hit by a car, I had to wait for the light to change.

Decisions, decisions.

I bounced between the balls of my feet, trying to keep momentum. I kept my target in my sight, eyes locked onto his fading form. He glanced behind him

once, smirked when he saw where I was, and resumed his running.

“God dammit,” I said again. I glanced back up at the street light. “Come on, come on.”

The second the light turned yellow, I took my chance. I nearly got hit by a Range Rover who wanted to try and make the yellow light, but I held myself back just in time. Under normal circumstances, I would have cursed at the blonde driver with her oversized sunglasses and perfect magazine-ready waves that cascaded down her face, probably never knowing the word frizz in the entirety of her life, but I really needed to capture this guy and turn him over to Irvine Police Department so I could collect my check.

My mouth ran dry thanks to the high sun, even in mid-September. Sweat made a home under my arms, on the back of my neck, on my brow, and between my breasts. I never used to sweat and then I decided to become a private investigator. I had no idea how this decision changed the function of my body for the more embarrassing, but it did. If it didn't pay as well as it did, I might have considered a career change. Sweat was not something I wanted to showcase on a first date. Which meant I would have to shower after this, which meant the probability of me being late for this date had increased.

I made it across the street and continued forward. Breathing was becoming more of a struggle for me. I made it a point to get to the gym twice a week in order to keep my stamina up, but considering how many chases I had experienced as of late, I should probably add another day.

The target hailed a left down a residential street. I cursed to myself and pulled out my phone. If I could avoid involving the IPD, I would. That wasn't to say that I wouldn't bring the target back to the station and turn him over to the detective assigned to the case. I just didn't like asking for help when it came to tracking down the perp in the first place because if the police officially arrested him, it meant I didn't get my bonus. And right now, my bonus was paying my rent – at least, that was what I intended it to do.

However, considering he was involving innocent people who lived on a quiet street, I realized I didn't have much of a choice but to do so. Unfortunately for me, I already knew the detective assigned to my target's case: Alexander Beech. Beech was a cocky jerk who was good looking and knew it. He was also a damn

good detective, which only added to his inflated ego.

I could always call nine-one-one and anonymously report a sighting of the target down the street. Irvine was notorious for responding quickly. I just didn't want to risk losing him because they sent a rookie patrol officer instead of a seasoned officer with chase experience under his belt.

"Dammit."

I pulled out my cellphone, maintaining my pace. I had Beech's number saved only because it was easier than calling into the front desk and having them transfer me to his desk. As much as I wanted to ignore the fact that we worked together a lot, we did. At least we were both on the same page about it. We both didn't like each other. It was the only thing we agreed on.

"Beech." His voice was crisp.

"Hey." I couldn't continue speaking because I had to catch my breath. "You know your offender for that four-five-nine?"

"I'm sorry, who is this?"

I rolled my eyes and dodged a couple walking their dog. The dog got excited at my running and tried to chase me but his owner held onto his leash tightly.

"You know exactly who it is," I growled. "Don't pretend like you don't have my number saved. I've brought you at least eight perps."

"Is this... Mika, is that you?" he asked. "You sound surprisingly out of breath. Tell me: are you running?"

"First of all..." I hated that I had to stop speaking to take another breath. Luckily, the target was still within sight. It seemed like he was getting tired too. "Do you want to know where your guy is or not?"

"I'm a homicide detective. Why would I be interested in a four-five-nine?"

"Oh, come on, Beech!" I exclaimed. "The guy just turned down a residential street, okay? Yes, I'm running after him and it sucks. I just thought you'd want to be there when I take him in."

“Like hell you’re taking him in.” A pause. I could picture him opening the top drawer of his desk and pulling out his keys. “Do not botch this up, Chalmers. I’m on my way. Actually, you better just wait there. Don’t go after him. Have you even caught up to him? Judging by the way you’re panting, probably not.”

“God, you’re a dick, Beech,” I muttered, wiping my brow. I hated that he was right, though, and tried to power walk without it distorting my breathing in any way.

“That was pretty direct for you. No witty retort? Has the sun fried your brain out there or something?”

“I’m going to hang up now,” I said. “And it’s going to be really fun catching the guy before you get here.”

“Do not fuck this up, Chalmers,” he repeated, this time with more insistence. “This guy has been hitting up Lantern Creek, the gated community adjacent to Newport Coast. You know, where the Lakers live in retirement and the billionaire tech geeks live after they’ve graduated from Silicon Valley.”

“Who do you think one of my clients is?” I pointed out.

My target was still in my sight – thank God. My power walking was abysmal at best but it appeared the offender was getting tired. Every now and then, Irvine would get ridiculously humid. Unfortunately – or fortunately, depending on how I could choose to look at it – today was humid days.

“Look,” I continued. Instead of following the paved sidewalk, I cut across the grass. My calves screamed in protest because there was an incline where I was walking. However, I knew if I headed through the backend of the neighborhood, I would be able to cut him off. “It’s not my fault you guys didn’t do your job well enough to get the confidence of the Creekers. They felt they needed to come to me to get the job done.”

“Because you’re such a good PI.” His voice was dry and bitter.

I smirked. “Try to pretend like I suck at my job,” I said. “I don’t. You can try and insult me but the one thing I know I’m good at in my life is being a PI.”

“Hmm, I thought you were going to say something more personal, but in order to

kill time, I'll keep my mouth shut."

"That's a surprise." A rabbit hopped out of my way, darting under a manicured bush. I sidestepped flowers paid gardeners planted to make the street look pop with colors. "I called you to help because there's no way I'm going to be able to drag this guy back to my car parked in front of the Coldstone on Culver, okay?"

"I'm getting in the car now." I heard the door slam and knew he was telling the truth. "You're in Northwood territory?"

I nodded, then remembered that he couldn't see me. "Yeah." I crossed over by the pool. It was surprisingly empty for the heat, but then I remembered that kids were in school now, despite the summer weather. I wasn't sure if having more witnesses or less would have been preferable. It probably didn't matter.

"At least traffic isn't that bad right now." He was talking more to himself than he was to me. "Everyone's in school. Lunch is almost over."

"You're talking to yourself again," I said. I heard a crunch and my heart jumped in my throat at the prospect that I might have stepped on an unsuspecting snail. I glanced down to see it was only a large leaf that had fallen from one of the trees overhead. "Shit."

"Shit?" Beech all but yelped. "You better not fuck this up, Chalmers."

"You've already told me that." I increased my pace, forcing myself to trust the fact that I would run into the target even though I couldn't see him. "I thought I stepped on a snail."

"Wait. Wait, wait, wait. Let me get this straight, Chalmers. You're running after a highly-sought after suspect attached to at least three different four-five-nines and you are more concerned about a snail than the suspect."

"Just because I can't see him doesn't mean I won't get him," I said between breaths.

"You don't see him?!"

"You don't have to raise your voice –"

“Jesus, Chalmers! Like, I literally don’t understand you. How is it that with all of our resources and manpower that’s been assigned to this case, how is it you are able to find him after everything? And not just find him, but actually chase him. And then lose him!”

The alley behind the row of houses came into view. I knew Beech was annoyed with me, but I was too distracted to care. If my calculations were correct, my target would be coming out of that alley any moment. Besides a couple of houses at the end of a cul-de-sac, there was nowhere for him to go besides the alley. I didn’t think he was familiar with Irvine’s rigid housing structure. Because the land belonged to the city, there were strict parameters for how houses were constructed. It was why many of the houses in specific neighborhoods looked very similar – because they were essentially the same house, just flipped around. There weren’t many alleys in Irvine which was why my instincts told me he would try to find shelter there.

“He’s coming out, Beech. Gotta go.”

“Don’t you hang up on me –“

I clicked the red circle and pocketed my smart phone. I positioned myself behind a couple of trees and waited. Closing my eyes, I tried to hear footsteps, any indication that he was coming.

It took a moment, but I heard him coming. Sneakers slapping against the pavement. Slightly out of breath. If I didn’t use the surprise to my advantage, he’d overpower me with his strength. I bounced from foot to foot. I took off my backpack and grabbed my half-eaten egg salad sandwich and threw it in the opposite direction just as he exited the mouth of the alley.

He turned and I tackled him to the ground. I acted quickly and pulled out my taser.

“Don’t move or else I’ll –“

He shifted, trying to hit me across the face.

“Asshole!” I exclaimed, shooting him with one thousand volts. “Not my face.”

He twitched once, collapsing back to the ground.

I huffed an indignant sigh, then smirked. I got my target. Which meant I got my bonus. Now all I had to do was wait for Beech to arrive and hope that this asshole didn't wake up.

■

Chapter 2

■

“Has anyone ever told you what a pain in the ass you are?”

I drummed my fingers on Beech’s old desk and tossed my ponytail over my shoulder. My lips twitched up into a smirk and I looked up to take him in.

“Only you,” I responded, swiveling in his comfy leather chair.

His pressed his lips into a thin line as he headed over to his desk in the bullpen, a Styrofoam cup of coffee in his hand.

“Did you need something, Chalmers?” He took a sip of the coffee and made a face, his dark eyes all but glaring at the liquid. “I’m sure you didn’t stop to see little old me.”

“I’m surprised you would actually refer to yourself as little,” I said. I placed my hands on the arms of the chair and pushed myself up into a standing position just as he stepped forward. “Actually, I have some paperwork I need you to sign in regards to your offender for case number one-nine-one-seven-four-five-two.”

Now, it was his turn to grin. He set his cup of coffee down on the corner of his desk and stepped towards me, completely ignoring the concept of personal space. I hated when he did that – and he chose to do it often, knowing it was one of the few ways to make me uncomfortable. There was something about Beech that drew me to him. He was ridiculously good looking – high cheekbones, sharp jaw, dark coffee-brown eyes, shoulder-length dark hair that shouldn’t work but did because he was just that good looking - but it was easy to write that off. He had this innate talent of detecting weakness and exploiting that weakness, wrapping up that exploitation in his charm. It was devastating, and even though I knew he did this and took advantage of it, I still let it affect me every time.

And I hated myself for it.

“You were the one who nabbed him?” he asked.

I could smell the hint of rolled cigarettes and ocean cologne. I hated the smell of cigarettes, but for some reason, it didn’t bother me on him.

I cleared my throat and stepped back. His grin only widened.

“You sound surprised,” I said.

He took a seat in his chair, leaning back and looking at the paperwork I placed on his desk. “I am,” he said. “I heard he got caught on foot and I know what a terrible runner you are. Is that why you haven’t interviewed for a position here? The physical exam?”

“Obviously I know I’m not in the best shape,” I said, “but I still caught the guy.”

“One wouldn’t know it, given how small you are.” I couldn’t tell if that was a compliment or not. Then I remembered that this was coming from Beech and I didn’t care. His eyes flickered down my body, but there wasn’t anything lecherous about it. If anything, it seemed as though he was studying me, taking me in. “You barely caught the guy. If you hadn’t, I would have been there to do just that.”

“Because I called you,” I pointed out.

“Thank God you did. I don’t think you would have been able to catch the guy if he hadn’t tripped over the tree roots in front of that house and twisted his ankle. Luckily, I was there to make sure he couldn’t get past you – which he definitely would have been able to do considering you were practically passed out by the time I showed up.”

I rolled my eyes. “Look, at the end of the day, I’m responsible for nabbing him,” I said. “That’s all that matters. Do I need to run more? Probably. But I get my bonus, and an asshole is behind bars. Everybody wins.”

Beech made a guttural sound from the back of his throat. He kicked his heels up, crossing them on the edge of his desk and leaning back against his leather chair.

“I need you to sign my paperwork,” I said, sliding my backpack off my shoulder and unzipping it. Thank God I kept it in my car at all times. I would probably

forget it if I didn't. I pulled out a manila folder as another detective scooted around me in order to head towards the exit. Phones were ringing in the background and a couple of uniformed patrol officers were murmuring at the desk behind Beech.

"My favorite part of the job." He smirked, only emphasizing his sharp cheekbones. "The part where you admit you need me."

"Yeah, yeah." It used to bother me that he reveled in this necessary part of the job, but I didn't care anymore at this point. As long as I got paid, he could enjoy the fact that I relied on him for my bonus. I genuinely didn't care.

"Don't you have a date tonight?" He took the paperwork from my hand and began to flip through it, his dark eyes scanning the typed font. I wasn't sure why he continued to read each contract I gave him; they were all essentially the same, just with different names, offenses, and case numbers. I would never try to pull a fast one on him and I think he knew that.

"How do you even know about that?" I asked.

"Well, you're dating one of our rookies," he said as though it was obvious. "You know how gossip is here."

"Wait, Daniel Boone works here?" I dropped in the seat in front of his desk, gripping the edge of the upholstery. These seats were not as comfortable as his chair, but at this moment, I didn't particularly care. "I mean, I knew he was a cop, but..."

Beech snorted, shaking his head. His focus was still on the contract, flipping the paper as he continued to read through it. "I thought you were damn good at your job," he said. "Don't tell me you agreed to go on a date with a cop without doing some kind of background on him." He pulled his eyes from the paper and looked up at me, raising a skeptical brow. "You should know better than that, Chalmers."

I grunted, rolling my eyes. I grabbed my hair and pulled it over my shoulder, looking down at the split ends that were in desperate need of a trimming.

"I don't want to be that, you know?" I glanced over at Beech and found him staring at me. My cheeks pinched in surprise and I hastily looked away, turning

to pretend one of his awards hanging from his cubicle had caught my eye. “Looking into someone’s background.”

“Yeah, but in this day and age...” He let his voice trail off. “Not going to lie, Chalmers. I’m surprised.”

“Why?” I still didn’t want to look at him. I didn’t know why, but his eyes seemed to know way more than I felt comfortable with. God forbid I revealed my feelings through my facial expressions. It was something I definitely needed to work on – even if I was still confident in my ability to be able to do my job.

“You’ve been a PI for, what, like three years?” He perked his brow, setting the pen down. He had yet to sign the contract and I couldn’t help but think he was delaying this on purpose. “It amazes me that you aren’t jaded by the job. The people that you’ve met, the perps you deal with, hell, even your clients are assholes. How do you still want to trust people?”

I paused, waiting for him to make a witty retort or some kind of insult. Instead, he was silent. I felt his eyes on my profile. Instead of meeting them with my own, I focused my attention on pictures he had on his desk even though I had them practically memorized. I didn’t even care if he made a quip about me checking him out. Anything but this curious silence.

“I think trust is a choice,” I finally said. “I can choose to let the job change who I am, or I can choose not to. Don’t get me wrong; it’s not easy for me to do. And I know a lot of my friends – even the civilian employees here – would probably think I’m stupid since I do have the resources to look into any potential dates, but I don’t want to lose that part of me.”

“Huh.” He shook his head. “I don’t think it’s stupid.”

My eyes widened. “You don’t?”

“Well.” He lifted his hand and tilted it to the left and the right. “Maybe a little stupid. But, uh... good for you.”

“Did you just sound... genuine?”

“I’m a pretty genuine guy, Chalmers. What, you think, I’m just a pretty face? There’s a reason I’m very popular with the ladies.”

“And yet, you’re perpetually single.”

“That is a choice.”

“Yes, and the ladies seem to make good choices by staying away from you.”

“They don’t stay away,” he corrected. “I wine and dine them, make polite conversation, throw in a couple of compliments, and then take them back to their place –“

“Never yours, right?” I arched my right brow.

“Never,” he agreed, shaking his head. “And from there –“

“I think I get it,” I said, making a face.

“I’m not sure.” He frowned. “I can always describe my technique if you want. I’m sure you’d be very interested in how I bring all of these women to their knees, make them beg for more.”

“And I’m sure you give it to them.”

“Oh, yes. But only for a night.”

“How unfortunate for them.” I hoped he could tell by my face that I was being sarcastic.

“I’m saving myself for you, Chalmers.” He winked.

I hated the way my heart fluttered in my chest. Not because of his words because I knew they were bullshit. That was one of Beech’s many talents – how much bullshit he could pull because he had a pretty face. He was charming too, and that certainly helped him. But the wink did me over because he was so ridiculously attractive that there were rare occasions where even I wasn’t impervious to him.

I immediately looked away again, hoping he couldn’t tell I actually liked his stupid charm wink. The last thing I wanted to do was stroke his ridiculously large ego. He could stroke it himself, and I was positive he did.

“That’s too bad,” I said. “I’m saving myself for Daniel Boone.” I stood up, ready to get out of here and collect my bonus. I also intended to take a quick shower and then get ready for my date. I might be a little late, but after I explained what a day I already had, I was sure he would understand. He was a cop, after all.

Beech scowled at me and opened his mouth to say something but I cut him off.

“Have you signed that yet?” I asked. “I have a hot date tonight that I don’t want to be late for.”

He flared his nostrils and grabbed a pen. Before I could make another smartass retort, my phone rang.

“Is that Boone? Spoiler alert: he’s a stage five clinger.”

I rolled my eyes and pulled out my phone, prepared to answer. I only faltered when I saw the name flash across my screen.

Eric Foresburg.

The professional hockey player.

One of the best centers in the league.

My ex.

What was he calling me for?

■

Chapter 3

■

“Hello?” I didn’t bother excusing myself from the conversation I was having with Beech because I wasn’t terribly interested in resuming it. He had signed the paperwork which meant I would be able to collect my fee – and a big, fat bonus – from my client. I didn’t need anything else from him.

Anyway, I was already distracted by the fact that Eric Foresburg was calling me.

My heart swelled at the name, but I tampered it down when I answered. I didn’t want to think about everything that had happened between us. It had been so long ago anyway. I didn’t even know why I kept his number saved into my phone.

“Hey.” His voice was soft-spoken, low. I suppressed a shudder and closed my eyes, taking a silent breath, hoping he couldn’t detect how much of an effect he still had on me.

Someone cleared their throat and I suddenly remembered that I was still adjacent to Beech’s desk and he was watching me with narrowed eyes having a conversation with Eric. I sneered at him and swiped the paperwork from the surface of his desk. The last thing I wanted was Beech listening in on a conversation I wasn’t sure I even wanted to have.

“Hey.” I closed my eyes and shook my head. I already said hello; I didn’t need to do it again unless I wanted to make myself look like an idiot. I stepped out of the bullpen and headed to the stairs, playing with the green lanyard around my neck.

“How are you?”

I paused. I reached the first floor and nearly bumped into Sergeant Isaac, the traffic sergeant. He grinned at me but saw I was on the phone, so he didn’t say anything else. I leaned against the wall of chiefs – the hallway was filled with

pictures of each police chief IPD had since the inauguration of the city and its police station – and tried to figure out what the hell Eric was doing. Why he was calling me in the first place.

“Eric.” I stopped. I didn’t want to attack him. I didn’t want to make any assumptions. That would open up a can of worms I thought we had buried back in the past. But it was difficult not to jump in and start asking my questions.

“Are you busy?” He sighed. “I know this seems... out of the blue. Can we meet? Now? I wouldn’t call unless it was important.”

Before I could respond, the deputy chief stepped out of her executive secretary’s office. Immediately, I ducked into the small corridor where the elevator was and pressed my back against the wall, shielding my body from her view. The DC wasn’t my biggest fan. She thought PI’s inhibited investigations rather than assisted with them, which meant she hated me with a passion and didn’t care that I had a badge that allowed me access almost anywhere in the station.

“...finally get the front desk some glass,” she said. I wasn’t sure who she was speaking with but I waited until I heard their voices fade down the short hallway to the break room before I stepped out of the corridor and back into the hallway.

“Hello?”

I shook my head. “Yeah. Um.” I pinched the bridge of my nose, my body pushing the exit door and opening it so I could get out of the station. “Sure. Where do you want me to meet you?”

“Can you come by my place?”

“No.”

I stepped past the automatic doors and into the surprisingly bitter air. It had been sunny with a cloudless sky a few hours ago when I was chasing down my target. Now, it was cool, the atmosphere pinching my skin as if it wanted me to wake up.

“Okay.” A beat. “Do you have a preference? I just... I don’t want to be somewhere public.”

I heaved a sigh. I had a feeling this was going to be a private conversation.

“I’ll just swing by your place,” I said, resigned. I turned towards the parking lot and glanced to my left and then to my right. When I was satisfied there weren’t cars coming, I stepped into the street and headed for my car. “I should be there in ten, fifteen minutes.”

“Thanks, Meeks,” he murmured. “I mean it.”

I hung up before I could respond and steeled myself for an uncomfortable conversation with my ex.

When I pulled up to his place on the Newport peninsula, I ignored the heavy sinking of my heart. This was supposed to be our place. I picked out furniture. I organized the furniture in the master bedroom. I had my fingerprints on this place.

And then he broke up with me.

“Who cares, Chalmers?” I muttered to myself, shaking my head. “It was a couple of years ago.”

Logically, I knew this, and yet, I couldn’t help but feel the pain I had buried from long ago start to claw its way back to my surface. I breathed it out. I didn’t have time for nostalgia, for what could have been. I took a step towards the door, and then another, until I found myself knocking.

Eric answered almost immediately. He gave me a warm smile. I blinked when I saw it, my cheeks turning red. I had to look away. It was too much for me to take in right now.

“Come in.” There was a stiffness to his voice, something that gave away that he was just as uncomfortable as I was. At least I had that much.

“Uh, thanks.” I stepped around him, making sure to keep my distance. I couldn’t let myself accidentally touch him, whether there was a barrier of clothing between us or not. I was already trying to keep it together and that was difficult for me to do when all I wanted was to fall apart now that he had made contact. I knew this was a possibility. He did play for my dad’s team. I just didn’t think I’d be at his place because he wanted to speak to me privately.

Stepping into this home was akin to stepping into a memory I desperately wanted to forget but couldn’t. There was the couch Eric and I broke in our first night in this place together. He kept the black and white curtains I picked out at WalMart. Hanging on the white walls were pictures of his favorite DC superheroes in black and white frames I picked out at IKEA. I didn’t recognize the television, but I did recognize the glass coffee table and the books scattered across it. I reached out to pick one up and then remembered I didn’t live here, not anymore, and these things didn’t belong to me.

I cleared my throat and turned. Eric was looking at me, his gaze scrutinizing me in a way that didn’t make me feel entirely comfortable. Like he could read my thoughts, like he could see into my mind and watch the memories that assaulted me in a way I didn’t expect.

My chest ached. I couldn’t breathe properly because it pinched, as though someone was stepping on my chest and pinning me in place.

I shouldn’t have come.

I thought I was over Eric – I was over him. But that didn’t mean I was comfortable being here, in a home we shared at one point together. It might have been for a short amount of time. Maybe it hadn’t meant all that much to him, but for that time, it was my whole world. The feelings I felt for Eric consumed me and I was utterly devastated when we broke up.

“So?” I winced. Did I just screech? I crossed my arms over my chest tightly, turning away from him. First Beech and now Eric. Was I seriously unable to look at any guy without embarrassing myself? I cleared my throat. When I trusted my voice, I took a breath. “What did you need, Alex? Are you okay?”

“No.”

The word was soft. In fact, I thought I imagined it. I whirled around to look at

him, more surprised than concerned about him reading the emotions on my face. However, the penetrating gaze Eric shot me told me he did speak, that it wasn't in my head.

"Okay." I wasn't sure how to respond to that. "Well, do you want to talk about it?"

He sighed and hung his head. I knew something was troubling him for him to actually show just how affected he was by whatever burden was occupying his shoulders. Eric rarely revealed any sort of emotion in the first place, especially to me. It was one of the issues we had as a couple. This Eric was someone I didn't know but was open to learning more about. Perhaps he was even someone I would be open to helping.

"Not really."

Scratch that.

I wasn't in the mood for his bullshit games. I scoffed, my annoyance with him removing any overtly emotive feelings I experienced upon first stepping into the house. It was so easy to forget why we were apart and so easy to remember why we were together.

"Why am I here, Eric?" I hadn't meant to sound firm. Whatever he was going through was clearly bothering him. But I had my own plans and my own day. I didn't want to wait around for him to decide whether or not he wanted to confide in me. He was the one who requested I come here. He was the one asking for my help. If he couldn't trust me with why he needed help, how could he expect me to even be able to help him in the first place?

He heaved a sigh and all but collapsed on his couch. His shoulders hung forward, elbows resting on his knees, head hanging forward. I never saw him look so helpless before. I wasn't sure what to do. I wasn't sure how to respond.

"Tomorrow, a woman by the name of Yvonne Wexler will announce that she spent the night with me against her will." He still wouldn't look at me. He still didn't pick up his head.

I furrowed my brow and gave myself a moment to let his words sink in. I must have misheard him. "Do you mean someone is going to accuse you of raping

them, Eric?" I asked. I nearly choked on the word rape. It felt out of place in this conversation, in relation to Eric.

"Yes." His voice broke and tears accumulated in my eyes. I blinked them away. The last thing Eric needed was me to get too emotional. He asked me to be here to help him, not turn into a child who just found out Santa wasn't real.

"Well?" I demanded, hands on my hips. "Did you?"

His head snapped up, blue eyes offended, raw, and hurt all at the same time. I had to look away again. I didn't like the way he looked at me. Whether he liked it or not, I had to ask the question. I had to hear him say it.

"Of course not," he said. "I'm surprised you would even ask."

"I have to," I said, crossing my arms over my chest. "What do you need me for? If you have a good lawyer –"

"If she accuses me, my reputation goes to shit," Eric pointed out. "I can prove my innocence, but in the court of public opinion? People will look at me and treat me like I am a rapist even though I'm not."

"So I'm going to –"

"I need you to help me prove my innocence," Eric said. "So I can stop her before she's able to announce anything and show her that she's wrong and filing any sort of report or even saying I'm a rapist is a crime. She wanted to settle out of court, but I –" A beat. "Please, Meeks. I don't know who else to turn to. You can help me."

"No." I wasn't expecting to vocalize the word out loud, but I did. "I can't help you, Eric. I have other cases and –"

"Mika, please."

"Did you sleep with her?"

He stopped, surprised by my question. I shouldn't care, but I did. I still did. And I hated myself for it.

“Did you sleep with her?” I repeated. “I’m not asking if you raped her. I’m asking if the sex between you was consensual. I’m asking if you slept with her in the first place.”

“Yes.” He looked away.

My heart had no right to break but it did. I thought I had moved on from him. I thought I was filled with steel when it came to Eric and his love life.

But I was weak. I was pathetic.

“I can’t help you, Eric,” I said, a tear rolling down my cheek. “I’m sorry, but I can’t do this.”

Before he could argue with me, before he could try and talk me into it, I all but ran out his house. The last thing I wanted was for him to see me cry

So, like a coward, I ran away from him. And I didn’t look back.

■

Chapter 4

■

I wasn't going on another date with the guy from last night. The entire time, my mind was on Eric, on what he was facing, on what was going to happen to him once news broke – and news would eventually break. Eric was a popular professional hockey player. There was someone, waiting to burst his bubble, waiting to watch him fall from grace. My date was cute and seemed sweet, but I couldn't force myself to pretend to make idle chitchat when my mind was reeling with what to do next.

I had said no. I intended to stick with that answer.

And yet...

I couldn't help but wonder if I could do something to help Eric. It seemed strange that he had a head's up about his impending charges. The victim wanted to settle things outside of court, which usually meant outside the court of the public's opinion. If word did come out, there was a good chance Eric's career would be over. Especially in the current societal environment, sexual abuse and harassment was not forgiven, and things that happened long ago had a way of showing up years later and haunting offenders in the present.

The fact that she asked for a settlement was usually a good sign. I believed Eric when he said he didn't do it, but if she was giving him an opportunity to settle before this came out, it typically meant her motive was money and that there wasn't hard evidence that a crime took place at all.

Still, that didn't mean I could make a difference. I understood why Eric couldn't go to the cops, but that didn't mean I was the right person for the job.

I pulled up in front of my father's home. The quiet street of Lincoln was still filled with natural light, though the sun was slowly making its descent against a glittering Pacific Ocean nearby. Besides his old pickup truck I remember him

having since I was in grade school parked on the driveway, his yard was kept but empty. He definitely needed to upgrade a few things – a rusted black mailbox, the wooden fence that was giving way to the elements – but I knew it would be a while before he decided to actually do these things. They had been on my mother’s list of things to upgrade before she died unexpectedly, and he wasn’t going to do something he saw as her job.

Her death still haunted him, even seven years later.

I stepped into my father’s home and shut the door behind me. I knew he was already in the backyard waiting for me to arrive. Our weekly dinners were something we did religiously ever since I moved into the dorms at the University of California, Irvine. He was all I had; I was all he had, and despite our busy schedules, we wanted to prioritize seeing each other. Even though things had calmed down somewhat for me, we kept the dinners.

“Right on time,” he said when I stepped into the backyard. A soft breeze tickled my skin and teased my hair out of its loose ponytail. “I got Wedge Burger.”

I grinned. “My favorite.”

“Extra sauce, chocolate shake.” He tilted his own cup – no doubt a Diet Coke already half-drunk – towards me. “I know my daughter better than the back of my hand.”

“I would hope.” I dropped into the chair and felt the weight of the world slide off of me for a moment. It always made me feel better when I was around my dad, as though life wasn’t quite as hard. “I order the same thing every time.”

“I think I forgot –“

“You didn’t say no tomatoes.” I pulled out the thick slice of the vegetable and tossed it into the white paper bag. “Almost, Dad. Maybe next time.”

He took a long sip of his drink, allowing me a moment to chomp into my burger and settle in. I appreciated the fact that he didn’t automatically start peppering me with questions about how my week was and what I planned to do next week. I was especially grateful that he didn’t ask me questions about my dating life – or lack thereof even though he could have, given my most serious relationship was with one of his top players.

Speaking of Eric, I knew I would have to bring him up today, even though I wasn't quite sure if I wanted to. I didn't know what my father knew, but after talking to Eric, it seemed as though he knew something. What that was, I didn't know. And judging by the casual way he was popping fries in his mouth and slurping his Diet Coke, he didn't seem perturbed by it. I wasn't sure if that was a good sign or not.

"Dad," I said once I satiated my hunger for the time being, "Eric called me."

He stopped drinking and slowly put his drink down on the table. Instead of asking me anything, he laced his fingers together and waited.

I glanced down at my food and grabbed a French fry. "He told me what happened," I said, then quickly amended, "what's going to happen, I should say. He wants me to look into it for him."

There was a long, drawn out moment. I didn't know why, but I was holding my breath. It was as though I was waiting for him to warn me against the case or to brush it off as though I was an unnecessary part of the equation.

"Okay," he said instead, ripping open a packet of ketchup and squeezing it on the paper bag.

"And, uh, I said no."

His brows shot straight up into the sky, wrinkling his forehead. "Okay," he said, dunking a fry into the ketchup. "Tell me." He popped the French fry in his mouth but continued to speak around the food. "Was the reason you said no to Foresburg because —"

"No."

I shot my father a look. He should know better than to bring up my previous relationship with Eric. We didn't talk about it when Dad talked to me about hockey and coaching strategy. We both pretended that he was just another unimportant player and that he hadn't been the love of my life for a very short blip in time.

"I just wanted to ask —"

“Dad.”

“Okay, honey.” He sighed and took another long sip of his drink. He had practically finished the drink. “I just – I just want to make sure you’re not letting the past dictate the present.”

“I wouldn’t.”

“I know.”

“Then why did you ask?” I dropped the remainder of my burger on my bag and crossed my arms over my chest, deciding to wait him out. My eyes narrowed, my lips pressed together. I ignored the tickle of the sea breeze as it caressed my bare neck, the soft rustling of the leaves my father had in his backyard singing a soothing song. It completely contradicted my mood right now, but even the peacefulness of Newport Beach was not enough to distract me from my father’s ignorance.

“I know how much you cared about him,” my father replied. He started tapping on his bag, making an annoying thwack sound each time he did it. “I wouldn’t blame you if you didn’t want to help him because of – because of what happened between the two of you.”

“Dad.” I let out a frustrated sigh through my nose, flaring my nostrils in the process. I glanced to my right, eyeing a porch swing my mother insisted my father buy even though he knew she would never use it. It was rusted from the elements, the upholstery ripped up, dirt and spiderwebs at home on different cracks and crevices for the past three years. It moved slightly in the breeze and I wondered if my mother was here, right now, with us. “I have a reputation to uphold. In this day and age, if I were to come out defending Eric when a woman had accused him of rape, I could be losing tons of potential clients. Women wouldn’t trust me to investigate their rapes because I sided with an alleged offender.”

“You don’t believe that bullshit, do you?” My dad gave me a disappointed look and I dropped my eyes. Even though I believed in my convictions, I hated how child-like he could make me feel. I hated disappointing him more than anything. “You aren’t taking Eric’s side; you’re not even helping him prove his innocence. You would be conducting your own investigation, completely unbiased either way.”

I furrowed my brow. “What do you mean?” I asked.

“Think about it, Meeks,” he said, throwing his arms out. “You’re not trying to help Eric. You’re not trying to help the accuser. All you’re doing is conducting an investigation. If he did rape her, you would be able to find the proof. You know you would. And if you don’t...”

“Just because I don’t find proof doesn’t mean he’s innocent.”

“Come on, Mika.” My dad’s voice was flat but there was an underlying edge to it. “You know Eric. Do you honestly think he’s capable of raping a woman.”

“I knew Eric. Years ago.” I didn’t like where this was going. I looked back at that swing. It stopped moving, even in the breeze. “Just because I knew him doesn’t mean I know him.”

“Sure it does.” My father was getting annoyed, I could tell. “You know Eric isn’t the type to take something. He’s a good looking guy. He doesn’t need to rape a girl to get what he wants.”

“Dad, ew. Please don’t tell me —“

“I know Eric. Eric is a good kid. It pisses me off that some girl he slept with once is going to completely ruin him.” He slapped the table, causing me to jump.

“How do you know she’s lying?” I asked.

“How do you know she’s not?” he shot back. “You have the resources, the experience. You could solve this —“

“The cops can solve it,” I pointed out, but we both knew that argument was weak.

“Yeah, I’m not even going to respond to that bullshit,” he replied. “You could help him, Mika. If not for him, for me. She’s going to make a statement tomorrow. She’s going to come out and say he did this horrible thing. And in this day and age, no one is going to question her. Everyone is going to believe her. And I’m going to lose my best center. Please, Mika. Don’t think of it as Eric asking. Think of it as me, your father.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, shaking my head. “I’ll think about it, Dad,” I said.

He huffed a sigh. “I guess that’s all I can ask for,” he muttered.

“Yeah, well, it’s all I can give right now,” I said.

I leaned my head back against the chair and stared up at the sky. I still didn’t know what I was going to do, but my father had put a wrench in my plans at staying out of it. I shouldn’t care, but I did. There was some small part of me that wanted to help. And that small part of me was starting to grow bigger.

Chapter 5

I strolled into my office the next day just before nine am. I had a small television set up and flipped it to one of the basic news channels. If this was going to happen, if this alleged victim was going to announce to everyone that Eric was a rapist, I wanted to watch it live. I wanted to hear what she had to say, study her facial inflections, her emotions, anything I could. I was recording it on my DVR at home so I could rewatch it if necessary.

I dropped into my chair and started pulling out a couple of files. Commercials for local fast food joints played in the background. I had a couple of clients coming in today to drop off checks and collect their evidence, including the Creekers. That would be applied to my rent as soon as I deposited it.

“...channel seven news,” the news caster said after the familiar theme music. “Before we get into our first story, we’re going to cut to a press conference thrown by Ashley Dunham, a twenty-three year old grad student from UCI.”

I looked up from my file – I wanted to double-check Beech had signed my contract – to catch a look at this young woman who was about to ruin Eric’s life. I began to tap my foot underneath the table, bouncing my knee up and down. I grabbed a pen and started to click it, waiting to see what she had to say.

My first impression of her was that she looked like the quintessential good girl. Her chestnut brown hair was curled and pinned to the top of her head. The style reminded me of high school cheerleaders where appearance was part of the uniform and perfection was key. Her eyes were a pretty shade of blue, her face symmetrical. She was petite, slender – the kind that was obvious she worked out – and she dressed in professional attire composed of a fitted pencil skirt, a collared long-sleeved shirt, and high heels.

She was pretty. I could see why Eric was attracted to her.

She cleared her throat. A man stood beside her and gave her a gentle squeeze. I imagined this was her attorney signaling her that she could begin talking.

“H-hello.” She seemed shy. Her hand reached up and played with the end of her ponytail. “M-my name is Ashley. Ashley Dunham. Thank you all for being here. Um...” She dropped her eyes to the podium she stood behind. My eyes narrowed in on the fact that her fingers shook. Stray strands of dark hair fell into her face but she didn’t bother pushing them away. I wondered if they offered her a safety blanket she could hide behind if she needed it. “I am here because I felt it was important to, uh, to let the general public know about a particular individual everyone, especially in this city, seems to care a lot about.”

She flipped her notecards over. Her eyes scanned the written words before she spoke.

I leaned back against my chair, arms crossed over my chest, wondering if she was a good actor or if she really was this timid. It wouldn’t be a bad strategy, to come across as completely weak. It would vilify Eric more; right now, Ashley looked like a girl that needed protection.

My eyes flitted over to her lawyer and I nearly rolled my eyes. Why hadn’t I looked at him more closely before? Her lawyer was Ryan King. He was a good-looking smooth talker, and unfortunately, used his last name as part of his slogan: Why hire an attorney when you could hire a king?

It was cringe-worthy to the ninth degree.

And somehow, many of my targets had him as a lawyer. Half the time he was in my office, being charming, half the time he was indignant. One would never know, but he was actually really damn good at his job. So much so that Beech absolutely loathed the guy. If I didn’t loathe the guy, I’d think the whole situation was hilarious.

“Eric Foresburg is the first-line center of the Irvine Buccaneers, the professional hockey team that plays out of the Five Point Ice Arena at the Great Park,” Ashley continued. I was surprised how quickly her voice gained confidence, especially after stammering before. “Eric Foresburg is lauded as a future Hall of Famer. He does numerous things for local charities. And people who meet him in person on the street have nothing but the nicest things to say about him.”

At that moment, Ashley looked directly in the camera. Her gaze was hard, unflinching. If anything, she seemed angry.

“Eric Foresburg raped me.”

I shuddered. The statement sounded true. There was power behind it, but also conviction. She honestly believed that Eric raped her. Hell, I believed her.

This wasn't good for Eric.

I shifted my attention to Ryan King on her right. I wanted to see how he was reacting to this speech, considering the guy had a flair for the dramatic. In fact, I wouldn't be surprised in the slightest if he wrote this speech for Ashley Dunham, including exactly where she was supposed to stutter.

I expected to see his lips twist up in a cocky smirk – a normal look for his sculpted face. In reality, he was stoic, his light brown eyes focused on his client, arms at his sides.

Huh.

That wasn't what I expected from the guy at all.

Unease filled my body. Could it be that Eric really –

No. Not Eric. Never.

Except...

Except...

I didn't really know him. Not anymore. I knew the Eric from three years ago. That Eric would never do anything like rape someone. I knew that with all of my heart.

But this Eric? I didn't know him. And that wasn't a bad thing. I wasn't part of his life anymore. He didn't know me, he didn't know the woman I was now. As much as I wanted to have faith that Eric was absolutely, positively incapable of inflicting harm on another woman, I couldn't.

Which meant, if I wanted to do a good job with this investigation, I would have to be completely unbiased. Sure, Eric hired me. Sure, he was my client. But that didn't mean I was in the business of proving his innocence. I intended to solve the case – or help the police solve the case. I looked for the truth, regardless of what that truth was.

There was a collective gasp heard in the audience. Ashley did not seem to flinch and Ryan King at long last curved his lips upward. I knew for sure that he was responsible for this speech now. That line had the intended reaction and he was proud of it.

“September nineteenth, a couple of weeks after the Irvine Buccaneers began their preseason training camp, I, along with three of my girlfriends, headed to a club in Costa Mesa. We knew the team liked to frequent there Friday nights and we were all big fans and wanted to meet them. I met Eric almost immediately after we got in. He bought me drinks. He said he liked the way I looked in my black and red dress, that red was his favorite color now because of how I looked in the color.”

I clenched my teeth and looked away. The line was cheesy. Unfortunately, Eric had told me the same thing, except instead of a red dress it was my green eyes.

I also knew that everything she said so far seemed plausible. The team did frequent that nightclub. Luxe in Triangle Square, just off the 55 freeway was popular among college students and businessmen, with the occasional athlete every now and then. Whenever Eric's best friend, Kevin Durante, invited him out – usually after a win – Eric would accept because of the cheap drinks and the good music.

“From there, we danced. We kissed. And when he asked me back to his place, I said yes.”

I furrowed my brow. That piece of information didn't sound like Eric. He wasn't the type to take someone back to his place.

Then again, maybe he changed. Maybe he really was a different person than the Eric I once knew.

Just because he didn't take you back to his place doesn't mean he didn't take other girls.

I pressed my lips together and crossed my arms over my chest. I didn't know why this seemingly innocuous statement was so infuriating to me. I didn't know why I was restraining myself over defending something that happened years ago.

I shook my head at my own antics, mumbling something about how pathetic I was acting.

"You have a case to solve, for crissake."

"We got back to his Newport Beach home a few minutes later. Eric has a thing about not parking on inclined driveways or in the street, even in a neighborhood in Newport Beach. He led me through the garage and into his home where he proceeded to pour me wine. I'm almost positive it was laced with some kind of sedative or something to make me weak and unable to fight back."

I snorted at this. I ignored the fact that she knew about Eric's weird habit with his cars, ignored the fact that he preferred red wine to white, and homed in on the one thing I knew didn't sound like Eric: spiking the drink.

For one, wouldn't she have seen him do it? For another, Eric would never do that. He just wouldn't. Even if he was the type to do that, why would he need to if all signs pointed to him being laid? She already agreed to go back to his place. Typically that meant that he was most likely going to get some.

"I started feeling sick almost immediately. I knew something was wrong when I couldn't stand by myself to use the restroom because I was so dizzy. I knew in my heart he had drugged me. I told him no. I told him no over and over again, but Eric didn't listen. He led me up to his bedroom – he had to hold me because I couldn't walk on my own.

"When we got there, he started removing my clothes one by one. It was such a weird feeling. I kept thinking: This can't be me. There's no way this is happening to you right now. Like an out of body experience.

"And then, and then –" She cut herself up, erupting into a storm of tears.

I frowned at the television, unsure if this was an act or if she was genuinely upset. What frustrated me was that I couldn't tell. I honestly couldn't get a read on her. Which wasn't like me at all. All these emerging emotions from when Eric and I were seeing each other to when we broke up were distracting me from the

facts. I needed to get a hold of myself. I needed to move on or else this wasn't going to work.

“Eric raped me that night. When I woke up, he was gone. I pulled on my clothes and walked home, scared he was going to stop me. Scared he was going to kill me. But the last thing I wanted to do was go to the police. Part of me still felt like it was a dream. And the other part didn't want to bring down such a beacon for the community. I know it's stupid but I thought just because he was bad with me didn't mean he was a bad person.”

“Oh, shut up,” I snarled at the television, and turned it off.

Ryan King stepped forward, all seriousness. Strange. There always seemed to be a glint of mischief in his eyes. I didn't realize he was this good at pretending to take something serious.

“At this time, there will be no questions,” he said. “Detective Alex Beech has just been assigned this case and we plan to turn over our evidence to him so he can do his job and put away this monster – so it doesn't happen again. Thank you.”

My heart skipped at the sound of Beech's name. I didn't think it was possible, but I knew that that was a good sign. If Beech had the case, I knew he would solve it with integrity.

Even so, something burned inside of me. I didn't want to, but now I was compelled to take Eric's case. I didn't necessarily believe him, but I would find the truth and expose the liar – no matter who that turned out to be.

Chapter 6

The first thing I did after leaving my office was head to the Irvine Police Department. I was almost positive the small parking lot would be overrun thanks to the explosive press conference Ashley and her lawyer threw that happened to take place just outside the city building, on the green grass with the impressive three-story glass building.

It took me ten minutes to find a parking spot and it was close to the daycare on the other side of the parking lot. There were media everywhere, journalists for local news channels, and videographers and passersby with smartphones recording whatever they could.

I wished I had a hat that would cover my face. I didn't think that anyone would recognize me – I wasn't that arrogant – but I did have a reputation, and those that might recognize me could put together that I was here on business. That Eric Foresburg hired me to prove his innocence.

I decided to go the long way and head into the back of the IPD building. There weren't any curious civilians here nor were there media outlets or aggressive journalists trying to get a soundbite. I pulled out my badge and pressed it against the keypad. The blue door popped open and I slid inside. I headed down the dim hallway, passing animal control and the evidence lockup. When I got to the stairwell, I headed up to the detective bullpen and beelined straight for Beech's desk.

I wasn't surprised to find him on the phone, his face pinched with annoyance. Being assigned to a high-profile case was not something Beech liked, I knew, not because he couldn't handle scrutiny and pressure, but because he couldn't handle the public. He hated dealing with ignorance, with people who thought it was their business to inquire about a crime and waste his time by peppering him with questions he wasn't going to answer. More than that, they would lodge complaints about his seemingly lack of progress in the case or something along

those lines. The only reason I knew this was because he confided in me once a while ago.

I plopped into the chair in front of him. He glanced my way and rolled his eyes at my presence. I gave him a grin, lacing my fingers across my lap and waited.

Even though he was on the phone, different lines of his phone began to ring. His brow wrinkled. He began to tap his desk harshly, each tap pointed and hard.

“Yes, well, I can’t give any quote because I’ve just been assigned to the case,” Beech said. “I haven’t interrogated anybody just yet. Now, I’m going to hang up so I can do my job, and despite what you think, it’s not providing you with a comment.” He hung up before the person – most likely a journalist – could respond.

His phone rang again but he ignored it. Instead, he fixed his gaze on me and waited.

“Yes?” he finally said, pushing up his brows. “As you can see, I’m the most popular guy at the station, so if you need something, you’ll have to get in line.”

I crossed my legs. “Why wait when I have a FastPass?” I asked with a grin. He didn’t take the bait. If anything, he looked tired and he had barely been assigned to the case maybe a couple of hours ago. “I wanted to talk to you about the case. The Foresburg case.”

“Of course.” He leaned forward, resting his elbow on his desk so he could pinch the bridge of his nose. “Let me guess – your father hired you to prove his golden goose isn’t a rapist, right? And now you’re here because your sense of entitlement is nearly as big as my ego and you thought I would just, I don’t know, hand over everything I had just because I know you.”

“Do you actually have anything?” I asked. I wasn’t trying to be a smartass, I was trying to make a point: he barely got assigned to the case. I was almost positive he hadn’t questioned Ashley Dunham yet because her press conference ended an hour ago, and from the exhaustion emanating from Beech, I imagined he had been planted at his desk since the press conference was over, fielding calls and making appointments. “This just broke today –“

“And yet somebody hired you,” Beech said. “You really want to look me in the

face and say you didn't know this was coming, Chalmers? You really want to take me for a fool."

I sighed. At that moment, two detectives walked by us, one holding an open folder, the other gesturing with her hands. Beech and I both closed our mouths and waited for them to pass by before we continued to speak.

"Okay," I said. "My dad talked to me about it the other day."

"So that's why you're here, then?" He dropped his hand to the surface of the table. His dark eyes seemed... hurt, but I knew that was the wrong word to describe it because why would Beech be hurt I was here to do a job? "Listen, not from you, okay, Mika? Everyone already wants something from me. The chief wants me to solve this. The people want me to find evidence against Foresburg. People are calling me, telling me how to do a job I've been doing for the past sixteen years. If you're here because you want something –"

"I'm not," I told him, cutting him off. "I'm here because I want to know your thoughts."

He blinked. "What?" His voice was flat.

"I'm serious," I said. "I'm not here to ask what you have and what you don't. I'm asking to hear what your gut says about this whole thing."

Beech bent over and opened his bottom drawer before pulling out a water bottle. He cracked it open and took a long sip of water before screwing the cap back on.

"What does it matter what I think?" he asked. "The court of public opinion has already spoken. Eric Foreburg is a rapist. Twitter is blowing up. The Buccaneers are locally trending and not in a good way. Hashtag I stand with Ashley is becoming a thing now. I'm getting calls from both women and men about arresting Foresburg and how I must be a sexist conservative who perpetuates our rape culture because I haven't arrested him yet even though Ashley hasn't filed a report and I just barely got assigned the case."

"You don't actually need a report to arrest him, do you?" I asked.

He pinched the bridge of his nose once again. The phone rang but he ignored it.

“Technically, no,” he said. “But since this is a he-said, she-said, a report with her statement would be incredibly helpful. I know I can just take it from her press conference, which is exactly what I intend to do, but the fact that I can’t question her isn’t going to help me in the long run.”

He opened his eyes and nodded his head at me. “What about you?” he asked. “What do you think?”

“What do you mean?”

He rolled his eyes and grabbed the water bottle. He started shredding the label with his fingers, completely ignoring the small pieces of paper that were starting to build up on his desk.

“Your father coaches the guy,” he said. “He hired you to figure out if he did it or not. You must know Foresburg in some way. Do you think he’s the type?”

I dropped my eyes to my lap and gave myself a moment to collect my thoughts. Beech didn’t know Eric and I dated. I didn’t blame him. In fact, I was glad. I wanted to keep it that way. I didn’t think Beech would believe I was completely unbiased if he found out Eric and I had a history together. And for some strange reason, it was important to me that Beech take me seriously at my job. He might not like me very much, but I knew he respected me the same way I respected him.

“Foresburg has always seemed like a good guy,” I said, meeting Beech’s eyes. I gripped the wooden arms of the old chair I sat in, grounding myself in the moment, reminding myself to select my words carefully. I wasn’t a good liar and I knew this. As long as I wasn’t technically lying, I would be okay. “I don’t know him well, but the time I have spent with him, he always seemed like a genuine person.”

“It’s strange that he’s still single,” Beech said, pursing his lips.

I tilted my head to the side. “What?” I asked. “How is that even relevant to what we’re discussing?”

“I mean, it’s just.” He shrugged. “Granted, I know nothing about hockey, but I always felt that hockey players typically settled down despite the fame and the money. Not all, obviously, but the majority. Think back to personal sports

scandals – not many are done by hockey players. Physical abuse, rape, murder, even drunk driving. I bet if I pulled numbers, hockey would have the lowest numbers for a sports team in California.” He turned to me. “Didn’t I hear that he had been dating someone? I think she was related to someone in administration? But they broke up?”

I held my breath, waiting for Beech to remember I was the coach’s daughter who might have information about the only time Eric was serious about a woman in his life, waiting for him to remember that I was the one Eric had been seriously dating during that time.

Instead, he leaned back and lifted his head up. “Fuck,” he muttered. “I shouldn’t give a shit about this.” He shook his head and looked at me. “Listen, Chalmers. I know Daddy hired you, but do all of us a favor and keep to yourself, okay? Stay out of my lane. Do not interview the victim or her friends. Do not insinuate she’s making this shit up. The last thing we need is IPD getting a reputation of being unsympathetic to rape victims –“

“Alleged rape victim,” I cut in.

“Bullshit, and you know it. You think people think he didn’t do it? You think people don’t see this girl as a victim now? Wake up, Chalmers. Come join us in the rest of the world. Even if she comes out and admits that she was wrong, that nothing happened, that she lied, people will say she lied because of pressure or whatever. No matter what we find, it’s not going to matter. Sure, Foresburg might be able to salvage his career if she withdraws her complaint and takes back her words, but people will excuse her or come up with an excuse as to why she backed out. IPD is the one that’s screwed over, and the last thing I need to worry about is some cocky little PI who’s in way over her head.”

“Last I checked, I close ninety-eight percent of my cases,” I pointed out, standing up. I didn’t need to be here. I didn’t need to listen to his bullshit. “When you decide to stop dicking around and need my help, you know where to find me.”

With that, I whirled around on my heel and left his desk, fuming the entire way out.

Chapter 7

I slammed the backdoor to the station open and all but stalked out of the building. I tried to control my temper. I understood Beech now had a lot on his plate thanks to the fact that he was assigned a big case with an important public figure that dealt with a lot of triggers for different portions of society. I understood he didn't even want the case, considering he was a homicide detective who sometimes worked robbery and burglaries because those types of crime were the most common in Irvine and there weren't enough detectives assigned to the 459 caseload to get through all of them as timely as the citizens of Irvine would have preferred.

My problem with Beech was what a dick he was being about everything. There was no reason for him to start taking his problems out on me.

Just don't think about it, Chalmers, I thought to myself, shaking my head. You need to go to the ice anyway.

I curled my fingers into tight fists and all but stomped to my car. I didn't feel any better by the time I got inside, so I put on some music and tried to forget about it. If anything, I needed to mentally prepare for my encounter with Eric. I had been caught off-guard last time, which meant that I didn't have control over my emotions and I let them get the best of me. That wouldn't happen again – especially since I decided I was going to take his case.

It took a half hour to get to the ice rink because of traffic. Irvine had some of the longest traffic lights because they had so many people driving at the same time. With my luck, I hit three red lights in a row, so by the time I finally pulled into Five Point Ice Arena, practice for the Irvine Buccaneers had already begun.

I grabbed a hot chocolate and hung out in the bleachers along with the rest of the public who had come to watch the team play. It wasn't a huge turnout but only because their social media hadn't advertised that the practice was open to the

public in the first place.

I couldn't help but be drawn to Eric. He wore a red practice jersey with his two-line mates, indicating that they were on the first line. The second line wore green jerseys, the third line wore yellow, and the fourth line wore navy blue. The defensemen wore black jerseys, and the goalie wore whatever the hell he wanted – typically Matt Stone wore white just because it clashed so much with his teammates and he liked to stand out even though, as goalie, he already did.

The team looked solid for the upcoming season. They worked well together, and there was a good blend of experienced veterans and young rookies. However, if Eric was arrested, if he was suspended – or worse, fired – it wouldn't matter. Eric was a central figure to how my father and Diego Espinoza, the team's general manager, built up the team. Eric was a central figure; if he was gone, the team would most likely collapse.

My father's voice floated up from the ice to the highest section of the bleachers. Many people – including even the most die-hard Buccaneers fans – were intimidated by him. He was bald with a large nose, a mouth that constantly settled into a natural frown, and eyes that always seemed to be narrowed. He wasn't a large or a tall man which almost made him more intimidating. He was constantly yelling, especially at his team during practice and during games.

But he wasn't actually a grizzly. He cared a lot about success so he was passionate. And this team, as a whole, seemed to respond best to yelling. Which was why my father chose to coach the way he did. Some criticized it as being old school – where the coach was less sensitive and more insulting – but my father didn't care what anyone else thought. If it worked for the team, if it inspired strong play and produced the results he was looking for, that was all that mattered to him.

The practice itself last a little longer than an hour. After I finished my hot chocolate, I glanced at my phone, only to see I didn't get service. It was the one thing that annoyed me about this rink; why put all this money into it when I couldn't even make a phone call? And I wasn't the only person who had service issues.

I stepped outside, waiting for the practice to finish while also being able to be on the internet and check any text messages or phone calls I might have received

while watching the team. Eric wasn't my only client, and there were a couple of targets I was keeping an eye on.

Besides a text message, however, no one tried to contact me.

I opened my messages and was surprised to find one from Daniel Boone.

I really enjoyed our date the other night. We should hang out again.

My lips curled up into a grin and I felt my cheeks pinch with color. I hadn't expected to hear from him again. For one, the guy was gorgeous and he was a cop. Beech made it seem as though he was a rookie, and technically, he was – he was a rookie to the station, but apparently he was a veteran police officer who transferred when he moved from London. Which meant he had the gorgeous accent that just riveted me.

I, of course, was on my best behavior, which always seemed to translate into awkward and aloof. When I laughed at one of my jokes, I knew I wouldn't be hearing from him again and I was fine with it.

But apparently I was wrong about hearing from him.

Definitely, I responded, and sent it.

I was going to send another one when I happened to look up and see some of the fans trickle out of the rink.

Practice was over.

I needed to get in there and talk to Eric, ASAP.

I walked back into the rink, the cold air slapping me across the face. I headed down the small staircase and walked down a hallway, waiting for the team to trickle out. A couple of media outlets including the local paper and the most recent Fox Sports West journalist were already hanging by the door, hoping to score an interview. I hung back, leaning against the brick wall and opening my phone, wondering if Daniel had texted back.

Of course, buried under all of this concrete, I had no service so I was left to wait without something to do to kill time.

It was another five minutes before players started to emerge. I straightened and tilted my head up, wondering if Eric was going to take his time like he usually did and hang out in the locker room, chatting with his teammates and completely losing track of time. It annoyed the shit out of me when we were together because he knew I was waiting for him but he didn't seem to care.

Those same feelings I had had in the past began to bubble up currently. My eyebrows pushed together, wrinkling my forehead and I kept glancing at my phone to see how much time had actually passed.

“Hey, Chalmers.”

I looked up, surprised to see Kevin Durante here. He wasn't a hockey player himself, but he had been part of the family that fostered Eric when he was first drafted by the team at seventeen years old. Kevin was the same age as Eric and he and Eric had gotten really close during the short amount of time they lived together.

“Hey, Kevin. How are you?”

Kevin had always been a quiet guy. He had never been rude to me but I was never able to get a read on him which unnerved me at times. I wasn't sure what he did for a living, but I think he had a job at the arena because of his ties to the Buccaneers' GM.

“Good.” He nodded his head. “Well, not great, actually. I take it you heard what happened?”

“I think the whole city heard,” I said.

“I'm glad you're here,” Kevin said, leaning close to me so no one would overhear. Not that they would when both journalists were doing interviews. Still, the thought was nice. “He's missed you. He'll never tell you, but he's missed you a lot these past few years. He still talks about you. And after everything, he said he was going to hire you to help him. I'm just glad you're here. He needs you.”

I wasn't quite sure how to respond to Kevin's words, but a small smile touched my face. It was nice to hear the sentiment from him, from Eric's closest friend.

At that moment, Eric walked out of the locker room. I couldn't help but stare at him. His broad frame was still damp with the water from the shower he took immediately after practice. His hair was slicked back in the way I liked, his plain white t-shirt clinging to his torso the way I used to when we were wrapped up in each other. My cheeks pinched and I had to look away, even as I felt his blue eyes on me.

"Hey." His voice jolted me out of my traitorous thoughts, reminding me that I was here for a reason.

I had a job to do. I was a professional, for crying out loud. Just because Eric was gorgeous didn't mean I needed to get tongue-tied, like some teenage girl chasing around a boy band.

"Hey," I responded.

"I'll wait outside," Kevin said, nodding his head to the doors. Eric acknowledged him with a nod. "It was good to see you, Mika. Wish it was more often, but I'll take what I can get." He smiled before disappearing.

I turned to Eric, shoving my hands in my pockets. I didn't really watch hockey, even with my father being who he was. It was easy to forget how cold the rinks could get. I should have worn a heavier sweater.

"I take it you saw the press conference?" he said. I was glad he didn't make an effort to engage me in small talk. That was the last thing I wanted, especially when there was a huge ball of tension between us.

"That was shit show, Eric," I said, not bothering to dance around it. "You look bad."

He sighed, adjusting the bulky hockey bag he carried on his shoulder. With his free hand, he rubbed his brow.

"Tell me about it," he said.

"It sounds like something did happen between you," I said. I was treading on a thin rope and I would snap it at any second. His sex life wasn't my business.

But it was.

At least in this particular instance.

At least if he wanted me to take the case.

“Sounds like that’s a no then?” He tilted his head to the side. “Look, you can just tell me without playing this game, Mika. Not you, okay?”

“Tell you what?” I furrowed my brow, giving him a face. “What game are you talking about?”

“About my case. Whether you’ll take it or not.” He let out a breath. “I gave them my DNA. In case you worried about whether I did it. I gave them my DNA. If I’m guilty, would I do that.”

“Honestly, Eric, you could do that knowing you didn’t leave any DNA on her and wanting to come across as innocent.” I shrugged. “I’ll take it, Eric.” I made sure to look him in the eye. “But you need to be honest with me from here on out. I’m going to be asking you personal questions, questions that might make you uncomfortable. I want to reiterate that my job here is not proving you innocent. It’s solving the crime. So if you did do it, I will find out.”

“I know you will,” Eric said, his voice low, his eyes pooling into mine. “I didn’t do it, Meeks. You can trust me.”

I wanted to believe him, but something held me back. I just hope it wasn’t because he was the monster I adamantly denied he could be.

Chapter 8

The next morning, I all but jumped out of bed. I planned to track down Ashley Dunham and try to figure out if I could get the real story. I wanted to rewatch her press conference on my laptop to see if I could pick up anything and jot down any questions I had.

This wasn't exactly something I was comfortable with. Essentially, I was tearing down a potential victim. Deep down, I knew Eric wasn't capable of something as heavy as rape, and yet, it didn't make confronting her any easier. I tried to remind myself that she was doing something wrong. She was ruining the reputation of a prominent figure in the community because he hadn't settled out of court. On top of that, she involved the police – though Beech said a report had yet to be filed so she couldn't be brought up on charges of filing a false police report just yet – and now an official investigation was underway.

The fact that Beech was investigating anything without a report was ridiculous. It aggravated me how easily the police department – the chief in particular – catered to the citizens. There was a reason Irvine as a whole felt entitled where they could call up Beech and start criticizing him before anything was official.

I had all of her contact info from Eric. After getting his side of the story – something much more difficult than I cared to admit – I immediately noticed some discrepancies besides the obvious issue of consent. Eric insisted they were both drunk. Ashley said she was sober but Eric was drunk. Eric said this happened at the team party last season after they got knocked out of the playoffs by the San Francisco Dolphins. Ashley said it happened more recently, during an outing at a nightclub once the team started practicing for this season. Unfortunately, Eric didn't have proof of what he said. I wanted to see if Ashley had proof that helped her story.

I headed to my office to run her number through my system and managed to find her address. I also got copies of her credit report and bank statements. I wasn't

sure I would actually need them but I wanted to have them just in case.

I looked through them but didn't find any enormous sum deposited into her bank account and I didn't see any uptick in her spending. I knew she had come out with this information because Eric didn't settle, but I still didn't see how this benefitted her. Sure, she could take down Eric, but once it got out that Eric was innocent, her life would be ruined. She would be forever the girl who falsely accused Eric Foresburg of rape. Why would she risk that?

"Not that that's any of my business," I muttered to myself.

"Talking to yourself again, Chalmers?"

I looked up at the familiar voice and came in contact with the light brown eyes of Ryan King, attorney for Ashley Dunham. I lectured myself at the fact that he managed to get in my office without me even realizing it. More than that, I should have expected his visit. Ryan King had a way of slithering to places he didn't belong to try and bat his eyelashes and get information. The only thing I couldn't figure out was how he knew I was investigating his client's case as well.

If he knew.

I pressed my lips together. The last thing I wanted to do was play my hand when he could very well be here for something completely unrelated.

"Just speaking my thoughts out loud," I said. I x-ed out the browser I had pulled up of the press conference in case he decided to come over and try to look over my shoulder. He had pulled shit like that in the past, and I wouldn't be surprised if he employed the same method even now.

Whatever it took to get him the win.

"What can I help you with, Ry-guy?"

He placed his hand over his heart. "You know I love when you use terms of endearment," he said. "It just legitimizes our relationship even more. Makes me feel like I mean something to you."

"Oh, trust me, you mean a lot of things to me." I smirked, leaning against the chair, trying to be casual. I perked my brows. "Well? Why are you here?"

“Can’t I drop by and visit my favorite PI?” He stepped forward and it was only then that I noticed he had a cup in his hand from the Moon Café, my favorite café in Irvine – in all of Orange County, actually. “I brought you your favorite drink: hot chocolate with whip cream, no mocha drizzle on top. Want it?”

“What would I have to do in return?” I asked, narrowing my eyes at the drink. I didn’t realize I wanted one until that very moment. I hadn’t had one since last winter. Because the weather was finally starting to cool down, it was the perfect time to start drinking it again.

“You wound me.” He placed the cup on my desk and stepped back. I noticed the sleeves to his teal button-up shirt were rolled to his elbows, his grey slacks pressed and fitted. “I would never give you something with any expectation of you doing something for me in return. I’m not Eric Foresburg.”

I let out a breath through my nose, a frown touching my lips. I was unamused by his segue, though I grabbed the drink regardless.

“I was wondering when I was going to see you,” I said before bringing the cup to my lips. The drink was sweet, chocolatey heaven. I practically melted in my chair.

“I was thinking the same thing,” he said, “especially considering the fact that you guys dated for a couple of years, right?”

I nearly spat up my drink. How could he possibly know that? Beech didn’t know that and he was the best detective in Irvine. Granted, I highly doubted Beech actually gave a shit about my love life. Which just begged the question: why did Ryan care?

“My love life isn’t your concern,” I said as sweetly as I could. I took another drink of the hot chocolate, hoping he didn’t see my initial reaction at his words. I didn’t want Ryan to think he got the better of me.

“It is when it could be a conflict of interest,” Ryan pointed out.

“Except I’m not a police detective. I’m not opening an official investigation. Anything I find won’t hold up in court unless I acquire it legally and I choose to turn it over to the police.”

“See? There it is.” Ryan gave me a sly look. “How am I supposed to trust that you’re going to turn everything over to the police.”

“I’m surprised by how much faith you have in me,” I said. I set the cup down and crossed my arms over my chest. “I didn’t actually think you took me seriously.”

“Oh, cut the shit, Mika,” he said. His voice was still charming, even if there was an edge to it. “We both know you’re better than ninety-five percent of the dicks at IPD. My concern stems from the fact that Eric hired you. My client –“

“Nice speech, by the way,” I said, deciding to cut him off on purpose. I glanced down at my nails, pretending to be indifferent to this entire conversation. “Your voice really shines no matter who’s reading the words.”

“You liked it?” He went along with my sarcasm, adding his own. “That’s great, considering it’s the truth. I copied everything she told me and dressed it up so it would pack more of a punch.”

“And here I thought you were a lover, not a fighter.”

“I only fight in the courtroom.”

I snorted, shaking my head. “You’re a piece of work, King,” I said.

“Yes, well.” He shrugged. “Anyway, let’s cut the shit – with all due respect, obviously.” He gave me what was probably his charm smile that probably won over tons of women who didn’t realize he had a terrible personality. “I already know Eric hired you. I already know you’re going to come at my client and question her. I know you’re going to catch her in a lie.”

“Because your client is lying?” I arched a brow and resisted the urge to drink more of the hot chocolate. I didn’t want to give him the satisfaction.

He gave me a fake smile that caused the corners of his eyes to wrinkle, but not in an unattractive way. “No,” he said slowly. “Because you’re a lot smarter than other people and you’ll probably twist her words, manipulate them into whatever you want, and throw them back at her before she can realize what’s going on. She doesn’t need that right now.”

“Maybe she doesn’t if she had been raped recently,” I said.

“Three weeks ago isn’t recent?” he asked, perking his brow. “That’s weird. I guess it depends on your definition of recent, then. I always assumed three weeks was recent, but maybe not.” He shrugged his shoulders. “I guess that’s my job to prove in court.”

I nodded my head. “Pretty much,” I said. “So what’s going to happen if you lose, Ry-Guy? When I prove Eric didn’t do it, do you retreat for the winter until spring comes and you can emerge from your cave of shame.”

“I don’t have one of those, but let me tell you, it sounds awesome.” He stuck his finger up. “In all honesty, I haven’t thought about losing because I don’t lose. I’m a winner. I’m better at what I do than anyone else.”

“So you saw a vulnerable girl and decided to team up with her and exploit something that may or may not have happened.”

“Oh, it happened. I have the doctor’s report to prove she was raped.”

I went absolutely still. My desktop phone rang but I ignored it. I couldn’t pull my gaze away from Ryan if I tried.

“It happened three weeks ago,” I repeated dumbly. “How can you get a report of something that happened three weeks ago?”

“She went to the hospital,” he told me. He was talking to me with clear, concise diction, as though I was an inept child and he needed to speak slowly so I would understand him better. “A rape kit was completed.”

“But she didn’t file a police report?” That struck me as strange. “Why wouldn’t she file a report?”

“That’s her business, not ours.” He shrugged his shoulders. “Look, the only reason I dropped by was to tell you not to interview her, not to upset her. The last thing you would want is to look like an unsympathetic jealous ex-girlfriend, would you?”

I narrowed my eyes. “Is that a threat?” I asked quietly, my teeth clenched together.

“You do what you need to do to solve your case,” he said. “I do what I need to do to win mine.”

I watched him walk out, leaning in my chair, arms over my chest. I wasn't sure what to make of this new information. She had a rape kit done the night of the rape?

That didn't bode well for Eric.

And yet, if they had concrete evidence against him, Beech would have already made the arrest.

I needed that report. I needed to see what they had. I knew the hospital wouldn't give it to me.

But maybe Beech would.

■

Chapter 9

■

Before I decided to drop by Beech's desk, I decided my best course of action would be to follow the alleged victim, Ashley Dunham. Beech and I still had tension between us. It wasn't like we had the sort of relationship where we could talk and work things out between the two of us. We would probably forget he wasn't such a dick to me for no reason because that was just who we were. He had too much pride to apologize, and if I asked him for one, it would come across like I cared.

Which I didn't.

At the end of the day, my only concern was figuring out whether or not Eric raped Ashley. It wasn't even to prove she got raped. I still didn't deny that that was a big possibility. The way she told her story – despite the fact that Ryan King wrote her statement – seemed to reflect someone who had suffered trauma. As though her words, while not the truth, were true to her.

The fact that she did have a rape kit threw me off. I still didn't understand why she decided to pursue a public forum rather than filing a police report privately if she had this evidence. It made me think that there wasn't enough evidence to officially name Eric as her rapist or else he would have already been arrested.

And yet, Ryan alluded to the fact that the rape kit was going to do just that – be the piece that did lock Eric up. Granted, they could arrest Eric based on her statement and the rape kit – even if it was only circumstantial – but Ryan might be able to knock things out of the park if it managed to go to trial. Ryan had a knack for both charm and persuasion. I wouldn't be surprised in the slightest if he was able to get Eric locked up on Ashley's statement alone, he was just that good.

I grabbed my keys and the information I had on Ashley. My first stop was her home, which happened to be in a small apartment in Irvine.

It took me ten minutes to get over to the Northwood neighborhood. I turned down Walnut and managed to find the small apartment complex easier than I thought I would. Sometimes, the apartment complexes in Irvine resembled homes so much it was difficult to figure out where the leasing office was and what apartment complex I was visiting.

Luckily for me, Ashley lived in a second-story apartment facing the street. As long as I parked my car in a white stall, I wouldn't be bothered by security and I wouldn't have to get out of the car at all. I pulled out my phone, ready to play Sudoku, thinking I would be here for a while. I was surprised to find that there weren't any media outlets hanging outside her door, waiting to catch Ashley as she left, throwing out questions they hoped she would answer.

It was quiet.

I wondered if the police had been here to clear them all out.

It was another hour before there was any significant movement. In fact, I might have been sharing a hilarious Baby Yoda meme to my Facebook feed when I heard her slam her door. I nearly dropped my phone but quickly tipped the bill of my Buccaneers hat down in hopes she wouldn't see me.

Not that we officially met. However, with King as her lawyer, and after his impromptu visit yesterday, I wouldn't be surprised if he warned her about me.

I watched her walk down the staircase and head for the parking lot. For one heart-wrenching moment, I thought for sure she was heading straight to my car. She was practically stomping and there was a look of determination on her face. I was waiting for her to pound on my window. I was waiting for her to snap at me and call me sexist because I took Eric's case. Instead, she walked right by me and headed into the lot where she crawled into her car.

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I had been holding and waited until she drove past me before starting my car.

I had never been good at following people when driving. It was easy to get distracted, whether it was because I had to focus on an asshole who cut me off or trying to merge into another lane during peak traffic hours where no one wants to let me over. I considered myself to be a good driver, but not to where I could perform crazy maneuvers and last-minute lane changes the way my friend's

husband could.

Luckily, Ashley wasn't a crazy driver either. I managed to keep a steady pace behind her. I didn't think she could tell I was following her either. From where I was, I saw her pause and look at her phone every time she hit a red light. I wondered where the hell IPD was so they could pull her over and give her a ticket simply for looking at her phone while driving.

I didn't realize she was heading to the ice rink until after she continued on Sand Canyon for a while. When she passed the 5 freeway and made a right on Marine Way, I frowned. Why would she go to the ice rink – the very rink the Buccaneers practiced out of? Was she here to meet Eric? Were they going to discuss something?

If that were true, surely Eric would have told me... wouldn't he?

Honestly, I didn't know.

Sure, he hired me to help him. That didn't mean he was going to be completely honest with me about everything. I didn't think we considered each other friends, not yet anyway. I didn't know if I even wanted to be his friend.

She parked her car and jumped out, throwing a blue parka over her shirt.

Smart.

Which meant this whole meeting was planned – although I hadn't seen her bring the jacket from her apartment. Maybe she left it in her car on purpose.

I got out of my car, immediately crossing my arms over my chest. Unlike Ashley, I was wholly unprepared for a visit to the rink. The autumn day was surprisingly crisp, and I was in nothing but a thin camisole shirt and skinny jeans. I headed inside, turning my head to the left and then the right. I saw no sign of Ashley and no sign of Eric. Maybe that was a good thing. Maybe it meant she wasn't meeting him at all.

I slowly moseyed my way to the snack bar and ordered a hot chocolate with whip cream. As I waited for my drink, I did another scan of my immediate environment. There were a couple of youth hockey coaches with big, bulky bags slung over their shoulder, heading into various locker rooms. I saw figure skaters

in tiny skirts and flimsy tights, stark-white skates with blade protectors, fixing their already-perfect hair, talking to each other with rigid faces. There were a couple of kids running down the long hallway, laughter echoing on the halls.

It was easy to forget the rink didn't just belong to the Buccaneers. It belonged to everyone – people learning to skate, people who skated for fun, intense figure skaters, youth hockey, both recreational and competitive, and Olympic medalists. I thought it would be easy to find Ashley here, but it was busy – busy even for noon on a school day – and Ashley was nowhere in sight.

“Mika?”

I grabbed my hot chocolate and murmured my appreciation before heading back to the first story. I knew I would have to go in each rink. A couple of them were empty but the other two were busy.

I sighed and took a long sip of my hot chocolate and headed to Rink 1. This one and Rink 2 were both closed. There were a couple of people in them – especially Rink 2 which was where the Buccaneers practiced – but no Ashley. I did a quick cursory glance in the locker rooms, but then decided not to do that because there were a lot of kids changing into hockey gear, and even though they kept the majority of their clothes on, it still made me feel uncomfortable.

After finishing up with Rink 1 and 2, I was starting to think she managed to avoid me completely. Had I been obvious?

I hadn't actually tried to hide the fact that I was following her. I took for granted that she had no idea about who I was and there might be a possibility that I would follow her.

That you know of, a voice pointed out.

I suddenly stopped in the middle of the hallway, just passing the front counter.

“Watch it,” some boy, probably ten, said, sidestepping around me and whacking me with his heavy bag.

I wasn't sure whether to apologize or tell him off. Instead, I went back to Ryan King's impromptu drop in at my office the other day. Would he warn her about me? I wouldn't put it past him. In fact, the more I thought about it, the more

confident I was that he had.

Which meant I had completely underestimated her.

“Mika?”

I turned at the familiar voice, careful not to jerk my hand and spill my hot chocolate. This was the second time someone was calling my name.

Unfortunately, I would not be receiving a tasty drink that would help me stay warm. I was surprised to see Kevin here during the day. When I was with Eric, Kevin had worked at a cell phone company, making pretty good money, selling phones and helping repair them. I wondered if he was still in that business or if he was now doing something different. I wouldn't be surprised. Kevin was good at a lot of things and had this uncanny ability to manifest opportunities for himself.

“Oh, hey.” I gave him a smile. “What are you going here?”

“Just had a meeting with the manager,” he said, shrugging his shoulders. “I don't know if you've experienced bad cell reception here, but we're trying to figure out how people can get cell service without restructuring the makeup of the building.”

I raised my brow and took a sip of the drink. “Wow,” I said. “Any luck?”

“Not really.” He shook his head. “What about you? What are you up to?”

“Oh, you know.”

He nodded. “Eric's case?”

“Something like that.”

“Any leads?” He seemed hopeful.

I bit my bottom lip. It wasn't like I didn't trust Kevin. Kevin had been Eric's best friend since even before I met Eric. I knew Kevin had Eric's back and I knew I could probably trust him with what I was doing here. The only issue I had was anything I told Kevin would find its way back to Eric, and I wasn't sure I wanted Eric to be aware of what I was doing. At least, not yet.

“Just covering my bases,” I said finally. “I’m hoping to have something soon.”

He nodded his head, seemingly okay with my answer.

“Well, I should get going,” Kevin said. “As much as I want to milk this little trip, my boss needs me back. Apparently, there’s a whole slew of phones with issues just waiting for me.”

“Aren’t you the lucky one?” I teased.

He grinned. “Something like that.” He lifted his arm. “Take care, Mika. It was good to see you.”

“Likewise.”

I watched him leave before realizing I still had a job to do. I checked the last two rinks – both crowded for different reasons. Rink 3 had private lessons going on on various parts of the ice. Skating lessons, figure skating skills lessons, stick time. Rink 4 seemed to be filled with public skaters. Once again, I was surprised by the turnout, especially for a school day.

I did a quick check in the restrooms and another check on the second story of the rink, but Ashley had completely disappeared.

I shook myself, stepping out of the building and heading back to my car. Either she completely eluded me, knowing I was on her tail, or I missed her.

I wasn’t sure what was worse.

Was I getting terrible at following someone – an important aspect at how I made my living? Or was my personal history with Eric affecting how I did my job?

■

Chapter 10

■

At this point, I typically had some kind of evidence that led me to believe something. By the end of forty-eight hours, I had a position, a gut feeling, something that indicated which way the case was going to go, how this was all going to turn out.

But, for some reason, I was still clueless when it came to Ashley and her suspicious behavior.

My fingers gripped my steering wheel as I turned right onto Harvard. I blew errant strands of hair away from my face, keeping my eyes fixed on the road. I wasn't quite sure where I could go from here. There was something about Ashley that didn't sit right with me. I didn't completely believe her.

The only reason why I couldn't completely write her off was because she knew things about Eric that were true, things only someone who had been intimate with him would know.

At least Eric wasn't stupid enough to deny that they had had sex at all. He wasn't saying that. He was saying it was consensual and it happened at the end of last season rather than at the beginning of this one.

As far as I knew, Eric hadn't experienced a concussion as a hockey player at any point in his life. Even when he was a kid back in Sweden, besides a broken wrist, he hadn't had any major injuries playing the sport. There was no reason for Eric to lie about when this occurred. If he wanted to lie, why not just lie that it happened at all? If there really was minimal to no proof, essentially the burden was on Ashley to prove that he had raped her, and as of right now, she couldn't do that.

One of them was lying. But who?

I pulled into the police station parking lot and pulled out my badge from the dashboard. I grabbed my purse and locked my doors. I didn't think Beech was going to be happy to see me, especially when I asked for the rape kit. In fact, I absolutely doubted he would let me see it. But maybe if I played my cards right, he would tell me what the report said in the first place.

I blew out a breath and headed up to the second story. It only occurred to me now that Beech might not be at his desk because he was investigating the case himself. As I walked down the aisle, I found his desk empty. I nodded at a couple of detectives who recognized me and dropped into Beech's chair.

Why not see if he has the report?

I sat up straighter at the thought.

No. I couldn't. That would be invading his privacy. I wasn't the type of person –

Don't even finish that thought. You are exactly that type of person. Your job basically forces you to be this type of person! Surely you're not this much in denial that you can't figure it out.

I pressed my finger to my chin, debating. It was my job to snoop. Although Eric had yet to officially pay me. Normally, I asked for half the payment up front, plus a daily stipend and expenses. But I didn't. I treated him like he wasn't a client. I treated him like... I didn't know what. He brought out an insecure little child when I was trying to set clear boundaries and emphasize self-respect. Around Eric, I had none of those traits and was reduced to a teenage girl, starstruck by someone as gorgeous, who had no regard for herself and what she wanted.

My hand teetered close to his top drawer. I bit my bottom lip.

Logically, this was wrong. Sure, I could tell myself that this was job and that Eric would eventually pay me to solve this. I could tell myself there was a good chance that there was a very important report that could very well implicate my client – or absolve him of his crime. I would be doing right by my client by looking for it.

I let out a sigh and dropped my hand back into my lap.

The issue was Beech himself. I knew Beech wasn't my friend. I knew we both didn't like each other. But we respected each other. And I just couldn't let myself go through his things. Maybe assholes deserved that but not Beech. I mean, yes, he was an asshole but he was an asshole I respected. There was a difference.

"What are you doing here?"

I jumped from where I sat, my hand over my chest as my heart shot straight out of my chest like it had been shot out of a canon.

"Oh my, God, Beech, what the actual fuck?"

He dropped into the seat across from me, seemingly too tired even for our usual banter. There were bags under his eyes and he reeked of cigarettes. His nearly black hair was not up, like it normally was, and hung down, the ends barely grazing his shoulders.

I had never seen him this way before. I almost felt sorry for him.

"What do you want, Chalmers?" He rested his elbow on the arm of the chair and placed his hand in his palm. "I'm not in the mood for you to come over and annoy the shit out of me, okay? I have too much on my plate."

I tried to ignore the hurt I felt at him saying my mere presence was annoying.

I knew this.

"I just want the report," I said.

The last thing I wanted to be was an annoyance to him. I knew many PIs and detectives, anyone in law enforcement, didn't give a shit about how they were perceived by other people, especially when they were being a pest as part of their job. Typically, I fell into line with this, but there were always exceptions. When it came to Beech, it was important for me that he regarded me as someone competent, who could do my job well, and someone he respected.

"You know I can't give that to you."

"Can you tell me the content?" I tried. "Maybe the dates or the times? Was there semen found? If so, does it match Eric's?"

Beech gave me a long look. “You’re not going to let this drop, are you?” He ran a hand through his hair, heaving a sigh. “Can I ask you a question? Why does this case mean so much to you?”

“All of my cases mean a lot to me,” I said through gritted teeth. He was baiting me, trying to change the subject. I knew this. Logically, I knew this. But I let him do it to me anyway. My nails dug into my palms, trying to get me back on track. Trying to get me to refocus on the rape kit. “I do what I need to do in order to get the job done.” I cleared my throat. “The fact that you haven’t arrested Eric says a lot about this so-called –“

“Eric?” He arched a brow. “You call all your clients by their first names or just the Swedish ones?”

My face exploded with heat. I wished I had worn my hair down because I could hide my obvious redness behind a curtain of my hair if I really wanted to. Unfortunately, because it was in a high ponytail, I would be forced to have his perceptive eyes pick up on my uncontrollable tell.

“Although,” Beech continued before I could come up with a clever retort, “he’s not really your client, is he? Your dad is your client. Foresburg is just the suspect.”

“Where are you even going with this?” I leaned forward, my forearms resting on the surface of his desk. His phone started to ring. Beech flickered his eyes over to it but didn’t make any sort of move to answer it.

“I’m the detective. I’ll be asking the questions.” He crossed his arms over his chest, waiting until the phone stopped ringing.

When it did, he cocked his head to the side and stood up. He leaned over the desk so he was close to me, closer than he had been before. My first instinct was to lean back, to get out of this web he was weaving around me. My pride, however, forced me to stay. I wouldn’t let him see me cower. I wouldn’t let him think he had any effect on me whatsoever.

“What are you doing, Mika?” he asked in that silky seductive voice.

“I’m trying to do my job.” I swallowed. His voice caused my entire mouth to go dry and it was difficult to form a sentence in the first place. “I came here to see if

you had the report on the rape kit.”

“Even if I did, you know I couldn’t share that information with you.” He pulled back, his little act of trying to seduce me into doing something gone for the time being.

Thank God. I had not done well with him so close to me. I was a hot mess and I wouldn’t be surprised if he knew it.

“Why not?” I asked. I was louder than I intended. I noticed a couple of other detectives who had desks close to Beech paused what they were doing in order to give us curious looks. I slowly released a breath and shifted my focus back on Beech. “It’s not like we haven’t traded information before. We’ve always helped each other with our cases. I’ve given you information, you’ve given me information.”

“Not anymore.” His hand rested on the surface of his desk, and he leaned his weight into it. “I’m done helping you pretend you’re more than what you are.”

My mouth dropped open. “And what do you think I am, exactly?” I asked.

“A fake detective,” he said. His words were like the edge of a paper, slicing into my skin and cutting me deeply. “Someone who couldn’t cut it as a police officer and had the arrogance to go off and become an investigator. Someone who gets paid to do the right thing. Someone who takes innocent victims’ money and uses it to their advantage. Someone who’s more of a detriment than an asset – and what’s worse, doesn’t even realize it.”

I abruptly stood up. Tears accumulated in my eyes at the harshness of his words. I had no idea where they came from. I had no idea if this was what he always felt and he was finally using the truth like a weapon against me, or if this was some sort of tactic to get me to stop my investigation. If it was the latter, I didn’t understand why. We had always helped each other. What about this case was causing him to push me away? To treat me like I was completely insignificant?

“Have you ever handled a rape case before?” he asked me, his eyes going over every inch of my face. I couldn’t read his expression, I couldn’t read the meaning behind his heavy eyes.

When I didn’t answer, he shook his head. “I didn’t think so,” he said. “You’re

out of your element, Chalmers. Go home before you completely botch my case.”

I clenched my jaw. There were so many things I wanted to tell him, so many things I wanted to scream. Instead, I kept them all bottled up inside and left. I managed to make it through the station without crying. Somehow, though, my chest ached and breathing became more difficult.

Regardless, I would not let Beech get the better of me. I would solve this without the rape kit, without the report, and without him.

Chapter 11

The second I got to my office, I slammed the door shut. I wanted to scream. Beech was being such a pain in the ass. I ran my fingers through my hair, tugging at the roots. The pain was enough to remind me that Beech was not obligated to help me with my investigation. I shouldn't be taking his actions personally. He was only doing his job.

And I had to do mine.

I released my grip on my hair and let out a breath. I dropped my purse by my desk before plopping into my chair. I would have to continue my investigation without the rape kit.

"Fair enough," I muttered to myself, flipping open my planner. "You've solved cases with less."

What I didn't understand was why I was letting Beech get to me this way in the first place. I shouldn't care. What he thought of me didn't matter. I didn't consider him a friend and I didn't think colleague was accurate either, considering we didn't technically work together.

I grabbed a pen and started tapping the surface of my desk. I didn't know how, but using a pen and taking my aggression on my desk was making me feel better.

"Whoa, what did that desk do to deserve the beating you're giving it?"

I looked up, surprised to see Eric standing in front of me with a gentle smile. I pressed my lips together and immediately stopped the tapping.

"Oh." I was embarrassed that I had been so consumed in my anger that I didn't hear Eric come in. "Hey."

“Hey.” He stepped forward. “Can I sit?”

“Yes, yes, of course.” I shook my head, trying to get rid of all thoughts of Beech. He was distracting me in a way that wasn’t helping. “How are you doing?”

He shrugged his shoulders, leaning in the chair and shifting his lower body until he got to a place where he was more comfortable. I made a note to upgrade my client’s chairs when I had the opportunity.

“As good as I can, I guess,” he said. “I’m lucky your dad has such faith in me.” He gave me a secret smile that seemed to imply we shared a secret. The only problem was I didn’t know the secret and he seemed to think I did. “I should say, I’m lucky he has such faith in you.”

“Hmm.” I forced a smile. Things were awkward between us, but I didn’t know why. I hated it. Part of me longed to go back to the way things were when we were together, where I knew him like the back of my hand, where he was my entire life. The other part of me wished things were back to just recently, when I wasn’t involved in his life at all and he wasn’t going to drop into my office unexpectedly. I wasn’t sure which part of me I gravitated towards. I just knew I didn’t like where I was currently.

He stood up, arms outstretched. “Look,” he said, “I feel like there’s something weird between us, something not like us. Something heavy and awkward and I don’t know why there is.”

I looked away. I fixed the small framed picture of me and my mom when I graduated college with honors. I didn’t know what to say to that.

“I know that face,” he said. He sat down in the chair across from me again. “You’re trying to figure out how to tell me bad news, right? Am I going to like what you’re about to say?”

I hated when he did this. I hated when he brought up our past and how much he remembered from it. I hated how easy it was for him to talk about our past, like it was nothing. Like it hadn’t been important to him and still didn’t affect him the way it affected me to this day – which I absolutely hated. It had been years and I was stuck. For whatever reason. I couldn’t seem to move on and instead taking steps to actually doing something about it, I ignored it. I pushed it down until I was distracted enough to forget about it.

And it would come back at the most inopportune times. Like now, when I was facing him.

“I still don’t know if I believe you’re innocent or not,” I finally told him, forcing myself to lock eyes with him. I hated the way he stared at me. It was like he could see straight through me, like he still seemed to know me better than I knew myself. But I would not allow myself to look anywhere else. I would not be afraid to show him this new me, to remind him that maybe he knew me at one point, but he didn’t know me anymore.

“Meeks –“

“I’m not trying to be difficult and I’m not trying to be a bitch.” I hated that I had to clarify the last part but I did. I rubbed my thighs with my palms, hoping to rid myself of the sweat that accumulated from them. It was almost embarrassing how much there was. “I followed her today. Ashley Dunham. Care to tell me why she would show up at the rink?”

“Five Point?” Eric seemed confused. I wondered if it was genuine. Eric had always been a good liar but I had always had the ability to tell when he was doing just that. Because there had been a couple of years between us now, I was unable to figure out if he was being genuine or if he had gotten better at lying.

I nodded in response to his question.

“Why would I – I have no idea.”

I clenched my jaw, looked down at my lap. “Where were you today?” I asked, my voice softer than I wanted it to be.

From my peripheral, I saw him shift in his chair.

“Why does this feel like it’s more of an interrogation than a friendly chat?” he asked.

I clenched my teeth and looked away. “I told you, I wasn’t going to be defending you,” I said. I couldn’t bring myself to look at him. It was too easy to get lost in his eyes. I didn’t even want to risk it. “My job isn’t to prove your innocence, it’s to find the truth. And finding the truth means asking hard questions. And, since your job is to prove your innocence, your job is to answer those questions

honestly.”

He looked away and shifted his weight again. I recognized the look on his face. He was debating whether or not to tell me. I didn’t remember Eric ever lying to me. There were times when he would purposefully not tell me things, but he never outright lied. But when he debated whether he would answer one of my questions or not, his face would always scrunch up, his eyes would always narrow, and he would drum his fingers on the table, the steering wheel, the arm of the chair, or wherever he was at the time.

“So?” I pushed. “Where were you?”

“I was at home,” he snapped.

“Can anyone confirm that?”

“Of course not.”

“Why?”

“Why what?”

I raised my brow. “Why were you home alone?”

He gave me a look, spreading his arms out. “What?” he asked. “Why do you think, Mika. Have you heard? I’m a rapist. The press is eating that up. They’re camped out on my lawn right now. I managed to sneak out without them noticing. I can’t really do anything except stay at home alone. No one wants to come over. No one wants to deal with them. Besides practice and team obligations, I have no other reason to go out.”

I released a breath, looking down at my hands. I should have expected that but I didn’t. I expected to feel guilty but I didn’t. This was part of my job and I wouldn’t let myself be moved to treat him like he was anyone but a client.

Because, at the end of the day, despite our history, despite these lingering feelings that had been hiding and were now smacking me in the face whenever Eric Foresburg was around, that was all he was.

“Okay,” I said, picking my eyes up to look at him.

“Okay? Okay? What does that mean?” He stood up abruptly from his chair and began to pace up and down my office. “I came here to see if anything had changed, if you have some sort of update that might actually help me, Mika. I’m grateful, again, for your dad because I’ve heard whispers that management wants me suspended until this is all sorted out. I don’t know what I can do anymore at this point. I’m a prisoner in my own home and the one person I reached out to, the one person I think can actually help me, is asking me questions like they think I’m guilty as well.”

I frowned. “Stop it,” I said. “Stop feeling sorry for yourself. Stop trying to make me feel guilty when I’m just trying to do my job.”

He opened his mouth, as though he was ready to argue some more, but stopped himself. I was grateful. I didn’t want to argue. If anything, that was the last thing I wanted.

“Do you think I did it?” Eric asked. His palms were on his thighs and he was leaning over, his eyes so blue and so intent. It was like nothing else in the world mattered to him except hearing my response to his question. As though everything hinged on this answer.

“I-I don’t know.”

He flinched, sitting back like he had been shot. “How can you say that?” he asked, his voice breaking.

I wanted to cry. I had only heard him sound like that one other time – when we were breaking up. And it gutted me. It made him sound broken. This big, intimidating, successful hockey player was vulnerable and sad, and it just didn’t resonate well with me.

“You know me. You know I would –“

“I thought I knew you.” My bottom lip trembled and I tried so hard to keep it from doing so, but I didn’t know how. “I thought we were going to be together forever. I thought you were the sort of guy who wanted to settle down. I thought I was special to you.”

“You were!” he exclaimed, standing up and walking over to me. He placed both hands on my desk, towering over me. “You are! Don’t you see that?”

“Then why -?” I stopped myself before I could finish that sentence. I refused to care one way or another why we broke up. I would not bring my baggage into an investigation he hired me to do.

His unflinching eyes never left mine. I knew, deep down, he knew what I was going to ask. Instead of goading me into doing just that, he waited.

I clenched my jaw. It was as though we were in a battle of wills, and there could only be one winner.

At that moment, my door swung open and Beech walked in with two police officers. He stopped when he saw me and Eric engaged in a staring contest, a look of confusion touching his chiseled face.

“You okay?” he asked me. As though he hadn’t insulted me hours ago.

I gave him a quick nod. “What do you want?” I snapped.

“Eric Foresburg?” he asked, turning his attention to Eric. “Your assistant told us where we could find you. I’m placing you under arrest for the rape of Ashley Dunham. If...”

I blocked out the Miranda rights as I watched Beech handcuff Eric. The entire time he was here, even as Beech led him away from me and out of my office, Eric’s eyes never left mine.

■

Chapter 12

■

The first thing I did after watching Beech pull out the cuffs was call Eric's lawyer. From there, I called a bondsman. Eric had more than enough money to be released. Granted, I wasn't sure the judge would release him based on the violence of the crime once he stood trial, but I could always hope.

I still didn't know if Eric was a rapist. What I did know was that Beech was arresting Eric because of pressure. He had shit evidence and he knew it. I was infuriated because I expected better from him.

I followed Beech back to the station. I knew I wasn't allowed to be there when he was booked, but I could wait until the bondsman came and he was released. Unless, of course, they decided to transport him to Orange County Jail where he would be booked there as well. Irvine never held arrestees unless they were drunks who needed to sleep off their alcohol. Instead, Irvine fed them to OCJ, where they would either be held until their court date or bailed out.

My gut said Eric would be transported to OCJ and when Beech came outside to meet me in the parking lot, my gut feeling was confirmed.

I pulled out my cell and relayed the information to both Eric's lawyer and the bondsman. I planned to head in my car and go to OCJ myself so once Eric did bail out, I could take him home and he wouldn't have to worry about calling for a ride.

"What are you doing, Chalmers?"

Beech's unexpected question stopped me. His dark eyes were narrowed, but instead of a jagged hardness I expected, there was genuine curiosity. Maybe even disappointment. I didn't like the way that look made me feel inside so I looked away, forcing myself to get angry. Forcing myself to remember that Beech sold out.

“I should ask you the same question,” I snapped. I kicked at the concrete. A couple of rocks hit the sidewalk.

“And what is that supposed to mean?” For whatever reason, he seemed upset by my question.

I turned to look at him, wondering why that would bother him. It wasn’t as though he cared about what I thought of him. If he had, he certainly wouldn’t have arrested Eric in my office the way he had.

“Why did you arrest Eric?” I asked. A couple of bikers brushed past us, heading to the bike trail just behind the station. I ignored them, keeping my focus on Beech. “You don’t have anything on him.”

“I have a compelling statement –“

“He said, she said, at best!”

“- and a rape kit.”

I clenched my jaw. “The rape kit,” I said, taking a step towards him. The last thing I needed was anyone to overhear our conversation. Because the PD was adjacent to the city building, there were people around that weren’t privy to police business. “Tell me, what was the date of the kit.”

“Mika.” Beech pinched the bridge of his nose.

My eyes widened. Rarely did he ever address me by my full name.

“Beech.” I couldn’t bring myself to say his first name. He looked away. I wasn’t sure if he was upset with me fighting him so much or if it was because I didn’t address him as Alex. “Please.”

“Why do you care so much?” he asked, crossing his arms over his chest. “You typically don’t care this way. You care about the job, sure. But this is more than I’ve seen you care at all. This is... personal for you. Why?” He narrowed his eyes at me.

“Are you accusing me of something?” I asked. I shifted my weight, avoiding his eyes. I thought back to my encounter with Eric in my office, just before he was

arrested, and how I avoided his eyes because I wasn't sure if he still knew me the way he used to know me. Now, I avoided Beech because I knew he knew me. We spent too much time together not to pick up on our tics and nuances.

"Not accusing." His voice wasn't sharp. There was no edge to it. If anything, it reminded me of his interrogation voice, the one he used when he was good cop and trying to get a suspect to open up to him. Typically, females broke down when he spoke to them this way. His voice took on a silky quality that rendered most to their knees. I couldn't help but be affected by it even though I told myself I wasn't. "I just don't understand. And I want you to help me do that."

"I don't have to explain myself to you," I snapped. I lashed out like a teenage girl. Inside, my stomach churned with guilt and I swallowed, hoping my voice didn't come out garbled or sad. The last thing I wanted was to show any kind of emotion in front of him. The last thing I wanted was for him to regard me as weak. Because as much as I told myself I didn't care what he thought of me, I did.

"Where is this hostility coming from?" he demanded, dropping his hands and getting defensive.

"Are you kidding?" I flared my nostrils, my annoyance at him flaring into full-blown anger. "Have you forgotten how you've been treating me ever since you got this case?"

"Well, quite frankly, Chalmers, this case is none of your business." His words had an edge to him now, as though he knew his seductive voice wouldn't work on me so he had given up on it completely. Now, I was the perp who he had no patience for, who was, in his eyes, completely hopeless. "And it pisses me off that you're involved at all."

"What?" I was proud of myself for keeping my voice low and not shrieking like a cat drenched with water.

"You heard me." His foot started to tap against the pavement. More bikers flew past us. "Why is your father involving you in this?"

"He wants Eric cleared." I thought that was obvious. If it had been, why was he asking. And why was he looking at me like I was a piece of the evidence, some code he was trying to decipher that would unlock a huge piece of the puzzle.

“There’s that name again.” Beech took a step back and faced the river trail. His hands were in his slack pockets. “Eric. Why do you call him that? Even if you’re a fan of the team, don’t people refer to players by their last names and not their first. Do you know Eric personally?”

“Why does that matter?” I asked, crossing my arms over my chest protectively.

“Don’t be naïve, Chalmers.” He glanced at me. Even behind his black shades, I could feel his eyes scanning me, studying me, trying to figure me out. “You know why it’s important. If you aren’t completely unbiased with your case –“

“Now you’re telling me how to do my job?” I scoffed, taking a step back. I nearly crashed into a biker who swore at me, swerving out of the way just in time. Under any other circumstances, I would have flipped him off. Because I was so consumed by what I thought was an unnecessary conversation with Beech, I barely even acknowledged the biker. “That’s rich, coming from you.”

“Oh?”

“I catch a quarter of your perps. There’s a reason why your numbers are so high, Beech.”

“You think you make me a better detective?” He snorted. “Unbelievable.”

“Are you calling me a liar?”

“Did those words come out of my mouth?” He took a step closer to me, and then another one, until he was directly in front of me. My entire body stilled. “I saw you in your office. I saw the way he looked at you. He has something for you, Chalmers, and if you don’t see it yourself, then you’re blind.”

I snorted, shaking my head. “Something for me?” I repeated. “Are you crazy? You think Eric Foresburg has – I mean, you can’t even label it. That’s a reach, Beech, especially for you.”

“Not when it comes to my gut.” He looked at me unflinchingly, his voice tight. “You can laugh at me all you want. I know what I saw. He wants you. I don’t know if it’s just sexually, or if there’s more behind it than that. But he wants you.”

“So what?” I rolled my eyes and kicked at a stray rock. “I’ve had clients who want me and I was still able to do my job. If you don’t believe me, I can get you references.”

“It’s more than just that,” he insisted. “It’s like he knows you.”

“What?”

“Are you seriously making me repeat everything I say to you.” He removed his sunglasses and inspected the lenses. “You do understand English, don’t you?”

I rolled my eyes. The clear blue sky promised a beautiful day, but the cold reminded me autumn was here and winter was coming. In a few weeks, the regular hockey season would start. With Eric’s arrest, I did not think my dad was able to protect him from being suspended the way he had before.

“I’m trying to see what you’re trying to insinuate,” I said.

“Stop assuming and just answer me. Why does Foresburg look at you like that? Why do you call him by his first name? Why are you so invested in this case? I don’t think you realize it, Chalmers, but you never would have asked me for a rape kit during an open investigation. You know better than that.”

“Is that why you were such an asshole earlier?” I asked. I wasn’t about to give him a reason for justifying his behavior, but I did want to know why he acted the way he was acting.

“I was an asshole because you’re acting in a way I don’t understand and you’re putting me in a position I don’t like being in.”

“And what’s that?”

“Being tempted to risk my job to make you happy,” he admitted.

I stopped. I wanted to analyze that line, to try and figure out what he could possibly mean by that.

Before I could do that, he continued. “I was an asshole because you aren’t acting like your normal self, and that pisses me off,” he said. He rubbed away whatever dust accumulated on his glasses before putting them back on. “I don’t know if

it's because of this extra pressure you feel because this is your dad's case he asked you to solve or if there's something you aren't telling me when it comes to you and Foresburg. I don't know, and not knowing also pisses me off. And yeah, I have my own issues, with the sergeant and the DC and the chief all up my ass to solve this as quickly as possible, not to mention all the phone calls and emails I'm receiving, I have my own goddamn issues I need to sort through."

I nodded my head, but I wasn't sure what to respond. I looked at the ground.

"To answer your question about the rape kit," Beech said slowly, causing me to look at him, "I can't give it to you. What I can tell you is that it was taken September nineteenth and no semen was found inside of her that night in question. But there was a pubic hair on her and it does match Foresburg's DNA. Before you ask, we have his DNA because he voluntarily gave us a swab of his saliva and some hair from his head to compare it to when this whole thing broke. I can't prove rape definitively, but they did have sex that night."

Chapter 13

I barely made it home before I found myself throwing up. Eric, a rapist?

Just because there was a pubic hair did not mean rape occurred, a little voice reminded me.

That much was true. And yet, I could not assuage my stomach from spilling its contents into my toilet. Because, deep down, it was more than the rape. I hated the abrupt evidence that he was sleeping around with people like Ashley Dunham. I absolutely hated it.

When I was finally done, I flushed the toilet. Instead of moving from my position on the floor, I leaned my back against the wall and gave myself a moment to catch my breath and confront what I had been denying for a long time: I still cared about Eric.

I didn't actually think I was reacting because I was jealous or because I wanted him back. It was more of a confusion. Why would he break up with me so abruptly only to sleep around with meaningless women? Had he gotten scared? Did he miss his freedom? And now, because of that choice, this was where we were. He was accused of rape and there was legitimate evidence against him. It was much more than just a simple he-said, she-said. A pubic hair indicated that sexual activity took place between them; now, it was just a matter of proving rape.

I closed my eyes and clenched my teeth together. Eric's idiotic decision to have sex with this person, to completely botch the dates (which seemed to imply he was heavily inebriated because I highly doubted Eric would forget something as simple as that unless he was drunk), was now biting him in the ass. More than that, I was now involved in this and it was the last thing I wanted.

I didn't want to hear that my ex raped another girl. I didn't want to hear he was

having sex with other people, even if it wasn't rape. I wanted to go on, pretending he didn't exist until my father casually brought him up in conversation during one of our dinners as a hockey player rather than a person who meant the world to me.

I picked myself off the floor of the bathroom and grabbed my toothbrush. At this point, I was left with two options: I could stay on the case and see it out to the end or I could quit.

I grabbed my toothpaste and squirted some of it onto the brush, before running water over it and sticking it in my mouth. For one thing, I wasn't a quitter, and that was what I would be doing if I decided to stop. Eric was entitled to have a personal life, despite what I thought, despite our history together.

Because that was what Eric and I had – a history. Not a future, and not a present. We were part of each other's past and that was that. Eric could do whatever and whomever he wanted, and it wasn't any of my business.

However, I couldn't dive any deeper into this without talking to Eric. I called his attorney, who assured me he would make bail by the end of the day. At that moment, someone knocked on my door. I furrowed my brow, picking myself up. When I reached the door, I looked through the peephole.

What was my father doing here? He did not seem happy, either, what with his hands on his waist, tapping his toes on my doorstep.

I unlocked the door and opened it. He barreled in without waiting for an invitation, throwing his hands up.

"Eric was arrested!" he exclaimed, as I shut the door. I could hear him stomping into my kitchen. "What the hell for?"

"Well, it was only a matter of time, Dad," I said tentatively, following him into the kitchen.

He grabbed a bottle of wine from the top of my fridge, the only alcohol I kept in my apartment, saved for those particularly long days when I had a shitty day of work and needed to unwind. The last time I drank was a few weeks ago.

I think.

“How is that?” He took the bottle to my sink, resting it there before opening my cabinets and procuring two wine glasses. “There’s no evidence –“

“There is evidence,” I said.

He uncorked the wine and began pouring the alcohol inside. A couple of drops splattered on the sink.

“Besides her story –“

“A rape kit. With a pubic hair. Eric’s pubic hair.”

My father’s mouth dropped open. When he realized he was gaping, he shut his mouth, shook his head, and turned his attention back to the wine. He moved to fill the second glass.

“That doesn’t prove anything.” His voice was quieter. He put the cork back in the wine bottle and placed it back onto my fridge. “Maybe he had sex with her –“

“Twice?” I pressed my lips together and looked away. I hadn’t wanted to say anything at all. Especially to my father. But it came out before I could stop it.

My father sighed. Conflicting emotions warred on his face. He handed me a glass of wine.

“People change, Mika.”

“Yeah, but Ashley Dunham?” I threw out my arm, all my frustrations spilling out. “He isn’t the type to sleep with someone twice, Dad. And Ashley Dunham - ?”

“What if he forgot he had?” my dad pointed out. He took a seat at my kitchen table. “What if he didn’t remember her? What if he was so drunk, he didn’t realize what he was doing? What if someone spiked his drink and he didn’t know?”

“Dad...” I let my voice trail off and took a small sip of the alcohol. There was no way I’d be able to finish the drink with the amount he had poured in my glass.

“What?” my dad said defensively. “If Eric was a girl, I’m sure that would be one of the first things suggested, but because Eric is a big guy, you’re assuming he can’t have his drink spiked?”

I let out a sigh. “Even if that was the case, how am I supposed to prove it?” I asked.

He shrugged. “That’s your job, not mine,” he pointed out. He took another long sip of his wine. “I need you to do something, Meeks. Bob wants to suspend Eric, especially after his arrest. And honestly? I can’t think of a reason why this shouldn’t happen besides me wanting him to be able to start in a few weeks.”

I play with the edge of my wine glass with my fingertip, tracing the circle without much thought. “Well, Dad, can you blame him?” My voice was quiet and I couldn’t bring myself to look at him just yet. He wasn’t going to like what I had to say but I had to say it. He had to hear it.

“Mika,” my dad growled. “You aren’t helping.”

“Not helping!” I dropped my hand so it slapped the surface of the table. “Are you seriously telling me I’m not helping?”

“It’s not –“

“Dad, you need to think about this after removing yourself from it,” I told him. “Eric raped someone allegedly. Keeping him on the team if it’s just a he-said, she-said is one thing. You stand by your player, fine. Commendable, even. But now he’s arrested. Do you really think he’d be arrested unless there wasn’t compelling evidence?”

“You tell me!” he exclaimed, throwing out his arms. The wine sloshed on the floor of my kitchen. “That’s what he hired you to do, isn’t it?”

“Eric has yet to pay me, so right now, I’m doing this out of the goodness of my heart.”

My father narrowed his eyes. “So you need a check to stop half-assing this and do something?”

“I’m sorry, did you just tell me I was half-assing my job?” I gripped the edge of

the dining table. “What is your problem, Dad? I didn’t even know if I was going to take this case in the first place and only decided to do it after talking to you.” A small half-truth he didn’t need to know wasn’t completely true. If I could twist a stab of guilt into him, I would be satisfied, especially with the words he was spewing at me right now. “And just for your information, Beech wouldn’t have arrested Eric without evidence. He already has the weight of the world on him with such a high-profile case. You know he doesn’t even work rape cases, right? His sergeant specifically assigned this to him.”

“You seem to know a lot about this Detective Beech,” my dad said, not bothering to hide his suspicion. “You need to realize you’re both on two separate teams.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose, standing up. I definitely needed a drink but I would not give my father the satisfaction of seeing him have such an effect on me.

“Actually, Dad, you’re wrong. We aren’t on separate teams. We have the same goal. We want the truth. And if that truth proves Eric is guilty, then there’s nothing that can be done. He deserves to be arrested. He deserves to be suspended.”

“How can you say that?” My dad stood up, taking his empty wine glass and carefully placing it in the sink. It didn’t surprise me that he wasn’t washing the dish. After Mom died, somehow that task was regulated to me even though we never discussed it beforehand. My mom used to joke Dad was allergic to doing the dishes in any capacity, even with a dish washer. “You know Eric –“

“I’m getting really sick of everyone telling me I know Eric,” I said, “when the fact of the matter is, I don’t. I don’t know Eric anymore and honestly, Dad, you don’t know him on a personal level either.” I wiped my face with my hand. “You can see yourself out, can’t you? I have some things to do.”

I grabbed my purse from my couch and made my way to my front door.

“Where are you going?” my dad asked.

“Office,” I stated and shut the door after me.

The truth of the matter was, I needed to get away from my dad. He was preventing me from thinking things through. It didn’t help that he was lecturing

me. It didn't help that, whether he intended it or not, it sounded as though he blamed me for this whole mess. I wasn't sure if he assumed I would have solved the case by now, or if he was merely annoyed that I didn't automatically believe in Eric's innocence. If I was being honest with myself, part of me thought what Eric was going through was deserved simply because of the choices he made. Instantly, I banished the thought, guilt coursing through my body. That wasn't fair. I knew that.

When I got to the office, I distracted myself with other, less pressing cases. I hadn't heard from Eric's attorney and I hoped that was a good thing. I hoped Eric was out and I hoped he was being smart about his freedom and at home, flipping through television channels and microwaving a pizza.

I wasn't expecting him to walk into my office. I wasn't expecting him to close the door and sit down across from him. And I wasn't expecting the relief to spread across my body like the chicken pox when I saw that he was okay.

"Hey," I said.

"Hey," he responded. He looked down at his lap. "So. I've had an interesting day."

"That's an underestimation if I've ever heard one." I looked at him, really looked at him. He was still the same striking, beautiful man I had fallen in love with, but there was a weariness to his pale blue eyes, a sallow look to his skin. He wasn't handling this well.

"Eric, I need you to be honest with me," I said, setting the file I had been flipping through down so I could focus my attention on him. "I think we all want this to be over, but I can't do that if I don't have all the information."

He nodded his head. "Ask me anything and I'll answer," he said. His wrists hung limply from the arms over the chair, exhaustion gripping his body like a possessive lover.

"I know you're inclined to spend the night with different women," I said. Before Eric could interject – to defend himself or maybe to explain – I held up my hand. "Honestly, it's your business what you do with your life. I don't care. I just need to know if there's a possibility you had sex with Ashley Dunham twice. I'm not saying you raped her. What I am saying is that the two of you engaged in sexual

activity when you said you did and when she said you did.”

Eric looked like he wanted to say no. I wanted Eric to say no. And for the most fleeting of moments, I thought he would. Up until he picked his eyes up from the floor, a resigned look on his face.

“Yes,” he finally said. “Yes, we did have sex twice.”

■

Chapter 14

■

Twice. Apparently Ashley Dunham was different because Eric deigned to have sex with her twice.

All attempts at trying to be professional was thrown on the backburner. My anger, my bitterness, my jealousy, got the better of me, and I leaned forward. My fingers gripped the edge of my desk so tightly, my knuckles were white.

“Are you kidding me right now?” I asked in a hiss. “I honestly don’t remember you being this stupid, this reckless, when we were together.”

I didn’t know why I had lowered my voice. We were in the safety of my office and I wasn’t expecting any other clients to show up. There always was a possibility for Ryan King to drop by and he would be skeezy enough to try and listen in on this conversation, even with my door closed. But I doubted he had the time to be here anyway. He had a pretty easy case, thanks to Eric’s stupidity.

“Yeah, well, I never had a reason to be stupid when I was with you,” Eric pointed out. He, too, kept his voice low, but there was an edge to it. I knew him well enough to know that his anger wasn’t directed towards me but at himself. It made me calm down, if only slightly.

“How did this happen?” I leaned against my chair before reaching into my drawer and taking out a stress ball. Sometimes, I forgot I had this thing only because I rarely used it. Now, however, I was squeezing it so tightly, I wouldn’t be surprised if I punctured it with my fingernails.

Eric sighed, running his fingers through his hair. It was one of the few times I remember it being loose, falling into his face, rather than slicked back with some kind of hair product. The only time he wore it like that was when he went to bed. At least, from what I remembered.

“Honestly,” he said, finally picking his eyes up from my floor and looking at me. “I forgot we slept together in the first place.”

I blinked once, then twice. I squeezed the ball again and held it in a vice-like grip. Kind of like the way I wanted to hold Eric’s neck currently.

“You’re telling me,” I said slowly, “that you slept with her in the summer, during the off-season.”

“When the season ended,” Eric said, nodding his head once. “I remember her specifically because Kevin introduced me to her. I don’t remember how he knew her in the first place. I think maybe they worked together?”

I furrowed my brow. “She said it was at a club,” I murmured. “So now you admit that she isn’t wrong with her dates then? It’s just, you slept with her twice?”

Eric nodded. “If that’s what the rape kit says,” he said.

I resisted the urge to throw the ball out my window, shattering glass. “What do you mean?” I asked. I wasn’t trying to be confrontational, but he was making it really hard. “Eric, you cannot possibly be this –“

“Well, I am, Mika, okay?” He abruptly stood up. “I am this stupid. I’m stupid for sleeping around. I’m stupid for forgetting that I slept with this girl earlier so I slept with her twice. And I’m a fucking idiot for breaking up with you in the first place.”

My eyes went wide at his last sentence. My grip on my stress ball tightened. My mouth went dry. Even he seemed surprised by the words that had just come out of his mouth. I wasn’t sure whether to address our history together or keep things focused on the case. I should be professional, but part of me – a stupid, silly, foolish part of me – wanted to talk about our relationship, to get that closure I had so desperately wanted.

“Eric,” I said, my voice soft. I didn’t know what to say. I didn’t know if I should have said his name at all.

He ran his fingers through his hair. “I just, I don’t want to hear it,” he said. His voice was almost sad, but I hadn’t seen Eric sad in a long, long time. “I know I fucked up. I know this is my fault.”

“I’m not saying that.” I sighed and rocked left and right in the chair, replacing my stress ball back into my drawer. “I just...” Didn’t understand why he slept with Ashley Dunham, out of everyone. Didn’t understand why he broke up with me in the first place. Didn’t understand he needed to sleep around in the first place. No one said it made sense. “Let’s say you didn’t rape her.”

“I didn’t.”

“Okay.” I nodded once. “Then why is she doing this to you?”

“She tried to blackmail me,” Eric said, though his tone indicated that he had no idea. “Maybe she was looking for easy money? What? Don’t look at me like that. How am I supposed to know why she’s doing what she’s doing?”

I didn’t realize my judgment had crept onto my facial features. I cleared my throat, trying to make it disappear.

“There are easier, less public targets,” I said, more to myself than to him. “Did she, I don’t know, want to be with you romantically? Was she trying to be your girlfriend?”

Eric rubbed his temples, wrinkling his brow as he tried to remember. “Honestly? I just remember the time we fucked at the club,” he said. “I don’t remember this one in September.” He shook his head. “What I do remember, though, is that I made it clear I wasn’t looking for anything serious. I just wanted to have fun. And she seemed to be on the same page. Actually, afterward, she went back to her friends and didn’t talk to me the rest of the night. But not because she was sad or anything.”

“Doesn’t that sound weird?” I asked.

“I thought it was cool at the time,” Eric admitted. “I didn’t have to leave the club because she was following me or staring at me or –“

I put a hand up. “I get it,” I said flatly, rolling my eyes.

“Does this bother you?” he asked.

My eyes snapped to his face. I couldn’t tell if he was being sarcastic or if he was amused. As though he was taking my reaction and making it about him. About

us and our past.

“My feelings on the subject don’t matter,” I told him.

“Bullshit.” Abruptly, he stood up and began to pace the length of my office.

“Bullshit, and you know it.”

“Excuse me!”

“How can you tell me that this case doesn’t affect you?” he demanded to know. There were moments in our relationship when we would fight. Our voices would rise, our words thrown like daggers intending to strike but never kill. And just as quickly, we’d be wrapped in each other, overcome with a different sort of passion. “It affects me! And not just for the reasons you think. Obviously someone is accusing me of something vile. Obviously my reputation is ruined, I have a criminal record now, and my career could be coming to a disastrous end. And yet, all I can think about is you and whether or not you think I’m capable of doing something like this.”

My mouth dropped open slightly, my breathing coming out past my lips rather than my nose. My eyes were wide, focused on him rather than anywhere else in the room. I wanted to look away, I wanted to show him that his words meant nothing to me. But I couldn’t pretend.

“It’s always, always been you, Mika.” He stopped when he was directly in front of me, but he didn’t come any closer. That familiar confliction of disappointment that he chose not to come and relief that he chose to stay where he was caused my heart to tighten. It was hard to catch my breath, and each word out of Eric’s mouth made it more and more difficult. “You are that annoying, nagging voice in my head that tells me what I should do, what I shouldn’t do. It’s you.”

“Well, clearly nothing has changed since you’re not listening to me now just like you didn’t listen to me then.” The words came out of my mouth before I could stop them. A wave of peace washed over my body the second the words left me, like they had wanted to come out to him for a long time. Instead of telling him the truth, I bottled up one part of my frustration with him until they forced their way out at the right moment. “Do you really think I’d tell you to sleep around with a bunch of strangers?”

“Maybe it’s me doing the opposite of what I know you’d tell me to do just to

spite you,” he said seriously.

“So this is my fault?” I nearly threw the stress ball at him.

“Of course not,” he said.

I cut him off before he could continue. “Well, tell me, then, Eric, what’s going on with you because you’re making some pretty stupid decisions that have come back around to bite you in the ass?” I snapped.

“I haven’t been handling our breakup well,” he finally admitted. He was defensive and his voice was raised slightly, his eyes on me.

Again, I was thrown by his answer, unsure of how to react to it. This should elate me. This should make me feel vindicated and ecstatic and justified. Quite honestly, the only emotion I was feeling was frustration. That, and exhaustion. I almost didn’t care anymore because it was too much work to do so.

“We’ve been broken up for two years now,” I pointed out. “You were the one who called everything off.”

“Don’t you think I know that?” He ran his fingers through his disheveled hair as he resumed his pacing, his shoulders hunched over, his eyes on the floor. “I’m a fucking coward, Mika. The way I felt about you, the way I still feel about you, scares the shit out of me. So I ran. I ran away from you. I ran away from the best thing that had ever happened in my life. And now, because of my fear, my life is imploding in front of me.” He stopped once again, his eyes burning into mine. “Please, Mika. Even if I go to prison, even if I lose my job and I can never play hockey again. I know I could survive all that. But I couldn’t survive if you honestly think I’m capable of such a violent act.”

My heart broke. I had to look away, out the only window I had in my office. Sunshine poured through, promising another glorious Southern California day. My heart squeezed so hard, it was difficult to breathe, like I was wearing some kind of corset.

“Please don’t give up on me,” Eric said, his voice cracking. Tears accumulated in my eyes but I still refused to look at him. “Please don’t run away from me the way I ran from you. I don’t deserve it, but I won’t be able to get through this without you. I need you, Mika.”

I clenched my teeth together. I gripped the arm of my chair. One fat tear rolled down my cheek, betraying my feelings.

“I need time,” I told him, making sure my voice didn’t quiver. “And I need you to leave.”

I finally looked at him so he could see I wasn’t playing any games. He looked like he wanted to say more, but didn’t. My shoulders nearly sagged in relief.

Instead, he nodded a couple of times and left me alone to my solitude. I wanted to break down and cry, but I refused to allow myself to even do that. I still had a job to do. I could cry after I discovered the truth.

■

Chapter 15

■

I still didn't know if Eric was telling me the truth. It was rather convenient to forget he slept with someone. Even now, he wasn't sure, and that uncertainty was something Ryan King would jump on in the court room. I had to figure out if sex occurred between them over the summer at all. I had no idea how I was going to figure this out and I had no idea if it would have any relevance to the case. Granted, if I could prove Ashley was lying about when the rape occurred, maybe that would put doubts about her as a credible witness in everyone's mind.

I made a left on Newport Boulevard. My first stop was at Luxe. I wanted to see if they had any surveillance tapes of the night in question. Ashley said it was during their year end party, after the Buccaneers got knocked out of the playoffs. Why the players wanted to celebrate losing, I couldn't say. When my father found out about it, he practically broke them in practice. I wish I had been there. I probably would have laughed.

Here was what I didn't understand. The date of the rape kit was September nineteenth which coincided with the date of the last game the Bucc's played last season. Eric seemed to think they had had sex early September. Ashley hadn't made any sort of statement until now, the end of September, after going to Eric and demanding a buyout.

Obviously, the fact that she went and tried to blackmail Eric into giving her money made her story suspicious, but it didn't disprove a rape.

However, the fact that she waited gave me reason enough to pause. If she had a rape kit done, if she had evidence against Eric in the first place, why wait?

Unless, of course, she didn't know the content of the rape kit. I racked my brain, trying to remember if victims got a copy of the report or if the report was turned over to the police. Weren't the police supposed to be called no matter what? Maybe they were. But what if she left? What if she checked herself out or left in

the middle of the exam? That would prevent the case from moving forward, wouldn't it? Or maybe she stayed and told the officer she didn't want to press charges?

But why?

And why change her mind now?

I pulled into a parking spot on the second floor of a narrow parking structure. I was glad it was a weekday and the place was practically empty. I hated how small the parking stalls were.

I walked through the structure and up a ramp, past a service elevator, before stepping outside. I hung a left, passing what used to be a Stagecoach Restaurant on my right. I hoped they'd be opened at this time. When I called, no one answered, and doors wouldn't open until ten that night. But maybe someone was counting inventory or accepting deliveries? Maybe someone who could help me with what I was looking for.

I walked up to the door and was surprised to find it unlocked. I pushed it open and looked around. The room was dark, the only lights coming from dim ones hanging on the wall.

"What are you doing here?" I turned to the bar where an annoyed bartender was washing a dish. "We don't open until –"

"Ten, I know." I pulled my badge from my jacket pocket. "I'm a private investigator, working independently on the Foresburg rape case. I was hoping I could talk to your manager or whoever would be in charge of looking into surveillance video the night of September nineteenth."

"I'm not sure if we keep video for that long," the bartender muttered before shaking his head. "Even if we did, there's no way we could release it to a private citizen. No offense."

"No offense taken." I expected as much but I figured I could at least ask. "Okay, we maybe you can't get me footage, but could I see what happened that night?"

The bartender looked around. I hadn't realized just how small the dancefloor of the club was until I saw it completely empty. In fact, the club itself was relatively

small. I didn't have anything to compare it to, only because I wasn't the sort of girl that went to clubs. Even when Eric and I were together, I only went out at night with him and only to show my support. If it was up to me, I definitely would not have wasted my time.

"I don't know," he said.

"Are you a Bucc's fan?" I asked, tilting my head to the side.

The bartender shrugged. "I mean, I'm not a hockey fan really." He grabbed another glass and started cleaning it. "But the Bucc's are really good tipplers. And they're nice. Like, just cool guys anyone could have a beer with."

"So you've met Foresburg," I said.

"A couple of times." Another shrug. "Look, if you're trying to get me to tell you whether I think Eric Foresburg raped that girl, I couldn't tell you. From my very brief interactions with him, I can tell you I never would have pegged him as being a rapist. He's always been one of the cool players. Even with our girls, the ones who work here, he's never harassed them or made them feel uncomfortable – at least from what they've told me."

"So what you want to ask yourself is whether or not you want to help him," I said slowly. I didn't want to attack him with my words, but I wanted to persuade him to bend the rules for Eric. For this investigation. "Because he needs it. That much I can tell you."

"He did rape her?" The bartender's brow disappeared behind his disheveled brow hair.

"That's what we're trying to figure out." I glanced around the small room, looking for any door, somewhere there might be an office that handled admin tasks. "Is there a place where we can go to check out the footage?"

"I don't know." The bartender set aside the glass and put his hands on the surface of the bar so his shoulders reached his ears. "I'm not supposed to. I could get into a lot of trouble, even just showing you."

"Look." I wasn't trying to push him, but I didn't have time to linger. If anyone else came in, it might push him to deny me access to what I came for. I needed

him to agree, to show me everything, and then to regret it afterwards. “There’s a chance that he’s not even on the video. He might be on the video with or without the alleged victim. They may or may not be interacting. There is a lot that has to happen before the footage even becomes necessary, and if it does, the police will go through the proper channels to acquire it legally. We can always pretend I saw nothing afterwards no matter what it shows.” He chewed his bottom lip and I masked a sigh. “It would be really helpful. Please?”

I hated myself in that moment. I wasn’t particularly fond of saying please even when I should. To use it on this poor bartender was manipulation, something I wasn’t exactly comfortable with.

“Fine, but if there’s nothing on the tapes, we forget everything,” he said, quickly walking around the bar.

I practically skipped as he led me across the dance floor and up the black stairs to the second story of the building. So, this was the elusive VIP lounge, with leather booths, fancy alcohol, and the prettiest waitresses. VIPs had a nice view of the dance floor below. I wondered if Eric had gotten a VIP table or if he chose to remain anonymous and idle downstairs.

If the former, Ashley might not have been able to access him – unless he went downstairs to dance or someone in his party brought her upstairs.

The bartender led me into an office he had to open with a set of keys. I realized he must have opened alone to have access to every part of the club, including what looked like a manager’s office. He went over to a storage cabinet and opened the top drawer, again with the ring of keys. I heard him flip through whatever was in there and looked around. I saw a variety of celebrity guests, signed pictures in frames, all with personalized messages to the manager as well as a couple of newspaper clippings regarding the club.

I heard the vroom of a computer starting up and I turned away from the decorated walls and stepped towards the desk. The bartender was in the seat, fingers typing furiously across the keyboard. It was another minute or two before he brought up the appropriate software after loading the video footage into the hard drive.

“Date?” he asked.

“September nineteenth, probably midnight, give or take an hour.”

The bartender types in the data. There were a couple of different angles.

“I’m assuming you want to go through all of the results?” he asked, tilting his head up to look at me.

I nodded my head. “If you don’t mind,” I said with a smile.

He sighed. “I still have a lot to do,” he said. “You can’t record or copy the footage. But you can go through it. Can I trust you by yourself? I don’t have time to stick around and babysit you.”

“Absolutely,” I promised, sliding into the chair he just vacated. “I’ll be gone way before you guys open.”

“You better be,” he said as he moved to the door. “If my boss knew you were here, he’d fire me on the spot.”

Before I could say anything more, he left, slamming the door shut. There didn’t seem to be any audio, which sucked because there might be a clue if the cameras happened to pick up conversation. Then, I realized I was looking at footage from a nightclub and even if there had been audio, I was certain it’d be crappy techno music blaring from the speakers, drowning out the low murmur of conversation.

I clicked on the first video and began to watch.

The task was incredibly tedious. Everything was in black and white, so I had to get used to the grainy figures. There were three different camera angles spread across a three hour time slot. I let it play. I wasn’t looking for Ashley or anyone on the team. The only person I was concerned with was Eric. If Eric didn’t show up on the footage, that didn’t mean they hadn’t met at the club or had sex. It just meant Eric’s story would be more difficult to prove because it reverted the case back to he-said, she-said. The pubic hair proved sex occurred, not rape.

I almost gave up.

Almost.

My eyes were drooping, my stomach was rumbling, and my muscles were

getting tight. I wanted to stretch.

No. I wanted a massage.

I was just about to head out when I saw a familiar set of shoulders sitting down at the bar. He talked to someone off-screen before Eric turned to look at someone.

My eyes widened. It was Ashley.

I watched as they conversed.

At least I knew Eric wasn't lying.

I thought that was it. I thought that was all I needed, but then something happened.

"What?" I asked.

I rewound the footage and watched again.

I shook my head. "No way. It can't be."

The third time I watched it, though, it was confirmed.

While Eric and Ashley talked, there was someone sitting on the other side of Eric. I couldn't make them out at all because the camera cut the majority of this person off.

But what I did see favored Eric's story. There was no way it could be a coincidence.

This person on the other side of Eric took advantage of the fact that Eric was distracted and poured something in Eric's drink.

Ashley hadn't been raped, at least not this time.

If anything, Eric was the one who had been violated.

Chapter 16

It was difficult for me not to pick up my phone and call Luxe every fifteen minutes. I put in my request with them for a copy of the security footage I was able to see before the manager came over and insisted I leave. Instead, I toyed with the idea of calling Beech.

We weren't exactly on the best of terms right now. He still didn't understand why I was involved in the case and I was upset that he didn't take me seriously as an investigator with a crime like rape, but when it came to burglary and robbery, he had no problem doing so. I didn't understand the difference, and it wasn't as though he had been forthcoming with the information either.

"Fuck it." I picked up my desk phone and dialed Beech's desk number. I had a feeling he wasn't going to answer, but I tried anyway.

"Detective Beech."

I was surprised to hear his voice on the other line that I didn't speak.

"Hello? I am very busy, so if you need –"

"It's Chalmers." I wasn't exactly quiet with the statement, but my voice lacked its usual force. I cleared my throat and waited. I wasn't sure what I was waiting for, exactly, but I was waiting.

"Oh." I couldn't tell if he was disappointed or not. It shouldn't matter, but I was holding my breath like it did. "Hey."

"Hey." That was a start. That was... something.

"Did you need anything?" he asked after a moment. "I'm buried under paperwork. The press has been calling nonstop. I think they've even started

erecting tents outside the station like the homeless community.”

“Too bad you just can’t round them up and dump them off in Santa Ana,” I said, running my fingers through my hair.

“Yeah.” A beat. “Look, Chalmers, I said some things the other day –“

“It’s fine.” I waved my hand away until I realized I was in my office and he wasn’t here. He was at his desk, probably hunched over with his hand holding his forehead, his thumb on one temple, his middle finger on the other. “We both said somethings we regret.” I licked my lips. Everything had gone dry, and I didn’t understand why that was. “Anyway, I wanted to call you because I have some information about the case.”

“Oh.” This time, I definitely recognized the disappointment.

I frowned. Had he wanted me to call just to apologize? To make things better between us? I didn’t think he actually cared one way or the other. We had said worse things on less important cases. We just ignored that and moved on without an apology uttered from either one of us. I didn’t understand why this case was different.

Maybe it wasn’t the case. Maybe it was Beech. Maybe it was me.

I shook my head. Now was not the time to analyze this.

“I went to the nightclub, Luxe. You know, where Dunham insists she and Eric met,” I said quickly.

“If I remember correctly, Foresburg was the one who said they met at Luxe during the summer,” Beech corrected.

I waved it away. “Yeah, yeah.” I smiled. “Anyway, I asked for footage of that night to see if maybe I could catch the two on camera –“

“Which they’re legally not allowed to give you, considering you are a private citizen.” He arched a brow. “Did you wave your badge and withhold the fact that you were a private citizen?”

I scoffed. “How dare you accuse me of such an illegal thing,” I said, hands on

my hips. “Of course I didn’t. Actually, I told him the truth.”

“Him?”

“The bartender.”

Beech shifted his eyes. “Why am I not surprised?” he asked. “So you batted your eyelashes and he did something illegal. Even if what you have completely exonerates Foresburg, I can’t use it to prove his innocence because it was obtained illegally.”

“If you would just let me finish...” I reached in my drawer and grabbed the stress ball. It amazed me how much I had already used this thing. I bought it just after Beech and I met about a year ago, knowing he had the full capacity of pissing me off and sending me into a frantic sweep of emotions. He did that to me almost every encounter we shared, but I had totally forgotten about it until a few weeks ago. “I didn’t obtain anything. He told me he couldn’t legally give me a copy. But...”

“But what?” He sounded exasperated and I bit my tongue to keep my laughter in check. I didn’t want to rile him up, especially if I needed his help.

“He showed it to me.”

“He showed you...”

“The footage.” I stopped squeezing the ball, sitting up straight. I thought it was common sense. “I saw Eric and Ashley that night together.”

“I’m assuming you actually saw something I can use or else you wouldn’t be calling me,” Beech stated. I could picture him now, leaning back in his chair, ignoring the other calls, pinching the bridge of his nose. In my entire time of knowing Beech, I never saw him react to his annoyance the way he did when I was the one annoying him. Honestly, I took it as a compliment, although I didn’t think Beech would see things the same way.

“I saw Ashley engaging Eric – who was already drunk, by the way – in a conversation,” I began.

“You’ve done it, Chalmers. You’ve completely cracked open the case. This

sounds like something where I need to call for backup.”

“You are such a dick,” I snapped before I could stop myself.

“Actually you’re the dick,” Beech said. I could hear his smirk in his words.

“Private dick, right?”

I rolled my eyes and squeezed the ball so hard, I was surprised I didn’t puncture it. “Okay, someone off camera was spiking his drink,” I said.

There was a moment of silence on the other line of the phone. I swung back and forth in my chair, trying to channel my buzzing energy into something. I twirled the cord of the phone around my finger and waited.

God, what was taking him so long to respond?

I opened my mouth, ready to repeat myself when he cleared his throat.

“Okay,” he said. “Let’s go through this step by step.”

“Sure.” I sat up straight, smug smile on my face, as I released the cord and grabbed a pen I could click.

“You decide to look for surveillance footage at the nightclub Eric says he met Dunham.”

“Yes.”

“And even though you know obtaining any evidence here would be illegal and possibly wouldn’t be admissible based on how it was acquired.”

I nodded, then said, “Yes. Which is why I specifically didn’t ask for a copy. I just wanted the opportunity to see if there was any evidence of them together in the first place.”

I could hear Beech’s other line ring. After a second, it stopped. Beech probably sent them to voicemail.

“Tell me exactly what you saw,” he said slowly.

That had to be a good sign. The fact that he was open to hearing what I saw

meant he was open to the fact that Eric might be innocent. At least, there wasn't enough evidence to say that he raped her without a reasonable doubt.

I told him everything – the way Ashley approached him, the way he turned to engage in the conversation with her, leaving his drink completely unaccounted for. I told him that she used small body gestures to keep him focused on herself, the way she fiddled with a necklace just above her cleavage, the way she flipped her hair and tilted her head, the one moment where he looked like he was going to reach for the drink when she grabbed his arm to stop him under the pretense of feeling up his bicep.

I told him how the person on the other side of Eric seemed completely innocuous. It was difficult to make out any distinguishing characteristic because the footage was in black and white. But there was movement and it was blatant that he or she slid Eric's drink and poured something in it. Then they threw cash on the bar and left

The entire time I talked, Beech didn't say anything. I couldn't figure out if that was a good sign or a bad one. He typically interrupted me, but that was to talk over me or to tell me how any of my theories wouldn't work.

If he wasn't doing such a thing now, that had to be because he saw that possibility of me being right this time, right?

I stuck my thumb in my mouth, playing with the nail. I didn't want to bite it, per se, but I liked tugging at it with my teeth. It helped calm my nervous energy.

"Well?" I urged when I couldn't take the suspense any longer. "What do you think?"

"I think I have video footage to collect," Beech said. "You're absolutely sure about this, right Chalmers? The last thing I need is to look like a fool in front of all of Orange County."

"I saw it," I told him firmly. "Trust me, Beech. The time stamp was one fifty-five in the morning. It's hard to see because it's grainy and everything is in black and white, but it's Eric. He's wearing a long sleeve white thermal. You can't miss him." I paused and then, in a softer voice, I added, "I want the truth just as much as you do."

There was another long silence on the phone. “Okay,” he said. “I’ll get a warrant.”

Before I could reply, before I could maybe apologize for my own behavior or make a smartass comment to ensure everything between us had reverted back to normal, someone came crashing into my office like a hurricane. I opened my mouth, ready to tell the person to calm down, when they removed their baseball hat and familiar brown hair cascaded down and narrowed blue eyes fixed on me like I was an annoying fly.

“Beech,” I said into the phone. “I’m going to have to call you back.”

Without waiting for a response, I hung up the phone.

“Ashley Dunham,” I said, spreading my hands out. “To what do I owe the pleasure?”

She sat in the chair, removing her purse from her shoulder and setting it on the floor next to her feet. The whole time, she never took her eyes off of me.

“We need to talk,” she stated, leaving me no room for argument.

■

Chapter 17

■

“Sure.” I nodded to a chair in front of my desk and dropped my hands to my lap. The last thing I needed was to show her just how unexpected this visit was. My palms were already perspiring and I wanted to wipe them on my thighs but I didn’t want her to know it. “Please sit.”

“I’ll stand,” she insisted. “My attorney warned me about you, you know.”

She looked down at her fingernails, inspecting her new manicure with a critical eye. The shade of red nearly matched her lipstick. I wondered if that was done on purpose or not.

I let out a dismissive sigh, leaning back in my office chair. Talking about Ryan King was enough for me to relax because he was easy to discuss. My annoyance and disgust with him was a good distraction from the fact that Ashley Dunham was in my office.

“I’m not surprised,” I said.

I crossed my ankles, debating whether or not I should kick them onto my desk or if that was going too far. I wanted Ashley to feel uncomfortable since she was in my office, but I didn’t want to come across as sloppy and unprofessional either. I wanted her to think I was the best at my job, and if she was lying about Eric, I wanted her worried I would figure it out. I wanted her worried I would expose her.

“He also told me you and Eric were together,” she continued, finally pulling her gaze from her nails to look at me. She rested her forearms on the back of my chair, leaning forward. She definitely did not seem intimidated or even bothered by me. In fact, she looked at me like someone might look at shit on their shoe.

“I’m sorry,” I said, trying not to let her words get to me. I could not show her I

was needed by her or else would pounce on me like a cat on a laser pointer. “How is that relevant to whether or not Eric raped you?”

“It’s not,” she agreed, “but it is relevant to know that your opinion on the entire situation is biased.”

My brow furrowed. “Excuse me?”

“You’re a woman, an intelligent one.” She stood up straight. “We’re supposed to stick together. We’re supposed to support each other and lift each other up, especially when men knowingly hurt us, when they’re trying to tear us down.”

“I’m not going to believe you just because you’re a woman,” I told her as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. “That would be a disservice to the truth.”

“Please.” Ashley rolled her eyes and headed over to a framed picture of me and my father after one of his games. “The truth? Who tells the truth anymore nowadays? The only thing that matters is who is more believable. Usually in cases like this one, it’s the woman.”

“Please tell me you don’t actually believe that.”

“Oh, come on, Chalmers.” She scoffed, shrugging as she spun on the balls of her foot. “Everyone is afraid to blame the victim, especially now, because everyone is so worried about being politically correct that they stop figuring out what’s right and what’s wrong anymore.”

“So, you’re telling me Eric didn’t rape you.” I crossed my arms over my chest and gripped the sleeves of my shirt tightly. I was tempted to grab my stress ball, but I knew I’d be throwing it at her or at my window and I couldn’t afford to fix a broken window right now. “You tried to extort him, and when that didn’t work, you went public because you want to take advantage of how worried society is about their perception of themselves rather than the truth.”

Ashley rolled her eyes and stopped pacing. “You are so ignorant,” she said. “I can’t believe King actually warned me about you.”

“Yes, well, Ry-Guy has been known to be wrong, even if he won’t admit it.” I pressed my lips together in a tight, condescending smile. “Let me ask you, are

you in on this with Ryan. Is he giving you legal advice so he can stay one step ahead of the police? He doesn't need the money, so I'm not sure why he would want to work with you." My eyes flickered up and down her person. "Although, you are his type."

"Gross. Like I would sleep with my lawyer." She took a seat in the chair – finally – and crossed her long legs. "King is good looking and smart, but I'm not interested."

"Just in players who make lots and lots of money. You realize Ryan has like, almost as much they do, right?"

"Lawyer aren't my type." She flicked her wrist dismissively.

"Why are you here?" I asked, leaning forward so I rested my forearms on the surface of the desk. "It's not like you're really proving your innocence. If anything, you've compelled me even further from believing you."

"Like I'm surprised." She glanced down and started fiddling with her many thin gold bracelets she wore around her right wrist. "The minute I knew who you were and what you used to have with Eric, I knew you wouldn't even hear me out. You'd believe Eric over me. Hell, if I were you, I'd be in your position. I wouldn't believe me either."

Here we go. She was trying to be innocent. She was trying to get me to feel sorry for her. It wasn't going to work.

"The thing is, Chalmers –" she looked up at me, her blue eyes hard with resolve – "Eric and I were supposed to be together."

I furrowed my brow. "What?" I asked, my voice flat. "Together as in intimately or –"

"Together as in I would get to call him my boyfriend," she snapped. "We had a good thing that night we met at the club. I know it doesn't seem like it, but the majority of the time, all we did was talk. He talked a lot about you – just not by name. It wasn't until Ryan King told me about your history that I finally pieced it all together."

"Wait, wait, wait."

I put one hand up to try and stop her from talking and the other rested in my lap. I gripped my upper, denim-clad thigh, reminding myself not to say anything stupid. At the end of the day, she was a victim. At least, there was something that had happened to her where a rape kit was taken. I couldn't let my jealousy and my anger at what she told me now cloud my judgment or I wouldn't be entitled to call myself a professional.

"It's the truth," Ashley insisted.

"I wasn't going to—" I cut myself off. I didn't owe her an explanation. "You're telling me that Eric told you he wanted to be with you... and you believed him?"

This was cruel. I knew this was cruel. And yet, taking Ashley Dunham down a few pegs brought me satisfaction I wasn't expecting to experience.

"Why wouldn't I believe him?" she asked, furrowing her brow. She crossed her legs again, this time in the opposite direction. "He told me how he was heartbroken over you, how he wanted to move on but couldn't. How he wanted to find someone to help him do just that."

I raised my brows and gave her a look that implied she was an idiot because this obviously sounded like he was feeding her lies.

"Did you guys have sex after he said those things to you?"

"W-what?" She swallowed and looked away. "I don't think that's any of your business."

"Actually, you're wrong." I swallowed, pausing to debate whether or not I should push forward with this. Should I be upfront or would that be deemed as cruel? Was I in my right frame of mind, or was every word out of my mouth tainted with jealousy? "You made it my business when you accused Eric of rape. I'm not saying your sexual history or your sexual behavior is my business because it's not. But when it comes to Eric, when it comes to your relationship with him, you made it my business and I have a right to question things."

"Your relationship with Eric is clouding your judgment," Ashley snapped.

"Isn't that what you want, though?" I cocked my head to the side, my hair falling over my shoulder. "Isn't that why you came here in the first place? I wouldn't be

surprised if Ryan King sent you himself to rile me up so I would say something that might prove how I'm ill-equipped to be on this case. Even if that had worked, you know I wouldn't have to legally recuse myself, right?"

Ashley opened her mouth to speak, but nothing came out. That wasn't actually a bad thing. It meant there was some part of what I said that was actually correct.

"What I'm sure King forgot to mention is that I'm really good at my job. There's a reason why I have a badge that gets me into the police department. I work closely with them, almost like a consultant, because they trust me."

"How can they trust someone who gets paid to look into things in a particular way?" she lashed out. "Your clients pay you. You're going to figure out things they want you to discover and bury anything they don't. You're completely skewed to one side. It isn't fair –"

I held up my hand to stop her and was surprised it actually worked.

"I assure you that my job isn't to help my clients," I told her. It was important to me that she understood that was the truth. Not because I cared what she thought about me, but my business reputation was important to me. "It's to find the truth. That is why I have such a close working relationship with the police. That's why they trust me with stuff like this."

"And it has nothing to do with the fact that you're the daughter of the coach?" she asked. "You have two relationships that would imply your head isn't completely clear as you might like to think it is."

"My father has nothing to do with this."

"So he didn't hire you?"

"I thought you said Eric did." I smiled sweetly at her. "Now you're claiming it's my father. Which is it? It can't be both."

"Can't it?" She perked her brows and leaned forward. "Derrick told me it's just you and your dad. Why wouldn't you do anything you could to help his most prized player?"

"What does my dad have anything to do with this?"

I didn't like that she knew more about me than I realized. I didn't like that she had access to my life because Ryan King wouldn't keep his mouth shut.

You can't blame him, can you? He's doing his job just like you have to do yours.

I brushed stray strands of hair from my face. This conversation was getting out of hand. I was getting bored and annoyed. In fact, I wanted time to think. I had different pieces of the same puzzle and I needed time to figure out how they all fit together. Ashley Dunham's presence was not helping in the slightest.

"Everything, duh," she said. "Every girl I know has daddy issues and I'm sure you have more than most. Your father is barely home because of his job. Your mother recently died. You have this innate desire to please authority."

"I'm going to stop you right there and ask you to leave," I said, my hand up. "Let me give you advice, Ms. Dunham. If you're going to regurgitate everything your lawyer says, you aren't going to be able to figure things out for yourself. Now, instead of listening to King and his paralegal or assistant or whoever this Derrick person is, maybe try to start thinking for yourself and –"

"Derrick isn't associated with Ryan King," Ashley said, scoffing. As though I was a complete idiot for not knowing this already. She bent over to grab her purse before standing up and heading to the door.

"Then who is Derrick?" I asked, leaning against my chair, my hands resting loosely in my lap.

She opened the door to my office. I thought she wasn't going to answer. She stopped and glanced over her shoulder.

"My ex-boyfriend."

■

Chapter 18

■

It shouldn't have surprised me how easy it was to find Ashley Dunham's ex-boyfriend online. All I had to do was find Ashley's Facebook profile and there he was, listed as one of her friends. There wasn't much interaction between the two of them; they liked each other's pictures every now and then but that was it unless they private messaged each other.

But I knew they had to still be in contact. There was no reason for them to talk about me before Ashley decided to claim Eric Foresburg had raped her. It was obvious she wasn't a hockey fan and a few clicks on his profile told me he was.

I frowned as I studied his pictures. It stated he lived in Santa Ana, and judging by the few pictures he had posted, I wouldn't be surprised if he had gang associations, or at least, knew people in gangs and did drugs. He looked like an idiot, but a dangerous one. An unpredictable one.

Unfortunately for me, he was my only lead.

I didn't waste any time checking him out and finding his address. If he knew something, if Ashley still confided in him, I had to find out.

I probably should have told someone I would be heading to Santa Ana to talk to Ashley's ex. However, I knew that I needed to act fast. Each day that passed by was one day closer to the opening. The Bucc's had their first preseason game with their crosstown rivals, the Los Angeles Warriors, and Eric was still not allowed to play. He had his first pretrial date as this Thursday, two days away. The DA would have to present evidence to show the judge there was enough to go to trial. Which meant if I didn't figure this out soon, Eric's reputation was going to get worse – maybe even irreparable.

I knew Beech was only doing his job. I knew the DA – whoever was assigned to the case – was only doing theirs. But I wished I had more time to figure this out.

This whole thing was problematic from the beginning. I wanted to be done with everything. I wanted put this case behind me and work on something that didn't involve hockey or my dad or Eric.

My grip on the steering wheel tightened. I didn't want to think about what Ashley said. I didn't want to think about Eric saying those words and meaning them.

I didn't believe Eric was a rapist. But I didn't like this new Eric. And he could blame his stupid decision to break up with me if he wanted. But I didn't care. This Eric wasn't someone I wanted in my life. I didn't know who this Eric was. I didn't want to know who he was. The Eric I did know was gone.

I got off the freeway and drove through the streets, looking for a small side street that would take me to a residential area. Santa Ana was much different than Irvine. It was more urban, with houses and businesses mixed together. There were more pedestrians, more people waiting for the bus. A homeless man snored softly on a bench sign advertising a defense lawyer in Spanish. The strong aromas of beef and chicken coming from a mom-and-pop Mexican restaurant tickled my nose and caused my stomach to rumble. A couple of skinny kids with shaved heads huddled on a street corner, their dark eyes glaring at me with unflinching resolve. It was like they knew I was an outsider and they wanted nothing to do with outsiders.

My heart skipped and I refocused my attention on the road. I didn't want to miss the street.

"Come on, come on," I muttered to myself.

I didn't like to admit I got nervous when I was alone in strange neighborhoods, considering my clients came all over Orange County, but I couldn't help but wish that I had someone with me so I wouldn't be alone. Unlike police officers who always had a partner, someone they could count on, private investigators tended to be on their own all of the time.

I finally saw the street and moved to the middle of the road, waiting for oncoming traffic to pass so I could turn left. It took a moment before it cleared up and I made my way through the small, residential street.

Santa Ana was a weird city. The main streets were urbanized. There was trash

everywhere, homeless people on a lot of bus stops and park benches, trying to find shelter for the night. Sometimes, gangs huddled on street corners, exchanging drugs and money between them in broad daylight.

And yet, when immersed in residential neighborhoods, small, quaint houses lined the streets with green grass and kids playing basketball in driveways or street hockey. There were parks that probably could use more upkeep – trash littered everywhere, graffiti was on the bathroom walls, homeless people were going through dumpsters – but weren't actually aesthetically displeasing besides the issues listed.

I pulled in front of a small, two-story house that resembled a cottage. Smoke came from the chimney and there was an old Buick in the driveway. Someone was home. I just needed it to be Derrick.

I turned off the engine and locked my doors before heading up to the small porch. The grass wasn't green and the lawn was overrun with weeds.

I knocked on the door and stepped back, waiting to be answered. I glanced at the windows, consumed with dust and tacky curtains. The smoke coming from the chimney smelled bitter, though I couldn't figure out why that was.

After a long moment, someone opened the door. He had dusty brown hair, maybe red, with tired blue eyes. He wore a muscle shirt and Nike sweatpants with no shoes or socks. Honestly, it looked as though he had just rolled out of bed. I was tempted to whip out my phone and see what time it was. It had to be well after noon.

"Yeah?" he asked, his voice gruff.

He scanned me from head to toe. There was nothing lecherous in his gaze but it made me uncomfortable, regardless. I couldn't figure out as to why that was, though. I didn't feel threatened, but I didn't exactly feel safe either.

"Hi," I said, too brightly even for my standards. I grabbed my badge from the waistband of my jeans and flashed it to him. "My name is Mika Chalmers and I'm a private investigator looking into the rape of Ashley Dunham. Mind if I ask you a few questions?"

"Ashley Dunham?" He ran his hands down his face like he was trying to wake

himself up. “Why would you want to ask me any questions? We’ve been broken up for, like, a year I think?”

“I know,” I said. “I was actually interviewing her yesterday and she mentioned you. I don’t think she realized what she was saying –“

Derrick scoffed, interrupting me. “Yeah, no surprise there.” He rolled his eyes. “She was all talk. That girl had a flair for the dramatics, let me tell you.”

“Yes, well.” I faked a smile and continued. “Anyway, like I said, I don’t think she realized how her words came across because she used the present tense instead of the past tense, and I thought that was strange, considering you guys had been broken up for a while.”

A gentle breeze nipped the back of my neck. It was humid, an uncomfortable thing that touched me the way a skeezy college professor might in an attempt to implore one of his grad students to be there for him in a way that had nothing to do with education and everything to do with satisfying basic needs in exchange for a passing grade in his class. I didn’t like it. The Santa Anas were going to pick up soon and they always brought discomfort and a sense of dread with them. I shouldn’t be here. Derrick probably had nothing to do with the case and Ashley was just some idiot who didn’t know how to speak correctly.

“Look, Ashley and I talk every now and then,” he admitted. “You know I’m the reason she likes the Bucc’s in the first place, right? Like, before me, she didn’t give a shit about hockey. I took her to the games. I watched them on TV all the time. The Bucc’s are my ride or die, you know?”

I didn’t. I knew the phrase but I didn’t know what it meant in this context.

“She called me out of the blue to give me these special tickets to the Bucc’s Lights Out Fan Event,” he said. “I already gave the stub to a detective.”

I did a double-take. “A detective?” I asked. “Detective Beech?”

“I don’t remember her name.” He shrugged. “I still don’t understand why I’m being interviewed by you guys at all. I have nothing to do with Ashley. Not anymore. I just talk to her because she gives me free tickets to Bucc’s games and she still goes down on me every now and then. I saw her little press conference and she brought up the whole Light’s Out thing. I decided to turn in my ticket

because I wanted to be helpful. I'm trying to get that assault off my record."

I made a face before I could stop myself. Not only was he the grossest asshole on the planet, he knew absolutely nothing of how police records worked. How Ashley ever dated him in the first place, I had no idea.

"Did your ticket have a golden insignia on it? Like a gold swish?" I asked.

He wrinkled his brow. "I think so."

"Did she ever talk to you about her relationship with Eric Foresburg?" I asked. I was ready to leave but I needed to know if there was anything else. Derrick was more helpful than I initially gave him credit for, but he had a creepy vibe and I was starting to feel uncomfortable.

"Relationship?" He laughed, shaking his head. "Foresburg doesn't do relationships. It's all in her head. Why do you think we broke up?"

I shifted my weight, refocusing my attention on him. "What do you mean?" I asked.

"Foresburg fucks, he doesn't –"

"Not about Foresburg," I snapped. I hoped he didn't notice. There was no reason for me to get so defensive over Eric's sex life, especially in front of some kid who probably didn't even realize I was the woman Eric dated seriously before jumping back into the single life. "Why did you guys break up?"

"Besides the fact that she was cramping my style with her constant talks of getting serious and marriage," he said, "and the fact that she wouldn't even try to swallow for me, Ashley thought we were more than what we were."

"You mean she thought you were serious when –"

"When we were just fucking around," he said. "Don't get me wrong, we did date. And I didn't have a side chick or anything like that. I liked Ashley. She's good with her mouth and she wanted to be with me when she could have any guy, you know? But she's a stage-five clinger. And when we broke up, she went crazy. Started saying some shit that was a fucking lie. I had to get my boys to shut her up, you know?" His hand shot out and I flinched, thinking he was going

to touch me. He didn't. "Not that they did nothing, you know? They just scared her. And now we're friends and she understands, we're not nothing more."

I nodded my head.

"Now, is there anything else?" He furrowed his brow. "The last thing I need is for my boys to think I'm talking to the cops, even one as fine as you."

There was something about the way Derrick looked at me... A chill ran down my spine. He had indulged my curiosity and if I didn't leave now, there would be consequences.

I forced a smile and nodded my head. I got all the information I needed anyway.

The fact that Ashley didn't do well with romantic rejection was something I would definitely have to look into. More pressing than that, however, was this piece of evidence Derrick had turned over.

That was something I needed to look into. Hell, it might even be that missing piece of the puzzle I needed to figure out the truth.

■

Chapter 19

■

What I wanted to know was how Derrick came into possession of this evidence. Could it have something to do with spiking Eric's drink? If Derrick had ties to gangs and drugs, it'd be easy for him to get his hands on a date rape drug. Maybe they were in it together. Maybe he was the guy in the video who spiked Eric's drink.

I made a mental note to watch the video again if I was able to get my hands on it.

I hopped in my car as quickly as I could and started the engine. It sputtered before stopping completely.

"Fuck!"

Not now!

I refused to let myself go over the list of everything I should have done that would have prevented me from getting to this spot here. Instead, I took a calm breath and ensured that my doors were locked. From my peripheral, I saw Derrick step out from his house and stand on his porch. The look he gave me was nothing short of scary – which didn't make sense because why was he so defensive of someone he wasn't even with anymore?

"Don't think about that yet, Mika," I muttered to myself. I tried to start my car and heard the screeching attempt of the engine trying to turn over, trying to start.

My heart squeezed with hope until it sputtered out.

I clenched my teeth together. I didn't even want to curse out loud.

Derrick moved from his porch, crossing his brown and yellow lawn. My heart sped up, as though I didn't already know that this was a bad idea and that I

should have called Beech or my dad so they knew I was here.

I should have a gun on me. I should have protection. I was a private investigator. As long as I passed a couple of tests, I could get licensed. It would be legal.

I shook my head of all of these plans. If I left this place alive, I would fill out an application for it right away.

Derrick rapped his knuckles on my window. I shrieked. I didn't roll it down. He was telling me something but I couldn't hear him. Not over the pumping of blood throughout my body. Not over the rapid beating of my heart.

I tried the keys one more time and managed to start my car.

"It's alive!" I yelled out, bursting into maniacal laughter.

I threw my car into reverse. I didn't care what Derrick was trying to tell me. He could be offering me help or wanting me to roll down my window so he could shoot me in the head. I did not want to be stupid enough to find out.

I only calmed down once I was back on the 55 freeway. I should go home, but I didn't feel like it. I was too jittery. I wanted to be around people. I wanted to feel safe.

"And," I murmured to myself, "if I can do my job at the same time, why not?"

I got onto the 405 south and headed for the police department. I wasn't here to see Beech. If Derrick was right and there was more evidence against Eric that he turned over to the police, I needed to find out what that was. I knew Beech wouldn't tell me but maybe I could compel whoever was working property to at least tell me.

This wasn't looking good for Eric. Then again, he had been drugged.

I wasn't sure what to believe at this point. If only I could get my hands on that evidence...

It took another ten minutes before I reached the police station. I was surprised by how empty the 405 was, but I didn't want to start questioning a good thing. After grabbing my badge, I stepped out and headed for the rear entrance of the station.

The city building was already closed. It was just after seven, and things had slowed down substantially. When I buzzed myself in, there was no one emerging from the locker rooms, no one telling the stories of their day over coffee as they headed into the briefing room. It always felt strange to me, being in a building that should be buzzing with people during their off-hours, because it filled me with peace. I much preferred this than during peak hours.

I followed the hallway until it spilled into the breakroom. If I continued down the hall, I would spill out into the lobby. If I chose to go straight, I'd be in the breakroom. Instead, I made a left. Property was nestled between the breakroom and CSI. It was handled by civilian officers rather than sworn officers, with a full-time lead and two full-time employees. Besides that, there were four part-time civilians who helped with menial tasks so the full-timers could handle the evidence.

I had no idea what I was doing or even what my plan was. I just knew I wanted to see what evidence Derrick turned in.

I wasn't surprised to find the doors to property closed. Typically, property closed at five every evening. Only one person ran it at night, just in case sworn officers needed to turn in evidence or sign out evidence. Rita said they were trying to get another full-time body in property so they could add a swing shift rather than day shift, night shift, and filling in part-timers in between.

Maybe Rita was working. Even though she was lead, she was known to take a night shift every now and then so her employees could have a night off. Whether that meant she would actually help me with what I was looking for was another thing. We were friendly, but she respected the rules and didn't bend them, not even for her friends.

"You'll never know unless you ask," I muttered to myself. "The worse they can say is no."

I knocked on the door before stepping back and waiting. I fiddled with the hem of my shirt, noticing a loose string. I itched to pull it even though I knew it would mess up the stitching.

The door swung open and there was an unfamiliar albeit handsome face peeked out. He must be a rookie – and, judging by his shift, I'd assumed Rita got her third full-timer.

“Hi,” he said, a shy smile on his lips. “Can I help you?”

“Oh, um, yeah, hopefully.” I gave him what I hoped was a flirtatious look. I was never good at flirting and my face was even worse. “I heard that you’re the new guy. They wanted me to come check you out – I mean, they wanted me to check something out from evidence.”

I inwardly cringed. Not because I was embarrassed for stumbling over my words on accident, but because this was all on purpose. Each word that came out of my mouth was supposed a strategy, one I didn’t like and thought I wasn’t very good at employing.

If I knew I was going to have to do this, I would have gotten myself dressed up more. Maybe a tighter blouse that dipped low in my chest area, my worn, one and only push-up bra, and tighter skinny jeans. Hell, I might have actually thrown on more makeup while I was at it because I doubted that mascara and eyeliner was enough to really emphasize my natural beauty.

“Oh, what department are you from?” he asked.

The thing was, the rookie was good looking. With sandy brown hair, crystal blue eyes, and smooth tan, he was the perfect candidate to be more comfortable on a surfboard down at Newport rather than a light blue uniform that resembled an officer’s, but was distinguished as a civilian due to its color. He was also much younger than I expected him to be. I was going to guess early twenties because if I guessed any younger than that, I would throw up a little in my mouth because he would still be a baby.

“Upstairs,” I said. “I’m Sergeant Winchesters EA.”

I had no idea if he had met Kristi yet and knew that she and I were definitely not the same person. Plus, there was absolutely no reason for executive assistant’s to stay past six o’clock, even when there was a high-profile case such as this one going on.

“Oh, I thought –“

“There you are.” Without warning, Beech stepped around the rookie so he stood next to him, staring at me from across the desk. His dark eyes stared at me, a hardness about them that made me squirm internally.

What the hell was Beech doing here? And why was he in evidence?

“I thought I told you I was going to document the evidence of the Dunham case,” he continued. He was giving me a reason to be here; he was helping me out. And yet, I could not deny the accusatory glare coming from his person. He knew what I was doing and he definitely didn’t approve.

“Oh, sorry.” I forced a laugh, waving my hand away. “I thought I would come down here and help. You’ve been down here for a while.”

“I’ve been down here for five minutes, at best.”

My eyes widened and I turned to the rookie, who seemed to be looking between me and Beech, hoping to make sense of what was going on between us.

“It just, it feels like forever,” I said.

Beech turned his head to look at the rookie and flashed him a smile. I managed to catch his name on his sliver tag. Brayden. It suited him.

“When you have beautiful women missing you, you know you’re in the right profession, am I right?” He clapped Brayden on the shoulder. “Mind giving us a couple of minutes? You can take your fifteen in the break room. I just want to talk to my assistant here about specifics regarding an ongoing investigation. I just can’t have anyone not involved directly listen in, if you know what I mean.”

“Oh, yeah, of course Mr. Beech, anything.” He nodded enthusiastically and stepped around the desk.

When the door closed, Beech whipped his head around to face me, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Just what the hell do you think you’re doing?” he asked. “Were you... were you trying to flirt with him in order to get the evidence? You know that wasn’t going to work, right?”

“And why not?” I asked. I shouldn’t be offended. I shouldn’t take anything Beech said seriously, especially when I was well-aware he was trying to do this to get a reaction out of me. “It seemed to be working before you popped up.”

“Because you’re better than that.”

I didn’t like the judgment in his tone. I shifted uncomfortable and brushed hair out of my face.

“I’m trying to do my job,” I said, trying to keep my voice level, “and for some strange reason, you’ve been distant. I get you have your protocol to follow. I respect that. It’s just, we always work together. We exchange information. We help each other out. You get official credit. I get paid. But this case is different.”

“Because if things get fucked up – and rape cases usually do – it’s on me. Not you.”

He stepped towards me, trapping me in my position against the desk. I couldn’t move around Beech unless I touched him and the last thing I wanted to do was touch him. Not when he was so close to me. Not when he was looking at me with heavy, dark eyes I could lose myself in.

“This way, I take full responsibility for anything that goes wrong.”

I swallowed. Beech was... protecting me? That seemed strange and completely out of character.

“I never asked you to protect me,” I said. My voice was supposed to come out stronger. Instead, it was quiet.

He tilted his head and dropped his eyes to my lips. “And you’ll never have to,” he said.

It was suddenly hard to breathe. The case, the evidence, my anger at Beech vanished. All I could think about was how close he was and how good he smelled and how badly I wanted him to kiss me. And maybe I was completely reading the situation wrong, but I could swear he wanted to kiss me too.

Whether that was a good idea or not, I didn’t know. Did it matter? I wanted it. He wanted it. We were alone. It was the perfect opportunity. No one had to know.

Chapter 20

I turned my head and stepped around Beech and moved from the desk. I didn't know why I did it. I didn't know why I distanced myself from Beech. There was some part of me that had wanted him to kiss me. And yet, if I allowed that, everything I just confessed to him would be a joke.

Because the truth of the matter was, I wanted Beech to take me seriously. His opinion of me as a professional was the only one I cared about.

Beech released a breath. I couldn't tell if it was one of relief or something else. Instead of trying to figure it out, I forced myself to look at him. I needed to know what Derrick claimed to have turned in. Beech had ruined my chances at getting that information from the rookie civilian. I had to figure out another way.

"I can't give you the evidence, Chalmers," Beech said, his voice low.

A shiver slid down my spine as I imagined him using this voice in a completely different setting. His hand might trace the curves of my body before stopping on my hipbone as he looked deep into my eyes and told me I was his...

I shook my head of the thought.

"I'm sorry," Beech said, misinterpreting my action as frustration at the fact that I couldn't get the evidence for myself. "The only thing I can do is tell you what it is. Not because I need help, but because you need to know what you're dealing with, who you're working for."

I tilted my head to the side. The phone rang at that moment, causing me to jump. I nearly cursed at myself. Beech hadn't even flinched. I didn't like being so jittery, especially around him.

"Eric isn't the person you think he is," Beech said, taking a step away from me.

He reached behind him and pulled out his phone from his back pocket.

“So what you’re telling me is you believe he raped her?” I asked, my voice cracking.

I wasn’t sure what to make of this. I wasn’t sure if I was pissed at the fact that he thought Eric could be a rapist or if I was mad at myself for still being in denial that Eric was still the Eric I once knew and loved. However, the fact that Beech wasn’t so close to me gave me control of my faculties once again. I could breathe without my chest tightening up. I could think without a heavy fog clouding my judgment.

“I don’t know what I believe,” he said. His fingers flew across his keyboard, his eyes staring at the screen. From where I stood, I could smell the strong scent of new coffee being made in the adjacent breakroom, and I made a note to myself to grab some on my way out. “But the evidence is making a compelling argument against him.”

“Everyone keeps telling me about this evidence,” I said before I realized it. “What is this so-called evidence that’s so goddamn damning?”

He rolled his eyes and then frowned. Cocking his head at me, he narrowed his dark eyes. “How do you know about the evidence?” he asked.

“W-what?”

“The only people who know about the evidence are myself, Rita – who signed it in – and the person who turned in the evidence who asked to be anonymous.” He paused, his fingers hovering above the keyboard. “How do you know about it?”

Shit.

I hated that Beech was too good at his job.

“I may have talked to the person who turned the evidence in,” I said, my face contorted into a wince.

“You what?” Beech’s voice was flat and he dropped his hands into his lap.

“Look, I didn’t know there was evidence when I went to talk to Derrick Bender,

okay?” I said quickly. “Ashley came into my office this afternoon and mentioned her ex. I don’t know why, but I thought I should follow up with him even though they’d been broken up for a year or so. I guess they were talking again because she left her jacket at his place and there was something in it. He wouldn’t tell me what, though. And I thought...”

“You thought you could come to property and flirt your way into figuring out what it was.”

“It wasn’t like I was going to sign out the evidence or take it,” I said. “I just wanted to know what it is. I wanted to figure out –“

“You wanted to figure out if Eric did it or not,” Beech finished for me. He placed one hand on his hip and chewed his bottom lip. “Why are you so adamant that this guy didn’t rape her? We have evidence that they were together at least two nights.”

“You got the tapes?” I asked, interrupting him. “So you saw his drink get spiked?”

“Yes.” Beech loosed a breath through his flared nostrils. “But that doesn’t mean he was raped.”

“What?” I slammed my hands on the counter. “Beech, by that logic, there’s no evidence she was raped that night either. The only thing you guys do have is them on video, his drink clearly being spiked, and you wouldn’t have gotten that evidence without me.”

“Please. You know I would have gotten that tape eventually.”

“Would you have? All you seem to care about is arresting him, building a case against him, not finding the truth.”

“Excuse me?”

“Look.” I dropped my hands to my side and turned away from him, glancing at the framed pictures decorating the room. “I get you have lots of pressure on you from everyone. But what’s your problem with Eric Foresburg? It’s not like you know him personally. It’s not like you’re a hockey fan and hate him as a player. I’m sure you’re well-aware of all he does for the community. More than that, he

brings in a bunch of revenue for the city simply by being on the team. Every time I'm at a game, even those middle games where they're playing teams that don't have big names are sold out. So what is it?"

I glanced over my shoulder and tried to read his eyes. Whenever Beech and I were indoors somewhere, I always took advantage of the fact that he wasn't wearing his aviator sunglasses. They were practically glued to his face otherwise, like a second pair of eyeballs. The glasses were like shields, protecting others from even attempting to read his eyes, to decipher what he was thinking. When he had to take them off, I jumped on the chance to read him.

He was silent for a moment, looking at me, studying me. His lips were pressed into a thin line. He did that only when he wanted to keep himself from saying something he might regret or that might come out in a way that didn't accurately reflect what he meant.

"Why didn't you tell me the two of you guys dated before?" he asked, leaning against the desk. "Why would you keep that from me, especially since you're working the case?"

I moved past him, rolling my eyes. "Who are you right now, Ashley Dunham?" I asked before I could stop it.

"Ashley –"

"Look, I don't know why I didn't tell you," I said, cutting Beech off. "I haven't told anyone. The only one who knows besides Eric, obviously, is my father."

"Your father?"

"Yeah," I said. "You typically introduce people you love and are serious about to your family."

He closed his eyes, frowning, and shook his head. "Wait," he said. "Let me get this straight. You and Foresburg were in a relationship? Not just dating, but you –"

"We lived together. We said I love you. We were talking about marriage." I spun around to face him. "What more do you want to know, Beech? You're poking and prodding into my personal life and –"

“It’s relevant,” Beech said. He slapped the counter. I flinched. I hated that he wasn’t being aggressive towards me, and yet a sound like that could get under my skin and make me uncomfortable. Scared, even. I highly doubted if I did the same thing, Beech would be as affected. “Unfortunately for you, it’s relevant. You would know Foresburg better than anyone. You could have written a statement –“

“About his character?” I furrowed my brow, looking at Beech like he lost it. Because he had. “Eric and I broke up a couple of years ago. I don’t know him anymore, Beech.”

“And yet, you took his case.”

“Of course I did,” I said. “If I still looked at him like he was a significant part of my life, I would still be wrapped up in my past. This gave me an opportunity to prove to myself that I’ve moved on. That he has too.”

“And have you?”

Before I could answer that question, Brayden came back into the room with a coffee cup. He looked at me, then at Beech, then back at me.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Am I interrupting anything? I can go.” He threw his thumb over his shoulder, pointing at the door. “My fifteen minutes were up though, and I didn’t want anyone to think I was slacking off. I love this job. I don’t want –“

“You didn’t interrupt anything,” I said, offering him a gentle smile. “I should go. I think it’s time for me to clock out anyway.” I looked over at Beech and gave him a nod. “I’ll, uh, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

I wouldn’t, though. But Brayden didn’t need to know that.

“Bright and early,” Beech said.

I headed out of property, shaking my head to myself. My fingers shook and I didn’t know why. Between Beech almost kissing me and him asking if I’d moved on from Eric on top of finding this piece of evidence was a lot for me to take in.

At least I could work with the evidence. At least that gave me something to do.

At least Brayden had come in at that moment so I wouldn't have to answer Beech's question. At least Beech wouldn't know that I had no idea if this case was proving I was over Eric... or proving I wasn't.

■

Chapter 21

■

I walked out of the station in a hurry. I didn't want Beech to have the chance to stop me, to demand an answer from me. I didn't want to put myself in a situation I didn't have control over. Beech could compel me to do almost anything, and I hadn't realized that until being in property with him, looking into those eyes, and realizing I wanted him to kiss me.

On the way to my car, I pulled out my phone and called Eric. I needed something to distract myself with, and the best person to do that with was Eric. Not because Eric himself was a distraction – I refused to even debate that – but because I was so close to solving his case and maybe talking to Eric would help.

“Hello?”

Except, it wasn't Eric who answered the phone.

“Kevin?” I asked after a moment. It was the only person I could think of that would have the ability to answer Eric's phone in the first place.

“Mika?” Kevin asked. “Hey, what's up? Eric's on the ice right now and told me to hold his phone in case you or the police called. This case has really got him shaken up, Meeks.”

“Yeah, I don't blame him,” I said. I unlocked my car and opened the door. “Can you tell him I'll meet him at Five Point? I know the Bucc's rink is closed so it would be the perfect place to talk. There's been new evidence I want to go over with him.”

“Sure, sure.” A pause. “That's wonderful news, Mika. I'll be sure to let him know.”

“Thanks.” I hung up the phone and clicked on my seatbelt.

I pulled onto Alton, heading south. Luckily, I was already familiar with where I was going thanks to my father working out of Five Point constantly. As such, I could drive there on autopilot.

My mind wandered over to the new piece of evidence. The ticket stub Derrick, Ashley's ex-boyfriend, turned over to IPD. How could he possibly get one of those? Last Night tickets were on the expensive side and only offered to season ticket holders first before they released a limited quantity to the public. But would Ashley go out of her way to buy tickets?

Maybe.

If she was trying to get Eric's attention.

But she couldn't have bought them, a voice in my head reminded me. The gold insignia was on it.

I slammed my breaks even though the light was clearly green. Someone honked behind me, snapping me out of my thoughts. I shook my head, rolled down my window, and waved my hand. It was a crappy apology and the driver flipped me off as he passed me. I proceeded to drive but my mind was back to that stub.

How could I have forgotten about that golden insignia?

Before I knew what I was doing, I reached for my phone. I was at a stoplight, but I still glanced around to make sure there weren't any cops around. I had a good relationship with the department, but Irvine took crime seriously regardless who committed it and the last thing I wanted right now was a three hundred dollar ticket. When I was certain I was safe, I dialed Beech just as the light turned green.

He answered on the second ring.

"Yeah?"

I bristled at how completely unaffected he was. He was chewing something – probably nicotine gum. Not because he wanted to quit smoking, but because long hours indoors on intense cases caused him to sometimes forget to take a cigarette break and this way, he was doing something with small hints of nicotine rather than sitting around with nothing.

I hadn't actually seen him chewing the gum lately or even smoking for that matter. However, I had only really seen him indoors for the most part so he could be smoking outside when I wasn't around.

"The stub," I said, bypassing our usually witty banter others might have labeled as small talk. "Are you still in property?"

"Yeah, why? What about the stub?"

"Can you check it for me?" I said. I was passing the freeway overpass and was about to turn right on Marine Way. I was a minute or two from the rink at most. "There should be a gold insignia on the bottom right corner with a skull and crossbones."

"Hang on." A pause. My light turned green so I made a slow turn off the main street. "Yeah, it's there. Does that mean anything?"

"It means Derrick – or whoever gave the ticket to Derrick – got it from a player," I said. "I think Derrick mentioned Ashley gave it to him."

"Wait, how do you know it had to come from a player?" Beech asked. His chewing became more incessant.

"That's why the insignia is there in the first place. That signifies this guest is here because of a player. Basically, it tells the employees to be a little more attentive to this person and their needs."

"As opposed to those who actually pay to see the team?" Beech drawled.

I let out a sigh and followed the roundabout directly to the parking lot of Five Point. Beech always had a problem with the wealthy and with people getting special treatment simply because they had money.

"So if Ashley gave this to Aaron," Beech said, deciding to momentarily forget about his unfair biases and focus on what was important.

"Who gave it to Ashley?" I finished. "Okay, turn over the stub. There should be a two-digit number in the right hand corner."

"Twenty-five."

My heart sank. It felt like I had been punched in the gut. I shook my head and pulled into a parking spot.

This didn't make any sense.

"Chalmers?" Beech said. The tone of his voice seemed to indicate this wasn't the first time he tried to get my attention. "What does that mean?"

I ignored his impatient tone. "It's Eric's number," I said. "It indicates that he was the one to issue them."

"Then how did Aaron get it? I highly doubt Eric Foresburg decided to give it to him."

"Aaron told me Ashley gave it to him."

There was a pause.

"So Eric gave a ticket to Ashley?" Beech asked. I appreciated the caution in his tone, as though he didn't want to upset me.

Because this wasn't looking good for Eric.

"I... I don't know."

I pulled into a parking spot and turned off the car. The lot was half empty. The majority of cars had Junior Bucc's logos on them, indicating the majority of people here were part of the travel team.

"Is there a way to track who they issued the tickets to?" Beech asked.

My brows rose at the idea. "I don't know," I said. "Let me make a few calls –"

"Chalmers, I'm in the car as we speak. Dispatch says there was just an accident on Sand Canyon. I'm going to get there as soon as I can. Don't do anything stupid. Please."

"Eric didn't –"

"You don't know Eric," he pointed out. "Not anymore. This is a good time to be jaded. Don't let your need for him to like you put you in danger. I'd rather you

be alive than liked.”

I wasn’t sure what to say to that. He was right. I didn’t want to believe Eric was capable of doing something like this, but the evidence wasn’t looking good.

“I’ll call you when I find out about the ticket,” I said.

“Be careful.”

I leaned my head against the seat, staring up at my ceiling. How I got spots of food up there was beyond me.

I dialed up the front desk of Five Point professional services.

“Hi, this is Patty.”

“Patty, this is Mika, Coach Chalmers’ daughter. Can you transfer me to Erika? I need to talk to her regarding distribution of Last Night tickets issued for this year.”

“Oh, sure, honey, no problem. One sec.”

I waited on the line as old school Britney Spears played. I nodded my head along with the beat, thumping my fingers on the steering wheel. I didn’t know why I was nervous. I didn’t know why I was impatient. I couldn’t see Eric’s car, but I wouldn’t be surprised if he had parked it in the back where the employees parked. There were designated spaces for them so people wouldn’t bother them or damage their cars.

“This is Erika.”

“Erika, hey, it’s Mika. I’m sure my dad told you I’m working to help Eric?” If he was even able to be helped at this point. “Do you happen to have a log of who he gave his tickets to Last Night to?”

“Of course.” The clacking of a keyboard filled the line and Erika popped a bubble with her bubblegum. “Now, I can’t give you more than the name and the number of tickets he signed out.” More clacking. “Huh. Looks like he only handed out two this year. He gave them to a Kevin Durante.”

“Kevin?” I furrowed my brow. “Not Ashley Dunham?”

“Isn’t that the girl who’s making allegations against Eric?” I couldn’t see Erika but I could picture her shaking her head of brown curls in a determined, no-nonsense way. “No way. You know he doesn’t give those out except to people he cares about.”

“So,” I said, “just to confirm, he only gave out two tickets this year and both went to Kevin?”

“I mean, I don’t know who actually got the tickets but those are who he signed them out to,” she replied.

“Thanks so much, you’ve been a big help.”

The second I got off the phone, I sent Eric a text. I knew he was on the ice, but I needed to know if Kevin gave those tickets to anyone else.

Hey, I said. I’m parked outside. Do you happen to know if Kevin was at Last Night with you? Or did he give his tickets to someone else?

I sent the text without thinking about it and leaned back in my chair. Something about this whole thing still bothered me, though. Even if Kevin himself got the tickets, how did Ashley wind up with at least one she could give to Derrick? Did she actually go to Last Night? Did Eric see her there? More than that, what was the connection between Kevin and Ashley?

Something tickled my brain, something important. It wasn’t as difficult to ascertain as I thought it might be. I knew this information. I just didn’t know how. I didn’t know what, specifically, I knew, but I knew something.

Suddenly, Eric’s voice filled my head and I was thrust back into a time when I was interviewing him about how he knew Ashley. He had been in my office. I could still smell the expensive cologne on him – one I hadn’t bought him for Christmas. It had been entirely new but it wasn’t a bad scent. It was actually nice.

I remember her specifically because Kevin introduced me to her. That was what he told me. Eric thought she and Kevin worked together at the phone company and that was why he had been open to meeting her initially – because Kevin

brought them together.

Which meant Kevin gave the tickets to Ashley.

Which meant –

A knock on my window broke my train of thought. I turned my head, expecting to see Eric.

“I didn’t realize you were already off the –“ I stopped myself from saying anything more.

Because it wasn’t Eric standing next to my car.

It was Kevin.

■

Chapter 22

■

I hesitated. I knew Beech was right. I should stay in my car. If I went into Five Point, I wouldn't have cell reception. Who knew how Kevin would be? It would be safer if I waited for him. It wouldn't take Beech longer than ten, fifteen minutes to get here.

A knock on my window caused me to jump in my seat. I turned to look at who it was, only to see Kevin himself, smiling and waving and looking completely innocent. My heart leapt into my throat like it was trying to escape from my body because it knew Kevin would have no problem doing something to me. If he could rape Ashley, if he could be that violent, what would he do to me?

I cleared my throat and rolled down my window – not enough for him to throw himself in or even reach for me. Besides his fingers, he couldn't fit any other body part in the car.

“H-hey.” I hoped Kevin didn't know me well enough to know I was scared shitless. I had no weapon. I had no way to defend myself.

Beech is coming, I reminded myself. Beech is on his way.

“Hey,” he said. Completely normal. Like he hadn't raped Ashley. Like he hadn't somehow pinned it on Eric.

I still had to figure out how it happened, why it happened, and if Ashley knew who her actual rapist was, but I knew Kevin was the rapist and I knew he was letting Eric – his best friend – take the fall.

“Eric just got off the ice. Did you want to come inside and wait? He's expecting you.”

How could he be expecting me if he just got off the ice?

Did he really think I was stupid? Clearly.

Was I this stupid?

Probably.

I hadn't realized it had been Kevin until now.

"Uh, that's okay," I said. I cleared my throat again because I sounded like tennis shoes on a basketball court, and if Kevin didn't know what a terrible liar I was, he would soon. "He already knows I'm uh, that I'll wait in my car. I don't like the cold."

"Isn't that funny?" Kevin asked with a grin.

"Um, what's funny?" I perked my brow, wondering how long it was going to take for Kevin to leave or how long it would take for Beech to get here.

"I mean, your dad is a hockey coach," he said, twisting his wrist to gesture with it, "so I'd imagine you grew up in an ice rink and you'd be used to it by now."

"No!" I let out a bark of sharp laughter. I sounded like a psycho. If he didn't know I was lying, he definitely knew now.

His smile slowly slid off of his face. "I think you should go inside, Meeks," he said. "Eric's waiting for you."

Except he wasn't. He knew this. I knew this. And he knew I knew this. I had no idea how he got Eric's phone. Granted, Eric wasn't on social media except sporadic tweets of the charity events he was attending and maybe to say he was excited about a win, and he wasn't as attached to it as other people were so losing his phone wouldn't be a big deal. I just assumed that since he was dealing with a media shitshow and since he had just been arrested and subsequently released on rape charges, he'd be a little more careful with his phone.

"No, that's okay –"

"I wasn't asking." At that moment, Kevin pulled out a gun as subtly as he could and tapped on my window a couple of times. "I'm not afraid to use this thing, Mika. Do something smart for a change and come with me."

I glanced over at my keys. How long would it take for me to start my car and back up? Would he be able to fire a shot at that point? Would he miss?

I doubted it. Not when he was so close to me. And even if he did miss, he would shatter my window, glass would spill everywhere, and then he would have a better target since nothing would impede his shot.

No. The smartest thing would be to go with him.

“Okay,” I said, putting my hands up. I needed him to think I would be compliant. I needed him to think he had me and that I was scared. All the while, my brain started piecing together as many things as I could to try and fight him, to try and stop him. “I’m going to slowly get out of my car, okay? Is that okay?”

He nodded. He glanced away, probably to see if anyone had noticed us or if anyone would potentially cause a disturbance.

I used his distraction as my chance. I unbuckled my seatbelt and thrust open the door. It managed to hit him in the kneecap. He dropped the gun in surprise and I dashed out, trying to go for it.

I wasn’t planning on his quick recovery.

“You bitch,” he said through gritted teeth as he tackled me to the ground.

I managed to catch my fall just before my face smacked against the gravel. My palms burned. I reached for the gun but it was too far out of my grasp as he tightened his grip on my ankle. I kicked behind me with my free foot. He managed to dodge it. However, I heard a muffled grunt, as though dodging the kick meant putting weight on his bad knee.

He yanked me back, my shirt riding up and my stomach dragged against the street. I hissed. I knew I’d have some scratches after tonight.

If I survived.

I started to shout, knowing I couldn’t easily get away from him. The gun was the only weapon I had and I wasn’t able to reach it.

“Help!” I cried out. “Hel-“

His hand clamped over my mouth and he got really close to my face.

“Scream again and I will kill you.”

I froze. I didn't know why but I believed him. I held my hands up. He tensed, expecting me to fight him again. He dug the gun into my ribs and I squeaked at the pain. I tried to convey that I would cooperate. Tears decorated my eyes. Snot threatened to run down my nose.

“Okay then.” He slowly stood up but kept the gun pointed at me.

I took a breath and then another.

“Get up,” he said. “And if you move –“

“You'll kill me,” I finished. I wiped my nose with the back of my hand. “I get it.” I sucked in a breath. I needed to calm down my pounding heart but I couldn't seem to do so.

“Get in the building,” he said, jutting his chin in the direction of Five Point.
“Rink 2.”

“Is Eric there?” I asked as we started to walk towards the entrance. “Are you both going to, I don't know, finish me off?”

He had placed his gun in the pocket of his jacket. I wasn't sure how it fit, exactly, but he kept one hand on it. I imagined he was ready to shoot at any moment. I wondered if I could get him to accidentally shoot his foot.

“You never should have been involved in the first place,” Kevin said. He grabbed my arm so he could control my movements and make it seem completely normal. “Why Eric went to you, I don't know.”

“So Eric did rape Ashley, then.”

I couldn't believe it. Everything I thought I knew was a lie. My heart thumped against my chest painfully, like tapping a bruise over and over again.

“It would have made things a lot easier if he had,” Kevin said.

I furrowed my brow. I opened my mouth, ready to ask what he meant by that, but he squeezed my arm. We walked through the sliding doors. One of the clerks behind the counter recognized me and gave me a wave. I gave her a smile in return. Hopefully she would see how completely strained it was and somehow decipher I needed help.

But no.

The lobby was practically empty. Everyone was on the ice and parents were watching practices or sticktimes across Rinks 1, 3, and 4 in the stands.

Kevin headed straight for Rink 2. We passed the restrooms and stepped into the cold room. The sliding doors shut behind me and I swallowed. I was instantly slapped with coldness, but there was more to my shivers than that. No one would come check on this rink, not when it was already closed. And because this place was made with concrete blocks, there was no way anyone would be able to hear me if I did decide to risk it and scream. If I was going to get out of here alive, I would have to make it out of the doors.

“So you’re saying you guys aren’t working together?” I asked slowly. I knew he was going to kill me here. Why else would he bring me into Rink 2? He wasn’t going to tell me everything and let me go. If anything, he’d probably try to frame Eric for it, the same way he was framing Eric for raping Ashley.

“You’re not an idiot, Mika,” he said. “Of course he didn’t rape Ashley. Do you really think he could?”

I wasn’t sure if the question was rhetorical so I didn’t say anything.

“We tried to get him to have sex with her again, but the drug must have been stronger than I realized because he couldn’t even get it up.” Kevin rolled his eyes, pulling the gun from his pocket and pointing it at me. I raised my arms up. “We had to settle for snatching a pubic hair.”

“And you thought a pubic hair would be enough?” I should keep my mouth shut. I should comply with whatever he wanted.

But I couldn’t. I had to understand the thought process behind this.

“It did, didn’t it?” He grinned but there was no warmth in it. “Nowadays,

everyone believes the victim. Everyone is too afraid to question her, to raise a sliver of doubt. When Eric told me he was going to hire you after extorting him didn't work and Ashley was going to go public, I thought you'd be the same way."

"Why would you think that?" I asked. My arms were starting to hurt. I really needed to get in shape.

"Because women are supposed to believe women." He said it as though it was the most obvious thing in the world. "Girl power and all that bullshit, right? Yeah, you might look into things but at the end of the day, you would tell Eric you couldn't get involved."

"But why get involve?" I asked. I took a step towards Kevin. And then another. If I was going to die, I wouldn't stand and wait for it. "You're his best friend, Kevin."

"I wasn't his best friend," he spat. "Eric took the life I should have lived if it wasn't for my stupid fucking injury! He had everything I wanted. I hated him. I thought I'd be happy after you guys broke up, but he turned into a pitiful mess. I couldn't find joy in pathetic misery. But if I ruined something he so carefully crafted – his reputation – if I took away his ability to play, he'd finally understand what it was like."

"So you teamed up with Ashley?" I guessed.

"She was complaining after the season last year about how Eric talked and talked about you but how he made no move to ask her out after their night together," he said. "The plan unfolded in my head after that. You could say Ashley was my muse. She wanted to hurt him just like I did."

"And me?" I asked tentatively. "What are you going to do with me?"

"Kill you, obviously."

I tackled him to the floor. A gun shot went off and hit the ceiling. I screamed. I hopped up, pulling myself away from him. I wanted to kick his wrist, wanted to get the gun away from him. He muttered expletives I ignored. He grabbed my wrist mid-kick and pulled. I lurched forward. With my other foot, I managed to thrust back and kick him in the face.

“You bitch!” he screamed, letting me go.

Instead of focusing on the gun, I ran. I needed to get out of here. I needed to escape.

He growled. “You are so dead!”

■

Chapter 23

■

A gunshot pierced the air. My eyes widened. I couldn't see where the bullet went, but I could see the wisp of steam that pierced the cold air from where it started. I held my breath, waiting for the pain.

No.

He knocked me down when the shot missed. He was hurting me, choking me.

Another shot went off.

Kevin grunted and rolled off of me. Breath crashed into my lungs the way waves crashed into the shore. I picked myself up and stumbled away. I didn't feel the cold. Not anymore.

"You okay?"

The second I heard Beech's voice, I let out a sob. It was over. Finally, it was over.

Beech still had his gun pointed at Kevin, dark eyes narrowed. His entire body was tense as he slowly stepped towards Kevin, currently writhing on the floor. He was wailing about his knee. Splatters of blood fell onto the concrete floor.

I didn't care. Let the fucker bleed out for all I care.

"Kevin Benjamin," Beech said. "You are under arrest."

I tuned out as Beech read Kevin his miranda rights. Patrol officers spilled into the rink, guns drawn, waiting for Beech's orders. There was no way Kevin could escape. There was no way he would be able to hurt me or anyone else again.

“Hey.” Beech was suddenly in front of me, hand cupping my cheek, tilting my head up so I would meet his eyes. “Hey. Chalmers. You in there?”

I furrowed my brow and hissed. I didn’t realize my head was hurting until now. Until the threat of Kevin was gone. I was hit with a wave of dizziness and nearly stumbled back. Beech tightened his grip on me to prevent me from falling. My head was light.

“Whoa, whoa. Let’s sit down.” He gently led me out of the rink and onto one of the bench’s in the warm lobby. I shivered even now, like I was dealing with residual cold. Beech eased me onto the grey bench. “There you go. There you go.”

He took my hands in his. I hadn’t realized how big they were before. Beech wasn’t the tallest or the buffest guy. And yet, he still made me feel safe – more than anyone else except maybe my father. But his hands were able to hold onto mine, his long, elegant fingers were able to wrap around me, holding onto me, making sure I knew he wasn’t going to let go any time soon.

“Mika.” My first name on his lips was a strange and wondrous thing. I wanted to hear it again but I was too shy to ask for it. “It’s okay. We got him. He can’t get you.”

“And Ashley?” I asked, taking my eyes off our hands to look at him. “Where’s Ashley?”

“You think she has something to do with this besides being a victim?” he asked.

I didn’t know, but something about her felt off.

“The thing I keep coming back to is the pubic hair,” I said.

I pressed my lips together, thinking. Under normal circumstances, I would have walked around, pacing until I came up with some sort of explanation even if it was wrong. Instead, I stayed wrapped up in the warmth of Beech’s arms. I didn’t want to leave just yet. I didn’t want to step back and step back into our usual roles that definitely did not have any sort of physical affection between us.

“Eric admitted to having sex with her after the last playoff game April eighteenth,” I said. “That was consensual. Maybe she got a pubic hair during that

encounter and saved it.”

Beech tilted his chin down, his face contorted in a look nothing short of disgust.

“She went out of her way to save one pubic hair?” he asked. “What, so she could plant it on herself a few months later?”

He was right. It didn’t make sense.

“What if,” I said slowly. I had the beginning of an idea but I didn’t quite know how it would pan out. “What if it was Kevin. Kevin has access to Eric’s equipment. Maybe he found a hair on his jock strap.”

“So he and Ashley planned this?” Beech said, his voice still doubtful.

“I’m thinking he and Ashley teamed up to pin a rape on Eric when Eric wouldn’t give her the money,” I said. “So if we broke it up by timeline, Kevin introduces Ashley to Eric. Ashley and Eric have consensual sex. Ashley thinks this will lead to a serious relationship. It doesn’t. She’s angry. Maybe at this point, she and Kevin come up with a plan to extort Eric. They all meet up at the club. Kevin drugs his drink. Eric doesn’t remember Ashley. They either hook up again – consensually, though Eric is drugged and drunk so maybe an argument could be made that he was raped – or he’s drugged enough where they assume he won’t remember having sex. I’m assuming they did just because of the pubic hair. It’s also why I do think Ashley’s involved.”

Beech nodded. His fingers gently stroked my hair and I sighed, placing my head back on his shoulder and giving myself this time just to enjoy him. He did smell like cigarettes but it was wrapped in his cologne, giving him a musky, masculine scent.

“I don’t get it,” Beech said. “I though Foresburg and Kevin were friends. Why would he do this to Foresburg? Jealousy?”

I nodded. “I don’t know why else he would,” I said, my hand resting on Beech’s hip. I could feel his warmth through the thin material of his shirt. I could fall asleep against him. “When he was chasing me, he kept going on and on about how Eric was living his life. I guess Kevin was actually drafted by an NHL team but opted to go to college and blew his knee so he never got to do anything with it. I guess the two met at that draft and when Eric was drafted by Irvine, they

stayed friends.”

“When you were together –“

“Kevin seemed completely normal to me,” I said. “I mean, he was kind of weird, sure, but not to the point where I thought he was going to kill me.”

“Could you detect his jealousy?”

I paused for a moment. I didn’t want Beech to stop playing with my hair. I didn’t want to leave his embrace. I didn’t want this moment to end, even if we were talking about my ex. I didn’t care. Beech didn’t make me feel ridiculed or ashamed about my past. He made me feel comfortable, like he was genuinely curious.

“Not really,” I said. “Every now and then, I suspected it. But I didn’t take it seriously. Kevin was successful in his own way. I thought he had gotten over the injury thing and was focusing his attention on other things.”

I could feel Beech shake his head even though I couldn’t see him. “Guys don’t just get over things like that,” he said. “Being an NHL player would have changed his life. There’s no way he wouldn’t have been slightly resentful of that.”

“You sound like you know this from personal experience.”

A couple of officers walked past us but Beech didn’t let go of me. It was getting dark outside and my skin continued to prickle with goosebumps. Every now and then, a shiver would ripple through my body and I would bury myself against Beech even more.

“I’ve never been a sports guy,” he said. “Look at me. I’m not tall and I’m not bulky. But I’ve been up for sergeant more than a few times and despite passing the exam, I’ve been passed over a few times. I’m not going to team up with someone and pin a murder on the chief or anything, but it’s easy to get sucked into resentment. It’s not fun.”

I picked up my head so I could look at him. I knew we were close, but I hadn’t realized just how close we were until I was directly in front of him. If I pushed up on the balls of my feet, we’d be kissing.

Suddenly, I remembered our almost kiss in Property. My cheeks warmed but I couldn't look away from him. His eyes rooted me to my spot. I sucked in a deep breath, hoping he didn't hear it. I didn't want him to think I was nervous. I didn't want him to think he affected me this way.

"I, uh," I said in a low voice. My face burned even more as I forced myself to continue my thought. "I didn't know you wanted to be sergeant."

He looked down at me with dark eyes that were nearly black. I felt sucked in by him with no chance of escape. Not that I wanted to.

"Of course I want to be sergeant, Mika," he told me. "What, you think I'm satisfied behind a desk, solving 459's all day? I'm not some slacker who doesn't give a shit."

"I didn't think you were."

I opened my mouth, ready to continue when he abruptly released me and stepped back. I was suddenly thrust into a coldness I didn't like, one that caused a shiver to run down my spine.

I wanted his arms around me. I wanted his hands in my hair.

"Mika?" a familiar voice called. Other arms wrapped around my waist and pulled me into a hug. "Oh my God, you're okay. When I heard Beech say you were in danger over the radio, I got here as quickly as I could."

Daniel Boone. I should have known.

I let my arms wrap around him, but it wasn't the same. They didn't make me feel safe the way Beech's did. They didn't make me feel like I could let down my walls and ugly cry and tell him everything I was feeling.

But I let him. It was easier this way.

I was able to untangle from him when my father arrived. I told him everything. He apologized for being a smartass and, like everyone else, he was just glad I was all right. Eric didn't show up. I couldn't blame him. He might not even know what happened, which was probably a good thing.

While Beech spoke to the chief – for such a high profile case at such a high profile location, it only made sense for the chief himself to arrive at the scene and get press – I looked at Kevin in the back of the car. His eyes were on me. They were accusing but also sad. His entire life had amounted to this. Despite his injury, Kevin had had so much potential. Eric Foresburg was his best friend. And he gave everything up for revenge.

Because he was jealous.

“Ready to go home?” my father asked. “I can drive you and leave my car in the back.”

I nodded, pulling my eyes away from Kevin.

As my father led me to the car, I felt a stare on my back. I turned, thinking Kevin shifted so he could intimidate me for as long as he could.

But it wasn't Kevin.

It was Beech.

And the look in those dark eyes seemed to indicate that we had a lot to talk about.

■

Chapter 24

■

I didn't want to be here.

Not really.

And yet, when Eric asked to see me just before the Buccaneer's first preseason game, I couldn't say no.

I was weak.

I stood in front of the Bucc's locker room, a magenta pea coat over my jersey. Even with skinny jeans and knee-high black boots, I was still cold. Five Point had always been cold but it had been more than just the atmosphere. Despite myself, I could still see Kevin's blood splattered on the concrete close to the entrance of the rink. They had scrubbed it and bleached it and done everything they could to remove it. Now they were black dots that looked like spilled paint. No one would even notice except those that knew what it was.

It had been a week since Kevin was arrested. I still woke up in the middle of the night, sweat dripping down the back of my neck, heart racing, as I tried and failed to get away from Kevin. In the three years that I had been a PI, I had never been this scared before.

Even now, I couldn't explain why. I had seen angry people before. I had been threatened and even attacked after confronting a cheating husband or a thieving employee. But there was something in Kevin's eyes, something maniacal and untamed.

I shuddered just thinking about it.

"You okay?"

I looked up only to see Eric, dressed in full gear save for his helmet, watching me. He was careful to stay on the carpet so he wouldn't damage his skates. I was surprised he still didn't use skate protectors because that one time he forgot he had them on and skated on the ice and fell flat on his face in front of thousands of fans. Now, he'd rather damage the blades of his skates than be embarrassed in front of so many people again.

I forced a smile, my body softening under his gaze.

"Yeah," I said.

"You seem worried about something." He took off a glove and stepped towards me until he was directly in front of me. "Whenever you're worried about something, you get this wrinkle right here..." He smoothed the wrinkle between my brows until my skin smoothed over. "Between your eyebrows. Whenever I saw that look on your face, I knew I was in trouble."

I laughed, despite myself. Eric always had a knack for distracting me from my thoughts, for making me forget what I was worried about in the first place.

"Am I in trouble?" he asked, his voice surprisingly tentative.

I shook my head. "I'm just glad everything is okay now," I said. "You're back on the team. You're about to play the first preseason game. I'm surprised Dad let you play, what with it being a preseason. Isn't he worried you're going to get hurt?"

"I asked to play," Eric said. "And I think he wanted everyone to know I was back."

"Well, I saw the crowds coming in," I said. "It seems you have a lot of fans."

Eric snorted. "Fairweather, at best," he said. There was a hint of bitterness in his voice but it wasn't malicious. If anything, it seemed disappointed. "Don't get me wrong, I'm appreciative of them. And I know there are a few people who stood by me no matter what. But I'm still reeling over how quickly everyone turned against me the second Ashley came out with her statement." He shook his head.

"You can't let it get to you," I said, reaching out and taking his hand in mine. "There will be a small, select group of people who still think you did it, despite

all the evidence against it. Despite the fact that charges have been dropped and that Ashley recanted and that Kevin was arrested. It doesn't matter. Sometimes, people just want to watch you burn."

"I just don't get that. Why would anyone choose to feel that way? I'm not saying I deserve automatic belief, but I do so much for the community. I give back in so many ways. Why not at least give me the chance to tell my side of the story?"

I lifted a shoulder and let it fall. "I think people have been so disappointed in their heroes that it's easier for them to just believe the worst in people because then they aren't disappointed if something like this did happen and it was true," I said. "In a way, they're protecting themselves. I'm not saying I agree with what they're doing, but I understand it."

There was a moment that hung over us. I wouldn't necessarily call it awkward and it wasn't uncomfortable, but it was poignant and I wasn't sure as to why.

"Thank you."

I let Eric's hand drop, completely forgetting I had had it in the first place. It was weird how used to something I was, even after years of not being together. I almost hated how easy it was to fall back into our routine.

I locked eyes with him, tilting my head to the side. "For what?" I asked.

"For believing in me," he said, "even when no one else did. Hell, there was a moment when I didn't know..." He let his voice trail off.

"No, Eric." I shook my head.

This time, I shoved my hands behind so I wouldn't be tempted to touch him at all. I didn't want to offer him comfort. I was too afraid it would turn into something more, and I didn't know if I was ready for that just yet.

"Granted, I'm not going to tell you I automatically believed you," I continued. "I didn't think you were capable of such a violent act against a woman, but people change. But you hired me to do a job and I promised you I would see it through until the end, no matter what I found."

"Was that it?" he asked, reaching out to curl a stray strand of hair behind my ear.

I leaned into his touch before I could stop myself and he swallowed slowly. “You helped me only because I hired you? No other reason?”

I didn’t want to do this. Not now. Maybe not ever.

“What do you want me to say, Eric?” I asked.

I avoided his eyes, tugging at my fingernail. Part of me wanted to rip it off and flick the nail away. The other part wanted to leave it alone because if I ever wanted to walk into a nail salon without being embarrassed, I needed to stop picking at them when I was uncomfortable.

“I want you to tell me the truth,” he said.

At that moment, someone poked their head out of the locker room.

“Five minutes, Foresburg.”

Eric nodded but didn’t acknowledge him otherwise. His eyes were firmly on me, as though nothing else mattered.

I waited until the player went back into the locker room, giving us slightly more privacy.

“The truth about what?” I asked.

“Us.” He took a step towards me. Every instinct in me screamed to take a step back, to get away from him, but I couldn’t. I was rooted in place. “What happened between us, Meeks. I want you to tell me –“

“What?” I interjected, throwing my arms out. I clamped my mouth together and glanced around. The last thing I wanted to do was attract attention. “What could you possibly want to know?”

“I want to know if you still have feelings for me.” Another step. He was closer. I was suddenly hit with a sense of déjà vu, how this was nearly the same position I had been in with Beech after IPD arrested Kevin. “I want to know if you feel something between us. I want to know if you still care.”

“Why?” I asked. “Why do you need to know? Why do you care? You broke up

with me.”

“It was the worst mistake I ever made,” he said. I knew from the glint in his blue eyes that he was sincere. He wasn’t lying. “I told you this. I was hoping that maybe you felt the same way you did then. About me. About us. I was hoping that you might want to try things again. Start over. I know I don’t exactly deserve it. But I thought maybe, if there was a chance you might still want to, we could try and make it work.”

I looked away. Eric was not one to talk and he had already said more words now than he had in three of his last interviews combined.

I just didn’t know what I wanted to do. I didn’t know how I felt. To be honest, this came out of nowhere. I wasn’t prepared for it.

“Mika?” He reached for me.

I still didn’t move. I closed my eyes, wincing. I wasn’t sure if I wanted the caress. I wasn’t sure I could trust myself around him at all, especially if he touched me.

“Foresburg!”

I cracked open an eye. Eric dropped his hand to his side, craning his neck in the direction of the locker room.

“You should go,” I said, my voice soft. “They’re waiting for you.”

“Mika, I want to talk to you about this, about us.” He turned, heading for the locker room.

I released a breath I hadn’t realized I was holding. I leaned against the rigid wall behind me, trying to make sense of what happened. It still boggled my mind that Kevin was responsible for everything. Sure, Ashley played her part but Kevin was the mastermind behind it all. I just –

A hand grabbed my face and before I realized what was happening, Eric’s lips were on mine. I stiffened, not expecting the kiss, not expecting anything from Eric at all. And yet, here he was.

Slowly, I relaxed in his arms. My eyes closed and I slipped back into the way I used to be when we were together. It was easy to kiss him because I knew exactly how to. Some things changed, sure, while others stayed the same.

I kissed him back, my lips parting for him. Everything about this was safe, comfortable. Even his smell took me back to all the good luck kisses he demanded from me before he went on the ice to warm up.

His kiss was gentle, almost tentative, like he wasn't quite sure he should be kissing me at all. I didn't know if he should, either. But I wasn't pulling away and I didn't know why.

After a moment – it could have been a second, it could have been an hour – but we were both more comfortable with the fact that we were kissing and relaxed into each other. I sighed and pulled back, but only to catch my breath.

I locked eyes with him and saw they darkened. He wanted me.

A sense of power washed over me and I wanted to make his eyes even darker and I wanted his eyelids to droop even further. I was about to tilt my head up, to kiss him again, when a voice interrupted us.

“For the love of all that is holy, Foresburg, I will bench you –“

My father.

We sprung apart. It amused me to see Foresburg, a grown man, shrink down at the sight of my father. I pressed my hand against my lips to keep from giggling out loud.

“Meet me here after the game,” he told me. “We can talk.”

Without another word, he headed for the locker room.

Finally, I was alone. I took a moment to catch my breath. I placed my hand over my racing heart, trying to calm it, trying to think sensibly.

But I couldn't.

What I did know was I had every intention of meeting Eric here after the game.

What I didn't expect was meeting George Probst, the Buccaneer's key enforcer instead, asking for help.

What I didn't expect was Eric not showing up at all.

■

Stay updated!

■

Want updates on when my latest book comes out, exclusive giveaways, and free stuff? Sign up for my newsletter [here!](#)

■

Did You Like Ice Breakers?

■

As an author, the best thing a reader can do is leave an honest review. I love gathering feedback because it shows me you care and it helps me be a better writer. If you have the time, I'd greatly appreciate any feedback you can give me. Thank you!

■

Acknowledgments

■

My family

My friends

Jane Austen, for crafting swoon-worthy stories

Theresa Schultz, my amazing and hilarious editor.

My readers on Fictionpress

Frank, Kylee & Madisyn, Josh & Jacob, for your continued love, support, and understanding