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ONE

SUMMER

SHE'S HOLDING A gun to my head.

Well, figuratively at least.

The gun in question: hockey. The woman holding it: Dr. Laura Langston, Ph.D.

"Hockey?" I repeat. "You want *me* to do my grad school application on hockey?"

Langston has been my grad school advisor for the past year, but I've been working under her wing since I started at Dalton University.

She's everything I want to be, and I've obsessed over every academic paper she's written. She's kind of my celebrity crush in the nerdiest way possible. With her Ph.D. in sports psychology, countless papers published, and experience with Olympians and athletes around the world, she's inspirational.

Until you get to know her.

When they said *Don't meet your heroes*, they were talking about Laura Langston. She's the human equivalent of an angry swarm of wasps. There are plenty of professors who treat their students like total garbage and think their fancy piece of paper means they can be

tyrants, but Langston is a different species. Her brilliance is undeniable, but she is patronizing, dismissive, and purposely difficult when she knows you need her help.

So, why the hell did I choose her as my advisor? Because her success rate in getting students into Dalton's prestigious master's program is too enticing to ignore. It's the number one program in North America and students vetted by her are guaranteed acceptance. Not to mention she chooses who will be eligible for co-op—a competitive program that allows one student from our cohort to work with Team USA. It's been my dream from the age of eight, so I'll suffer through her monstrous dictatorship if it means I'll soon have my own master's degree in sports psychology.

"You need to start using your resources to your advantage, Summer." She surveys me above the rims of her glasses. "I know you hate hockey, but this is your last chance to submit a solid application."

The word *hate* slips past her lips as if my aversion to the sport is completely fabricated. Considering she's one of the few people who know why I stay far away from the icy rink and the similarly icy men skating on it, I barely keep my composure. Sticking me right in the center of that blue circle with an empirical research study that determines the fate of my future is pure evil. An evil only Dr. Langston and her molten heart can manage.

"But why hockey? I'll choose football. Basketball. Even curling. I don't care." Does Dalton even have a curling team?

"Exactly. You don't care. I need you to do something you care about. Something you feel strongly about. Hence hockey."

I hate that she's right. Sweeping aside her overall ominous nature, she is a smart woman. I mean she didn't get her Ph.D. for nothing, but being her student is a double-edged sword.

"But—"

She lifts a hand. "I won't approve anything else. Do this or lose your spot. The choice is yours." It's like the universe sent me my very own *Fuck You* in the form of my professor. Years of working my ass

off in undergrad only to be told hockey is my saving grace. What a joke. Clenching my fists, I swallow the urge to scream. "That isn't much of a choice, Dr. Langston."

"If you can't do this, then I overestimated your potential, Summer." Her voice grows sharp. "I have four students who would kill to have your spot, but I took you under my wing. Don't make me regret this."

She didn't exactly choose to take me under her wing. I had a 4.2 GPA and killer reference letters. Not to mention the extremely difficult advisor's exam she implemented last year to pick out the best students. I got food poisoning from the campus cafeteria that week, but I still dragged myself to the exam. I beat every student, and I'll be damned if they take my spot now.

"I understand what you're saying, but as you know, I'm not very fond of hockey. For good reason, might I add, and I doubt my research will be an accurate representation, considering that."

"Either you get over your apprehension or lose what you've worked for."

Apprehension?

Ignoring the pointed jab feels like trying to ignore a bullet lodged in my sternum. "There's no reason why I can't choose basketball. Coach Walker would happily let me collaborate with one of his players."

"Coach Kilner has already agreed to allow one of my students to work with his players. Get me your completed proposal by the end of the week or forfeit your spot, Ms. Preston." Her dismissal is clear when she twists away from me in her chair.

If I could commit one crime and get away with it, I have a feeling it would include Dr. Langston.

"Okay. Thank you," I mutter. She's typing aggressively on her computer, probably making another student's life a living hell. I imagine she goes home and crosses off the names of students she has successfully tormented. My name and the doll she sticks pins into are at the top of that list today.

I've successfully avoided everything to do with hockey for the past three years, only for it to be my front and center for the next few months. I'm beyond screwed, and I have to suck up my distaste for the sport of my Canadian ancestors.

I use all my willpower to not slam her door on the way out.

"You look pissed." The voice comes from the hallway leading to the advisor's lounge. Donny stands against the wall, dressed in cashmere and his brown eyes focused on me.

I've made a few mistakes since I got to college. Donny Rai is one of them.

An exhausting two-year relationship later, we have no choice but to see each other every day because we're both getting the same degree and applying to the same post-grad program. It doesn't feel like a competition between us, but I know Donny wants that co-op spot just as bad as I do.

He falls into step with me. "An ultimatum?"

"Exactly." I look over at him. "How did you know?"

"She gave one to Shannon Lee an hour ago. Shannon's thinking of dropping out now."

My eyes widen. Shannon is one of the smartest students on campus. Her work in clinical psychology was sent for review, making her the youngest student considered for publication.

"That's ridiculous." I shake my head, knowing how screwed I am. "You're so lucky you submitted your application early. The rest of us are stuck completing this new requirement."

He shrugs. "It's only a conditional acceptance."

"Right, like you would ever let your 4.0 drop."

"4.3," he corrects.

Donny is at the top of the dean's list every year; he's in every club and committee imaginable. He is the poster child for the Ivy League, so it's no surprise he managed to carve his way into this competitive program. I like to think I'm academically gifted too, but I might as well wear a dunce cap in comparison.

"I have a meeting right now. But I'll help with your application; we both know you'll need it."

The insult stings, but Donny just smiles and peels away to head to his meeting with the Dalton Royal Press. Yeah, he works on the school paper, too.

When I finally stomp into my dorm, I fall flat on the living room couch. "If I gave you a shovel, would you hit me over the head with it?" I ask Amara.

"Depends. Am I getting paid?" I groan into the throw pillow, but she pulls it away. "What did she do now?"

Amara Evans and I have been roommates since freshman year. Luckily for me, being best friends with a tech genius means getting perks from the university for her contributions. The most important one was securing Iona House. The only student living complex with two-bedroom and two-bathroom units. It's still cramped, but anything is better than the communal bathrooms where athlete's foot lurks in every corner. "She's making me do my application on hockey," I tell her.

Amara drops the pillow. "You're kidding. I thought she knew about everything."

"She does! This is what I get for sharing my secrets with her."

"Can't you find another advisor? She can't be the only one who gets students accepted to the program."

"No one has her success rate. It's like she's rigging acceptances or something. But maybe she's right. I should put aside my *apprehension*."

Amara gasps. "She did not say that!"

"Oh, but she did." I sigh, rolling to a sitting position. "How come you're back so early?"

"Sitting in that lecture hall with a bunch of sweaty dudes isn't how I want to spend my first day back."

Majoring in computer science means ninety percent of Amara's class is dudes. Which isn't something Amara's used to, coming from

a family of five sisters. She's smack in the middle and says she's never known a moment of peace. Stuck between the impossible position of being the older and younger sister, and simultaneously having to deal with teenage hormones and adolescent tantrums. As someone with twin sisters who were born when I was already a handful of years older, I can't relate.

"Are you going to the party tonight?" she asks.

Being surrounded by hundreds of drunk frat dudes sounds like a nightmare. "I have way too much to do."

Her exasperated look tells me I'm in for a lecture. "Last semester you said you'd loosen up and enjoy your senior year. You said you would go out more, Summer. If I have to drag you along, I will." I did say that. To be fair, it was after I cried over a particularly difficult assignment and Donny's perfect score sent me over the edge. That's when I vowed that I'd let loose, because only focusing on school wasn't making my grades better.

I shoot her a sheepish look. "But I have to start that proposal, and I have readings to do."

She huffs out a breath. "Fine. I'll go with Cassie, but you have to promise to take a few breaks."

"Promise. I'll even go for a run later."

Amara's head hangs in disapproval. "Not the type of break I was talking about, but I'll take anything if it gets you out of here."

TWO

AIDEN

SHE'S WATCHING ME sleep.

Drawing away from the last remnants of my dream means I'm hyper-aware of my current surroundings. Either she's enjoying the view, which I wouldn't blame her for, or she's planning on ripping off my skin and wearing it later.

The latter seems more likely, because I fell asleep on her last night.

The welcome party at our house had gotten a little out of control. By a little, I mean *extremely* out of control. When Dalton University's left-winger and one of my best friends, Dylan Donovan, is in charge of a party, it's meant to turn into a rager. Mostly because I decided not to be the one policing it. We had just come back from break, so it was the only time I'd let myself drink before the season starts up again, and I'm not sure how much I'll regret that decision until I've seen the aftermath.

Opening my eyes means having to deal with the aftermath.

When Aleena, a smoking hot redhead, picked me out of the crowd to do body shots last night, it was only right that we found

ourselves in my room, naked and all over each other. Though that didn't last long, because sleep debt is real, and I am its latest victim.

I train every day and take a full course load, and when I'm not doing that, I'm keeping the guys out of trouble. So, as I laid her on my bed and kissed my way down her stomach, I fully knocked out. It would have been embarrassing if I was conscious, but the sleep was so great I had no complaints.

"Morning." I stretch my arms out and under my head, opening my eyes to see exactly what I expected.

Red hair pools on my chest and full pouty lips are trapped between white teeth. "Good sleep?" she asks. "I hope you're not feeling too lazy this morning."

Anyone else would have been emasculated by the comment, but I couldn't be. Not when practically every girl on campus knows that *lazy* and *Aiden Crawford* have never been used in a sentence together. This was a one-off, and judging from her darkening blue eyes, she knew I'd make it up to her.

I chuckle. "Great sleep, actually."

"Well, if you're awake now"—she runs a red fingernail down my chest—"we can start the day off right."

What kind of host would I be to turn down that offer? When her hand trails lower, I flip her over and make up for last night.

By the time Aleena finishes up in the shower, I'm already downstairs making breakfast. Turns out women are big fans of steam showers, and I am the proud owner of the only one in the house. Rightfully so, because my grandparents had bought the house when I got accepted to Dalton. But that didn't stop Kian Ishida, the team's right-winger and our roommate, from fighting me tooth and nail for it. The captain card never failed to win a disagreement, but now he's across the hall with his loud music and constant pounding on my bedroom door.

I offer Aleena breakfast, but she only shakes her head in response before walking out the front door. I smile to myself. There is nothing

better than a one-night stand who doesn't try to be your girlfriend after.

Eli watches the exchange with raised brows. "That's a first."

"What is?"

"It's past ten. You've never had a girl stay that long. Did you finally find the one?" His eyes widen with a grin that I'd like to punch off his face.

"I fell asleep last night before we got to do anything. It was only right."

"How chivalrous," he says dryly. "You've been exhausted lately. Think you need to cut back?"

Now it's my turn to laugh. Elias Westbrook, Eli as everyone knows him, and I have known each other since we were in diapers. His worry doesn't irritate me like everyone else's because I know he says it with great caution, and I must really be cutting it close with practice and school if he's saying something. "I'm fine. I've made it work for this long; what's a few more months?"

He doesn't seem to like that answer, though he only nods and plates his eggs.

"Sick party, guys." An early-morning straggler walks out of the house wearing just boxers, the rest of his clothes dangling from his arm. The pin on his jacket tells me he's one of Dylan's fraternity brothers.

Dylan is the only one out of us who is part of a frat. Kappa Sigma Zeta treats him like royalty, and although he lives with us, he could easily have the master suite in the Greek Row house. But according to him, having to be in the same house as the "ass-kissing freshmen" is the last thing he wants.

I eat a spoonful of oatmeal. "Where are the rest of the guys?"

Eli scrolls through his phone and shows me the screen. It's a picture of Kian passed out on the grass at the front entrance of our campus. Behind him, the monument of Sir Davis Dalton is trashed. I squeeze my eyes shut, hoping there is a simple explanation for this. Maybe a really good Photoshop job. "Who took that?"

"Benny Tang."

I pause mid-bite. "Yale's goalie? What was he doing here?" Having Yale come here after we slaughtered them in a game before winter break would be the worst possible scenario. The last thing I remember before heading upstairs was telling Dylan to shut it down soon. Clearly, he didn't listen.

"Might wanna ask Dylan. I wasn't here."

Of course he wasn't. If Eli, the only other responsible one, hadn't been at the party, that means the two overgrown children, Dylan and Kian, were in charge.

This all started when they lost a bet last semester that has us throwing the majority of the parties on campus. The parties we don't throw, we have to provide the booze. When I found out, I had both of them benched for two games straight.

Despite everything, I'm hoping this is a nightmare and I'm still in bed with Aleena. "And do I wanna know where Dylan is?" I ask cautiously.

When Eli picks up his phone again, I groan.

He chuckles. "I'm kidding, dude. He's passed out in the living room."

"IT WAS ME."

Every eye in the room zeroes in on me, and I regret ever learning how to speak. The pounding in my head persists because Coach wanted to torture us with practice before we gathered in the media room for a mandatory meeting. The bright white of the rink had sent my headache doubling in pain. I don't drink often, and my body never lets me forget when I do, so today was no exception. Everything was intensified, including Kian's loud voice, which spewed paranoia about why Coach called a meeting. The kid woke up with grass stains on his body and still wondered what was happening.

When Coach Kilner entered, he was fuming, his pale skin glowing red. He even knocked the hats off the heads of the juniors, who

immediately cowered to the back row, and I began regretting my decision to sit up front. Kian and Dylan were way in the back too, hiding behind our goalies.

"A fucking party that trashed campus?" Coach yelled, and suddenly everything made sense. "Is this a fucking joke to all of you? Never in my twenty-five years of coaching have I had to deal with this kind of blatant disregard for the school code of conduct."

That part wasn't all true. I know for a fact that Brady Winston, the captain from the year before mine, threw a house party that landed a yearlong ban on Greek Row. The dean's car went missing, the swim team's pool was trashed, and all extracurriculars were canceled. So I'm pretty sure trashing the campus and vandalizing the monument of Sir Davis Dalton isn't the worst thing to happen to the school.

"When I became a coach after years in the league," Coach started as Devon muttered, "Here we go," beside me, "never did I think I would be giving my senior players a lecture on throwing parties."

"Coach, the party—"

"Shut it, Donovan," Kilner scolded. "We are in the fucking qualifiers that will get us to the Frozen Four and you are messing around with other colleges. At this stage?"

"Yale came here. Shouldn't they be getting the brunt of this?" asked Tyler Sampson, our alternate captain, and one of the smartest guys on the team. He's headed to law school instead of following in his hockey superstar father's footsteps.

"They are not my problem, you idiots are! I should have every single one of you suspended," he says, rage pouring out of his sweat-covered forehead.

"But then we wouldn't be able to play the Frozen Four." Kian's chiming in didn't help the rest of that speech, and now he's stuck with laundry duty for a month. It was originally a week, but Kian kept protesting, and everyone knows if Coach gives you a punishment, you shut your trap and take it.