**CHAPTER 1**

**~MARIAH~**

My nude colored heels clicked against the asphalt as I stormed out of the tv station into the parking lot. The glass doors revolved behind me in the aftermath of an angry push. My fingers jammed the button on my key fob with a vengeance as I stepped into my blue Prius angrily.

I ensured all my windows were closed before letting out a loud scream. Imaginary punches were thrown as I flailed about on my leather seats. The transitional May weather had me sweating through my once-pristine white shirt in mere seconds as I kicked off my heels in frustration.

“Siri, call Keaton.”

“Calling Keaton.” The robotic voice blended with the revving sounds of my engine as I drove out the parking lot. Manicured fingers flicked my blonde ponytail behind me as I chewed on my lip nervously.

“Hey Bunny,” Keaton greeted, the throes of his law firm's hustle and bustle seeping through the speakers.

"Keaton, you won't believe this," I grumbled, the remnants of my anger still simmering. "The station just dropped a bombshell on me. This isn't what I signed up for."

His voice, steady amid the legal chaos, inquired, "What's the scoop?"

Instead of going into the long vent session I imagined for the last twenty minutes in Wilson’s office; I cut to the chase. "They're tossing me into the ring with the Duluth little league hockey team."

A brief pause lingered on the line before Keaton's composed reply, "Well, that's a curveball. Need directions to the rink?"

I couldn't help but roll my eyes, it wouldn’t hurt for my older brother to be angry on my behalf. But Keaton was always prim and proper even though he cared about me the most. "Yeah, I'm lost on this one. Never been there, and I need to get there pronto."

Keaton failed to hold back a chuckle. "Mariah, you do realize you've got a smartphone with a GPS, right? Just fire up Google Maps, and it'll be your guiding star."

I felt my cheeks flush with more anger. "Of course," I mumbled, chagrined. "Since you're so smart, Keaton. Enjoy the rest of your freaking day."

Of course I knew I had google maps. I just wanted his consolation and companionship. Dense idiot!

I sighed, allowing the Duluth traffic at the intersection to dictate my pace. The early afternoon sun glinted off fenders and benders, horns blaring at random strangers.

My thoughts circled back to my new assignment.

Covering a little league hockey team wasn't in my career playbook. I craved the front row seats to major league sports, not watching little kids skate.

*God help me.*

As Duluth's familiar streets unfolded before me, I couldn't shake the feeling that the universe was playing a little joke on me. Traffic finally loosened up and I made a right according to the GPS.

“Make a left 10 metres ahead.”

I leaned my head against a clenched knuckle, lost in thought over the situation on ground as residential areas slowly gave way to large buildings and less greenery.

"Make a left onto Elm Street," the robotic voice of the GPS interrupted my thoughts and I complied, following the directions with a swerve.

"Arriving at your destination," the GPS chirped.

*Here goes nothing.*

I parked my Prius in front of a sprawling ice rink complex. It’s blue walls were a far cry from the colossal arenas I had dreamed of reporting from.

My feet stung in protest as I slipped them back into my heels and let out a sigh, reflection shimmering in the car's rearview mirror.

*It’s just temporary, Mariah.*

With a final breath, I gathered my composure and stepped out of the car. Heels clicking against the asphalt once more as I made my way to the entrance of the rink.

The entrance to the rink was flanked by towering glass panels, allowing the midday sun to pour into the lobby.

The light blue walls of the lobby were adorned with vibrant posters and banners celebrating the accomplishments of the Duluth Red Angels hockey teams from seasons past.

My gaze was drawn to a pretty impressive banner that had a team photo of young players beaming with pride. Their tiny hands were holding a championship trophy high above their heads. I glanced off to a receptionist at the corner with a bored look on her young face.

“Where am I supposed to go here?” I mumbled to myself.

I approached the registration desk, tapping the shoulder of the young brunette with a name tag that read "Linda".

"Hi, I'm Mariah Caliet, from the TV station," I introduced myself with a professional smile. "I'm here to cover the Duluth little league hockey team."

Linda's brown eyes sparkled with enthusiasm as she handed over a little tag. "We've been expecting you, Mariah. Your team's practice is just about to start on rink three. You can't miss it."

With the tag hanging around my neck, I followed the black signs to rink three. The hallways felt colder with each step into the building.

“Move Max!” “ No, you move dickface.”

The sharp sounds of skates on ice preceded my sight into the wide blue doors tagged with the number three. The rink was smaller than the grand arenas I had imagined but even in the ice it felt a little bit warm.

How ironic.

Young hockey players, their red gear glistening in the overhead lights were scattered across the ice. My nose tingled with the crisp, clean smell of ice as I walked in, accompanied by the occasional thud of a puck hitting the boards.

“Get your ass off that side, Max.” the coach bellowed from the edge of the rink.

A freckle faced boy with bright red hair stuck his tongue out mockingly as he skidded to a stop. “Make me, Mike.”

Seething, Mike blew into a heavy silver whistle. The shrill sound pierced the air and brought back memories of Keaton’s high school hockey games. He enjoyed playing hockey and so did that son of a gun. *Ice*.

“Seth, bring the fire truck under control,” Mike shouted again, veins bulging in his neck.

*Fire truck? That’s rude.*

An older boy with soulful brown eyes scoffed, passing the puck to a shorter boy with braces. “His name is Max and you’re an asshole.”

I walked over to the barrier, regretting my decision of not bringing a coat. The metal rods clinked as my pink manicured fingers wrapped around them for support.

“You little brats, once I get my hands on you!” Coach Mike’s voice rang out as he ran into the ice, attempting to grab one of the little rascals

The kids, decked out in their vibrant hockey gear, displayed a mischievous streak as they skated in every possible direction, defying any attempt at discipline from the unhappy man.

"Stay right there!" Coach Mike's voice, tinged with authority, reverberated through the rink. But his words were swallowed by the infectious laughter and animated chatter of the young skaters. They zipped around his bulky frame like a swarm of playful bees.

*Shit’s about to go wrong.*

With each step Coach Mike took onto the ice, I couldn't help but sense that this situation was ripe for comedy. His foot met the slippery surface, and with an exaggerated wobble, he teetered on the brink of a fall.

"Be careful!" I shouted, cupping my hands around my mouth.

But he was too far gone as his legs betrayed him, causing a loud, comical thud as he crashed onto the ice, his whistle skidding away in a flush of hilarity.

*That has to hurt.*

“Oh damn.” A shocked gasp involuntarily escaped me as I witnessed the unfolding spectacle and a twinge of pity broke through my frustration. “Stay still….I’ll help you up.”

My heels stared back at me mockingly as I took a shaky step onto the ice. *I’ve had bad ideas before but this takes the cake.* Meanwhile, the kids, realizing the mishap, gathered around their groaning coach, expressions shifting from mischief to genuine concern and guilt.

Desperation spurred me to attempt a rescue mission, but my impractical footwear transformed each step into a wobbly dance. I might as well have been auditioning for a role in a slapstick penguin-themed comedy. Apparently, the red-faced kids agreed as they watched my attempts with laughter.

The kids, their laughter now contagious, caught sight of my predicament. Among them, Seth, the tall and sturdy boy who carried an air of natural leadership, skated over to me. His eyes twinkled with mischief, but his outstretched hand offered genuine assistance. “Hold on to me.”

“Thank you.” Grateful for the lifeline in my heel-induced predicament, I grabbed his arms as he skated slowly towards the groaning man.

With Max's support, I finally managed to step onto the ice, we shared a little laugh as I struggled. It was a moment that left Coach Mike unwilling, frustrated, and angry, groaning on the ice in embarrassment and annoyance.

I waded through the sea of chortling boys and leaned down towards the obviously unhappy coach. “Are you alright, does anything feel broken?”

“Yes. Their brains! I shouldn’t have given in to the pressure of this darned job!”

I pulled the red haired Max away from the venting man as his cheeks matched the colour of their bright red gear. “We were just playing around a little bit.”

My hands patted his back as I wobbled up to my feet, giving the horrid man on the white ice a mean glare. “I hope you broke something and it takes a long long time to heal.” *Asshole.*

The bottom of my shoes skidded against the ice, and I held onto the poor child in shock.

“Oi, Carey!”

I could hear my heart pound in response to the name that just echoed through the rink. *Carey*. Only that bastard Ice would call me that.

*But why is Ice back in Duluth?*

**CHAPTER 2**

**~OZIAS~**

Duluth stretched out before me as we drove through its familiar streets. The town I once called home. I looked out of the car window to the shimmering waters of Lake Superior, an endless surface of blue.

We passed the buildings and parks where I used to play as a kid, it all seemed so small now. My mother, Patricia, sat beside me, chatting away with an enthusiasm that was beginning to irritate me. “You’ll heal better here, Ozzy.”

“That’s if I ever heal,” I groaned, tugging the hood of my black hoodie over my head.

*Heal.*

I shuffled uncomfortably in the passenger seat, shoving my hockey stick away from my ribs. A quick glance in the rear view mirror showed it all. Cardboard boxes and a blue suitcase that carried both my belongings and broken dreams.

“Don’t be such a wet blanket. You’ll have so much fun here.” My mum persisted, black curls flailing around in the wind.

My phone buzzed with yet another instagram notification that I swiped away almost instinctively. *I don’t know and I don’t want to know.*

Loud honks of the horn went off as we made a turn at the neighborhood middle school. My lips quirked into a reluctant smile at our little tradition and I whooped weakly, “Whoop whoop.”

“There ya go,” My mum chuckled, brown eyes shining with warmth.

*Thank you.*

As we continued our journey, we passed by Leif Erikson Park, a witness to several family picnics along the lakeshore. “Dad loved coming here on sundays.”

“That he did, but now he gets to travel around the world with you.” Her red painted nails pointed at my heart with emphasis.

“GOT, I’m retired now.”

“Psssshh, you’ll play again in no time.” She dismissed with a wave of her hand as the tassels of her blouse clinked against each other.

I nodded absentmindedly, leaning my head against the door in fake slumber. My mind was elsewhere, lost in a mangle of thoughts and emotions. I couldn't help but pat my left leg through the thick fabric of my black joggers. The very limb that had betrayed me. Once a source of pride, a symbol of my nimbleness and agility on ice.

*But now, it’s a reminder of my shattered dreams.*

The memory of the final doctor's appointment in Boston with Coach Terry and Dawson played like a movie in my mind. We sat in that sterile white room, tension thick in the air.

"Ozias, I'm afraid there's very little chance your ACL will recover in time for the season.” The doctor's words had cut through me like a knife.

Coach Terry was more or less invisible in the room as he hung his head down between his legs.

Dawson on the other hand, was a green eyed bulldozer, slamming a muscled hand on the black leather table. “What do you mean by that! He’s had surgery, been through rehabilitation, what else!”

“Let’s go back. Thank you, doctor.” Coach Terry’s calm words soon tuned into knives as we stepped out into the hallway. "Your injury is severe, and the agency can’t keep waiting. Your endorsements and brand deals are also gone."

The weight of those words had crushed me. The realization that my career was over and everything I had worked for was slipping through my fingers, was almost too much to bear.

Back in the present, the rhythmic spin of the tires against the road almost lulled me to sleep. But my mother still had lots to say.

“You can hang out with Keaton again playing video games and stuff,” she said, excitedly tapping her fingers against the wheel.

“Keaton is a lawyer now and he’s always busy.”

My mum hummed in agreement, giving me a side eye. “You could just hang out with Mariah…..but I don’t think she’d want to hang out with you.”

*Ah, Mariah.*

Her name brought a small smile to my face. Keaton's younger sister had always been the shy, awkward one, blushing at the slightest provocation. Back in high school, she was my favorite pastime, with her high ponytails and origami creations. The idea of seeing her again was oddly appealing.

My mother’s voice broke through my thoughts, "You remember Mariah, don't you, Ozias?"

I muttered,"Yeah, of course."

It was only when I realized we weren't heading home and I snapped back to reality. "Where are we going?" I asked, a hint of surprise in my voice.

"To work, Ozias," my mother replied matter-of-factly.

“What the hell?” My anger flared, and we argued for a while as she drove up to the little league hockey rink.

“Language, young man. It’s just a little coaching gig for the little league.”

“Peewee?”

“Nope, squirts. I already promised Mr Tomhelly.”

“Fuck, mom!”

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Reluctantly, I followed my mum into the rink, memories flooding back as I took in the familiar surroundings. A faded photo behind a banner of smiling children caught my eye. It was my dad and I, holding my first trophy win, lips pulled into wide smiles.

My throat tightened with sadness. Now, there was a real chance that I might never play again.

"Come on, Ozias," my mother called, breaking my reverie.

I followed her down the familiar halls, almost on autopilot. The sound of skates on ice reached my ears, and I knew we were headed to the rink where I used to practice.

*Rink three.*

A female voice that dripped with venom reached my ears as we walked through the door. “I hope you broke something and it takes a long time to heal.”

What I noticed at first was a group of kids gathered on the ice, a groaning man laid at their feet, unhappy and displeased.

 I couldn't believe my eyes when I saw Mariah, standing confidently in the middle of the ice rink in heels and looking every bit like a sexy professional figure out of a magazine. She was clad in a chiffon top and tight black pants, her light blonde hair adding to her striking presence.

"Carey!" I called out excitedly, unable to resist a playful parody of the singer Mariah Carey with her name. It was a trusted method to see her cheeks flush.

Mariah's expression shifted from annoyance to shock as she glanced in his direction, face turning red in indignation.

*Bingo.*

The red-haired boy in her arms took advantage of her distraction and skated off to his team. They continued to pass the puck, seemingly oblivious to the man sprawled on the ice.

*I’ve got questions.*

“Ozias, how the hell—-“she yelped, green eyes wide as she came crashing down. With Mariah now shaky on the unstable ground of the rink in her heels, I couldn't just stand by.

I expertly navigated the ice, low dunk sneakers providing the grip I needed. In a swift move, I reached out and held her in my arms, preventing her from taking an unexpected tumble.

Our eyes locked for a long moment, fingers tightening around each other’s arms. The world seemed to fade away, leaving only the two of us in that intimate, frozen moment.

“Wrap it up people!” Our reverie was abruptly interrupted by a sharp blow on a whistle, courtesy of Seth. The loud sound jolted us back to reality, and I reluctantly released Mariah from my grasp.

I guided her over to the seats where my mother was waiting. “Mariah, darling,” she greeted with a broad smile, arms stretched out for a hug.

“Hello, Mrs Anderson. I didn’t meet you at home the other day, did you enjoy the brownies?” Mariah and my mother engaged in conversation, the curiosity in Mariah's eyes palpable as she stared at me.

As the conversation flowed, the owner of the rink, Mr. Tomhelly, emerged. He had a full head of gray hair, a slight potbelly, and was dressed in a white shirt and tie. His presence commanded respect…..occasionally.

“Patricia!” Mr. Tomhelly greeted my mother with warm hugs and exchanged pleasantries. His eyes then landed on Mariah, and he brightened up.

"Ah, Mariah! I see you've already met Ozias. Wonderful," he exclaimed, pleased at the sight of the two together. “He’s the temporary coach for the little angels you’ll cover.”

*Talk about ripping the bandaid right off.*

The young players, who had been passing the puck, couldn't hide their displeasure. They gave me a collective death glare that drilled into my back, clearly not thrilled with the idea.

"Team, gather 'round! We have some special guests today," Mr. Tomhelly declared, introducing us. "This is Mariah, and this is Ozias, your new coach. Introduce yourself, starting from Max.”

The players quickly chimed in with their introductions: “I’m Max” The boy that Mariah held onto earlier muttered, fiery locks contrasting with his freckled face, making him easily distinguishable.

“I’m Seth." Seth had a mop of curly, almost black hair that framed his round face.

"Nate." Nate wore a Yankees cap pulled low, casting a shadow over his braced grin. "Liam." Liam's dreamy blue eyes were his defining feature, framed by long, dark lashes.

The next boy had an infectious grin that stood out of the crowd of gloomy faces. “Ethan.”

My mind logged off at this part, only processing their names as they went. “Caleb, Noah, Henry, Sam, Aiden, Oliver, Lucas, Isaac, Ryan. I’M BEN, THE GOALIE!”

The loud scream from a petite, heavy set boy at the end of the rink jolted me out of my monotony. “Nice to meet you, BEN,” Mariah screamed back in response to the blushing brunette.

*God, help me.*

**CHAPTER 3**

***~MARIAH~***

“Ozias is back? He said next week,” Keaton said, excitement spilling through his voice as he bit into an apple.

I rolled my eyes at his childish excitement of seeing his best friend again. “You’re almost thirty, grow up. Where’s my coffee?”

“Right behind you with…”

“Ow, ow, ow....hot!” I yelled, pulling out a scalded finger from the coffee mug on the kitchen counter.

“I was about to tell you it was hot.” Keaton smiled sheepishly, moving towards the living room. With a jingle of his keys and a kiss on my forehead, he was out.

I loved my brother but he could be a pain in the ass. Our parents let us move out immediately we turned eighteen but he seemed to enjoy staying in my house more than his.

I huffed and grabbed a bag of crackers, tearing it open. I had to report to the rink today for their practice, Wilson’s orders.

*It must be nice to sit all haughty at your table and dictate my life.*

I looked at my reflection in my phone, blonde hair tied into a bun, dead green eyes and lips coated in the pink shade;busty baby.

*I’m ready.*

*~~~~~~~~*

*I’m not ready.*

I stood at the edge of the ice rink, my hockey skates laced up around my calves and my clothes far more appropriate than yesterday. My brown jacket and thick black jeans sent warmth into my bones. It allowed me to blend in with the crowd of little league players on white ice. My gaze wandered over to Ozias, or rather, 'Ice' as he was known by everyone here all through high school.

He was out on the ice at the corner, back against the glass walls of the ring. His gaze, focused on little helmet clad heads, attempting to familiarize himself with the fifteen players.

Good luck with that.

Ozias had pointed out several issues to a few of the little league players. “You…..red hair and you too Seth, you need to bend more in your knees and not your back!”

*Max.*

Max had it tough, his name was only three letters but it didn’t stick for the horrible coach yesterday and now Ozias.

Six other players also got corections on their form. It was clear that he was already assessing their playing styles and weaknesses. His experience and keen observation skills were evident. He was going to be a good coach, whether I liked it or not.

The little players didn’t like it much but accepted his corrections with little frowns.

I couldn't resist the opportunity to skate over to Ozias. "Impressed yet, Coach Ice?" I called out, my tone laced with a hint of snark as I approached him.

Ozias turned towards me, his tall and athletic frame clad in hoodie and sweatpants.

*Did he abandon his wardrobe in Boston?*

"Carey," he responded, emphasizing his nickname for me in a way that made my eyes roll. "Impressed? Not quite yet. But we'll get there."

His dark hair shone under the rink's white lights, and his piercing blue eyes seemed to bore into mine. He truly deserved his childhood nickname – 'Ice.' His hoodie and sweatpants completed the look, adding an air of casual confidence.

“Why are you doing this, Ice?” I asked, placing a hand on the rod for support.

His gaze met mine, and for a moment, I couldn't help but admire him, despite our ongoing tension. His chiselled jaw, framed by the scruff of a light beard. The languid way he carried himself was undeniably attractive. The sunny jock from high school was gone, replaced by a man.

*A very hot brooding man.*

“I didn’t get the memo about an interrogation. Just do your job,” he snapped, clenching his jaw.

I couldn't help but feel a surge of annoyance at his cocky attitude. He was too used to being in control, even as a coach. My pen and notepad in hand, I angrily scribbled down some notes for my first report on the team. I needed to document basic introductions, strengths, weaknesses, and potential areas of improvement.

As I jotted down my observations, Ozias leaned against the rink, shaking out his left leg. The chatter and sounds of the kids filled the air he looked ahead.

“Yo Max! Max!” He blew on the silver whistle around his neck, gesturing towards the little redhead. “Slow the fuck down.”

His words were too late and Max crashed into Ben, the goalie with a bang.

*What’s up with this rink and horrible falls.*

I skated over to pick up Ben, hearing Ozias’s movements as he followed closely. Max's antics stood out since yesterday, his recklessness always got the better of him.

While we helped Ben to his feet, I couldn't help but let my mind wander back to a high school game. I was in middle school but it was a time when Ozias's presence had been even more prominent in my life.

“ICE ICE ICE ICE.” The rink was electrifying, the crowd's chants of 'Ice' reverberating through the air.

My friend Katie had been particularly enthusiastic, nudging me to join in the chant. “Just join in, Mariah.”

The sound was deafening as everyone cheered for him.

Ozias had taken the ice, his figure imposing in his hockey gear, number 11. I shrugged my blue holdie closer, hiding from the chill of the rink's air. The scent of hot dogs and popcorn wafted from the stands with the taste of victory or defeat in every breath.

“Not for a billion dollars.” I yelled, running my tongue over my braces, a nervous habit I had back then. In my hands, I fiddled with an origami frog, folding and unfolding it as I watched the game.

But my memories of that game weren't entirely positive. Ozias had always been a bully in my eyes. He'd tug at my ponytail whenever he came over with Keaton and insisted on calling me "Carey" just because my name was Mariah.

Everyone else found it funny, but I didn’t.

“Yayyy, he scoredddd,” Katie screamed, barely audible over the noise of the crowd.

Ozias had scored a goal that was nothing short of spectacular. He'd skated with speed, past defenders with a perfect wrist shot that sent the puck soaring into the net. The crowd had erupted in cheers, causing my lips to twist into a scowl.

The star of the moment turned to me, mouthing the word 'Carey,' a sly grin playing on his lips. It was a moment that had stuck with me for a long time.

As I snapped back to the present, I couldn't help but feel a mix of emotions. Ozias was a talented asshole, and his presence in the rink was a force to be reckoned with. But his attitude and the memories of our past made it hard for me to appreciate his abilities.

I continued to observe and document. I guess in a way, wanting to unravel the layers of Ice. The team started to play again punctuated with whistles from Ozias.

The doors to the rink swung open, catching our attention. Patricia walked in with Mr Tomhelly, dressed in her blue scrubs, hair slung over her shoulder in a loose braid.

She probably had the night shift.

“Ozzy.”

I sniggered at Ozias' nickname as he skated over to her. “Hey, Ma.”

“Hey, Mr Tomhelly,” I greeted, offering the older man in black slacks a smile.

“Hey, Mariah,” He replied simultaneously with Patricia and she blushed deeply.

That’s suspicious.

Mr Tomhelly looked away, clearing his throat loudly as he addressed Ozias. “I’m glad you’ll be here for a long time, Coach Mike totally quit and there’s no chance he’ll return. You’ll have to work with Mariah for the rest of the upcoming season.”

*No way. I’m so screwed if this goes* wrong.

"Mr. Tomhelly, this is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity for me. I’m not very familiar with the little league. I’m struggling enough as it is and Ozias here is just going to mess it up!"

“Hey!” He protested, brows furrowed at my jab. “ Whatchu mean by mess it up?”

My ponytail swung side to side behind my flushed face like a pendulum. “I meant exactly what it sounds like, asshole.”

“Language, there are children here!”

The argument that ensued was loud and spirited. Despite all efforts to separate us, we passionately engaged in a screaming match. The tension in the rink was palpable as our voices filled the air, and the fate of the little league team hung in the balance.

“Don’t even start with me, Ozias. You ruin everything you touch,” I screamed at him, jabbing my finger into the thick fabric of his black hoodie “That’s why you’re back in Duluth. You probably fucked up your life in Boston.”

Patricia bristled, looking at me in indignation. “That’s enough, Mariah!”

*That was too much.*

“Well at least I have a life. Little miss ‘I’m going to be a big sports reporter in New York,’ but look at you covering a shitty little league team in the backwaters of Duluth!”

Ozias’ voice settled in the deafening silence of the rink. I took in the shocked gaze of Patricia and the little league players, the anger in Ozias’ eyes and the flaming anger in Mr Tomhelly’s wrinkled face.

*Fuck the promotion.*

“You know what, fuck this place. I can’t do this.”

My apology disappeared somewhere along the third teardrop as I got into my car. The heat of the sun had made my steering wheel hot to touch. But it didn’t matter as I sobbed into my wheel.

*Why did Ozias have to return to Duluth?*