

Good Girl Hockey Romance

Chapter 1: Vanessa

Meditation. Salutations. Affirmations.

This is how I start my every morning. I say those words to myself before my eyes open. Lifting the silk sleep mask off my face, I breathe in morning air. After a brief use of the bathroom, I sit on my living room floor and clear my head of all thoughts. I enjoy the sounds of the city waking up from my window. For a few minutes, they become my whole world. Once I've completed meditation, I unroll my yoga mat and begin the next step. My inhales are slow and my exhales are slower. I stretch. I work up a sweat.

Moving to the shower, I bathe under steamy water. I tell myself I am strong. I tell myself I am capable. I affirm to myself I will succeed, earn a raise, and win myself a man with broad shoulders and tattoos and body hair running down his navel. I turn on my waterproof vibrator and repeat my affirmations until I slip over the edge. I feel those affirmations move through my muscles, shaking me to my core. It's not just my mind who believes them, but my body, too.

That's when I apply my hair mask.

People like me don't make it easily in the sports industry. And by people like me, yes, I mean women. So I have to work twice as hard. I optimize every moment of my free time, so I'm not wasting even a second. I pre-plan my meals. I've programmed my coffee maker to start when my alarm goes off. I schedule my masturbation sessions.

And when I walk through the halls at work, people look at me (people, here, being men) with my glowing skin, my tailored outfits, my immaculate hair, and they think it's

effortless. They think I roll out of bed and saunter to work each day. I let them think that. No, I make them.

Every so often, the schedule grows overbearing. But don't worry, I've thought about that, too. I leave room in my schedule for an occasional cry, or scream, or whatever release I'm craving. In my bag, I always carry a snack, tissues, and extra batteries.

Because we are, after all, only human.

Leaving the house with my power suit, designer bag, soy milk latte (which I brew at home while my hair dries), and go-getter attitude, I drive my economy car past the Gateway Arch to my office, where I park on the third floor of the garage. Walking into my third floor office, I pass my best friend Sarah, who likes to joke that she slept her way to the top (she laughs as she says it, though it's completely true) and my new colleague, Mark. If I allowed myself the time to look at him, I might find him attractive, but in a safe, boring way. Thus, I don't allot myself the time.

As my affirmations tell me, I'm in line for something big.

"There she is!" calls Sarah. "They found Mary Tyler Moore in a ditch this morning, with Vanessa Trent walking out of it without a hair out of place!"

Call me selfish. I know exactly what I want. When I was a little girl, I cut out pictures of magazines and stuck them to my vision board. Every night before bed, I told myself I would achieve each of those goals, and every morning when I'd awake, I'd say it again.

You could have done it, too. If you really wanted to.

Mark offers me his phone. "It's the police, Miss Trent. They'd like to speak to you about the whereabouts of Miss Tyler Moore."

I pass them both and move straight to my desk. As much as I love jokes, I have no time for them.

Don't blame me. After being told my whole career that I've only made it this far because my brother plays professional hockey, I lost my laughter. Was it my brother who nailed every interview? Did my brother stay up all night doing endless research on sports history and media literacy? Did my brother accomplish all that while maintaining a regimented skincare routine?

That's what makes me laugh.

Ryan is a dear, and I support his career as much as my schedule allows. But I earned this on my own, even as the detractors claim otherwise.

Leonard, my boss, pops his head out of his office. "Trent."

Sarah and Mark break their necks. I'm either about to be fired, or I'm getting the story of a lifetime. I rise from my seat and march to Leonard's office with an elegant sway, knowing Sarah's eyes are glued to my ass.

I take a seat in Leonard's office. He's been my editor for almost a year. Deep down, I think he has to force himself to make changes to my sports stories. His notes are minuscule, taking away a comma here or adding a dash there. He grunts as I sit across from him. What he would give to tear apart my stories word for word. To find enough mistakes that would get me fired. Call it a hunch, but I don't think Leonard likes watching a woman succeed.

"How's your coverage on the Golden Knights?"

I stop myself from rolling my eyes. "There's not much there."

"Would you call being undefeated not much?"

"Seeing as we're four games into the season and they've only gone against the weakest teams in the league, why don't we give it a minute?"

He grunts again.

Sometimes I think I should give him a win. Throw him a bone, so to speak. But his layups are so perfect, I can't stop myself from scoring.

"I'm ready for something else," I tell him. "Something juicier."

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. We're looking for someone to interview Ryan Trent."

I hear my own last name, and my heart races. "Sir, with all due respect—"

"I know it's not what you want to hear. But it's not a low-ball. Your brother is a rising talent. I can't just give his interview to anyone."

"Thank you for saying that. But interviewing my brother is a huge conflict of interest. And every reader is going to think I'm only interviewing him because of our relationship."

"Let them think whatever they want. If you do a good job, you'll prove them wrong."

Of course he doesn't understand. He's never been held to the same level of scrutiny. If he had to walk one day in my four-inch pumps, he wouldn't make it out the door.

"Sir, I respect your decisions even when I don't agree with them. I've written whatever you've asked of me. I'm only saying this once, and I'll never say it again: I cannot write that story. I'm sorry, I can't."

The implications are bigger than this one job. That's my whole career, being branded as someone's sister and not my own person. I could get fired tomorrow, but that story would hang over my head forever.

That's when I notice Leonard grinning. He looks like a kid in a candy store, eyeing me like I'm some giant lollipop.

"Is that right?" he asks.

I shift in my seat, starting to grow uncomfortable. Was this some kind of trap?

"If you really feel that way, Trent, that's fine by me. Because my next offer for you is one you can't turn down. I want you interviewing Steel."

My heart stops. How could I have been so foolish? I walked right into this. Leonard practically laughs as it hits me. I have no more plays here. I have to interview Steel Fletcher.

Where to begin? The Calvin Klein spot where he grabbed his crotch? Behind the scenes footage of award shows where he cursed out celebrities? His own memoir, where he describes bullying kids in his hometown? Steel Fletcher is what we in sports journalism like to call retirement. You interview him, and you never work again.

"I think I could work something out with Ryan," I begin to stutter.

"No, Trent. I heard you loud and clear. You couldn't possibly interview your own brother. What a silly idea!"

I've known colleagues primed for Pulitzer's who lost to Steel. I've seen grown men cry after encountering him. He's so toxic, there's a rumor that his kiss will sting your lips. And now I have to interview him.

"Don't lose your cool on me, Trent. Think about why I'm asking you."

Because he wants me fired. Because he's jealous of how my legs look in this power suit. Because he has a kink for disarming strong women.

"Who's best friends with Steel Fletcher?" he asks me.

I stop. I take a deep breath.

Meditation. Salutations. Affir-

Nope. Not this time. Kind words and deep breathing won't save me now. Because my brother Ryan is Steel's best friends. They play on the St. Louis Blues together, and their lockers are next to each other. This might actually be the story of my career, and it's all thanks to my brother.

This was not in the schedule.