

# Gloves Off



THE VANCOUVER STORM SERIES  
STEPHANIE ARCHER

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*For Mr. Archer, my accident-prone sleepwalker.*

## CONTENT WARNING

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## CHAPTER 1

### ALEXEI

THE MORNING of the Vancouver Storm's season opener, I wait for the elevator up to Coach Tate Ward's office at the arena when I hear it—heels clicking.

She steps into my periphery, and a familiar scent washes over me—vanilla, violets, and sandalwood. My shoulders tighten.

Here we fucking go. My blood starts to hum. On my wrist, my watch beeps in warning as my heart rate rises above resting rate, and I silence it.

She looks up from her phone, those warm whiskey eyes cooling. “Oh. You.”

I reach for the elevator call button and press it again. I don't want to spend more time with this spoiled brat than I have to.

I cannot fucking stand Dr. Georgia Greene.

“Thanks, Volkov.” She offers me a mock grateful smile. “I don't want to spend more time with you than I have to.”

Like always, her auburn hair is down around her shoulders, loose, wavy, and thick like one of those laughing women on shampoo commercials. It's not red, it's not brunette, it's something in between, with gold strands that catch the light. A crop of new freckles span her nose and cheekbones, probably from sunbathing on a yacht all summer, lounging topless while being served drinks on a silver tray by some employee whose name she doesn't know. My teeth grit.

She stands next to me and faces the doors as we wait, still reading emails on her phone while I try not to inhale her.

“I'm surprised you're back at work this season.” Apparently, I can't stop myself from provoking her. “I thought you would have bagged a rich

husband by now.”

I give her a sidelong look, taking in her flawless hair, her makeup, the outfit she has chosen to fit her every curve. Her skyscraper heels. The expensive handbag dangling from the crook of her arm. The Greene family is notorious for owning half of Vancouver. She’s exactly like my ex—superficial, self-centered, and obsessed with wealth and image.

“I’m ignoring you,” she says, eyes on her phone.

*I’ll never get married*, I heard her say last year. Still, it pisses her off when I talk about her wanting to find a rich husband, and the only thing I love more than pissing off the doctor is hockey.

“Isn’t that your deepest desire?” I ask. “Land some old guy on the brink of death and cash in when he crosses over to the afterlife so you can quit your job and live out the rest of your days doing what you love most, spending money on yourself?”

I don’t know why I act like this around her. I don’t talk to anyone the way I talk to this woman.

At the words *old guy*, her lips curve into a sick smile. “Maybe I’ll marry you.”

“When hell freezes over.” I would never marry, let alone marry *her*. “And I’m not old.”

I’m thirty-six. For an enforcer defenseman, I’m old, but I’m still in incredible shape. The Norris trophy is awarded to the NHL’s best all-around defenseman. I haven’t won it three times because I let myself go.

“Hellfire,” I add.

She stiffens, and I fight the urge to smile. She hates that nickname.

“Don’t call me that.”

“That’s where you’re from, isn’t it? Forged in the fires of hell?”

A feeling expands in my chest, like the moments before a game starts, and the air between us crackles.

“You want to know what my deepest desire is, Volkov?” She whirls on me, eyes flickering with fire, and my heart hammers harder. “My deepest desire, which I wish for every birthday, is that you’ll fall down a very narrow, very deep hole. You won’t have your phone on you. It’ll be in the middle of nowhere, and I’ll be the only person around.” She puts on a high, sad voice. “*Help me*, you’ll call up the hole. *Please, Georgia, help me.*”

“I’d never ask for your help. And I don’t sound like that.”

“You will, because you’ll be starving, thirsty, and very scared. It’s a hundred feet deep, and there are snakes at the bottom.”

“That’s what you wish for on your birthday? That’s kind of pathetic, don’t you think?”

“You know what else I wish for? That you’ll finally retire.” Her gaze trails over me, cataloging every injury, every pin and steel plate in my body from seventeen years in the NHL. “And I never have to see you again.”

Her words hit me in the gut like an arrow. I can control my diet to a tee, can do everything to heal and play my best, but I can’t stop time. My impending retirement is the shadow I can’t shake.

Where the hell is this elevator? I watch the number above the doors. “Do what you do best, Doctor, and make shopping your full-time job so we can hire a real doctor.”

She doesn’t say a word, but I can feel her irritation. Bull’s-eye.

“Asshole,” she mutters.

She’s not wrong. A beat of silence stretches between us before the elevator doors open and we step inside.

“It must be Friday,” I say to the doors as the elevator ascends.

“Excuse me?”

“It’s Friday. How do I know that?”

“Oh my god,” she whispers in mock awe. “You *can* read. This whole time, we weren’t sure.”

My competitive instincts wake up. “Making fun of my immigrant heritage? That’s a low blow, Doctor, even for you.”

She gives me a flat look. “That’s not what I meant.”

My parents fled Russia when I was a kid, and worked around the clock to pay for hockey. “Not all of us could afford private school.”

Our upbringings couldn’t be any different. *We* couldn’t be any different.

Her face turns a shade of pink that makes my watch go off again. I silence it, victory coursing through me. She’s about to say something when I cut her off.

“Violets. Every Friday, you wear the perfume that smells like violets.” It took me months to identify that note. I only figured it out because I was picking something up at my mom’s flower shop and the scent stopped me in my tracks.

She blinks up at me in shock. I bet she hates that I know this about her. I bet she hates that I’m on to her.

“That’s the one you wear when you go out, trying to catch a rich husband, isn’t it?”

She straightens up an inch but she’s still almost a foot shorter than me. Deep in my lizard brain, I like how much taller I am. In her heels, she’s tall, but I’m taller. I’m twice her weight. It would be no problem to throw her over my shoulder.

“Don’t be such a stalker, Volkov.” She turns back to her phone.

My gaze dips to her shoes. Tall and spiky, designed to castrate her victims with one sharp kick to the balls. Way too high, with dumb little straps that look like they’ll break at any minute. So fucking impractical. Real doctors don’t wear shoes like those. The soles are red, I remember, from her wearing them to an event last year. The same color her eyes probably turn when she doesn’t get what she wants.

In my nightmares, her shoes are as tall as buildings, taunting me with their clicking sounds as she walks up and down the hall. So unprofessional. Doctors are supposed to wear ugly Crocs, not sexy little fuck-me heels.

I hate them, and I hate how much I think about them.

“Are you going to get that?” She sends a pointed glance at my wrist.

Goddamnit. My watch is going off again. I silence it, taking a slow, deep breath. The program helps me keep my heart rate low when I’m supposed to be resting, to aid recovery and performance, but it’s going haywire today.

“They’re Christian Louboutin,” she adds with a smirk, “in case you want to buy a pair to jerk off onto at night.”

My lip curls. “I don’t jerk off to your shoes,” I grit out. “This may be hard for you to understand, Doctor, but some people aren’t attracted to you.”

I let my gaze rake down her body, lingering on the long line of her neck, the smooth skin above the collar of her silk shirt, the dip at her waist, and the swell of her hips.

I don’t hate her because she’s so similar to my ex, Emma—charismatic, friendly, confident, gorgeous—and I don’t hate her because she knows exactly how hot she is. I don’t even hate the doctor because she comes from wealth and privilege.

I hate her because she doesn’t believe in me.

Two years ago, I had one meeting with her where she ran her hands all over my body, over all the injuries I’d accumulated, before I got a

concussion during a game and landed myself in the hospital.

*"You're transferring me to another doctor?"* I asked her the day after I was discharged.

She didn't meet my eyes. *"I'm not the right physician for you."*

*"Too much work? I'm going to cut into your shopping time, huh?"*

Those whiskey eyes flashed with irritation. *"You're held together with pins and K-tape, Volkov. I've recommended you for retirement. I'm not going to invest time into a lost cause."*

One meeting. That's all it took for her to give up on me.

Fucking finally, the elevator reaches the floor at the top of the arena, where the offices are. It pings and the doors slide open.

*"Have a great day, Volkov. Don't knock any more teeth out tonight."*

She strides out and down the hall to her office, head held high, wearing those pants like they were designed for her.

*"I have all my teeth,"* I snap after her.

I hate her, but the doctor has a great ass. My watch goes off again.

*"Everything okay, Volkov?"*

Coach Tate Ward stands at the reception desk, watching me watch the doctor, wearing a curious but amused expression.

*"Everything's fine."* I silence this stupid fucking watch. It's probably broken or something. *"You wanted to talk to me?"*

*"You bet."* He tips his chin at his office across the hall. *"Come on."*