

The Wild Card



THE VANCOUVER STORM SERIES
STEPHANIE ARCHER

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For my readers, who changed my life.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Some details of the professional hockey world have been adjusted for your reading enjoyment.

For content warnings, go to stephaniearcherauthor.com/content-warnings/

CHAPTER 1

JORDAN

IT'S a quiet afternoon in the Filthy Flamingo.

My bar doesn't usually get busy until the evenings, and tonight is game night, so the Vancouver Storm hockey team will fill the place with their boisterous, friendly energy. For now, it's just me and the cook, but he's hiding in the small kitchen, prepping for tonight.

The twinkle lights strung across the ceiling give the dim, windowless bar a warm glow. As I move behind the counter, the old wood flooring creaks. I have the music cranked—seventies rock, my late mom's favorite.

I'm at peace; being alone like this in my safe space. Behind the bar, where I belong. My gaze strays to the wall of Polaroids tacked up behind the bar, images of the players and their partners, smiling, laughing, enjoying themselves at the bar they've made their usual hangout after games. My heart gives a weird tug, but before I can dwell on it, the front door opens.

The head coach of the Vancouver Storm walks in, and my good mood pops like a balloon.

“Good afternoon, Jordan.”

He takes a seat at the bar stool right in front of me and I keep my best disinterested bartender stare firmly in place.

Tate Ward—one of the greatest hockey players of all time, forced to retire when a knee injury ended his career over a decade ago. Beloved head coach of the Vancouver Storm. My best friend, Georgia, says he has a nine-year-old daughter, but he keeps her out of the media, and obviously she's never been in my bar.

Today, he's wearing a light blue button-down oxford shirt tucked into slim-fitting jeans that emphasize his narrow hips, and my eyes linger on the

shape of his muscles. The fabric pulling across his broad shoulders.

Fuckable Dad style, Georgia would call this outfit.

“Wow,” I drawl, holding his eyes despite the nervous flutter in my stomach. “The great Tate Ward, come to pay me his monthly visit.”

“Great to see you again, too.” His polite tone makes my blood boil, but it’s the shard of sarcasm beneath his words, almost undetectable, that hooks something behind my ribcage.

Tate Ward doesn’t want to be here, either, but he’s doing my father, the Storm’s owner and Tate’s longtime mentor, a favor and checking up on me. He will never, ever admit it, but he can’t stand me.

I could kick him out. It’s my bar and I make the rules. This tiny building is my little kingdom, and something tells me he’d oblige. He’s an incurable rule follower. He’s unfailingly *good*, so responsible and ethical and kind and patient and truthful. Like Jesus. Or the Dalai Lama. Except extremely hot.

More than a decade after he left the NHL, he’s still more fit than most guys on the team, with broad, muscular shoulders, a trim waist, and forearms that make me lose my train of thought. His face? Like a model. My stomach dips at the sharp, rich green of his eyes. His thick, dark hair with threads of silver at the temples. The crinkles at the corners of his eyes from smiling at everyone but me. Strong nose but soft-looking lips. Stubble across a sharp jaw.

His gaze lifts to the specials board. “I’ll have the club sandwich, along with a soda water with lime. Thank you.”

Without a word, I leave to plug his order in, returning minutes later with something clutched behind my back.

“I was wondering,” I start, and he looks up from his phone. “Could I get your autograph?”

He studies me, something bright in his eyes. “*You* want my autograph.”

“Mhm.” I hold my expression neutral and detached instead of letting myself smirk.

His eyes narrow slightly but there’s an infuriating tilt to his lips. “Sure. I’d love to sign something for you, Jordan.”

“Great.” I hand him a pen before pulling out the toilet paper and unrolling it on the counter. “Right here.”

He stares at it for a moment before his eyes close and he takes a deep, calming breath. A flutter of delight moves through me.

This is our game. I push and poke and prod and flick and he doesn't give an inch. Doesn't show an ounce of frustration or annoyance or impatience.

Tate Ward is so controlled. Just once, I'd love to see him break.

"I'm going to keep it in the men's room," I tell him.

His eyes open and he's actually smiling.

"So people can use it to wipe their ass," I add, and he drops his head. Watching him squirm fills my heart with joy.

"Yeah." He nods. "I got that, Jordan."

He holds that annoying, unfazed expression, his eyes bright with entertainment. Tate Ward is so handsome that it makes me sick.

"Sometimes," I tell him, "I really want to punch you in the throat."

His eyebrows lift in mild surprise, like I told him I got a parking ticket. "You think you could reach?"

My jaw drops. "Was that a short joke?"

"It wasn't a joke."

The unwelcome urge to laugh sneaks up my throat and I clamp my lips shut so I don't give in to this childish game we're playing. He isn't funny. "I'm five-four. I'm not short."

He's at least a foot taller than me, though. *Could* I actually reach? Of course I could—oh. He's smiling like he knows he's gotten to me.

"You seem tense today, Jordan."

"I'm not tense." I'm so tense, now that he's here. "I feel great."

His eyes narrow, that stupid fucking smile on his dumb mouth. "Hmm."

"I do."

I sound defensive. My face is going red, so I mutter something about checking on his order and whirl around, heading to the kitchen.

"Don't be fooled by Tate Ward's dashing good looks, though," I read out loud from the magazine article about him as he eats his sandwich. I bought it weeks ago and kept it tucked under the bar for exactly this purpose. *"This single dad is the most well-respected man in professional hockey, beloved by players, fans, and fellow coaches. Even the parents at his daughter's school sing his praises, regaling this interviewer with stories of his*

involvement in school events and generosity with his time, money, and attention.” I hold a finger up. “Excuse me a moment.”

I turn around and pretend to convulse, making a wretching noise, before turning back and politely wiping at my mouth.

“Do you normally read out loud,” he asks, “or is that just a treat for me?”

“*During the hour I spent with hockey’s most eligible bachelor,*” I continue, ignoring him, “*all praises and compliments were politely rebuffed with a gentle change in conversation to the charities with which Coach Ward is involved. Wow.*” I look up. He’s rubbing the bridge of his nose like he does when he’s just about had enough of me, and my heart sings. “How honorable of you.”

I flip back to the cover and pretend to admire the handsome picture of him, sitting on a stool in a t-shirt and jeans, looking like a model. “And what a *flattering* cover photo.”

He lets out the world’s quietest sigh, looking around.

“Admit it.” I narrow my eyes at him with a conspiratorial look. “This was the first picture they took, wasn’t it? You got it in one.”

“May I have the bill, please?”

“You can end this,” I tell him, printing the bill out and dropping it on the counter in front of him. “Stop coming to my bar and stop checking up on me. It’s been, what? Three years?”

Since he started with the Storm.

“Three and a half.” His eyes meet mine and there’s a dip in my stomach. “Talk to your father,” he says simply.

Laugh out fucking loud. There’s an ice cube’s chance in hell of that happening. I was done with Ross Sheridan ten years ago, the day he skipped my mother’s funeral.

“Maybe I will.” I won’t. “Maybe I’ll march into his office, give him a big hug, and join the Storm organization so that one day, he can pass it down to me.” I gasp. “Maybe we can run it together, the two of us. Wouldn’t that be fun?”

Deep in my chest, it still hurts to joke about. I know I’m not meant for that world. But still, it hurts.

Tate doesn’t laugh, though. He doesn’t even smile. “I hope you do go see your dad, Jordan,” he pulls his wallet out and takes out a few bills, “because I have better things to do than babysit you.”

His eyes flash with something sharp, and victory surges through me. Got him. Fucking *got* him. I got Tate Ward's unending patience to slip.

He stands, slips his jacket on, and I frown down at the bills he set on the receipt. It's too much money.

"You're not supposed to tip the owner." He knows this. I tell him every time.

"My mistake," he says over his shoulder, halfway to the door. "I forgot."

He does it to bother me. "You must be getting forgetful in your old age," I call after him.

With his back to me, he laughs, low and dry, a sound that goes straight to the spot between my stomach and lungs. The joke doesn't land, because Ward makes forty look fucking incredible, and he knows it.

"Have a great rest of your day, Jordan."

The door opens and closes, and I'm alone again.

I look down at the receipt and crumple it into a tiny ball of rage. He tipped a hundred percent.

Again.