**Trent vs. The Boys**

**Carrie S. Allen**

 I dish another pass to Megan, because I am that desperately and obviously in love with her.

 With quick, soft hands, she cradles the puck on her tape for only the split second it takes her to slip past the defenseman and put a wrister over the goalie’s blocker.

 And that’s the amazing thing about Megan, or maybe it’s more like #8 or #9 on the list. If I passed to Joey or Derrick, they’d get all excited about the defenseman and shoulder into him, losing the puck. Or they’d pull out their brand-new slapshot, that in their brain is 85 mph, but in real life has a 2% chance of connecting.

 But Megan, she’s got skills and a cool head and she’d rather show off a quick wrister than a slapshot, or quick feet than a check.

 I meet her in the slot with my fists raised and wrap her in a celebratory hug. That’s the other thing about Megan. She’s gorgeous and she smells amazing, unlike the rest of our team, and when she squeezes me back, my breath leaves me for more than one reason. I glance at the clock over her shoulder. Five minutes left in this game. Five minutes left in our season.

 Five minutes left till I can ask her out.

#

 Coach Norman smacks Megan between the shoulder blades, right on her name plate. Henson. For a moment, my good mood over winning our last game of the season slips. My eyes automatically go to the spot behind the D, where Mich would be standing if Megan’s asshole of a stepfather hadn’t gotten her removed from her coaching position.

 Megan, barely breathing hard next to me on the bench, elbows me. “She saw your awesome pass,” she reminds me.

 Of course she did; she’s in the stands, sitting between Mom and Dad. There’s a frostiness between her and Mom, angled away from each other, and I can practically feel Dad’s jiggling knee rattling the old rink like an earthquake. *You and me both, dude*. Three nights ago, Mich told us what’s really been going on with her team this year. It’s been scary to let her out of my sight ever since. I knew shit was off, but I thought it was harmless pranks. I didn’t know how bad it was.

 And it’s stupid, because clearly Mich can handle herself. She came out of it all, didn’t she? But still. I feel guilty that I didn’t see it. I should have at least guessed what was going on.

 “I miss her on the bench,” Megan says.

 “Me too.” I feel like we should have a deeper conversation about this, but I don’t know how much she knows about what happened. I doubt Henson filled her in on the ugly stuff. It sounds like maybe she’s trying to apologize for Henson, but there’s now four minutes left in the season and I kind of want to skip to the part where I ask her how she feels about dating teammates when you’re not actually in season anymore.

 Pipes makes a save and I stand, whacking my stick against the boards. “Pipesyyyyy!” I holler. “Way to keep us in the game!”

 We’re up 3-1 but this would be the worst time for Calumet to score and get enough mojo to tie up. I can’t afford overtime. As it is, I can barely remember the speech I memorized for Megan.

 “Hey, where’d they put you today?” I ask her. When Megan joined our team, the rink manager tried to shuffle her off to the broom closet where Mich changes—changed, before she got booted from her team. But Megan’s mom and Coach Norman threw a fit. I think Megan was a little embarrassed. Whatever’s good for Mich is good for Megan, in her brain. But Coach said no way was Megan getting treated as less just because she’s the only girl on our team. So, depending on the day’s schedule, sometimes the rink gives her a full locker room, sometimes they give her the ref room, sometimes she has to hoof it to the employee changing room behind the garage.

 “Locker Room B,” she says, and then grins at me. “Why, do you need a safe place to change away from Joey’s body spray?”

 *Don’t think about changing with Megan Don’t think about changing with Megan Don’t think Don’t think Don’t think…*

 The real answer is that when she’s done getting dressed, I’ll be standing outside Locker Room B with a smooshed bouquet of flowers that probably smell more like my hockey bag than roses by now. But Joey saves me from answering by taking a dumbass penalty with one minute left in the game, throwing his shoulder into a kid barreling past with the puck.

 “Megan! Trent!” Coach Norman yells.

 I hop over the boards, heading for the faceoff dot, with a quick look over my shoulder into the stands. Michigan aims two thumbs up at me. Or maybe it’s at Megan. We’re both looking at her.

 We kill the minute left, with only one weak shot on Pipesy, and finish the game, and our season, with a lot of whooping and fake punches thrown at our teammates’ heads. I don’t know how Megan puts up with us. The rink manager opens the doors noisily, making his point that he’s got a public skate to clean the ice for, and Coach Norman breaks up our celebration and shoos us off the ice.

 I crane my head around, looking for Megan, but she’s already disappeared.

 “Looking for your girlfriend?” Cole asks, punching my arm right on the shoulder pad. Hurts his bare hand more than it hurts my shoulder pad, I’m sure.

 “She left the ice early.”

 He shrugs. “Probably ‘cause they got her hiking to Marquette to change.”

 “Nah, she’s just in B today.”

 He gets a wicked grin on his face. “B, huh?” Before he can make some crack about Megan showering or about me being all clingy and swoony over her, I shoulder him into the cinderblock wall for fun. Then I hustle to Locker Room D. Because I cannot smell bad for what’s coming next.

#

 I took the world’s fastest shower, put on a clean shirt—my Red Wings sweatshirt, the one Megan once said she likes. She is welcome to it, too. I will happily be that boyfriend who lets his hot gf have his favorite sweatshirt. Instead of my usual hat, I quickly—but carefully—comb my hair in the smeared mirror over the locker room sink.

 Freddie Pipes whistles at me. “Hot date, Trent?”

 I’m so hyped up, I wink back at my goalie. “Never know.”

 I shoulder my bag—I was super careful not to let the boys see the flowers, but not to squish them either. They’re nestled between my shin pads at the very top of my open bag. I grab my sticks at the doorway and throw a “See you, boys,” over my shoulder on my way out of the locker room.

 There’s a commotion at the other end of the hallway, a loud, hooting bunch of my teammates, clearly still game-high. But as I approach, my pace quickens and my heart rate speeds up. Megan—she’s in the doorway of her locker room, and there’s Cole, full gear on top and his bare butt sticking out the top of his breezers, bent over and shaking it at Megan. Xavier and Austin are on the other side of the hallway, laughing so hard they’re leaning against the wall to stay upright.

 I drop my bag, ignoring the flowers sticking out the top, and charge Cole, wrestling him to the ground. He’s dazed for a split second, but he starts punching me as soon as he realizes what’s up, and I give it back to him, punch for punch.

 “You fucking asshole!” I holler, as Xav and Austin pull us off each other. I stumble out of Austin’s grasp, shaking so hard I can barely get my feet under me. I only get a brief look at Megan’s bright red face before she slams the door shut in our faces. The lock clicks.

 “You done?” Cole asks me.

 “Are you fucking kidding me?” My knuckles are smarting and my legs burn, a combo of post-game sore and the wrestling match, but I’ll go another round if I have to. I’ll go twelve more. “No, I’m not done. Get your asses back in our locker room, all of you.”

 I sound like my dad when he’s pissed. Maybe that’s not a bad thing, because they listen. The three of them trudge to the locker room, Cole pulling his pants back up as he goes.

 Guys are getting ready to leave when we enter the room, but I block the door with my body. “Everybody sit. Now.”

 “What’s up, dude?” Joey asks.

 My hands are shaking so badly. I jam my fists onto my hips to calm them, and pace back and forth in front of the door. “You guys don’t know what happened with Mich this week. And I can’t really tell you, because it’s so bad that cops are involved. Like, Daniel and those dudes are going to jail.”

 Pipes gasps and I check his face. And the face of Joey next to him and Derrick next to him, clenching his fist against his knee. These guys like Mich. She’s always been my hot older sister—and it’s not weird, I can totally admit, my sister is pretty. But she’s also a badass on the ice, and she actually gives my teammates the time of day. Those other varsity guys would walk past us at the rink without even a head nod or a “hey, dude.” But Michigan, she coached our team and she took the time to break down a skill or help you practice it. And whenever we saw my guys around town, she’d greet them by name and ask how they were doing.

 “What I can tell you,” I say, “is that it started out just like that.” I point at Cole. “Stupid stuff.”

 “What’d you do?” Joey asks Cole.

 “Nothing, dude. I just mooned Megan. It was funny.” He ribs Xav with his elbow, but Xav doesn’t laugh.

 “You think that’s funny?” Pipesy asks. “Your IQ is lower than I thought, Cole.”

 “That’s how it started,” I repeat. “The varsity guys were doing dumb hazing shit and it escalated. Fast. Daniel’s going to fucking prison, and he deserves it. Three nights ago, I sat next to my sister at the police station while she finally told us all what happened and…” I squeeze my trembling hands together, exhale a shaky breath. “We’re not going to be like that.”

 I stare down my team, every single one of them. “We are not going to be like that.”

 “I’m with you, Trent,” Pipes says. “We don’t need that stuff on our team. And Megan’s part of this team. It’s bad enough she has to change in her own room and the refs treat her different and sometimes parents get all worked up about her being here. We need to work harder to make sure she feels like part of our team.”

 Guilt pricks at my conscience. I was just about to ask her out. Which sets her apart from us even more, doesn’t it? Or does it?

 Not that it matters. It’s all screwed up now. I can’t ask her if she likes me when she slammed the door in my face. And our teammate’s ass.

 “I agree,” Joey says, bumping fists with Pipes. “We’re better than that.”

 There’s a silent murmur around the locker room as the rest of the team agrees. Even Cole nods. “Sorry, dude. I was only doing it for fun, but… fuck, man. I could punch those guys that did that to Mich. I don’t ever want it to go too far.”

 *It already did*, I think. But I walk over to him, man to man, and hold out my fist. Cole bumps my scuffed knuckles with his, and pauses there, lifting his eyes to meet my glare. He gives me a short nod of his chin, to let me know he got the message, loud and clear.

 With that settled, I leave the locker room to collect my bag and my smooshed flowers. But when I open the door, Megan is leaning on the wall next to it.

 So is Coach Norman.

#

 Coach’s arms are crossed and his frown says that it doesn’t matter if the season is over, someone’s getting *worked*. I’m afraid to look at Megan, not only to judge how upset she is, but because I’m afraid if my focus slips from Coach for even a second, I might be one of the ones who gets worked.

 His face never slips, but he nods toward the locker room. “Proud of you, Trent.”

 “Yes, sir,” I mumble, but I don’t want him to be proud of me for that. That’s the bare minimum for being a decent human.

 “You handled the team well,” Coach continues. Then with a glance at Megan, he amends. “You handled *most* of the team well.”

 He uncrosses his arms, pulls his shoulders back, and I swear he Hulks up to twice his size. “My turn with Cole.” He disappears into the locker room.

 *Oh shit*. I almost want to stick around to see that.

 Awkwardly, I turn to Megan, opening my mouth to ask if she’s OK.

 Her jaw is clenched and her eyes narrow at me. “So that’s why you wanted to know what locker room I was in,” she says.

 My jaw drops. Double shit. Triple, quadruple shit.

 “No!” I shake my head vigorously, and my hair, so neatly combed only twenty minutes ago, flops around wildly now. I try to smooth it down with my hands. “It wasn’t, I swear it wasn’t.”

 But Megan is heading down the hallway, away from me.

 Crap crap crap. I scan the hallway, trying to figure out what to do. Do I chase after her? She clearly hates me, so there’s my answer on the question of us. But, also, she’s my friend. My teammate.

 What would Jack do? Mich’s boyfriend clearly managed to get past their recent problems. Apparently, he and Mich had it out, but once Mich was honest with him, they were cool. But that’s it, isn’t it? Jack handles conflicts, he doesn’t ignore them, and he expects everyone else to be that straightforward as well. I grab the flowers from my bag and run down the hallway after Megan.

#

 She’s leaning against the boards behind the home net, watching the learn-to-skate students wobble around the ice. I approach warily. She doesn’t appear to be crying. She’s actually surprisingly calm.

 I wonder, if Michigan had a coach who’d stormed the locker room for her, would she have been able to be this calm about everything?
 And then I remember that Michigan’s coach, who didn’t storm the locker room, who never stood up for her, is Megan’s stepdad.

 I hold out the flowers as I reach her side. Either as a shield or a peace offering, I don’t know. They’re fairly wilted by now, and a pink petal slips out of the dotted cellophane and hits the cement floor at Megan’s feet.

 “I asked your locker room so that I could bring you these,” I say, channeling Jack. Full, unflinching honesty, even when it hurts to say the words. “And I accidentally let it slip to Cole where you were changing today, but I had no clue that he would do that. No clue, I swear. I’m so sorry that I told him where to find you.”

 She looks at the flowers but doesn’t move to take them. “I believe you. You did take him down. And thanks, for what you said in the locker room.”

 Her voice is flat, though. She’s upset about something else.

 “You heard, didn’t you?” I say. “What I told the guys about Michigan?”

 Megan wipes under her eyes, sudden and quick. “Yeah. Trent, is she OK?”

 I lower the flowers. I am the world’s biggest ass. Megan’s right smack in the middle of all this crap, my sister’s going through hell, and I’m trying to find a way to tell a girl I like her. Awesome timing, Trent. Way to propose on the Titanic. Maybe you could have pulled your head from your own butt and thought about everyone else?

 “She will be OK. She’s trying out for her team tomorrow. Again.”

 “She’ll make it.” Megan’s smile is weak, but at least it’s there. “She’s got to hate me.”

 “Why would she hate you?”

 “Because of my… step-whatever.” She blows out a long breath.

 “She does not hate you. Henson… yeah. But you’re not him. Do you know what’s going to happen with him?”

 “He got fired.” She turns her back to the ice, leaning against the boards and crossing her arms. Her green fleece jacket looks so soft, I have to restrain myself from touching her arm. I want to hug her, but I think it would only make me feel better, not her.

 “It hasn’t been going well the last few months,” she admits. “Apparently, Mom getting back together with her old high school sweetheart wasn’t the answer she was looking for.”

 Panic rises in my chest. “You’re not… moving, are you?”

 She shakes her head. “I don’t think so. Mom loves being back here. And I kind of like it, too. We’re moving in with my aunt this week-- her sister-- and they’re best friends and Mom really loves her job. She’s actually the happiest I’ve seen her in a while.”

 “And you?” I risk scooting a few inches closer, leaning against the boards like she is.

 “I’m fine.” She shrugs. “This isn’t the first team of guys I’ve played on. Not the first time I’ve seen a teammate’s butt. What is it with you boys and dropping trou anyway?”

 I shake my head. “I’ve never done that.”

 “I know. You wouldn’t.” She smiles at me. “Why did you bring me flowers?”

 “I, uh.” I hold them up again. “I thought, because the season is over now, that I would tackle my mooning teammate and bring you flowers and park my white steed out in the parking lot and you would, you know, swoon or something really really really stupid.”

 She takes the flowers now, sticking her cute little nose into the bunch and breathing deep. “Ah. They smell like hockey.”

 I work on smoothing my hair down again. “Yeah, they got squished in my bag. And my pads are kind of sweaty.”

 “Thank you,” she says. “I like them.”

 *OK, but do you like* me?

 This is harder than I thought. I try to channel Jack again. I had a whole nice speech practiced for telling Megan how I felt. About how her wrist shot is the best on the team, and she’s the most solid of us on her edges, and how she’s super smart and pretty.

 But that’s as far as I got. I kinda forgot to work on what comes next. Do I ask her on a date? I’m thirteen, I don’t have a car. I can’t take her to a nice restaurant, because I hear that costs money.

 “Maybe we could…” I search my brain. What—do I ask her over to play video games? How pathetic is that? “Like, on Saturday…”

 She perks up. “There’s a Rivalry Series game on Saturday. We could watch it at my aunt’s house.”

 I nod, like I know what that is. Game, it’s a game. Sports are good.

 But Megan’s no dummy. “You know, USA-Canada?”

 USA is playing Canada? Aren’t the guys in season—oh. She means the women, doesn’t she?

 “Always up for a game,” I say. I’ll smile and nod and google the heck out of it once I’m out of sight.

 “Especially this Series—they’re tied!” Megan’s picking up momentum. I’m watching her transform back to her normal, bubbly self, and I’ll say yes to anything that puts that light back into her eyes. “Did you see the last game? That’s where I got that move today.” She gestures at the ice. “That second goal was exactly what Brianna Decker did late in the third. Of course, she had Renata Fast bearing down on her, which is a lot scarier than a thirteen-year-old boy from Calumet.”

 That slick goal was a move from this Decker girl? I’m all in. I feel myself picking up momentum, too. Megan plus hockey? Just so happens to be my perfect idea of a first date.

**Game Over**