# Penalty Box Blues

# Chapter One

When the Idaho area code popped up on Stryker Gyllenhaal’s iPhone, he knew Karma Kincaid was calling in his debt. The only thing that surprised him was that she’d waited two days to call.

Two days was a lifetime in Karma’s world.

Two days since his hockey team, the New Orleans Cajun Rage beat the scourge known as the New York Spartans and won The Cup in the seventh game of the series.

It had been two days, and the fact that they’d won The Cup hadn’t yet sunk into his thick skull. Maybe it was because he still hadn’t recovered from the hangover, not to mention the bruises from all the hits he took in that last killer game.

And it had been two days since he awoke in a cold sweat remembering the deal he’d made with Karma.

He slid his finger over the screen and tapped the speaker icon. “Karma Kincaid, what a surprise.”

“Is that a hint of sarcasm? You’re just lucky I waited this long to call. So, since you’re probably tired of hearing all the congratulatory crap, I won’t bore you with it. I gotta tell you, though, business at Humpin’ Hannah’s has been amazing since The Rajun Cajuns made the play-offs. Thanks for that and for waiting until the seventh game to win The Cup. It gave me the full series to make bank, and then we had a Fill the Cup Party to celebrate your win. Ka-ching.”

“Yeah, Karma, you know, the guys and I planned to string out the Series until game seven just with you and your bank account in mind.”

“I thought so.”

Her laugh, crisp and deep, rang through the phone. A picture of Karma took shape in his mind, her blonde, curly hair flying everywhere like a hot Medusa, her bright green eyes snapping at him. Yes, Karma’s eyes actually snapped and got scary when she was pissed, and a pissed off Karma Kincaid was to be avoided at all costs.

“Stryker! I’m so stoked. Having our hometown boy, The Enforcer, bring The Cup to Boise and Humpin’ Hannah’s is going to be epic. I have visions of dollar signs and free press dancing in my head. And at the risk of increasing your already overinflated ego, I have to admit that you were pretty amazing all season—which, when you think about it, is not surprising. After all, I only back winners.” Karma paused, and he could almost see her winking. “I have awesome instincts.”

“Are those compliments I’m hearing? From you? Impossible.” He wondered if she was punking him. Karma had never, in all the years they’d known each other, ever complimented him or anyone else that he could remember. “Have you had a personality transplant? Or was it a lobotomy?”

“Hey.” She let out a huff that meant she was probably blowing the hair out of her eyes in exasperation. She would have hit him if he were within striking distance. “That’s not fair. I always compliment people when it’s deserved. Can I help it if compliments are rarely deserved?”

Karma would have made a hell of a coach. She’d ridden his ass all through college. Okay, she’d ridden his ass since that day in their first semester freshman year when she found him getting hammered after his coaches had benched him for failing all his midterms. He’d had a failing grade in every class but Gym and Freshman Seminar. Karma must have missed having her brothers to run roughshod over, so from that day forward, she made Stryker her own personal pet project.

Karma had never let him get away with squat. She hadn’t let him skate through classes in the hope that the professor was a hockey fan and would give him a C to keep him playing. No, Karma—or her rich Grandfather—funded a tutor, Trish Reynolds, who’d taught him enough to pass his classes on his own. He’d stuck with the little drill instructor all through college. She’d kept the NCAA and his coaches off his back about his grades, kept him on the ice, and in a position to be seen by the scouts, and it hadn’t hurt that he’d ended up learning enough to get by even after his hockey career. He’d always thought the promise of giving Karma a week of his time—if his team ever won The Cup—in exchange for tutoring, and anything else Karma had to do to get him over the NCAA 2.0 GPA minimum, would be worth it. Now that it was time to pay up, he wasn’t so sure. He had to hand it to Karma though—she’d scored the hat-trick of a lifetime. What were the odds of a failing college freshman hockey player making a pro team, getting into the finals, and winning The Cup? Ten million to one? He’d bet Trish Reynolds could figure it out without a calculator.

“You know what this means, Stryker. I own you for a week, and you have to spend your one day with The Cup right here, in Boise, at my kick-ass bar. I’ve been busy calling all my media contacts, and I’ve started planning. I just need to know the date we have The Cup so I can firm up the schedule.”

He couldn’t help the groan that escaped. “I have The Cup July 29th. It’s a Saturday.”

“Fabulous. I’d like you to fly in no later than the 22nd, and your first day of freedom will be July 30th. Text me the dates you’d like to fly in and out of Boise, and I’ll make the reservations.”

“Those dates are fine.”

“Are you sure? I’m going to keep you really busy that week so it’s not as if you’ll have time to spend with friends—except me, that is. You do realize that when I say I own you, I’m not joking.”

“Not a news flash, Karma. I do know you.”

“Why don’t I get you an open-ended ticket? After all, it’s the offseason, it’s not as if you have anywhere else to be, is it? No girlfriend or significant other?”

“I had no idea you were interested.” Sweat prickled on his forehead. Shit. He liked Karma—always had, but not that way.

Karma cleared her throat. “Really, Stryker? Did you just ask me if I was interested in you?”

“You’re the one who brought it up.”

“Ewww. No. It’d be like sleeping with one of my brothers. Seriously, talk about a high ick factor.”

Thank God. “Then why’d you ask?”

“It’s important information for the week of media I’m planning. Besides, if you’re involved with someone, I might have to rethink the whole bachelor auction idea.”

He groaned. Again.

“No, I’m not involved with anyone, and no, I’m not doing a bachelor auction. No way in hell. Remember, we said that you’d own me—within limits. A bachelor auction is beyond my limit.”

Karma let out an exasperated grumble. He could envision her eyes snapping like towels in a middle school locker room. “Fine. No bachelor auction. What about the Humpin’ Hannah’s Hunks Calendar photoshoot?”

“As long as I’m not expected to pose naked.”

“Well shit, Stryker. You can stand behind The Cup, can’t you? It’s not as if anyone will be able to see anything. Will they? I mean, I know you’re a big guy and all, but The Cup should cover up most of your rod and tackle, right? And if not, there’s always Photoshop.”

“Karma.”

“So,” She continued, ignoring the growl that made professional hockey players quake in their skates, “You can stay at the apartment over The Three French Hens, our shop. I know your penchant for privacy and avoiding the press, so you’ll love it. No one will know where you are except for us. Oh, and you’re going to have to get over that little problem you have with the press the week you’re mine. You know that, right?”

“I know.” His stomach already burned with dread.

“You can stay as long as you want. The apartment has been empty since Mary Claire got married.”

“Mary Claire got married?” The third of the Three French Hens. There was Karma—his present nightmare, Trish Reynolds—the smartest woman he’d ever known and a born librarian, at least that was the way she’d dressed in college and Mary Claire—who was... nice in an artsy-fartsy kinda way. Mary Claire wore more paint than makeup and always wafted the distinct aroma of Eau de Turpentine.

“You remember Jack Bennett from high school, don’t you? He came home from Germany last year and talked Mary Claire into marrying him on Christmas Eve.”

“Marriage?” Stryker felt the familiar zip of an electric shock skitter up his spine. Marriage: the other item on Stryker’s no-way-in-hell list. It was a shortlist. He avoided both the press and marriage like Indiana Jones avoided snakes. In his experience, the press did nothing but look for the next sports scandal, the next salacious tidbit, and the next new and better way to ruin a player’s life and career. Thus far, he’d excelled at avoiding both items on The Short List as he called it. He didn’t date. Sure, he hooked up with women, but he made it a point to never ask one out. As for the press, he never opened his mouth except to answer game questions for which he’d memorized safe, canned, innocuous responses they didn’t want to hear. Unfortunately, that wasn’t going to work for Karma’s version of Hell Week. He’d have to actually talk to the press for a full week and do whatever else Karma planned for him, because not only was Karma scary when pissed, she was just a little bit evil too. In other words, he was completely and utterly pucked.

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“You have to do it.” Karma sat and threw her jean-clad leg over the arm of the couch she’d just helped carry into The Three French Hens. She inspected her favorite cowboy boots—they were red with bold black stitching, and she loved them with all the enthusiasm that a flat-chested thirteen-year-old loved her first padded bra. Shit, her brand new boots already had a scuff on the toe.

“I don’t have to do a damn thing.”

Trish stood over Karma, hands-on-hips, feet spread shoulder-width apart, eyes squinting, and nostrils flaring. Trish looked and sounded like she wanted to throttle Karma, which was nothing out of the ordinary, so she wasn’t at all worried.

“I may be your partner in The Three French Hens, but Humpin’ Hannah’s is all yours, girlfriend.”

Karma refocused on the matter at hand and took in Trish’s shimmering dark eyes. Trish’s eyes always watered when she was over-the-top pissed. Karma would say she was crying, but Trish claimed overactive tear glands. Potato, po-tah-to.

“Come on, you have to admit you’re the perfect person to handle Stryker Gyllenhaal. You know him better than anyone. Hell, you personally tutored him through almost every class he ever passed in college. You’ve spent more time with the man than any human, *without* the need for helmets and skates.”

Trish looked as if she were about to hyperventilate. Her already pale skin whitened even more, her dark eyes went from large to huge, and her thick mane of blue-black hair only added to her *Night of the Living Dead* look.

“You have to be joking. You want me to be his—“Trish’s hands flailed, and she cleared her throat before swallowing as if she’d inhaled half a hot dog in one bite without chewing, “—his h-h-handler? For a week?”

Curiouser and curiouser. Karma’s Spidey sense went off like a car alarm. “Yes, you have to. I’m going to be too busy dealing with everything on my end—the golf tourney, Humpin’ Hannah’s Boise River Float Party, and everything else in my media bag-o-goodies on top of running Humpin’ Hannah’s. Which reminds me, do you have any idea where I can get a realistic-looking penalty box built for the bar?” She looked up from the notes she’d made on her iPhone to Trish’s blank face, which was turning slightly blue around the lips. “Hmmm… “Karma made a note to ask Trish again after she got over the apparent shock. Maybe next week.”

“Mary Claire can handle the shop—”

The bells over the door jingled.

“—it’s going to be perfect.”

The scent of turpentine filled the air. Speak of the angel. Mary Claire, dressed in painting clothes, sauntered toward them and pushed her red hair out of her eyes, leaving a streak of yellow paint on her forehead. “What’s perfect?”

Karma waggled her eyebrows and was about to pat the spot on the chintz couch beside her, but after taking another look at the paint-splattered Mary Claire, nixed that idea. “When Stryker Gyllenhaal comes to Boise for his week-long media blitz, Trish is going to be his handler. You can run the shop, and I’ll deal with all the last-minute decisions and details regarding the media, the Cup events I have planned, and run Humpin’ Hannah’s. See? Perfect.”

“H-h-h-how could this p-p-possibly be p-perfect?”

Trish was actually stuttering. All the hair on the back of Karma’s neck stood straight up. It was as if she’d been zapped by a car battery. “Stryker hasn’t hurt you in some way, has he?”

“H-h-hurt m-m-me? How could he h-h-hurt me?”

“You’re stuttering. I haven’t heard you stutter since the night I walked in on Billy Cavanaugh forcing himself on you, and I made his head one with a crystal vase.” She’d knocked him out and left his lifeless body on the front stoop of their apartment, allowing him to come around surrounded by Denver’s finest.

Mary Claire followed the conversation the way she always did—she stepped in only when things got out of hand, but soaked up all information like a dried sponge dumped into a sink of soapy water.

Trish took a measured deep breath and blew it out slowly. “Stryker and I were never involved. I was never anything more than his tutor.”

Karma raised an eyebrow and kept her better-than-a-lie-detector stare riveted on Trish.

“He didn’t know I was alive other than to meet at our scheduled times. I don’t think he so much as looked at me, even less touched me.“

“Then what’s the big deal?“

Trish’s mouth opened and shut, opened again, but nothing came out.

Mary Claire reached over and slid her hand up and down Trish’s arm. “Trish? What is it? What’s going on?“

It was as if Trish were zapped with the same battery that had Karma’s hair standing on end.

“Nothing’s going on. I’m just busy, and I don’t have time to take a week off from the business to babysit Stryker and do Karma’s bidding. Contrary to popular belief, I actually work full time here. I put in over fifty hours last week.“

Mary Claire, the nurturer among them, continued soothing Trish. “I know you work full time, and I appreciate you covering for me the other day, I really do, but I can’t help but think there’s more to this that you’re not telling us.“

“There’s not. It’s nothing. I’m leaving. I’m done. I have an auction to get to tomorrow morning at the crack, so I’m taking off early.” Trish spun on her heels, her long hair flew in a wave around her head, and settled perfectly over her shoulders. The sound of the bells ringing angrily filled the air, followed by a slam of the door.

Karma tamped down the spurt of jealousy over Trish’s perfect hair. Trish had never had a bad hair day in her entire life, and it was so dark—Trish’s hair, not her life—that Karma couldn’t help but envy it. Karma had curly dishwater blonde hair that was a little like Karma herself—it had a mind of its own and an aversion to anything or anyone trying to control or tame it.

“What are you really up to?”

Mary Claire’s question dragged Karma out of her moment of hair envy. “Nothing.” Okay, she hadn’t meant to start anything, but now that she obviously had, she wasn’t going to let it go. When Karma caught Mary Claire’s dubious expression, she laughed. “Honest, I just needed to find someone who would babysit Stryker and make sure he shows up and does everything he’s supposed to do. I don’t know why, but Stryker doesn’t seem at all enthused about this little venture of ours.”

Trish laughed, and it wasn’t a funny-ha-ha laugh either. It was an annoying and slightly scary Evil Witch of the West laugh. “You know damn well why Stryker is unenthused. No guy like him wants to be paraded around like the grand champion at the Westminster Dog Show for a week—especially since he seems to have a real reluctance to attract attention of any kind that doesn’t involve his performance on the ice. Is it so extraordinary to think that Trish might be uncomfortable being the one asked to spend a week responsible for holding the man’s leash and forcing him to perform, knowing how much he’s going to hate it?”

“Trish spent four years tutoring Stryker in almost every class he took knowing full well how much he hated that. It never bothered her before—what’s so different now?”

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Trish kept one eye on the speedometer and the other on the road while practicing mindfulness—rather unsuccessfully. This whole mindfulness practice proved much more difficult than it had initially sounded. It was the same with meditation. For something that in concept seemed so easy—concentrate on breathing and empty your mind of all thoughts—meditation was the most challenging exercise at which she’d repeatedly tried and failed. She’d never before been unable to succeed at something she’d diligently made an attempt to do.

Her phone rang, interrupting her umpteenth attempt to practice mindfulness, and Trish pressed the phone icon on the screen when Mary Claire’s name popped up. “I’m still not doing it, Claire.”

“Okay, but just hear me out.”

Damn, Trish hated it when Mary Claire spoke to her using that soothing, tell-me-all voice she’d developed while taking a course in art therapy. Trish let out a slow breath and reduced the pressure she’d inadvertently put on the gas pedal. “Fine.”

“I know you’ve been working really hard on this whole self-help thing you’re into. You’re studying the law of attraction, positive thinking, changing your vibrations, and opening yourself up to the possibilities of the Universe, God, or whatever you call your higher power, puts in your path, correct?”

“You haven’t told Karma about this, have you?”

“No, of course not. I swore I wouldn’t, and I always keep my word. I was just thinking that your reaction to the thought of spending the week being Stryker’s handler was a bit extreme. Maybe it’s something you need to, I don’t know, investigate. Think about the reason for your reaction. Cogitate on it.”

Trish had nothing to say that wouldn’t be peppered with four-letter words, so she chose to say nothing. An uncomfortable silence filled the line.

“Trish, we’ve known each other since you skipped two grades and ended up in fourth grade sitting next to me. Even then, when you were the smallest kid in the class and knew no one, you’ve always been more or less unshakeable. This thing with Stryker shook you. Now, if it’s true that you have no history or bad blood with Stryker and no relationship, then why the extreme reaction?”

The silence on the line did nothing but amp up the tension. Mary Claire knew too much as it was, and if Karma got wind of it, no one, no matter how well-intentioned, could keep her from extricating every relevant piece of information. Having Karma, someone who could make the lead interrogator at the CIA look like an amateur, as a best friend certainly had its drawbacks.

“Okay, I’ll back off, but know that I’m here if you need to talk about it, or if you need someone to bounce ideas off of. No pressure. It’s just that envisioning your future, goals, and dreams as if they’re already part of your life probably feels safe. But if this whole law of attraction thing starts to manifest your dreams into reality, well, that would be enough to freak anyone out. Take my word for it. When Jack popped back into my life—someone who had been my ideal man, whom I thought was completely unattainable, well, it threw me for the loop of a lifetime. That first night we ran into him at Humpin’ Hannah’s shook me to the core. I have no doubt that I looked as shaken as you did when Karma asked you to be Stryker’s handler.”

“This is different. When I envisioned my dream man, I kinda used Stryker—you know, as a place holder. Just someone to fill the space in the picture in my mind that I want to be occupied by my dream man. I just couldn’t put a face to someone I didn’t know yet. Do you understand what I’m saying? I didn’t *mean* for Stryker Gyllenhaal to be the one I want to date, marry, and create a family with.”

“Do you find him physically attractive?”

“Who wouldn’t? The man is gorgeous. But he’s a pro hockey player for God’s sake. He lives in New Orleans, and I live in Boise.”

“Other than his occupation, his physical location, and his apparent unattainability, do you have anything against him?”

“Like what?”

“Do you dislike him?”

“No, why would I?”

“You tell me? Your reaction was really over-the-top.”

Trish turned onto Irving and saw her sweet little cottage surrounded by flowers and felt the slightest bit of tension leave her shoulders. Mary Claire might not have Karma’s inquisition skills, but she had no less determination—and that was scary. Trish parked in front of the house and turned off the car, shoving the phone between her ear and shoulder, and grabbed her purse.

“Doesn’t this law of attraction thing espouse dreaming big? Doesn’t it say to dream about things that you might consider unattainable?”

Trish tossed her purse over her shoulder and closed the car door with her hip. “Yes, but—”

“Doesn’t it suggest that you can succeed beyond your wildest dreams? And then, due to the positive vibes you radiate, and the change in your vibration ’station,’ if you will, things, people, and situations that before were unattainable become possibilities and throw themselves directly into your path?”

Trish punched the seven-digit entry code into the keyless lock and listened to the tumblers turn. “Yes, so?”

“So if this manifesting your dreams stuff works, then maybe by picturing Stryker—envisioning him—with or without the caveat that he’s not your real dream man and not someone you feel equal to attracting, the Universe just tossed him in your path. The problem as I see it is not that you don’t want him, it’s that you really don’t believe you can handle him.”

“You think I can’t handle Stryker? I handled him for almost four years.” Trish pushed open the front door, stepped into her living room, and tossed her purse on the table.

“As a tutor, sure, but everything is different now, isn’t it? Before, you saw him as a student, but now, when you envision him, you’re seeing him as a what? Boyfriend? Lover? Mate?”

“Mate? Did you seriously just say mate?”

“You know what I meant. Husband, life partner, significant other? Whatever it is you want to call it.”

“Okay, yes, but I never meant to attract the *real* him—just someone like him.”

“Are you sure of that? Oh, and when you envisioned him, did you envision him with or without clothes?”

She definitely was not going to answer that last question because half of the time, when she was lying in bed all alone—again, she’d imagined him beside her, and he wasn’t wearing a hockey uniform. “I’m not sure of anything. I just started studying the Law of Attraction and manifesting my dreams. I was just, I don’t know, taking a practice run, I guess. I’m not ready for it to actually work! What was the Universe thinking?”

“I suppose this is the point where I tell you to be careful what you wish for—or in your case, envision, because you might just get it.”