

First Intermission

A Minor Penalties Short Story
Collection

S.B. Barnes

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Four Conversations Chris Calabrese Had About Tom Crowler

One

[Video of several members of the San Francisco Sea Lions clinking champagne glasses together]

“The Sea Lions’ annual fundraiser for the children’s ward at the St. Sebastian hospital is underway! Looking fine, boys!”

Top comments:

seelionssaylions: some of the boys look fine. many of the boys look like they would rather be shooting pucks at a washing machine in someone’s basement.

phileastonfanclub: love East’s fits 90% of the time, but man, elbow pads? Really? Dude is married to a supermodel.

(From: San Francisco Sea Lions official Instagram account, posted on 11/03/2022)

Chris pulled his tie looser. He'd followed the instructional YouTube video on how to do a half-Windsor knot to a tee, but despite it only being half of a knot it practically choked him. His dad tied his tie for the draft, which was the last time Chris had worn this suit. Dad told him to leave the tie knotted and slip it over his head. Chris should have listened, then he'd never have to bother tying it again.

Unless he stayed up this year, in which case they'd expect him to buy a second tie.

Maybe even a third.

Chris shuddered at the thought.

He took a deep breath and smiled at his date. Jessica returned the smile and patted his hand. "You're going to great, Chris. And remember—"

"Stay on your right side for the photo ops, I know. You look great from all angles, Jess."

Despite the thick layer of makeup, Chris could see her eyes crinkling through the smile. "You're such a flirt."

Chris forced a laugh. "Sorry. I know we're not getting back together. Thanks for this"

"No problem. But hey, if you can introduce me to Tom Crowler while we're here..."

"I bet he has a super serious girlfriend. Or wife." Crowler didn't wear a ring, not even one of the rubber ones some married guys wore on the ice. Which didn't mean anything, lots of couples didn't do rings.

Jessica shook her head. "No way a hockey player that famous could get married without anyone knowing."

Chris wanted to argue because he hadn't known about Vanderbilt being married either until he saw him pull the ring out of the coin compartment of his wallet after a night out during camp, but he didn't follow the gossip blogs like Jess did.

The car pulled up to the arena and Jess slid out of the back seat, thanking the driver. Chris had always appreciated that about her, how polite she was, especially to service staff. The worst part when she dumped him had been not getting to go out for meals together anymore. She understood how much fun it was to be nice to people and to make them smile. As he got out to join her in front of the Arena, she asked, "So remind me what we're supporting today?"

"Uh, it's a gala to support...wait, lemme check on my phone." Chris fumbled for the inside pocket of his suit jacket.

Jess laid a hand on his, stalling him. "We talked about this," she reminded him. "Use your *own* words or no one will take you seriously."

No one had ever taken Chris seriously, including Jess. When she dumped him, she called him a great "starter boyfriend". Not using his phone to remind himself about the right words would only speed up the process of his new teammates realizing how dumb he was.

But he didn't like to disappoint Jess, either, so he cleared his throat. "It's for the kids cancer ward at the hospital closest to the arena. We're raising funds for, um. New machines? I think?"

Chris didn't know what machines they needed. Those ones that beeped with your heart rate, maybe? Would he be asked? He'd never been to a gala, let alone one where he would be photographed for social media.

"Cool," Jess said.

The arena air made Chris shiver. Someone turned the AC up to the max no matter what went on, which he appreciated for game days when a

zillion people crowded the stands and the halls and the locker rooms, but in the drafty hallways where super rich people rented out boxes and the team held fancy functions, it caused a significant chill.

Jess smiled her most dazzling smile at the attendant who took her light jacket and Chris realized he counted as a super rich person now. Or at least super rich person adjacent. In the hockey world, an ELC counted as the bare minimum, but in the real world Chris signed a contract a few weeks ago which earned him a sum in one year which equaled ten years of hard work for his dad. And that wasn't even taking the bonuses into account.

Not that Chris would get the bonuses, and he doubted he'd stay up for the full season. He could block well enough and he'd been working on his speed, but on the whole he doubted "good at Juniors hockey" would translate as easily to the NHL as his parents seemed to expect.

Jess tucked her hand into the crook of his arm. "Oh my God, there's Camille Easton. I love her Insta. She's so refined."

"Wanna go say hi?"

A happy little squeal emanated from the back of her throat. "You are my *favorite ex*," she said.

Chris beamed. He didn't have a ton going for him, but he was great at staying friends with people he'd dated, and he loved being able to fulfil this wish for her. Besides, she used to go out with an underwear model in Montreal, so ranking above that guy made his day.

They made their way across the floor. Chris nodded his hellos to the servers, a few of whom he recognized as part of the usual catering staff for the team. Not many teammates had arrived yet, so far he mostly saw the coaches and a few guys from the front office gabbing over champagne.

Phil clapped Chris on the shoulder. “Breezy! Right on time!”

“Was I not supposed to be?”

Phil and his wife both laughed, not unkindly but Chris couldn’t shake the feeling it was at his expense.

Jess cleared her throat and Chris remembered his role here. “Oh, uh, this is my date tonight, Jessica Lombardi.”

Phil’s wife extended a long, elegant hand laden with several clunky rings. “Camille. What a pleasure to meet you.”

“Oh my God, it’s an honor,” Jess gushed. “I love the shoot you did for Vogue two years ago? With the feathers? You looked like an angel.”

It became evident that Chris was not required to have any further input in this conversation, especially when Camille invited Jess over to the refreshment station to get a drink.

Chris pulled at his tie again.

“Girlfriend?” Phil asked, watching his wife’s retreating form. Given the back of her dress only started right above her hips, Chris guessed his interest had to do with sexy thoughts. He stared down at his shoes to give Phil privacy.

“Ex, but she’s in town and she wanted to go to this and I needed a date, so.” He chanced a glance up (surely sexy thoughts had to be done by now?) and found Phil eyeing him thoughtfully.

“You want a beer?”

“Oh, um, are we allowed? The nutritionist said—”

“The nutritionist doesn’t expect anyone to listen to half the things she says, she just has to say them. Come on, let’s get you a drink.”

Both brands of beer on offer light. At nineteen, Chris had been legal in Canada for all of one hockey off-season so far, so he hadn’t

gotten much experience drinking yet. He elected to not remind Phil about his age as they clinked cans together.

“I imagined this way more fancy,” he admitted, examining the streamers dangling from the light fixtures.

“It’ll get there,” Phil assured him. “They’re gonna plate dinner to be fancy, and there will be speeches and dancing and all that.”

“Dancing?” Chris didn’t know how to dance. He’d spent most of his own prom glued to the wall, which, come to think of it, might be part of why Jess dumped him.

Phil chuckled. “You don’t have to. I mean, your ex over there might be upset.” He jerked his chin in Jess’s direction. She had a flute of champagne grasped delicately between her thumb and her forefinger, her white teeth glinting as she smiled and talked simultaneously. *She* looked as fancy as Chris had imagined.

“Don’t they expect us to? Like, the team or whatever?”

“Nah. I mean, Kayleigh would love it if you did, but after a decade of Tom Crowler, the organization knows what to expect.”

Chris blinked. “Huh?”

Sighing, Phil threw back the rest of his beer. “Tom will show up maybe twenty minutes late, he’ll make the rounds once, have dinner, and then leave. No date who’ll take photos for social media, no dessert if it’s off the meal plan, and definitely no dancing.”

“No date?” Chris knew repeating everything Phil said would not help him appear smarter, but from everything his mom and Jess had said, he’d assumed bringing a date to team functions was mandatory.

“Tom always goes stag,” Phil confirmed. “No clue how he does it, I’d go nuts if I didn’t have a built-in buddy for all the parts I don’t want to do.”

A built-in buddy. That sounded awesome, like a friend you could trust with the secret truth of your feelings on stuff you were supposed to enjoy, such as slow-dancing and meals with tons of tiny courses. Jess knew Chris felt out of his depth, of course. During the four months or so they did actually date, right around when he got drafted, they would go out for meals at various trendy restaurants back home in Montreal. She'd take selfies of the two of them, they would order delicious food she ate a fraction of, and then they'd go to her place and watch a movie. Sometimes, he put his head in her lap and she petted his hair, which always made him feel as though he had melted into a big ball of hockey player. One such time, he'd admitted he didn't think he had what it took for the big leagues. She told him he was being an idiot, which was usually true, but he couldn't shake the feeling she didn't take his concerns seriously at all. They'd decided they were better off as friends not long after.

"Camille must be an awesome wife," he said, trying to sound less wistful than he felt.

Phil's eyes wandered over to Camille once again, greeting Jimmy Hayes and his girlfriend with cheek kisses. "She sure is," he said.

Chris took another sip. "So the Crow—I mean, Tom really never brings anyone?"

"Nope."

"Does he, like, meet people here?"

Vanderbilt had arrived, and with him his wife Cheryl and what looked to be three or four of her closest friends. He'd met a few of them at an informal meet-up for the team at Phil's place toward the end of camp and found their focused interest in him and his stats a little

uncomfortable. But some guys liked puck bunnies. Vanderbilt, for example.

“Good god, no. Never even seen the man try to flirt. Can you imagine?”

When Chris got drafted to the team, he’d gotten a generic “welcome to the Sea Lions” message from Tom Crowler and a phone call from Phil. Neither of them kept in touch during the year he stayed with his Juniors team in Montreal. Since making the team this year, though, Phil had been super welcoming and kind.

Tom, well...

He wasn’t *unkind*. He wasn’t much of anything. Chris hadn’t really spoken to him yet. Every time he tried, Tom had been on his way out the door or about to put his earbuds in.

“So he’s just...single?”

“I guess.” Phil sighed. “He’s never said as much, but it’s been ten years, if he had a girl he’d bring her, right?”

Chris scratched his head. “Didn’t Bill Rowden in Tampa keep his wife a secret for ages ‘cause he didn’t want the publicity?”

People called Rowden “Billy the Kid” or “The Second Coming” because he was so fucking good at hockey, and Tom’s stats weren’t far behind his. Chris could see it.

“From his team, too?” Phil made a face. “I don’t think so. He’s my best friend.”

“Ten years with no dates, though? He must be so lonely.”

Phil nodded slowly. “Sometimes I think...I don’t know, there must be *something*. He must have a reason for it. Maybe it’s complicated, like he met a married woman.”

Chris gasped. You don’t think he’s cheating—”

“No, no, Tom’s too principled. He’s more the pining from afar type.”

And who would a guy like Tom pine for if not his best friend’s supermodel wife? Horrified, Chris sought out Camille again. Jess remained attached to her, shaking hands with all the Vanderbilts’ friends. Good. If her marketing degree didn’t pan out, Jess planned to meet an athlete. She’d need friends in the same lifestyle. And a mentor like Camille Easton, a poised, classy woman who didn’t appear bothered by all the girls demanding her attention. She led the group over to the buffet table full of tiny appetizers which had appeared out of nowhere and no one protested her being in charge. That was the kind of woman who ran the WAGs the same way a captain ran the team. It would make sense.

The elevator slid open and Tom Crowler walked in, fixing his cuff as he did.

Phil checked his watch. “Twenty minutes on the dot.”

Maybe Tom couldn’t stand to be in the company of the woman he loved but couldn’t have for long. Maybe he needed boundaries to guard his heart. Maybe he needed boundaries to guard *hers*. God, what if she felt the same? Phil was such a great guy, he didn’t deserve that, no matter whether they acted on it or not. The only way they could ever be together would be if he *died*, which would be terrible—

Tom passed by the buffet table and snagged a plate of appetizers.

Several of the pack of young, blonde women turned to greet him. He smiled, but even at a distance, Chris could tell it was fake. He barely knew Tom but he could not picture him dating someone who would wear a skintight dress with so much cleavage. Not that either of those things were bad, but a man as reticent as Tom would get lost in a neckline that deep.

Camille swooped in to save him, placing a hand on his arm and leaning in for an air kiss to the space beside his cheek.

Tom fumbled the plate from one hand to another and returned the gesture stiffly.

Yikes.

No feelings there, then. Definitely not unrequited passion for a married lady. His body language could not scream “don’t touch me” any louder than it did.

Plate in hand, he extricated himself and made a bee-line for Phil and Chris.

One hand came up to loosen his tie on the way.

“Phil, Breezy,” he said in greeting. “Have some snacks. I nearly died procuring them.”

“Oh no, a social interaction. Have you gotten all your shots for those?” Phil popped a piece of stale bread with prosciutto on top in his mouth and ducked out of the way of Tom’s hand coming to punch his shoulder.

Chris looked between them. Did Tom have social anxiety? Was that his whole deal about dating? And if so, had he seen the team’s therapist yet? Chris had an appointment with her coming up and it made him nervous. While he thought of a way to ask, he helped himself to a bruschetta bite and grimaced. The tomatoes were ice-cold and the bread was stale.

“Not good?” Phil asked.

“No! Is all the food going to be like this?”

That set them both off, discussing the best and worst meals they’d had at team functions in the last few years. Before long, Hayes and

Vanderbilt joined them, and then a few other newer guys trickled in, and Chris never got around to asking Tom.

Two

“With a last-minute beauty of a goal in double overtime by Tom Crowler, the Sea Lions win the game and clinch a playoff spot! That team had better celebrate their captain tonight!”

(Live commentary on Carolina Twisters @ San Francisco Sea Lions, 04/05/2023)

“Breezy!” Vanderbilt’s thick, heavy forearm settled heavy on the back of Chris’s neck, pulling him in the direction of the men’s room.

Chris let himself be dragged, somewhat relieved. Hayes had just gone to the bar for more shots and honestly, Chris was already pretty drunk. The strobe lights of the club made everything spinny and the bass pounded in his chest and he really, truly believed that if he had another shot he might do something embarrassing like cry.

They had made the playoffs, his very first year on the team.

“Breezy,” Vanderbilt said as the scuffed-up metal door closed behind them .

“Uh-huh.”

“Are you ready?”

“For playoff hockey? I don’t know, man, it’s supposed to be, like, super intense, and—”

Vanderbilt broke into loud peals of laughter. “Bro,” he managed between gasping for air. “Bro, are you kidding me?”

Chris frowned. Had he said something wrong? Was he not supposed to be nervous about the playoffs?”

Vanderbilt pinched his cheek. “You’ll do fine, don’t worry about the ‘yoffs. Now, *are you ready?*”

“Um.”

The bathroom door slammed open, letting in Hayes and Dmitriyev.

“*Finally*,” Vanderbilt complained. “What kept you?”

Dmitriyev made a noise of impatience in his throat. Hayes said, “Tom.”

“He wanna—”

“Of course not, man, he wanted to talk about D-zone coverage.”

Vanderbilt rolled his eyes. “Dude needs to get laid.”

“For real,” Hayes agreed. “I haven’t seen him leave with a chick in...I dunno, ever.”

“Way too buttoned-up,” Vanderbilt said. “Bet he’s the kind of freak who gets off in kink clubs or with a special escort service that does the real weird shit.”

“Hey.” Chris’s ears burned at the thought of Tom—or anyone, really—doing “real weird shit”. “That’s our captain you’re talking about.”

Hayes patted him on the top of the head. He had to stand on his tiptoes to do it. “I dunno,” he said to Vanderbilt. “I figure he’s with someone, but she’s married so he keeps it on the DL. No one’s *that* squeaky clean.”

Dmitriyev’s face went so pale Chris blurted, “It’s not that.”

Hayes and Vanderbilt turned to him as one, keeping their attention off the goaltender. “Uh,” Chris said. “I mean, he’s never talked to me about it or anything.”

Hayes snorted.

“Obviously,” Vanderbilt agreed.

“But he’s awful at lying. He can’t even do it to be polite.”

Hayes nodded. “You make a good point, Breezy. One time, Allie’s friend Andrea asked him if he liked her dress and he turned bright red and asked if she enjoyed barbeque sauce.”

“Definitely a freak in bed,” Vanderbilt decided. “So, we doing this?” From the inside pocket of his suit jacket, he pulled out a small plastic baggie filled with plain white pills. He opened it and shook a few into his palm, holding it open. Dmitriyev took two and swallowed them dry. Hayes turned on the tap for a swallow of water before taking his. Vanderbilt proffered his open hand to Chris.

“Oh, no thank you.” Chris’s voice had gone so high as to be squeaky. “I couldn’t.”

Vanderbilt raised an eyebrow and shook the pills a little harder.

“I think I forgot I ordered an ice water,” Chris blurted, turned tail and ran.

He found Phil at one of the hightop tables, sipping a gin and tonic and eyeing the dance floor. “Um, Phil,” he began, voice pitched so low it took three tries for Phil to notice him.

“What’s up?”

“I was just in the bathroom and Vanderbilt. He, um. And Dmitriyev, uh, there were...like, I don’t know if it—I don’t know what it was, but—”

“Ah.” Phil put down his glass. “Probably ecstasy. Unless they snorted it, then it was coke.”

“Coke?!”

“Keep your voice down, will you?”

“Don’t we need to *do* something?”

“Such as?”

Chris swallowed. In Juniors, they'd have called the coaches, and the coaches would have called their parents. No one got in *real* trouble, but they would get benched for a while and maybe they'd have to do some community service or something.

The NHL wasn't Juniors. They were all adults. Someone could call the police and get Vanderbilt arrested.

The lines around Phil's eyes creased more deeply with a hint of a smile. "You're a good kid, you know that?"

"Huh?"

"Guys will find something to snort or swallow whenever they think there's a reason to celebrate. If you know of a way to stop rich, successful athletes from doing drugs, let me know."

"But..."

"But if you tell the coaches, or the GM, or the trainers, they'll tell you to shut up or we'll lose a big chunk of the team. But if you tell the press, we will lose a big chunk of the team. So long as they're not shooting up and the trainers wave them through the doping tests, it's just a part of the lifestyle."

Chris frowned. "You don't—"

"Not anymore, no. I tried a few times, when I was your age. Not worth how shit you feel afterward."

Letting himself fall into a barstool beside Phil, Chris propped his elbows on the table. "Oh."

"Yeah."

"Did Tom ever...?"

"Good God, no. Tom pretends he doesn't know about this shit."

That sounded more like the Tom Chris knew. "Where is he?"

“Home.” A weak smile stole across Phil’s face. “He saw an out when Abrahamov went to find vodka and he took it.”

Classic Tom.

Unless he actually left to go to a super secret kink club and do...whatever Vanderbilt meant. Did people tie each other up at kink clubs? Or use toys? Chris had never been very successful at having sex the way people in his biology textbook did, he couldn’t imagine adding props would help.

“He didn’t want to celebrate?”

“Nah.” Phil downed the rest of his drink. “Tom won’t celebrate until we bring home a cup.”

With a flash of insight only the tipsy could have, Chris knew him to be right. Tom would no more frequent a secret sex club than he would sleep with a married woman. There was no space in Tom’s life for anything but the chip he carried around on his shoulders. Chris might be too inexperienced for sex clubs and too straight-laced for drugs in the bathroom, but he wouldn’t let himself be that sad.

“Well, *I* think we should party! Let’s get another round for everyone and hit the dance floor!”

Phil laughed ruefully. “I’m too—”

“Do not say you’re too old!” Chris considered. “Unless you want to be with Camille, that would be—”

“Nah, come on. Third place in the Pacific, we deserve a celebration.”

Chris followed Phil to the bar, smiling as big as he could and trying not to think of their captain, alone at home.

Three

[Image of Allie Hayes in a white lace sundress surrounded by other women in a richly decorated room, all of them blowing air kisses at the camera]

Top comments:

cheryl_vanderb: can't wait to keep celebrating you boo!

andrea_morris: always elegant, always classy!

(Posted to Allie Hayes' Instagram on 12/02/2024)

“That is the silliest thing I have ever seen,” Luca said. His low, rich voice sounded right by Chris's ear.

On Chris's phone screen, Andrea, best friend of Allie soon-to-be-Hayes, threw massive amounts of glitter confetti in the air at Allie's Cancún bachelorette party. The tagline read, “love celebrating you bc you're so easy to celebrate!”

“Look how happy they are, though!”

The women all smiled widely at the camera on the first picture, but subsequent ones showed them goofing around, grinning, playing with the confetti.

“They are very happy to show off for the camera, yes.”

“Okay, if you're gonna be all judgy and rude, you can just not watch over my shoulder.” Chris tilted his phone screen away and rolled to a different position on the couch so his roommate couldn't lean over the backrest to watch his feed.

Luca huffed.

“See, you like it.”

“I enjoy mocking people, yes.”

“She’s getting married, she’s allowed to be excited!”

The sound of disgust Luca made had more to do with Chris’s socked feet suddenly up in his face, so Chris let it slide.

“I like weddings and people being happy,” he said.

“Oh?” Luca asked. “Do you see that with...what is her name...Chloe?”

Before he could stop himself, Chris hissed in a shocked breath.

A triumphant expression spread across Luca’s face.

“We’ve been dating for two weeks!” Chris complained. “I’m not thinking about marriage yet.”

“She is,” Luca said drily.

“You don’t know that.”

“It is an educated guess.”

“Well I guess you aren’t as smart as you think you are, then.”

Luca fell into place on the couch beside Chris. Chris tensed, expecting further mockery for his choice of girlfriend, his interest in romance in general, or Luca’s favorite thing to poke fun about, his alleged Italianness. Instead, Luca heaved a great sigh and asked an earnest question. “All right, fine. You want the whole...the wedding, the photos, the beautiful children.”

A tight, cold knot formed in the center of Chris’s breastbone. “I, uh,” he said.

“It is not a bad thing to want,” Luca said. “I should not mock.”

Chris let his foot bump against Luca’s knee. “I was thinking more that I wanted to have good friends to take fun photos with, to be honest.”

Luca laughed. Chris wondered if he ever sang. He had such a musical note to his voice. “It is the NHL way, though, is it not? Marry young, have a big party, then lots of small children.”

“Not everyone.”

“Oh?”

“Look at Tom.”

Luca frowned. “I suppose he has not brought a date to a team function yet.”

“He never does.”

“Never?”

“Cap doesn’t date.”

“Why?”

Chris shrugged. He’d heard just about every theory the team had to offer, from the the childhood sweetheart he was saving himself for to the high-end dominatrix he saw on off-nights, and he thought they were all bogus. “Honestly, I think it must have been a tragedy.”

“A *what*?”

“Like, he loved someone and lost her and now he can’t ever...go there again.”

“You think she *died*?”

“Maybe,” Chris said.

“How?!”

Chris hadn’t thought about that part of his theory very much because it depressed him. In movies it was usually cancer or some sort of vehicular accident, but in books it could also be something romantic like getting lost at sea. Did that still happen to people?

He shrugged.

Luca narrowed his eyes. “You don’t know anything, do you?”

“Not for *sure*, I mean, he never talks about it.”

“So you just assume a tragic backstory!”

“Well, yeah! He *seems* tragic.”

Luca subsided. “You have a point.”

“And what other reasons could there be?”

“Many!”

“Like what?”

“He could have had a bad breakup, he could be one of those men who hate women, he could have a rich and active sex life he tells us nothing about,” Luca ticked off on his fingers, “Or he could simply care only about hockey.”

Chris snickered. “Hockeysexual.”

A smile twitched at the corners of Luca’s mouth. “Absolutely not.”

“I once saw this reality show about a guy who fell in love with his car, maybe it’s like that.”

They considered this for a moment, and then they both began laughing and couldn’t stop for quite some time. What pulled Chris out of it was Luca getting out his phone and snapping pictures of him.

“What are you doing?”

“You wanted fun photos with good friends, no?”

Chris tackled Luca to the couch and hugged him tight, and before Luca could escape, he snapped one last picture of the two of them together. Luca huffed and curled up tight to his end of the couch all through dinner in wounded dignity, but later on, he posted the photo to Instagram.

Chris double-tapped as soon as he saw and shared it to his own page.

He wondered if this was how it felt for Allie Hayes and her friends, too, to get along with someone so well you wanted the whole world to see how happy your friends made you.

Four

“[...] And as the season heats up and each point in the standings might make or break the team’s chances at a playoff berth, the question has been raised by fans: should the team continue splitting their focus with this heavy involvement in a local homeless shelter?”

Top comments:

seelionssaylions: ah yes, great look in the year of our lord 2025, calling into question the one NHL team loudly and vocally standing up for LGBTQIA+ rights (as a whole team, not just individual players, stop @ing me about what good dudes the huskies are already).

grant16rox: did the fans question? did they really?

[comment deleted]

[comment deleted]

(From: “Sea Lions Playoff Chances - Dire or Doable?” by Olivia Starling, published in the San Francisco Herald on 03/31/2025)

“Man, why does Tom never date?” Howie wondered aloud as he collected pylons.

Chris glanced at the shelter to make sure none of the kids were still outside. “Shh,” he hissed all the same.

“Not like they care. Seriously, though, last night at the New Year’s party? He hung out with Jax *all night*.”

“You didn’t bring a date,” Chris pointed out.

“Yeah, but I’m twelve years younger.”

“Jax didn’t bring a date.” Shit, Chris shouldn’t have pointed that out, Howie might connect the dots.

Howie shook his head. “Not the same, everyone knows Jax gets it in.”

Crisis averted. Chris wrinkled his nose. “Gets it in. Gross.”

“Just stating facts, man. Anyway, Tom would be a good dad. Or husband, I guess. He’s a great listener.”

“Aww, does Howie have a hockey crush?”

“Shut up.” A dull red flush spread across the back of Howie’s neck. Chris hated to embarrass him, but Howie couldn’t keep questioning this or he might stumble across the truth.

The whole team could, and then...and then...

Chris had no idea what would happen then, but he knew he had to stop it.

“I bet Cap keeps his private life private,” he said, wishing more than knowing it to be true. If Cap could keep his private life private for shit, Chris would never have seen him about a minute away from third base in the locker room.

He’d never wanted someone so much he’d disregard a public space like that.

“I guess,” Howie said doubtfully. “I dunno, I wish he’d let us in some.”

“When he’s ready,” Chris said.

He just hoped when Tom was ready, the rest of the team would be, too. Especially Howie.

Performance Consultant

Title: Performance Consultant

Job type: Full-time

Job description: The San Francisco Sea Lions NHL hockey team seeks applications for the position of Athletic Performance Consultant. The role of the Athletic Performance Consultant is to counsel staff and players in a way which enables their best possible performance in all aspects of their job.

Qualifications: 2+ years work experience in sports psychology working with professional athletes (e.g. lower league teams, other sports), Ph.D. in clinical or counseling psychology

Salary: Subject to negotiation

(From: nhl.com job listings, posted 01/04/2022)

The door to Michelle's office swung shut behind Chris. She sighed and squished her feet back into today's heels. They were gorgeous, peep-toe blue numbers with bronze ribbons threaded through the ties around the ankle, but they also made her feet hurt like crazy.

She strode over to the door. Confidence was key, even when her feet were killing her. She opened it halfway and pushed the stopper under the crack before peering down the corridor.

Empty.

She sat down in her office chair again and looked down at her notes on Chris. Breezy. No, Chris, as a professional she couldn't do the nicknames. Not that it mattered. Her notes comprised five question marks and a drawing of a seagull. Mostly because Chris spent the entire session talking about whether he could date a girl whose great-great-grandma came from Andorra if the girl thought Andorra was in Italy. Ten years of higher education were either not enough schooling or far too much to provide a therapeutic strategy for Chris's problems.

Outside her office door, Michelle heard the familiar tread of footsteps in athletic shoes. They slowed by the door and then retreated again in the direction they'd come from.

She sighed.

Someday he would come in.

Michelle didn't study psychology with the intention of becoming a sports therapist—sorry, a “performance consultant”. She just happened to be in a really intense doomed relationship with a soccer player for most of her Master's degree and ended up spending far too much time talking over each team member's specific damage until an ankle injury torpedoed her ex's soccer career and subsequently their relationship.

By the time she managed to drag herself out of the depression hole caused by the breakup, it turned out Michelle had a ton of participants for a Ph.D. thesis study, and everything snowballed from there.

Years of working with women's soccer teams had done very little to prepare her for the realities of men's professional sports. Michelle

came from Boston and had enough integrity to not be a football fan from Boston, so she'd grown up supporting hockey and the nascent women's team affiliated with the Boston Redcoats. But while she knew ticket prices kept climbing, it hadn't prepared her for how well the NHL paid. She didn't want to jinx it, but if she kept this job for a few more years, she might be able to pay off her student loans.

Of course, in order to keep the job, she had to get the guys talking to her.

The generational divide was stark. Chris, Kilian, Diego, almost all the girls in the PR department and the front office, they all stopped by on the regular. Diego, a disgustingly well-adjusted human, didn't make a formal therapeutic relationship out of it, but every now and again he would come in for a session when he got in his head about his passing or his speed. The others she saw every other week.

But the older players didn't know what to do with her. Phil Easton regularly showed her office door to all the rookies and prospects, but he'd never stepped inside himself despite going through a harrowing injury her first year on the team. Jimmy Hayes snorted dismissively when she introduced herself and hadn't so much as made eye contact since. And up until a few weeks ago, Tom Crowler speed-walked down the hall any time he knew she was in residence.

So this lingering by her doorway and then retreating again...that interested her. Enough for her to keep the door on the lean.

She leaned back in her chair, propping her bare feet up on the desk. What would be the right tactic to get Chris to face his actual problems rather than weird made up ones? Should she be direct and ask him why he kept dating girls his parents set him up with when he clearly didn't want to? Or should she keep on with counseling sessions where he

told her nothing of importance and after half an hour they segued into discussing what movies they had watched in the last fortnight? How long could she do that before she crossed the line from “building a rapport” to “unprofessional”?

Someone cleared their throat and then rapped twice on her open door.

Michelle started and swung her bare feet off the desk and stuffed them into her shoes again, ribbons left untied. “Come in!”

Tom Crowler walked inside, all six foot three of him practically shaking with nerves (according to nhl.com, which also called Luca Mazetti five foot eleven, a stat which only held up when he wore skates).

“Tom!” Michelle smiled broadly.

“Um. Were you expecting me?”

“Well, I was wondering a little when you’d stop loitering at the office door.”

Tom’s eyes went wide and his whole body clenched up. Oops. Not ready for teasing yet, then. Weird. Most athletes preferred it when Michelle mocked them a bit before they got into the heavy stuff. Something about it must remind them of the locker room.

“I promise I’m nice,” she told him. “Close the door, have a seat.”

He did as she told, but he did it so slowly he might as well be moving backward.

Michelle put on her most non-threatening smile. “So what brings you here today?”

Tom cleared his throat again. His eyes darted to the door.

She waited a beat, then another.

“You have to keep whatever I tell you secret, right?”

Technically, she didn't. The job title the organization hired her under didn't read "therapist" and the GM, Pulvermacher, a man Michelle would describe as "the slimiest guy she'd ever met", strongly implied she ought to break patient confidentiality if she discovered anything to do with substance abuse or what he called "immoral sexual practices". She had no intention of doing so.

"Yes, of course I keep confidentiality."

Tom let out a long, slow breath. "Okay. Okay, so that's good."

Michelle smiled at him encouragingly.

He stared down at his hands.

"How about we start simple? Why don't you tell me a bit about yourself?"

Tom looked up. "I could do that."

She tried to intensify her smile without appearing creepy. It must have worked, because Tom began to speak, though his tone remained hesitant.

"So, uh, I'm Tom Crowler. I play left wing. Uh, I'm the captain, but I haven't won any awards or anything. Furthest I've gotten is round two of the playoffs."

Michelle bit the inside of her cheek. "And where are you from?"

"Sudbury. So I grew up a Huskies fan, but I got over it. Uh, I did peewee and U15 at home, and then I got drafted in the OHL and went to London. And then the Sea Lions chose me in 2011 and here I am." He shrugged and then chose a spot on the wall behind her head to examine.

If Michelle chose to put on her analysis hat, she would have a lot to say about Tom's choice of important life details to tell her about. If she put on her "member of the Sea Lions organization" hat, she would tell

him she already knew everything he'd just said. She had read his biography section on NHL.com.

"Lots of hockey," she said instead.

"Yeah." Tom laughed uneasily. "Yeah. Um. My..."

He swallowed so heavily she could see the movement of his throat and looked her straight in the eye. "My boyfriend says I need to have more in my life than hockey."

If Michelle were a cartoon, she'd be one of those ones where the character's mouth dropped open and their eyes went all big and googly. "He sounds smart," she said, which she thought showed remarkable self-control.

"Yeah." Tom smiled. "Or, wise, I guess."

"And supportive."

"He's...I've never had anyone be there for me the way he is."

"I'm glad to hear it." In all honesty, hearing it saddened Michelle. At thirty-two, Tom had gone a long time without experiencing having anyone in his corner. It wasn't an individual fate; so many men in professional sports substituted their team for the emotional intimacy they lacked in other areas of their lives, be it due to their own failures or the environment they were raised in. And then pro sports ran its course with trades, injuries and retirements pulling apart the fragile bonds making up a team. Some guys got lucky and found partners or meaning in other parts of their lives before that happened. Some didn't and turned to the welcoming arms of addiction or the colder embrace of bitterness and hatred of anyone younger and happier. Some got smart and came to her to find the first path.

Across from her, Tom sat up straight. "That's why I'm here."

Michelle propped her elbows up on the desk. "Oh?"

“Yeah. I want to be there for him, too. To support him. To be ready for...when he wants to...” Tom huffed, shifting in his seat.

“I usually make a point not to finish a patient’s sentences, but...” Michelle offered.

“Go ahead.”

“Do you mean your partner wants to come out?”

Tom’s breath left him all at once, his shoulder collapsing up into his neck leaving his posture perfect but clenched. “Someday, yeah. He was going to, but he put it off for me, and I need to be worth that, you know?”

“Okay.” Michelle reclined in her chair. She took a calculated risk and slipped her shoes off again, displaying the comfort with each other neither of them felt yet. “Awesome that you want to be there for your...partner? Sorry, you called him your boyfriend, right?”

“Either works.”

“The first thing you can do to support him is to support yourself. What makes *you* happy, Tom?”

Finally, Tom relaxed into her couch. “I don’t know. I never got around to doing much, besides hockey.”

“Right, tough schedule.”

“Exactly.”

“So how do you deal with stress?”

Tom remained silent for a suspiciously long time in which Michelle drew the conclusion the answer was that he didn’t. Finally, he said, “I used to go jogging, but it’s rough on my joints these days. Sometimes I go to Phil’s place.”

“So getting out of the house helps.”

“Right. I thought about taking walks or something, but I don’t want to be the creepy loner walking around a public park at dawn or whatever.”

“Do you have to go by yourself?”

Tom shrugged. “Jax isn’t really an early riser, and he doesn’t get as in his head as I do. Anyway, if we’re walking around together I’m not getting better on my own, am I?”

“True.” Michelle wondered if he realized he’d revealed his boyfriend’s name. It didn’t matter, she’d be keeping it a secret anyway.

“But I’ve been thinking...” Tom smiled and Michelle remembered for the first time that out there in the real world, thirty-two wasn’t old. She was thirty-five. “I don’t know, it might be stupid, but I’ve been thinking about getting a dog.”

Redo

This just in: Tom Crowler is now a Prada brand ambassador. A weird choice for an athlete, let alone one as historically nondescript as Crowler. But a recent run of photos on Crowler's brand new social media accounts show him in Prada's line of loungewear, hanging out around the house and playing with his adorable dog, Artemis. So long as he isn't looking directly at the camera, Crowler develops twice the personality, good gamble, Prada!

Top comments:

clions2010: didn't take Crowler for a brand whore :(

grant16rox: The Jax Grant Effect in action!

(From: Caption to post of Tom Crowler's modeling shots shared to Instagram fan account "SeaLionsNews", 04/13/2025)

"I don't think this is what Zinnia had in mind when she sent me those scarves," Tom said. He lay prone on the bed, back to the wine red sheets with a thread count so obscene he hadn't dared check the tag since Jax got them.

“I promise not to take any pictures of you.” Jax wrapped the scarf in his hand around one of the slats in the headboard and then around Tom’s wrist. “Anyway, you’re really not a scarf guy, I don’t see you wearing these out and about otherwise.”

“Fair.” Tom did his best to relax. Zinnia, the outreach manager at Prada who handled his sponsorship deal with them—a crazy sequence of events he still didn’t fully understand—had attached a note to this shipment that she knew not everything involved “matched his style” and he should just use the things he felt comfortable with.

He didn’t think she had meant this.

With all four of his limbs tied to the bed, Jax came around to his side and crawled on top of him.

“Hi,” Jax said. He had one knee either side of Tom’s hips and one wrist above each of Tom’s shoulders.

“Hi.” Tom coughed and cleared his throat. “Are you, um. Are you sure about this?”

The look Jax gave him was fondly exasperated. In lieu of answering the question, he bent low to kiss Tom. He only pulled away when Tom had gotten so lost in his mouth he’d forgotten he about the scarves and tried to reach for Jax.

“Shh.” Jax pressed a kiss to his fingertips. “Let me.”

Seeing as Tom didn’t have a lot of other options, he let Jax. He let Jax run careful teeth along his collarbone, he let Jax grind down against him, wearing nothing but his form-fitting boxer briefs. The scrap of cloth soon drove Tom utterly insane dragging against his sensitive cock, but he couldn’t do anything about it, so he laid there and took it.

When Jax moved on to running feather-light fingers across his inner thighs and under his balls, Tom had to hang on to the headboard for

dear life. Did people get friction burn from silk scarves? That would be a wild one for a sponsored product review. The thought made him smile and, sensing his distraction, Jax took that moment to take the head of Tom's cock into his mouth and suckle him gently.

"Pay attention to me."

"As if I could pay attention to anything else," Tom scoffed.

"Uh-huh," Jax said, the way his eyebrows twitched showing his skepticism, and then began to suck Tom off in earnest.

Jax's mouth was wide and generous and he knew how to use it. Tom had been spellbound by those lips since day one and he didn't foresee that ever changing. It would be nice if he could hold out for more than five minutes against it, though.

Especially because Jax's lips twitched upward, even occupied as they were, when Tom began whimpering and his hips twitched upward.

"You don't have to be so smug about it," Tom groaned when Jax pulled off, leaving him twitching up against nothing.

"Mm, beg to differ. "Jax licked his lips. "You ready, babe?"

"Ready?"

"For me to blow your mind."

Tom wanted to retort something snarky about how Jax would have to try harder, or maybe something cheesy about how he did that every day by existing. The words caught in his throat when Jax slid up his body again and sank down on his cock with no warning.

Tom's mouth flew open but nothing escaped but a tiny, broken sound. "Jax," he said when words were again a possibility.

Jax took a deep, steadying breath. "Yeah."

He began to move so slowly Tom barely noticed it happening until he'd already established a gentle rocking motion. The friction was intense

all the same. Jax must not have prepped very much, or at all. He'd never fuck Tom with so little consideration himself, he often drew it out until Tom begged for his dick or an orgasm, whichever came first.

"C'mon," Jax taunted. "Aren't you going to give it to me?"

Tom strained upward, stymied by the scarves holding him down.

Jax pouted. "Aww. Guess I'll have to do it myself."

He arched his back and moved his hips faster, one hand coming down to jerk himself off.

Pleasure thrummed in Tom's balls, in the pit of his stomach, in the base of his cock. He wondered if there would ever come a time when he wasn't so easy for Jax, when the sight of him getting himself off didn't make Tom crazy.

He hoped not.

At the same time, he wished he could reach out and palm the curve of Jax's hips as he screwed himself down harder and harder on Tom's dick. He wished he could cup Jax's balls in his hand, could thumb at his nipples, could *kiss* him.

"You gonna come for me?" Jax panted. "Gonna lose it 'cause I make you feel so good?"

A pulse of precome left Tom. "You first." He bit his lip to distract himself from everything Jax was doing to him.

Jax laughed breathlessly. "Please, baby. I could get you to give up for me in a heartbeat."

Of course he could, Tom knew he could because he'd done it many times. He didn't want that today. He strained upward as much as he could in his confines, rocked into Jax using his thighs and his hips.

A shocked, strained sound left Jax's mouth, and then warm come shot out over Tom's stomach as Jax froze in place before frantically riding out his orgasm.

Tom followed him over the edge in an afterthought, a happy sigh he'd made Jax feel good and a gentle slide into bliss.

After, they lay side by side, skin sticking together with sweat and other substances. The breeze of the air conditioning sent shivers across Tom's skin.

Eventually, Jax heaved himself up to undo the ties around Tom's wrists and ankles. If he'd pulled hard enough, he could have gotten out of them himself. He'd never wanted to.

"Feel better now?" Jax asked around a yawn.

"Hm?"

"About the restraints."

Tom snuggled down into the bed, giving Jax pleading eyes. Jax groaned and went for the en-suite, muttering something about "spoiled pillow princesses".

Tom smiled at his retreating back. When he returned with a damp washcloth and wiped Tom down, Jax gave him a pointed look. "So? How did you feel about it?"

Tom shrugged. "I'm glad you came first."

"That was important to you, huh? Why didn't you say so?"

"I didn't know I cared so much about it until just now."

"You know why?"

"I guess..." Tom sighed and propped himself up on an elbow. "I got pretty hung up on not being enough for you after the last time you tied me up."

"Tom—"

“No, I know that’s not why we broke up—”

“We didn’t break up.”

Tom eyed him.

“We weren’t officially dating,” Jax defended.

“But we both wanted to be. And the reason we didn’t was because of me.”

“Fine,” Jax conceded. He let himself fall into his pile of pillows with a huff. “But it wasn’t because you weren’t enough for me, Jesus.”

“I know.” Tom placed a hand on Jax’s chest. “In the rational parts of my brain, I know. But…”

“But you still had something to prove to the irrational parts.”

“Yeah.”

Jax’s warm fingers stroked through his hair.

Then, a whine sounded from outside the door.

“She needs to go out,” Tom remembered. He’d been so ready to relax into bed and forget the rest of the world for a while.

Jax groaned. “Give me five.”

“I’ll go.”

“We can go together.”

“You don’t have to—”

“I’m not ready to let you out of my sight right now.”

Tom’s breath caught. Before he could stop himself, before he could even really think about it, he said, “I love you.”

Jax stared at him.

Tom got to his feet and opened the door so Artemis could come in. He shouldn’t get her used to being in the bedroom or in his bed but he couldn’t keep her behind a closed door when she was upset. He kneeled

down to scratch behind her ears and let her lick at his face. All the while, her paws skittered on the floor, anxious to go out.

Tom reached for sweats from the dresser.

He ought to say something like, “it’s okay if you’re not ready to say it”, but Jax hate it when Tom lied to make other people comfortable.

“I had a plan,” Jax said forlornly.

Tom pulled a T-shirt over his head and turned to look at him.

“I was gonna take you out to some fancy place by the bay when I said it. Or tell you when we clinch a playoff spot.”

Sitting down at the end of the bed, Tom put a hand on Jax’s ankle. Artemis immediately came over to nose at them. “I don’t need it to be special. Just true.”

“Of course I love you,” Jax said, waving a hand in dismissal. “I *wanted* it to be special.”

“Of course,” Tom echoed, voice as weak as his knees.

“Of course.” Jax sprang to his feet with a grunt of effort and began getting dressed. “With that cleared up, can we talk about real estate?”

“Um.”

“My realtor has a line on this amazing place, a refurbished Victorian near Golden Gate Park. It’d be great for Artemis, and it’s only a few minutes away from Phil’s. We could move in this summer.”

It was Tom’s turn to stare, holding his socks in one hand as Jax finished getting ready and dug Artemis’s lead out from where she’d pushed it under a pile of clothes. “You want to...”

“I want to buy a house together,” Jax said. “And live in it with you. Because I love you and I don’t want to spend a minute apart from you if I don’t have to.”

Tom swallowed. “And because you hate my apartment,” he tried to joke.

“No, Tom.” Jax grasped Tom’s hands in his. “Because when I say I love you, I mean I’m ready for us to have a future together that makes us both happy.”

Tom had no idea what he could possibly respond, so he kissed Jax as hard and as long as he knew how. They only stepped apart when the dog complained again, and as they took the elevator downstairs, Jax opened up pictures of the houses his realtor had suggested on his phone and began telling Tom about his ideas for the future.

Sean

Spotted Jax Grant and Tom Crowler getting lunch at a bistro near the Marina yesterday! They were deep in conversation and I think they shared a dessert? Wonder what important Sea Lions business they were talking about. I heard something about the penalty kill, but when I passed them to go to the bathroom it sounded like they were talking about dog breeds. I didn't want to bug them while they weren't working but I did shoot a sneaky pic.

(Image of Crowler and Grant dressed casually, sitting on opposite sides of a small table. Grant gesticulating with one hand while the other holds a fork. Crowler smiling at him.)

Top comments:

clions2010: Should have told them Easton needs to hang it up already if we want to win big this year!

grant16rules: idk shooting pics of guys getting a meal in their spare time is kinda skeevy.

1682rox: just two guys being dudes sharing a dessert

(From: Secret team leadership meeting in downtown SF? posted to r/sf_sea_lions on 03/11/2025)

On Tuesday morning, Sean woke up to a text from a number he hadn't seen on the lockscreen of his phone in years.

Tom Crowler: *Is this Sean's number?*

Sean blinked at the message. Was he still asleep? No, he had to pee and his feet were cold, he was definitely awake. Beside him, his wife Martha snuffled in her sleep and burrowed deeper under the blankets, which she had both of, as usual.

He got to his feet and padded out of bedroom as quietly as he could. Martha had been working overtime at the vet clinic she started two years ago and needed all the rest she could get. Running her own business, even in sleepy rural British Columbia, was hard work.

In the kitchen, he turned on the coffeemaker and leaned against the countertop while it did its thing. Tom Crowler. He hadn't heard from Tom in years. Not since...what, 2013? It must have been, Sean hadn't played hockey since.

God, hockey.

It was hard to remember a time when his whole life had centered around playing the game, when he'd spent five days a week in the gym working on his endurance and every winter weekend on a bus that reeked of sweaty hockey gear getting to his next game. He used to track his own stats, not just points but faceoff wins and plus-minus, religiously. He used to think he had a future in the sport.

Getting drafted low in the sixth round made his dreams sound more realistic than they were. For a while he'd been motivated to try to make the team, or at least the AHL. His first rookie camp put paid to the notion. Sean did alright in Juniors, middle of the pack at best. The other rookies were faster and better than him and crucially, they wanted it more. Not that Sean could admit it to himself then. He figured he wasn't ready.

Being drafted, even so low, made his college hockey scholarship in Michigan worthwhile despite the headache it caused him and his parents to send him to a college in the U.S. as a Canadian. At the time, Sean thought he would do the standard hockey player year or two of blowing off college classes to play during the season and to party out of it and then he'd make the AHL no problem and work his way up.

Reality had different plans for him.

But here he was, a decade later and no worse for not having played a single game of hockey in the interim. At eighteen, he thought he would miss it. He thought the disappointment of not living up to whatever potential he imagined he had would destroy his life.

It didn't.

His life turned out alright.

No interminable travel to put on disgusting gear in tiny locker rooms with shitty water pressure. No alternately freezing on the bench and sweating on the ice. No ice baths, no joint pain, no money spent on gear.

He still watched, of course. He was Canadian after all. And from Toronto, making him that most unpopular hockey fan in the rest of Canada: a Huskies supporter.

Tom never had been despite growing up in Sudbury. Sean was hard-pressed to remember him being a fan of any specific team, as a matter of fact. He'd watched Paul Zelinka's highlights as a matter of course, as had everyone because the man was a genius, but he never went so far as to support Pittsburgh in the playoffs. His mom's family came from Alberta, so he could have repped for Calgary or Edmonton, but he never did. The one hockey team he really cared about was their own. He

took being team captain so seriously. At the time, Sean looked up to that quality. In retrospect, what teenager overthought so much?

No wonder he made it to the NHL and stuck around there when no one else on their Juniors team lasted more than a handful of years.

Sean wondered if he called himself a Sea Lions fan now he was their captain.

One way to find out.

Sean: *Hi Tom, this is Sean. How are you?*

He put his phone aside and cooked up some porridge for breakfast. He put raspberries and coconut flakes in Martha's, she needed the energy. He only had raspberries in his own. One drawback of not playing hockey anymore and being in his thirties: His metabolism was much slower than it used to be.

Grabbing the bowl and his coffee cup, he headed for his office. Accounting wasn't as glamorous as playing hockey professionally, but he liked working from home and having a steady income. He made his way through his emails for a while. Around eight the door closed when Martha left for the clinic. Sean huffed out a breath and began work on his newest clients' financial records. He got through everything they gave him for the last quarter before remembering to check his phone again.

Tom: *I'm good. Are you still in the GTA?*

Sean: *No, I moved to the Victoria area with my wife three years ago.*

He meant to put his phone aside again when he saw the texting bubble appear. Trying to refocus on work was futile. He spun around in his desk chair. The bubble hadn't resolved into a new text. He went back to the kitchen to get another cup of coffee and drank it slowly in the living

room, looking out at the back yard. Two robins flitted around the birdhouse, pecking at the seed.

They should get a dog. Or a cat. Or one of each. What kind of vet didn't have pets? They'd always talked about a future with a full house, animals and kids, the whole shebang, when Martha had her practice up and running and they had their own house. They did now. Maybe it was time to talk about more.

It would feel a lot less lonely puttering around the house all day if he had a few pets to keep him company.

The robins flew away. Sean returned to his desk.

Tom: *Even better. We play Vancouver next week, want tickets?*

Sean typed his agreement before he could think about it twice.

Martha had never cared about hockey, so Sean took a coworker to the game. It was a little awkward, given they usually interacted via video conference. After, he had to leave because he had young kids and needed to be home in time to help his wife with the night shift, meaning Sean had to loiter in the stands and wait for Tom alone.

When most everyone but cleaning staff and a few stragglers had cleared out, just past the point Sean started to feel awkward, a young woman wearing a headset, a blazer and a friendly smile came up to him.

"Sean McAllister?"

"That's me."

"Follow me, please."

Sean did, feeling oddly flattered at the celebrity guest treatment. He'd never been to one of Tom's games before, not even when they were

still in touch, in part because the logistics never worked out when he played in the NCAA, in part because Tom never asked.

Never before now, a dozen years after the last time they'd spoken.

Tom met him outside the visiting locker rooms. The smell of worn hockey gear wafted out from the open door and with it a wave of nostalgia so strong Sean had to swallow hard against the memories. Running down corridors lit up with fluorescents carrying his stinky hockey gear in a bag over one shoulder, hair wet after he and Tom had gotten caught up talking about the game under the showers and were in danger of missing the team bus. Passing around goalie gloves in the locker room, everyone taking a whiff and then groaning in disgust when they did. Long, earnest talks from their coach after which Sean left the rink feeling about ten centimeters tall.

When he turned to greet Tom, the sense of *déjà vu* intensified.

Tom looked exactly like he had as a teenager, only more so. He was still tall and slim, but it had become a quality rather than a side effect of growth. His hair was still thick and dark, but he'd figured out how to style it in a way that made it seem messy on purpose rather than as if he didn't care. His face was still serious, but the expression suited an adult.

They shook hands. Sean had held his out on instinct, but it felt strange when they touched. He and Tom were never the kind of friends who casually crossed personal boundaries when they were young. Sean had had hockey friends like that, guys who always had their arms slung over someone else's shoulder or their feet kicked up on someone else's lap. Tom was never so unthinking about his own body.

"It's good to see you," Tom said when their hands separated once again.

“Yeah,” Sean agreed. “I mean, it’s good to see you, too. Been too long.”

Tom smiled in response, tight and uncomfortable and exactly how Sean remembered him.

“So, uh, what’s the plan?” Sean asked. “Do you have to get on a plane in an hour, or...”

“No, we’re staying the night. I hoped, um. I hoped you knew a good restaurant around here somewhere?”

Since he lived out in the boonies, Sean didn’t, but he had years of experience googling shit, so they found a nearby Asian fusion place with good reviews where Tom could get his fill of protein post-game and Sean could eat without mainlining Lactaid. “Worst part of Juniors,” he recalled, stuffing his phone into his pocket after checking the directions. “I can’t believe I was too stupid to stop eating cheese.”

“Cheese is pretty good.”

Sean squinted at him. Tom had already been halfway to a keto diet when they were teenagers, no way had he come around on lactose as a pro. Before he could inquire more thoroughly, a tousled blond head peeked out of the locker room.

“Tom,” Jaxon Grant chided. “What are you still doing here? Go on, have fun!”

“I’m working on it.”

“Work faster.”

In a move Sean would never in a million years have expected, Tom stuck his tongue out at his teammate before turning back to Sean. “Sorry. Jax, uh...well, I’ll tell you over dinner.”

They walked to the restaurant at a brisk pace. A cool breeze blew in off the Pacific and Tom stuffed his hands into his pockets. He did always run cold.

They reached the restaurant at nearly eleven because hockey games went for a long fucking time. Sean had a sandwich before, but he was hungry enough for a second dinner. *He* didn't have to maintain an athlete's physique. Not that he'd let himself go, he went running every other morning and he wondered if Tom could tell, looking at him, that he kept in shape.

The late hour and the mid-week date meant the restaurant was empty. They ordered fast and then settled in their chairs.

"This is a nice place," Tom observed. "I like the art."

The art was nice, not as over the top and kitschy as some Asian fusion places got. Any other time, Sean would have been happy to talk about it. He'd taken an art history class in college to fill a general requirement and it turned out to not be as shit as he thought it would be. He remembered a few things from it and liked to bring them up when he wanted to impress people.

Tonight, he had other priorities.

"It's great. Why are we here?"

Across from him, Tom froze, his water glass at his lips.

"Not that I'm not happy to see you," Sean added. "I am. But I haven't heard from you in *years*."

"Sorry."

"I could have gotten in touch, too," Sean felt compelled to mention.

"Why, um," Tom licked his lips. "Why didn't you?"

"A lot of reasons. I stopped playing in hockey."

“Your rotator cuff.”

“You knew?”

“I kept track of your college games.”

Sean had no idea what to make of that. “Even before I fucked up my body, I wasn’t half the player you were. Got kind of jealous of you living my dream for a while there,” he admitted. “It took me a bit to get over it.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t apologize for being successful. I guess I struggled with accepting I didn’t have a real future in hockey, more so when I got injured, and then I met Martha.”

“Girlfriend?”

“Wife.”

“Congratulations.”

Sean never bothered sending Tom a message when he and Martha got engaged, or when they got married. The wedding was two years ago and by then, he and Tom hadn’t spoken in four times that. Hearing Tom congratulate him now left a strange taste in his mouth, bitter like day-old coffee.

“Anyway. She’s not much of a hockey fan. Guess it just...stopped being part of my life.”

Tom huffed a laugh. “Can’t imagine.”

The waitress brought over their food, a big steaming bowl of udon noodles with seared tuna and spicy kefir lime leaves for Tom and a salmon salad for Sean. They both dug in and ate in silence for a few minutes before Tom ventured, “So you stopped talking to me because you stopped being interested in hockey?”

It sounded simplistic, as if Sean had closed the door on a section of his life and left Tom behind it. The notion made Sean uncomfortable in the same way as telling Martha he didn't mind her working late for the third night in a row and truly meant it but not for the reasons she thought. "Why did you stop talking to me?"

Tom chewed a bite of tuna and swallowed it before responding. "Remember the night we made the OHL finals?"

The bottom of Sean's stomach dropped out.

He'd been drunk that night. They both had. Their coach got the team disgusting, watery light beers on the premise he would rather know what they were doing and they were doing it safely than let them procure their own alcohol. It took quite a few light beers to get drunk nowadays, but back then they were inexperienced and had just sweated out half the water in their bodies during the game and when the party ended and the team bus dropped them off, they were buzzed on the drinks and the adrenaline.

But Sean wasn't drunk enough to forget the way Tom surged over to him, crossing the distance on the shabby couch in the basement of his billet family's duplex with hectic movements to grab Sean by the shoulders and press a sloppy kiss to his lips. He certainly wasn't drunk enough to forget how struck dumb he had been, totally speechless, unable to move or think or react at all when Tom dropped to his knees between his legs.

When Tom pulled down the band of his sweatpants he'd regained some motor control, but he'd been a dumb teenager so all he did was help Tom get his half-hard cock out.

The blow job Tom gave him couldn't have been as good as Sean remembered it being. He remembered a lot of spit and he remembered

Tom moaning like he'd never tasted something so good and he remembered coming so hard he could barely stay awake long enough to pull his pants up afterward. The incidental correlation of the big win with the unexpected sex was the only reason Sean couldn't help compare every subsequent blow job with that night.

Aware of Tom's eyes on him, waiting for an answer, he cleared his throat.

"Of course I remember."

"That's why we lost touch." Tom spoke with a firm certainty Sean hadn't heard in his voice before. He had never realized Tom sounded unsure of himself, but hearing him speak with such authority put a hundred televised interviews Sean had half-listened to into stark perspective.

"Was it..." Sean swallowed hard and dabbed at his mouth with a napkin. "Did you not want to?"

Miraculously, Tom laughed.

The sound catapulted Sean back over a decade, when eliciting Tom's rare laugh filled him with pride like a helium balloon floating off to space. Hearing it now made his chest feel funny and light as if it remembered the sensation.

Still smiling, Tom told him, "I definitely wanted to, and if you do remember it, you'd know that."

"I thought so, but we never talked about it."

"I wanted to," Tom repeated. "God, I had such a crush on you."

On a late-night YouTube spiral, Sean once learned that if the Earth ever stopped spinning for even a second, the atmosphere would remain in motion and would sweep across the globe with a devastating force,

uprooting trees, knocking over buildings and throwing people out of windows.

Hearing those words out of Tom's mouth had roughly the same effect on Sean.

"You *what*?"

"Why did you think I did it?"

"I..." Sean hadn't thought about it. Sean had done his level best to put the incident from his mind except for during filthy, guilty jerk-off sessions. When he did chance upon the memory after turning an odd corner in his brain, he told himself it didn't mean anything, it was a normal incident between good friends celebrating a big win. Guy stuff. Hockey stuff.

Tom smiled ruefully.

He was so gorgeous when he smiled. He ought to do it more. Sean had always thought so, had spent so much time as a teenager thinking of stupid ways to make Tom take everything less seriously.

Sean cleared his throat. "I think I had a crush on you, too."

"That makes me feel better about sucking you off. It would have been embarrassing if you didn't even want it."

What a Tom thing to say. Sean laughed and leaned back in his chair. "Have you been worrying about it ever since?"

"I was more worried you would tell someone and I would get outed."

The smile fell from Sean's lips. "Oh."

It made sense that Tom was—that he identified—that he wasn't straight. God, *Sean* probably wasn't straight, a brand new nugget of information destined to become one of those uncomfortable facts he

didn't think about for too long like how boring he found his job and how seldom he saw his wife though they lived in the same house.

Tom had never been one to run from responsibility, though.

He must have known all those years ago, known and agonized over it.

"I wouldn't have. I didn't—I never thought about what we did as gay." He winced as soon as the words were out. "I should have. It was pretty stupid of me."

Tom shrugged. "It had nothing to do with you. The reason I stopped texting, I mean. I worried about myself."

The enormity of it spread out before Sean all at once. "You've spent the last ten years...what, thinking I would go to the press?"

"Not you." Tom glanced away, staring at his own reflection in the dark window. "But if you told a friend, or a girlfriend, or *anyone*, it could leak. And I thought it would be the end of the world."

It hadn't been Sean's fault, then, or his responsibility. The thought was a breath of relief through his whole body. He didn't have to know what any of this meant to him right now. "But it's not anymore."

When Tom's gaze returned to him, the echo of jealousy spread through Sean. He'd never made Tom smile so wide, never made him look as if every care he had in the world had vanished.

"It's not," Tom said. "It might even be a good thing."

"I'm happy for you." Sean wasn't actually sure he was. Being happy for Tom meant being lost and alone for himself with all this new information. But one more glance at Tom confirmed he couldn't say anything else. He couldn't take any part of this joy from Tom.

"Me too. And I'd like it if we could be friends again."

That, at least, was uncomplicated. “I’d like that, too. Then I can brag to all my colleagues about how my friend is going to win a Stanley Cup.”

“Don’t jinx us!”

“You’re looking great this season, though.”

Hockey talk got them through the rest of the meal and they parted with the promise to text more regularly and for Tom to arrange tickets anytime he played in Vancouver, an excellent deal for Sean.

He watched Tom walk away, a tall, narrow figure in the darkness. Out of a coffee shop three doors down from the restaurant, a second person stepped out, slightly shorter and stockier. He fell into place beside Tom, matching his stride. Their shoulders and arms brushed against each other and Sean’s envy ate him alive.

On the drive home, he didn’t turn on the radio or Spotify. Instead, he watched the landscape go by and tried to think. He hadn’t formed a complete notion by the time he got home, but he sat down on Martha’s side of the bed fully dressed all the same, waking her up.

“How was the game?” she asked, voice rough with sleep.

“We’re not ready for a dog,” he told her. “Or kids. Are we?”

She pushed herself upright, her knees a mountain under the sheets as she drew them toward herself.

“No. I don’t think we are.”

About the Author

S. B. Barnes attended college in the Hudson Valley, studying English Language and Literature and Anthropology (although unlike her characters, her time there was not interrupted by crime-solving). She grew up split between the USA and Germany, attending university in both countries before eventually settling in Germany. Today, she works as a teacher and lives with her husband, son, and two cats. Fiction has always been one of her greatest loves, as a reader, as a teacher, and as a writer, and she hopes you enjoy reading her work as much as she enjoys creating it.

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