

Chapter 1

Sarah

As the storm descends on downtown Seattle, the only thing louder than the heavy gusts of wind rattling the windows is my co-host's uncontrollable laughter into the microphone.

"Wait, wait, wait," he wheezes in between laughs. "You think Seattle's defense is... *underrated?!?*"

Thank God it's Monday and it's a non-television taped version of our podcast because I give my co-host, John Starbuck, the finger.

"Sugi," he continues, pushing his thick, black-rimmed glasses further up his face. "Come on. You've got plenty of wild ideas, but this...is absurd."

I lean into the microphone and say in my calmest, most syrupy radio voice, "It's not absurd, you're a fuc-"

From under my desk, my phone chimes quietly in my purse, making my heart leap and pulling my attention from supporting the much-maligned Evergreen's defensive numbers with wins over expected averages.

I close my eyes and try to breathe through the brain fart.

"A fu-, a fu-," I stumble, wondering not what the quarterback sack average on third down was, but what amazing message awaited me on my phone. "A fu-, grrrrr, oh forget it! Stop! Stop!"

With a sigh, our producer, Brian, cuts the live switch on the recording and the light under my Evergreens helmet goes dark.

“I’m sorry,” I mutter, yanking off the thick earphones, which knocks my backward baseball cap into my eyes. “It’ll just be...I need to...” I tug my hat back into place, push back from the desk and dive under the wooden top for my purse.

Don’t look. Don’t look. Don’t look.

Turn it off and finish the show.

I find the plastic brick and thumb the buttons on the sides of the phone resolute in recording the last bit of the big Christmas extravaganza and delaying, for just a few more hours, the giddiness bubbling around inside me like a hot spring.

Awww, man, I can’t.

I mean, it is almost Christmas after all.

And what is Christmas without a little peeking?

I pull the phone out enough to read the screen:

Hunter: Hard to believe I finally get to see you tonight. The waiting is absolute torture. Trying not to think of everything at once. Focused on taking my time and exploring...you.

A surge of heat floods my cheeks and rushes through my body, igniting an electric thrum that has grown from the first message he sent to each long video conversation we’ve had over the last month.

A thrum that made me ache from the anticipation and delicious possibility.

“You okay there, Sarah?”

Next to me, Brian’s quiet voice snaps me out of my super-heated thought box.

“Yep,” I whisper, turning off the phone and shoving it back into my purse. “Totally okay.” I straighten up, clear my throat, and roll back to the desk. Grabbing my headphones, I’m fully aware of the heat in my cheeks and the amused gaze of my co-host. “Let’s do this.”

Brian gives me an unsure glance but flips a few switches before putting on his headphones. “Let’s start with the read again, shall we? In three…”

He counts the other two numbers silently and then points to me.

I take a breath and then say in an animated voice, “Hey, Evergreens fans! Sugi here with my friends from Rounders Sports Bar and Grill, the best place on the Sound to catch a game, host an event, or just hang out. And don’t forget the Four for Four Friday nights, where everything is four dollars until midnight.” I glance over at John, who’s tapping at something on his phone. “And Starbuck and I broadcast live from three to seven. Rounders, Seattle’s premier sports bar and grill.”

Brian plays a clip of a baseball smacking a leather glove and a crowd cheering. I hesitate for a moment afterward and then settle into the microphone, elbows spread wide on the desk.

“Alright, welcome back to the Starbuck and Sugi Show. I’m Sarah Sugiyama. Next to me, watching porn on his phone, is John Starbuck.”

“That’s me,” John says quickly into the mic before he goes back to his phone.

I roll my eyes and smile. “This is it, our final segment of the show. We’ve been teasing our prediction for the monstrous Christmas game between your Evergreens and those hated Los Angeles Missions. But, as you know, before we give our final predictions and lay down our double sawbuck, we like to play our favorite game, Head or Heart.”

Brian presses the button and the intro to the segment plays over the headphones. As soon as it’s done, I click my tongue and speak smoothly. “For those of you who are new, this is the part of the show where I destroy Starbuck’s silly heart predictions with cold... hard... num-bers.”

“Says the woman who thinks Seattle’s defense is underrated,” Starbuck jokes into the microphone.

“Okay, then, tell you what. If Seattle loses, which they won’t-”

Starbuck cuts me off. “Wait, wait, does this mean I have to pick the Missions? Winners of ten straight? Best quarterback in the league?”

“If Seattle somehow loses this game, then I will not only double your winnings, I will, on-air, wear a Missions jersey.”

Starbuck gasps, but not a fake radio gasp. I can see he’s serious.

“That’s how much I believe in this game. The numbers are screaming a course correction for the defense. They’ve been this close.” I hold up a thumb and forefinger to my two co-workers. “Seattle will win this game. I won’t have to wear the stupid red and gold. And Christmas will be ep-ic.”

I press the button on crowd applause. After a few seconds, I let it fade and offer in my most sultry tone. “So, do we have a deal?”

Starbuck stares at me for a moment and then his eyes narrow playfully. “Before I take that deal, I want to raise the stakes.”

“Okay,” I say slowly, a small tremble in my chest.

“We all know how much you love Christmas, Sugi.”

“Uh, yeah, best holiday ev-er.”

Starbuck rubs his jaw and grins. “If the Missions win the game, you not only have to wear a Missions jersey during next year’s Seattle-Los Angeles games, you also...can’t decorate your condo next year.”

“Starbuck.” I gulp. “That’s...*cruel*.”

“I know. Now how much do you like that Seattle defense?”

Eyes narrowing into slits, I speak daggers into the microphone. “Even. More. Seattle wins. Straight up, no points.”

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Half an hour later, we’re wrapped, Brian’s in editing, and I’m rushing around the small office flat collecting my things.

Outside, the rain explodes against the windows like icy bullets. Despite it being early afternoon, the sky is black, and the city is lit up like it’s midnight.

“So, you’re finally meeting this guy?” Starbuck asks, arms resting against the back of his chair, hands wrapped around a coffee mug.

I stop briefly and look out at him from under my bright red rain slicker - helpful for Seattle drivers in spotting a small, half-Asian woman crossing sidewalks in the Pacific Northwest winter gloom - with a miffed expression. “For the thousandth time, yes. If I could just find my stupid bag I left here...”

“And you’re not at all worried about driving two and half hours into the mountains? You know there’s a blizzard up there. Snoqualmie Pass will shut down at any moment.”

“I know,” I say, looking behind the couch in the corner of the office. “I drive a Subaru.”

“On top of all that, playing a road game with a strange dude...” Starbuck continues.

I open the tiny storage closet for the second time and yell out from behind the door. “He’s not strange! I’ve been talking with him every day for a month!” Tucked behind the small vacuum is the shiny silver gift bag I’ve been keeping hidden from the nosy sneak that was my mother. I squeal in happiness, grab the bag, close the door, and storm over to Starbuck, trying to keep the slicker hood above my eyes. “And for crying out loud! I’m 33 years old! I don’t need you or anyone worried about Who. I. Date. Understand?”

Starbuck holds his hands up in surrender. “Okay,” he says, pushing his glasses up his nose. “No more.”

The gift bag goes into the larger duffle bag, which holds half of what I need for the weekend. The rest waits patiently in my car a couple blocks away. My hand is on my purse when Starbuck coughs and says cautiously, “What town did you say you were going to?”

“None of your damn business. Population, you.”

“What? I’m your friend, I’m making sure you’re okay.”

I raise an eyebrow and smile. “Don’t.”

“Oh, come on. You’ve seen what they say about online dating and the creepos. It’s like a minefield.”

“You watch too much Dateline, Starbuck, seriously.”

“70 percent of people say they resent ever going on an online date.”

I sling my purse over my shoulder and wrap my keys around my fingers. “And you miss 100 percent of the chances you don’t take.” I stick out my tongue. “My number’s bigger, so I win. Again.”

“Sugi...”

“Look, I’m sorry most of the world has had problems with online dating, okay? I’m trying to be good and not brag that the first time I did it, I found a great guy.”

“Are you...sure?”

“Any guy willing to wait that long is amazing!”

“I’d wait that long,” Starbuck says under his breath.

I ignore his muttering and zip up my rain slicker. “He also doesn’t do that dismissive, chauvinistic, oh-God-here-goes-the-girl-talking-sports-again internal eye roll when I open my mouth!”

Starbuck says nothing, but his face looks as though his eyes are rolling internally.

“Finally, he gets me wet in *all* the right places,” I say in my most lusty tone before flipping the switch and shrieking, “so, yeah, he’s a great guy!”

I spin around on my heel and head for the elevator, knowing Starbuck’s awkwardness over discussing my vagina.

Right before I hit the down button on the elevator though, I hear a sigh and a pleading voice.

“Sarah, please, why can’t he come to you?”

“Augh, Starbuck!” A blistering response sits on my tongue. I open my mouth to let him have it but stop. Shoulders slumped, his face is loaded with concern. I let out a breath. “Look, I’ll be fine. Okay? I’ll text you when I get back to Seattle. How about that? You can buy me a beer after Christmas.”

His chest lifts a little. “Deal.”

Walking back, I fling my possessions around him and give him a friendly bro hug. “Thank you for being worried about me. You’re like a brother I don’t want.”

Starbuck hisses. “Damn, that’s mean!”

“Merry Christmas,” I laugh, heading for the door. “Say hi to your mom for me!”

Starbuck’s voice rings out as I punch the button to the elevator with my elbow.

“Dateline, Sugi! Dateline!”