



HIM

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HIM

They don't play for the same team. Or do they?

Jamie Canning has never been able to figure out how he lost his closest friend. Four years ago, his tattooed, wise-cracking, rule-breaking roommate cut him off without an explanation. So what if things got a little weird on the last night of hockey camp the summer they were eighteen? It was just a little drunken foolishness. Nobody died.

Ryan Wesley's biggest regret is coaxing his very straight friend into a bet that pushed the boundaries of their relationship. Now, with their college teams set to face off at the national championship, he'll finally get a chance to apologize. But all it takes is one look at his longtime crush, and the ache is stronger than ever.

Jamie has waited a long time for answers, but walks away with only more questions—can one night of sex ruin a friendship? If not, how about six more weeks of it? When Wesley turns up to coach alongside Jamie for one more hot summer at camp, Jamie has a few things to discover about his old friend...and a big one to learn about himself.

Praise for HIM

“I read HIM in one sitting—it’s so, so good! If I had to pick two authors who I’d have team up, it would be Bowen and Kennedy” — *#1 New York Times bestselling author Colleen Hoover*

“HIM is everything I didn’t realize I was missing on my bookshelf. I’m not much of an m/m reader but I couldn’t help but fall in love. Must read this summer!” — *Dear Author*

*HIM is dedicated to our friends in [The Locker Room!](#)
We are so lucky to know all of you.*

*Love,
Sarina & Elle*

APRIL

Wes

The coffee shop line is a little long, but I know I'll make it to the rink on time. Some weeks just *click*.

Over the weekend, my hockey team clinched the first two rounds of the NCAA playoffs, and now we're headed to the Frozen Four. I somehow got a B-minus on a history paper I wrote in an exhaustion-induced coma. And my spidey sense tells me the guy in front of me won't order a complicated drink. I can tell from his clothes he's a simple man.

Things are going my way right now. I'm in the zone. My skates are sharp, and the ice is smooth.

The line advances so Dull Guy can order. "Small breakfast blend. Black."

See that?

It's my turn a minute later, but when I open my mouth to order, the young barista lets out a fangirl shriek. "Omigod, Ryan Wesley! Congratulations!"

I don't know her. But the jacket I'm wearing makes me a rock star, at least for this week. "Thanks, doll. Could I please get a double espresso?"

“Right away!” She barks out my drink order to her colleague, adding, “Make it snappy! We’ve got a championship to win here!” And wouldn’t you know? She refuses my five-dollar bill.

I shove it in the tip jar, then haul my ass outside and head for the rink.

I’m in a stupendous fucking mood as I stroll into the screening room at the team’s top-notch facility on the Northern Mass campus. I love hockey. Fucking love it. I’m heading for the pros in a few short months and I can’t frickin’ wait.

“Ladies,” I greet my teammates as I flop into my usual seat. The rows are set up in a semi-circle facing the massive screen at the head of the room. The chairs are padded leather. Yup, Division I luxury at its finest.

I shift my gaze to Landon, one of our freshman D-men. “You’re looking kinda green, man.” I smirk. “Does your tum-tum still hurt?”

Landon flips me the finger, but it’s a half-hearted gesture. He looks sick as hell, and I’m not surprised. Last I saw him, he was sucking on a bottle of whiskey like he was trying to make it come.

“Dude, you should have seen him when we were walking home,” a junior named Donovan pipes up. “Stripped down to his tighty whities and trying to dry-hump that statue in front of the south library.”

Everyone around us breaks out in laughter, including me—because either I’m wrong, or the statue in question happens to be a bronze horse. I call him Seabiscuit, but I think it’s just a memorial for some filthy-rich alumnus who made the Olympics equestrian team a hundred years ago.

“You tried to ride Seabiscuit?” I grin at the freshman.

Red splotches rise in his cheeks. “No,” he says sullenly.

“Yes,” Donovan corrects.

The cackling continues, but I’m now distracted by the smirk being aimed in *my* direction, courtesy of Shawn Cassel.

I guess you could call Cassel my best friend. Of all my teammates, I’m closest to him, and yeah, we chill outside hockey, but “best friend” isn’t

exactly a term I throw around often. I've got friends. I've got a shit ton of friends, actually. Can I honestly say any of them really *know* me? Probably not. But Cassel comes damn close.

I roll my eyes at him. "What?"

He shrugs. "Landon isn't the only one who had a good time last night." He's lowered his voice, but it doesn't really matter. Our teammates are too busy riding Landon about last night's horse shenanigans.

"Meaning?"

His mouth twitches. "Meaning I saw you disappear with that meathead. You guys were still AWOL when Em finally dragged me home at two."

I raise one eyebrow. "I'm not seeing the problem."

"Isn't one. Just didn't realize you were corrupting the straight ones now."

Cassel's the only guy on the team I ever discuss my sex life with. As the only gay hockey player I know, I walk a fine line. I mean, if someone brings it up, I'm not gonna clam up and scurry into the closet, but I don't volunteer the information, either.

Honestly, my sexual orientation is probably the worst-kept secret on this team. The guys know. The coaches know. They just don't care.

Cassel cares, but in a different way. He doesn't give a shit that I like to fuck dudes. Nope, what he cares about is *me*. He's told me on more than one occasion that he thinks I'm wasting my life moving from one anonymous encounter to another.

"Who says he was straight?" I say mockingly.

My buddy looks intrigued. "Seriously?"

I arch a brow again, which makes him laugh.

Truth is, I doubt the frat brother I hooked up with last night is gay. Bi-curious, more like it, and I won't lie—that was the appeal. It's easier to mess around with the ones who are gonna pretend you don't exist in the morning. One night of no-strings fun, a BJ, a fuck, whatever their liquid

courage allows them to try, and then they disappear. Act like they didn't spend the hours leading up to it eyeing my tats and picturing my mouth around their dicks. Like they didn't run their greedy hands all over my body and beg me to touch them.

Hook-ups with gay guys are potentially more complicated. They might want *more*. Like commitment. Promises I'm unable to make.

"Wait," I demand when I register what he'd said before. "What do you mean Em dragged you home?"

Cassel's jaw tightens. "Exactly what it sounds like. She showed up at the frat house and dragged me out." His features relax, but only slightly. "She was just worried about me, though. My cell died so I wasn't answering any of her texts."

I say nothing. I've given up on trying to get Cassel to see the light about that chick.

"I would've gotten trashed if she hadn't shown up. So...uh, yeah, I guess it was cool of her to come get me before I got too wasted."

I bite my tongue. Nope, not getting involved in the man's relationship. Just because Emily happens to be the clingiest, bitchiest, *craziest* chick I've ever met doesn't give me the right to interfere.

"Besides, I know how she feels about me partying. I shouldn't have gone in the first place—"

"You're not fucking married," I blurt out.

Shit. So much for keeping my mouth shut.

Cassel's expression goes stricken.

I hastily backpedal. "Sorry. Ah...forget I said that."

His cheeks hollow, jaw working as if he's grinding his molars to dust. "No. I mean, shit. You're right. We're not married." He mumbles something I can't make out.

"What?"

"I said...not yet, anyway."

“Not yet?” I echo in horror. “For fuck’s sake, man, please, *please* tell me you aren’t engaged to that girl.”

“No,” he says quickly. Then he lowers his voice again. “But she keeps saying how she wants me to propose.”

Propose? The thought makes my skin crawl. Goddamn it, I’m gonna be the best man at their wedding, I just know it.

Is it possible to make a wedding toast without acknowledging the bride?

Luckily, Coach O’Connor marches into the room before this insane conversation with Cassel can make my mind spin any harder.

The room falls silent at his entrance. Coach is...commanding. Nah. Make that *terrifying*. Six-five, perpetual scowl, and a head he shaves not because he’s balding, but because he just likes looking like a scary motherfucker.

He starts off the meeting by reminding us—one by one—what each of us did wrong in practice yesterday. Which is completely unnecessary, because yesterday’s criticism still burns in my gut. I screwed up one of the faceoff drills, dropped passes I had no business dropping, missed on goal when I had an easy shot. It was just one of those crappy practices where nothing goes right, and I’ve already vowed to get my shit together when we hit the ice tomorrow.

The post-season is down to just two fateful games, which means I need to stay sharp. I need to be *focused*. Northern Mass hasn’t won a Frozen Four championship in fifteen years, and as the leading scorer, I’m determined to seal this victory before I graduate.

“All right, let’s get to it,” Coach announces after he’s finished telling us how much we suck. “We’re starting with this Rainier-Seattle game from last week.”

As a frozen image of a college arena fills the huge screen, one of our left wings wrinkles his forehead. “Why are we starting with Rainier? We’re playing North Dakota in the first round.”

“We’ll focus on North Dakota next time. Rainier is the one that worries me.”

Coach touches the laptop on the desk and the image on the big screen unfreezes, the sound of the crowd echoing in the viewing room.

“If we meet these guys in the final, we’re in for a world of hurt,” Coach says grimly. “I want you to watch this goalie. The kid’s sharp as a hawk. We need to find his weakness and exploit it.”

My gaze focuses on the game in progress, resting on the black-and-orange uniformed goaltender manning the crease. He’s sharp, all right. Steady eyes assessing the field of play, his glove snapping shut as he stops the first goal slapped in his direction. He’s fast. Alert.

“Watch the way he controls this rebound,” Coach orders as the opposing team takes another shot at goal. “Fluid. Controlled.”

The longer I watch, the more uneasy I get. I can’t explain it. I have no clue why the hairs on the back of my neck are tingling. But something about the goalie makes my instincts hum.

“He angles his body perfectly.” Coach sounds thoughtful, impressed almost.

I’m impressed, too. I haven’t followed any of the west coast teams this season. I was too busy concentrating on the ones in our conference, studying the game tapes to find a way to beat them. But now that post-season is underway, it’s time to assess the teams we might face in the championship if we make it to the final round.

I keep watching. Keep studying. Damn it, I like the way he plays.

No, I *know* the way he plays.

Recognition dawns on me at the same moment Coach says, “Kid’s name is—”

Jamie Canning.

“—Jamie Canning. He’s a senior.”

Holy shit.

Holy fucking shit.

My body is no longer humming, but trembling. I've known for a while that Canning goes to Rainier, but when I checked up on him last season I found out he'd been relegated to backup goalie, replaced by some hotshot sophomore who was rumored to be unstoppable.

When did Canning get the starting job back? I ain't gonna lie—I used to keep tabs on the guy. But I stopped once it started to feel like borderline stalking. I mean, there's no way he was keeping tabs on *me*, not after I torpedoed our friendship like an asshole.

The memory of my selfish actions is like a fist to the gut. Fuck. I'd been a terrible friend to him. A terrible *person*. It was so much easier to deal with the shame when Canning was thousands of miles away, but now...

Dread crawls up my throat. I'm going to see him in Boston during the tournament. I'll probably even face off against him.

It's been nearly four years since I've seen or spoken to the guy. What the hell will I even say to him? How do you apologize to someone for cutting them out of your life without so much as an explanation?

"His game is flawless," Coach is saying.

No, not flawless. He retreats too quickly—that was always a problem for him, scrambling back to the net when a shooter approached the blue line, giving them a better angle to shoot from. And he was always too pad-reliant, creating easy rebound opportunities for the offense.

I have to bite my lip to keep from offering the information. It feels... *wrong*, I guess. Telling my teammates about Canning's weaknesses. I should, though. I really should, because this is the Frozen fucking Four at stake here.

Then again, it's been years since I was on the ice with Canning. He could have tightened up his game since then. He might not even have those particular weaknesses anymore.

I, on the other hand, do. I have the same damn weakness I've always had. It's still there as I stare up at the big screen. As I watch Jamie Canning stop another dizzying slap shot. As I admire the grace and deadly precision with which he moves.

My weakness is *him*.

Jamie

“You’re awfully quiet this morning, even for you.” Holly’s fingers drift down my back, ending their journey on my bare ass. “Thinking deep thoughts about the Frozen Four?”

“Yeah.” And it isn’t *exactly* a lie. I can guarantee that Friday’s trip to Boston is in the forefront of two dozen other players’ minds this morning. And about a zillion fans’.

I have more than winning on my mind, though. Now that we were actually headed for the championship, it was time to come to terms with the idea that we might face Northern Mass. The star player of their team? None other than Ryan Wesley, my ex-best-friend.

“What is it, sweetie?” Holly props herself up on an elbow to study me. She doesn’t usually stay over, but last night’s sex marathon had lasted until four a.m., and I would’ve felt like an ass hustling her into a cab that late.

I’m not sure how I feel about having her curled up in bed beside me, though. Spectacular morning sex aside, her presence makes me uneasy. I’ve never lied to Holly about what this is—and what it isn’t. But I’ve had enough experience with chicks to know that when they agree to a friends-

with-benefits arrangement, a part of them hopes one of those benefits will somehow be landing a boyfriend out of the deal.

“Jamie?” she prompts.

I push aside one set of troubling thoughts and replace them with another. “Have you ever been fired by a friend?” I hear myself ask.

“What? Like...someone you worked for?” She has wide blue eyes, which always take me seriously.

I shake my head. “No. The leading scorer on Northern Mass was my best friend in high school. And junior high, too. You know that hockey camp where I work in the summer?”

“Elites?” She nods.

“Yeah, good memory. Before I was a coach there, I was a camper. So was Wes. He was *crazy*.” I chuckle to myself just picturing his scruffy face. “The dude would do anything. There’s this toboggan chute in the center of town—in the winter you can sled down onto the frozen lake. But in the summer it’s closed, with a twelve-foot fence around it. He’s like, ‘Dude, after lights out we’re climbing that thing.’”

Holly massages my chest with one of her soft hands. “Did you?”

“Naturally. I was sure we were going to get busted and thrown out of camp. But nobody caught us. Wes was the only one smart enough to bring a towel to slide on, though. So I had burns on the backs of my thighs from sliding down that fucker.”

Holly grins.

“And I still wonder how many tourists had to delete the pictures they took of Mirror Lake. Whenever Wes saw a tourist lining up a shot, he would always drop his pants.”

Her grin turns into a giggle. “He sounds like fun.”

“He was. And then he wasn’t.”

“What happened?”

I fold my hands behind my head, trying to appear casual despite the wave of discomfort sliding down my spine. “I don’t know. We were always competitive. Our last summer he challenged me to a contest...” I stop, because I never tell Holly the really personal stuff. “I don’t *know* what happened, exactly. He just cut off contact with me after that summer. He stopped responding to my texts. He just...*fired* me.”

She kisses my neck. “Sounds like you’re still mad.”

“I am,” I surprise myself by saying.

If you’d asked me yesterday whether there was anything in my past that bothered me, I would have said no. But now that Ryan Wesley has parked his nutty ass back in my consciousness, I’m all churned up again. Goddamn him. I really don’t need this going into the toughest two games of my life.

“And now you have to play him,” Holly muses. “It’s a lot of pressure.” She’s rubbing my hip now. I’m pretty sure she has some plans for the two of us involving a different kind of “pressure.” She’s looking for round two, but I don’t have the time.

Catching her hand in mine, I give it a quick kiss. “Gotta get up. Sorry, babe. We’re watching tape in twenty minutes.” I swing my legs over the side of the bed and turn for an eyeful of Holly’s curves. My friend-with-benefits is sexy as hell, and my dick gives a little twitch of gratitude for the fun we already had.

“Shame,” Holly says, rolling onto her back invitingly. “I don’t have class until this afternoon.” She runs her hands up her flat stomach and onto her tits. With her eyes locked on me, she gives her nipples a flick then licks her lips.

My dick does not fail to notice.

“You are evil and I hate you.” I grab my boxers off the floor and look away before I get all boned up again.

She giggles. “I don’t like you at all, either.”

“Uh-huh. Keep telling yourself that.” But then I clamp my lips together. Six weeks before graduation, it’s unwise to start even a playful conversation about how much Holly and I like each other. We’re strictly casual, but lately she’s been making noises about how much she’ll miss me next year.

According to Holly, it’s only forty-three miles from Detroit, where I’ll be next year, to Ann Arbor, where she’ll be in med school. If she starts wondering aloud whether there are any apartments for rent halfway between those cities, I don’t know what I’m going to say.

Yep. Not looking forward to that conversation.

Sixty seconds later I’m dressed and heading for the door. “Are you cool letting yourself out?”

“Yeah, it’s fine.” Her laughter stops me before I can turn the knob. “Not so fast, stud.”

Holly gets up to kiss me goodbye, and I make myself stand still for a second and return it.

“Later,” I whisper. It’s my standard goodbye. Today, though, I find myself wondering if there are other words she’s waiting to hear.

But when the door closes on her, my head is somewhere else already. I sling my backpack over one shoulder and slip out into a misty April morning. Five days from now I’ll be on the east coast, trying to help my team clinch the national championship. Man, the Frozen Four is such a rush—I’ve been once before. It was two years ago, and I was the backup goalie instead of the starter.

I didn’t play, and we didn’t win. I like to think those two things are related.

This time it’ll be different. I’ll be waiting between the pipes, the last line of defense between the other team’s offense and the trophy. That’s enough pressure to freak out even the chilliest goalie in college sports. But the fact that the other team’s star center is my ex-best friend who abruptly stopped talking to me?

That is whack.

I meet a handful of my teammates on the sidewalk as we all approach the rink. They're laughing about somebody's antics on the bus last night, joking and shoving each other through the glass doors and into the gleaming hallway.

Rainier did a massive rink renovation a few years ago. It's like a temple to hockey, with conference pennants and team photographs lining the walls. And that's just the public area. We pause in front of a locked door so that Terry, a junior forward, can swipe his ID past the laser eye. The light flashes green and we push through to the opulent training area.

I haven't said a word to anyone yet, but I've never been as much of a smack-talker as the rest of them, so nobody calls me on it.

In the team kitchen, I pour myself a cup of coffee and grab a blueberry muffin off the tray. This place makes me feel like a spoiled brat, but it's useful when I've overslept.

Ten minutes later we're watching tape in the team video room, listening to Coach Wallace's analysis. He's at the podium wearing a little mic that amplifies his voice all the way to the back row. But I can't hear him anyway. I'm too busy watching Ryan Wesley dart across the ice. I see clip after clip of Wes passing through the line of defense like smoke, creating scoring opportunities out of nothing but ice shavings and quick wits.

"The number two offensive scorer in the nation, the kid has balls of steel," our coach admits grudgingly. "And enough foot speed to make his opponents look like my ninety-seven-year-old granny."

Shot after unlikely shot flies into the net. Half the time the on-screen Wes doesn't even have the good manners to look surprised. He just glides onward with the grace and ease of someone who'd practically been born with steel blades under his feet.

"Like us, Northern Mass woulda made it to the finals last year, but they were hampered by injuries in the post-season," Coach says. "They're the

team to beat...”

The footage is mesmerizing. I’d first seen Wes skate the summer after seventh grade. At thirteen we all thought we were hot shit just for attending Elites, the world-class hockey training camp in Lake Placid, New York. Hear us roar—we were the best of the ragtag players on our club teams back home. We were the kids to beat during pond-hockey pick-up games.

We were mostly ridiculous.

But even my punk-ass junior-high self could see that Wes was different. I was a little in awe of him from the first day of my first summer at Elites. Well, at least until I discovered what a cocky bastard he was. After that, I hated on him for a bit, but being assigned as roommates made it difficult to keep up my hatred.

Six summers in a row, the best hockey I played was against the sharp-eyed, steel-wristed Ryan Wesley. I spent my days trying to keep up with his quick reflexes and his flying-saucer slapshots.

When practice was over, he was even more of a challenge. Want to race to the top of the climbing wall? Ask Wes. Need a partner in crime to help you break into the camp freezer after hours? Wes is your man.

The town of Lake Placid probably heaved a sigh of relief each August when camp was through. Everyone could finally go back to living normal lives that didn’t include seeing Wes’s bare ass in the lake every morning for his daily skinny-dipping sesh.

Ladies and gentlemen: Ryan Wesley.

Coach drones on at the front of the room while Wes and his teammates do their magic on-screen. The most fun I ever had at a rink was with him. Not that he never pissed me off. He did that hourly. But I can honestly look back on his challenges and taunts and see he’d made me a better player.

Except for the last challenge he issued. I never should have accepted that one.

“Last day,” he’d taunted me, skating backward faster than most of us could skate forward. “You’re still afraid to take me on in another shootout, huh? Still whimpering over the last one.”

“Bullshit.” I wasn’t afraid to lose to Wes. People usually did. But it was hard to shut out a shootout, and I already owed Wes a six-pack of beer. Trouble was, my bank account was drained. As the last of six kids, sending me to this fancy camp was all my parents could do for me. My lawn-mowing money had already been spent on ice cream and contraband.

If I lost a bet, I couldn’t repay.

Wes skated a backward circle around me so fast that it reminded me of the Tasmanian Devil. “Not for beer,” he said, reading my thoughts. “My flask is full of Jack, thanks to the beating I gave Cooper yesterday. So the prize can be something different.” He let out an evil laugh.

“Like what?” Knowing Wes, it would involve some sort of public display of ridiculousness. *Loser sings the national anthem while hanging brain on the town dock.* Or something.

I set up a row of pucks and prepared to shoot them. *Whack*, went the first one, just missing Wes as he went by in a blur. I set up my next shot.

“Loser gives the winner a blowjob,” he said just as I swung.

I missed the fucking puck. Actually missed it.

Wes cackled, skidding to a stop.

Jesus Christ, the guy was good at fucking with my head. “You’re hysterical.”

He stood there breathing hard from all that fast skating. “Think you can’t win? Shouldn’t matter what the prize is if you’re confident.”

My back felt sweaty all of a sudden. He had me in an impossible position, and he knew it. If I refused the challenge, he won. Yet if I accepted, he had me rattled before the first puck even flew my way.

I’d stood there like a moron, unsure what to do. “You and your mind games,” I muttered.

“Oh, Canning,” Wes had chuckled. “Hockey is ninety percent mind games. I’ve been trying to teach you that for six years.”

“Fine,” I’d said through clenched teeth. “You’re on.”

He’d hooted through his facemask. “You look terrified already. This is gonna be rich.”

He’s just fucking with you, I’d told myself. I could win a shootout. Then I’d turn the mind games back on him—I’d refuse the prize, of course. But then I could hold the fact that he owed me a BJ over his head. For *years*. It was as if a cartoon light bulb went off over my head. Two could do mind games. Why had I never realized this before?

I’d lined up one more puck and shot it with great force right past Wes’s arrogant smile. “This is going to be a piece of cake,” I said. “How about we have this shootout, wherein I kick your ass, right after lunch? Before the end-of-camp scrimmage?”

For the briefest moment his confidence slipped. I’m sure I saw it—the sudden flash of *holy shit*. “Perfect,” he said eventually.

“Kay.” I scooped up the last puck off the ice and flipped it in my glove. Then I skated away whistling, as if I didn’t have a care in the world.

That had been the last day of our friendship.

And I never saw it coming.

At the front of the room, a new reel is playing, this one highlighting North Dakota’s offensive strategy. Coach is no longer thinking about Ryan Wesley.

But I am.

Wes

Boston's skyline comes into view from my bus window well before I'm ready.

It's a mere ninety minutes from Northern Mass to TD Garden. The Frozen Four is always played at a neutral rink, but if anyone has a home-ice advantage this year, it's me. I'm from Boston, so playing in the Bruins' arena is my childhood fantasy come to life.

Apparently it's my jackwad of a father's fantasy, too. Not only is he pumped up to invite all his asshole colleagues to my game, he can look like a hero on the cheap. He only has to spring for a limo, not a charter flight.

"You know what I like best about this plan?" Cassel asks from the seat next to me as he flips through the itinerary our team manager passed out.

"That this event is like the puck bunny world headquarters?"

He snorts. "Okay, sure. But I was just going to say that they're putting us up at a nice hotel, not some sleazepit off the interstate."

"True." Although the hotel, whatever it is, won't be nearly as grand as my family's Beacon Hill mansion a few miles away. I'd never say that, though. I'm not a snob, because I know opulence doesn't stamp out ignorance and unhappiness. Just ask my family.

We spend the next half hour snarled in traffic, because that's just how it is in Boston. So it's almost five o'clock by the time we're finally unloading the bus.

"The gear stays!" our student manager shouts. "Take only your luggage!"

"We don't have to schlep our gear?" Cassel yelps. "Baby, I've *arrived*. Get used to this treatment, Wes." He elbows me. "Next year in Toronto you'll probably have a personal assistant to carry your stick around for you."

It feels superstitious to talk about my NHL contract before the Frozen Four. So I change the subject. "That's awesome, dude. I love it when another guy holds my stick."

"Teed that one up for you, didn't I?" he asks as we grab our duffels off the sidewalk where the red-faced driver has tossed them.

"Sure did." I let Cassel enter the revolving door first just so I can grab the door by its handle and trap him inside.

Stuck now, Cassel twists around to give me the finger. When I don't let go, he turns away and reaches for his belt buckle, setting up to moon me and whatever slice of Boston happens to be walking past the hotel on a windy April Friday.

I let up on the door and give it a shove, smacking him in the not-yet-bare ass.

Ah, hockey players. You really can't take us anywhere.

Then we're in the shiny lobby. "How does the bar look?" I ask.

"Open," Cassel answers. "That's really all that matters."

"Truth."

We find an out-of-the-way place to stand while we wait for the team manager to sort out the hotel rooms. But it's going to be a while. The lobby is busy and getting busier. Our end of the room has a distinctly green-and-white color scheme, with our Northern Mass jackets everywhere.

But on the other end of the room another color catches my eye. It's orange. Specifically, the orange and black of another team's jackets. They're filing through the same doors we just entered, shoving each other and generally acting like testosterone hounds. It's all very familiar.

And then the room tilts a little as my gaze locks onto a sandy-blond head. I only need the oblique view I've got to recognize the shape of his smile.

Fuck me. Jamie Canning is staying at this hotel.

My entire body tenses as I wait for him to turn his head. To look right at me. But he doesn't. He's too engrossed in conversation with one of his teammates, laughing at something the guy has just said.

He used to laugh with me that way. I haven't forgotten the sound of Jamie's laughter. Deep and husky, melodic in a carefree kind of way. Nothing ever kept Jamie Canning down. He was the epitome of go-with-the-flow, probably because of his laidback California upbringing.

I hadn't realized just how much I've missed him until this very moment.

Go talk to him.

The voice in my head is persistent, but I silence it by wrenching my gaze off Canning. With the colossal amount of guilt lodged in my chest, it's now become even more evident that I need to apologize to my old friend.

But right this second I'm not ready. Not here, with all these people around.

"It's fucking Grand Central Station in here," Cassel mutters.

"Dude. There's an errand I need to run. Come with me?" I form this idea on the fly, but it's a good one.

"Sure?"

"Back door," I say, nudging him toward a nearby exit.

Outside, I realize how close we are to Faneuil Hall and all the touristy crap they sell there. Perfect. "C'mon." I give Cassel a tug toward the first row of stores.

“Forgot your toothbrush?”

“Nah. I gotta buy a gift.”

“For who?” Cassel hefts his duffel higher on his shoulder.

I hesitate. I’ve always kept my memories of Canning to myself. Because they’re *mine*. For six weeks every summer, *he* was mine.

“A friend,” I finally admit. “One of the Rainier players.”

“A friend.” Cassel’s chuckle is low and dirty. “Trying to work out how to get laid after tomorrow’s game? What kind of store are you taking me to?”

Fucking Cassel. I should have left him in the crowded lobby. “Dude. It’s not like that.” *Even if I wish it were*. “This guy—Canning, their goalie—we used to be tight.” I reluctantly add, “Until I wrecked it by being an ass.”

“You? Who woulda guessed.”

“I know, right?”

I scan the row of storefronts. They’re full of the Boston tourist crap that is usually invisible to me: toy lobsters, Bruins pennants, Freedom Trail T-shirts. Something here would definitely fit the bill for what I have in mind.

“C’mon.” I wave Cassel into the cheesiest store and start scanning the shelves. Everything is garish as hell. I pick up a bobblehead doll of Paul Revere and then put it down.

“These are funny,” Cassel says. He’s holding a box of Red Sox condoms.

I laugh before I think better of the idea. “True. But that’s not what I’m looking for.” Whatever I choose, it cannot have anything to do with sex. We used to send each other all sorts of gag gifts—the dirtier the better.

But not this time.

“May I help you?” The sales girl is dressed in colonial garb, complete with the bosom-squishing flouncy dress.

“Sure you can, doll.” I lean against the counter in the cockiest way possible, and her eyes open a little wider. “You got anything with kittens on

it?”

“Kittens?” Cassel chokes back a laugh. “What the hell for?”

“His team is the *tigers*.” Duh.

“Sure!” Miss Betsy Ross perks up at the request, probably because this job is boring as fuck. “One sec.”

“What’s the deal?” Cassel tosses the condoms down onto a table. “You never buy me prezzies.”

“Canning and I were summer camp friends. Tight, but we only saw each other for six weeks a year.” A very intense six weeks. “You have friends like that?”

Cassel shakes his head.

“Me neither. Not before, and not since. But we didn’t speak during the year. We texted, and we sent the box.”

“The box?”

“Yeah...” I scratch my chin. “I think it started on his birthday. He must have been turning...fourteen?” Christ. Were we ever that young? “I sent him this obnoxious purple jock strap. I put it in one of my dad’s Cuban cigar boxes.”

I could still remember wrapping the box in brown paper and taping it all to hell so that it would get there in one piece. I’d hoped he’d open it in front of his friends and get embarrassed.

“Here we go!” Betsy Ross returns to spread several things on the counter in front of me. She’s found a Hello Kitty pencil box, a big plush cat wearing a Bruins T-shirt, and white boxers covered with kittens.

“These.” I push the boxers to her. Underwear hadn’t been my goal, but the kittens are even the right shade of orange. “Now, for bonus points, I need a box. Cigar-shaped, if possible.”

She hesitates. “Gift boxes cost extra.”

“I’m good for it.” I wink at her and she blushes a little. She’s checking out my tats where they peek from the V-neck of my T-shirt. Can’t blame

her. Most women do. Better yet, men like 'em, too.

“Let me see what I can find.” She scurries off.

I turn to Cassel, who's chewing his gum, watching me like I'm not making sense. “I still don't get it.”

Right. “So, a couple of months later I get the box in the mail. No note. It's just the box I sent him but it's filled to the top with purple Skittles.”

“Gross.”

“No, man. I fucking *love* purple Skittles. Took me a month to eat them, though. That's a lot of Skittles. And eventually I sent the box back.”

“With what?”

“No idea. Don't remember.”

“What?” yelps Cassel. “I thought this story had a punchline.”

“Not so much.” Huh. I didn't realize until right this second the gift inside wasn't that important. It was the act of sending it. I'd been just like every teenage kid going through the grind of school and practice and homework, communicating only by email and text and grunts. When that box showed up unannounced it was like Christmas, but better. My friend had thought about me and gone to the trouble.

As we got older, the jokes got even more ridiculous. Fake poop. Whoopie cushions. A sign that prohibited farting. Stress balls shaped like boobs. The gift wasn't nearly as important as the fact that something was given.

Now Betsy Ross is back with a gift box that's roughly the right size, even if it doesn't flip open at the top like our box used to. “That will do,” I say, even though I'm disappointed.

“So...” Cassel looks around the store, bored now. “You're sending him this one?”

“Yeah. Our old one is probably at my house somewhere.” If I weren't an asshole, I'd know where. “I broke the chain a few years ago. So this'll have to do.”

“I’m gonna text the manager and see if he’s got hotel keys for us yet,” Cassel says.

“You do that.” I’m watching Betsy Ross wrap the kitty boxers in some tissue paper, then tuck them in the box.

“Need a card?” she asks, flashing me a smile and a better view of her cleavage.

Those don’t work on me, sweetheart. “Please.”

She passes me a sturdy square of cardstock and a pen. I write exactly one word on it and drop it into the box. There. I’ll send this gift to Jamie’s room in the hotel as soon as we get back.

Then, when I can pull him aside somewhere quiet, I’ll apologize. There’s no way to undo the wreckage I’d wrought four years ago. I can’t take back that ridiculous bet I’d forced on him or the very awkward result. If I could go back in time and restrain my stupid eighteen-year-old self from pulling that bullshit, I would do it in a heartbeat.

But I can’t. I can only man up and shake his hand and tell him it’s good to see him. I can look into those brown eyes that always killed me and apologize for being such a dick. And then I can buy him a drink and try to go back to sports and smack-talk. Safe topics.

The fact that he’d been the first guy I ever loved and the one who made me face some terrifying things about myself...well, all that will go unsaid.

And then my team will kill his in the final. But that’s just the way it is.

Jamie

We're looking at a quiet night in the hotel—a fact I'm sure half my teammates are extremely unhappy about. Particularly the freshmen and sophomore players, who are at the Frozen Four for the first time and were expecting to party like crazy this weekend. Coach squashed that notion pretty quick, though.

He laid down the law before anyone could even pick up their menus at the team dinner—ten o'clock curfew, no alcohol, no drugs, no shenanigans.

The upperclassmen know the drill, so none of us are especially bummed as we ride the elevator up to our block of rooms on the third floor.

Tomorrow is game day. That means tonight is about taking it easy and getting some sleep.

Terry and I were assigned room 343 near the stairwell, so we're the last ones in the hallway as we head for our door.

The moment we reach it, we freeze.

There's a box on the carpet. Pale blue. No wrapping except for a white notecard stuck to the top reading *Jamie Canning* in flowery cursive.

What the shit?

My first thought is that my mom shipped something from California, but if she had, there'd be an address, postage, *her* handwriting.

"Um..." Terry shuffles before planting his hands on his hips. "You think it's a bomb?"

I snicker. "I don't know. Go put your ear on it and tell me if you hear ticking."

He snickers back. "Uh-huh, I see how it is. Such a great friend, Canning, putting *me* in the line of fire. Well, forget it. That's *your* name on the fucking thing."

We both stare at the package again. It's no bigger than a shoebox.

Beside me, Terry scrunches his face in mock terror and wails out, "*What's in the box?*"

"Dude, nice *Seven* reference," I say, genuinely impressed.

He grins. "You don't know how long I've been waiting for an opportunity to do that. *Years.*"

We take a moment to high-five each other, and I squat down and pick up the box because as entertaining as this convo is, we both know the thing is harmless. I tuck it under my arm and wait as Terry swipes his keycard to open the door, and then the two of us stride into the room. He flicks the light and heads for his bed, while I flop down on the edge of mine and lift the box's lid.

Wrinkling my forehead, I unwrap the white tissue paper and pull out the soft bundle of fabric inside.

From across the room, Terry hoots. "Dude...what the fuck?"

I have no idea. I'm staring at a pair of white boxers with bright orange kittens all over them, including an ill-placed tabby right at the crotch. When I hold them up by the waistband, another card flutters out. This one has one word on it.

MEOW.

And holy shit, I recognize the handwriting this time.

Ryan Wesley.

I can't help it. I snort so loud it sends Terry's eyebrows soaring up his forehead. I ignore my friend's reaction, too amused and bewildered by the significance of this gift.

The *box*. Wes has resurrected our old joke box. Except for the life of me, I have no idea *why*. I had been the last one to send it. And I remember feeling pretty damn smug about my choice of gifts—a package of Blow Pops. Because, well, how could I resist?

Wes hadn't sent anything back. He also hadn't called, texted, snail mailed, or courier pigeoned. Not a single word from him for three and a half years.

Until now.

"Who's it from?" Terry is smirking at me, visibly entertained by the ridiculous gift in my hands.

"Holly." Her name leaves my mouth so smoothly it surprises me. I don't know why I lied. Easy enough to say the boxers are from an old friend, a rival, whatever. But for some reason, I can't bring myself to tell Terry the truth.

"Is this an inside joke or something? Why would she send you kitten boxers?"

"Uh, you know, because she calls me kitten sometimes." Oh, for *fuck's* sake.

Terry pounces on that in a heartbeat. "*Kitten?* Your girlfriend calls you *kitten?*"

"She's not my girlfriend."

But the point is moot because he's doubled over in laughter, and I want to kick myself for giving him embarrassing ammo he'll no doubt use against me until the end of time. I should've just told him it was from Wes.

Why the hell didn't I?

"Uh, excuse me," he says, still chuckling as he marches to the door.

I narrow my eyes. “Where are you going?”

“Don’t worry about it, kitten.”

A sigh gets stuck in my throat. “You’re going to knock on every door and tell the guys, aren’t you?”

“Yup.” He’s gone before I can protest, but honestly I don’t care all that much. So the guys will ride me about the kitten thing for a few days. Eventually one of my teammates will do something ridiculous and it’ll be his turn to take the heat.

After the door swings shut behind Terry, I stare at the boxers again, an unwitting smile reaching my lips. Fuckin’ Wes. I’m not sure what this means, but he must know I’m in town for the championship. Maybe this is his way of apologizing? Extending an olive branch?

Either way, I’m too curious to ignore the gesture. I reach for the phone and dial the front desk, then wait on the line to an awesome elevator rendition of Katy Perry’s “Roar.” Which only makes me chuckle, because, you know, roar. Meow.

When the desk clerk answers, I ask if there’s a room number for Ryan Wesley. I’m pretty sure the sea of green-and-white jackets in the lobby means he’s at this hotel.

“I can’t provide another guest’s room number, sir.”

That stops me for a second, because clearly Wes was able to learn *my* room number. But this is Wes we’re talking about. He probably offered some woman at the front desk a look at his abs.

“Sir? I could try to connect you by phone.”

“Thanks.”

It rings, but nobody answers. Shit. But there’s one more thing to try. I scroll through my phone to see if his number is still in my contacts. And it is. Guess I was never quite pissed off enough to delete him. I shoot him a text, just three words: *still a smartass*.

When my phone chimes a second later, I expect it to say my message bounced. That Wes changed his number a long time ago, fuck you very much.

Some things don't change, it says instead.

I can't help answering him in my head. *But some do*. Eh. Listen to me getting all bitchy. What's the point of that? So I tap out something else: *So was this a hello present or a fuck you, loser, we're gonna kick your ass present?*

His reply: *Both?*

Sitting there on the hotel bed, I'm grinning at my phone. Seriously, my face is about to crack in two. It's really just nostalgia for a simpler time in my life when the biggest decisions were pizza toppings and what bit of ridiculousness I should mail in a box to my buddy.

But I like it anyway, which is probably why my next text says: *I'm probably heading down to the bar for a bit*.

His reply: *I'm already there*.

Of course he is.

I pocket my phone and open my duffel. Heading into the shower, I take a few minutes to wash the long day off me. I need to regroup. And I could really use a shave.

Or maybe I'm stalling.

I don't know what to expect from Wes. With him, you *never* know what to expect, which was one of the reasons I always liked him so much. Being his friend was a goddamn adventure. He'd drag me into one crazy situation after the other, and I was happy going along for the ride.

I did that so loyally. Right up through the crazy part at the end.

In the hotel shower, I take a deep breath of steamy air. Holly was right. I *am* still mad. Because if Wes and I had had a fight or something, then his turning his back on me would at least have made sense.

But we hadn't fought. He'd just challenged me to a shootout. And that day—the second-to-last afternoon of camp—we'd lined up the pucks with perfect fairness. He shot five times at me, I shot five times at him.

Shootouts are never easy. But when you're defending the net against Ryan Wesley, the fastest skater I've ever played with? It's intense. Still, we'd done this often enough for me to be able to anticipate his flashy moves. I remember cackling after I stopped the first three shots. But then he got lucky, deking me once and then winning one on an unlikely bounce off the pipe.

Maybe another guy would have panicked a little when he realized he'd let in two. But I was a cool customer. Ultimately, it was Wes who'd choked. He wasn't used to the goalie gear, but neither was I used to firing on goal. I sank my first two shots. Then he defended the next two.

It was all down to one shot, and I saw it—fear in his eyes. In my gut, I knew I could do this.

I'd won, fair and square. The third shot went past his elbow and landed with a swish in the back of the net.

For the next three hours I let him twist—all through dinner and the bullshit awards ceremony they held at the end of camp. Wes was uncharacteristically mute through all of it.

I waited until we got back to our room to let him off the hook.

"Think I'll collect my prize next year," I'd said with as much nonchalance as an eighteen-year-old can muster. "June, maybe. Or July. I'll let you know, 'kay?"

I'd wanted some kind of relieved gasp. Making Wes sweat for once had been fun. But his face gave nothing away. He'd pulled out a stainless steel flask and slowly unscrewed the top. "Last night of camp, dude," he'd said. "We'd better celebrate." He took a good gulp and then passed it to me.

When I took the flask, his eyes flashed with something I couldn't read.

The whiskey was rough going down. The first swallow, anyway. Up until now, we hadn't drunk more than a beer or two, squirreled away in our footlockers. Getting caught with alcohol or drugs would have meant real trouble. So I didn't have any kind of tolerance back then. I felt the liquor's warmth slide through my chest just as Wes said, "Let's watch some porn."

Almost four years later, I stand there shivering in a hotel bathroom. I shut the water off and grab a towel off the stack.

I guess it's time to go downstairs and see if our friendship is fixable. What had happened on that night was a little crazy, but not exactly worthy of the record books. I'd shrugged it off easily enough.

But Wes had not. There's really no other explanation for why he'd cut me loose.

God, I hope he doesn't dredge that up. Sometimes it's better to just let shit lie. The way I see it, one night of drunken stupidity shouldn't be the defining moment in a six-year friendship.

Even so, I'm oddly nervous five minutes later as I ride the elevator downstairs, and I hate the itchy feeling in my spine, because I don't get nervous often. I'm probably the most chill person you'll ever meet, which I'm sure has to do with the fact that my family is the walking definition of laidback Californians.

The bar is packed when I enter. No surprise. It's Friday night and the hotel is booked solid because of the tournament. Every table and booth is occupied. I have to turn my body sideways to move through the place, and I can't see Wes anywhere.

Maybe this was a stupid idea. "Excuse me," I say. There's a clot of businessmen blocking the thoroughfare between the bar and the tables. But they laugh at someone's joke, ignoring the way they're making the whole room impassable.

I'm probably seconds from going back upstairs when I hear it.

"Suckers."

It's just one word, but I recognize Wes's voice instantly. Deep, kinda raspy. I'm suddenly transported back to high school, to all those summers I heard that voice mocking me, challenging me, ragging on me.

A communal snort of laughter follows his comment, and I turn my head to search him out in the group of hockey players against the far wall.

He turns his head at the same time, almost as if he senses my presence. And shit, I've traveled back in time again. He looks the same. And different. He looks both different and the same.

He's still got the messy dark hair and scruffy beard growth, but he's bigger now. Solid muscle and broad shoulders, more lean than bulky, but definitely bulkier than his eighteen-year-old self. Still has the tribal tattoo on his right biceps, but now there's a lot more ink on his golden-toned skin. Another piece on his left arm. Something black and Celtic-looking peeking from the collar of his T-shirt.

He's still talking to his friends as he watches me approach. Of course he's surrounded by people. I'd forgotten how magnetic he is. As if he burns with higher test fuel than the rest of us.

A barbell pierced through his eyebrow catches the light as he turns his head, a wink of silver just a shade lighter than his slate-gray eyes. Which narrow when I finally swim through the sea of people to arrive at his side.

"Shit, man, did you get highlights in your hair?"

More than three years since we've been in the same room together, and *that's* the first thing he says to me?

"No." I roll my eyes as I slide onto the stool beside his. "It's from the sun."

"Still surfing every weekend?" Wes asks.

"When I have time." I cock a brow. "Still pulling down your pants and flashing your junk for no conceivable reason?"

His teammates erupt around us, their laughter thundering in my chest. "Shit, he was always like this?" somebody says.

A grin tugs the corner of Wes's mouth. "I've never deprived the world of my God-given masculine beauty." He reaches out to put a big hand on my shoulder. He gives it a squeeze. It's gone again in a split second, but I can still feel the warm spot on my shoulder. "Guys, this is Jamie Canning, my friend from way back and goalie for those punks at Rainier."

"Hey," I say stupidly. Then I glance around, looking for a waitress. I need a drink in my hand, even if it's just a soda. But the place is mobbed, and the only server in view is nowhere nearby.

I glance at the glass in Wes's hand. He's drinking something fizzy—Coke, from the looks of it. No, root beer. He'd always preferred root beer. And obviously his coach gave him the same no-drinking spiel.

Wes raises his hand in the air, and the waitress abruptly turns in our direction. He points at his glass and she nods as if commanded by God to do his bidding. Wes flashes her a smile, his favorite currency for favors. And I notice another flash of metal.

His tongue is pierced. That's new, too.

Annnd now I'm thinking about his tongue. Jesus fuck. And the last four years of silence between us suddenly make a bit more sense. Maybe there *are* drunken antics capable of wrecking a friendship.

Or maybe that's crap, and if we'd stayed friends we could have gotten past an hour's worth of stupidity a long time ago.

Meanwhile, it's really too warm in this bar. If that waitress brings me a root beer, I'm going to be tempted to pour it all over myself. And the silence between my ex-friend and I is growing longer by the second.

"Crowded," I manage. Just barely.

"Yeah. Need a pull?" He offers me his glass.

I take a greedy gulp and our eyes meet over the rim. His confidence has slipped a millimeter or two. His gaze asks a question. *Are we going to make it through the next half hour?*

Swallowing, I make a decision. “Shame the Bruins got punished by the Ducks last month.”

I see the flash of arrogance return at lightning speed. “That was a fluke. And a *terrible* call in the third. Your wing tripped over his own duck feet.”

“With a little help from your D-man.”

“Oh, fuck that. Twenty bucks says the Ducks don’t make it past the first round this year.”

“Twenty is all you’re willing to bet?” I gasp. “Sounds like you’re afraid. Twenty and a YouTube video proclaiming my greatness.”

“Done, but when you lose, you make that video in a Bruins T-shirt.”

“Sure.” I shrug. And just like that, the night gets easier.

The waitress appears with two glasses of root beer and a hungry smile for Wes. He slips her a twenty. “Thanks, doll.”

“Let me know if you *need* anything,” she says, overselling it by a shade. *Christ*. Hockey players don’t have a lot of trouble getting laid, but my old friend obviously enjoys his pick of the litter. She’s hot, too. Great rack and a sweet smile.

He doesn’t even spare a glance at her perfect ass as she sashays away.

After she disappears, Wes opens his arms and grins at the group of hockey players standing around him. “Shit, we’re just a bunch of pussies, aren’t we? Root beer and ginger ale on a Friday night. Someone call the cops. We need a game of darts or something.”

“Table hockey!” someone calls out. “Saw it in the game room.”

“Cassel!” Wes thumps the guy standing next to him. “Who won our last game, anyway?”

“You did, you prick. Because you cheated during the shootout.”

“Who, me?”

Everyone laughs. But my mind snags on “shootout.”

Of course it does.

Wes

The college sprang for an executive suite at TD Garden, a fancy-ass private box with a gleaming floor-to-ceiling window that overlooks the arena below. The celebratory bottles of Dom that had been delivered, however, were courtesy of my shithead father. The prick is riding the high of our win as if it had been *him* out on the ice this afternoon—I even heard him bragging to one of his buddies that he was the one who taught me that triple-deke move I used to score the winning goal in the third period.

Bullshit. The old man hadn't taught me a damn thing. From the moment I was able to hold a hockey stick, he threw money at coaches and trainers and anyone else who could groom his only son into a superstar. The only credit I'm willing to give him is that he's really fucking good at signing his name on a check.

Canning's team is on the ice now, facing the same pressure we did earlier. Coach has allowed us each one glass of champagne. We're playing in the finals tomorrow night, and he wants us sharp. He doesn't have to worry about me, though. I'm sipping on a root beer. Not just as a fuck-you to my dad, but because my stomach is in knots as I watch the game, and alcohol will only make it worse.

I want Rainier to win.

I want to face Canning in the finals.

I want to pretend I still don't have feelings for the guy.

I guess I'll have to be satisfied with two out of three. Because I *can't* pretend I'm not still into him. Seeing him again last night made that impossible.

Fuck, he'd looked good. Really good. All golden-boy California hotness, big and blond and sexy as fuck. With those soulful brown eyes—surprising on a blond guy. It's an understated sexiness, though. Jamie Canning never flaunted his looks in all the time I'd known him. Sometimes I think he's not even aware of how goddamn attractive he is.

"Ooooooh *shit*," one of the seniors crows as a Rainier player delivers what might be the hit of the week.

It's a clean check, but it makes the opposing player bounce off the boards like a rubber ball and sprawl face-first on the ice.

Rainier is in it to win it. They're playing aggressively, all offense, all the time. I don't think Yale has taken more than a dozen shots on goal, and it's already well into the third. Canning stopped all but one, and the one he let in was a total fluke of a shot, smacking off the pipe to provide Yale with a rebound the center slapped right back in. I could practically hear the hiss of the puck as it whizzed past Canning's glove, just a nanosecond too fast for him to swallow it up.

The score's tied now. 1-1, with five minutes to go. I find myself holding my breath, willing Rainier's forwards to make something happen.

"Your man Canning is rock steady," Cassel tells me, taking a dainty sip of his champagne like he's the fucking Queen of England.

"Cool under pressure," I agree, my gaze glued to the rink. Yale's left wing just flicked a lazy wrist shot that Canning easily stops, his body language almost bored as he keeps possession of the puck before passing it to one of his wings.

The Rainier players tear past the blue line, going on the attack.

But my mind is still on the last goal attempt, the way Canning faced off with the Yale player. I can't even count how many times I was in that exact position, flying toward my buddy, slapping bullets at him.

Except the last time we faced off, I was the one in the net. The last barrier standing between Jamie Canning and a blowjob.

I like to think I didn't let him win on purpose. I'm a competitor, always have been. Didn't matter how much I wanted Canning's dick in my mouth. Didn't matter that if *I* won, I knew I'd have to let him back out of the bet. I'd defended that net with everything I had. Maybe?

Because when that puck flew past me, I can't deny a part of me had been thrilled.

"With that said, I wouldn't bawl my eyes out if they lose," Cassel says. He turns to grin at me. "I know he's your BFF and all, but I'd feel better going up against Yale's goalie than cool cucumber down there."

Cassel's right. Canning's the bigger threat. Those weaknesses he'd had back in the day? Gone. He's a fucking rock star now. No wonder he got the starting job back.

Even so, I don't want him to lose. I want to see him in the finals. I want to see him, period. And I've experienced crushing defeat before—if his team chokes, I know he won't be up for hanging out, catching up, reconnecting...

Sucking each other off?

I banish the thought. I don't fucking learn, do I? The last time *sucking* entered the equation, I'd lost my best friend.

It's funny—I'm sure everyone has something they regret saying. An insult they'd hurled someone's way. A confession they wished they could take back. Maybe, I don't know, an insensitive joke they wish they hadn't told.

The one sentence *I* regret? "*Let's watch some porn.*"

There was no turning back once I uttered those four words, and I can't even fully blame the alcohol, because a few sips from a flask does not a drunken idiot make. I knew what I was doing. What I was coaxing Canning into. I was collecting on the damn bet, which is so fucking ironic, because *he'd* won. The prize was *his*, except it wasn't. It was *mine*. Because I'd wanted to touch him more than I'd wanted my next breath.

I still remember the shock on his face when I loaded the porn site on my laptop. I chose a tame scene—tame for me, anyway. I set the laptop on the mattress, then sprawled on the bottom bunk as if I had no care in the world.

For a long moment Canning didn't move. I waited, tense, while he decided whether or not he was going to sit next to me on my bed, or climb up to the top bunk. Without looking at him, I passed him the flask. I heard him gulp. He swallowed on a sigh, then parked his ass beside me.

I didn't risk a look at him for several minutes. We lay on our backs, passing the flask back and forth as we watched two dudes double-team a busty blonde on the screen.

"How would you compare your technique to hers?" Canning cracked himself up with this quip, his stomach shaking even as he looked at the laptop.

To him, it was just the latest amusing result of our competitive shenanigans. He was going to lord it over me, the way we always did with each other.

But to me, it was no joke. I'd just spent the last year trying to accept my increasingly obvious attraction to men. The bumbling loss of my virginity to a chick during junior year had been a pretty big red flag. I hadn't been attracted to her, but I'd needed to try it. To be certain. I'd barely been able to get it up, and even then, I'd managed only because I was thinking about...

Canning. I thought about Jamie Canning.

I'd been crushing on my straight best friend for a long time. But I couldn't tell him that. My only move here was to play along.

"Well, I've always been good at stickhandling."

Jamie snorted. "Only you could be cocky even about this."

"I always tell you, Canning. No fear. No matter what."

God, I was such a jackass. Because fear wasn't even part of the equation. All I had was a pure, aching desire as I lay there beside Jamie. Last year I'd enjoyed a couple of drunken make-out sessions and a hand-job exchange with a guy from school. But even then, I hadn't been one hundred percent sure.

Lying in bed next to Canning? I burned with certainty.

On the screen, the blonde was moaning like crazy. Spit-roasted and loving it. Canning went quiet for a while. I lay there, trying to keep my breathing even. But I couldn't resist sneaking a peek at his crotch a minute later. And then my breath hitched, because holy shit, he was hard, a long, thick erection straining beneath his athletic shorts. I was sporting the same visible boner, and I know he saw it. He probably thought it was the porn. Hell, that was the only reason *he* was turned on.

Not me, though. My dick throbbed for *him*.

Beside me, he swallowed roughly. "Interesting pick, Wesley. Considering the stakes. I'm not gonna force you to blow me." He grinned. "I'd rather bask in the glory of knowing you finally wrote a check you couldn't cash." Then he rolled his gorgeous eyes at me, and it only made my skin burn hotter.

"What," I said, hoping he couldn't hear the rasp of lust in my voice, "You think I'm too chicken-shit to blow you?"

He turned his chin to meet my eyes...

"Fuck yeah!"

Our team captain's shout jerks me out of my trip down memory lane. The whole arena is in an uproar, fans screaming as the scoreboard lights up

and the screens mounted all over the place flash the word GOAL! in huge yellow letters.

My stomach drops like a sack of bricks when I realize who scored.
Yale.

Fucking hell. Yale scored, and I'd been too distracted to see it. It's 2-1 now, with a minute and a half to go.

"I spaced out," I tell Cassel. "What just happened?"

"One of the Rainier D-men took the stupidest penalty I've ever seen."
He shakes his head in amazement. "Idiot just handed Yale the win."

No, they haven't won yet. There's still time for Rainier to regroup. Still time, damn it.

"Your boy didn't stand a chance on that power play," Cassel adds.

My gut twists harder. Say what you will about Yale, but they lead the NCAA in capitalizing on power plays. Every time we played them this season, Coach uttered one grim sentence before we left the locker room—"You wind up in the sin bin against Yale, you lose."

I pray those words aren't prophetic, that Rainier can come back from this, but my prayers go unanswered.

The final buzzer blares through TD Garden.

And Rainier loses.

Jamie

We lost.

We fucking lost.

I'm still dazed as I trudge down the chute toward the locker rooms. The mood all around me is somber. Suffocating. Nobody is playing the blame game, though.

There's no anger directed at Barkov, who tripped the Yale forward for no comprehensible reason—the guy didn't even have the puck.

There's no recrimination toward our defense, who inexplicably fell apart during that power play.

And there's no accusation aimed *my* way, for not being able to stop that last shot from lighting the lamp.

But, inside...I blame myself.

I should've stopped it. I should've dived faster, extended my arm farther. I should've hurled my body on that damn puck and not let it get anywhere near the crease.

Numbness sets in. I'd been bummed my family didn't make the trek from Cali to watch me play. Now I'm grateful they didn't see me lose. Except on television. Along with a few million other people...

Damn.

Back in our hotel room, I find Terry sitting on the bed, clicker in hand. But the TV is off, and he's watching a black screen.

"Um, Terry? You okay?"

He looks up fast. "Yeah. Just..." The sentence dies an early death.

The next several days are going to be just like this. I can see it now. We wanted so badly to be the ones who brought this title home to Rainier. It would have proved to our families and the college that all these years of sacrifice were worth it.

We proved nothing.

"It's still the winningest season in thirty years," Terry says slowly.

I flop onto my bed. "Is winningest a word?"

"Not if you're us." We both laugh. But his laugh ends on a sigh. "That was my *last* game, Canning. My very last one. I'm not an NHL recruit like you. Three months from now I'm wearing a suit and sitting at a desk."

Shit. That's really grim.

"For fifteen years I've been a hockey player. As of a half hour ago, I'm a junior associate in the investment banking division of Pine Trust Capital."

Jesus. And now I'm hoping our hotel room windows aren't the kind that open, because I'm half afraid he's going to step out onto a ledge. Or else I will. "Dude, you need alcohol and a girl. Like, yesterday."

His chuckle is dark. "My cousins are on the way over here to pick me up. There will be drinking and titty bars."

"Thank Christ." I roll over to study the pebbled hotel room ceiling.

"You know, there's a very real chance I never play a single NHL game. Third-string goalie? Detroit might as well make a bench to my ass's exact measurements. If I'm lucky they'll let me play backup to their farm-team goalie."

"You'll still have the jersey and the puck bunnies." His phone rings and he swipes to answer. "Born ready," he tells the caller. "I'll be right down."

Then to me, “You coming with?”

Am I? I definitely need a drink. But at the moment, my back is plastered to the bedspread. “I’m not ready,” I admit. “Can I text you in an hour, see where you are?”

“Do it,” he says.

“Later,” I call out as the door clicks shut.

For a little while I just stew in my own misery. My parents call my phone, but I don’t pick up. They’ll be awesome, as always, but I don’t want to hear nice, encouraging words right now. I need to feel bad. Get drunk. Get off, maybe.

There’s a firm knock on the door and I haul my sorry ass up to answer it. Probably a teammate, ready to help me with the getting drunk part of tonight’s activities.

I yank the door open to find Holly standing there, her face smudged with orange and black paint, a bottle of tequila in one hand and limes in the other. “Surprise,” she says.

“Jesus, Holls.” I laugh. “You said you weren’t coming.”

“I lied.” She gives me a big grin.

I open the door wider. “You’ve never had better timing in your life.”

“Really?” she challenges, pushing past me. “Not even the time I got you off in the bathroom of the train right before our station stop?”

“Okay, maybe then.” I am so happy to see her it’s not even funny. Distraction is what I need, and that’s what Holly and I have always been to one another.

She gets down to business, cutting limes on the hotel table with a knife she’s pulled from her purse. Do I know how to pick my friends, or what?

“Glasses,” Holly orders over her shoulder.

I think I could go straight for the bottle tonight, but for her sake I look around, finding a pair of them on the console by the TV. I plunk ’em down and she’s pouring before I know it.

“Here.” She offers me a glass and raises another in the air. “To kicking ass and getting over our disappointments.” Her wide blue eyes study me, looking for something.

“That’s a good toast, pal,” I murmur. “Thank you.” When I touch my glass to hers, she grins like she’s won something tonight. That makes one of us.

“Bottoms up, hunk. Then I’m stripping you naked.”

I like the sound of that. The tequila slides down, and then I let her stick a lime in my mouth. We’re both chuckling and sucking down the sour citrus flavor. Then I give her a nudge onto the bed. I’d like to freaking *unleash* all my tensions on this smiling girl, but I take a deep breath. Holly is kind of a peanut and half the time I’m worried about crushing her.

My knees are on the bed now, and she’s scooting back, shucking off her shirt. My own shirt hits the floor before I lower myself over her body, taking care to hold most of my weight off of her. Except for my hips. Those sink decadently onto hers, and my dick wakes up and says, *lookee what we have here*.

Holly grabs my head and pulls me down for a kiss. I taste lime and tequila and willing, happy girl. “Mmm,” she moans. “I’ve been waiting all day for this.”

So was I, it’s just that I didn’t know it. My eyes slam shut and I sink down into her mouth and this beautiful place of forgetfulness. There’s no game and no goal just before the buzzer. There’s no disappointment. There’s only a sexy girl beneath me and some more shots to drink.

And a knock on the door.

“Fuck,” Holly and I grunt in unison.

“Canning!” a voice calls from the hallway.

Wes’s voice. The sound of it pulls me out of the moment.

“Do you *have* to?” Holly pants.

“I kind of do,” I whisper. “But only for a minute. I swear.”

“Fine,” she huffs, pushing on my chest. “But I’m pouring more tequila.”

“You are awesome,” I insist, reaching down to the floor for her shirt. I ignore mine in the interest of time. The second she’s covered, I cross the room and open the door.

“Hey,” I greet Wes.

I expect him to launch into a “tough luck” spiel. Wes is competitive as fuck but he’d never kick me when I was down. Oddly, though, he stays silent, blinking at me from the hallway. “Hey,” he echoes after a long pause. “I just...”

No more words are forthcoming. He takes in my half-dressed look, and the sight of my fuck buddy pouring tequila.

“That’s Holly,” I say quietly. “Holly, this is an old friend, Ryan Wesley.”

“Shot?” she offers from across the room. She’s flushed, and her hair is mussed.

I’m probably in the same state. But Holly doesn’t seem embarrassed, so I don’t worry. “Wes, you coming in?”

“No,” he says quickly, and the word sounds like a chip of stone falling onto a hard surface. “I just wanted to tell you that I’m sorry we’re not facing off tomorrow.” He shoves his hands in his pockets in a rare display of humility. “Won’t be the same now.” The corners of his mouth turn up, but the smile doesn’t make it to his eyes.

“I know.” My voice is full of all the disappointment I’d been hoping to escape tonight. “Not like camp.”

“Loved that place,” Wes says, reaching up to rub the back of his neck.

“I still coach there, you know.” I’d meant to end this conversation already, so I have no idea why I add, “It isn’t the same without you.” It’s true, but this is already the most emotionally loaded day of my life, and I really don’t need more to think about.

“I’m going to head out,” Wes says, jerking a thumb toward the elevators. “You, ah, take care of yourself if I don’t see you tomorrow.” He

takes a step backward.

That's the moment when I really don't know what to do. My team will head back to the west coast in the morning. We won't stay for the final. I'm not sure Wes and I have more to say to each other right now. But is this really it? I feel a strong urge to add something—to delay his departure.

Except I'm beat and confused and so fucking spent. And he's already turning away from me.

"Later," I say gruffly.

He looks over his shoulder to raise one hand in a wave.

I stand there like an idiot a moment longer, and he turns the corner toward the elevator banks.

"Jamie," Holly says softly. "Here's your drink."

Reluctantly, I shut the door. I cross the room, take the glass from her and pound it.

She slips the empty tumbler from my hand. "Now where were we?"
If I only knew.

Wes

“You know we just won the national title, right?” Cassel says for the hundredth time in the past hour. He wears the goofy, king-of-the-world grin he’s been sporting all night. Even before the four vodka shots he threw back.

“Yeah, I know.” My tone is absent as I sweep my gaze over the crowded, overheated bar we’d chosen as celebration headquarters. The drinks at the hotel bar are ridiculously overpriced, so we decided to venture somewhere else tonight. And according to Donovan’s Yelp search, this tiny dive bar has half-price drinks on Sunday nights and apparently they don’t taste like piss.

I don’t give a shit how the alcohol tastes, though. I’m only interested in the effects of it. I want to get drunk. I want to get shit-faced out of my mind so I don’t have to think about what a total fucking idiot I am.

Cassel’s voice drags me out of my bleak thoughts. “Then quit sulking like a bitch,” he orders. “We’re national champions, man. We *crushed* Yale tonight. We fucking shut them out.”

We did. The final score had been 2-0, Northern Mass. We’d wiped the ice with our opponents, and I should be happy about that. No, I should be

goddamn ecstatic. It's what we trained all year for, yet instead of savoring the win, I'm too busy bumming out about the fact that Canning has a girlfriend.

Yes, folks, Jamie Canning is straight. Shocker.

You'd think I'd have learned my lesson by now. I spent six years hoping that maybe the attraction wasn't one-sided. Maybe one day a switch would suddenly go off and he'd be like, *hmmm, I'm totally into Wes*. Or maybe he would figure out he swings both ways and decide to take a walk on the dude side.

None of those maybes had panned out, though. And they never fucking would.

All around me, the guys laugh and joke and recap their favorite moments of tonight's game, and nobody notices I'm not saying anything. My mind keeps wandering back to Jamie and his girl and the hook-up I'd interrupted last night.

"We need another round," Cassel announces, searching the main room for our waitress.

When I spot her behind the counter, I abruptly scrape back my chair. "I'll go order it," I tell the guys, and then I dart away from the table before anyone can ask why I've suddenly become so charitable.

At the bar, I order another round of shots for the group, then rest my forearms on the splintered wooden counter and study the liquor bottles on the shelves. I've been drinking beer all night, but it's not getting the job done. I need to be drunker. I need something harder.

My gut tightens when my gaze lands on a gleaming bottle of bourbon. My father's drink of choice. But the bourbon he buys is a thousand times more expensive than the bottle on this shelf.

I shift my gaze to the row of tequila bottles.

Canning had been drinking tequila last night.

My gaze moves again. Jack Daniel's.

Aw hell. It's like every bottle in this fucking bar is full of memories.

Before I can stop it, my mind flashes back to that last day at camp, to the silver flask I'd passed Canning, and the mocking question I'd hurled his way.

"You think I'm too chicken-shit to blow you?"

He'd seemed to consider me for a minute. "I think it's a bad idea to ever say that Ryan Wesley is too chicken-shit to do something."

"True dat."

He chuckled, but his eyes went back to the screen. Again, he let me off the hook. But I didn't want to be let off. I wanted to *get* off. The longer we sat there discussing sex, the more certain I was. Touching my best friend was all I could think about. It wasn't a dare for me, either. It was pure desire.

On the screen, the blonde was on her knees, sucking one of the guys while jacking off the other. Jamie took another sip from the flask before passing it my way. Beside me, he shifted his hips, and I had to suppress a shudder. My heart's desire was sitting beside me.

And now he was horny.

His hand had moved, resting just above the waistband of his shorts. He gave the spot beneath his abs the tiniest of caresses, like he had an itch, but it was obvious he'd been hoping to do some strategic rearranging.

I swallowed a mouthful of whiskey. For courage. Then I put a hand between my legs, just resting it there. "This is killing me," I said. It was the most truthful statement I'd made all day. I took a slow stroke down my hard cock and then back up again. I could feel his eyes on me, on my hand. And that made me even crazier. Forget the screen. I'd rather star in my own solo act right here, with my favorite pair of brown eyes as the only audience.

My heart started to pound, because I knew what I was about to do.

There's this cliff at the swimming hole we liked, a twenty-foot drop into the lake, and that night, it was like I was standing atop it. Like I was

creeping toward the edge and pulling him with me. I remember one year when Canning was taking so long to jump I'd lost patience and pushed him off, cackling as I watched him windmill down to the water below.

But I couldn't do that this time. I couldn't push him. He had to jump.

I licked my dry lips. "I really need to jerk. You mind?"

His moment of hesitation practically killed me. "Go ahead. We shower in the same room, right? Hell." He chuckled. "We crap in the same room. Though there's walls."

There weren't any here.

I shoved my hand under my waistband and gripped my aching shaft. I didn't whip it out, though. Just gave it a slow tug beneath my shorts.

His eyes had filled with surprise, then flashed with something that sucked the breath right out of my lungs. Not anger. Not annoyance.

Arousal.

Holy hell, he was getting off on seeing me jerk it. And neither of us was looking at the laptop now. Canning's gaze stayed glued to the slow movement of my hand beneath my shorts.

"You can, too." I hated the gravelly sound of my voice just then, because I knew that I had an agenda. "Go ahead. It'll be less weird for me."

Hell. I was like the serpent shoving the apple at Eve. Or rather the banana...

All the bad analogies fled my stupid brain a moment later when Jamie reached into his shorts and pulled his dick all the way out.

My heart shimmied in my chest at the sight. He was pink and thick and perfect. With the fingers of one hand he stroked the underside—up and down. The lightest touch. I envied those fingertips.

I cupped my aching balls and tried to take a deep breath. My chest was tight from wanting him. He was right there—his hip touching mine. I wanted to bend down and take him in my mouth. I wanted it so badly I could taste it.

His eyes went back to the screen. I felt him sink a little further back into the bed. We were both stroking in earnest now. His breathing became shallower, and the sound of it sent another shot of lust up my spine. I wanted to be the one making him pant like that. But then his pace faltered, and I looked up to find out why.

The video had ended. I'd chosen a clip that was only a few minutes long. And now the screen had frozen on a menu of clips, but the thumbnail photo displayed most prominently was this awful shot of a woman's giant ass.

"Um..." Jamie actually chuckled. "That's not getting the job done."

I felt a sort of awareness settle over me then. In hockey, when a shot opens up, a good player has to react immediately. That's exactly what was happening here. A window of opportunity had cracked open a sliver, and I was going to dive through it.

"You could call in your bet," I croaked.

Stroking himself, he let out a hot breath. "You daring me to?"

"Yeah."

His throat worked as he swallowed. His eyes flickered with a parade of emotions I couldn't keep up with. Reluctance. Heat. Confusion. Heat. Irritation. Heat.

"I..." He laughed, his voice hoarse. He stopped, cleared his throat. "Double dog dare you."

His gaze locked with mine again and I almost came right there and then. My cock had swelled in my hand, pulsing. Aching. But somehow I managed to put on a careless tone, my trademark up-for-anything drawl that half the time is a total front.

"Well. This should be interesting."

The faint hint of panic on his face was unmistakable, but I didn't give him time to back out. I wanted him too much. I'd *always* fucking wanted this guy.

Releasing myself, I reached over to cover his hand with mine. He tensed, and for a split second I thought he was going to push me away.

I wouldn't have blamed him.

But then he let go, leaving my hand there alone. And I was holding his dick. *Finally*. He was hot and hard, and the ends of his soft blond pubic hair tickled my fingertips. I squeezed, and all the air seemed to drain out of his body, his torso practically melting into the mattress. My mouth was a desert, my pulse a loud drum in my ears.

I stroked my palm along that hard shaft, acting like what I was doing was no biggie. Then I said, "Fuck, I think I'm drunk." Because that seemed like the right thing to say. Like alcohol was the reason we were doing this. Alcohol was our hall pass.

It worked, because he choked out, "Me too." But his voice was smoky and distracted.

And maybe he *was* drunk. Maybe the flush on his cheeks was all thanks to the whiskey and not from the feel of my other hand yanking his shorts down further. Maybe his breathing quickened because alcohol was surging through his bloodstream and not from my fingers curling around his shaft.

I shifted on the mattress, kneeling in front of him as I pumped him in slow strokes. My entire body throbbed with uncontrollable need, my erection heavy between my legs. I ignored it, though. Jamie blinked twice when I rose above him, and I watched his face, gauging his reaction. He didn't look horrified. He looked turned on.

I'd been fantasizing about this moment for years. Couldn't believe it was really here.

"What are you waiting for, *Ryan*? Suck it already."

Surprise jolted through me. He only called me Ryan when he was taunting me. And right now he was taunting me about sucking his dick. Jesus.

My bravado faltered, just for a second. Until I saw his pulse hammering in the hollow of his throat, and realized he was as nervous and excited as I was.

I took a breath and lowered my head.

Then I closed my mouth over his swollen tip and sucked.

Jamie's hips snapped up instantly, his breath leaving his throat on a ragged shudder. "Oh Jesus."

I remember wondering if he'd ever been blown before. The shock and awe in his voice had been so raw. So sexy. So I'd wondered, but not for long. Not when he started whispering the hottest, filthiest commands at me.

"More," he muttered. "Take more. Take it all."

I sucked him deeper into my mouth, almost to the base, and just when he moaned, I released him, gliding my tongue along the long, hard length of him until his dick was glistening. I lapped at the moisture leaking out of his tip, and the taste of him infused my tongue, making my head spin.

I was blowing my best friend. It was so surreal. It was what I'd dreamed about for so long, and the fantasy was nothing compared to the reality of it.

"Fuck, yeah." Canning's hips began to rock as I took him in my mouth again.

I licked the crown of his cock, teasing, savoring, then taking him deep again. I didn't dare peer up at him. I was too afraid to look him in the eye—afraid he'd be able to see on my face how much I wanted him.

"Jesus, Wes, you're way too good at this."

The praise just lit me up. Holy *hell*. He was thrusting into my mouth because *I* turned him on.

His fingers suddenly tangled in my hair, tightening when I swallowed him as far as I could take him.

"Oh Christ. Keep doing that, man. Let me fuck your mouth."

Every husky thing he said practically made me go up in flames. I knew *I* would enjoy this. But if he was too? Mind bending. I quickened the pace,

squeezing his shaft on every upstroke, tighter than I thought he'd like, but he kept muttering *harder, faster*.

My eyes squeezed shut as I worked him over, determined to make him lose control, to make him feel the same urgent need wreaking havoc on my body.

"Wes..." A choked sound left his lips. "Fuck, Wes, you're making me come."

His fingers pulled my hair to the point of pain, his abs tightening as his hips rocked faster. A few seconds later, he groaned. The husky sound vibrated against my lips as he went still, thrust deep, and came inside my mouth while I swallowed up every last dro—

"You hoping one of those bottles holds up a little sign for you and says 'order me'?"

A male voice jolts me back to the present. I blink, disoriented. I'm still at the bar, still standing at the counter and staring at the liquor bottles. Shit. I'd totally spaced out. And I'm semi-hard now, thanks to the memory of my last night with Jamie Canning.

Gulping, I turn to find a smiling stranger beside me.

"Seriously," he adds, his smile widening. "You've been eyeing those bottles for almost five minutes. The bartender gave up on trying to ask you what you wanted."

The bartender had talked to me? He probably thinks I'm a total weirdo.

The guy next to me doesn't look like a weirdo, though. He's really good-looking, actually. Late twenties, wearing faded jeans and a *Ramones* T-shirt, a full-sleeve tattoo covering his right arm. Tribal shit, mixed with skulls and dragons and some other badass imagery. He's skinnier than I usually like, but not anorexic thin. Not entirely my type, but he's not *not* my type, either. He's definitely hook-up material, and from the way he's checking me out, I know he'd be down.

"You with those guys?" He gestures to the table of hockey jackets.

I nod.

“Whatcha celebrating?”

“We won the Frozen Four tonight.” I pause. “College hockey championship.”

“No shit. Congrats, man. So you play hockey, huh?” His gaze lingers on my chest and arms before sliding back to my face. “It shows.”

Yeah, he’d be down.

I glance at the table, where Cassel catches my eye. He grins when he notices my companion, then turns back to the guys, laughing at something Landon just said.

“So what’s your name?” my stranger asks.

“Ryan.”

“I’m Dane.”

I nod again. I can’t seem to muster up any charm. No cocky remarks, no blatant come-ons. I won a championship game tonight—I should be celebrating. I should invite this very attractive guy back to the hotel, hang the do-not-disturb sign on the door so Cassel gets the hint, and screw Dane’s goddamn brains out.

But I don’t want to. I’d just be trying to screw Canning out of my system, and I know I’d feel like shit after.

“Sorry, gotta get back to my boys,” I say abruptly. “Nice chatting with you, man.”

I march across the bar before he can say another word. I don’t turn around to see if he looks disappointed or to make sure he isn’t following me. I just tap Cassel on the shoulder and tell him I’m taking off.

It’s another five minutes before I’m able to convince him I haven’t been abducted by aliens. I plead a headache, blame it on the adrenaline and the beers and the temperature and everything else I can think of, until finally he gives up on coaxing me to stay, and I’m able to leave the bar.

It's twenty blocks back to the hotel, but I decide to walk instead of cabbing it. I could use the fresh air and the time to clear my head. Except now I'm ten blocks into the walk, and my head still isn't clear. It's fogged in with images of Canning.

I can't stop picturing the way he looked last night. His sexed-up hair, the flush on his cheeks. He'd either gotten laid or had been about to. And the chick had been hot, a tiny little pixie of a girl with big blue eyes. He'd always gone for the petite ones.

Gritting my teeth, I force the girl out of my head and think about the goodbye Canning and I shared.

The place isn't the same without you.

It had sounded like he'd meant that. Hell, he probably had. We'd spent the best summers of our lives at Elites. Obviously one BJ hadn't wrecked all the good memories for him.

I shove my hands in my pockets as I stop at a crosswalk and wait for the signal to turn green. I wonder if I'll ever see him again. Probably not. We're both graduating, about to start our post-college lives. He's on the west coast; I'm heading north to Toronto. Our paths aren't likely to cross.

Maybe that's for the best. Two measly encounters this weekend, just *two*, yet somehow they'd managed to erase the *four* years I'd spent getting over him. It's obvious I can't be around Canning without wanting him. Without wanting more.

But this weekend wasn't enough for me, damn it.

I grab my phone before I can stop myself, halting at a newspaper dispenser and leaning against the metal box as I pull up a web browser. The site takes a while to load, but once it does, it takes no time to get to the contact page. I skim the staff directory until I find the phone number for the camp director. He knows me. He likes me. Hell, for the past four years he's been hounding me to come back.

He would do me this favor if I asked him.

I click on the number. Then I hesitate, my finger hovering over the call button.

I'm a selfish bastard. Or maybe I'm a fucking masochist. Canning can't give me what I want, but I still can't stop myself from wanting it. I want whatever I can get—a conversation, a joke gift, a smile, *anything*. I might not be able to have the steak, but fuck it, I'm fine with some scraps.

I just... I just can't let him go yet.

JUNE

Jamie

“Hey, Canning?”

“Yeah?”

Pat, the camp director, has come over to the penalty box to talk to me. I don’t take my eyes off the scrimmage I’m coaching, but he won’t think I’m rude. “Got you a roommate,” he says.

“Really?” That’s good news, because every summer Pat scrambles for coaches. And this year is no different. Guys like me keep graduating and moving on. He wants the best coaches at his camp, but the best guys are in high demand.

This year I’m one of those. I’m due in Detroit for training camp six weeks from now, which means Pat will have to find someone to fill in for me when I go. I glance at him for a split second before looking back at the boys’ game in progress.

He’s sizing me up, and I don’t know why. “Be nice to him, okay?”

It takes me a moment to answer, because I don’t like the direction the scrimmage is taking. Tempers are about to flare. I can feel the tension mounting. “When am I not nice?” I ask, distracted.

A firm hand lands on my shoulder. “You’re the best there is, kid. Although your goalie is about to lose his shit.”

“I can see that.”

It’s like watching an accident. I know what’s about to occur, but forces are already in motion and I can’t stop them.

My best goalie—Mark Killfeather—has stopped twenty shots in this scrimmage already. With quick reflexes and a big, agile body, Killfeather has all the physical traits a good goalie requires.

He also has, unfortunately, a lightning-quick temper. And the talented French Canadian forward on the other team has been playing him like a fiddle all day—taunting him and teasing him on every offensive push.

I see the play the Canadian is about to make. He passes back to his buddy on the blue line then takes the puck again as the other side’s D-men get hung up in the corners. He fakes left, then right...and sends a flying saucer past my man Killfeather. It is a beautiful play until the Canadian kid sprays the goalie with ice shavings and calls him “*un stupide*.”

As if it were a boomerang, Killfeather throws his stick with enough force to crack it like a matchstick against the boards. It falls onto the ice, splintered.

Check, please. I blow the whistle. “That’s the game, we’re out of time.”

“*Pourquoi?*” protests the aggressive forward. “Zhere is time on zee clock!”

“Debrief with your offensive coach,” I say, waving him off. Then I skate over to Killfeather, who stands panting in the net, helmet yanked off to reveal his sweaty head. He is only sixteen and looks it. While other kids his age are kicking back under the sun or playing video games, he’s spent his hours duking it out on the rink today.

I’d been that kid, too. It was a good life and I wouldn’t trade it for anything, but it helps to remember these are still kids. So I don’t open with, “Hey asshole, you just trashed a hundred dollar stick.”

“Who’s your favorite goalie, kid?” I ask instead.

“Tuukka Rask,” he says immediately.

“Good pick.” I’m not a Bruins fan, but the man has an excellent record.

“What does his face look like after he lets in a goal?”

Killfeather quirks an eyebrow. “Why? He just takes a drink and puts his mask back on.”

“He doesn’t lose his shit and throw his stick,” I say with a smile.

The kid rolls his eyes. “I get that, but that guy is *such* an ass.”

Leaning down, I tug the net off its spike so the ice can be resurfaced.

“You did great goaltending today. Truly exceptional.”

Killfeather begins to smile.

“But you have to learn to keep your cool, and I’m going to tell you why.” His smile fades. “Rask is calm after he messes up. But it’s not because he’s a better person than you or me, or because he meditates or never gets mad. It’s because he knows that putting it all behind him is the only way to win. Seriously—when he’s having that gulp of water, he’s already moved on. Instead of saying, ‘Man, I wish I hadn’t done that,’ he’s saying, ‘All right, now I get a brand new chance to stop him.’”

The kid is scowling at his skates now.

“You know that thing they say about goldfish? Their memories are so short that each time they swim around the bowl, it’s all brand new again.”

The corners of his mouth lift up. “That’s deep, Coach Canning.”

Aw. It kills me to be Coach Canning for a few weeks a year. I freaking love this job.

“Be my goldfish, Killfeather.” I give him a little punch on the chest pads. “Forget every stupid thing that guy says to you. Because the world is filled with dicks who will rile you up for fun. You’ve got the moves. You can do the job. But only if you don’t let him wreck it for you.”

He finally looks up at me. “Okay. Thanks.”

“Hit the showers,” I say, skating backwards away from him. “Then get your credit card out and buy another stick.”

I leave him, unlacing my skates and slipping into my Chuck Ts. When you’re the coach, you don’t have to gear up. Just skates and a helmet. I’m wearing hiking shorts and a Rainier College sweatshirt. And they feed me three meals a day in the camp dining room.

Did I mention this is a sweet job?

Leaving the rink takes me past every kind of Olympic sports memorabilia. The rink where I stood a minute ago trying to talk some sense into a sixteen-year-old goalie is the same ice where Team USA won Olympic gold in 1980. So there are “Miracle on Ice” pictures everywhere. During the winter months, there are more athletes per capita in this little town than most anywhere. People move here to train for hockey, skating, ski jumping and alpine events.

But when I push open the glass doors, it’s a warm June day. Mirror Lake glitters in the distance and I have to shield my eyes. The town of Lake Placid is five hours from New York City or Boston. The closest real city is Montreal, and that’s still two hours away. Smack in the middle of nowhere sits this cute little touristy town surrounded by unspoiled lakes and the Adirondack mountain range.

Heaven. Unless you need airport access.

But today I don’t. I’m walking past a ski shop and an ice cream parlor, measuring the hours until dinnertime. I have a lot of nostalgia for this town, probably because it’s *mine*. When you’re the youngest of six kids, nothing is ever just yours. I think that’s why I went out for hockey in the first place—my family is all about football. No Canning had ever set foot in the Adirondacks until I was invited to this camp. In fact, leaving the family cuckoo’s nest to come here as a teenager felt like venturing to the moon.

It’s four o’clock, and there’s time for a run or a swim, but I’ll need to change clothes.

All the campers and coaches are housed in an old dormitory that was built to accommodate European athletes for the 1980 winter Olympics. The building is a five-minute walk from the rinks. As I jog up the steps I pass a plaque that describes the original occupants and the medals they won, but I don't stop. Spend a few years in this town and you forget to be impressed.

My room is on the second floor, and I always take the stairs instead of the creaky old elevator. The dim hallway smells of floor wax and the lilacs blooming outside. Plus a whiff of old socks. You can't have a building full of hockey players without that.

I am ten feet from my door, keys in hand, when I realize someone is standing stock still beside it. That alone is enough to startle me. And then I realize who it is. "Jesus Christ!"

"I still go by Wes," he says, pushing off the wall. "Or Ryan. Or jackass."

"Are you..." I'm almost afraid to say the words, because he's shut me out for so long now. "My roommate?"

I open the door to my room to give my hands something to do. A surge of joy builds low in my stomach. Just the idea of another crazy summer with Wesley...it can't be true.

"Well..." His voice is uncharacteristically cautious. And since light from my open door spills into the hallway, I can see his face properly for the first time. He's *worried*. That jaunty jaw is tucked low, and his eyes dip when I study him.

Weird.

I push into the room and fling my keys onto my bed. "I'm about to go running. Feel like a jog? You can fill me in. I assume you're coaching for Pat, or you wouldn't be here."

He nods. But when I strip off my shirt, he jams his hands in his pockets and turns away. "We have to talk, though."

“Okay.” *About what?* “We can do that while we’re running. Unless you’re getting fat since your big victory?”

He snickers. “Fine.” From out in the hall he grabs a big duffel bag.

“Pat just said something to me at practice about finding me a roommate. He meant you, right? He was just pulling my chain?”

With his back to me, Wes nods. Then he yanks his faded T-shirt over his head. And Jesus Christ, he’s enormous. Tattoos and rippling muscles as far as the eye can see.

I’d forgotten we were really only boys the last time we stood here together. Teenagers. Feels like yesterday.

“Nice room you got here,” he remarks as he changes into a wife-beater and gym shorts.

It’s true. Instead of bunk beds, we’ve got twin beds built into the walls. And there’s a comfortable expanse of floor between them. “The coaches get a little more breathing room. I’ve been living it up in here the last three years.”

He spins around. “Who do you room with?”

“Whoever.” I drop a wicking shirt over my head and then toe into my running shoes. Tying them takes only a few more seconds, and I’m anxious to get out of here and run. Maybe Wes will stop acting like a weirdo and just tell me what’s on his mind. “Let’s go?”

He gives his bag a kick. “I’m going to leave this here.”

“Where else would you leave it?”

He winces, and I don’t know why.

Wes

Outside, Jamie heads toward Mirror Lake, and I follow him. How many times have I run this loop with him? A hundred, at least.

“Remember that summer when we said we’d do five miles a day, no matter what?” I ask.

He’s put us on an easy pace as we head away from the dormitory. “Sure do.”

“Then we had that hot day with two practices and weightlifting. But you said, ‘We still have to do the run, or the summer won’t count.’” I snort just thinking about it.

“Nobody told you to eat that ice cream cone first.”

“I was starved. Of course, I haven’t been able to order pistachio since.”

Jamie snickers as we turn toward the lake. “Light green puke all over the lawn.”

“Good times.” They were, though. I’d yarf on the grass every day if it meant I could go back to the easy times. Chasing Jamie’s big, blond body around the lake was all I wanted out of life.

Okay, that’s a lie. I’d rather tackle him to the ground and strip off his clothing. Seeing him again is killing me right now.

I have something to say, though, and it has to be soon. We run the next mile in silence as I rehearse it again. My big apology. If Jamie is horrified, it's going to sting.

There are kayakers on the lake, their vessels tipping with each stroke of the oar. I feel as steady as they look.

"So what did you want to talk about?" Jamie finally asks.

There's no ducking it anymore. "I'm here just through July." It's best to get the preliminaries out of the way.

"Me too. I'm supposed to be in Detroit before August first. You're heading to Toronto, huh? You pumped?"

"Sure. But listen... I just need to say that if you don't want to room with me this summer, I'll ask Pat to move me. I won't even be offended."

Jamie stops running, and I pull up short to avoid plowing into his back. "Why?" he asks.

Here goes nothing. It all comes out in a rush. "Canning, I'm gay. And yeah—maybe that's not such a big deal in the grand scheme of things. Except that the last time we were here I kind of...pushed you into fooling around with me. It wasn't cool, and I've spent the last four years feeling shitty about it."

For a long moment he just gapes at me. And when he finally speaks, it isn't what I expect him to say. "And?"

And?

"And...I'm sorry."

His face reddens. "You know I'm from Northern California, right? You get that I know a gay dude or ten?"

"Uh, okay?"

Jamie's mouth opens and then closes. And opens again. "*This* is why you didn't call me for four years? Why you ignored my texts?"

"Well...yes." I'm so confused now. I just pled guilty to assholery in the first degree and practically molestation. And he's worried about a few texts.

His face turns another shade redder. Then he takes off running again, and I'm so startled that it takes me a second to chase him.

He's running faster now. He lengthens his long strides and moves his arms with power. The athletic shirt he's wearing hugs each muscle as he moves, and I am jealous of that piece of polyester fabric.

The loop around Mirror Lake is a little under three miles. I don't know what's in his head as he runs the rest of it. I'm a few paces behind, confused and disheartened. On our way back through town, we pass all our old haunts—the fudge shop and the toy store that sells rubber-band guns. A bakery called Miracle on Icing.

I don't see Jamie's face until he slows to a stop in front of the toboggan run, locked up again for the summer. I wish we could go back to a simpler time when climbing some chain-link was my biggest offense.

When he turns his sweaty face to me, there's still anger in it. "You didn't talk to me for four years because you thought I'd freak out about you sucking me off."

"Uh...yeah." But given the resentment in his voice, it's clear I'd fucked up in some other way that hadn't made it into my calculus.

His hands are clenched into fists. "Is that how you see me? Some uptight asshole?"

On a bench nearby I see a young mother scoop up her toddler and walk away from us, frowning.

But Jamie is on a roll. "It was just a little sex, for God's sake. Nobody died."

And I'm probably going to swallow my tongue now. "I... It was dishonest."

"Ah. Thanks for punishing me for *your* dishonesty. A four-year sentence. I went off to a strange college where I knew nobody, wondering how I'd been such a shitty friend."

Well, fuck. “I’m sorry,” I mumble. It sounds inadequate. To both of us, I’m sure.

Jamie kicks a trashcan. “I need a shower.”

My traitorous dick volunteers to join him, but I keep my big trap shut as we walk the last block and climb the stairs. This had *not* gone the way I’d anticipated. My worst-case scenario had involved Jamie recoiling in horror at my gayness and accusing me of manipulating him into fooling around.

I’ve spent four years riddled with shame over what I’d done, and now it turns out I should’ve felt ashamed about something entirely different. Jamie didn’t care that I’d blown him. He cared that I’d *abandoned* him. And knowing I’d hurt my best friend much more deeply than I’d realized twists me up in knots.

I hesitate at the top of the steps, calling out to his rigid back. “Um, Canning?”

“What?” he mutters without turning around.

“Am I finding somewhere else to sleep tonight?”

He sighs. “No, jackass.”

Jamie

Twenty-two seems too old to be giving someone the silent treatment. Not that I played those sorts of games when I was younger. I've always been a talk-it-out guy. Face your problems head on, don't freeze the other person out.

That's Wes's specialty, freezing someone out.

Can anyone say "still bitter?"

The two of us haven't really spoken since we went running. At dinner, he'd sat with Pat, catching up on the last few years. Then Pat banged his spoon on a water glass and introduced Wes to the campers. "Frozen Four champion..." and "number two in the nation for points scored," and "guaranteed to see some ice time in Toronto next year."

The eyes of the boys around me grew wider and wider. They'd hung on every word. Meanwhile, Wes had sat there cracking half an "aw, shucks" smile, looking cocky and carefree.

Maybe he's not as carefree as he looks, my conscience suggests.

Fuck off, conscience! I'm busy being mad here.

Now we're in our respective beds, but neither of us is sleeping. I still wear my anger around me like the bedsheet that covers me. But it's a thin

layer.

I hear him sigh from the other bed, and I stare up at the ceiling, wondering if I should just get over it already.

His husky voice breaks the silence. "I was afraid."

There's a rustling sound, and from the corner of my eye I see that he's rolled over on his side, watching me in the darkness.

"You?" I ask. "Didn't know that was possible."

"Not often," he concedes, and I snort.

There's more silence, but I finally give in. "Afraid of what?"

"That I'd used you. And that you'd hate me for it."

A sigh rises in my chest. I shift onto my side too, but it's hard to make out his expression in the shadows.

"I could never hate you, dumbass." I consider it. "Well, unless you did something hate-worthy, like run my mom over with a car on purpose or something. But hate you for being gay? Or for giving me a BJ without telling me you were gay?" Fuck, I'm still resentful as hell that he thought I was capable of being so narrow-minded.

"But I wasn't ready to tell you the truth," he admits. "I'm not sure I was ready to tell *myself*. But deep down I knew, and I felt like such a shit afterward. I felt like, I dunno, I took advantage of you."

I can't help but laugh. "Dude, it's not like you tied me to the bed and forced yourself on me. I don't know if you remember, but I came like a motherfucker that night." *Aw shit*. I don't know why I said that. And the flash of heat that travels down to my dick is equally perplexing.

Thinking about that night is something I rarely let myself do. It was easily the hottest sexual experience eighteen-year-old Jamie Canning had ever had. But remembering it always confuses me, because I associate it with getting banished from the friendship I valued most.

"Oh, I remember everything about that night." His voice thickens, and the stirring down below grows stronger.

I quickly initiate an emergency subject change, because talking about BJs seems to be confusing my body. “So are you out now? Like officially? Do your folks know?”

His answering breath is heavy. “Yeah, they know.”

I wait for him to continue. He doesn’t. Which isn’t much of a surprise, since Wes never liked talking about his family. I know his father is some bigshot investment banker and his mother sits on a bunch of charity committees. And the one time Wes’s dad had driven him to camp, I remember shaking the man’s hand and thinking he was the coldest person I’d ever met.

I’m so curious to hear what they think about having a gay son, but I know he won’t answer if I ask. The thing with Wes is, everything is always on *his* terms.

“What about your teammates?” I try. “Toronto?”

“With the Northern Mass guys, I had a don’t-ask-don’t-tell thing going on. I didn’t hide it, but I didn’t talk about it, either. They left it alone. But Toronto—” He groans. “Not sure how that’s going to work. My plan is just to duck the question as long as I can. I guess I’m slipping back into the closet for a while until I feel like I know those guys. Until I’m so valuable to them they won’t care who I screw in my spare time. That should only take three, four years tops.”

That sounds unbelievably rough. “I’m sorry.”

“No, *I’m* sorry. I’m sorry I fucked up our friendship, Jamie.”

Shit, he called me Jamie. He only does that when he’s actually being serious, earnest. Regret radiates from his body and rolls toward me in palpable waves, and I feel my anger crumbling like a sandcastle in high tide. I can’t stay mad at this guy. Even when I thought he’d thrown our friendship away like a piece of trash, I still hadn’t been able to hate him.

I swallow. “Water under the bridge, man.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah.” Letting out a slow breath, I crook my arm under my head and glance over at him. “So what’s been going on with you? Catch me up on the last four years.”

He snickers. “Four years’ worth of Ryan Wesley shenanigans? That’ll take all night, dude.” Then he pauses, his tone going awkward. “I’d rather hear about you, anyway. How’s the Canning clan? Still chaos central over there?”

I smile in the darkness. “Always. Mom sold her art gallery and opened up one of those pottery places where you come in and spend the day making vases and ashtrays and shit.”

“How many times do you think she’s caught people acting out that scene from *Ghost*?” he cracks.

“At least once daily,” I answer solemnly. “No joke.” I think about what else has happened, but it’s hard to sift through four years of events. “Oh, my sister Tammy had a baby, so I’m an uncle now... Um, what else... Joe—that’s my oldest brother—he got a divorce.”

“No shit.” Wes sounds genuinely upset. “Weren’t you best man at their wedding?” He suddenly laughs. “Hey, remember that bowtie I sent you to wear for the ceremony?”

I stifle a groan. “You mean the bright red one with pink cocks all over it? Yeah, I remember. And fuck you very much, by the way. Joe was in the room when I opened the box, and he almost had a heart attack when he thought that’s what I was wearing.”

“So you let my gift go to waste? Asshole.”

“Nope, I wore it at the bachelor party.”

We both snicker, and something hot and familiar clenches in my chest. I’ve missed this. Talking to Wes. Laughing with Wes.

“The wedding was fun,” I add. “Me and Scott and Brady were the best men, Tammy was one of Samantha’s bridesmaids, and my sister Jess got ordained and performed the ceremony. She was hilarious up there.”

Wes chuckles. “How have you not gone insane yet, dude? I don’t think I’d survive having five siblings.”

“Naah, I love it. Besides, I’m the youngest—by the time I came around, my parents just let me do whatever I wanted. They were exhausted from all that disciplining they had to do with my brothers and sisters.”

He falls silent, and I can feel the tension in the air again, as if he wants to say something but is too afraid to say it.

“Just spit it out,” I order when his silence continues to drag.

He sighs. “Are we good?”

“Yeah, Wes, we’re good.” And I mean it. It took us four years to get back to this point, but we’re here now and I’m happy.

I have my best friend back, at least for the next six weeks.

Wes

So this coaching thing? It's harder than it looks.

At the start of the morning session, it feels easy. I set up some drills for the youngest offensive players and run 'em like crazy. There's a whistle around my neck, and they have to do whatever I tell them. Easy money, right?

Not so fast.

When I take on a scrimmage for the older teens, all the wheels fall off. It's not that the kids are no good. Their skill levels vary from awesome to virtuosic. But they don't work in sync like a college team. They're headstrong and irrational. They listen to what I say, and then they go do the opposite.

They're *teenagers*. And after ten minutes of play I'm basically beating my head against the plexi, praying for my own death.

"Pat," I beg. "Please tell me I wasn't like this."

"You weren't," he says with a shake of his head. "You were three times worse." Then that traitor has the balls to exit the building, leaving me in charge of thirty sweating hormone-crazed teenage hockey punks.

I blow my whistle for the millionth time. “Offsides! *Again*. Seriously?” I ask Shen, an arrogant D-man who’s been torturing the goalie for my whole session. The two of them have some kind of vendetta against each other, and it isn’t helping the general chaos. “Faceoff.”

Play starts again when I drop the puck. I look up to see Canning walking down the chute to assist me with the scrimmage. Thank Christ. His calm face is like a cool drink of water.

I skate over and hop the wall to greet him. “Why didn’t you tell me this job was hard?”

He grins, and my heart melts a little in the usual way. “What’s hard? You’re not even sweating.”

I am, though. Because even as I turn my head to watch my players, Shen goes sliding backward into the goalie he’s been taunting, knocking him over. It looks intentional, and Canning must have thought so too, because we’re both scissoring over the wall to get over there.

“What the—” starts Killfeather, the goalie.

Shen smirks. “Sorry.”

“Fucking chink,” Killfeather swears.

“Faggot,” Shen returns.

My whistle is so loud that Canning claps his hands over his ears. “Two minute penalties!” I roar. “Both of you.”

“What?” Killfeather yelps. “I didn’t touch his ass.”

“For your *mouth*,” I snarl. “On my ice you don’t use a slur of any kind.” I point toward the sin bin. “Get.”

But Killfeather doesn’t move. “You don’t get to make new rules.” His sneer is as big as the banner advertisements lining the boards.

All the players are listening, so I can’t do this wrong. “Ladies, it is a rule. Two minute bench minor for unsportsmanlike conduct. If you’d kept your trap shut after he hit you, your team would have a power play right now. I’m doing this for your own good.”

“Sure you are.”

In spite of that parting shot, both my troublemakers finally aim their bodies toward the penalty boxes. So I issue *my* parting shot, and I make sure that everyone can hear. “By the way—science has proven the correlation between calling someone a *faggot* and having a really small penis. You do *not* want to advertise that. Think about it.”

Canning doesn’t say anything. But he skates off, too. I see him take a seat off to the side and then bend over as if he’s retying his skates. Whatever, right? But then I see his back shaking.

At least somebody gets my jokes.

The rest of the scrimmage lasts about a decade. When we finally break for lunch, Jamie catches up to me on the way to the locker rooms. “Science has *proven?*” He chuckles.

“I do science on the side.”

“Uh-huh. I’m thinking of skipping the dining hall today and grabbing a burger at the pub in town. You down?”

“Fuck yeah,” I answer. Then I wince and glance around to make sure none of the kids are lurking around. I don’t know if I’m cut out to be an authority figure. I’ve spent four years surrounded by Northern Mass hockey players who drop F-bombs in every sentence, and I keep forgetting I need to censor myself while I’m at Elites. The teenagers here swear like sailors—at least when Pat and the other coaches aren’t around—but I refuse to corrupt the younger ones with my filthy mouth.

“*Fudge* yeah,” I correct.

Canning gestures at the emptiness around us. “We’re the only ones here. You can say *fuck*, dumbass. You can say anything, really.” With a grin, he unleashes a string of expletives. “Fuck, shit, cock, pussy—”

“For the love of Christ!” a loud voice booms from behind us. “Do I need to wash your mouth out with soap, Canning?”

I choke down my laughter as Pat appears. He shakes his head in disbelief as he stares at Jamie, then narrows his eyes and turns to me. “Actually, what am I saying? Canning wouldn’t even know those words if it weren’t for you, Wesley. Shame on you.”

I flash Pat an innocent smile. “I’m pure as the driven snow, Coach. Canning was the one who corrupted *me*.”

They both snort. Pat claps me on the shoulder and stalks past us. “Yeah, keep telling yourself that, kid,” he says over his shoulder. “And both of you, watch your mouths around the campers or I’ll kick your motherfucking asses.”

Jamie and I are still laughing as we duck into the locker room to ditch our skates and change into our sneakers. When we exit the building a few minutes later, I feel like I’ve just left an icy pool and stepped into a sauna. The humidity in the air is stifling, causing sweat to roll down my back. My T-shirt sticks to my chest like plastic wrap.

Shrugging, I yank it over my head and tuck the fabric in the waistband of my gym shorts. The atmosphere in Lake Placid is as casual as it gets—nobody’s gonna care if I walk through town rocking a bare chest.

Canning keeps his shirt on. I think I might prefer it that way, because his shirt is paper-thin and doing the same clinging thing mine had done, which gives me a decadent view of every hard ripple on his broad chest. Fuck, I’m yet again jealous of his shirt. I want to be the one plastered to his chest, and the ache I feel for him brings a spark of guilt.

We’re good now. We’re *friends* again. So why can’t my traitorous body just be cool with it? Why can’t I look at him without imagining all the dirty, dirty things I want to do to him?

“So what’s the deal with you and that girl?” I hear myself ask. I don’t particularly want to hear the answer, but I need the wake-up call it’ll bring,

the reminder that lusting over this guy is a disaster waiting to happen.

“Holly?” He shrugs. “Nothing, really. We just hook up. Or rather, we used to hook up. I don’t think I’ll be seeing much of her now that we’ve graduated.”

I arch a brow. “Just a hook-up? Since when are you into a friends-with-bennies arrangement?”

Another shrug. “It was convenient. Fun. I don’t know. I’m just not looking to settle down with anyone right now. Holly understood that.” His voice takes on a note of challenge. “What, you disapprove?”

“Nah, I’m all about fuck buddies.”

We pass the toy store and duck out of the way of two moms pushing strollers. Both women swivel their heads in my direction and stare at my tats. Not with contempt, but intrigue. It happens again on the next block when a group of teenage girls stop in their tracks at the sight of me. The words “tattooed hottie” tickle our backs as we walk past.

Jamie chuckles. “You sure you don’t want to go the bisexual path? ’Cause I’m pretty sure you won’t have any trouble in the chick department.”

“S’all good. Wouldn’t be fair to the straight guys if I threw my hat in the pussy ring. They wouldn’t stand a chance.”

His expression turns thoughtful. “I’ve seen you fool around with girls before. You *seemed* interested.”

I know he’s thinking about all those nights we snuck into town and flirted with the locals. But we were fifteen, maybe sixteen then, and I was still experimenting, figuring things out.

“Were you just pretending to enjoy it?” he asks curiously.

“Not so much pretending as *trying* to enjoy it,” I admit. “And it wasn’t awful. I didn’t go home afterward and scour my skin off in the shower. Making out with those girls was... I don’t know...it just *was*. I did it, it was

all right, but it's not like I was dying to rip their clothes off and get inside them."

The way I'm dying to rip your clothes off and get inside you.

I clench my teeth, annoyed with myself. Christ, enough. It's not going to happen with Canning. I need to stop this.

"Got it." He nods, then tips his head. "Who does it for you, then? Like, what's your type, looks-wise?"

You. "Ah, I'm not picky."

We reach the corner pub, but he doesn't make a move to open the door. He just lingers on the sidewalk and chuckles. "Really. So you'll just stick your dick in anyone?"

"No," I concede. It feels so fucking weird discussing this with him. "I'm not crazy about twink, I guess. I don't like the whole scrawny, young boy vibe."

"So you like 'em big." A broad grin fills his face as he winks at me. "So to speak."

I roll my eyes. "Yeah, big's a nice bonus. Tall, athletic, not too hairy—" That makes him snicker. "—and, I don't know..." I start to laugh. "You seriously want to hear all this?"

His eyes flash with hurt. "Why, because you're talking about guys instead of girls? I already told you, I'm not some uptight prude who—"

"That's not what I meant," I cut in hastily, and he relaxes slightly. "It'd be weird even if I was describing a chick. Like, what two guys stand around describing their perfect sexual partner?" I widen my eyes and look around. "Did we wander onto the set of *Sex and the City*? If so, I'm Samantha. Called it."

The tension diffuses instantly, as Canning's lips twitch uncontrollably. "You know actual character names from *Sex and the City*? Shit, if you hadn't told me you were gay, I would've figured it out just now."

“That was an extremely insensitive case of stereotyping, Jamie,” I say primly. “Just for that? You’re springing for lunch. Asshole.” But I’m grinning to myself as I flip him the bird and stride into the bar.

Jamie

Sunday is the day the coaches have off. Pat's wife usually takes the kids on an outing. They're all going fishing on East Lake tomorrow morning. Meanwhile, the coaches usually have a drunken Saturday night followed by a sleep-in on Sunday.

We've just eaten a six o'clock dinner with all our teenage charges, so we're officially free. Wes has been at camp for four days now, but we're usually too beat at night to do anything but chill in our room. So I'm going a little stir-crazy.

"What should we do tonight?" I ask Wes, who is lying on his bed. "You have a car, right? Let's put 'er to use."

"My car is a dude," he says, swiping through some app.

"Of course it is. What are you doing, anyway?" The app keeps making a strange notification sound that's unfamiliar to me.

"Checking out Brandr. Pretty entertaining in a small town."

That shuts me up for a moment. Brandr is a gay hook-up app. I'm suddenly ornery because I just assumed we were going out tonight. Together. Maybe that was a stupid assumption, but that's how it always was before.

“So...” I clear my throat. “How does that work?”

He chuckles. “Come here and see. It’s hysterical. All the worst traits of humanity on display in one place.”

Intrigued now, I sit down on his bed, and he props himself on an elbow to show me. We’re leaning over the phone together, the same way we did when we were teenagers. Except we haven’t been on a bed together since... well. *That* night. And I’m conscious of the fact that we don’t fit so well. We’re taking up most of the surface, but I’m still practically sitting on top of him. I can feel the crinkle of his leg hair brushing mine when he leans in to show me the screen.

“It’s like a menu board. Each picture is a dude.”

Some of the pictures are close-ups but some are impossible to see. There’s a number tagging each one, too. *0.7 mi.* and *1.3 mi.* “It tells you how close everybody is? That’s a little creepy.”

“That’s part of the fun. If someone acts creepy, you can just block them forever. One click and they’re history. The bios are the funny part. Check this out.” He taps one of the tiles and some dude’s picture fills the screen. It says: *Online now, 0.9 mi away.*

“He’s too old for you,” I say immediately. “And what’s with the socks?” The guy has gray hair and leans against a red convertible. He’s in decent shape, but nobody should wear socks that tall with shorts. That’s just wrong.

I won’t lie. This is weirding me out—the idea that this man is staring down at his screen somewhere on the other end of town, tapping Wes’s picture...

Wes just laughs. “Looking at Brandr in a small town is always amusing. The odds are good, but the goods are odd.” He scrolls the picture to the bottom where the guy has added his 140 characters or whatever. The headline is “Looking 2 get naked with muscles.” And below that: *If I’m*

online then I'm lknng to get naked. Kissing, body contact & more just ask. No fems. Sorry only attracted to whites.

"What the fuck?" I stutter.

"Sounds like a charmer, doesn't he? That's the internet for you." Wes bails out of that jerk's profile. But then his phone makes a noise and a little window pops up.

"Hey," it says, and there's a thumbnail of some other guy beside it.

"Someone's talking to you," I mutter. And now I hate this app more than I thought possible. Competing for my friend's attention isn't fun. So I stand up and shuck off my Elites T-shirt. I'm getting out of here tonight whether Wes comes along or not. I pull on a polo shirt, which is as dressy as a guy ever gets in Lake Placid.

"You want to head out?" he asks from the bed.

"Yeah." When I turn around, he's changing his clothes, too. Thank Christ.

"To think that we can be out after dark without climbing out of the windows," Wes cracks. "That's just weird." He's dressed in hiking shorts and boots, and pulling a black wife-beater over his head, leaving his arms bare.

"You can jump off the fire escape if you want," I tell him. "But I'm taking the stairs."

"Where are we headed?"

I grab my keys and phone. "If your manly car is available, let's go to Owl's Head."

He stops in the middle of tying his shoelaces. "Yeah? I thought we'd go to a bar."

"We're going to do both," I say. "But only if you can move your ass out that door."

Wes drives a newish Honda Pilot with a sweet stereo and leather seats. But it's a mess. I have to move several copies of *USA Hockey* off the passenger's seat and throw away an old McDonald's bag. "This is...nice," I tease as I chase an empty cup off the floor.

"I'm not going to gay up my ride for you, Canning. Let's go. We're racing the daylight."

Owl's Head is a short hike we used to do with the group as campers. It's a few miles out of town, and there aren't any other cars at the trailhead when we arrive. Wes bleeps the locks, and then we're scrambling uphill over rocks and tree roots.

I love this. Hockey is great, but it keeps you indoors. My summer sport is surfing, but I've always loved a good hike.

Did I mention I'm from California?

"Slow down," Wes pants at one point.

I stop, holding on to a sapling to wait for him. "Too much for Toronto's recruit to handle? I'd better call my bookie. Who are you playing first?"

He smacks me on the ass. "I stopped to take a picture, asshole. Carry on."

The views really are intense. We're climbing up a ledge, basically, and Adirondack peaks stand out all around us, dark against the early evening sky. "It's just two more turns," I promise.

It takes us thirty minutes to reach the bald, rocky outcroppings at the top just as the sun prepares to set behind a distant peak. Panting a little from the climb, I plop down on a sun-warmed rock and take it in.

"What a dump," Wes jokes, sitting beside me.

"Right?"

I've probably climbed this hill every summer for the last nine years. When we were fourteen, it was fun to scare each other by sitting way out on the ledge. When we were seventeen, we probably came all the way up here without really seeing it. Wes and I would have been arguing about hockey.

Or football. Or some dumbass movie. We climbed because that was the activity on the day's itinerary.

It had startled me this past year to realize everything I did from here on out I did for myself. College graduation is the end of the road map. It's all uncharted territory from this point, and I'm the one in the driver's seat.

The distant clouds turn orange-pink while I watch. My friend sits beside me, lost in his own thoughts. "We're going to lose the light," he says eventually.

"We still have time." Another beat of silence goes by before I ask, "What are you thinking about, anyway?"

He chuckles. "Freshman year of college. What a dick I was to everyone."

"Yeah?" I'm surprised Wes is going all introspective like me. I would have thought he was sitting there trying to figure out the best way to prank Pat and blame it on the kids.

"Yeah. Rough year. Lots of hazing."

I sneak a look at him for the first time since we sat down. "Same here. Those seniors were psycho, seriously. Never seen anything like it." I clear my throat. "That fall I kept thinking, Wes is not going to believe this shit when I tell him..." I let the sentence die. That was probably too harsh. If we're friends again, I shouldn't let my anger bubble back to the surface.

He makes an irritated sound in the back of his throat. "Sorry."

"I know," I say quickly.

"But I spent that first semester just praying those assholes didn't figure out I liked dick. And since I wasn't so comfortable with that idea myself..." He sighs. "I wasn't very good company that year, anyway."

Something goes a little wrong in my stomach at the idea of Wes being scared. My whole life I'd thought of him as fearless. Nobody is. Intellectually I know that. But even the other night when he'd told me he had struggled with being gay. I don't think I really got it.

“That sucks,” I say softly.

He shrugs. “Didn’t kill me. Just made me work twice as hard. Maybe I wouldn’t have ended up as a first liner if those jackasses hadn’t put the fear of God into me every fucking day.”

“That’s looking on the bright side.”

“Canning, we’re going to lose the daylight,” he reminds me.

He’s right. The sky has already faded to a soft purple in some places. I hastily stand up. “Let’s go, then.”

It’s counterintuitive, but on a steep hike the way down is much harder than the way up. Every step threatens to sweep your feet out from under you. We don’t speak at all during our descent. We’re too busy concentrating on where to place each foot and which branches will make a steady hand-hold.

The dark is coming on fast. We’re almost there when the path becomes truly difficult to see. I can hear Wes’s footfalls behind me, and the skittering sound of the pebbles he displaces with each step. I’d bet cash money that Wes is in the zone like I am right now, thinking only of the task at hand. When the body is busy, the mind shuts up for a while.

It’s almost totally dark, but I know we’re just yards from the trailhead. That’s when I hear Wes stumble. There’s a grunt and the sound of feet sliding on dirt. My heart catches as I hear him go down a few paces behind me. “Fuck,” he grumbles.

I turn around and find him splayed out on the ground. Shit. I’ve dragged Toronto’s new forward up a fucking mountain in the dark. If he’s sprained something, it’s all on me. “You okay?” Feeling sick, I make my way uphill again to where he is.

“Yeah,” he says, but that’s not proof. A hockey player always says that, even when it’s not true. But then Wes sits up from the shadows.

I stick out a hand and he closes his fingers around it and squeezes. The pressure of his grasp calms me down. With a tug from me he’s on his feet

again, and the warmth of his hand leaves mine. But I don't turn around and head down yet. "Seriously, did you twist anything?"

The shadow of Wes shifts his weight from one foot to the other and back again. "Nope. Banged my knee on a rock. But it's nothing." He scrapes his hands together to dust them off.

Letting out a breath I don't even know I'm holding, I turn around and pick my way even more slowly down the hill.

Wes's car waits for us in the dark. I hop into the passenger seat, relieved that my hike hasn't injured anyone. The dome light shows me a smiling Wes, but there's dirt on his shirt. I reach over and brush it off, undoing the damage.

He gives me a wink. "You copping a feel?" Laughing at his own joke, he cranks the engine. "Where are we headed?"

"Anyplace. Your pick."

Wes turns the car around and heads back to the main road. "We passed a bar before this turnoff. Lou's, or something. You ever been there?"

I shake my head. "Never have wheels, so I always drink in town."

"We'll give it a try," he says.

Jamie

There are a million cars outside Lou's because the place shares a parking lot with a Dairy Queen. We park on the road and walk through the cricket-filled darkness to the decently sized roadside bar.

Lou's has an Adirondack theme, and they're working it pretty hard. The requisite old wooden paddles hang from the paneled walls. An inverted canoe is suspended on hooks from the ceiling. The drink specials are named for nearby peaks.

Of course they are.

"Okay, so you'll have the Nippletop, and I'll have the Dix Mountain." Wes is already enjoying himself.

"Dude, if the Nippletop has peach schnapps in it, I will hurt you."

He grins, and it's wicked. "How do you feel about elderflower vodka?"

"Not funny." I wave down the bartender. "I'll have a Saranac IPA. Thanks."

Wes flips the drink menu onto the bar. "Make that two, please." He puts a twenty down, and when I reach for my wallet, he waves me off. "I'll get these."

We take our beers to a high table, both of us doing a little people watching. I don't see any girls I want to chat up, but that's fine because that's not what I came here for, anyway.

Wes fishes his phone out of his pocket. "Should have shut this thing off," he says. Then he squints at the screen.

"What?"

"It's a Brandr notification. Somebody's trying to chat me. And it says 'less than 100 feet away.'"

I almost choke on a swallow of my beer. "Some guy in here?" Then I'm swiveling my head in every direction, wondering who it is.

Wes kicks me under the table. "Cut that out."

But it's too late. At the far end of the room, there's a guy in a Fugees T-shirt looking this way. He's watching me. Then he *smiles*.

"Oh, fuck," I hiss out.

Wes is laughing. "Dude, you just picked up a guy."

"What?" I'm sweating now. And I can't beat the crap out of my best friend because the guy has almost reached our table.

"Hey," he says, giving me a grin. Then he looks at Wes. "Wait." He chuckles. "Which of you...?"

Oh my fucking God.

"It's my profile," Wes says, and I can tell he's trying very hard not to bust a gut. "You like?"

"You fishing for compliments?" The guy winks. He's a few years older than us, with dark, shiny hair. "I need another beer. Can I buy a round?"

"I'm good," I say quickly.

"One for you, then," he says, pointing at Wes. Then he slips away to the bar.

When he's gone, Wes puts his face in his hands and laughs. "Jesus, the look on your face!"

Ugh. "Why did he think it was me, anyway?"

“My face isn’t in my profile pic.” Wes can hardly speak for laughing. I realize something. “You didn’t show me your profile.”

“No kidding,” he says, getting a hold of himself finally. “Not showing you that.”

“Why?” When he shrugs, I suddenly wonder if... “Is it a *dick pic*?”

Another burst of laughter shudders out of his mouth. “Abs,” he croaks. “It’s my abs.”

Of course it is.

Wes’s new “friend” drifts back to our table, sliding a bottle in front of Wes, who’s barely made a dent in his current one. We spend the next few minutes chatting. Well, *they* chat. I just listen, feeling uneasy. There’s something kinda...*sleazy* about the whole thing, about this *guy*, but maybe I’m just grumpy. I wanted to hang out with my best friend tonight, not watch him eye-fuck some other dude.

“I teach second grade at the public school,” the guy’s telling Wes. His name is Sam, and it’s a little hard to hate him now that I know he works with kids. He seems decent. And he’s really good-looking. Not Wes good-looking or anything, but—Jesus. Am I seriously sitting here comparing the level of attractiveness of the two guys beside me?

I take a deep gulp of my beer. Screw it. If I’m going to be the third wheel tonight, I might as well get wasted.

“Pool table’s available,” Sam says, gazing across the room. “You guys up for a game?”

“Sure,” Wes answers for us, and I swallow down my irritation with another swig of beer.

“I’ll just watch,” I mutter as we reach the table. “Not in the mood to shoot pool.”

Wes eyes me for a moment. “All right.”

Sam racks the balls and flashes Wes a grin. “Looks like it’s you and me. For the sake of full disclosure, I’m about to kick your ass.”

This guy doesn't know Wes, though. I used to watch my buddy hustle every unsuspecting sap who'd ever challenged him to a game.

Wes smiles sheepishly. "Yeah, you might be right about that. I'm not very good."

I stifle a snort.

"You want me to break?" Sam offers.

Wes nods. His gaze meets mine briefly, and I see the twinkle in his eye before he turns away.

I lean against the wood-paneled wall as Sam bends over at the far end of the table, the pool cue positioned skillfully in his hands. His opening shot sends the balls scattering in a dizzying whirl, but he only lands one—solid red in the side pocket. He sticks with solids, sinking one more before missing the next shot.

Wes is up. He studies the table with a frown, as if he can't decide which shot to take. Bullshit. Like his shrewd brain hasn't already planned out every single shot all the way up to the sinking of the eight ball.

Sam sidles up to him, lightly resting his hand on Wes's shoulder.

I narrow my eyes. Handsy motherfucker, ain't he?

"Go for the eleven," Sam advises. "Corner pocket."

Wes bites his lip. "I was thinking the thirteen." Which would require a combo shot that would make even the most advanced billiards players sweat.

Sam chuckles. "That might be a bit too difficult considering you're not ____"

Wes takes the shot before Sam can finish the sentence. He sinks the thirteen. And the nine. And the twelve. In one impressive combo that makes Sam's jaw hit the floor.

I can't help it. I start to laugh.

"You're not very good, huh?" Sam sighs heavily.

Wes's mouth twitches. "I may have underplayed my level of proficiency."

A part of me hopes Sam is one of those sensitive egomaniacs who can't handle losing, but Mr. I-Teach-Second-Grade seems delighted by Wes's awesomeness. He simply stands there and whistles as my buddy circles the table like the pool shark he is, even breaking out in applause after Wes cleans the table without once letting Sam take another shot.

Sam accepts his defeat by chugging the rest of his beer, then slamming the empty bottle on the ledge behind the pool table. "Another one?" he asks Wes.

Wes glances at me as if to check if I'm cool with it. I just shrug. I know there's no prying Sam away from Wes right now. He's too fucking enamored with my buddy.

They play another game.

I order another beer.

They play a third game.

I order a third beer.

The drunker I get, the handsier *they* get. Sam's palm grazes the small of Wes's back as he leans in to line up his next shot. Wes glances over his shoulder and winks at Sam, his gray eyes gleaming.

Eventually I wander back to the table, alcohol buzzing in my bloodstream as annoyance builds in my gut. Fuck this Sam guy. I take it back—he's not decent. He seems to have no problem monopolizing my best friend's time. Doesn't even give a shit that they're both ignoring me.

And he won't stop touching Wes.

My fingers curl around the beer bottle. When Sam steps closer to Wes and whispers something in his ear, my knuckles turn white as my grip tightens. Is he asking Wes if he wants to get out of here? Telling him how much he wants to screw him right now? Offering to blow him in the bathroom?

I drain the rest of my beer. Yeah, I'm buzzing hard now. And the alcohol has done something to my brain. Short-circuited it somehow, flooded it with memories I don't usually allow to surface.

The soundtrack of that last day at camp four years ago runs through my mind.

"What are you waiting for, Ryan? Suck it already."

"Fuck, Wes, you're making me come."

It bothers me that I remember every word I said to him. I've been on the receiving end of some pretty phenomenal blowjobs these past four years, but can I tell you what was said during them? Can I repeat, verbatim, every single word I uttered to those chicks? To Holly? Every dirty command that left my mouth?

No, I can't.

My gaze shifts back to the pool table, locking on Wes's mouth. My dick stirs, remembering that mouth wrapped around it.

Shit, maybe I'm more drunk than buzzed.

Sam and Wes's laughter wafts toward me. Looks like Sam finally won a game, and knowing Wes, he's taunting the guy about it being a fluke. Or hell, maybe Wes let him win. Maybe he decided to throw the guy a bone before he...*throws the guy a bone.*

My chest goes rigid. The thought of Wes hooking up with someone tonight pisses me off.

Jealous? a little voice mocks.

Screw that. I'm not fucking jealous. I don't care what Wes does—or *who* he does—but we were supposed to hang out tonight. Me and him. Not him and some random guy he met through a hook-up app.

I abruptly hop off my stool and make my way back to the pool table. They're not even playing anymore, just standing close together, chuckling about something. Sam's hand rests on Wes's hip. A casual gesture. Light, harmless.

But it sparks resentment in my gut. Why the hell is he touching him? He doesn't even know him. Presumptuous asshole.

"Ready to go?" I raise my voice, because neither of them notices me standing there.

Wes blinks. "Now?"

I answer through clenched teeth. "Yes. I want to take off." I can't help but offer a cool look. "You're my ride, remember?"

Wariness floats through his expression. Then he gives a quick nod and turns to Sam. "Thanks for the games, man. Looks like we're taking off now."

The other guy's disappointment is impossible to miss. He glances at me, then back at Wes. "Uh, yeah...sure. Let me just grab your number before you go?"

Asshole.

I grind my molars as I watch them exchange numbers. Well then. I guess they're going to meet up again. So much for getting to spend the summer reconnecting with my best friend.

Wes doesn't say anything as we head for the exit. The music in the bar had been too loud to hear what was happening outside, but when we step out the door, we find ourselves in the middle of a torrential downpour.

A cold gust of rain slaps me in the face, soaking my clothes in seconds. "Shit. Run to the car?" I shout over the deafening pounding of the rain hitting the pavement.

Wes stays put. His expression is as thunderous as the weather. "What the hell was that?"

I can barely hear him over the wind and rain. "What?"

"You acted like a total douchecanoe in there." Then he stalks away, his boots splashing the puddles forming on the asphalt.

The little awning spanning the side of the building does nothing to protect us from the rain. Our clothes are plastered to our bodies. Water

clings to my hair and drips down my face as I hurry after him.

“I was the one acting like a douchecanoe?” I yell after him.

He stops, spins around to face me. “Yes. Jesus, dude, the way you treated that guy, you’d think he was carrying the Ebola virus.”

“Maybe I just didn’t appreciate the way he was pawing you right in front of me!” I shoot back.

Wes’s mouth falls open. “What?”

My mouth slams shut. Jesus fuck. Why did I say that?

“I mean...” I swallow. “It was rude.”

Wes stares at me. Droplets run down his chiseled face, catching in the beard growth shadowing his jaw. His lips are slightly parted. I can’t stop looking at them.

“What is happening right now?” he asks slowly.

Misery lodges in my throat. I don’t know. I honestly don’t know what’s happening. The rain falls harder. A flash of lightning slices through the black sky. I should be cold, but I’m not. My body feels like a furnace. Three beers shouldn’t be having this effect on me.

Maybe it’s him? Maybe *he’s* making me hot?

Wes’s tongue darts out to lick at the raindrops on his bottom lip, and I catch a glimpse of his tongue ring. It wasn’t there when we were eighteen. It wasn’t there when his tongue had circled the head of my cock the night he gave me the best BJ of my life.

And there it is.

Ryan Wesley had given me the best BJ of my life.

“Canning...” He trails off, watching me again. He looks uneasy, but... there’s something else in his gaze. A flicker of confusion. A hint of interest.

I take a step closer, but I’m not sure why. My heart is pounding harder than the rain. My eyes are glued to his mouth.

“Jamie.” A note of warning this time.

I suck a gulpful of oxygen into my lungs.

Then I ignore the warning.

His eyes widen as I shove my fingers through his hair and tug his head closer. “What—”

He doesn’t get to finish that sentence, because I’m smashing my mouth against his.

Wes

Jamie is kissing me.

Jamie is kissing me.

Jamie is kissing *me*.

Nope, no matter which way I run it through my head, it still doesn't make sense to me. The pressure of his mouth? Makes no sense. The shocking sweep of his tongue over my bottom lip? No sense.

But holy fucking shit, I want it.

Rain pours off the awning and slides over our heads as my best friend's lips latch onto mine. I taste the rain, beer, something addictively masculine. His mouth brushes mine, over and over again, and when I part my lips to draw a shaky breath, he takes full advantage and slides his tongue inside.

It's like a cattle prod to the spine. Desire surges through me and spirals down to my balls, drawing them up tight. When his tongue touches mine I damn near keel over. I have to grab the front of his shirt and bunch it between my fingers to keep from being swept away by the storm. Not the storm that's lighting up the sky, but the one that's roaring inside me.

I know the moment he feels my tongue ring, because his tongue curls around the metal stud and he moans against my lips. Deep and husky.

It's that lust-drenched sound that snaps me back to reality. This might *feel* right, but it's wrong. He's drunk again. Not thinking clearly. For some reason he decided shoving his tongue down my throat was a good idea, but it fuckin ain't. At the end of the day, I'm still gay—and he's still straight. Even worse, I'm still *in love* with him.

With a tortured groan, I wrench my mouth away. I can't fucking do this again. I can't let myself want him or get my hopes up about the two of us. He's my friend. He'll always be my friend and nothing more.

His eyes, hazy with passion, absolutely wreck me. He blinks as if disoriented, as if he can't understand why I broke the kiss.

"Your tongue ring..." His voice is hoarse with excitement. "I want to feel it on my cock."

Oh sweet Jesus.

Okay, he's drunker than I thought. I hadn't seen him pound back more than a couple beers, but he must have snuck a few more in when I wasn't looking.

"Yeah..." I manage a hasty laugh. "That's not gonna happen, man."

Jamie narrows his eyes.

The rain slows a bit, making it easier to speak without having to raise my voice. "We're not going down this road again, Canning." I swallow hard. "The last time we did, it ruined our fucking friendship."

He slants his head, those big brown eyes gleaming with challenge. "You're saying you don't want me?"

Aw hell. "No, I'm saying this is a bad idea."

Jamie steps closer, backing me into the wall until my back bumps the wet bricks. Now he's got me pinned in place. There's a hard wall behind me and an equally hard one in front of me. Emphasis on *hard*, because holy hell, he's rocking one hell of a boner. It presses against my thigh as he eases even closer, until his lips are inches from mine.

“You’re the king of bad ideas,” he reminds me. “At least this one ends with both of us feeling good.”

He’s going to kill me. The role reversal melts my brain, because I’m the one who’s usually in charge, who calls the shots, sets the limits.

Jamie shifts his hips, a breath panting out as his erection brushes my leg. If he were sober, he’d probably be horrified. When he sobers up, he *will* be horrified. He’ll apologize for coming on to me, and we’ll end up having that awkward conversation we should’ve had after I blew him four years ago. He’ll tell me he’s straight, he was just fucking around, he’s not into me.

And I’ll be crushed.

I know all this, but it doesn’t stop me from stealing one more taste. I mentioned I’m a masochist, right? It’s the only explanation for why I curl my hand around the back of his neck and tug him toward me again.

Our mouths meet in another kiss. Soft this time. Agonizingly slow. It’s not enough. I’ll stop it soon, any second now, but not yet. Not until he gives me more.

Groaning, I push my chest against him and spin us around so he’s the one against the wall, and *I’m* the one grinding up on him. He makes a surprised noise, but it turns into a husky rumble when I deepen the kiss and drive my tongue into his mouth.

I’m greedy now. Desperate. I fuck his mouth with my tongue the way I want to fuck him with my cock. Deep, hungry strokes that leave us both breathless, and now he’s the one clutching *my* shirt.

To my right, the door of the bar bangs open. A female shriek rings out. She’s probably screaming about the weather, not the two guys against the wall trying to eat each other’s faces. Either way, her scream brings me back to my senses. Stumbling backward, I’m panting like I’ve just run three marathons.

I'm under the downpour now, but Jamie's not. So I can see his expression perfectly—the wide-eyed panic on his face. The disbelief.

Fuck. My straight-as-a-blue-line friend is about to freak out. An hour from now, he'll probably have one hell of an identity crisis, and for what? The best kiss of my life wasn't worth screwing up *his* life.

I've lived confusion. It ain't pretty.

Now I have to look away. If I don't, he'll see my eyes and know I'm dying inside. I want him more than anything in the goddamn world. It takes all my willpower, but I turn and walk off in the rain toward my car.

The rain is coming down in sheets, so I start to run for it. I don't even know he's followed me until he slides into the passenger seat opposite me and slams the door.

In less than thirty seconds I've got the engine cranked. We're cruising back up 73 toward Lake Placid before a whole minute has passed. There's a terrible silence in the car. If it weren't raining I'd probably double the speed limit trying to get Jamie back to town.

He still hasn't said a word.

"I'm sorry," I croak. "Didn't mean to let that happen."

He makes an irritated noise. I'm dying to know what it means, but too chicken-shit to ask. We are never speaking of this night again. Never. Even if we're wasted the night before Jamie's wedding. Even if we're trapped in a mineshaft with thirty minutes of oxygen. Not even then.

Earlier, I told him he'd acted like a douchecanoe. But that's crap. I'm the one who's in love with my best friend and pretending I'm not.

The rain lets up. A few minutes later (even though it feels like hours) I pull up in front of the dormitory building and step on the brakes. Jamie doesn't move.

"I'm going to find a parking spot, and then take a walk," I tell him. There is no way I can go back to our room right now. We need a time-out. I hope he understands.

Later, when he's asleep, it might be possible to breathe the same air as Jamie Canning again.

He doesn't move.

Please, I beg him inwardly. *Please go up to bed*. It's hard enough to look at his face each day and not feel heartbreak. I can't be close to him right now. I'm afraid I'll give in and kiss him again. The way his hard body had aligned so perfectly with mine is burned in my consciousness. I'll be trying not to remember that for weeks.

I wait, and I ache.

Finally the door clicks open. I hear him exit the car. When the door slams shut, I feel it like a sledgehammer to the heart. *Don't look*, I coach myself.

But my self-control isn't infinite. His fair hair glints under the streetlight as his long legs eat up the walkway in just a few paces. Seeing him walk away from me splinters something inside me.

Jamie

I pound up the steps of the building, my heart thumping, my skin wet from the rain and sweat and nerves.

“Jamie.”

Shit, I’d almost made it inside. But Pat is sitting in stealthy darkness in one of the rocking chairs on the front porch. He’s probably on stakeout, watching for teenagers sneaking out. Instead he’s caught me sneaking in. And at the sound of his voice I feel at least as much terror as an escaping kid.

Stumbling, I stop before reaching the door. “Hey,” I say, trying to sound normal. At least it’s dark. I don’t trust my face right now.

“Got a minute?”

Do I? What I need is to be alone for several hours to bang my head against a wall. To try to figure out what on God’s green earth just happened. But Pat is like a second father to me, and being rude to him isn’t something I can do.

I don’t answer, but I do take the rocking chair right next to his. My hands are shaking so I curve them around the chair’s arms. A couple of very slow breaths help me calm down.

Across the road, the lake is a dark void. Lights from the Lake Placid restaurants twinkle in the misty night air. Everything looks so calm and ordinary. The world would make more sense to me if the buildings were falling into the lake, or the fudge shops were on fire. But the only thing quaking is me.

“You okay, son?”

“Yeah,” I grind out, my voice like a chainsaw. “Got caught in the rain.”

“I can see that.” He’s quiet for a moment. “I just wanted to ask you how Wesley is holding up. Did the first week treat him okay, you think?”

Just the sound of his name makes my gut clench.

Well, Pat, I just threw myself at him. We made out like porn stars up against the side of a bar. Then he gave me the brush-off. And I don’t have any idea what any of it means.

“He’s, uh, okay,” I stammer. I don’t really even remember the question he’d asked.

“If he’s struggling out there, I hope you’ll tell me. I won’t fire him—I’ll just get him some backup.”

I pull myself together and try to focus on the conversation. “Coaching takes practice.”

Pat smiles. “That’s very diplomatic of you. Coaching takes practice, yes, but not everyone is a natural at it the way you are.”

“Thank you.” The compliment is unexpected.

“And I think the kids will get a lot out of their time with Wes—I wouldn’t have hired him if I wasn’t sure of that.” Pat’s chair squeaks as he rocks it gently. “It surprised me, though, getting that call from him. It was a few hours after the Frozen Four victory. I’d watched the game—it makes my year anytime I get to watch you boys on my television. But it’s funny—when I saw who was calling, I had this moment where I thought he was going to say, ‘I owe it all to you.’” He chuckles to himself. “That’s not Wes’s style, so I don’t know why I expected to hear that. But yeah, when he

said, ‘I’m calling to take that job you offer me every year,’ I really was surprised.”

So am I. In fact, many things about this information surprise me. “You’ve been recruiting him all these years?”

“Sure. All my boys who become successful college players get a call from me. Wes never said yes, though. Then I get *this* call...” He pauses. “Took a lot of guts, really. He says, ‘I want to coach for you this summer. But you need to know I’m gay. Nobody knows, but if it bothers you—running a camp and all—I understand.’”

A drop of sweat runs down my back. “What did you tell him?” Even though I know Pat hired him, my breath still catches for the Wes on the other end of that phone, waiting for someone to pass judgment on him.

Maybe it takes more balls to be Wes than I’d realized.

“I said that was his business, and I didn’t give a shit as long as he showed up every morning ready to coach. Later I asked him if he wanted to room with you again after all these years. He said, ‘Sure, but I gotta come out to Jamie, too. If he has an issue, you might have to trade things around.’”

An *issue*. I have one all right. My *issue* is the giant boner he gave me tonight. God, it’s a struggle not to bury my head in my hands and scream from confusion.

Weirdest night of my life. Right here. Winner!

And Coach Pat is still waiting for me to say something. “Um, I just told him I’m from Northern California.”

Pat laughs. “I see. Didn’t think you’d have a problem. You two were inseparable all those years.”

Inseparable. A while ago my tongue was inseparable from his. And it was all my doing. I mauled my best friend. His taste is still on my lips.

I need to eject from this conversation before I lose my mind. “No problem at all,” I say gruffly. “I think I gotta hit the hay, though.”

“Good night, coach.”

“Good night.”

I climb the stairs and walk down the hall toward our room. None of the doors have light leaking from underneath, but I can hear the sound of voices and male laughter as I pass by. Wes and I had been the same at their age—talking ’til all hours.

Now? I’m not sure we’re talking at all.

I make a stop in the bathroom to brush my teeth. When I catch my face in the mirror, it looks the same as it always does. Same square jaw. Same brown eyes. My skin is a little pale under the fluorescent bathroom lights. There’s nothing to see here, but like an idiot I stare a little while, looking for who knows what. A change. A sign.

What does a guy who’s not as straight as he thought look like, anyway?

“Like you, apparently.” My lips move with these words, and I’m no closer to understanding what happened.

But now I’m talking to myself. *Awesome.*

I can’t avoid it any longer, so I head into our room. Flipping the lights on only makes me squint, so I shut ’em off again. I strip down to my briefs and climb into bed. I’m sober now, which is a bummer. That’s not going to help me sleep. But at least I’m not shaking like a leaf anymore.

Wes is not here, but I feel his presence. And I’m just lying awake, waiting to hear his rough, cocky voice in the hallway. It’s not an exaggeration to say I’ve always felt a little more alive when he’s around. Life is just a little brighter, a little louder wherever Wes is.

But now it’s tempting to reexamine my impressions of him. I’m *mostly* sure I’ve always loved him as a friend and that tonight’s impulse was just a new craving born of beer, ordinary jealousy, horniness and some kind of friendly emotional overload. The perfect storm. My desire is a strange creature of the night, brought to life by a strike of lightning in exactly the right place.

Right?

Sigh.

I'm not a navel gazer. I don't sit around inventing complex theories to explain my behavior. But tonight it's impossible not to lie here and wonder... All those times I watched him fly down the rink with the puck under his command—was that simple admiration? All those times I watched his flashy skating with a warm feeling in my chest. Or when he'd smile at me from across the table. Was I hiding something from myself? Or was there nothing to suppress?

Fuck, does it even matter?

Desire is chemistry. And in a biochem class I took once, they taught us that all chemistry is just electricity. We're all just bags of charged atoms walking around bumping into each other.

My electrons went seriously haywire for his tonight, though. Particles *collided*.

Pushing my hips into the mattress, I wish I could feel it again—the press of his body. The scrape of rough hands on my forearms.

I don't know why I want it. I don't know if the craving will disappear with tonight's rain shower. But right this moment it's here. And it's real.

The night now feels endless. And tomorrow will be an awkward eternity.

Yay.

I can't even begin to imagine what Wes is thinking right now. He wanted me—I felt it. But he stopped because it would ruin our friendship. This man who fucks strangers off an app.

I'm still lying there face down in my pillow when his key finally turns in our lock. I freeze, of course. He tiptoes in. I hear the thud of his hiking boots hitting the floor, and the soft swish of clothing coming off.

My dick hardens against the mattress. I'm actually hard, and all he's done is walk in and undress. *Interesting.*

His sheets rustle as he gets into bed. And then there's silence. A minute passes, then two. I'm not sleeping, and he can probably tell. Which means we're like two teenage girls after a catfight at a sleepover—ignoring each other.

I roll over to face him. "If you're trying to avoid me, you might have to do another seventeen laps around town. I'm still awake."

Wes sighs. "How are you feeling?"

"Horny."

He snorts. "That's the beer talking. Did you know you go gay when you're drunk?"

When I hear the word "gay," I almost argue. But that's not really the point. "I'm not drunk, Wes."

What I am is very, very curious. Wes thinks he did me a favor tonight by heading us off at the pass, but now I have this giant question inside me, and I don't think it will fade in the morning. But it *will* make things awkward. I'll be watching him in the mirror while we both shave, wondering what it would have been like. Wondering whether it's something I could really get into, or just a weird moment of happenstance.

"I don't want to fuck with your head," he whispers. "I wish I hadn't ever done that."

But it's not my head that needs fucking.

"Come over here," I say. "Please."

"No fucking way," he replies.

"I can make you."

He laughs. "Did you smoke some pot while I was out, Canning?"

I laugh, too, and it's such a relief. Because it means I haven't wrecked everything. But then I lift my hips, peel off my briefs, and throw them at his head. He bats them away, smiling in the dark.

Kicking the sheet off, I put my hand on my dick. And he stops laughing.

Wes

Fuck me. I'm a strong guy. I'm a tough guy. But I was not built to withstand the sight of Jamie Canning stroking himself.

The shred of moonlight shining through the gap in the curtains shows him reclining on his back, his far knee cocked wide. His body is perfect—strong and lean on the bed. His palm is cupped over his dick, the fingertips just brushing the cockhead. He takes a deep breath and then pushes it out slowly, his back arching a little ways, his hips rolling a few degrees.

And I am dying a quiet death. My mouth actually waters, and I have to swallow hard. He's *right* there. In two paces I could have him in my mouth. It's like Jamie Canning looked into my filthy mind and extracted my fantasies. Well, the opening reel, anyway.

He doesn't turn his head to look at me, because he doesn't have to. We both know where my attention lies. He squeezes his shaft once. Twice. Then he opens his hand, letting the fingers drift down. He cups his balls, his thumb skimming the delicate skin.

I hear a hot gasp, and realize it's come from me.

Then? The fucker *smiles*.

That wakes me up, at least a little. "What the fuck are you doing?"

“I really need to jerk. You mind?”

Holy...! I rue the fucking day that I said those same words to him. I was eighteen, and I thought I was so smooth. But I was only setting in motion some serious pain for everyone. And it's *still* happening. There's blood pounding in my ears now.

And other places.

My hand creeps down into my boxers without my approval. Jamie is pumping himself now. Slowly, up and down. He pauses to rub his thumb over the head, and my throat constricts.

“Wes,” he says, his voice like gravel. “I need your help.”

It's a miracle I'm able to answer in an almost-normal voice. “Looks like you're doing fine on your own.”

That's when he finally turns his head to look at me. As he rubs himself, he swallows, and I see his Adam's apple bob roughly. “I need to know.”

Know what? I almost ask. But he's studying me now. His eyes are trailing across my chest and down my arm. He's watching the hand in my shorts. And I get it. He wants to know why he's feeling this way, if it's attraction or beer or temporary insanity.

Earlier tonight I was telling him the truth when I said I didn't want to help him make this discovery. I'm not sure I'd survive it.

This is, of course, all my fault.

We lock eyes. His are heavy-lidded. I've always wanted another chance to see his lust-filled face. Now his lips part on the upstroke, and it's almost enough to get me across the room. But still I hesitate, and not because I'm afraid he'll regret this tomorrow.

Because I know I will.

“Please,” he says.

That one word is enough to get me off my bed. I'm standing in the center of our room now, hands on the waistband of my boxers. I yank and let them drop to the floor.

And now he's staring at my cock, stroking his.

"What do you want?" I ask. And I need him to be specific. This is a very dangerous game we're playing. It will probably end in disaster. But if there's any way I can prevent that, I will.

He moves further onto the bed, making room for me. Then he beckons. And there isn't enough money, fame or fortune in the world to keep me from obeying. I'm on that bed a second later. His arms reach for me, pull me in.

We're side by side, chest to chest. And Jamie Canning is kissing me again.

He doesn't taste like beer anymore, but toothpaste. There's no way either of us can blame this on alcohol tomorrow. His tongue is in my mouth and I take greedy pulls on it, loving every second of it.

Our lower bodies grind together, and he lets out a soft moan, rocking harder into me. His cock slides over my belly, lines up with my own aching shaft. That bit of friction brings stars to my eyes.

"*Fuck*," I choke out.

His eyes slit open, searching my face as his tongue comes out to lick his bottom lip. "If you stop right now, I'm going to kick your ass."

Stop? Is that a word? What does it mean? Probably the opposite of what I'm doing when I slide my hand between our bodies and grasp both our cocks in my hand.

Jamie's spine arches on another husky moan. "Oh shit. That's good."

I jack us slowly, squeezing on each upstroke. His mouth finds mine again. His stubble scrapes my cheek as he angles his head to deepen the kiss. That magic tongue slides between my lips again, hungry and eager. I can't believe we're doing this. I can't believe he's *letting* me do this.

We're both leaking, making it so fucking easy for my fist to slide over our slick cocks. My balls are heavy, tingling with the need for release. A few more strokes and I'll probably blow, but Jamie doesn't let it happen.

He wrenches out of my grip and plants both palms on my chest to shove me onto my back. My dick sails up and slaps my navel, and he groans at the sight before wrapping his fingers around my shaft.

“Can I...” His voice comes out in a rush. “Can I suck you off?”

Holy mother of God. I’m caught in some kind of fever dream. I *have* to be, because there’s no other explanation for why my best friend is offering to put his mouth on my dick.

I figured this exploratory I-need-to-know-if-I-like-dudes session would involve me doing all the work, ravaging him the way I’ve always fantasized about doing. But one thing about Jamie Canning? He’s full of surprises. Every time he used to accept one of my crazy challenges, my eyebrows would soar, my mind unable to comprehend how this laidback Cali boy who always followed the rules could be so willing to follow me down whatever rabbit hole I was leading him into.

I’m not leading him into anything tonight, though. This is all Jamie. It’s Jamie’s fingers skimming along my hard length. Jamie’s breath hot on the tip of my dick as he slides down and brings his mouth within inches of me.

“Have you ever...” I swallow past the gravel in my throat. “Done this before?”

“No.” His lips are hesitant as they graze my cockhead. “I might suck.”

A laugh chokes out. “Sucking is kind of the point.”

He lifts his head, brown eyes twinkling. “I might be *bad* at it,” he corrects.

“You won’t be.” Because there’s no way he can be. I’m too close to coming already, just from being in the same bed as him. He doesn’t need skill—he just needs to be here. Him. Here. With me.

I almost lose my mind when his tongue touches me. Every inch of me is hot, tight, prickling with need. He licks a slow circle around my tip, then kisses his way down my shaft. He’s *kissing* my dick, light, open-mouthed

caresses that blow my fucking mind. Holy shit. Jamie Canning is a cocktease. Who woulda thought?

“You trying to drive me crazy?” I growl after he kisses another path up my cock.

His chuckle vibrates through me. “Is it working?”

“Yes.” I slide both hands through his hair, cupping his head. “What about you? Enjoying your first taste of dude?”

He laughs harder now, broad shoulders quaking as he crouches between my thighs. “It’s...” His tongue finds me again, tickling the underside of my shaft. “Different.”

He wraps his hand around my base and closes his mouth around my cockhead, giving a slow, decadent suck. “It’s...”

He sucks again, taking me deeper this time, and my cock pulses uncontrollably. He must feel it on his tongue because he groans, loudly, desperately. He lifts his head, his expression foggy with lust, cloudy with confusion.

Joy surges through me. And apprehension, because I don’t know what to do with his bewilderment. Do I assure him it’s no big deal? That it’s perfectly cool for a straight guy to love blowing another man?

But he doesn’t give me the chance to say *anything*. He just dips his head and his hot, wet mouth surrounds me again.

My hips shift on the mattress, pure lust sizzling in my cock and balls as my best friend works me over. I keep one hand tangled in his hair. The other claws at the sheet, bunching it tight between my fingers. My heart is pounding. It’s all I can hear, a frantic *thump-thump* rattling my ribcage. That and the sounds Jamie is making. Husky groans, wet *pops*, a deep growl as he takes me almost all the way to the back of his throat.

Jesus Christ. This man is wrecking me. I’m *wrecked*. I’m—

“Going to come,” I ground out.

The climax seizes my balls and shoots up my shaft, hot jets spurting out of my cock just as Jamie's mouth releases me. He strokes me through the release, his breathing heavy and eyes gleaming as he watches my come land on my abs, my chest.

I can't breathe. I'm a gasping, shuddering mess, and he just keeps watching. And then the fucker does it again—he *smiles*. He fucking smiles as he lowers his head and licks one pearly drop off my stomach.

"That was so hot," he tells me.

Hot? Try scorching. Blistering. A goddamn inferno.

I'm unable to do anything but lie there like a sack of potatoes. Struggling to breathe. Blinking like an owl as I watch the most beautiful man grab my discarded shirt from the floor and clean me up. Once he's done, he tosses the shirt away and bends down to kiss my collarbone. Then my shoulder. My other shoulder.

He keeps kissing my feverish flesh, licking, nibbling, and I just let him explore, offering myself up as his sexual guinea pig. He's tasting every inch of me, his mouth moving tentatively over the ripples of my abs, my hips, my pecs. I moan when he licks one of my nipples, and he peeks up at me, his lips curving.

"You like that."

I manage a nod.

He does it again, this time closing his lips around the tiny nub and sucking on it. I can feel his erection against my thigh, leaving streaks of moisture against my skin. Drawing a breath, I reach down and grasp him, and now *I'm* smiling, because his tongue freezes on my nipple as his entire body tenses.

He thrusts into my hand, and it's all the invitation I need. "On your back," I mutter.

Jamie rolls over so fast it makes me laugh. He props his arms behind his head, one brow cocked as he nudges his hips up, all but taunting me with

his perfect dick.

“Let’s see if you’ve still got it,” he teases.

My laughter is muffled against his stomach. “You know, you’re a cocky bastard when you’re gay.”

“Guess I am.”

I slowly crawl up his body, propping my elbows on either side of his head. Our gazes lock. He parts his lips, peering up at me with hazy eyes. Swallowing, I lower my mouth to his in a soft kiss. Fuck, I taste myself on his tongue, and it’s enough to send my mind spinning. This guy...goddamn it, this guy. I’ve never wanted anyone the way I want Canning. The way I *crave* Canning.

Four years’ worth of meaningless sexual encounters flash through my head as I break the kiss and slide down his body again. All those guys I hooked up with in the past...they’re a blur. They’re faceless. Sometimes they were faceless even when I was *with* them. I got off, they got off, but I wasn’t fully present. I always held something back from them.

Not with Jamie. I can’t hold back with him, and never could.

“Trust me, I’ve still got it,” I whisper as my mouth descends toward his cock. And I’m going to prove it to him. Show him how much I fucking love him, because I sure as shit can’t *tell* him.

I take a breath. His erection is millimeters away and it’s mine. Tonight, *he’s* mine. I grip his shaft and give it a light squeeze. He shudders in response, watching me. Waiting.

Licking my lips, I bend down and swipe my tongue over the little slit at his tip. He teased me before, and now it’s time for some payback. I’m going to worship every inch of Jamie Canning’s cock. I’m going to torment him with my tongue until he can’t remember a time when my mouth wasn’t on his dick bringing him pleasure. I’m going to—

Jamie comes the second I wrap my lips around him.

Yup, he fucking *comes*, and I don't know whether to laugh or groan as he starts to shake with release. In the end I do neither—I suck him all the way down to the base, drawing a strangled cry from his lips as I swallow the salty drops that shoot down my throat.

When he finally goes still, I raise my head with a sigh. “Really, dude? That was like *two* seconds. You have the stamina of a pre-teen.”

His shoulders tremble as he rolls over on his side in hysterics. “I guess you’ve still got it,” he chokes out between laughs.

Climbing up the mattress, I ease in behind him, yanking his big body toward me. He stiffens for a second, then relaxes, his taut ass nestling against my groin, his back flush to my chest.

I wrap an arm around his waist. If I’m honest, I wanted this as much as the blowjob—the right to just touch him. To lean on him, skin to skin.

But he’s silent. Too silent, probably. “Jamie,” I murmur in his ear, before planting a kiss on his shoulder. “Are you going to freak out now?”

The pause before he speaks cuts me in half. “Do you want me to?” There’s humor in his voice.

“No.” It’s my turn to pause. “Do you want me to go back to my bed?”

He snuggles even closer, plastering himself to my body like a warm blanket. “No.” He sighs in contentment. “Night, Wes.”

A lump rises in my throat. “Night, Canning.”

Jamie

Wes isn't beside me when I open my eyes the next morning. I roll over and study the room. His bed is empty. It doesn't look like it's been slept in, and I don't remember him climbing out of mine during the night. What I do remember is waking up at six in the morning to find Wes's arm wrapped tightly around me. Then I'd fallen back asleep, so he must've left some point after that.

Probably makes me a jerk, but I'm relieved. I'm not sure what I would have said if I woke up to find us snuggling.

According to the alarm clock on the end table, it's almost eleven-thirty. Dining hall stops serving breakfast at eleven. I'd slept right through it, but that's okay. It's our day off, so I'm not needed at the rink.

On the other hand, *it's our day off*. That means hours and hours of free time. Time I'll probably be spending with Wes. Who I hooked up with last night.

I don't feel any different, though. I fooled around with a guy yesterday—shouldn't I feel different?

Feel gay, you mean?

A laugh bubbles in my throat. Does one *feel* gay?

And damn it, I'm bewildered to discover I'm rocking a boner, and it's more than just a case of morning wood. It's Wes-wood, a result of thinking about us messing around.

I...think I might want to do it again. And how screwed up is *that*? I'd been fully prepared to view last night as a chemistry experiment. A test. I hadn't expected to *ace* the damn thing.

The door suddenly swings open and Wes trudges inside, red-faced and breathing hard. He's in running gear, the front of his sleeveless shirt drenched in sweat. He peels it off his muscular chest and throws it aside.

"It's fucking hot out there," he mumbles without glancing my way.

Oh shit. He's going to make it awkward. He can't even look me in the eye.

"Why didn't you wake me?" I ask. "I would've come running with you."

He shrugs. "Figured I'd let you sleep in." He kicks off his shoes and socks, then strips out of his shorts.

Now he's naked. And I'm even harder.

He's still averting his gaze, so he has no idea I'm admiring his lean, sculpted muscles and the black ink winding around his heavy biceps. I realize this is the first time I've seen him naked in the light of day, and his skin gleams in the sunlight peeking through the curtains. He's all muscle. All man.

And all those questions I'd asked myself last night—*Am I really attracted to him? Would I like it if we hooked up? Am I totally crazy?*—I know the answers to them now. Yes, yes, and maybe.

But I didn't expect to wake up with *more* questions.

I slide out of bed and notice he's making an even greater effort not to look at me now. Because...yep, I'm naked, too. We'd fallen asleep naked. In each other's arms.

His back is to me as he stalks over to the dresser.

“Wes,” I say quietly.

He doesn’t react. He grabs a pair of blue gym shorts from the top drawer and tugs them up to his hips.

“Wes.”

His shoulders tense. Very slowly, he turns around, and his gray eyes focus on my face. There’s an unspoken question flickering there—*what now?*

Fuck if I know.

What I *do* know? I’m not equipped to have this conversation right now. Not until I’ve given it some thought and figured out what I want from this. From *him*.

So I put on a careless tone and ask, “What are we doing today?”

He’s silent for a beat. I can tell he expected me to go all chick on him and demand we talk about last night. I can also tell he’s relieved I decided to choose the dude route and ignore it.

His lips quirk slightly. “Well, we need to get some food in you and then hike over to the soccer field. The kids came back from the fishing hole already because nothing was biting except the mosquitoes. So Pat’s organizing a game.”

And just like that, we’re cool again. Sure, we’re pretending we didn’t blow the shit out of each other last night, but for now, I’m happy to pretend. I’m not ready to deal with this yet.

I wrinkle my forehead. “For the kids?”

“Nope, the coaches. But a bunch of the boys are already there taking bets on which team will win.”

“There are teams already?” How long had I been asleep?

Wes grins again. “Pat’s calling it boys versus men. Him and the older coaches against us young’uns.”

“Sweet.” I’m not a soccer enthusiast, but any sort of competition gets my adrenaline going.

“PS—losers have to perform a song for the campers in the dining hall tonight,” Wes says.

I narrow my eyes. “Which song?”

“Winners’ choice.” He snickers.

“Just out of curiosity—who came up with these stakes?”

My best friend blinks with the utmost innocence.

That’s what I thought.

“You know if we lose, Pat’s gonna make us sing Mariah Carey or some shit,” I grumble as I look for my shorts.

“Which is why we’re not going to lose,” he says cheerfully.

We stop at the bakery in town so I can grab a coffee and something to eat, and I scarf down two banana muffins as we head to the soccer field. It’s another gorgeous day and the tourists are out in droves, bustling down the sidewalk and filling the outdoor patios we pass on our way.

Two chicks stop in their tracks as Wes and I walk by. They’re in their early twenties, both blond, both incredibly attractive. One girl is wearing a top that’s cut so low her tits are practically hanging out of it, and a spark of heat ignites my groin. Shi-it. That rack is spectacular.

Wes winks at them and keeps walking. I match his strides, trying not to glance over my shoulder to see if the girls are watching us.

Okay, just one peek. I flick my chin back for a quick look, which causes one of the girls to nudge her friend.

Whoops.

“See something you like?” Wes asks.

I feel a slap of discomfort that wouldn’t have been there twenty-four hours ago. “Just thinking things over,” I mumble.

“I’ll bet.” His voice is low.

We don't speak of it anymore, because I don't need to involve Wes in my confusion. But I'm pretty sure that my dick is an equal-opportunity player. Because I love women. I love how soft they are and the way they smell and how they feel in my arms. I love fucking them and going down on them, and I'm never faking it.

Last night, I wasn't faking it, either. And now I have no idea what it all means.

Wes nudges me, then points at a street sign we're passing. *Cummings Road*.

"Like that joke has never been made before. Now who's the pre-teen?"

He stiffens for a beat, as if he didn't expect me to make a reference to last night. Then he snorts. "Let's play some soccer, Canning."

Indeed.

First, Pat gathers everyone around. You can't ask a bunch of highly competitive athletes to play a friendly game of soccer without going over a few rules first. There will be two twenty-minute periods. And will the offsides rule count? Yes it will. Is slide tackling legal? No. "Because I will fucking kill anyone who injures himself," Pat adds.

Good to know.

We're playing five on five, and I'm in the goal, of course. I can see Killfeather over on the side, watching me with a grin on his face. He's not a bad kid when he forgets to be stressed out.

I'm not stressed, either. I'm bored to tears, because Wes and the other guys are giving 'em hell at the other end of the field. We're up 1-0 by the time I have to make my first save. A soccer net is a lot bigger than a hockey goal, so saving the net seems more haphazard. But I stop Pat's shot in my hands and my team cheers.

I set the ball down on the line, back up and kick it downfield. Before it reaches Wes, he gives me a little smile, then traps the ball with his chest. It

drops to the ground between his muscular legs and then he's off running, controlling the ball, masculine beauty in motion.

Suddenly I'm thinking about sex again. In the middle of a game.

That's never happened before.

The next time the ball threatens our goal, things don't go so well. Our defense falls apart when Pat is able to deke my teammate Georgie, leaving the most senior coach unguarded. The old man promptly fires a flying saucer right at me.

I leap, but it sails past my thumb and into the corner of the net.

Wes makes an ornery noise, and I can see he's about to lay into Georgie for leaving us wide open.

Meanwhile, Killfeather and the rest are watching. I walk over to Wes and put a hand on his shoulder. "Hey," I say, holding my hand up for a high five. "We'll get the next one."

Wes is a quick study, so it's no surprise to me that he catches on. He smacks my hand. "Yeah, man." Then? He reaches around behind me and gives my ass a quick squeeze.

Holy...!

I can't help that my eyes dart around, checking everyone's face for a reaction. But there isn't one, because nobody saw. And even if they had, it's such a Wes move that nobody would think twice about it.

But I do. Because even if I'm not freaking out about what we did last night, I don't want anyone else to know.

If Wes was a girl, I wouldn't care, though.

And why is that, exactly? my conscience wonders. It's a good question, and not one that I'm prepared to answer. And anyway, there are ten more minutes of soccer to play.

We hold at 1-1 until there are only two minutes remaining. Then Wes gets lucky with Georgie's corner kick, heading the ball into the top of the

net. And we've won. I collapse on the grass and yell for Killfeather to bring me a bottle of water.

He does, but he pours some of it on my face before handing me the rest.

"You are such a punk," I complain, and he laughs.

The walk home takes longer than it should, because the coaches are sweaty and tired. "So who do you room with?" I ask Killfeather.

"Oh, with Davies."

"Really? How's that working out?"

"It's all right," he says. "He's not bad when he's not on the ice."

I file that away to think about later. And I let my eyes linger on Wes. His gait is so familiar to me. The way he carries his shoulders hasn't changed in the nine years I've known him. The way his hamstrings tighten with each step is as familiar as my own hand.

There's a warm feeling in my belly when I look at him. And it's not just sexual. It's...*comfortable*. Like we're close even when he's twenty yards ahead. I wear a consciousness of him like a second skin.

Okay, that sounds a little creepy. A little too *Silence of the Lambs*. Sunshine and sexual confusion have gone to my head.

Just before he reaches the dormitory, I see Wes answer his phone. And when I arrive in our room a minute or so behind him, he's frowning out the window while he talks.

"What if I don't want to do an interview?" he asks. His tone is recklessly belligerent if he's talking to a PR person. *Careful*, I feel like saying.

"This isn't a good idea. Why set me up just to lie?" There's a pause on Wes's end. He kicks off his shoes with more force than is necessary, and they fly with an angry thunk into the desk we never use. "Dad, if I tell them there's a girlfriend, they're going to ask her name. And *then* what would you have me say?"

Ah. The conversation makes more sense now. Wes never got along with his father. Every phone call home had always ended with Wes red-faced and irritated. The one time I met Wesley Sr., I found him to be awfully arrogant and demanding for someone who sits at a desk all day.

The fact that Mr. Wesley isn't happy about his son's sexuality comes as no surprise to me at all.

In front of me, Wes hunches his shoulders. Without thinking too hard about it, I step forward and put both hands there, squeezing the muscle between his neck and shoulders. I dig my thumbs into his traps and push.

At first he goes rigid. Then he makes an effort to relax. And when he shoots me a little glance over his shoulder, it's grateful.

"I gotta go," Wes is saying, his voice still grumpy. "I'll think about it. But don't you dare schedule anything without my permission."

He ends the call and drops the phone on the desk. Then he drops his head and leans into my touch. "Thanks, man," he says gruffly.

"What does he want from you?" I work my hands up onto the back of his neck. Would I have touched him this way yesterday? Maybe? Probably not. But it isn't sexual. He feels good under my hands, though. Warm and alive.

Wes groans. "He's got a buddy at *Sports Illustrated*. You know him—he's got a buddy *everywhere*. My dad came out of the womb with business cards in his hands. He's convinced the guy to interview me about my rookie season. Like—following the ups and downs."

I'm horrified. "That's a terrible idea." In the first place, rookie seasons are wildly unpredictable. Wes could end up as a healthy scratch for two dozen games before suddenly seeing tons of play. And who wants the pressure of speaking to a reporter all the damn time? "You don't want to be *that* rookie on the team—the one a reporter follows around all fucking day."

Wes sighs, his back rising and falling under my hands. "You think?"

I feel a rush of...*something* for him. Solidarity. Affection. Maybe it doesn't need a title. But I wish his father hadn't meddled. "What are you going to do?"

"Lie," he says, his tone flat. "I'll tell him I spoke to the Panthers' PR team, and they vetoed the idea."

"Will he believe you?"

"Does it matter?"

"Yeah," I say quietly. "Because you don't want to piss off *Sports Illustrated* before you've even sharpened your skates in Toronto."

Wes makes a frustrated sound as I work my hands down his spine. "My fucking father, sticking his nose where it doesn't belong again. He thinks he's helping, too. He wants his buddy to write an all-American-kid kind of story. Apple fucking pie and all that. Like if it's printed in a magazine, he can make it true."

Wes turns around suddenly, interrupting the killer massage I'd been giving him. I'm oddly disappointed. I enjoyed having my hands on him. I know he enjoyed it too, but his expression is shuttered again, just like it was this morning.

I open my mouth. Then close it. Nope, I'm still not ready to have this conversation.

Neither is he, apparently. "Let's grab some lunch," he suggests.

I hesitate, then shake my head. "You go ahead. I think I'll take a nap for a bit. I'm...tired after that game."

It's a lame-ass excuse, and I know he sees right through me. But he just nods. "Yeah. Sure. I'll catch up with you later."

A moment later, he's gone.

Wes

I don't end up grabbing lunch. Instead, I walk around aimlessly for almost an hour, then plant my ass on a park bench and do some people-watching.

Canning is freaking out. I don't need to be a mind reader to know that. But fuck, I wish I *could* read his mind. I want to know just how badly I screwed up our friendship again.

Or had I? I don't even fucking know. A part of me assumes that yes, I've lost him again. But another part keeps saying, *dude, he just gave you a MASSAGE*. That means we're still friends, right? Except...do friends really give each other back rubs? The one time I had a kink in my neck and asked Cassel to knead it out for me, he nearly bust a gut laughing.

And speaking of Cassel, there are two text messages from him on my phone, both from earlier in the week. I've been too busy settling back into the Lake Placid routine to answer him.

I type a quick response: *Camp's good. Some real talent here. How's ur sis? Make friends with any lobsters?* I chuckle to myself. Cassel's spending the summer with his older sister in Maine, busing tables at her seafood restaurant.

He responds faster than I expect: *All good here. Sis says hi.*

There's a long delay, and then a second message pops up: *Broke up with Em.*

Sitting there on the bench, I let out a whoop of joy. About fucking time. This is too important for texts, so I pull up his number and call him.

He answers on the second ring, his familiar voice sliding into my ear. "Yo."

"So how'd she take it?" I demand.

"As expected."

"Freaked out and slapped you, you mean?"

A heavy sigh echoes on the line. "Pretty much. She accused me of stringing her along for four years. I reminded her we were only going out for one, and then she called me an insensitive fucktard and stormed out."

"Shit. Sorry, man. You doing okay?"

"Oh yeah. Never realized how high maintenance that chick was until I set her loose. Just enjoying my freedom now, taking a page out of the Ryan Wesley playbook and screwing anything that walks."

"Next year that won't be my playbook."

He's silent for a second. "You going to try to keep your extracurriculars on the DL?"

"I think I have to keep it zipped up instead. A rookie can't afford rumors. At school... That was just different. The stakes were lower."

"Yeah. I guess so. Sorry, man. Sounds lonely."

I try to laugh it off. "Sounds *horny*."

"You'd better have some fun this summer, before you're all famous and shit." Cassel laughs at his own humor.

"I'll get right on that."

"How is the pickup scene in Lake Placid? Can't imagine there's a gay bar there. You'll have to turn a jock or two."

My stomach shimmies. *If only I hadn't already tried that.* "I'd better go," I say. Because I'm really not fit for conversation today.

“Good talking to you, man.”

“Stay strong if Em calls,” I warn.

“Don’t worry.” He sighs. “I will.”

Jamie

I glance at the door for the hundredth time in ten minutes. Just, you know, to make sure little gremlins didn't crawl out of some air vent and unlock it. But nope, still locked.

It feels like I'm doing something wrong. Like I just dipped my hand in the cookie jar when my mom turned her back to me. But maybe I'm being too hard on myself. There's nothing wrong with looking at porn. I'm a red-blooded, twenty-two-year-old man. I'm not a virgin. I'm not a prude. Just a guy trying to figure out what his kinks are.

Sighing, I lean back against the pillows, my laptop positioned on my thighs as I scroll through the thumbnails on the screen. I hover over one of the images, which shows a preview of what I can expect. All right. Seems okay.

I click on the title: *Hot jocks suck 'n fuck*.

Did I mention I'm browsing gay porn?

Yep, I'm a filthy liar—I told Wes I was taking a nap, and look at me now.

A breath shudders out of my chest as the video loads. It's a short clip, and it starts splat in the middle of a scene from whatever movie the site

pulled the clip from. I've got the sound turned down low, but I can hear every word loud and clear. Well, just one of the dudes is *talking*. The other guy is only capable of wet slurps and deep moans as he goes to town on the first guy's dick.

"Fuck yeah...oh fuck yeah...suck that big cock..."

Okay, that's just cheesy. I laugh as I imagine myself ordering Wes to "suck that big cock".

Next clip. This one's not doing it for me.

I click on something labeled *Poolside fuck*. Sounds promising. I like pools and I like fucking. Can't go wrong with that, right?

"You like that big dick in your hole, boy? That's it, boy, take it—"

Annnnnnd I press stop. Nope. Just nope.

I hit the jackpot on my next selection. Two very attractive guys are making out on a bed, grinding their hard cocks together.

My dick says hello.

Interesting. There's something about the grip they have on each other that turns me on. It's not gentle. There's a hungry, forceful energy to their kissing that I appreciate. That my dick appreciates.

Shit, like *seriously* appreciates. I'm hard now, my gaze fixed on the screen as I watch one guy kiss his way down the other one's stomach. When his mouth engulfs his partner's erection, a jolt of heat shoots up my spine.

Sucking in a breath, I reach down and grip my aching cock. Oh fuck, that feels good.

I keep watching. Keep stroking.

And the messed up thing is, I'm not even mentally replacing the guy's face with Wes's. That had been one of the reasons for this little experiment, to find out if it's just Wes who turns me on, or dudes in general.

The guy receiving the blowjob releases a husky moan. The masculine sound of it does something to me. His partner sucks him harder.

I'm literally five seconds away from coming.

Chillax, I order my dick. *We're just getting started*.

But the little goalie's got a mind of his own. He won't quit throbbing, so I hit the fast forward button to skip to the *real* test.

The anal.

And holy shit, that's some serious pounding. I wince as the sound of flesh slapping flesh bursts out of the laptop speakers. Jesus. How is that guy not screaming in pain?

He is screaming, though. Well, moaning. And there's grunting. They're not careful with each other, but all that graceless enthusiasm looks like fun. I keep staring at the guy who's taking it. His biceps bulge as he jacks himself, his eyes slammed shut, his neck taut with pleasure.

And then he's coming, and I'm not far behind. The computer falls off my lap as I stroke faster, cupping my balls with my other hand. I gasp for air, my eyes glued to the screen, to the sight of two *men* screwing. My spine arches as my cock twitches in my hand, spilling all over my stomach.

Holy...shit.

It takes almost a full minute for my heartbeat to regulate. Once my limbs no longer feel like spaghetti noodles, I reach for the tissue box next to me and clean myself up. Then I stare up at the ceiling for a while.

I'm not done, though. That was just the first part of the experiment. I pick up the laptop again and click on a new category. Good ol' fashioned lesbian porn.

I'm too spent to jerk it again, but I still click on a thumbnail, one that shows two smoking hot brunettes tangled together on a white couch. I hike my shorts back up, one hand resting on my crotch as I settle in to enjoy the view.

And enjoy it I do. I'm hardening again. The lust isn't as strong as before, but that's because of the orgasm I just had, not because the girls aren't doing it for me. They are. Big-time. Their soft curves and pretty pussies and those sweet whimpers.

I'm attracted to women, no doubt about it.

I'm also attracted to men, apparently.

Wonderful. Complicated fellow, my dick.

When footsteps thud in the hall, I slap the laptop shut, nearly clipping my fingers off. Then I shove the computer aside and stand up, quickly tossing the used tissue in the wastebasket near the dresser.

A second later, a key jingles in the lock and Wes strides through the door. He sees me standing in the middle of the room, lifts an eyebrow, and says, "How was the nap?"

I get the feeling he knows exactly what I've been up to, but I simply shrug. "Just what I needed. How was lunch?"

"Didn't have any. I ended up walking around."

"You hungry?" I swipe my T-shirt off the floor and throw it on. "'Cause I am."

When my head pops through the neck hole of the shirt, I find Wes eyeing me warily. "You okay, Canning?"

"Yep." I walk to the door, glancing at him over my shoulder. "So... lunch?"

His brows knit, drawing my attention to the barbell in his left eyebrow. It gives him this whole bad-boy vibe that makes me kinda...horny.

"Wes?"

He snaps out of whatever thoughts had just preoccupied him. "Uh, yeah. Lunch sounds good."

I leave the room without checking if he's following me. I know he is. I can feel his perplexed gaze tickling my back.

After the way I spent the afternoon, I'm pretty sure he's nowhere near as perplexed as I am.

Wes

We buy burritos and eat them by the lake. After that, we go for ice cream at one of the many places on Main Street. Jamie wants to talk about coaching, apparently. So we do.

“A lot of these kids still don’t understand ‘first touch,’” he theorizes. “If there was one thing I could have ’em take back home, it would be that. In a high-level game, you only get one chance at the puck. If they waste time repositioning, it’s over.”

“Uh-huh.” But every time he says “first touch” my mind is on an entirely different kind of touching. He’s talking a lot with his hands, and I’m fixated on his biceps, and the fine blond hair on his arms, which I now know is very soft to the touch. I think about removing that T-shirt to kiss his chest, and my dick begins to grow heavy.

Wearing these nylon athletic shorts? Not smart. And horniness isn’t even my only problem.

Last night I’d asked Jamie if he was freaking out. Funny, I’ve now spent an entire day doing just that.

The guy is fucking with my mind. First he acts like nothing happened. Then he ditches me so he can take a “nap.” But no way was he doing that. I

mean, I wasn't born yesterday. When I got back to our room and saw him standing there all guiltily, it was obvious what he'd been doing. The fucker had jerked off.

I would have been happy to help him out with that, but clearly he'd rather go solo than let me touch him again.

Except...then he'd checked me out. Again, not born yesterday. I saw the way he was looking at me before we headed out.

Jesus. Good thing he's not a traffic cop, because he's sending enough mixed signals to cause a ten-car pileup.

I've played it cool, but inside I'm a wreck. Because once was not enough, and yet I haven't a clue what Jamie's thinking.

No clue.

Shoving the last of my ice cream cone in my mouth, all I want is to drag him back to our lair and do very dirty things to him. But is that even in the cards? I know two things so far. First, Jamie Canning can get hot for me. I saw it last night. And second, he's not horrified by what we did.

That's amazing, and I feel like pinching myself that I had even one awesome night with the love of my life. But it doesn't guarantee me a fucking thing. He owes me nothing. He could tire of this little experiment. He probably already has.

It's terrifying. Because I want another taste. Hell, I want to gorge myself on him. I'm a glutton for Jamie Canning.

"Wes?"

"What?" Oh, shit. I've been staring at him, and I have no idea what we're talking about.

"I asked if you wanted to swim. It's still hot."

"Uh." I really just want to go home and get very, very naked. "I'm not wearing a suit."

His eyes narrow. "Who are you?"

Right. When you spend your life giving zero fucks about appropriate attire, people notice. “Okay,” I concede. “Let’s swim.”

Jamie’s phone makes a trilling noise. “Oh. Hang on two minutes? If I don’t answer, they’ll keep calling.” He swipes the screen, but holds the phone away from his body. “Hey guys!”

A chorus of voices pours from his phone, which is on Skype or some shit. “Jamie!” “Jamester!” “Hi baby!”

I’d forgotten about this. Jamie’s whole family has a big meal together on Sunday every single week, and apparently it’s a family sacrilege to miss one. So while their youngest was away at camp, he got these calls every week. Probably when he was away at college, too.

“You need a haircut,” a female voice pipes up.

“Yeah,” he concedes, running a hand through his golden hair. I’m jealous of that hand. “What’s new in Cali?”

I listen while his family all tries to talk at once. “Guess who’s knocked up again?” a male voice asks.

“Language!”

Apparently Jamie’s sister is pregnant again. And one of his brothers got a promotion. Another brother broke up with his long-time girlfriend.

“I’m sorry about that,” Jamie says.

“We’re not!” a sister cries.

“Fuck off!”

“Language!”

Suffice it to say that Jamie’s call from home is nothing like mine.

“So, son,” an older voice booms. Jamie’s dad always manages to sound commanding without coming off like an asshole. My father could take a few pointers. “What have you been up to this week?”

I snort so hard that Jamie’s eyes flick over to me before quickly moving back to the screen. “The usual,” he says, giving me a kick under the table. “Lots of ice time. Went hiking.”

Sucked off my gay friend Wes.

He keeps his eyes firmly on the screen so I can't really tell whether he's sweating this part of the conversation or not.

"Sounds good," his father rumbles. "Your mother is busy in the kitchen, but she said to tell you to make sure you come home before you head for Detroit."

"I'll try," he promises. "It depends on whether Pat can replace me for that week."

"Your mother also reminds you to try to get enough fiber and eat organic."

There's a boom of laughter from the phone at that.

Jamie grins. "I'll get right on it."

"Be good, Jamie!" "Love you!" "Wear your cup!" More snickers. More endearments.

And then Jamie ends the call, tucking his phone into his shirt pocket, shaking his head. "Sorry about that."

"No big. Still want to swim?" *Please say no.*

"Yeah. Let's do it."

The town beach is at the southern end of Mirror Lake, really close to the dormitory. Everything in Lake Placid is close to everything else. This town was a summer resort for rich people well before it was a winter sports destination. So we pass all manner of attractive old buildings on the short walk to the little beach.

Jamie kicks off his flip-flops and strips off his shirt. He walks into the water, where his shorts start to cling to his body even before he's submerged himself.

I follow him, of course. He could lead me anywhere right now, and I wouldn't argue.

The cool water feels great, though. When I'm up to my thighs I dive under, chasing Jamie out past the sandy area. There's a floating raft a

hundred yards out, and we swim to it.

Jamie is smiling at me when I break the surface. With one palm I splash him a good one, then dive under again to escape retribution. Passing him, I make for the far side of the raft.

When I come up to take a breath, a big hand pushes me under again. So of course I'm coughing when I bob up a second later. "Fucker," I sputter, even though we spent the better part of our summers trying to drown each other every afternoon after practice.

He's got an elbow on the raft now, too, which prevents me from dunking him. Figures. So I do the same, coming to perch beside him.

Our shoulders are touching. All he has to do is turn his head and his mouth would be inches from mine. And then all I'd have to do is lean forward and his mouth would be *on* mine.

But he doesn't turn toward me. He just stares straight ahead.

Fucking hell. I can't take this anymore. I need to know where we stand. Because the thought of spending even another minute guessing what this guy wants from me is absolute torture.

Under water, I reach out and touch his belly with my fingertips.

Jamie's eyes widen. But he doesn't say anything. I hitch myself over to be a little closer. Then I flatten my palm on his cool, wet skin, my pinkie finger breaching the elastic of his shorts. I don't think anyone can see what I'm doing. But Jamie's eyes do a circuit of the lake. He's worried.

Fuck, I don't want to freak him out. "Feel like going home now?" I ask. It's code for, *are we going to fool around again?* If we're not, I wish he'd just tell me. Put me out of my misery.

He licks his lips. "Yeah," he says. Then he knocks my hand away. "But cut that out, or I won't be able to get out of the water."

I obey immediately.

Five minutes later we're walking into the dormitory, our clothes dripping on the old tile floors. But that's how people roll around here in the summertime. The place is mostly quiet, which means the kids are all at dinner.

Without a word we walk into our room and shut the door. The first thing I do is drop my shorts and boxers to the floor where they make a wet slap. Jamie follows suit. Then we're both just standing there, starkers, staring at each other. His eyes are startled, and my heart quakes with the fear that he's about to say, "I can't do this again."

"We have to be quiet," he says instead.

My smile is the size of Mirror Lake. "You can bite the pillow when I make you scream."

He takes a stuttering breath when I move closer to him, and I instantly freeze.

"Are you sure you wanna do this?" I gnaw on the inside of my cheek. "You've kinda been running hot and cold on me all day."

He nods. "Needed to get some things straight in my head."

I snort at his choice of words. "Straight, huh?" I offer a pointed look at his very noticeable hard-on.

His mouth twitches. "My dick and I reached an understanding."

"Yeah? And what's that?" I ask curiously.

He shrugs. "We both like you."

Fuck yeah.

I erase the rest of the distance between us. I'm hardening already, which is no surprise, because I've been thinking about this all day. My hands land on skin cool from the water. I brush his nipples with my fingertips, and they stiffen immediately. His ear is right beside my mouth, so I stick my tongue in it, making him gasp.

"Get on my fucking bed," I whisper.

Two seconds later, he's there. And I'm stretching out on him like a blanket, and jamming my tongue into his mouth. Jamie moans, but I'm too wrapped up in the taste of him to worry about it. I have my fingers in his hair and his hot, hard body under mine and it's everything I've ever wanted.

He's not hating life, either. His hips roll beneath me, his cock bumping and scraping against mine. It aches. My balls are tight already. Rubbing off on him feels amazing, and I love that his sweet mouth is a prisoner of mine. But I don't want to come yet.

So I force myself to pull back. When I look down at Jamie, his eyes are glazed with lust, and his lips are swollen and red. I make the sign for "time out." He tips his head back into the pillow and sighs, and I can't help dipping down to kiss his exposed throat.

I love you. The words are always right there on the tip of my naughty tongue. I swallow them back like I need to and say something much more practical instead.

"Have you ever been acquainted with your prostate?"

He shakes his head.

"Do you trust me?"

Jamie nods immediately, and my heart constricts. I must be insane to push him like this, but the things I crave are at war with my better judgment. So now I'm getting off the bed to dig in my duffel for the bottle of lube I keep in there.

His eyes follow the bottle when I sit back on the bed. He's probably seconds away from saying, "Hang on, that's just too gay for me." So I lean down and take the tip of his erection in my mouth.

"Fuck," he gasps, arching his back.

Once again I am socked with the certainty that I'm the world's most manipulative bastard. But I'm trying to blow his mind, and I'm hoping that's enough justification. I torture him with my tongue until he's practically levitating off the bed.

“Lift this leg,” I whisper.

Drunk from my teasing, he hikes his knee without complaint, and I position him so I can reach his crease easily. I dribble some lube onto the fingers of one hand. Then I drop my head and take his cock in my mouth. When I start sucking, he gasps. But when I slide my fingers between his ass cheeks, he goes silent.

For a moment I don't know what he's thinking. I release his dick and place a kiss on its tip. “You okay?”

He takes a slow breath. “Yeah,” he says as I tease his hole. “It's strange.”

“Can you take more?” If he says no, I'll drop it.

“Okay.”

I apply some more lube and then penetrate him with the tip of my finger. “Relax for me, baby.”

He tries. So I reward him with some kisses right where he wants them. “Mmm,” he says. “*That* I like.”

I give him some more. Since I've weirded him out with the ass play, he's not teetering on the edge anymore. I lean down, sucking and licking and just generally bringing out my A game. And at the same time, I'm working a finger slowly toward his prostate.

When I finally get there, everything changes.

“Ohfuckohfuck,” Jamie whispers, his thigh muscles trembling.

I rub his prostate again and give another good suck.

He moans, and I reach up with my free hand to cover his mouth. “Shh,” I remind him. “Don't make me stop.”

He shakes my hand off his mouth. “It's... You're... My feet are tingling.”

That's a good sign.

Smiling, I resume my wicked ministrations, my finger sliding inside him in time to the long, lazy strokes of my mouth. Jamie begins to shift his

hips, thrusting into my mouth. And it's not just his dick he's thrusting. It's his ass, too. He's bumping it toward me, seeking me out. Jesus. He's trying to fuck my finger.

"You doing okay?" I murmur.

"More than okay." His voice is a choked whisper.

He's squeezed his eyes shut. A flush rises in his cheeks, his brow drawn together as if he's in pain. But I know pain is the last thing he's feeling right now. His dick grows impossibly hard in my mouth, and I groan when his ass bears down on my finger.

"Wes..." He breathes out my name, his thighs quivering as he lifts his hips again. "You're making me crazy."

That's what I like to hear. His arousal surrounds us like a thick mist, pulsing in the air, in my cock. I slide the pad of my finger over his prostate again, and he croaks out a curse, and I'm loving it. "Has anyone ever told you before that you're sexually adventurous?"

One eye opens. "All the time," he mumbles, and I experience a jolt of jealousy, wondering which lucky girl helped him discover it. Jamie groans again. "Keep doing that. Please...don't stop..."

This guy is under the impression that stopping is even an *option*. I would, of course, if he asked me to, but as long as he's begging for my mouth? For my finger? Nothing short of dying will stop me from giving it to him. I'll give him every fucking part of myself, serve it to him like a feast at a banquet.

Jamie Canning has no idea the kind of power he has over me.

Jamie

I thought I had sex down to a science. I mean, it's not difficult. Kissing, foreplay, intercourse. I've tried almost every sexual position known to man, even the crazy ones you see in porn, where the chick pulls some exorcist-contortionist maneuver while I pound into her.

But my ass was never part of the deal.

Right now, it *is* the deal. Because even though Wes's mouth engulfs my cock like it's trying to swallow me whole, the arousal humming in my blood is centered solely on the pressure between my ass cheeks. It's good pressure. A slight burn that turns into a mind-melting rush of pleasure each time he hits this one spot inside me.

He's destroying me. He's bringing to life nerve endings I didn't know existed. It's unfamiliar. It's new. And experiencing it is a million times hotter than watching it happen to some other guy in a porn clip.

"So good," I choke out. "Jesus, don't stop...baby." He called me that before and I test it out now. It feels weird leaving my mouth. As weird as the new sensations coursing through me and tingling in my ass.

I wasn't sure I'd like this, but I do. God, I do. When his tongue ring scrapes the underside of my dick, I shiver, my breath catching. His finger is

lodged inside me, and I wonder what it would feel like if he slipped another one in there. Or if he used something other than a finger...

I suddenly think of the porn I watched earlier, the husky moans of the guy who was being drilled, and the dirty memory makes me clamp harder around Wes.

He lifts his head abruptly, his finger stilling but not withdrawing.

Uneasiness circles my gut as I meet his eyes. Lust has darkened them to stormy silver, and his throat works as he swallows.

“Why did you stop?” I swallow, too. “Are you going to...fuck me now?”

The question brings a jolt of panic. As hot as it was to watch on a screen, I don’t think I’m ready to experience that for myself yet. I’m not sure I’ll ever be ready—

“No.” He’s quick to reassure me, his gaze softening when he sees my face. “Not unless you want me to.”

“I...” I bite my lip. “I...don’t know. Maybe another time.” *Maybe another time?* God, when I go gay, I *really* go gay.

Wes’s lips quiver. “We’ll put a pin in that.”

I shudder out a laugh. “Why’d you stop then?”

“Just wanted to do *this*,” he says roughly, and then his finger disappears as he slides up and brushes his mouth over mine.

The kiss goes from sweet to molten in a matter of seconds. His tongue fills my mouth in deep, hungry strokes that make me gasp. I’m eager for more, desperate for it, but he’s gone again before I can blink, crawling back between my legs.

This time when his finger slips past that puckered ring of muscle, I welcome the burn. I crave it. Wes licks a hot line from the tip of my cock to my aching balls, teasing the delicate sac while his finger toys with me. When I try to push my ass against it, he retreats, a dark chuckle fanning over my shaft.

Jesus. I can't take it anymore. I need to come before I self-combust.

"Stop being a cocktease," I growl. "Give me what I want."

His tongue ring teases my slit. "Yeah, and what do you want, baby?"

"For you to suck me dry."

Wes pushes his finger in deeper, rubbing that spot that makes me see stars. My prostate. Why hasn't anyone ever told me the prostate was some kind of magical pleasure zone? Are there unicorns and orgasm fairies dancing around in there?

"Ask me nicely and I'll consider it." He grins up at me.

I narrow my eyes at him. "Make me come, jackass."

His laughter sends my heart soaring. Which is the most confusing thing of all, because it adds an element to the sex I didn't expect. I'm comfortable with him. I have fun with him. I'm not trying to impress anyone. It's...easy. Like splashing in the lake. But with orgasms.

"You're a bossy bastard, Canning." His lips tickle the head of my cock. "I fucking love it."

And I love what he's doing to me. The sucking, the blunt fingertip rubbing inside me. It's not long before the tension gathers again. A knot of pleasure that coils tighter and tighter until finally I cup the back of Wes's head and bear down on his finger as the orgasm shoots through me. Out of me.

Wes drinks me up like he can't get enough, humming around my cock, and I have to tug on his hair to get him to stop once my dick has had enough.

I lie there panting. When my breathing finally slows to an almost normal rate, Wes is straddling my thighs, his hard dick in two hands. He jacks himself slowly. My gaze rests on his erection, long and proud, the engorged head making my mouth water. It's the same response I have when a girl parts her legs for me, offering that sweet paradise to my mouth or

dick. I never thought another guy's package could look appealing too, and I really wish I knew what it meant.

Now's not the time to dwell on it, though.

"Give it to me," I say roughly, beckoning to his erection.

His eyebrows go up, the barbell catching the light. "You feel like returning the favor?"

When I nod, he moves closer and straddles my shoulders, then grabs the second pillow on the bed and tucks it under my head. The added height brings my mouth to cock-level. I swallow, then flick my tongue around the head.

"I'm almost there," he admits.

"Yeah?" I tip my gaze up, but keep my mouth on him, lightly scraping my teeth over his dick.

A soft groan escapes his lips.

I release him with a chuckle. "Didn't we have a whole convo about stamina last night?"

"That was before I spent twenty minutes fingering your ass."

I shiver at the memory. Jesus, I'm getting hard again. It's like I can't get enough of this guy.

"Turned you on, huh?" I drawl.

"Oh yeah." He nudges his cockhead forward, and I open my mouth, letting him slide inside.

My hands drift around his body to cup his ass. I squeeze and he groans again, pushing in a bit deeper. With my hands occupied, it's hard to control how much of him I take, but he's not a jerk about it. He doesn't plunge deep and force any deep-throat action on me. He seems to sense my limits, the same way he senses shit on the ice—when to pass the puck, when to take his time until that perfect opening reveals itself so he can slap one in.

He fucks my mouth in fast, shallow strokes that match his fast, shallow breathing. I taste his pre-come on my tongue. It's a heady flavor that makes

me wonder how it would feel flooding my mouth, sliding down my throat. Never in a million years did I think I'd be contemplating that. Or that I'd be kneading another man's ass cheeks, urging him to orgasm while I clamp my lips around his dick.

"Coming," he warns.

I stick with him until the end this time. The first hot spurt hits my tongue, the second goes to the back of my throat, triggering my gag reflex. I breathe through my nose and swallow, my heart pounding as my best friend gasps through the orgasm.

That wasn't...bad. The taste of him is strangely appealing.

I indulge in one more lick before allowing him to pull out. He collapses beside me, his head resting on my shoulder. We both release a sated sigh, then laugh.

Silence stretches between us, but it's not an awkward one. We're both relaxed. My mind drifts in a post-sex haze, where thinking is overrated.

"We should probably head to the dining hall before dinner ends," Wes says. "Don't want to miss the big show."

Right. The song. Someone—ahem, Wes—had decided the coaches should serenade the kids with some good ol' Britney Spears. Pat had griped and complained, claiming he didn't know the words to any of her songs. Wes, of course, had promptly whipped out his phone and emailed the older coaches the lyrics to Britney's entire catalogue. Very resourceful, my best friend.

I'm too relaxed to move, though. "Five more minutes," I tell him, wrapping my arm around his shoulders to prevent him from getting up.

His cheek nuzzles my left pec. "You're a cuddle whore, huh?"

I am. Absolutely. Just never dreamed I'd be cuddling with another *guy*.

"I watched porn earlier," I blurt out.

He snickers. "Yeah, I figured. You had that guilty, I-just-tugged-one-out look when I walked in."

I pause. “Gay porn.”

He tilts his head up to look at me, his gray eyes twinkling playfully.

“Uh-huh. I see. Did you enjoy it?”

Another pause. Then I puff out a breath. “Yeah.”

Wes lowers his head again, rubbing a soothing hand over my stomach.

“Freaked you out, huh?”

“Well...” It’s not easy to explain. “I’m a little freaked out about not being freaked out. If that makes sense.”

We go silent again. I can tell he’s absorbing what I just told him.

“Can I ask you something?” I murmur.

“Hit me.” His breath tickles my nipple, and it hardens. Instantly.

“Have you ever...” I’m not sure how to phrase it. “Bottomed? Is that the right word?”

His shoulders tremble as if he’s trying not to laugh. “As good a word as any. ‘Been fucked’ also works. ‘Taken it up the ass’, also a goodie.”

“Okay. Well?”

He shifts a bit. “Yeah. I have. Once.”

“Just once?” I guess I’m not surprised. Wes has “top” written all over him. “Did you like it?”

He considers it. “Not at the beginning. And definitely not at the end. But it was pretty good in the middle.”

Classic Wes answer. I burst out laughing, my palm sliding over his bare arm before I give his biceps a pinch. “Um...what happened at the beginning and end?”

“The beginning, it hurt.” His tone is rueful. “But that’s probably ’cause we were both eighteen-year-old morons and neither one of us thought to bring lube.”

Eighteen. For some reason that makes me bristle. I wonder if it was before or after our last night at camp. Before, I’d be okay with. But after...

Not sure why, but the thought of Wes cutting me out of his life and then going off to lose his virginity to some dude pisses me off.

“Spit’ll only get you so far,” he’s saying, oblivious to my turbulent thoughts. “So it took a while for him to...yeah.”

I force a casual tone. “But then it got good?”

He pauses again. Then nods, his chin bumping my shoulder. “Yeah, it got good.”

A hot rush travels up my spine. I’m stunned to realize it’s jealousy.

“And at the end?” I prompt, in the hopes that hearing how the sex got sucky again will ease the tightness in my chest.

Wes sighs. “He wasn’t anyone I need to see again. He got off on making it degrading for me. Kind of soured me on the whole experience.”

I stroke the top of his head. I can tell he feels awkward talking about it, but I appreciate that he told me. It’s rare for Wes to shed his fuck-the-world attitude and let himself be vulnerable.

“So that was it? You didn’t let anyone else...uh...stick their flag in there after that?”

He chokes out a laugh. “Nope. I decided I’d leave the flag-sticking to me.”

I chuckle, stroking his hair again. It’s silky-soft beneath my palm, a contrast to the stubble scraping my shoulder.

“I...” He clears his throat. “I’d let you do it, though.”

My hand freezes in his hair. “You would?”

Wes nods. “I’d let you do anything to me, Canning.”

When his voice cracks, something inside of me does, too. I have no clue what’s going on here or what we are to each other.

Friends. We’re friends. Except that doesn’t feel like the right label.

Friends with benefits? Doesn’t feel right, either.

I must have stayed silent for way too long, because Wes suddenly sits up, the warmth of his body abandoning me. “Come on,” he says gruffly.

“We should get going.”

Wes

Our coaching schedule picks right back up again the next morning, and I hit the ice ready to coach the hell out of these kids. I had a rough start last week, letting their hot-headedness and inability to follow my instructions get to me, but I'm determined to take a page out of Jamie's book and exercise some patience.

Don't get me wrong, I know how to be patient—when I'm *playing*. But watching other guys play? Seeing the mistakes they're making and then watching them make them all over again instead of correcting them based on my advice? It's maddening.

The kids are listening better today, though. I'm running some basic passing drills with my forwards, switching up the lines every so often to let them get a feel for their teammates' style and technique. For the most part, it's going okay, but one kid—Davies—hogs the puck no matter what line he's playing on.

I blow my whistle, tempted to rip my hair out by the roots. Davies has just ignored my instructions *again*, snapping a weak wrist shot at Killfeather instead of passing back to Shen like he was supposed to.

I call him over, and he skates up to me, red-faced and surly.

From the corner of my eye, I see Jamie watching us carefully, as if he's assessing my coaching prowess. Pat's watching too, from the bench, and I'm gratified to see he's finally quit scowling at me. Last night Canning and I had shown up too late at the dining hall to catch the live performance, but luckily, Georgie filmed it on his iPhone. And trust me, I'm never going to forget the sight of Pat and his four coaches shuffling around and singing the most off-key rendition of "Oops, I Did It Again."

I don't think Pat will forget it, either. Or stop hating me for choosing the stakes of that soccer game.

Focusing on Davies, I cross my arms over the front of my Northern Mass hoodie and ask, "What kind of drill are we running?"

"Um...?"

"Passing," I clarify.

He nods. "Right."

"Which means you need to *pass* the puck, kid."

"But last practice you gave us that whole speech about not hesitating. You said if you have a shot, you take it." His chin juts out defensively. "I had a shot."

I mock gasp. "Wait—the puck made it past Killfeather? I must've missed that goal."

His expression goes sheepish now. "Well, naw, I missed, but..."

"But you *wanted* to score. I get it." I offer a gentle smile. "Look, I'm with you, kid. There's no sweeter feeling in the world than watching that lamp light up. But lemme ask you something—how many forwards are usually on the ice?"

"Three..."

"Three," I confirm. "You're not playing alone out there. You've got your teammates with you, and it's not so they can skate there and look pretty."

He cracks a smile.

“Shen had a shot. If you’d passed to him, he would’ve one-timed that baby right in, top left corner. And you would’ve gotten the assist. Instead, you got nothing.”

Davies nods slowly, and a burst of pride goes off inside me. Holy fuck, I’m reaching him. I can see him absorbing the words—*my* words—and suddenly I understand why Canning has such a hard-on for this coaching thing. It’s...rewarding.

“You need to trust your teammates,” I tell Davies.

But for some reason, that wipes the smile off his face, a dark scowl taking its place.

“What is it?” I ask.

He mumbles something I can’t make out.

“Can’t hear you, kid.”

He meets my eyes. “It’s kinda hard to trust them when I know they want me to fail.”

“That’s not true.” Except even as I voice the protest, I know on some level he’s right. Some players do have the tendency to be cutthroat, to only look out for themselves. It suddenly makes sense why Davies is always looking to be the star—because he thinks that’s what everyone else is doing.

“It *is* true.” His gaze strays toward the net, where Jamie is talking to Killfeather. “Especially with Mark. He fuc—frickin’,” he corrects. “He frickin’ loves watching me screw up. And then he lists everything I did wrong the next day at breakfast, or dinner, or when I’m trying to fall asleep. He’s all about the mind games.”

I stifle a sigh. “You’re roommates, right?”

“Unfortunately,” he mutters.

“You guys ever hang out outside of practice? Talk about something other than hockey?”

“Not really,” he says with a shrug. “I mean, he talks about his dad sometimes. I don’t think they get along. But that’s pretty much it.”

“You want my advice?”

His expression is earnest as he nods again.

“Try getting to know him. Develop some trust off the ice.” I jerk my head toward Jamie. “The first day I faced off against Jamie—uh, Coach Canning, I mean—I was a total a-hole. Cocky, full of myself. I taunted him every time I took a shot at goal, did a little victory dance every time I scored. I swear, he wanted to murder me by the time practice was over. He told Coach Pat he hated my guts and suggested they send me back to whatever jackass planet I came from.”

Davies snickers. “But you guys are bros now.”

“Yup. And we were roommates back then, too. We were in our room after that first practice and he just sat there glaring at me for a good hour.”

“So what’d you do?” Davies asks curiously.

“I suggested we play a game of ‘I Never’. Took a while to convince him—he was still pretty annoyed with me—but I wore him down eventually.”

I smile at the memory. We’d passed around some cans of Red Bull I’d stolen from one of the coaches and gotten to know each other by saying the craziest things. *I never pissed my pants at a Bruins game. I never mooned a bus full of nuns during a school trip to a gum factory.* Those were mine, of course.

Jamie’s had been more serious—*I’m not an only child. I don’t want to play for the pros one day.* Yeah, he hadn’t quite mastered the “never” part of the game, but I hadn’t minded. My thirteen-year-old self was having too much fun getting hopped up on sugar and caffeine. We stayed awake until four a.m. and could barely get up the next morning.

“After that, we were inseparable,” I say with a chuckle.

Davies chews on his lip. “But Coach Canning is cool. Mark is...kind of a dick.”

I swallow a laugh. “You never know, he might end up being the coolest guy you’ve ever met.”

“I don’t know...”

I give him a good-natured slap on the shoulder. “Just give him a chance. Or don’t. Do with that advice what you will.” Then I snap into Coach Wesley mode, blowing my whistle loud enough to make him jump. “Now get back out there and share the wealth, kid. Hog the puck one more time and I’ll bench you for the rest of the practice.”

The week goes fast.

When Jamie and I were teenagers, everything took forever. A summer was a lifetime. But I’m already two weeks into my six-week stay in Lake Placid, and I can’t figure out where the time went.

After dinner with the kids on Friday night, Jamie and I have dorm duty. That just means counting heads and yelling “lights out” when ten o’clock comes. Then yelling it again when they fail to follow through.

By eleven it’s totally quiet. Jamie is lying on his bed texting someone. And I don’t like it. Not at all. So I climb onto his body, straddling his ass, my chest to his shoulders. “Hi.”

“Hi,” he says without looking up.

I drop my nose into his hair and take a deep breath of him. He smells like summertime, and I can’t get enough.

“Dude, are you sniffing my head?”

“Just checking to see if you were paying attention.”

“Mhm,” he says, tapping away on his phone.

I settle in a little further, my dick waking up to the fact that I’m *this* close to Jamie’s ass. Funny how he thinks it’s weird when I sniff his hair, but he’s perfectly fine that I’m about two seconds from dry humping his backside.

Times they are a changin’.

We've been going at it every night like puck bunnies in heat this week. Pinch me. It's like a blowjob relay race around here. And we've gotten really good at passing the *baton*.

But my favorite thing is just to make out while we rub off. Kissing Jamie Canning is mind-blowing. I'm greedy for it, because I know in my gut it won't last. The summer ends for me in four weeks, and Jamie's interest in me may be even shorter. So I'll take all I can get.

It's one hundred percent honest to say I've never been happier. But of course I can't say it aloud.

Trouble is, it's harder every day to express any of the fuck-it-all attitude I'm famous for. And I'm *not* going to look over his shoulder and read the text. That would be an asshole thing to do, right?

I look. The screen says HOLLY.

The next instant I feel a fucking tsunami of jealousy. "You want to go to a movie?" Except I don't want to go to a movie, and they've probably started already. "What's at the theater this week, anyway?" I ask. As if I care. I'd rather get naked and make out.

"A chick flick and a kids' movie," he says. "I checked."

"Bummer. Blowjobs, then?"

He snickers. But he's still holding that goddamned phone. I'm not saying a word, though.

Right.

"Whatcha doing?"

"Texting Holly."

I can't help it—even the sound of her name on his lips tenses me up. The first and only time I met the girl, she had sex-tousled hair and a dreamy smile on her face. It bothers me that Jamie was responsible for both of those things.

"What's she up to?" I try to sound casual.

I fail, because he turns his head to roll his eyes at me. “Is that your way of asking if we’re sexting?”

I shrug.

Jamie starts tapping on the phone again. “We’re not sexting. We don’t do that anymore, by the way. And tonight she’s stuck babysitting her little cousins on Cape Cod. They keep watching the same movie over and over again, and she’s about to quit the family and join a traveling circus.” He turns to smile at me. “I suggested fire eating, but she thinks trapeze would be fun.” He stops talking, those brown eyes holding a hint of amusement. I think he’s this close to calling me on my dickish behavior.

Then he doesn’t. Fucking Jamie. Always so easygoing. Some days I’d give up a limb to be more like that. But not a leg, because I need those for skating. And not my arms... God, I’m stuck inside my head tonight.

Do I need a blowjob or what?

Jamie reads the screen again and chuckles, and I want to grab the phone and bash it against the wall. The only thing holding me back is the fact that Cape Cod is like five hours away from here. Maybe six.

So I start kissing his neck instead. That’s something Holly can’t do.

After a while, it works. He sets the phone down and drops his head onto the pillow. “You feel good up there.”

“Yeah?” I thrust my hips downward and feel him pushing back at me.

I slip a hand under his T-shirt, stroking his side. Then I work the shirt upward and kiss his back, and he flattens under my touch, his body lazily shifting on the bed.

“Want you,” I whisper. Lately, those two words define me.

“Have me,” he says.

My heart stutters in my chest, and my dick hardens into the approximate texture of an iron bar. Does he even mean it the way it sounds? We haven’t talked about fucking since the one time. I want him so badly, but only if he wants it.

Only one way to find out.

I climb off him and yank his shorts down. And his briefs. His ass is perfect—strong and round, with a tan line cutting across at his waist. I kiss the tan line, because I have to.

“Mmm,” he agrees, his eyes shut. I watch as he pushes his hips into the bed. Like me, Jamie has two speeds: horny and asleep.

I yank off my shirt and then my shorts. The more of my skin that touches his, the happier I am.

Then? His phone rings.

I swear to God, if that’s Holly...

Since I’m lying on his body, I swallow my annoyance and ask if he wants me to get it.

“Just check the number,” he says lazily. “It’s probably nothing.”

But Jamie’s phone doesn’t usually ring at this hour, so I look. It’s not Holly. The display says KILLFEATHER.

“Um... It’s a camper.”

He lifts his head up quickly. “Really?”

I hand over the phone, and he answers.

“Hello?” He frowns. “Where are you? Where?” Another pause. “I’ll be right there.” He ends the call.

“What’s the matter with your goalie?”

Jamie scowls, and I can’t help noticing even his grumpy face is hot. “That was Shen using Killfeather’s phone. Apparently my goalie is drunk with two of your forwards. They’re not far away, but Killfeather won’t come home, and they didn’t know what to do.”

I reach for my shirt. “Let’s go. Where are they?”

“Behind the high school.”

“That’s original. When I got you drunk, it was on the roof of the Hampton Inn.”

Jamie laughs, tugging his clothes into place. “They can’t all be Ryan Wesley. The town would have to double the size of its police force.”

By silent mutual agreement, we leave the dormitory like thieves in the night. If it’s necessary to call in reinforcements, I’m sure Jamie will do it. But sometimes it’s just better to handle things quietly.

Once outside, we book it toward the high school. There’s a fence around the place, but Jamie points to a two-foot gap. When I squeeze through ahead of him, he puts a warm hand on my back, and I shiver slightly.

I’m so gone for him. I hope he can’t tell.

We find our charges sitting on their asses in the gravel under a sign that says “The Blue Bombers”. It’s fitting, because these kids are bombed. Especially Killfeather.

Jamie crouches down to talk to them. “What seems to be the trouble here?”

“We’re, like, drunk,” Davies says. “Annnnd Killfeather won’t go home. But we can’t leave ’im here.”

“I see.” Jamie somehow keeps a straight face. “Why won’t you go home?” he asks his goalie.

“Just...sick of it all,” Killfeather slurs, his head knocking back against the brick wall. “Tomorrow we gotta just do it all over again.”

“I see,” Jamie says again. “How much did you all drink?”

Shen makes a face. “A six-pack.”

Wait, what? “Each?” I ask sharply.

Killfeather shakes his head. “No.” He pushes a six of longnecks into the light. The bottles are empty, of course.

“What else?” I demand.

Looking sheepish, Davies pulls an empty liter bottle of some local beer out from the shadows. Jamie takes it and reads the label. “Okay. Anything else?”

Three heads shake.

“Where’d you get it?” Jamie asks.

“Paid a guy.”

Jamie tips his chin up to look at me, and I can see him struggling not to laugh. That’s how we got our beer at that age, too. “Sidebar,” he says, standing and beckoning to me.

I walk around the corner of the building with him. We’re only a few yards away, so he puts his lips right to my ear. “Seriously? They got wasted on less than three beers each?”

Turning to whisper my answer, my chest brushes his shoulder. I let my lips brush his jaw before I speak. “They have zero tolerance and a really fast metabolism. Weren’t we the same?”

Jamie chuckles and his breath tickles my ear. “So no hospital.”

“Nah,” I say quickly. “Nobody ever died from two and a half beers. Let’s march ’em around, sober ’em up and then put ’em to bed.”

“Sounds like a plan.” Jamie stalks back around the corner. “Okay, ladies. Let’s go. We’re going to make a deal. You three go for a little walk with us, and we’ll take you home without turning you in to the authorities.”

“Like, the police?” Shen slurs.

“Naw, he means Pat,” I clarify.

Shen struggles to his feet. “Okay. Lesh go.” Davies rises, too.

That leaves Killfeather still sitting there. Not budging.

Jamie leans over, offering a hand. “Come on now. You have practice in the morning.”

“Won’t be good enough,” Killfeather mumbles.

“You’ll be a little hung over,” Jamie admits. “But that’s never killed anyone.”

Killfeather gives an adamant shake of the head. “Won’t be good enough for my father. Never will be. Nothing is.”

Ah. I could have written that speech myself. “Don’t play hockey for your dad, dude. You have to play for yourself.” I try putting a hand out, too.

This time he takes it. I haul him to his feet, which mostly works. He has to steady himself against the wall for a second, but then he's vertical on his own power. "Seriously. Fuck 'im. It's your life."

Killfeather's head dangles a little in the classic drunken pose. "He needs to chill out."

"But some never do," I tell him. The truth hurts, but he should understand this as soon as he can. "And you still have to live your life. If you don't, then he wins. What a waste, right?"

The young goalie nods with his whole body, like a horse. But he's listening to me.

"Let's go, then."

"Where are you taking us?" Davies asks.

"We're going to have a little history lesson," Jamie replies. "You chose to imbibe about fifty yards away from a legendary spot." He leads the kids across Cummings Road, and I manage not to make a crack about it. They shuffle along behind him until we're standing in a dusty parking area behind the Olympic stadium. "Okay, what's famous about this place?"

"Um," Shen says. "The arena. Where the U.S. beat Russia to win the gold in 1980."

"Ah," Jamie says, raising a finger in the air. "The U.S. did beat the impressive Russian team four to three, with a team of twenty college students. But the gold medal game was two days later, against Sweden. Four to two. But that's not why we're here."

"It isn't?"

Jamie shakes his head. "See that hill?" He points over his shoulder, and we all look up.

"I see another parking lot," Killfeather mutters.

With a closed fist, Jamie cuffs him gently under the chin. "That's not just any parking lot, and it's not just any hill. Herb Brooks was the coach of

the U.S. team. That's why the building is named after him now. He put his guys in all their pads and ran 'em up and down that hill."

"Sounds like a party." Davies sighs.

"We're going to find out." Jamie rubs his hands together. "On a count of three, everyone runs up there. We'll go together. You too, Wesley."

"I'm not running," Shen complains. "Too drunk."

"Uh-huh," I say, gripping his shoulder. "Shoulda thought about that earlier. Let's go." I clap my hands.

"One, two, three!" Jamie takes off across the gravel. There's a grassy bit where the hill begins, and he reaches it quickly.

I hang back to make sure the boys follow him. And they do, at a sluggish pace. That's fine, because we really don't need any injuries. The moon is up, though. It's not all that dark, and there are floodlights at the top of the hill.

We're all breathing hard within minutes. The hill is a real bitch, and I'm glad I'm not wearing my pads. The kids make it up to the top eventually, grumbling all the way. Then the five of us are panting in the parking lot, hands on hips, wishing we had water.

"I don't feel so good," Shen mumbles.

"In the bushes if you're going to yarf," I say quickly. This parking lot belongs to a golf club. We're already trespassing.

He lurches off, just making it to a boxwood before there are sounds of retching.

"We'll walk 'em down slowly," Jamie says, stroking his chin. "And buy some water."

"And Advil. I have some in our room."

"Of course you do."

I have to bite back a smile. Another silly, ridiculous night in Lake Placid with Jamie. I hope the next four weeks go slowly.

On our way down, I have a little chat with Davies. “So... Why’d you guys have to go and get drunk? You could get kicked out of camp.”

He sticks out his chin. “You told me to.”

“Say what?”

“You said to spend some time with them off the ice. I did that.”

I give this some thought. “Okay. It’s my job to tell you to quit breaking the rules. But I hear where you’re coming from. And I like that you called Coach Canning when Killfeather wouldn’t go home.”

“I wouldn’t just *leave* him there.”

He gets a friendly slap on the back for that. “Good man. Stay out of trouble and we can keep these shenanigans private, okay?”

“Okay.”

We walk back to the dormitory through the fresh summer air while the moon rises higher over the lake. I can’t wait to get home.

Wes

Forty minutes later I have Jamie's dick in my mouth and I'm stroking his prostate like a champion. He's writhing and begging. "Give me more," he pants. "Give me the D. You know you want to."

I release him with a pop, and practically swallow my own tongue. The casual way he's asked me to fuck just blows my mind. "I don't know," I stammer.

He opens one heated eye and looks at me. "Christ. Sometimes it feels like you've got your whole arm up there, anyway. How is it so different?"

Because it just is.

Don't get me wrong—I want inside that fine ass of his more than I want my next breath. But I'm also afraid. It's not a familiar sensation. I never used to care about the consequences of my actions. But if we do this, I won't just be fucking Jamie. It will *mean* something to me. And chances are, it won't to him.

For him, it'll be another little experiment he can take with him before he goes off and settles down with some girl.

He's watching me now, waiting for me to decide. And while he waits he's gently jacking himself and staring into my eyes.

Holy shit, I'm going to do it.

I'm going to fuck the only man I've ever loved.

I can hardly breathe as I reach for the lube. Then I realize I need a condom too, so I climb off the bed in search of my duffel bag. I stashed a whole box of them in there, though I'm not entirely sure why. When I took the job at camp, it was for the sole purpose of spending time with Jamie, not to go on some kind of sex spree with the gay locals.

I never thought I'd be opening this box. With Jamie. *For* Jamie.

"Are you *sure*?" I ask thickly.

He nods. Those brown eyes burn with hunger. They shine with trust. I memorize that expression, the way he looks lying there at my mercy, big and hard and rippling with masculine power.

I take my time with him, more generous than usual with the lube. Fuck, I don't want to hurt him, and I absolutely don't want him to hate this. I can't help but remember my first time, how cheap it made me feel, being used by a guy who didn't give a shit whether I enjoyed myself or not.

I want this to be so good for Jamie.

"One finger won't be enough this time." My voice is so gravelly it stings my throat. "You'll need to get used to more before I...uh..."

He sounds as raspy-voiced as I do. "You'll stop if I don't like it?"

My heart squeezes. "Of course." I lean over him and plant a reassuring kiss on his lips, then wink at him. "Just say *ballsack* if you want me to stop."

A wave of laughter shudders through him. "Oh shit. I totally forgot about that."

I laugh too as I think about the ridiculous code word we made up when we were fourteen. I'm not sure who came up with it—who am I kidding? It was obviously me—but we'd used it during our wrestling phase. We decided MMA was the *coolest* shit ever and spent hours in the gym

practicing our “moves.” Except half the time when one of us tapped out, the other wouldn’t notice, so we devised a safe word.

I don’t think I’ll ever forget the day Pat walked into the gym and found us—me, flat on my stomach with Jamie’s knee digging into the back of my neck, while I yelled “Ballsack!” over and over again.

“Ready to come harder than you’ve ever come in your life?” I ask solemnly, lifting one of his knees up.

He smiles. “You sure you want to put that much pressure on yourself, dude?”

“No pressure. Just fact. Science has proven it.”

Now he snickers, but the sound dies when the tip of my finger circles his hole. His ass cheeks instantly clench. Not in fear, but anticipation. I see it in his eyes, a raw gleam of heat, before he lifts up his other knee and all but puts himself on display for me.

Jesus. Nope, not gonna survive this.

I tease and caress for several long moments before slipping my finger inside. My other hand grips his erection. I’m selfish, but I don’t want him to come until I’m buried inside him, so I don’t take him in my mouth or jerk him as hard as I know he wants. Slow, featherlight strokes are all he gets as I work my finger into his tight hole.

When a second finger joins the party, his brows draw together. Beads of sweat break out on his forehead. Mine, too. Loosening him up is one of the hottest things I’ve ever done. It takes all my concentration. Stroking, teasing, twisting, getting him ready for me.

At three fingers, he moans loud enough to wake the dead, and I release his erection to press my palm to his mouth. “Quiet, baby.”

“Wes...” He’s squirming now, pushing his ass against my probing fingers. Every time I connect with his prostate, he pants out a breath. “I need more.”

He's beautiful. Goddamn beautiful. And I'm so hard it hurts. My heartbeat takes off like it's on a breakaway as I tear open the condom packet with my teeth. I cover myself with one hand, then pour lube on the condom to get the latex even slicker. My fingers continue to torment Jamie's ass.

"You ready for it?" I rasp.

His lips part on a shaky breath. He nods.

Gripping my shaft, I position myself between his big thighs. My breathing is equally unsteady. Hell, my hand is trembling around my cock as if I've never done this before. But I *haven't* done this. Not with someone I love.

The head of my cock nudges his hole. He tenses again, clenching to deny me entrance.

I find his erection and stroke my fist up its length. "Breathe," I whisper. "Relax for me."

His throat dips. Then he lets out another breath.

I push forward again, and this time I'm able to ease in. Just the tip, but holy hell, the pressure is incredible. He's hot and tight, squeezing me into oblivion.

"Ohfuckohfuckohfuck." It's all he seems capable of saying as my cock tunnels deeper. Jamie's cheeks are flushed, his eyes glassy.

If I last more than five strokes, it'll be a miracle. Then again, we *are* in Lake Placid, which just happens to be Miracle Central.

His erection pulsates in my fist, but I don't stroke it. Not yet. Not until he begs me to. "Jamie...you doing good?"

He moans in response.

I'm all the way in now, and my dick is in heaven. *I'm* in heaven. I lean forward and cover his torso with mine, my elbows on either side of his head as I bend down to kiss him. Then I start to move.

"Oh... God..." He whispers the words into my lips and I swallow them up with another tongue-tangling kiss.

I fuck him slowly, letting him get used to the sensation, but Jamie Canning is a master at adapting. It's him who wraps his arms around me, who hooks his legs around my ass. It's him who starts rocking up to meet my every thrust, and him who says, "*Faster, Wes*" as I desperately try to go slow.

"Don't wanna hurt you," I mumble.

"Wanna come," he mumbles back.

I smile when he snakes one hand between the tight seal of our bodies, trying to find his cock. He's burning up, his face and chest flushed with desire. When he bears down on my ass and groans in frustration, I take pity on my man and rise to my knees again, yanking his hips to pull him closer.

The new angle makes him curse. His fingers seek out his erection, but I gently bat them away. "My job, baby. *I* make you come."

I withdraw until just my cockhead remains inside him. Our gazes lock. His breathing quickens.

Then I jack his dick in a long, hard pump at the same time I slam back in.

I have to give him credit—he manages to stay quiet this time. He bites his lip to keep from groaning, his gorgeous features strained. He's close. I can see it in his eyes, feel it in the urgency with which he grinds his ass against my groin.

I'm covered in sweat. My own release is imminent and I want so badly to prolong it, but that's like passing the puck to Gretzky and asking him not to take a shot. There's no stopping the orgasm. It sizzles in my balls and ripples through my shaft, and I come while still jacking Jamie's cock.

My world is reduced to the man beneath me. I nearly act out a scene right out of a chick flick and shout "I love you!" while I shudder in release. But I fight the temptation and focus on getting Jamie where he needs to go. My dick remains rock-hard despite the mind-blowing climax. I keep fucking him, keep thrusting forward as my hand works his erection.

“Oh...yessss...”

Sheer bliss rolls through me when his release soaks my fingertips. He comes on a strangled cry. And keeps coming. And then comes some more.

I guess nobody can say he didn't enjoy himself.

When he finally goes still, I collapse on his sticky chest and growl in his ear. “That was the hottest thing I've ever seen.”

He clings to me, his big palms pressed to my damp back.

We lie that way a long time. I'm just drifting on my own happiness. I lead a big life, and it's a hell of a ride. But there aren't many moments like this. I want to bottle it and carry it everywhere I go.

Finally Jamie speaks. “Do you think anyone's still sick?”

“Wha?” There are only two people who exist to me right now, so I have no idea what he's asking.

“I was just hoping they got it all out on the way home.”

He's talking about the drunk teens who took half a fucking hour to walk home tonight. We had to keep stopping while they upchucked. “They're fine,” I murmur. I kiss Jamie's sweaty neck, and he tastes like heaven.

“Should we clean up?” he asks.

I can't hold on to this moment any longer. It won't stretch and stay with me no matter how badly I want it to. “Yeah. You want to go first?”

“You go ahead.”

I take my sticky self into the bathroom for a sixty-second shower. When I get back to the room, Jamie departs for his own shower. I stare at my bed, cursing its size. The twin beds are built into the wall, so the only times I've pushed them together have been in my imagination.

Sometimes we fall asleep together, but it's a really tight fit. I have an idea, though. Actually I've thought of this before, but I'm too chicken to bring it up. Fuck it, though. The summer is half over.

In for a penny, in for a pound.

My mattress slides off the wooden frame when I give it a tug. I drop it on the floor beside my bed. There's just enough room left for Jamie to do the same.

Standing there staring down at my mattress, I feel exposed in a way I haven't ever felt before. Jamie and I fool around, but we don't talk about it. I don't ask him for anything except orgasms.

It has to be that way. I'm heading to Toronto in a month, where I've vowed to keep my head down and play the best hockey those fuckers have ever seen. My rookie year is going to be spotless—no scandals, no shenanigans.

It's shocking, but my dad and I are actually in agreement about something for once in our sorry excuse of a relationship: flashing my sexuality around is not a good idea right now.

Which is why it terrifies me that I'm becoming so attached to Canning. *Says the guy who's already stupidly, disgustingly in love with him...*

I am, and always have been. I love everything about him. His quiet strength, his dry humor, his carefree approach to life that contrasts with his controlled manner on the ice. That sexy-as-sin body...

I've made sure to keep my feelings for him under wraps, though. He thinks we're just messing around. Good-time Wes just having some fun. But I've changed the game for myself tonight. And if I let him know how much I want him beside me in bed, that's changing it for him, too...

Which is why I'm just standing here in my underwear, arguing with myself about whether or not I should have thrown a mattress on the floor.

The door opens behind me, and I'm so busted.

Jamie towels off his hair. He looks down at the mattress. "Never thought of that," he says. The towel lands on our unused desk chair, and then he yanks his mattress down, too.

My face heats as I go to switch off the light. It's hard to move around the room with the floor space eaten up with mattresses.

Jamie gets into bed on his side, and I lie down too. I wrap an arm around his waist and stroke his bare belly with my hand. "You okay?" I murmur. As if I've changed our sleeping arrangement to comfort him.

As if.

"I'm going to be sore, aren't I?" he asks.

I hesitate. "Maybe a little. Sorry."

He picks up my hand and kisses the palm. "Totally worth it."

Now I'm grinning in the dark. I hold him as close as I dare. Even if my entire life goes to shit before breakfast tomorrow, I'll always have this night.

Jamie

The kids aren't nearly as hung over as they should be. I'd forgotten how the teenage body can bounce back from anything. All the day's drills are over already, and nobody even looks green.

Now the teens are scrimmaging on the practice rink, and Killfeather is kicking some serious ass. Every time he makes a save I feel like I did something good. This kid is going to be *great* someday. He's scholarship material, and I hope the father Killfeather complains about can appreciate it.

The young forwards Wes has been coaching are finally pulling it together. They've taken quite a few shots on goal already. And Wes is reffing the game. Even the lazy backward circles he skates are fluid and powerful. There's so much talent in this room right now I can hardly believe it. This is why I've made the 2,500-mile trek every year. For this.

There's another attack on the net. Shen makes a tape-to-tape pass to Davies, who doesn't hesitate. He fires it into the goal before Killfeather can stop him.

A small whoop of victory rises up from the scoring team. "Smoked you, Killfeather!" Davies yells. "You're a sieve, sucka!"

Oh, fuck. Here we go. I watch Killfeather push his mask up. Then he takes his water bottle off the top of the net and pours some into his mouth. I'm half expecting him to spit it into Davies' face, because my boy's face is red. I brace for disaster.

Killfeather tosses the bottle onto the net. Then he locks eyes with me.

Please don't blow like a land mine, I silently beg him.

My goalie actually gives me a small smile before he speaks. "Yeah, Davies. You owned me. Only took you two dozen tries, you big bad thing." He yanks his mask down over his face and picks up his stick.

Wes is grinning when he skates over to retrieve the puck. "Good attitude today, kid," he tells Killfeather.

The teenager looks a little smug when he tosses the puck into Wes's hand.

I'm so engrossed in this little drama I don't notice heads are swiveling to look at someone who's appeared behind the penalty box. "Jamie! Over here!"

I turn around to find Holly standing there, waving her arms. "Holly," I say stupidly. "What are you doing here?"

She rolls her eyes, her hands on the hips of a tiny pair of jean shorts. "That's a heck of a greeting, Canning. You can do a little better than that."

"Holy crap," Killfeather blurts out. "Coach Canning's girlfriend has a great rack."

"Shut it," I mutter, glaring at him.

More than a dozen teenage boys are now eye-fucking Holly in her teeny shorts and skimpy top. My neck is hot all of a sudden. And that's *before* I glance at Wes.

He skates up, a twisted little smile on his lips. "You're having a visitor, Canning?"

"Um." I've lost the ability to speak, because I'm busy sifting through all the uncomfortable conversations coming my way. "Holly, this is my friend

Wes.”

“I remember you from the hotel,” she says with a wink.

Wes keeps his own smile waxed on, and you’d have to know him as well as I do to see the sneer beneath it. Yikes. “Looks like you should quit early, Coach. Take your girl out for drinks. Catch up a little.”

“That would be awesome,” Holly says. “I stopped at the dormitory first, and Coach Pat said I could probably shake Jamie free.”

“Yeah, okay,” I say slowly. “Let’s head out.”

“You kids have fun,” Wes drawls. Then he turns his back on me and blows his whistle. “Let’s go, ladies! Enough standing around.”

That’s how I find myself removing my skates and exiting the rink an hour early with Holly.

“God, you look good!” She stops on the steps of the building to hit me with another blinding smile, then stands up on her tiptoes and... kisses me. Her mouth is smaller and softer than I expect it to be. Confusion must be written all over my face, because she says, “Sorry to surprise you, but I thought it would be fun.”

“It’s... Wow,” I stammer. “How did you get here?”

“Well, when I threatened to take up trapeze, my uncle lent me his car. Thought I’d get away for the night.”

I do the math. It’s got to be a five-hour drive from Cape Cod. “Wow,” I say again. Apparently “wow” is now three quarters of my vocabulary.

“Jamie,” she says, staring up at me. “Stop freaking out.”

“What?”

She tilts her head to the side, and those familiar blue eyes study me. “You’re panicking. Why?”

“Um...” I can’t tell her. But I can’t *not* tell her. Because Holly is almost certainly planning to stay with me tonight. In fact, last summer I told her she could visit and I’d make it work, but she hadn’t been able to swing it then.

Fuck.

“Honey.” She reaches up to cup the side of my neck. “Is there someone else?”

My heart spasms, because there is someone else. Sort of. Wes and I aren’t a couple, exactly. We’ve never had one word of conversation about it. But there’s no way I’m sleeping with someone else right now—that just wouldn’t be right.

“There is,” I admit.

Her eyes widen. She’d asked the question, but she still seems pretty shocked by my answer. “Who is she?”

I shake my head. “You don’t know her. I’m sorry,” I say quickly.

She takes her hand off me and steps backward. “Okay.” She bites her lip. “I should have called.”

“I’m sorry,” I repeat.

And I am. Holly has only been good to me. But after graduation, we’d had a little talk. She’d said, “I want to see you when you’re in Detroit,” and I’d said, “That’s probably not going to work.”

She’d said, “We’ll see.” And now here she is, her face turning red.

“Look,” I tell her. “Let’s go have ice cream. Or tequila, if you prefer. I want to catch up with you.”

“We’re still friends,” she says softly.

“Always.”

Her eyes wander away from me and over toward the lake. She takes a slow breath and lets it out again. “Okay, Jamie Canning. Show me Lake Placid. You always talk about how much you love it here.” Her gaze returns to mine. “Show me why.”

For a moment, my mind goes straight into the gutter, because Lake Placid means something a little different to me this summer than it ever has before. But I clobber that thought and hold out a hand for her. “How do you feel about waffle cones?”

She closes her fingers around mine. “I feel pretty good about waffle cones.”

We spend the afternoon together walking all over town. Holly likes to poke around in the little touristy shops, and this gets old pretty fast. But since I’ve ruined her day once already, I just go along with it. I show her the toy store with the awesome rubber band guns, and she buys one for her brother. They have targets set up inside the store, so we stand there for a long time trying to outshoot each other.

A few doors down there’s another kitschy shop, and I hold back my sigh when she leads me inside. She stops to look at a bunch of Miracle on Ice coffee mugs, while I wander over to the back aisle where they have a bunch of candy for sale in bulk. And when I take a closer look, I let out a bark of disbelief.

“What is it?” Holly asks.

“Purple Skittles!” I grab a bag and hold it under the chute. “Pull the lever,” I tell Holly. She does, and I don’t say “stop” until the bag is full. Then I chuckle all the way to the checkout counter.

“What’s so funny?”

I toss my wallet onto the counter. “I have this friend,” I begin. I feel like a heel describing Wes that way, but it’s the best I can do at the moment.

“We used to send this box back and forth with, like, gag gifts inside.”

“That’s fun. And he likes purple Skittles?”

“Yeah. Except the last time I sent him purple Skittles in the box, you had to buy all the colors at once. I bought four giant bags at BJ’s...” Holy God, the name of the store causes an inappropriate bubble of laughter to rise in my chest. “I sorted them myself and sent him only the purple ones. Then I shared, like, five pounds of the other ones with my high school

buddies at a party. It was a kegger, and when they did the Technicolor yawn, it was *really* Technicolor.”

She hip-checks me. “Thanks for that visual.”

“My pleasure.”

When we step outside, she clears her throat. “Jamie, I need to find a place to stay tonight. Can we sit down somewhere so I can use my phone?”

I don’t answer right away, because I’m wracking my brain for a solution. Which doesn’t come easy, because the dormitory is always plenty full. “Let me find you a hotel room,” I suggest.

“I’ve got it,” she says quickly. “Seriously. It’s no big deal.”

Still. “Let’s sit on the porch at the dorm. You can use the wi-fi. And if everything is booked up, I’ll ask Pat for help.”

“Thank you.” Her voice is low.

Another apology is on the tip of my tongue. But I don’t say it, because I don’t think she wants to hear it.

There’s nobody in the rocking chairs, so I set Holly up with the wi-fi password and tell her I’m going to get us a couple of drinks. “I’ll be right back,” I promise. Then I shoot up the stairs and drop by our room, hoping that Wes is there.

The room is empty.

Before I leave again, I dig out that gift box Wes had sent me in Boston. I’d brought it all the way to Lake Placid, because I was trying to decide whether I should restart our meme. But then he showed up here, and I forgot about it entirely.

Now I dump a motherlode of purple candy into the box and close the cover. Setting it on his pillow, I wonder if I should leave some kind of note. But what the hell would it say?

Before Holly showed up, it didn’t seem to matter that Wes and I were hooking up without any sort of discussion about it. We didn’t need a label.

This room was like our private bubble—everything that happened here was just between us. The rest of the world didn't matter.

And that was fine. Except the rest of the world still exists, whether I remember it or not. Suddenly this whole thing has gotten all kinds of tricky, and not because of Holly—that was just an awkward moment with a friend. In a few short weeks, though, he and I would land on two different NHL teams in two different cities. We were heading for an upset regardless, and I just hadn't realized it.

Hurrying back downstairs, I grab two sodas and take them to the porch where my ex-fuck-buddy waits. "I found a place just outside of town," she says. "It wasn't even expensive."

"Are you sure? I don't want you to—"

She holds up a hand, silencing me. "It's fine, sweetie. And in the morning I'm going to drive back to Massachusetts, okay?"

"We could—"

Holly shakes her head. "You have a job to do. And it's not your *fault*, Jamie. I didn't... I wasn't being smart." The words are firm, but her eyes water a little, and it kills me to see it.

"I'm sorry," I whisper. "I do care about you but..."

Once more she waves me off. "You were never dishonest, Jamie. Don't start now."

Well okay then.

We go out to dinner together. I pick a nice seafood restaurant right on the water, but as we eat our crabcakes, the mood is subdued.

"Will you tell me about her?" she asks at one point.

I shake my head. "Let's not do that."

Holly gives me a rueful grin. "I was just trying to be a big girl about it."

I take a long look at her. “Can I tell you something *I’m* trying to be a big girl about?”

Holly giggles, and I’m happy to have made her do that. “What?”

“The idea of moving to Detroit depresses the hell out of me.” I haven’t said that to anyone yet, and it feels good to get it off my chest.

She stirs her drink with her straw. “I know it’s not the prettiest city in the world, but you can find a nice place there, I bet.”

I shake my head. “Urban decay isn’t the problem.” Although it isn’t helping me picture a life there. “I don’t know a soul. And I’m not getting any playing time next year. Let’s be honest.”

“Oh, honey.” She sighs. “The first year could suck. But you’re good at what you do.”

“See, I know that. It’s not that I lack confidence. But the odds of really making it as a goalie are awful. It isn’t just the first year that might suck. It could be five years where they play me twice a season, and I’m just waiting around for my big chance. Or they send me to the minors, and I play seven games instead of two.”

“Or someone could get hurt, and your number could come up.” She puts her hand over mine. “But I know what you’re saying. It’s a long shot. And it won’t be your fault if it doesn’t work out.”

A waiter comes over to take our plates out of the way, and Holly orders a piece of blackout cake. “And two spoons.”

I’ve never been a fan of blackout cake, but now is not the time to point that out.

“I don’t like feeling ungrateful,” I tell her. “Everyone is so excited for me—they hear ‘NHL’ and get stars in their eyes. I’m not sure what to do.”

“I guess you show up and try it. Give it a year?”

“Maybe.” That’s the easy choice. But I can see how I could end up waiting forever. You could keep telling yourself, *just a little longer!*

“Maybe there’s something else I could do with that year, though.”

“What does your friend Wes think?” she asks suddenly.

“What?” The mention of his name startles me.

“What does he think about Detroit?” She waits for my answer.

“I, uh, haven’t asked his opinion,” I confess. “He wants to be in the pros so badly. I’m not sure he’d understand. But it’s different for him. There’s more demand for centers. And he’s got that Frozen Four win...”

“Should have been yours,” Holly says firmly. She’s loyal to the core.

I look across the table at her wide-set eyes and wish things were different. If I was in love with Holly, life would be less confusing.

But I’m not. And it isn’t.

When the dark chocolate cake arrives, I tell her I’m too full to have any. Then I pick up the check on my way to the men’s room, so she can’t get to it first.

Wes

It's past midnight when I stumble back to the dorm. Luckily Pat isn't sitting guard in one of the rocking chairs, because there's no way I can carry on a normal conversation right now. Walking in a straight line is also a challenge.

Yeppers, I might be a wee bit drunk.

I approach mine and Canning's door and stare at it for a good minute. Fuck, what if his girl is in there? I stayed away for as long as I could, but a man's gotta sleep sometime. And I'm not fucking doing it on the porch.

He would've texted me if she was crashing here and told me to stay away.

Right?

The thought is like a hot blade to the gut. I can't believe his fucking *girlfriend* showed up at camp. He spent the whole day with her. Whole night too, probably.

My hands curl into fists as a parade of unwelcome images marches through my head. Jamie's big hands roaming Holly's feminine curves. His cock sliding inside her. His lips lifting in that dirty grin he always gives me right before he puts his mouth on my dick.

I'm such a goddamn moron. I shouldn't have started anything with him. It was going to end once I left for Toronto, anyway. So hell, maybe it's better if it just ends now.

I finally suck it up and turn the doorknob. It's unlocked. And when I enter the room, I see Jamie's mattress is on the floor again, just where it had been last night. But mine is on the bed frame where I'd put it this morning. Jamie is the only one in the room, too. My blood pressure eases, but just a bit.

He's asleep. Good, because I'm not in the right frame of mind to talk to him right now. I can feel my temper pulsing through my veins along with all the alcohol I drank.

The room's annoyingly dark. I stumble forward, bumping my arm on the side of the dresser as I reach down to unbutton my jeans. I kick 'em off, then tackle my shirt. There. I'm in my boxers now. I just need to make it to the bed without waking Canning, and then we'll both be sound asleep and the Big Talk can be dealt with in the morning.

I ease my body onto the mattress as quietly as possible. Hell yeah. I did it. My drunken ass is now in bed and Jamie is still sleepi—

My head collides with something hard, and then an explosion of sound blasts through the room. A cacophony of *pings* and *dings* and *clangs* assaults my ears. It's as if someone took a sledgehammer to a gumball machine and unleashed a wave of candy.

I stagger to my feet, cursing loudly when I step on something hard and round. "Son of a motherfucking *bitch!*" I hop around on one foot as I use my hand to rub away the pain shooting through the other foot.

Jamie bolts into a sitting position, his panicked voice slicing through the darkness. "What the *hell?*"

"Seriously? You're asking *me?*" I squawk. "What did you put on my pillow?"

"Skittles."

He says this as if it's supposed to make sense. "Why?"

I kneel down, fumbling for the box I'd just conked my head on. I hear Jamie's footsteps heading for the door, and then a switch flicks and light floods the room.

Jesus. A sea of purple Skittles covers the floor and Jamie's mattress.

And a lump rises in my throat as I realize the significance of what I'm seeing. Canning kept the box I'd given him in Boston, filled it with my favorite candy and left it on my pillow.

As an apology for spending the day with his ex?

Or is it an apology for something else? Something worse...like *fucking* his ex.

Jamie squats beside me. "Help me clean this up."

He sounds pissed. Looks it, too. Which only pisses *me* off, because what the hell does he have to be angry about? I'm the one who got ditched today.

We don't speak as we start picking up Skittles. His jaw is set in a tense line, and he's tossing the candy back in the box with more force than necessary.

"What?" I mutter when I catch him scowling at me.

"You're back late." His voice is tight.

"It's our night off. I grabbed a drink at Lou's." I stick a hand under my bed and gather up more Skittles.

"I'd say you had more than one. Your breath smells like a brewery." His tone suddenly sharpens. "You didn't drive, did you?"

"Naw. I got a ride."

"With who?"

"What's with the Twenty Questions?"

Jamie whips a Skittle into the box but it bounces right back out, skidding under the desk. "None of the other guys have cars, Wes. Please don't tell me you hitched with some random stranger."

Guilt pricks my insides. But why the fuck am I feeling guilty? Unlike some people, I didn't spend the day gallivanting around with an ex.

"Who drove you home?" he demands when I don't answer.

I meet his gaze head-on. "Sam."

Jamie's breath hitches. There's no mistaking the cloud of hurt in his eyes. "Are you kidding me? The guy from that hook-up app?"

"I met him for a drink," I say with a shrug. "What's the big deal?"

He doesn't answer. He just kneels on his mattress, gathering up more candy.

"Are you seriously pissed off right now?" I fight a burst of annoyance. "Because you're not the one who got ditched today, Canning."

"Like hell! First of all, *you* told me to take off early. And I didn't know she was coming, okay? She showed up out of the blue, and, what, I'm supposed to ignore her? She's my friend."

"She's your fuck buddy," I shoot back.

"Not anymore."

He stands up and rakes both hands through his hair, then grabs the box and slams it on the desk. The floor looks pretty clear, but I know there's no way we managed to pick up all the candy. Canning must've cleaned out that entire fucking candy store.

Either way, the Skittles are all but forgotten as Jamie levels an irritated look in my direction. "But just because we're not fooling around doesn't mean she's not my friend anymore. And she drove all this way to see me. So yeah, I spent the day with her. Went shopping, grabbed some dinner."

I can't control the hot streak of jealousy that races through me. "Bet that was fun. Did you eat some pussy for dessert?"

His mouth falls open. "Did you really just fucking say that?"

I sure did, and I don't even regret it. I'm sick to death of not knowing where I stand. Where *we* stand. Last night, I was *inside* this guy. And the

second Holly showed up, he acted like we were strangers. He hadn't even *looked* at me before he'd gone off with her.

Ain't gonna lie—it hurt.

“Am I wrong?” I ask flatly.

Jamie releases a slow, even breath, as if he's trying to calm himself. “I want to punch you right now, Wesley. Like, for real.”

I set my jaw. “What, for *daring* to call you out on the fact that you're still into women?”

“You really think I'd just roll out of bed with you and into bed with her? I didn't hook up! Which is more than I can say for you and your precious *Sam*.”

“I didn't hook up with him, either.” Frustration spirals through me. “We just met up for a drink and talked about *you* the whole time. Jackass.”

Jamie blinks. “Then why the hell are we arguing right now?”

I falter. “Uh. I'm not sure anymore.”

There's a beat. Then we both let out a tense chuckle. I'm feeling a lot less hostile and a lot more sober as I walk over to shut off the light again. When I turn back toward Jamie, he's beckoning to me in the dark from his mattress on the floor. When I sit on the edge, he tugs me down to his pillow.

We're stretched out on our sides, facing each other. We're both waiting for the other to speak. Then Jamie sighs, his expression flickering with resignation. “I don't like the idea of you messing around with anyone else.”

I swallow my surprise. “Right back atcha, babe.”

“I told Holly there was someone else,” he admits. “Pretty much right when she got here.”

My heart soars. “You did?”

His voice is thick. “Yeah. “

“I told Sam the same thing,” I confess. “He tried to cop a feel when we hugged hello, and I straight-up said I wasn't there for that.”

His eyes narrow. He slides toward me, one arm coming around my waist as his warm palm settles over my ass. “Where did he touch you?” Jamie squeezes one of my butt cheeks. “Here?”

I chuckle. “Yup.”

“Fucker.”

I lean closer and kiss the tip of his nose. “That’s as far as it got, man. I promise.”

“Don’t have to promise. I trust you.”

My stomach churns at his earnest declaration. He trusts me. Fuck, I’m such an asshole. Because *trust* was the last thing I felt today when I was imagining Jamie’s hands all over that chick. And the fact that she’s rocking a vagina makes it a thousand times worse. I’ve never had to worry that the guy in my bed might choose a girl over me.

Then again, I’ve never cared what the guys in my bed did after they *left* my bed. It’s different with Jamie. I feel sick when I picture him leaving me. I feel sicker knowing I’m competing with not one, but *two* gender pools for his affection.

Except I won’t have his affection for much longer. Once camp is over, we’ll be going our separate ways. I hadn’t been joking around with Cassel the other day—if I want to succeed in the pros, I need to keep my pants zipped.

“But I think we need some ground rules or something,” Jamie says ruefully.

I swallow. Me and rules have always had a love-hate relationship. “Like what?”

“Like as long as we’re fooling around, we’re exclusive.”

Ha. Because I’m so interested in screwing anyone else. Still, I nod in agreement, because I happen to be *very* interested in making sure *he* doesn’t screw anyone else. “Deal. What else?”

He purses his lips. “Ah...that’s all I’ve got right now. You?”

Reluctance jams in my throat. I know I need to say this, but I don't want to. I've wanted this guy for so fucking long. Forever. And the thought of letting him go in less than a month rips me apart.

But I'm going to have to.

"We end it when we leave for training camp." My voice comes out hoarse, and I pray he can't hear the note of pain in it. "We only have the summer."

Jamie goes quiet for a moment. "Yeah." He sounds equally hoarse. "I figured."

I can't tell how he feels about that. Disappointed? Sad? Relieved? His expression reveals nothing, but I decide not to push for answers. Besides, I'm the one who came up with that rule. I should be glad he's not fighting me on it.

"We should go to sleep," I murmur.

"Yeah." He closes his eyes, but instead of rolling over, he shifts closer and kisses me.

I return his kiss softly. When I put a hand on his hip, the fabric crinkles beneath my fingers in a way that feels unfamiliar. They're not his usual underwear, so I break our kiss to squint at them in the dark. "Canning," I whisper. "Are you wearing your boxer shorts with kittens?"

Even in the dim light I can see the corners of his mouth twitch. "So what if I am?"

For some reason, this makes me unthinkably happy. I lean in to touch my smile to his. But Jamie squirms a little, as if uncomfortable. Then he sticks a hand down the back of the aforementioned boxer shorts and brushes something.

"Everything okay back there?" I ask, wondering if he'd left the tag in them.

"Just, uh, a Skittle in my shorts."

We both chuckle even as our lips meet again. And again. Finally I'm able to relax. His arms close around me and it feels like coming home.

Our mouths fit together so perfectly. Every time we kiss, I fall even more in love with him, and it has nothing to do with sex or lust. It's *him*. His closeness and his scent and the way he soothes me.

My life has been chaotic for as long as I can remember, and I always dealt with it alone. My parents' criticism, my confusion over my sexuality. But for six weeks every summer, I didn't have to be alone. I had Jamie, my best friend, my rock.

Now I have even more of him. I have his strong arms around me and his lips lazily brushing mine, and it absolutely kills me that I have to give him up when I go to Toronto.

We kiss for a while. There's no urgency to do anything more than that. Our dicks don't even enter the equation. We just lie there making out, while his palms stroke up and down my back in sweet, reassuring glides.

Eventually we fall asleep with my head on his chest and the sound of his steady heartbeat beneath my ear.

JULY

Jamie

Several days later, I get an email from my agent.

A year ago, I loved saying that. *My agent*. Sounds pretty important, no? Not so much.

When I was a kid I collected hockey cards. They came in packs of ten with a lousy piece of gum that tasted awful. In every pack there'd be one good player—hopefully not a duplicate of a card I already had—and nine guys you'd never heard of. Those nine went in the bottom of my shoebox, where they waited. Every once in a blue moon one of those guys would rise in the ranks, but usually they didn't.

Fast forward ten years. To my agent, I'm one of those cards at the bottom of the shoebox. In fact, it's unlikely the emails I get from him are even written by him.

This one asks me for the date I'm moving to Detroit. "The club will put you up in a hotel near the rink until you've found housing. Attached you will find the real estate agent's contact information. Please set up an appointment with the realtor once you've arrived in Detroit."

The end of summer crawls closer every day. I'm not going to be able to put off these plans any longer.

Between sessions at the rink on Thursday, I look for Pat in his cramped little office. Since I'd promised my mother I'd try to come home, I need to find out if that's possible.

"Got a second?" I ask from the doorway.

Pat beckons to me, then turns away from his computer screen. "What's up, Coach?"

Still tickles when he calls me that. Campers get *what's up, kid?*

"I'm trying to plan my life, which is always a fun time. So I need to know how you're doing with your personnel shortage at the end of the month."

He gives me a thoughtful stare. "Sit down, Canning."

I drop into a chair feeling like a kid who's been called to the principal's office. And I'm not sure why. But there's something serious in his expression, and I think I'm about to find out what it is.

"I haven't heard you mention Detroit all summer," he says, folding his hands into a tent. "Why is that?"

"Um. Been busy." *And you don't want to know with what.*

Pat smiles at me, cocking his head. "Not buying that. Sorry. A man who's getting everything he wants in life can't stay silent about it. Not even you."

Damn it. Coach is going all head-shrink on me. "It's... I dunno. Not quite sure how it's going to work out, that's all. Maybe in a year I won't be able to shut up about it."

His nod is slow. Thoughtful. I feel like an amoeba under a microscope. "You know I think you're a hell of a goalie. You put your heart into it, and someone is going to notice. Even if it takes time."

It's kind of hard to swallow all of a sudden. "Thanks," I manage.

“But I find myself wondering if you’re feeling it. Not everybody wants to get on that treadmill when he could be, say, coaching instead.”

Now it’s my turn to stare across the desk. “Who would hire me as a coach?”

Pat makes a show of looking up at the ceiling before meeting my eyes again. “Lots of people, Canning. You’ve been coaching your ass off here every summer since you started college. I’d be happy to tell anyone who’ll listen. And you had great stats in college. Best stats on your team. Rainier might even want you.”

It’s sort of dizzying to allow myself to think about this. Coaching? As a full-time gig? That sounds like a blast. Coaching at the college level would pay me a living wage, too. I’d just never imagined I could have a job like that.

But Pat knows people. A lot of them. All over the country. Where would I want to be?

The idea pops out of my mouth before I can think better of it. “Do you think someone in Toronto might need a defensive coach?”

Pat’s bushy eyebrows lift, but only for a split second. “Dunno, Canning. They don’t play a lot of hockey in Canada.” Then he bursts out laughing. “Lemme see what I can learn.”

I leave his office feeling lighter, even though nothing has really changed, except there’s a new idea in my head.

But it’s a hell of an idea.

It’s the Friday of parents’ weekend, so coaches have tonight off instead of Saturday because we’re required to be at a special dinner with the parents tomorrow.

When Wes and I were campers, neither one of us ever had visitors on parents’ weekend. My clan couldn’t exactly buy airfare for seven people

and drop everything to watch me play a scrimmage in upstate New York. And Wes's parents... They just didn't bother. His father liked the fact that his son sometimes won state championship games, but if there wasn't any way to brag about an event, he didn't see the point of showing up. And Wes's mom? I've never even met the woman. Sometimes I wonder if she even exists.

As coaches, parents' weekend means we have to show up and look attentive. Pat's camp is funded by tuition checks from parents, and when those parents stop by, they want to be sure their kids are getting 24/7 attention.

The kids don't really want 24/7 attention, of course. But that's not our problem.

Wes and I are just back from the rink and trying to sort out our options.

"So tell me about this outdoor concert," he says. "Is that what we're doing tonight?" Wes is scrolling through his messages.

"I think the music could be okay."

He looks up. "Says the man with boy bands on his phone."

"That was a *joke*," I sputter. "We've been over this."

Wes cackles. "Tell you what—let's make a deal. It's been a while since I had a steak dinner. You find me a steak, and I'll subject myself to this concert."

"Here, man." I pretend to unbutton my fly.

He throws a pillow at me. "Feed me, Canning. Bad local music is easier to take after a porterhouse."

I pull out my phone. "We can use your car, right?"

"Sure."

Most of the restaurants in Lake Placid are burger joints, but the Squaw Lodge Boathouse on West Lake looks like the real deal. And since the outdoor concert is in the same direction, I make a reservation and hope for the best.

Then I go over to the closet we share and fish out Wes's one polo shirt.

Dropping it on Wes's bed, I find a button-down shirt for myself, and a clean pair of khaki shorts.

"You want me dressed up?" Wes asks, hoisting the shirt over his head. "Are we going on a date, Canning?"

"Seems so. The steak place looks nicer than swim trunks and flip flops."

"So it's my fault then." His words are grumpy, but he's admiring my chest while I button up the shirt. "You clean up nice, honey."

I flip him off.

Wes heads to the bathroom to brush his teeth, and I watch him go. I even catch myself admiring his ass. Lately I find myself sneaking looks at him, trying to raise some kind of *holy shit* reaction to the idea that I'm involved with a guy.

When I was young I used to try to scare myself walking through the woods alone. I'd peer into the shadows and imagine something terrifying waited there, just to give myself a little thrill. But it never worked all that well, and neither do my attempts to frighten myself over recent events.

Because it's Wes. He's not scary. And the things we do in bed are just plain hot.

As it happens, the lodge *is* a nice restaurant. But we're not underdressed, because the place offers dockage. In other words, some of the dinner guests have arrived on small watercraft, looking wind-tousled and sunburned.

We don't get a table outside, because I only made the reservation an hour ago. But the interior is dark and sleek, with leather upholstery and candles flickering on the tables. We're shown to a comfortable booth in back, and I slide onto the seat feeling like this was a damn good idea. I smell garlic bread, and there's a microbrew beer list a yard long.

“We’re going to eat like Vikings,” Wes says, giving the hostess his cockiest grin. “Which steak is the best one?”

The girl is all too happy to stay and chat. “The creole is popular,” she says with a toss of her hair. “I like the New York strip, though.”

“Do you now. Thanks for the tip.”

She walks away, shaking her hips, and I bite back a grin. “You were *this* close to making a bad *strip* joke, weren’t you? Be honest.”

Wes reaches across the table to cover my hand with his. He makes a dead-serious face, the kind he only makes when he’s pulling my chain. “I was this close to making a *good* strip joke. Duh.”

That’s when the guy sneaks up on us. “Good evening! I’m Mike, and I’ll be your server this evening...”

Calmly, Wes removes his hand from mine and looks up at the waiter.

The man glances from Wes to my hand and back again. “Welcome to the Squaw Lodge Boathouse. Have you dined with us before?” His voice has taken on a slightly different tone. Softer, with a riff of affectation in it.

I’m distracted, but Wes looks him straight in the eye and says, “Actually, it’s our first time.”

“Oh! Well, you’re in for a treat...”

He and the waiter discuss the menu, but I tune out. This is the first time someone has looked at me and decided I was a gay man out on a date, and I’m trying to figure out how I feel about that. Don’t get me wrong—I’d be seen anywhere with Wes. Any day of the week. But there’s something strange about becoming his dinner date. Like I’ve shrugged on someone else’s costume and I’m playing a role.

I order a beer and a steak when it’s my turn, and the guy runs off to put in our order.

“You buggin’?” Wes asks, nudging my foot under the table.

“No,” I say quickly. I’m not, either. “I don’t give a shit whether we set that guy’s gaydar off or not.”

Wes actually winces. “Wouldn’t blame you if you did. Look, *that* dude is only jealous. But some people are assholes about it. I mean, the things you and I do every night are illegal in some places.”

“You’re really selling it to me then.”

His grin is wry. “There are benefits.”

“Yeah? Hit me. What’s good about going gay?” I nudge him back under the table.

“Well, *dicks*,” he says. “Obvs.”

“Obvs.”

He smiles. “Okay, now picture this. You wake up on a weekend beside your really hot boyfriend, and fuck like horny hedgehogs for a couple of hours. Then you spend the rest of the day watching sports on television, and nobody ever says”—he pitches his voice high—“honey, you said we could go to the mall!”

Now I’m laughing. “And I guess you can leave the toilet seat up, right?”

Wes spreads his hands. “See? Benefits everywhere. And here’s one more—the parents don’t nag you for grandchildren.”

“I have five siblings,” I point out. “They’re guaranteed at least a basketball team.”

The waiter brings our beers, and I actually give him a wink before he goes.

“Look at you!” Wes crows after he walks away. “You could be good at this.”

“Like it’s hard?” Wes is grinning at me, and I hate to kill the mood. But I realize that I’ve got a question for him that’s been bothering me. “What did your parents say when you told them?”

His face falls. “Well. At first they didn’t believe me. My mother said, ‘This is just a phase.’ And my father said nothing.”

“When was this?”

“Freshman year of college. I decided to tell them on the way to my grandfather’s house for Thanksgiving. We were all trapped in the car together.”

“Nice timing.”

He shrugs. “I didn’t even know what to do with that reaction. It never occurred to me they’d just sort of ignore me. Though in retrospect it makes plenty of sense.”

His dull admission brings an ache to my heart. It also makes me wonder how my own family would react if they knew I was hooking up with a guy. But no matter how many times I try to picture their expressions filling with horror or disgust, I can’t see it. Support is all I’ve ever gotten from them.

“So what did you do?” I ask, hoping my inner distress doesn’t show on my face.

“Well, Canning, this is me we’re talking about here. So I got really fucking mad. And next time I was home on break I picked up a guy at a party and blew him in the family room when I knew they were on their way home.”

Yikes. “That probably got the point across.”

Wes takes a long pull of his beer and I watch his strong throat work. “It did the trick. My dad did all the yelling I expected him to do the first time. He said I was disgusting. And that I was going to fuck up my hockey career. Hell. That’s still his biggest concern.”

Ouch. “What does your mom say?” He never mentions her. How can a mother not defend her son?

“She’s his yes man and pearl-clutcher-in-chief. So she never says much.”

Shit, I *really* killed the mood. But luckily our appetizers arrive a moment later, and we’re happy again. Sometimes it’s just that easy.

Wes

I drive us a mile farther up the road to the park where the band is playing. Neither of us has ever been to this place before, but it's nice. A lawn runs all the way down to the water. A band shell has been set up near the shore, and people of all ages are settling down on the grass.

We find a spot easily enough. I sit down, but Jamie doesn't. "Shit. I didn't think this through," he says, eyeing his rather nice pair of khaki shorts.

I look up at him. "And here I thought I was the gay dude."

He smacks the top of my head. "Tomorrow is Pat's parents' weekend. I'm just trying to represent."

"Fine." I stand up. "Wait here a second." I jog to the car and dig an old plaid blanket out of the back. When I rejoin Canning, I give him a cocky smile. "See? It's a *good* thing I never clean my car." I spread it out on the grass and flop down.

Jamie sits beside me. We both lean back at the same time, and my hand comes down on top of his. So I move mine a couple inches to give him space.

But he moves his too, covering mine.

I don't want him to know how much I like that, so I don't look him in the eye. Instead, I stare up at the darkening sky over the lake and wonder how I've made it to age twenty-two without ever going on a date. I'd *teased* Jamie about it earlier, too. But here we are. Dinner and live music. Sitting on a fucking blanket in the park. I've never dated anyone before, and I'm probably not very good at it.

After a while the band starts up. There are four of them—a singer, a guitar, a double bass and percussion. The first song they play is a weak cover of a Dave Matthews song.

“Huh,” Jamie says.

“What?”

“I'm worried.”

“About the music?” I'm in a mood to be generous. “They're just warming up, right? Every band covers Dave Matthews. It's a law, I think.”

Unfortunately, things don't improve.

“Could that be an old tune by Billy Joel?” Jamie asks.

I listen hard for a second. “God, maybe. It sounds like they're trying to play ‘New York State of Mind’.”

“Not sure they've quite got it.”

I flip my hand over and squeeze his fingers as the sky grows darker.

By the third song, it's so bad it's funny. The lead singer looks out into the crowd and announces, “We're going to play an original tune that my friend Buster wrote.”

Jamie and I both clap, like we know Buster. *Go Buster.*

“It's called ‘Captive Rain,’ and we're giving this song its world debut.”

The drummer counts them in, and the first four bars aren't so bad. But the lyrics are... awful. I don't know what the guy is singing about. Captive rain is coming at him like a...train.

“Oh my God,” Jamie whispers. His hand lands on mine again.

As the song progresses, I can feel him start to shake beside me.

“Shh! I’m trying to hear the music,” I say, and he pinches me with his free hand. “Dude, he just rhymed ‘chicken’ with ‘stickin.’”

Jamie snorts and I reach across my body to clamp a hand over his mouth. So he sticks out his tongue and licks my palm. So I wipe that on his shirt. Seeing as we’re seconds away from repeating our experiments with MMA, I make a suggestion. “Time to swim?”

His eyes cut over to mine. “I don’t have a suit.”

“Seriously?”

When the song finally ends, Jamie jumps up and heads for the trees that border the lawn. I wade the blanket under my arm and follow him.

He’s waiting a few yards into the woods. “Look out for poison ivy,” he says, and I freeze, looking down. “Made you look!”

“Jesus, Canning.”

He laughs and picks his way toward the water’s edge.

We can’t see the people on the lawn from here, but we can still hear the band. It’s almost completely dark, which is good for us. There are some rocks at the water’s edge, so I toe out of my shoes and put them in a safe spot. Then I strip off my polo.

Jamie is laying his clothes on the rock almost daintily. He’s even removing his shorts. I’d forgotten he was trying to keep them clean.

“Dare you to skinny-dip.”

“Of course I’m skinny-dipping,” he says.

Well then. Can’t let him do that alone. I drop every thread of my clothing onto the rocks. It’s not a hot night, but when I wade into the water, the temperature isn’t too bad. I turn to watch Jamie step toward the water’s edge, and I like what I see. The dim light makes shadows in the valleys of his abs.

I wade in deeper, and the water caresses my bare skin. This is decadent. The sound of Jamie’s chuckle makes me smile in the dark. When he reaches me, I take his hand, and he lets me. Together we duck under water,

swimming out just a little ways. Some of the people on the lawn probably have an oblique sightline of us by now. Then again, it's awfully dark.

We're in up to our necks, and the lake is both beautiful and a little creepy if your mind works that way. I wonder if Jamie's does. "I think I just felt something brush my foot." I didn't, but Jamie doesn't know that.

He twitches a little. "Probably just a sunfish."

"Uh-huh. You're right." I maneuver my foot under the water, finding Jamie's calf and grazing it with my toe.

He lurches away from me. "You asshole."

That gets me laughing, and Jamie splashes me. "The bottom's kind of sludgy here." And this is true. "I worry about leeches. Did you ever see *Stand by Me*?"

"Ugh," he complains. "Way to ruin it." He moves closer to me. All at once he springs forward, grabbing my shoulders, wrapping strong legs around me. "Now they can only find you."

He kisses me.

Jesus. So sexy. I open for him and our tongues tangle right away. I moan into his mouth, and it doesn't matter, because the music is going again, and the darkness gives us plenty of privacy. Jamie's fingers weave into the hair at the back of my head. He tastes like good beer and sex. I'm standing in a lake with the most beautiful man wrapped around my body, and his dick is hard against my belly already. This must be what heaven is like.

I cup his ass, unable to resist sliding a finger down his crease and teasing his hole. He moans into my mouth. "You are goddamn addictive, Wes."

That's what I like to hear. I've only fucked him one other time since that first night almost a week ago. Our second time, I took him from behind and had to cover his mouth the entire time to stop him from making noise.

I want him again now, but screwing in the lake isn't really an option. No condom or lube, a lawnful of people less than a hundred yards away.

I move my hand to his groin and give his erection a soft stroke as our tongues tangle in a hungry kiss. Then I jump, because *his* hand is on my backside now, *his* fingers traveling between my ass cheeks.

"Gonna fuck you one of these days," he whispers.

Yeah, I know he will. I know I'll let him, too. Maybe one guy soured me on the idea of taking it, but with Canning, I'll take anything he has to give me. I'll take it all.

His finger breaches my hole and I hiss out a breath. Jesus. I'd forgotten how sensitive all those nerve endings are.

"You like that, huh?" Droplets cling to his perfect face as he smiles at me. A filthy, beautiful smile.

"Mmm-hmmm." I jam my tongue in his mouth again, grinding my cock against his as he tentatively plays with my ass.

He kisses me back, just a brief taste, before breaking our mouths apart. He's in the mood to talk. No, he's in the mood to *torment*.

"So tight," he sighs.

The angle allows just the tip of his finger to penetrate me, but even that is deep enough to make me moan.

"My dick's gonna like being in you, Wes." His lips latch onto my neck, dropping greedy kisses on my wet skin. "And you're going to be begging for it."

I shiver. I think he's right.

When his finger disappears, I bite back a disappointed groan. That fleeting tease had turned me on like nobody's business.

"But not tonight." He says it decisively, as if he's carrying out some conversation in his own head. That dirty smile returns as he leans in to nibble on my jaw. "Tonight, I want you to fuck me. I've been thinking about it all day."

I growl. “You need to shut up, Canning. Otherwise I’ll do you right now. Bend you over that log over there and take what’s mine.”

Wet lips place a kiss right under my jaw. “Promises, promises.” Then he disentangles from my body and swims backward as if he has no care in the world.

Swimming with a hard-on is extremely difficult. But maybe I should be thinking of my stiffy as a floatation device. Or an oar, because God knows it’s long and hard enough to single-handedly propel an entire fucking canoe. We swim side by side for a while, then float on our backs and stare up at the inky black sky.

I laugh when I notice both our cocks slicing upward as if to salute the moon. “Should we do something about those?” I crack.

Jamie chuckles. “Yeah, probably. I’m dying over here.”

“Me too.”

In unspoken agreement, we swim back to shore, our naked bodies dripping lake water all over the muddy bank. Jamie stares at his pristine clothes, then says, “Fuck it.” He puts on only his boxer-briefs, and holds on to the rest.

I do the same, and luckily we don’t encounter anyone on the quick walk back to the parking lot. His briefs are black and my boxers are navy-blue, so there’s no peekaboo happening with our dicks, but still, traipsing around in our underwear might be a bit too racy for Lake Placid.

A moment later, we’re in the car. I put it in drive and breeze out of the lot, tensing when Jamie reaches over and strokes my package over my wet skivvies.

“Won’t be able to drive in a straight line if you keep doing that,” I warn him.

“Eyes on the road,” he teases. “Don’t worry, we’re not going far.”

I wrinkle my forehead. I was planning on driving back to the dorm, but Canning apparently has other ideas. We’ve traveled no more than five

minutes when he nods to a gravel path to our right. “Turn there.”

A grin tugs on my lips when I realize what he has in mind. It’s the pull-off to one of our old hiking spots. The area is usually deserted even in the daytime, so at night there definitely won’t be anyone around.

I park in the small dirt clearing near the trailhead, and before I can even kill the engine, Jamie is climbing into my lap.

Jamie

I wasn't exaggerating before. I'm addicted to Ryan Wesley. And right now I desperately need a fix. A couple of weeks ago, getting it on with a dude had freaked me out. Now it's as obvious as breathing that everything about this guy turns me on—his raspy voice, his powerful body, the tattoos inked all over his golden skin. My mouth is on his in a heartbeat, my tongue down his throat as I straddle his muscular thighs.

He sighs against my lips. "You're such a horndog."

I totally am. I rock into his lower body, my palms skimming up and down his broad chest. The question now isn't whether I want to fool around with this man. The question is how I'm ever going to give it up. I push that thought overboard, though, because I'm about to combust.

But I might have been too hasty with my choice of hook-up spots, because the front seat is too small to accommodate two horny-as-fuck hockey players. My legs are already starting to cramp, and when I shift around trying to get more comfortable, my back hits the horn and a blast of sound hits the air.

Wes bursts out laughing. Then laughs harder when I make another attempt to reposition myself. "Backseat?" he chokes out.

Much better idea. He climbs over first, his butt cheek smacking me in the face as he heaves himself into the back. I land on him with a thud, and now we're both laughing our asses off. It's just as cramped back here. We can't lie side by side, so I'm on top of him, and when I bend down to kiss him, my forehead slams into the door handle. And when I grab my head in surprise, I manage to elbow him in the eye socket.

"Holy fuck!" Wes yells. "You trying to kill me, Canning?"

"No, but—"

"Abort!" he says between laughs.

Screw that. All this shifting and maneuvering has succeeded in my rubbing my aching dick all over his body. If I don't get off soon, I'm going to lose my mind.

"We've got this," I tell him. Then I sit up and bump my head on the car roof.

"Uh-huh," he says solemnly. "Seems like it."

"Hockey players like it rough," I argue, reaching into the front seat for Wes's shorts. In the back pocket I find his wallet. A second later, I flick a condom at him and order, "Suit up."

"Yes, Coach." He still looks like he's trying not to laugh, but his gray eyes are now glittering with lust. Keeping our gazes locked, he eases his boxers down his hips.

I shuck my briefs as he covers himself, then curl over and take him in my mouth. The medicinal taste of the latex fills my mouth, but I ignore it. This is the first time lube hasn't entered the equation, so I want to make sure the condom is nice and wet before I dare ride his cock.

God, and that's something I never imagined I'd be doing. Riding another man's cock.

"Baby," his voice is low and husky. "I'm loving that, but you don't have to do it. Give me my wallet."

I fumble into the front seat one more time and pass it to him. He removes another packet and tears it open. This one is full of lube. A second later, a deliciously slippery hand slides up my crease, rubs my taint and makes me shiver.

“That’s handy,” I rasp.

He doesn’t answer. He’s too busy working me open with his fingers.

When we do this, there’s always one awkward moment when he first breaches me. Before my body gets the joke. But now that I know how this works, it doesn’t even slow me down. I’m eager for it. And it’s only a couple of minutes later when I’m pushing Wes’s hand away and straddling his lap again.

The way I handle him is nothing like the way I’d touch a woman. He’s as big and strong as I am, and I don’t have to worry about hurting him. His broad shoulders make a sturdy place to put my hands. Rising up, I wait for him. He positions himself beneath me, and we both hiss when I slide down over his hard cock.

For a moment I don’t move. We’re nose to nose, blinking into each other’s eyes. Wes’s tongue emerges to slick my lower lip. And I dive onto his mouth, jamming my tongue inside. There isn’t a lot of space for me to move, but it doesn’t matter. I’m riding him in short, fast strokes. The angle is heaven—I can bear down on him just where I need him.

Wes is cupping my ass in strong hands, and with each thrust, he lets out a sexy grunt. Our chests rub together as our mouths lock again. My dick is trapped between our stomachs, slicking us both with pre-come.

My climax takes me by surprise. One second I’m fighting Wes over whose tongue belongs in whose mouth. The next, I’m fighting the urge to explode. And losing. “Fuck. I have to come.”

Wes moans into my mouth, and I jam myself down on him one more time. That’s when I feel it—the whole-body orgasm. My limbs tingle unpredictably as I slump forward, my face landing in Wes’s neck. The

world goes fuzzy at the edges, but I feel myself shooting all over him while he bucks beneath me.

He lets loose a growl, and the muscles in his neck tighten all at once. Then he drops his head back and shudders through his release.

Heavy breathing and thudding hearts are all that can be heard in the car afterwards. I'm lazing against his sticky chest, too blissed out to move. His hands trace lazy patterns over my back.

I could get used to this. I really could.

After a bit, Wes slaps me on the ass. "Up, baby. We can't stay here forever."

I hate the way that sounds, but it's hard to argue the truth. So I peel my satisfied body off his, and we begin the ridiculous process of trying to clean up in a confined space without further injury.

We manage, but just barely.

Wes and I drag our bleary selves out of bed the next morning and book it over to the rink, where the other coaches already congregate.

The parents are arriving at nine, the first scrimmage is scheduled for ten, and Pat has a prep list that's a mile long. He begins to bark instructions once Wes and I round out the group, then stops midsentence when he notices Wes's face.

"What the hell happened to you, Wesley?"

I press my lips together to fight a laugh. Our sexual circus act in the car last night left Wes with a nice shiner on his left eye, courtesy of my wayward elbow. It's not black, but definitely purplish, and visibly swollen.

"Canning beat me up," he says gravely.

Pat flicks his gaze to me, then back at Wes. "What'd you do to piss him off?"

Wes mock gasps. "You saying I deserved it, Coach?"

“I’m saying you’ve got a smart mouth and it’s a miracle you don’t get wailed in the face every day of your life.” But Pat’s grinning as he says it. Then he claps his hands and gets back to business. “Maybe you boys can kiss and make up on the trip to the supermarket. You’re on ice duty. Make sure you use some of it on that eye.”

I feel my neck heat up at Pat’s mention of kissing. *Coach, if you only knew...*

Wes lifts a brow. “Ice?”

“Machine in the cafeteria broke down, so I need you to drive to the market and grab a dozen bags.” He’s already dismissing us, turning to Georgie and Ken. “Check the equipment—we need the extra helmets and pads out of storage for any parents who want to scrimmage with us later.”

Wes and I head out while Pat is still playing drill sergeant. I slide into the passenger seat of his car, grinning at him as I remember last night’s automotive adventures.

He casts a rueful glance over his shoulder. “I can never look at that backseat the same way again.”

“Wait, you’re saying you never hooked up in your car before yesterday?”

“Nope. I had a single at Northern Mass, so I usually brought hook-ups home. Or I went to their place.” He pauses. “That was the better option. Means I didn’t have to kick ’em out when they wanted to spend the night.”

I furrow my brow. “You’ve never spent the night with anyone?” He and I have been sleeping together regularly.

“Nope,” he says again.

“Why not?” I’m suddenly curious to know about his love life. Not the sex—the idea of him with anyone else bugs the shit out of me—but the relationship stuff. For as long as I’ve known him, Wes has been single. Now, knowing he’s gay, it makes sense why he never had a girlfriend. But has he had a *boyfriend*?

“I didn’t want anyone getting too attached to me,” he says with a shrug, his eyes focused on the road.

The response only makes me more curious. “Did you ever get attached to *them*?”

“Nope.” This is his go-to answer for the day, apparently.

“Have you ever gone out with anyone?” I ask slowly.

He’s quiet for a moment. “No,” he admits. “I don’t do boyfriends, Canning. It’s too messy.”

For some reason, my gut clenches. I want to ask him what *I* am, then. An extended hook-up? A summer fling? I knew this thing with us was bound to end eventually, but I at least thought the time we’ve had together has meant something to him.

Because it means something to *me*. I’m not sure what, or why, but I do know that this isn’t just about sex for me.

“And once I’m in Toronto, I won’t be doing *anything*,” he says glumly. “Celibacy is gonna suck.”

An uneasy feeling washes over me. “Did you talk to your dad about the *Sports Illustrated* thing?”

“Haven’t told him yet. But I’m not doing the interview. That’s not a can of worms I’m interested in opening.” He swiftly changes the subject, as he usually does when the conversation is too focused on *him*. “What about you? Have you bought a ticket to Detroit yet?”

Great. He picks the one topic I don’t want to discuss. “No.”

“Dude, you need to get on that.”

Wes parks in front of the supermarket and we hop out of the car. I hope he’ll drop the subject now that we’re here, but he’s still talking about it as we walk into the air-conditioned store.

“You’re supposed to report there in three weeks,” he reminds me as he grabs a shopping cart. “You thinking of renting a house in the suburbs? Where do the Detroit players tend to live?”

I nod, thinking about my conversation with Pat. He pulled me aside a couple days ago and said he'd put some feelers out in the coaching community. We're supposed to talk again on Monday, but I still haven't told Wes about it.

Deciding to test the waters, I grab another cart and say, "Honestly, I'm not sure how I feel about going to Detroit."

He looks startled. "Meaning what?"

"Meaning..." I take a breath. Screw it. Might as well tell him.

We head for the freezers in the back, and Wes listens with no expression as I pretty much repeat everything I discussed with Holly—how I don't want to play backup my entire career, my lack of enthusiasm about going to Detroit, the possibility of being sent to the minors and not even playing a pro game. The only part I leave out is that I'm toying with taking a coaching job. I'm not ready to talk about that yet, especially when nothing is even official.

Once I'm done, he still doesn't respond. He chews on his lips, thoughtful. Then he opens the freezer and heaves out a bag of ice. "You're really considering not playing this season?" he finally says.

"Yeah." The cold air hits my face as I grab two more bags and load them into my cart. "Do you think I'm fucked in the head for throwing away a chance at the pros?"

"Yes and no." He drops another bag in his cart. "I think all your concerns are valid."

The conversation halts when a woman pushing a cart pops around the corner. Her step stutters when she notices Wes's black eye, and then she continues on with a wary look.

Wes glances at me, chuckling. "She thinks we're hooligans."

I roll my eyes. "She thinks *you're* a hooligan. As she should. I, on the other hand, am a saint."

He snorts. "Should I flag her down and tell her how I got the shiner, Saint Jamie?"

I give him the finger, then grab two more bags. We push our carts side by side and wander over to the checkout counter, where we get in line behind an elderly couple with a shopping cart full of cereal boxes. *Just* cereal boxes and nothing else.

"So my concerns are valid," I prompt as we wait our turn.

He nods. "Goalies have it tough. I can't deny that."

"But?"

"But this is your one chance." His voice softens. "If you don't take it, you could regret it for the rest of your life. Look, if I was in your shoes, I might be questioning my decision too, but—"

"No, you wouldn't. You'd report in a heartbeat, even if it meant spending years waiting for your shot."

"True dat." He rests his forearms on the cart. "But that's because I love the game. Even if I get to play only five minutes in a whole season, it's worth it to me. Hockey is everything to me."

But is it everything to me?

I'm even more troubled as I think of all the hard work that goes into a professional hockey career. The constant training, the rigid diet, the grueling schedule. I love hockey, I really do, but I'm not sure I love it as much as Wes loves it. And if I compare the level of satisfaction I get from stopping a goal to the pride I feel teaching someone like Mark Killfeather to become a better goalie, a better *man*... I honestly don't know which one means more to me.

"I just think you need to give it a shot," Wes says, jolting me from my thoughts. "At least go to training camp, Canning. What if you're there and suddenly they're like, 'We're giving you the starting job, kid.'"

Right, and then I'll fly to work on a Pegasus, befriend a genie, and get paid in leprechaun gold.

Wes notices my expression and sighs. “It could happen,” he insists.

“Yeah, maybe,” I say noncommittally.

The old couple pushes their cereal cart away, and Wes and I step forward, charging the ice to Elites’ account. Five minutes later, we’re loading the bags into Wes’s trunk.

I’m no closer to reaching any sort of conclusions about my predicament, and Wes seems to sense that. He nods at the gas station fifty yards from the supermarket. “Let’s grab some slushies,” he suggests.

“The ice’ll melt if we leave it in the trunk for too long,” I point out.

He rolls his eyes. “It’ll take us all of five minutes. Besides, science has proven that slushies are conducive to the making of important life decisions.”

“Dude, you really need to quit quoting ‘science’ all the time.”

Laughing, we lock the car and make the short trek to the gas station, where Wes grabs two empty cups and nudges me toward the slushie station. He fills his cup with the cherry flavor and then waits. But I haven’t had a slushie in a long time, and I can’t decide. So I put some of each flavor in my cup.

At the counter, the middle-aged clerk chuckles at the sight of my rainbow concoction. “I did that once,” he remarks. “Felt sick for days afterward. You’ve been warned, son.”

Wes snickers. “My buddy likes a little bit of everything.”

I give him the side-eye for that awful joke. We pay for our drinks and leave the store, but we’ve barely taken two steps when Wes slaps his forehead. “We forgot the straws. Wait here. I’ll grab ’em.”

As he ducks back inside, I linger near the door, admiring the sleek, silver Mercedes S-class that pulls up to one of the pumps. A gray-haired man gets out of the Merc and smooths the front of his silky tie. Shit, the guy’s rocking a suit that probably costs more than my parents make in a year.

His gaze flicks in my direction. “Are you the attendant?” he barks out. I shake my head. “It’s self-serve,” I call back.

“Of course it is.” His tone is condescending as fuck, and there’s a sneer on his face as he twists off the cap of his gas tank.

Frowning, I turn away from Snobby McSnobbers just as Wes pops out the door. He hands me a straw, his forehead wrinkling when he notices my expression. Clearly he thinks my frown is a result of my Detroit dilemma, because he lets out a quiet sigh.

“You’ll figure it out, babe,” he says softly. “You’ve still got time.”

Then he leans into me, gripping my shoulders with one arm. He brushes a reassuring kiss over my cheek, and my entire body tenses, because Snobby McSnobbers chooses that exact moment to glance our way.

The look on the man’s face cuts through me like a blade.

Disgust.

Pure, malicious disgust.

Jesus. *Nobody* has ever looked at me that way before. Like I’m a piece of dog shit they’ve just had the misfortune of stepping on. Like they want to wipe my very existence off the face of the earth.

Beside me, Wes stiffens. He’s just realized we’re being watched.

No, that we’re being *judged*.

“Do you know that guy?” he says warily.

“No.”

“He looks familiar.”

Does he? I’m too stuck on his expression to know.

“Ignore him,” Wes murmurs, taking a step toward the car.

My breathing is shaky as I follow him. Unless we walk all the way around the gas station to get back to our car—which I’m unbelievably tempted to do right now—we have no choice but to pass the Mercedes. As we near the man in the suit, I find myself bracing myself the way I do on the ice right before a puck flies toward me. I’m in defense mode, ready to

protect myself at all costs, even though I know I'm being ridiculous. This man isn't going to attack me. He isn't going to—

"Fucking faggots," he mutters under his breath as we walk by.

Those two words are like a blow to the gut. From the corner of my eye I see Wes flinch, but he doesn't say a word. He keeps walking, and I struggle to match his brisk stride.

"I'm sorry," he says when we reach the car.

"Nothing to be sorry about, man." But I can't deny I'm shaken up. That bubble Wes and I have been living in all summer has just burst. If we somehow managed to keep seeing each other after camp, I might encounter this type of shit all the time.

Unbelievable.

"People are assholes." His tone is gentle as we get into the car. "Not all of them, but some."

My hand shakes as I place my slushie in the cup holder. "This happens to you a lot?"

"Not often. But it happens." He reaches for my hand, and I know he feels it trembling as he laces our fingers together. "It sucks, Canning. Not saying it doesn't. But you can't let jerks like that get to you. Fuck 'em, right?"

I tighten my grip on his hand. "Fuck 'em," I agree.

Still, the drive back to the rink is subdued. We don't say much as we drop the ice off at the cafeteria. I really wish I could just brush off that bigoted comment—that *look*—but it stays with me. Gnaws at me. Yet at the same time, I feel a burst of pride for Wes. No, it's *awe*, because it takes true strength for him to be so unflinching about his sexuality. His own parents refuse to accept it, and even that doesn't keep him down.

"Coach Canning, Coach Wesley!" Davies calls when Wes and I arrive outside the rink. "Come meet my dad."

The front steps are littered with teenagers and their folks, all of whom are eager to meet the coaches who are grooming their kids into champions. Shen is in the middle of an animated conversation with his parents, grinning wildly as he talks about his progress. A few feet away, Killfeather stands alone, his teeth worrying his bottom lip as he looks around.

Wes and I have just reached Davies and his father when a flash of silver catches my peripheral vision.

I shift my head, and my heart drops to the pit of my stomach when the Merc from the gas station suddenly speeds up to the curb. I notice Killfeather take a step forward, looking even more agitated now.

The driver's door opens.

The bigot gets out of the car and addresses Killfeather in an annoyed voice. "Isn't there a closer parking lot?"

My goalie visibly gulps. "No. Only the one behind the building."

"I'll leave the car here then."

"It's a fire lane," Killfeather protests. "Just park in the lot, Dad. Please."

Oh shit. *Dad?*

Dread floods my stomach at the same time Killfeather Senior registers my presence. His head turns sharply, those dark eyes landing on me. Then on Wes.

As his lips curl in an angry sneer, only one thought runs through my head.

Fuck.

Damn it. I *knew* that fucker at the gas station had looked familiar. I hold my breath as my gaze locks with the man at the curb. But Mr. Killfucker doesn't make me hold it for long.

"No fucking way," he spits. "No *fucking* way. Where is Pat?"

"Right here," says a calm voice. Pat appears in the open doorway, a frown playing on his lips. "Is there a problem?"

"You're damn right there is. *This* is what's costing me thousands? I'm paying a couple of *perverts* to spend hours each day with my kid? That is fucking *bullshit*."

Heads are turning faster than on spectators at Wimbledon. And as I watch, Pat's face pales. His eyes bounce onto me for a fraction of a second, and my heart sinks.

I'm going to be a liability here. A fucking crater for Pat and his business.

Killfucker is also noticing all the other parental attention he's garnered. That's when he goes in for the kill. "I will not keep quiet about this."

Cue his son's involvement. "Dad!" the kid shouts. "What the hell are you saying?"

Pat's jaw hardens until it resembles a granite block. "You'll need to follow me, sir. If you're going to slander my NHL-bound coaching staff, you can do it in the privacy of my office." He turns around and disappears into the building.

I wait until Killfucker passes me. On his way up the steps he gives me an evil glare. Then I follow him inside. Right behind me is Jamie, his eyes downcast.

"I'm going to hear what he has to say," I whisper. "But you don't have to come."

Jamie gives me an exasperated glance and follows me anyway.

Fuck me sideways. I've just fucked up Jamie's final summer at Elites. This job he loves so much? Torpedoed by yours truly. He's going to rue the day he ever met me.

A minute later, the four of us gather in Pat's tiny office, and I flick the door shut.

Killfucker obviously knows not to hesitate before taking a shot. He lets it fly before Pat can speak first. "Don't try to tell me you don't know about these two. How the *fuck* could you hire them to work with impressionable teenagers?"

Pat takes a deep breath, but his face is red. "I have no idea what's set you off. Does someone want to fill me in?"

Jamie opens his mouth to speak, but I hold up a hand. I can feel myself shaking with anger, but my voice sounds reasonably steady. "Let's let Mr. Killfeather tell Coach Pat *exactly* what he saw." I turn to Killfucker. "And don't hold back, man. Tell him every detail."

This parry works, because Killfucker starts to look uncomfortable. I've just managed to use his own homophobia against him. He can't even get the words out, he's so disgusted. "They..." He clears his throat and points at me. "He kissed him."

And now I have to give Pat credit. There's a flash of surprise on his face, but he shuts it down only a nanosecond later.

I jump in again before Pat has a chance. "That's not a good enough description, man. What *else* did you see? I'm waiting to hear the perversion."

Killfucker shakes his head. "That was plenty, trust me."

"Really?" I snarl. "Where did I kiss Coach Canning?"

He's clearly finding my offensive play exasperating, so I know I'm on the right track. "At the gas station!"

"On what part of his body, dude?" Then I almost snicker, because now there's a throbbing vein in the center of Killfucker's forehead.

"Uh, *here*," he says, pointing at his cheek. "But that's not the point."

I keep pushing. "Really? Because I think it is *exactly* the point. I've known Jamie forever, and he'd just told me something important about his career, and I hugged him. With one arm. Don't skim on the details, okay? I *comforted* my friend in all that gory detail—half a hug and a kiss on the cheek. Slap the cuffs on me, why don't you?" I put my wrists out straight.

Killfucker is about to explode. "But I saw... I think you two *clearly*..."

Pat jumps in now. "It really doesn't matter what you think. *This* is your big problem? A G-rated private moment between friends?"

"Friends who—"

"Not your business!" Pat shouts him down. "Not mine, either. I've never seen my coaches do anything inappropriate. They are *all business* on that rink. And that's what you're paying for, sir."

"No!" counters Killfucker. "I'm paying for good judgment, and I will tell whoever is willing to listen that you don't screen your employees. You're just waiting for disaster, anyway. These two cause a stir and—"

Pat cuts him off. "The only *stir* Coach Canning caused was the day his girlfriend showed up at the rink. And your son made an inappropriate comment about her anatomy."

Killfucker's mouth falls open. "Then it's worse than you know, Coach, because Mr. Canning here obviously gets around. Because I *know* what I saw. And my son and I are out of here."

Shit. Poor Killfeather. He's got this ass for a dad, and he gets yanked from camp?

Pat's face is a stone. "You're free to do as you wish. But if you slander my coaches to anyone I will *not* take it lying down."

"Not like *they* do, huh?"

After issuing this parting shot, Killfucker leaves.

The office is left in a deafening silence. The only sound is Pat's loud sigh, until Jamie tries to say something. "Coach, I..."

Pat holds up a hand. "Just give me a minute to think."

Chastened, Jamie is silent again. He doesn't glance at me, though, and I wish he would.

"Okay," Coach says. "You two can head back to your room, I'll text you when it's clear how this jackass is going to play it. And I want to apologize, Jamie, for bringing up that bit about your female friend..."

"Not necessary," he says quickly.

But Pat is shaking his head. "No. It shouldn't matter! I don't give two fucks if you have a girlfriend or not. But I let him get me flustered. The fact that the situation took me by complete surprise only means you've both behaved impeccably."

Now *that's* not true. Good thing Coach Pat doesn't follow us around when we're skinny-dipping and fucking in the car.

"I've run this camp for twenty years," he adds, looking us each in the eye in turn. "There have been times when I've had to ask staff to be more discreet. But that is not the case here."

And now Jamie is the color of a tomato. He looks like he'd happily activate any trapdoors in Pat's office floor.

My fists finally unclench. “Pat? I apologize if I’m making your day more complicated, but I’m not going upstairs to wait for your text. We’re supposed to be scrimmaging, right? I don’t run. My private life is my business. Not many people know my secret. But if some asshole decides to confront me, I *never* duck him. That only looks weak. I have every right to be here. I have every right to coach those kids.”

Pat squeezes the bridge of his nose. “Of course you do. I was just trying to shield you from any more ignorant bullshit. Get your skates on, then. Fuck ’im.”

Jamie

Maybe it makes me a pussy, but I take Pat up on his offer to sit this scrimmage out. I'm not afraid of Killfeather's dad. And I'm not afraid to have people whisper about me.

But what I am is *sad*. And I don't want it to show.

Before today I didn't really understand what Wes was up against. I'd never heard anyone give a homophobic rant except in movies. I didn't know that one man in a hundred-thousand-dollar car could wreak so much havoc.

Since everyone is supposed to be at the rink, the second floor of the dormitory sounds deserted as I turn my key in our lock. Inside, I stretch out on my bed.

Sad as I am, I can at least take one heart-lifting thing from this experience. One piece of insight I've been reluctant to give a label to.

I'm...bisexual.

Yep, I know, not exactly a mind-blowing M. Night Shyamalan plot twist over here, but it's the first time I've allowed the word to take root in my consciousness. I'm bisexual, and it's not just a physical connection I feel with Wes.

I can also see myself in a *relationship* with him. I can see myself being happy with him and never feeling like things were lacking.

I'd had this idea I could find a job near Toronto. That Wes and I could keep up... whatever it is we are to each other. But that isn't going to happen. Wes all but told me to go to Detroit. He *needs* me to stay four hours away.

We only have the summer, he'd said the night we argued. He was right. That's all we're going to get.

Some time later I hear a commotion out in the hallway. The place echoes, so even though Killfeather's room is on the opposite end of the building it's easy to hear him. "I don't *want* to leave!" he yells after a door bangs open.

"You *will* get your ass in my car right now."

"You can't make me!" The kid is putting his best effort into the resistance. But I know very well who always wins these fights.

The voice that answers him is low and steely. "If you're not in that car in sixty seconds, you're not playing in the Labor Day tournament this year."

Ouch. Hit the kid where it hurts, why don't you?

I hear the inevitable—the sound of a suitcase rolling across the tile and feet on the stairs. When I look out the window a minute later, I see my goalie slouching toward the passenger seat, and his father heaving suitcases into the trunk. That asshole didn't even get a ticket for parking in the fire lane.

They peel off a minute later, and that's the end of the Killfeathers, both junior and senior.

I blow off the barbecue, too.

Since I've missed the scrimmage, Pat doesn't really need me, and I use the time to regroup. I need to face the fact that summer will end soon.

So I call my mom on her business phone—the one that’s always smudged with clay. “Hi baby!” she chirps when she answers. “Are you calling to tell me that you’re coming home?” The woman always cuts to the chase. With six kids, she’s always had to. There just aren’t enough hours in the day for small talk.

“I am, as a matter of fact. Coach Pat hasn’t replaced me yet, but I’m going to tell him I need that week off.”

“Excellent,” she says in the same tone of voice she’d always reserved for good report cards. “We need to see you before you join the NHL. While you still have all your teeth.”

“That’s uplifting,” I complain.

“I don’t know why my boys choose dangerous careers,” she says. “I always tell your brother to make sure he visits while he still has all his vital organs.”

My brother is a cop. “Gross, mom. And Scott has never drawn his weapon in the line of duty.”

“Truthfully, bullets aren’t his biggest problem right now.” She fills me in on the fact my brother has moved back home for a little while. He’s the one whose girlfriend recently dumped him. And since they lived together, he needed a temporary place to land.

“So he’s in his old room?” I ask, trying to picture it. Scott is twenty-eight years old.

“He is, but rarely. He’s picked up a lot of extra shifts lately. I think he’s just trying to stay busy.”

“Ouch,” I mumble.

“James,” my mother says sharply. “Why are you blue?”

“I’m not,” I try. But bullshitting my mother is impossible. You don’t raise six kids without having laser-sharp perceptive abilities.

She clucks her tongue. “If you say so. But I’ll be taking a good look at you later this month, young man. I’m going to make lasagna and hold it

under your nose while I grill you with questions.”

Mom’s lasagna is damn good. I’ll probably confess everything if she does that. “Can’t wait,” I say truthfully. Home sounds pretty good right now.

“Love you, Jamie boy,” she says. “Buy your plane ticket.”

“I will.”

Talking to Mom has improved my mood. So I go out and treat myself to a bacon cheeseburger in a bar on Main Street. While I eat it, I watch the Red Sox lose, and think of Wes. He’s at the barbecue right now, where parents are probably grilling him about the NHL recruitment process. And he’s the best man to answer their questions.

That’s not me brooding—that’s just a fact. Wes has always wanted to play in the NHL. It’s the first thing he told me about himself when we met as teenagers.

Me? I chose hockey because my brothers had already broken every football record our high school had ever recorded. I love hockey. But you can’t ever say I love it more than Wes does. Because nobody loves hockey more.

When I get back to the dorm, the place is still empty. I brush my teeth and dig out a military thriller I’d brought with me to camp and haven’t had time to read. I slide into bed in my underwear. Maybe Wes will come home in the mood to burn off some tension.

I fall asleep with the book on my chest.

Some time later I wake to the sound of the key turning in the lock. Bleary, I blink at Wes as he walks over to my bed.

“How was it?” I ask, my voice rough from sleep.

Wes doesn’t answer me. But he removes the book and sets it on the floor.

“You okay?”

He's still silent, but it doesn't seem weird. Because he's perched on the side of my bed now, just admiring me. Lifting one hand, he pushes my overgrown hair off my forehead. Then he bends down and kisses the cheek that had caused all the trouble earlier. In the exact same spot.

The brush of his lips makes me shiver and lean in for more.

Soft lips continue to press kisses on my face. On my neck. Their gentleness feels unfamiliar to me now. And the contrast between the size and strength of this man and the softness of his touch makes goosebumps rise on my chest.

A warm hand lands on the juncture between my legs, settling over the thin fabric of my underwear. The gentle pressure encourages me to roll my hips into his hand. A little friction would feel terrific right now. But all I get is the soft sweep of his thumb across my groin.

Apparently Wes is in the mood to torture me with kindness. And I'm in the mood to let him. Sinking into the bed, I close my eyes while he bathes me with soft kisses and even softer touches. When I reach up to put my hands on his chest, he corrects me, gently moving my hands back down onto the mattress.

"Fine. Be that way," I grumble.

He doesn't even chuckle. Instead, he clicks off my lamp and begins to shed his clothing. Every scrap. I lie there on my back while my eyes grow accustomed to the dark, admiring each newly exposed inch of smooth skin and hard muscle. An impressive erection bobs against his stomach. I want to sit up and take him in my mouth, but I wait lazily instead. Whatever Wes has planned, I'm pretty sure I'm going to enjoy it.

Then he's bending over me, kissing the strip of exposed skin between my T-shirt and my briefs. "Mmm," I sigh. I'm so hard, and he hasn't really even touched me yet. His hands slide into the elastic of my shorts and I lift my hips. *Whoosh*, they're gone. The next second, he puts a hand across my mouth and then deep-throats my cock in one gulp.

The heat and pressure are so swift and shocking it's a miracle I don't bite his hand. Wes works me over with his eager mouth, while my stomach quivers and my hips roll. Jesus Christ. I know we have to be absolutely silent, but I may not survive it.

By the time he releases me with a pop, I'm trembling everywhere. Wes disappears from my line of vision for a moment. When he returns with a condom and a bottle of lube, I sigh with relief.

He offers me a hand, and I take it, allowing him to pull me into a sitting position so he can remove my T-shirt. Then he straddles my thighs, crouching there on his knees. For the first time since he walked into the room, we're kissing for real. And I'm so hungry for it. All the softness from a few minutes ago burns off like steam, leaving a brush fire in its wake. These kisses are hard and molten. I capture Wes's tongue in my mouth and suck hard.

He moans—the first real sound I've heard from him tonight—and I swallow the sound down my eager throat. On his knees, he ruts slowly against my body, our chests bumping, our cocks aching. Wanting him hurts so good.

Eventually he sits back a bit, breaking our kiss. I reach for the condom, hoping to move things along. But he takes it out of my hand, tearing the package.

Instead of sheathing himself, he reaches down and rolls it onto my cock. The breath halts in my chest. "Really?"

Wes kisses me instead of answering. Another tongue-tangling scorcher. Then he pops open the lube and applies some to his own hand. He reaches back, a serious expression on his face. I can tell when he penetrates himself, because he bites his lip.

"Let me do that for you," I whisper. I lube up my hand and reach between his legs. Wes puts both fists on the bed and leans into my body, kissing my jaw.

I caress his taint, and he sighs into my ear. When I finger his crease, he lays his head on my shoulder. “That’s it,” I breathe. When I penetrate him, he freezes for a second. Then I hear him take a deep breath, and I feel him relax.

He’s hot and tight and like nothing I’ve ever felt. I ease inside. He alternately fights me and then relaxes. I stop to apply a ridiculous amount of lube to my hand. And now I’m able to reach his spot. I move my finger in a beckoning motion, and he shivers against my body.

Wes’s face is still buried in my neck. I like it there. I wish he’d never leave.

Wes

I'm struggling.

That's the theme of today, apparently: flat-out struggle. But this is a struggle I've chosen. Letting another man into my body isn't easy for me. I don't know why. It just isn't.

I want to, though. Every time I tense up against the intrusion, I tell myself the same thing: *this is Jamie. It's okay.* And then I'm able to relax. Jamie's taking it slowly. He reads me in the way a talented goalie would. He's firm and gentle in this as in all other things.

Fuck. I love him so much.

Today was another reminder of the way things are. The first time I ever touched Jamie, I pretended to be giving him something when in truth I was *taking*. He forgave me, of course. Unfortunately, this summer has been more of the same. I give him my affection. And in return, I put him at the mercy of assholes like Killfucker.

Today Jamie lost his star player. He'll probably never see that kid again. And it's all my fault.

Jamie's free hand warms my back while his other one preps me. "Baby," he whispers. "Can you take more?"

I nod into his neck. A second finger joins the first one. At first I struggle against the burn. *It's Jamie. It's okay.* Another deep breath and I make myself relax.

"That's it," he urges. "I want you to ride me, okay? And when you come, I want you to shoot all over my chest."

A bolt of lust races down my spine. I bear down on his fingers, and I'm rewarded with a brush against my prostate. Yes. That zing of pleasure makes me shiver, and I can feel Jamie's smile against my cheek.

After a few minutes, he gets me to three fingers. I start riding his hand in small thrusts. He murmurs encouragement while I ask my body for a little more stretch. It's been years since I tried this. I was hoping it would just seem easy, but like everything else in my life, I have to work for it.

But I do it. And it leaves me with yet another reason to appreciate Jamie. My daring, big-hearted man. He does this for me, and he makes it look easy.

He's amazing.

I sit up a little straighter, kissing him hard to let him know I'm ready. Jamie's mouth welcomes me in. I take a few more exquisite sips of him. For courage. Then I rise up on my knees, readying myself for him.

Jamie settles himself so he's propped up on the headboard, pillows at his back. He applies some lube to his cock, and the sight of him rubbing himself makes my mouth water. He positions himself beneath me.

Right then, with those brown eyes looking up, full of lust for me, he's the sexiest thing I've ever seen.

So I do it. I sink down onto his dick. Jamie's mouth opens on a silent groan, and those beautiful eyes go half-mast. The burn returns, but it's nothing I can't handle. I give myself a minute to adjust, and I use the time to take Jamie's gorgeous face in my hands. For a second I just admire the view. He's flushed and sex-tousled, burning up with arousal. I came to Lake

Placid hoping we could still be friends. I got much more than that. And I'm so grateful.

The kiss I give him tries to let him know that. He's almost whimpering into my mouth now, so maybe he hears me. I give my hips an experimental thrust, and I like the results. So I brace my hands on Jamie's shoulders and begin to slowly fuck myself on him. I shift my hips until I get the angle just right. And when I do, it's miraculous. Pleasure pulses through my body each time I thrust. It's so, so good.

Beneath me, Jamie takes my weeping cock in hand. His lips are parted, his throat working. I see yearning anywhere I look at him. It's in the set of his jaw and in the ripple of his forearm while he jacks me.

He licks his lips. "If you come, you'll take me with you."

Now that he's said it, I really want to. Closing my eyes, I slow my pace and focus on the pleasure of each stroke. Out and in blur together. There's only the ruffle of bliss I get from him.

When I open my eyes again, it's Jamie's expression that finally takes me there. It's a cocktail of desire and wonder so potent that I feel myself tip over the edge. "Jamie," I gasp, chasing the sensation. Leaning into it.

I shoot and he shudders beneath me. I collapse on his messy chest before it's over. My lips land beside his ear and I moan quietly while my ass clenches around his cock.

"Jesus," he whispers.

Indeed. I wrap my arms around him and hold on for as long as I dare.

I honestly don't know how I'm ever going to give him up when summer comes to an end.

Jamie

Camp is almost over. Seriously, these past five weeks have flown by. And now there's one week left and I can't wrap my brain around it. I guess time flies when you're playing hockey every day and getting laid every night.

As the afternoon scrimmage winds down, the kids are in high spirits. Correction—the offensive players are in high spirits. My goalies, on the other hand, are grumpy as hell. It was a high-scoring game for both sides, and there was no stopping Wes's forwards today.

Killfeather's absence is definitely noticeable. He had real talent. *Has*, I correct myself, because it's not like the kid dropped dead. His gay-bashing father decided that pulling his son from one of the most prestigious training facilities in the country was a *smart* move. You know, because Elites is crawling with perverts. Moron.

I skate over to the net, where my fifteen-year-old goalie lingers, scowling as he removes his helmet.

"I was dog shit today," Brighton informs me.

"You had an off day," I say with a smile. "But you weren't dog shit. You stopped more than you let in."

"I let in *seven*."

“It happens, kid. You did everything right out there.” I’m not lying—Brighton heeded every piece of advice I gave him today. Just happened that Wes’s advice to his forwards was better.

I blow my whistle to signal my other goalie, who looks equally glum as he skates over to us.

“I played like—”

“Let me guess, dog shit?” I cut in, grinning at Bradowski. “Yeah, Brighton and I just went over that. But you guys played hard today, and you played *well*. I don’t want you going back to the dorm and sulking all night, okay?”

“Okay,” they say in unison, but it doesn’t sound too convincing.

I sigh. “Look at it this way. Brighton, you let in seven out of—” I call out to Georgie as he skates by us. “How many shots did Wes’s boys take on net?”

“Thirty-five,” Georgie calls back without stopping.

“Seven out of thirty-five,” I tell Brighton. I do some quick math. “That’s twenty percent. And Bradowski, you had eight get by you, but stopped about as many as Brighton. It’s not a terrible statistic.” I chuckle. “Coach Wesley and I used to challenge each other to shootouts all the time when we were training here. There were days when he’d slap five shots at me and every single one would hit its mark.”

Wes’s ears must be burning, because he suddenly appears beside me. “Everything okay here?”

“Yep. Just telling the boys about how you used to smoke my ass in shootouts.”

When his brows shoot up, I realize he’s thinking about the last time we faced off. Awesome. Now I’m thinking about it too, and I hope to God the kids don’t see the blush on my cheeks.

“Yeah, Canning didn’t stand a chance against me,” Wes says, recovering quickly. “On either side of the goal, actually. Didn’t matter if I was holding

the stick or wearing the goalie pads—he lost every time.”

I narrow my eyes. “Bullsh—uh, bullcrap. Are you forgetting who won the last one?”

I have to give Wes credit—he doesn’t even blink this time, even though we both know he’s remembering the outcome of that last shootout.

The boys snicker. “Rematch,” Brighton blurts out.

Bradowski’s eyes light up. “Shit! Yes!”

Wes and I exchange a look. We should really be hustling the kids into the showers so they’re not late for dinner, but the boys aren’t having it. Bradowski and Brighton are already whizzing away, calling out to the teenagers who haven’t made it to the tunnel yet.

“Coach Canning and Coach Wesley are having a shootout!”

Well, then. I guess it’s time for a shootout.

Wes winks at me and says, “Same stakes?”

“Damn straight.”

We both grin at my choice of words.

Ten minutes later, we’re suited up and getting in position. Our audience has grown—even the coaches are gathered around the boards, Pat included. I’m wearing full pads, because no way am I leaving myself unprotected while Toronto’s new forward fires bullets at me.

Wes shows off his flashy moves as he skates toward the blue line, then stops and looks right at me. The wicked gleam in his eyes makes my pulse race. I can practically hear his unspoken taunt—*get ready to suck my dick, Canning*.

I take a breath and tap my stick against the ice. A whistle blows, and then Wes comes barreling toward me. One lightning-fast slapshot, and a loud cheer echoes in the rink. *Goal*.

Shit. He’s not pulling any punches today. I brush it off and focus, defending against his next two shots and drawing my own cheers from the crowd.

Wes grins at me as he lines up the next puck. “Ready for this?”

The asshole has just repeated the same words he’d said to me last night right before he’d shoved his cock in my ass. All about the mind games, my boyfriend.

Wait, *what?*

The puck flies past me and I don’t even stand a chance, because my brain is still tripping over that last thought.

My boyfriend? I thought I’d resigned myself to the fact that we weren’t going to be together. And now I’m thinking of him as my *boyfriend*?

I shrug the cobwebs from my head and force myself to concentrate on defending the net. When my glove swallows up the last puck, I breathe in relief. I only let in two. Which means I need to score on him twice to tie, three for the win. Considering he’s nowhere near as good as me in the crease, I can already taste the victory.

But he looks way too comfortable in front of that net. His gray eyes mock me behind the mask, and when he calls out, “Show me what you’ve got,” there’s laughter in his voice.

Cocky bastard thinks he can actually stop me.

Fuck. The cocky bastard *does* stop me. My first shot lands in his glove.

I grit my teeth and try to deke him out with the second attempt, but his hawk-like gaze isn’t fooled. He stops this one with his pads, the next one with his stick. Shit. I need to sink the next two to tie.

The kids whoop in delight when my fourth attempt proves fruitful. It flies past Wes’s shoulder and hits the net.

“Last shot,” he says in a singsong voice. “You’re totally gonna blow it, Canning!”

I know exactly what kind of blowing he’s talking about.

Brighton gets a drum roll going by tapping his hands on the boards, and the other kids quickly follow suit. The beat matches the steady thumping of

my heart. I take a breath, then skate forward. I pull my arm back, assess, and release a slapshot.

The puck hisses in the air.

I miss.

The kids go nuts as Wes leaves the net and skates up and down the boards to accept their high fives. I watch him in suspicion, wondering when he'd gotten so good at defending against the puck. Four years ago he'd been totally inept.

Shrugging the thought away, I accept my condolences from my goalies, who actually look kinda pleased I lost. I guess it made them realize even the best goaltenders suck sometimes.

As the kids file toward the locker rooms, Wes skates his way over to me and raises one eyebrow. "You're either slacking on your shooting drills, or you let me win that."

"Didn't let you win," I say through clenched teeth. Except then a thought occurs to me. That last shootout before college... had *he* let *me* win? Because the guy I saw in the net today was *not* the one I saw there four years ago...

I'm about to ask him point-blank when Pat interrupts us. "Canning," he says, appearing near the bench. "A word."

Wes claps a hand over my shoulder. "I'll see you in the dining hall."

We skate off in opposite directions, but Pat doesn't speak until Wes is well out of earshot.

"I got a call from a friend in Toronto this morning." As usual, Pat gets right to the point.

I tense up. "About the possibility of me coaching?"

He nods. "My buddy's name is Rodney Davenport. He's with the OHL, coaches one of the Junior A teams in the league. He's in Ottawa, but he's tight with the head coach of the Toronto team—Bill Braddock. He spoke to Braddock on your behalf."

Surprise jolts through me. “He did?”

“I told Davenport all about you. Vouched for you.” Pat shrugs. “You’ve got an interview in Toronto on the twenty-eighth.”

“I do?” I’m dumbfounded. A part of me hadn’t expected Pat to actually come through for me.

“It’s an assistant coach position, defensive coordinator for a major juniors team, so you’d be working with kids ages sixteen to twenty. The interview is just a formality, though. The league was highly impressed with your level of experience.”

Well, goddamn. I guess all those years of coaching here at Elites are coming in handy.

“I...” I don’t know what to say. But then I realize there’s an important question to address. “If I’m in Toronto with...” I clear my throat. I’m not ashamed; it’s just that I’ve never had any practice talking about this. “What if there are other men like Mr. Killfeather?”

Pat yanks a piece of paper from his shirt pocket. “This is the league’s anti-discrimination policy. I looked it up. Everything is, uh, covered.”

I skim the words on the page. The league has pledged not to discriminate on the basis of race, religion, creed or sexual orientation.

“That’s...helpful,” I say, and Pat grins. “July twenty-eighth, huh?” Shit. That’s next week, and three days before I report to Detroit. *If* I report to Detroit. The thought of showing up at training camp grows less and less appealing the closer it gets to the date.

Do I want to play in the pros?

Or do I want to help young, talented kids *get* to the pros?

“Braddock needs an answer by the end of the week,” Pat tells me.

“They had another candidate they were considering, so if you decide not to interview for the gig, they’ll most likely give it to him.”

My mind is still reeling, indecision surging through me. I should really talk to Wes before I do anything. He made it more than clear he won’t be

dating anyone when he's in Toronto. He *told* me to go to Detroit.

So yeah, I need to talk to him before I make any decisions.

But I have a sinking feeling I know exactly what he's going to say.

Wes

Canning is acting weird. He barely said a word during dinner, and then he vetoed my suggestion about catching a movie in town, saying he just wanted to go back to the room.

As we climb the dormitory steps in silence, I wish I knew what was going on in that sexy head of his. He doesn't seem angry, or even upset. More like worried, which is so unlike Jamie it worries *me*.

"So what did Pat want to talk to you about earlier?" I'm trying to make conversation, but my question has the opposite effect.

"Just some coaching stuff," he answers. And then he clams up again.

I smother a sigh and follow him up to the second floor, admiring the way his faded jeans hug his ass. We've been in shorts and flip-flops all summer, but it's surprisingly cool out tonight, so now I get to experience Jamie in jeans. He looks fucking spectacular.

"Wanna watch something on your laptop?" I ask as I enter our room. "Cassel sent me this hilarious video of—"

His lips are on mine before I can finish that sentence.

Jamie pushes me up against the door and jams his tongue in my mouth, and I instinctively kiss him back despite the WTF bells going off in my

head. He grips my waist and grinds his lower body against mine, groaning roughly.

Jesus Christ. I'm not sure where this sudden onslaught of passion came from, but my dick sure appreciates it. After a minute or two, I'm an iron spike behind my zipper. Jamie notices, and his hands are almost frantic as he fumbles for the button of my jeans.

"Owe you a blowjob," he mumbles.

Right. The shootout. I'd forgotten about the prize. Not that it matters, seeing as we blow each other regularly without needing a shootout to justify it.

He tugs my pants and boxers down my hips, sinking to his knees with damn near desperation. The alarms in my head blare louder.

"Hey." I thread my fingers through his hair to still his frenzied movements. "What's gotten into you?"

"Nothing yet." He licks the head of my cock, and I see stars. "But I'm hoping *this* will get into me pretty soon."

Then he takes my entire length in his mouth, proving without a doubt he's picked up a few new tricks this summer. He can deep-throat like a champ now, and normally I'm all over that.

Tonight, something feels off.

His urgency thickens the air. I lean back against our door and try to give myself over to him, but in spite of his magic mouth, I can't quite focus. Slipping a hand under his chin, I urge him upward. "Come here."

Jamie gives one more good suck, which I feel down to my toes. When he stands, I turn us around so his back is to the door. Cupping his chin in both hands, I examine his gorgeous face. His cheeks are flushed, and his big brown eyes are full of some emotion I can't quite read.

I'm going to find out what's up, but first I kiss him. Once. Twice. "Canning," I whisper. "We don't fuck until you tell me what's on your mind."

His eyes drop. "I might coach next year," he says, his voice hoarse.

"Really?" That's an idea I didn't know he'd considered. Depending on the job, it might be an interesting solution to his goalie woes. Though a part of me still thinks he'd be nuts to throw away a professional hockey career. "Where?"

"There's a defensive coordinator job for a major junior team..." He swallows. "In Toronto."

In Toronto. The words ricochet through my mind. For the briefest of seconds, my heart takes off like a rocket. I might have gotten around to giving a whoop of inappropriate glee, except I'm still staring into Jamie's wary eyes. He's always been the smarter of the two of us.

But I'm a quick study. So it's only a half-second later when my chest tightens, and my hands slip from his face. He actually flinches when they fall away.

I can't be with Jamie in Toronto. Because if we're found out, there won't be any reason for me to be in that city at all. I'm a fucking rookie, hoping to be lucky enough to make myself valuable to the team.

Another few seconds go by before I can bring myself to point this out to him. Because it's Jamie Canning we're talking about here. The odds of me ever loving anyone else like I love him are about as good as being attacked by a shark.

In Toronto.

But Jamie's odds of moving on are exponentially better. We've had a lot of fun this summer, but it can't possibly mean to him what it means to me. This beautiful man is probably more straight than not. And even if I'm wrong about that, there are now twice as many available partners for him on the planet than there were six weeks ago.

He can have anyone. And I won't ask him to wait around for me.

"Say something," he mutters.

I don't want to. There's heat behind my eyes, and my throat might crack. But I won't pussy out. He deserves my honesty for once.

"We can't be together in Toronto," I say.

Just six little words. But they make his eyes turn red.

"I'm sorry," I add. Sorry doesn't even begin to describe it.

He sidesteps me, moving away from the door. I take a moment to tuck myself back into my jeans. By the time I've done up my zipper, Jamie has made a frantic change into a pair of running shorts. He stuffs his feet into his shoes, not even taking the time to lace them.

"Going for a run," he grunts.

When he moves for the door, I move out of the way. It's precisely the opposite maneuver than I want to perform, and my heart is screaming at me to call him back.

But the door opens and shuts again with a snap, and he's gone.

Panicking now, I hurry over to our window. A minute later he bursts off the front porch and goes running down the street, shoelaces still trailing behind him.

Even after he's out of view, I need a minute of calm breathing to compose myself. I can't believe I just did that. It's not what I want. My thoughts zip around like a pinball while I search my brain for a solution to the problem.

But there isn't one. I've just spent a decade of my life trying to get this job in Toronto. I have a college degree in communications, like every other fucking jock on the planet. And a father who will have me tarred and feathered if I fuck up in Toronto.

Jamie Canning was my first crush and my first love. But he was never mine to have.

There's one silver lining here. Just one. I know Jamie's pissed right now because he's feeling rejected. That's never fun. But I know in my gut he'll move on. The Hollys of the world are waiting to take him back. Some cute

girl will catch his eye before the week is through, and a few months from now, today's disaster will be just a bad memory.

As will I.

I swallow that thought down, then look on the closet floor for my suitcase.

Jamie

It's Sunday dinner at my parents' house in San Rafael, California. This time I'm not seeing it on Skype—I'm prepping the pasta course myself. I've minced a mountain of garlic, diced several onions and chopped a mountain of olives. We'll be ten for dinner tonight—the eight of us plus Tammy's husband and Jess's new boyfriend. Mom has had me in the kitchen for an hour and a half, and we're nowhere near ready.

As it happens, cooking is very therapeutic. I've got something to do with my hands, and I don't have to look anyone in the eye.

I've been home for forty-eight hours, and Mom is circling like a shark. She knows something is seriously wrong with me. All I've told her is that I'm having a career crisis. She knows about the interview scheduled three days from now, which conflicts with the fact that I'm supposed to be in Detroit six days from now.

Everything I've told her is true. But it's not *all* the truth. Choosing between two career paths is big stuff, but it's not nearly as painful as what Wes has done to me.

After that awful scene in our room, I went out to run. Three miles later, Wes was gone. I don't mean gone out for a drink—he was gone from camp.

All his clothing had disappeared from our closet. His toiletries were gone.
His skates were gone.

I knew without asking that he wasn't coming back. When I went down to breakfast the next morning, Pat's face was full of sympathy. And when I asked Pat if he was sure he had enough coaches on hand the following week for me to take off for Cali, he said yes without even an argument.

I've spent the last two days trying not to mope around my room. Coincidentally, my parents' garden is well weeded. I've lost to my father at chess four times. And I finally finished that book I'd brought to camp.

But I just *ache* from the loss of my best friend / boyfriend / whatever. We never did get around to putting a label on it. And now we never will.

"Fuck!" I curse as the paring knife slices the top of my finger. The knife slips from my hand when I pinch the cut closed.

"James." My mother's voice is gentle. "Maybe you need a break." She doesn't even complain about the F-bomb I just dropped. So I must be acting like a real head case. "Let me find you a bandage," she says instead.

Two minutes later she's covered the wound. "I can sauté one-handed," I offer.

"How about you tell me what's bothering you instead?"

Now, I *could* do that. My parents wouldn't flinch at the idea of me being involved with a man. They're both California hippies all the way to the core. And if Wes and I had stayed together, I'd share it in a heartbeat. But there's no point in telling the story now. I'd just be buying myself a lifetime of teasing from my siblings. ("You need to know which shirt goes with those pants? Ask Jamie. He was gay once for a few weeks.") You can't just give five siblings that kind of ammo unless it's relevant.

And anyway, I'm saved from answering my mother's questions, because the kitchen door bangs open as the first wave begins to arrive.

"Jamester!" my sister Tammy yells. "Here. Hold this."

Before I can argue, there's a toddler in my arms.

“Fresh meat!” my sister cackles. And her husband slips past us both to get himself a beer.

I look down at the baby. “Um, hi,” I say to Ty. I haven’t seen him in two months, and I swear he’s doubled in size.

“Hah,” he answers around the four fingers he’s got jammed in his mouth. Then he removes his drooly little hand and uses it to grab my nose.

The size of Tammy’s smile doubles. “Good to have you back, kid.” Tammy is thirty, but she’s been calling me “kid” since she was twelve and I was four.

Ty and I fetch a beer from the refrigerator and head out to the deck where there’s a sweeping view of the San Rafael bay in the distance. My parents bought this house thirty-four years ago before Joe was born. That’s the only reason they can afford this sweet view in a great neighborhood. The house itself received two half-hearted additions as the family grew. We call it the Hodge Podge Lodge. In its current configuration, there are five bedrooms. As the youngest, I had my own room in this house for exactly one year before leaving for college. My life was a series of bunk beds, fights over the best-flavored cereals, and loud family meals.

I fucking love it here.

“I think I need to add a third thing to the list,” I tell Ty. When I look down at him, he’s staring back with wide brown eyes that are not unlike my own. “Detroit, Toronto or California?” I ask him.

Ty scrunches up his face and appears to consider the question. He’s thinking about it *hard*. But then there’s a small gassy sound. His face relaxes just as I begin to smell something foul.

“Did you just take a crap on my watch?” I ask the baby.

He gazes back, all innocence.

“There he *is*! Jamie!”

I spin around to find my other sister, Jess. And before she can react, I’ve walked over and handed her the baby. Then I give her a big kiss on the

cheek. “Good to see you, sis.”

“Did you just hand me a poopy nephew?”

“Is that what that smell is?”

“You!” Jess sputters. She and I are the youngest of the family. She’s twenty-five, and the sibling I feel closest to. Which means we drive each other insane.

“No backsies,” I add.

She rolls her eyes. “Fine. I’ll go find the diaper bag. Get a beer for Raven, would you? Do something useful.” She leaves the deck, walking past a man I’ve never seen before.

“You’re...” Did she say *Raven*? What the hell kind of name is that?

“Raven,” he says, and he holds out a fist for me to bump.

Seriously? I bump it, so as not to be rude.

“You’re the hockey player,” he says. His voice is kind of smoky, I realize.

“Sure,” I reply noncommittally. Because who the hell knows what I’ll decide to do by the end of the week.

“Cool,” he says, sounding rather stoned. My sister sure can pick ’em. But when Raven puts his hip against the deck railing and crosses his arms, I notice the tats peeking out from the sleeves of his T-shirt and the curve of his bicep. Not bad.

Jesus Christ—now I’m checking out my sister’s boyfriend. Argh! *Fuck you, Ryan Wesley. You see what you made me do?* But that’s a ridiculous thought, and now I have the sudden urge to laugh like a hyena.

“You,” I choke back a laugh, “want a beer?”

“Sure,” he grunts. He’s a real talker, our Raven. If Wes were here he’d...

Right.

Sigh.

Dinner is loud and fun, the way it's always been. Listening to my brothers' smack talk, I forget about Wes for a couple of hours at least.

"We got one professional athlete in the family," Scotty whines, "and he wastes it on hockey."

"It's not too late," his twin Brady argues. "Jamie could take up football. The Niners need defense, too."

"I've got it all figured out," my dad announces. "Jamie's team plays Anaheim in November..."

My stomach drops, because there's almost no chance he would see me play in that game.

"Which means we could all go to a Niners game together!" my father finishes.

Typical. At least if I do give up on the NHL, nobody will be too upset.

We tease Tammy about her round belly. And we tease Joe about his thinning hair. And when it's my turn to be teased, I hardly even hear it.

The day flies by in a whirl of gossip and taunts. Now the dishes are done and the peach pie is eaten up. Most of the clan has gone home, and it's down to me, my parents, Brady, and Scotty, who is staying here right now.

We're on the deck again, feet up on the railing, watching the sun go down as Scotty tells me his tale of woe. "She said, 'I don't want to be married to a cop.' And—

honest to God—I tried to figure out how not to be one. I have a degree in criminal justice and seven years of work experience. And I seriously thought of chucking it."

My brother's voice is rough, and I feel a hell of a lot more than a simple pang of sympathy.

"But then I realized that it probably wouldn't matter. If she loved me, the job wouldn't matter. But she didn't. Not enough anyway."

Okay, *check, please*. There's a small but statistically significant chance I'm going to be crying into my beer in a minute. And won't that be fun to

explain?

“At least I know I did everything I could,” he adds. “I told her that I loved her, that I wanted the real deal. I made my case, and I made it strong. So I have no regrets.”

Fuck. It’s not like I can say the same thing. Wes pushed me away, and what did I do? I went for a run. I let him sneak off like a thief in the night. I didn’t say, “I love you.” I did not say it. Instead, I just choked it back.

I am a moron.

“Jamie?” my mother says gently.

“What?” I croak.

“You okay over there?”

Where do mothers get that ability? It’s so fucking inconvenient. “I’m fine,” I mutter, convincing nobody.

“Whoever she is, honey... If she matters to you, I hope you’ll tell her.”

Argh. I guess there’s someone else I’ll need to see after that interview in Toronto.

I approach the floor-to-ceiling windows of my potential apartment's living room, gazing at the panoramic view of Toronto's waterfront. It's definitely the best view of all the other apartments I've looked at today, but the calm water of Lake Ontario reminds me too much of Lake Placid. Of Jamie.

But who am I kidding? *Everything* reminds me of Jamie. Last night I couldn't even sit at the hotel bar without remembering the roadside place back at camp, where we shared our first kiss. This morning I walked past a candy shop and thought of the purple Skittles he'd bought me. At the last apartment I toured, I spent ten minutes staring at the futon bed on the floor remembering the two mattresses we slid together at the dorm.

I can't escape Jamie Canning, no matter how hard I try.

"You're not going to find a better deal in this neighborhood," the realtor chirps. She waltzes over and stands next to me, admiring the view. "Rent this low for a two-bedroom Harbourfront condo? It's unheard of."

I turn away from the window to study the huge open-concept room. The apartment isn't furnished, but I can already imagine how it would look with furniture. Leather couch and massive flat screen in the living area. A dining room table. Some tall stools for the eat-in breakfast counter.

I can picture myself living here, no doubt about it. And I have to admit, I'm a lot less likely to break my self-imposed celibacy rule in this neighborhood. The gay scene isn't as prominent here compared to the other areas I visited. One apartment was down the street from not one, but *three* gay bars.

Not that I'm looking to hit up any bars and sample the meat market. The idea of being with anyone other than Jamie absolutely kills me.

"And I'm not sure if this is a plus or a minus for you," the realtor continues, "but the owners told me they're planning on selling in a year or two. If you're already living here and looking to invest in real estate in the city, you'd be in a great position to buy this place."

I frown. "What if they decide to sell earlier and I'm not interesting in buying? Will I have to pick up and move?"

She shakes her head. "You'll be signing a one-year lease. You're guaranteed the place until the lease is up."

Fuck it. "I'll take it," I tell her. Because honestly? I'm tired of apartment hunting. I just need a place to sleep. Doesn't matter where.

Either way, my heart won't be in it. My heart is back in Lake Placid. Or maybe it's in California. It goes wherever Jamie Canning goes.

I feel like such a shit for walking out on him like that. But I've never been good with goodbyes. Which just proves I'm as immature and thoughtless now as I was four years ago. I cut him out of my life back then too. I guess that's my "thing".

I really am an asshole.

Oblivious to my self-hatred, party of one, the realtor's face lights up. "Wonderful. I'll draw up the paperwork this evening."

Five minutes later, I step out of the glass lobby onto the sidewalk, breathing in the warm July air. There's a streetcar stop a block away, so I shove my hands in my pockets and head toward it. I just want to get back to

my hotel and spend the rest of the day doing nothing, but as I climb onto the streetcar, I decide against that.

I can't keep wallowing in misery. Canning and I are over. And in a few days, I'll be immersed in training, which won't leave me much time to explore my new home.

I grab a late lunch at a small café overlooking the lake, then wander around for a bit, slightly amazed by my surroundings. The streets are so clean, and the people are so damn polite. I can't even count how many times I hear the words "excuse me" and "sorry" and "thanks so much" in the two hours I spend exploring.

Eventually I go back to the hotel, where I take a quick shower before tackling the next item on the day's to-do list. Email agent—check. Find apartment—check.

Next up is a phone call to my father. Gee. Can't wait.

I dial my home number, then sit at the edge of the bed, already dreading hearing the sound of his voice. But my mom is the one who picks up the phone.

"Ryan, how nice to hear from you," she says in her crisp, emotionless tone.

Yeah, I'm sure she's thrilled. "Hi, Mom. How's everything in Boston?"

"It's lovely. I just walked through the door, actually. I was meeting with the historical society tonight. We're talking with the city about restoring the old library on Washington."

"Sounds fun." As if. "Is Dad around?"

"Yes. Let me ring him on the intercom for you."

Yup, our house in Beacon Hill has intercoms in every room, because that's how rich people roll. Who has time to walk into another room and hand someone a phone when they're so busy counting their piles of money?

My father comes on the line a moment later, greeting me coolly. "What is it, Ryan?"

Hello to you too, Dad. “Hey. I just wanted to talk to you about the *Sports Illustrated* interview.”

He immediately goes on guard. “What about it?”

“I’m not going to do it.” I pause. When he doesn’t respond, I hurry on. “Rookie seasons are too unpredictable, Dad.”

“I see.” His tone is clipped. “And this has nothing to do with you wanting to hide your...activities...from the magazine?”

“It’s not about that,” I insist. “I can’t have a reporter following me around for a whole year, especially if that year ends up being a bust.” I clench my teeth. “As for my *activities*, you don’t have to worry about that. As of this moment, it’s a non-issue.”

“I see,” he says again. “Then it *was* a phase. ” He sounds smug.

Yes, Dad. My sexuality is a phase. Who I am, to my very core, is a phase.

Bitterness clogs my throat, threatening to choke me alive. I can’t deal with him right now. Or ever. But especially right now.

“Anyway, I appreciate the opportunity, but the interview won’t be happening. Please thank your friend for me.”

I hang up without saying goodbye, then bolt to my feet, resisting the urge to hit something. Am I a bad person for hating my parents? No, for *loathing* them? Sometimes I feel like I’m going straight to hell for the thoughts I harbor.

Biting the inside of my cheek, I glance around the suite. I guess I can watch some TV. Order room service. Do *something* to distract myself from thinking about Jamie or my parents or my fucked-up life.

But it feels like the walls are closing in on me. I need to get out of this room. I need to get out of my *head*.

I grab my wallet and keycard, tuck them in my pocket, and hightail it out of the hotel. Once I’m on the sidewalk, I falter, because I honestly don’t know where the hell I’m going. I consider ducking into the bar across the

street for a drink, but I'm scared I won't stop at one. My first night in Toronto, I got blackout drunk, alternating between kneeling over the toilet puking my guts out, and curling up on my bed missing Jamie. I refuse to make that a habit.

I start walking. It's eight o'clock on a weekday, so stores are still open and the sidewalks are crowded. Nothing or no one catches my interest, though. So I keep walking. And then I walk some more, until the neon sign of a storefront in the distance snags my attention.

The tattoo parlor beckons me like a light at the end of a tunnel. I find myself walking toward it without really thinking about it, and suddenly I'm in front of the door.

I've been considering getting this done for a while now, but it felt too cheesy. Now, it feels bittersweet. And fitting.

I hesitate for a beat, then study the store hours posted next to the door. The shop's closing at nine. It's eight-twenty now. Chances are, it won't be enough time for the artist to see me, but I'm nothing if not impulsive.

A bell rings over the door as I stride inside and approach the longhaired guy behind the counter. He's in a black wife-beater, leaning back in a swivel chair with a magazine in his lap. His neck, arms and shoulders are covered in ink.

"Hey," he says easily. "How can I help you?"

"Do you take walk-ins?" I ask.

"Yep, but it depends on what you're getting done. Bigger pieces require multiple sittings." He gazes at the tats peeking out of my sleeves. "But you probably already knew that."

I look around, examining the photos plastered all over the walls. There are some incredible pieces up there. "Did you do all these?"

"Damn right I did." He grins. "Are you looking for a custom piece?"

"No, just something simple." I hold up my right wrist. "One line of text here."

“I can do that for you no problem.” He rises from his chair and sets the magazine aside, then talks prices with me.

It’s affordable, and I feel an instant trust toward the guy, so when he says, “Why don’t you come on back?” I follow him without any further questions.

He leads me through a dark curtain into a workspace that’s clean and uncluttered. That’s a good sign.

“I’m Vin,” he says.

I arch a brow. “Is your last name Diesel?”

He snickers. “Nope. It’s Romano. Vin’s short for Vincenzo. My family’s Italian.”

“I’m Wes.”

We shake hands, and then he gestures to the chair. “Have a seat.” After I sit down, he rolls up his sleeves and asks, “So what text do you want inked?”

I reach into my pocket for my phone, tapping on the screen to pull up the note I’d left in my notepad app. I find it, then hand him the phone. “Those numbers exactly.”

He studies the screen. “You want it as numerals or spelled out?”

“Numerals.”

“How big?”

“Half an inch maybe?”

Nodding, Vin grabs a sketchpad and scribbles down the numbers before handing the phone back. His pencil flies across the pad as he sketches something. A moment later, he holds up the page. “Something like this, maybe?”

I nod. “Perfect.”

“You’re easy to please.” With a grin, he quickly bustles around to prepare his station, grabbing supplies from a nearby cupboard while I scrutinize his every move. I’m pleased to see that the medical-grade needle

he brings over is packaged, which means this shop is disposing of the needles after every use.

Vin settles in front of me. He snaps on a pair of latex gloves, takes the needle out of its packaging, then reaches for the tattoo gun.

“So where is it?” he asks.

I wrinkle my forehead. “Where’s what?”

He swipes disinfectant over the inside of my right wrist. “Those numbers...they’re longitude and latitude, right? Coordinates? Where would I wind up on the map if I looked them up?”

“Lake Placid,” I say gruffly.

“Huh.” He looks intrigued. “Why Lake Placid? And feel free to tell me to mind my own business, if you want.”

I swallow. “No, it’s fine. The place means a lot to me, that’s all. I spent the best summers of my life there.”

Vin pours black ink into one of the plastic cups on the tray in front of him. “I hate the summer.”

I can’t help but grin. You’d think someone who deals with the frigid Canadian winter for half the year would welcome the hot weather. “Why’s that?”

“Because it always ends.” He lets out a glum sigh. “We get, what, two, three months? And then it’s gone and we’re back to shivering in our long johns. Summer’s a total cocktease.” He shrugs, repeating himself. “It always ends.”

He’s right about that. Summer always ends.

Jamie

I am nailing this interview. That's not me being cocky—it's just the truth.

My potential boss, Bill Braddock, is about forty years old, and a good guy, too. I can tell already. We've just spent forty minutes nerding out about the best methods for training forwards to be more responsible defensively. When Bill talks strategy, his eyes light up.

I want this job. I really do.

"Sorry," Bill says. "I got us off track again."

"That's quite all right," I answer. "This is the crux of it, right? Teaching kids to relax so they can defend their zone effectively."

He nods enthusiastically. "How did you learn to be so calm, anyway? I've seen your tape."

"Ah." I chuckle. "I'm the youngest of six kids. I was born into mayhem. It's all I know."

I've got Braddock laughing now. He actually slaps his own knee. "Priceless. Was it ever a drag?"

"Sure. When you have six kids, you're always losing one. And when you're the youngest, it's usually you. I remember standing in the cereal aisle of the grocery store, trying to decide between Cheerios and Chex. I'd

look up and everyone would be gone. Once they left me at a rest stop outside Lake Tahoe. At least they only got fifteen miles away before they realized I wasn't in the car."

Bill is red-faced from laughing. "How old were you?"

"Seven? Eight? I don't know. But I knew not to panic."

"Incredible." He chuckles, then reaches a hand across the desk. "Come to work for me, Jamie. I think we'll get along great."

I lean in for the handshake. "I'd like to do that."

"It's a big decision, you can take the weekend..."

Now I shake my head. "I *want* to coach. I don't need the weekend."

He sits back, his expression telling me he's impressed. "Well, all right then. Can I hook you up with a rental agency? Housing is going to be a little tricky. Toronto is expensive. We pay our coaches what we can, but nobody's getting rich..."

"Yeah, I'm going to need to sort that out." For the first time in an hour, I think of Wes. He might be only a few miles away right now, looking for an apartment, too.

I need to speak to him—I've already decided that. But then I'll have to find a way to put him out of my mind. I don't want to always be looking for his face when I walk down the street.

Moving on is going to be hard.

I stand up and offer my hand one more time. Bill shakes it, still smiling as if he's just won the lottery. At least I'll be working for a good man. I'm hoping that means good things about this organization, too.

"Let me know how I can help you get settled in," Bill says, rising from his chair. "I mean it. Shoot me an email if you have any questions about neighborhoods or whatever."

"I'll do that."

Five minutes later, I'm outside again on the streets of Toronto, loosening the tie I'd worn to my interview. I missed lunch today, so I take a

seat at an outdoor cafe on Lakeshore and order a wrap sandwich and iced coffee.

Toronto is a nice place. A big city, too. Somehow I have to find Wes today. I tried calling him this morning after I got off the plane, but his number has been disconnected. At first I'd panicked, thinking he'd gone to great lengths to shut me out. But when my phone carrier sent me a text explaining the international charges I was racking up in Canada, I realized Wes had probably switched to a Canadian carrier.

That has to be it, right?

Either way, I need another plan for reaching him quickly. I could go to the rink, but I doubt they'll let me just waltz in. And even if they do, Wes might not appreciate it...

My phone rings, startling me, and for a second my heart leaps. But of course the caller isn't Wes. The phone says HOLLY.

"Hi there," I answer, trying to keep my tone light. We haven't spoken since our awkward evening in Lake Placid, but I'm really hoping she meant what she said about us still being friends. "You'll never guess where I am right now."

She laughs, and the sound is comforting. "Not Detroit, then?"

"Nope. Toronto. I'm taking a coaching job."

"Really? That's great, Jamie. I'm so proud of you. Glad you went with your gut."

My heart swells a little. Everyone likes to hear they've done well.

"Thanks. It's going to be an adjustment. Canadian money is funny looking."

Holly giggles. "Why Toronto? Are you going to tell me about your mystery woman?"

"Um..." *Ouch*. "Not sure if that's going to work out. And I'm not too happy about it."

"Oh honey." There's genuine sympathy in her voice. "I'm sorry. Why not?"

The waitress drops off my food, and I take a moment to thank her. “So,” I say, glancing over my shoulder. I’m alone and outside, which is why I answered my phone in the first place. “Here’s something that will crack you right up.” I need to tell someone. And Holly will keep my secret. She’s a good friend.

“What?”

“My mystery woman? There isn’t one. I was seeing a guy.”

There is deep silence for a moment. “Really?” She sounds incredulous.

“Really. Apparently I’m, um...” I’ve never said it out loud before.

“Bisexual.” There. That really wasn’t so hard.

“I’m... Wow,” Holly says. “I didn’t see that coming.”

“Me neither.” I laugh. “It’s been a really interesting summer.”

“Who is he? Wait—that friend from the hotel! And the rink in Lake Placid! Ryan somebody.”

Well, fuck. I forgot that women are so weirdly intuitive. “Holly, you can’t tell anyone. It doesn’t matter so much to me, but it could really hurt him.”

Her sigh is loud in my ear. “I won’t tell a soul. But...he *dumped* you? I’ll kill him.”

Now she has me smiling. “You are the best. Have I ever told you that?”

“Eh,” she sighs. “I have my moments. Hey, now I can stop trying to figure out what sort of girl you’d fallen for. Wondering what she had that I don’t was really taking up a lot of my free time. Now at least I know the answer—a dick.”

I burst out laughing. “Damn, Holly. It’s good to talk to you.”

“Likewise.”

When we hang up, there’s still a smile on my face. I eat my lunch thinking of all the crazy things I’ve done these past six weeks.

And one memory in particular solves the problem of finding Wes.

I flag down the waitress and pull out my phone. I have an app to download.

Wes

My first practice is brutal, but that's how I like it. Coach Harvey starts us off with a crossover drill designed to strengthen our ability to accelerate on curves, and it only takes five seconds for me to fully grasp that I'm in the big leagues now. *Nope, you're not in college anymore, Dorothy.*

This is a whole new level of intensity, and I'm sweating my balls off as I weave in and out of traffic, changing directions on Coach's whim. Pushing myself to keep up with players who've trained together for much longer than the five minutes I've been with them.

And it just picks up in intensity from there, but I'm cool with that. This is all I have. This is the choice I've made. Playing the best hockey I can will be the focus of my life for the next several years.

By the time we're done, I'm so sweaty there's steam rising from the inside of my helmet when I finally pull it off. My legs are like jelly as I walk down the chute into the locker room.

"Good hustle out there, man. You're gonna make a good addition," my teammate Tomkins says. He's three seasons in and doing well, so I'm pleased to hear him say it.

"Thanks. I'm happy to be here."

And I am. Mostly.

After a shower, I get dressed and leave the rink. I'm tired, and I don't need to be social anyway, because there's a team dinner starting in two hours.

I check my phone for calls, but there aren't any. The Brandr app has a new notification, though. That's weird, because I haven't messaged a soul since I came to Toronto. I've been a good boy. In fact, I should really just delete the fucking app. Lead me not into temptation, and all that.

But I read the notification anyway, just in case it's from someone I actually know. There's a message from a brand new profile, with a thumbnail picture I don't recognize. My thumb hovers over the delete button when the sender's name sinks in.

The message is from PurpleSkittle. And when I open it, his location is clocked at 3.3 km away.

There's an instant shimmy in my chest. Jamie Canning is in Toronto.

I steel myself as I open the message, because he's got to be so angry at me. But it's for the best.

Wes—I need fifteen minutes of your time. I'm going to take this coaching job, and there's something I want to say. We're going to share a city. It's a big one, but still. Tell me where we can meet. I don't care where—Starbucks or whatever the Canadian equivalent is.

Do me this favor.

J.

I am responding before I even think it through. I tell him yes. Not because it's the right thing to do, but because I'm powerless to say no. A coffee shop

isn't the best idea, though. Too public. So I ask him to meet me at the empty apartment I've agreed to rent.

The real estate agent had asked me if I wanted to get in there to take measurements. That's a thing, apparently. I'd told her yes, and she'd left me a key at the front desk.

Now I'm racing there.

The concierge gives me the key and I tell him I'm expecting someone to look at the place with me. He promises to send him right up.

I ride the elevator with a hammering heart, and when I open the door to the apartment, I look at it with new eyes. It's too much space for one guy. I should have looked for a one-bedroom. Jamie is going to look at this place and think I walked away from him so that I could have a big NHL lifestyle. As if I give a fuck about the perks.

But the granite countertop and the cherry wood floors laugh at me. *This is what you wanted.*

I'm supposed to be here taking measurements, but I haven't even brought a measuring tape. And it's not the apartment I need to measure—it's the size of my balls. Jamie is on his way here to tell me I'm a fearful asshole, and I really can't argue the point.

When the knock comes, I'm not ready.

But I man up and open the door, and he walks through in a fucking suit and tie, looking hot enough to scorch me. I back up instinctively, because I cannot touch him. I've never had any willpower where Jamie Canning is concerned. And I'm done sending him mixed signals. I can't do that to him anymore.

"Hi," he says cautiously. "Nice place."

I shrug because my mouth is too dry to speak. His big brown eyes take in the room, which gives me a minute to admire this man I love, maybe for the last time. His face is tan, and his hair has been trimmed. I know exactly

how soft it feels sifting through my fingers. And I know it's really a million different colors up close.

My ass hits the kitchen counter, and I almost stumble.

"You okay there?" he asks.

I nod, helpless. This is so hard. But I brought it on myself. I rest a hand on the granite countertop, and its cool temperature steadies me.

"Well, there's something I came here to say, even though I know you don't want to hear it."

Jamie's eyes search me, but I don't know for what. I'm done being a jerk to him, and I can't show him how I really feel. That leaves me mute. That's the best I can do.

"I don't know what you think happened this summer," he continues, fitting his hands into his trouser pockets. If this coaching thing doesn't work out, he should try becoming the CEO of a company somewhere. Because he really rocks the look. "In fact, I'm sure you've invented a lot of bullshit in that stubborn head of yours. You think you've corrupted me, or manipulated me, or some shit."

My face is hot now. Because I do think that.

"You think that I was just playing around. Taking a walk on the wild side. You think I'm just going to—" He brushes his hands together as if dusting them off. "—go back to girls. Chalk this up as an experiment."

Yeah, I think that, too.

"That's *not* what happened, Ryan. Not for me. What happened is that I got my best friend back for a little while, and I also fell for him." His voice thickens. "I'm not just saying that. I fucking *love* you, and I know that's inconvenient. But I didn't get a chance to tell you in Lake Placid, so I'm telling you right now. Just in case we can ever get more than a summer. I love you, and I wish things were different."

There's pressure in my ears, and the world goes a little blurry. I find myself sinking down toward the floor, my back sliding along the expensive

wood cabinet, my ass hitting polished cherry. My eyes are wet, so I look out the window. I see blue. That fucking view. It's beautiful, and I just don't care.

Because nothing is as beautiful as the man who just told me he loves my fucked-up self.

"Wes." The voice is soft, and it's coming closer. I hear the rustle of a suit jacket being removed. A few seconds later, Jamie seats himself on the floor beside me.

In my peripheral vision I see muscular forearms jutting from rolled-up shirtsleeves. He links his hands around his knees and sighs. "I didn't mean to upset you," he says quietly. "But it needed to be said."

He's *right there*. The clean scent of his shampoo and the warmth of his elbow against mine are overwhelming. I've missed him. So fucking much I've been walking around with a hollow chasm in my chest where my heart used to be.

But that gaping hole is full again. My heart is back, because Jamie is here.

And he fucking *loves* me.

My next breath escapes as a shudder. "I can't choose," I grind out.

"You've already chosen, and I understand why..."

I give my head a violent shake. "No. I mean it—I *can't* choose. I *won't* choose between you and hockey. I want both. Even if it's a disaster." I look at Jamie again, finally, just in time to see him wince.

"I do *not* want to be the reason your NHL career doesn't work out," he says vehemently. "I *get* it, Wes. I really do."

There's a tear running down my face and I don't even care. I scoop Jamie's hand off his knee and kiss it. He feels so fucking good.

"Sorry," I choke out. "We're going to have to work something out. I love you, goddamn it."

His breath hitches. "Yeah?"

“Fuck yeah. And I’m not letting you walk out of here.”

“Ever?” he teases, squeezing my hand. “That’s one way to prevent gossip.”

I sigh. “We need a strategy. I have to stay out of the newspapers as long as I can.”

“But, see, that’s why—”

“Quiet, baby,” I murmur. “Let me think for a second.”

We can’t lie forever to save my career—that isn’t fair to Jamie. Maybe he hasn’t thought it through, but I’ve been gay a long time and I know how much the closet sucks.

“I need to be sneaky until next June,” I finally decide. “But that’s it. And that’s only if Toronto gets pretty far in the playoffs. Just one season.”

“And then what?”

I shrug. “Then you can be my date at the next team barbecue or what-the-fuck-ever.”

Jamie chuckles, but I’m dead serious. It only took one look at him today to realize I can’t keep the parts of myself in separate drawers. It was never going to work.

“What if something happens before June? I mean...” He sighs again. “I can’t lie to my family. I can ask them to be discreet, and they’ll try. But I’m not kidding when I say that I don’t want to be your downfall. Think hard about how much risk you’re willing to take.”

“You’re worth it,” I whisper. Fuck, *I’m* worth it. My change of heart isn’t pure generosity. If Jamie is brave enough to walk in here and tell me he loves me, I’ve got to take some chances, too. “I’m going to have a talk with the PR department. I’m going to warn them.”

His hand tightens on mine. “You can’t be serious.”

I turn my head against the little wooden wall where we’re sitting. “I’m dead serious. It’s my *life*, and yours. I’ve loved you for years, babe. If the NHL can’t deal with it, then that’s just the way it is.”

Jamie's expression softens. "That will be a really bad day, though."

"No. A bad day is you giving up on me." I rake one hand through my hair, and he suddenly captures my wrist, his brown eyes narrowing.

"When did you get this done?"

He's looking at my new tat, and I feel sheepish as I answer, "Couple days after I left camp."

Rough fingertips skim the line of black ink. "What are these coordinates for?" I'm not surprised he's figured it out. My man is smart.

"Lake Placid," I tell him.

His eyes lock with mine. "I see." He clears his throat, but when he speaks again, his voice is still lined with gravel. "You really do love me, huh?"

"Always have." I swallow hard. "Always will."

It's not clear who moves first. But a second later our lips brush, then press together. I moan even before Jamie's tongue parts my lips. I kiss him hard, and he gives as good as he gets.

Time slips. Once we start kissing we don't stop. My lips are swollen and I'm so hard it's painful. But this isn't about sex. Each kiss is a promise of more to come. I know we need to stop. There are plans to make, and there's a dinner I have to get to, but each time I tell myself that *this* is the last kiss, I go back for one more. And then one more.

I pull back eventually. "You have to live here," I blurt out.

"Wha?" Jamie says, looking dazed. His cheeks are flushed and I've tousled his hair.

"A twenty-two-year-old rookie might have a roommate, especially an old hockey friend. It would actually be weirder if you were coming and going all the time."

He smiles, and I think he's going to make a joke about *coming* and going. "Did you just ask me to move in with you?"

"Well...yeah. Would you?"

Jamie's eyes sweep the room. "I can't afford this place."

I'm already shaking my head. "That is not going to be an issue. You can pay the utilities or some shit."

"I can't..."

"Yeah, you can. Consider it a gift for putting up with ten months of hiding."

"I can't pay *nothing*."

"Fine. Contribute what you would otherwise budget for rent money." I stand, offering him a hand. "Come on, let's have a tour." I don't want to talk about money. Fuck that.

Jamie takes my hand and follows me to the little hallway off the kitchen.

"We'll put a bed in this room, but it's not going to be our room. You can have a desk in here, though, if you need one for your job. It will give you a place to work."

This all seems so easy now. Toronto just became a place I really want to be. "And this is our bedroom." I walk him into the big room, which is slotted into a corner of the building. "See how private? When we fuck, nobody can hear us." I risk a look at Jamie, and his eyes are molten.

Fucking hell. Shouldn't have said that. I'm hard, and there's no time to do anything about it. "Wait. What time is it, anyway?"

He checks his watch. "Six."

Shit! "I have to be at this restaurant in a half hour. And my hotel is on the other side of town..." I look down at what I'm wearing. Track pants and flip-flops. Great. I'm going to be late for my first team event. *Goddamn it*. I chuckle, because it's either that or cry. And I've already done the latter today.

"Babe, do you want to wear this?" Jamie indicates his suit.

"Really?"

He shrugs. "You don't have to, but..."

“Let’s try it.” I laugh, because this is crazy. But that’s what happens when he and I are together. Crazy happens.

And we *are* just about the same size. Jamie’s waist might be a little wider than mine, but he’s wearing a belt.

He’s looking down at himself, doing the same math. “What size are your feet?”

“Ten and a half.”

“I’m eleven,” he says. “Close enough.”

We’re grinning like idiots as we strip off our clothes in the big empty bedroom. Jamie is down to only his dress socks, and I groan at the view. “I hope this dinner doesn’t last too long. Will you stay with me tonight at the hotel?”

He licks his lips. “Sure. But you’ll have to tell me where that is.” He passes me his shirt and I put it on. It smells like him. I’m going to be horny all evening. The best kind of torture.

We make the switch and I don’t look half bad. The jacket shoulders are a little wider than I’d wear them, but fuck, who cares. “I forgot something.”

“What?”

I work on tying Jamie’s tie, but there’s no mirror, so it’s slow going. “That night we were making the list of benefits of being gay? Borrowing your boyfriend’s clothes.”

Clucking his tongue, he pushes my hands out of the way and straightens the knot. “You look hot in my suit.”

“You look hot in anything.”

He reaches down and squeezes my dick through the wool trousers. “You get a blowjob later, just for saying that.”

I groan. Then I have a thought so evil I almost can’t say it with a straight face. “Tonight, I want you in nothing but my Toronto jersey.”

Jamie sputters with laughter and gives my cheek a fake slap. “You ass. I’m not your puck bunny.”

“Please? I’ve never fucked a puck bunny. This is my only chance.”

He wraps his arms around my body and squeezes my ass. I receive a single, bruising kiss before he steps back. “Now give me your hotel key and go to your dinner already. No more lip.”

When I step out onto the sidewalk a few minutes later, I’m a little dazed and walking carefully in shoes that are slightly too big.

And I’ve never felt better in my life.

AUGUST

Wes

At the end of my first week of training camp, Coach Harvey shifts the lines around and puts me in the second line with Eriksson and Forsberg. The latter led Chicago to a Stanley Cup win three seasons ago before being traded to Toronto. The former was tied for highest-scoring offensive player last season. And then there's me—Ryan Wesley, wet-behind-the-ears rookie, skating with two goddamn legends.

It's a promising sign, because that means they're seriously considering me for the roster this season, instead of sending me down to the farm team for more development.

Our shift lasts two minutes, and just before Coach shouts for a line change, I slap a one-timer past the goalie (another former Stanley Cup champ) and accept a vigorous back clap from Eriksson, who's grinning behind his facemask.

"Shi-it, kid, that was a beauty!"

The praise warms me up inside. And I'm even giddier when I notice Coach nodding in approval from the bench. "You've got solid instincts," he

tells me when I heave myself over the boards a moment later. “No hesitation. I like that.”

Is hearing that good for my ego? Damn right it is. These past two weeks, I’ve learned that praise from our head coach comes about as often as a solar eclipse. But even though he pushes us hard and is tough as nails, he’s a nice guy when we’re not on the ice, and the man sure knows his hockey.

Forsberg sidles up to me as I head down the chute, ruffling my hair like I’m a five-year-old. “You’re fast, Wesley. Keep showing off that speed in practice, okay? I want you on my line.”

My heart does a crazy somersault. Jesus Christ. How is this my life?

But my good mood doesn’t stick. I’m scheduled to meet with one of the team publicists in thirty minutes, and depending on how that goes, practice might not be the only thing that’s over today. My career might end, too.

Before it even begins.

I haven’t changed my mind, though, no matter how many times Jamie has urged me to reconsider. I’m not giving him up. This next year might be tough for us, especially if my publicist goes all fire and brimstone on my ass to keep the relationship under wraps. But I know we can weather through it.

I love Jamie. I’ve *always* loved Jamie. And now that I know he feels the same way, I can’t wait to see him again. To live with him again.

After accepting the coaching job and informing Detroit of his decision, Jamie went back to Lake Placid for two weeks. He told me this plan when we were lying in my hotel room after sex. And even in that blissed-out state, I’d thought it was a terrible idea. “Don’t go,” I’d argued. “I just got you back.”

Smiling, he’d kissed me. “We can’t get into the apartment yet, anyway. And Pat needs the help. Plus, this means you can focus all your energy on impressing your coach.”

I miss the hell out of him, but I've done what he suggested. All I do is practice and talk to him on the phone at night. My lease on the condo began three days ago. I went shopping for the essentials—a king-sized mattress and a giant flat-screen TV. But that's all I'm buying until Jamie comes back next week to help me pick everything out.

Actually, I found an armchair on the curb yesterday and hauled it upstairs. But when I set it in front of the living room windows I noticed that it wobbled.

I snapped a pic of the chair and texted it to Jamie with a note about finding it outside. His response was fast and furious: *It has to go! People throw shit out for a reason! I bet you someone died on that chair!*

Tonight's agenda: getting rid of the death chair and going grocery shopping.

Look at me being all domestic. I'm kinda digging it.

After I've showered in the locker room and changed into my street clothes, I walk toward the elevator bank at the far end of the training arena. The PR guy agreed to meet me in the upstairs offices, saving me from having to trek to the team's head offices on the other end of the city during rush hour.

He waits for me in the corridor when I step off the elevator. I've already met him once before. It was after I signed my contract, when he'd given me an info packet about the promotional events I'll be expected to attend this season.

"Ryan," he says warmly, extending his hand. "Good to see you again."

"Frank," I greet him as we shake hands. "Thanks for coming down to meet with me."

"Anything for our new rookie superstar." He grins and gestures for me to follow him.

A moment later, we're seated in a small office with a view of the parking lot. Frank dons a wry look. "Not exactly the lap of luxury here. I

can't even offer you anything to drink."

"That's fine. I just chugged two bottles of water in the locker room."

"I caught the end of practice. It looks like you're meshing well with the other guys."

"I think so," I admit. "Hopefully Coach agrees."

Frank smiles. "Trust me, kid, Hal loves you. I heard that when the coaches were going over the draft prospects, he refused to look at any other centers. You were his first and only choice."

Pleasure shoots through me. Then guilt. Because the thought of disappointing my new coach makes me sick to my stomach.

But the thought of not having Jamie in my life makes me even sicker.

"So, listen. I had something important to discuss with you," I start awkwardly.

Frank's expression goes serious. "Is everything okay? Someone giving you trouble?"

I shake my head. "No, nothing like that." A rueful sigh slips out. "If anything, I'm the one who's about to give *you* trouble."

He actually laughs. "Gotta tell you, lots of conversations start this way. By now, I'm unshockable, Ryan. Just hit me."

I clasp my hands in my lap to stop from fidgeting. "Frank...the roommate I listed as my emergency contact on my health forms? He's actually my boyfriend. But, uh, nobody else knows."

He doesn't even blink. "Right."

Right? Confusion fills my gut as I attempt to make sense of his response. It hadn't sounded sarcastic, like *riiiiiight, sure he is*. It hadn't sounded hostile. It hadn't sounded like anything.

"I'm only telling you this, uh, because it could leak out. I'd never try to bring negative publicity to the team," I hurry on. "My sexual orientation has nothing to do with my skills as a hockey player. I plan on playing my ass off for this club, and I truly hope that who I date in my spare time won't

affect my teammates' opinions of me as a player. But I also know the media will jump on this story if it gets out."

Frank is nodding now.

"I..." I take a breath. "I mean, I'm living with someone. It's serious. The only, um, scandal is that he's a he."

His lips twitch.

Fucking hell. Is he *laughing* at me?

I clench my teeth and force myself to continue. "We're willing to be as discreet as the team needs us to be, but we can't hide our relationship forever. We shouldn't have to." My breath comes out in a rush. "So I figured I'd disclose this information and let you and the team decide what happens next."

Frank leans forward, resting his arms on the desktop. "Ryan." He chuckles. "I appreciate you coming forward, but...we already knew about your sexual orientation."

I cough in surprise. "You did?"

"Son, we have a thorough vetting process for all our draft prospects. The last thing a club needs is to draft a kid in the first round, only to find out later that he's got a criminal record a mile-long or he's addicted to pills or has some other skeleton in his closet that might negatively impact the league."

Jesus. So they knew I was gay *before* they drafted me? How?

I voice the troubled thought. "How did you know?"

He chuckles again. "Were you trying to keep it a secret? Because from what we gleaned, your college teammates—and coaches—were well aware of it."

I'm...dumbfounded. "My coach *told* you?"

He shrugs like this is nothing surprising. "The coach didn't want you to hitch your wagon to a team that wouldn't treat you right. He did you a favor. And like I said, Hal was impressed with you, and not just with the

level of talent you bring to the team. You're smart, discreet, you've got a good head on your shoulders. That's all that matters to him. To *us*."

"So..." I try to find my voice. "You guys don't care that I'm involved with another man?"

"Not at all." He folds his hands together. "In fact, I've already written the press release for whenever this eventually leaks. The organization has agreed on all the supportive language. We're ready."

I just sit there, my mind reeling. There's something tickling the back of my brain about this discussion. It almost sounds as if they're hoping to issue that press release. "What's in it for you?" I blurt.

He grins. "Faith in our fellow man?"

"Bullshit. What does this get you?"

Frank opens his hands in a gesture of humility. "Last year we traded Kim to Anaheim, and Owens to Miami. Because we had—"

"—too many right-handed D-men," I finish.

Frank nods. "Only Kim is Korean-American and Owens was..." He stares at the ceiling trying to remember. "I forget. But some dipshit sports reporter made a big stir about how we didn't want to be a diverse team. Someone jumped on that and started a petition that somehow gathered twenty-five thousand signatures."

I can't believe what I'm hearing. "So you drafted the faggot."

Frank rolls his eyes. "I'll have to ask you not to use that word, son. It's not nice."

My groan echoes off the walls of the office. "Please tell me you're not going to leak my sexual orientation the next time some asshole writes that Toronto isn't a PC organization. I don't want to be your pawn."

He grins. "We're not interested in turning you into a poster boy for gay athletes. We don't need to invite the circus to town—it always shows up eventually. But we won't be sending you out to face the media waving a

rainbow flag, or ask you to give interviews touting yourself as the ‘first openly gay player in the NHL.’”

He air-quotes the headline, chuckling again, and I realize they’ve put a lot of thought into this. And meanwhile, I’ve spent every waking moment since I got drafted worrying about how I would keep it under wraps.

“I gotta say, though. If you’re telling me you’re in a committed relationship, I’m doing a happy dance. When the press finally catches on to you, it won’t be some photo of you in a skeezy bathhouse on Jarvis Street. I prefer the visual of you and your boyfriend having a candlelit dinner.”

I open my mouth to argue with this bit of cynicism, and then discover I don’t care enough to fight this fight. Toronto is keeping me, even if Jamie and I are outed. *That’s all that matters*, I tell myself. And the man in front of me is paid to think like a jackass, just like I’m paid to think like a killer.

“Is there anything else you wanted to discuss, Ryan?”

I blink. “Um...no. That was it.”

Frank scrapes his chair back and stands up. “Then I hope you don’t mind if we cut this chat short. I need to speak to Hal before I head home to the wife and kids.”

My legs are wobbly as I follow him to the door, where he stops to clap me on the shoulder. “You should come to dinner at our place sometime. Your boyfriend’s welcome, too.”

I blink again. What fucking *planet* am I on right now?

He grins at my confusion. “I know you’re new to the city and probably haven’t met a lot of folks yet. And my wife loves to host members of the team. She’ll be thrilled if you came by.”

“Oh. Um, sure, then. I appreciate the invite.”

We go our separate ways once we reach the lobby. I’m not feeling too steady on my feet as I head outside and walk toward the subway stop. It’s like a huge weight has been lifted off my shoulders, and I’m not sure how to handle the sensation it leaves behind. Lightness, giddiness. Relief.

I can't wait to tell Jamie.

Jamie

It's been a long day of coaching.

Pat runs a two-week intensive at the end of camp, and we really fill the place up. Since the dorm is jam-packed, the kids who show up stay in condos with their parents. We max out our ice time, and we max out our waking hours.

It's tough, but I love it.

I'm on pins and needles all day, though, because Wes has his meeting with the PR guy. So after the last session of the day, I run back to the dorm. This morning I intentionally left my phone in the room so I wouldn't spend the day checking it.

There's something in front of my door. It's a FedEx package. When I pick it up, it's weightless.

I unlock the door and push inside my mostly empty room. Pat is still a coach short, which means it's a good thing I came back to help him.

Checking the phone is the first thing I do. There aren't any voicemails, and the only email is a solicitation for discount sunglasses. So I turn my attention to the package, tearing off the strip at the edge and opening the envelope.

A gift box falls out—the same one I recently filled with purple Skittles. I yank open the top and find a piece of paper inside, grinning when I see a single purple Skittle taped to the page.

It's the result of recent medical tests on Mr. Ryan E. Wesley, Jr. Every STD known to man is listed there, and the word "negative" appears after each one.

He's scribbled something at the bottom: *I was going to fill this box with purple condoms, but then I had a better idea.*

Annnnd now I'm horny as well as impatient.

So I commence pacing the room.

When the email program on my phone pings a few minutes later, I yank it out of my pocket to read the message.

But it's not from Wes.

Dear Coach Canning, I can't believe that I didn't get to finish the session with you. I'm still not speaking to my father, either. Working with you has been the best summer of my life, and I'm pissed that it ended on a bitter note.

My team for this year is the Storm Sharks U18. Here's the link, just in case you were ever curious about my stats. I think they're about to improve, and it's all because of you.

Sincerely,

John Killfeather, Jr.

I read the email twice. And then I read it one more time. It doesn't say a thing about Wes and me, and there aren't any slurs. Just a kid who wants to play hockey, and knows enough to say thank you to the people who've tried to help him.

Damn, I'm proud of this email. And I feel just a little more optimistic about life than I did five minutes ago.

I tap out a quick response, because I sure don't want to forget.

Killfeather—you are an amazing goalie and it was my pleasure to work with you this summer. Of course I'll check out your stats as the winter progresses. You're going to rock this season.

Sincerely, Jamie Canning

Then I go back to pacing and worrying about Wes. What if they show him the door, and I'm not even there for him?

And where in Lake Placid can I get a blood test, like, tomorrow?

When my phone rings, I jump about a foot, then hurriedly swipe to answer. "Hey babe! You okay? What happened?"

"Yeah, I'm okay." His husky voice slides into my ear and wraps around my heart. I can hear that he's out on the street somewhere, and I wonder what he'll be able to tell me. "Damn, I wish you were here right now," he says.

I brace myself.

"I'd take you out to this Italian restaurant on Queen Street that the guys love. I'm starving and I want to tell you every word of the trippy conversation I just had."

I'm practically dizzy with stress right now. "What kind of conversation?"

"The good kind," he assures me.

My heart rate drops one notch, but I'm still afraid to be hopeful. Because it seems impossible to believe a high-profile NHL team would shrug off Wes's confession. None of this computes.

“But... wouldn’t we *avoid* the places where your team likes to eat?” I ask slowly. “You know that means people will see us, right?”

“Yeah, but some day soon that’s not going to matter.”

“Really?” I want a guarantee. I want a notarized document.

I want a Valium. Or a blowjob. Or both.

“I’m having a really good day,” Wes whispers.

My blood pressure drops again. “I’m glad,” I whisper back.

“I love you,” he adds.

“I know.”

Wes laughs in my ear, and the happy sound of it is what convinces me we might be okay.

Jamie

On a Friday in mid-August I move in to our apartment. Though “moving in” requires air quotes, because we don’t own much of anything.

Earlier in the week Wes ordered a couch—a macho leather thing, if I’ve understood the description correctly. It seems his taste runs to “early man cave,” and I can’t say I mind. He also picked up three bar stools for the kitchen island, which means we can put off worrying about an actual table.

Last night, after round one of our I-missed-you-so-much sexual marathon, Wes made a show of going to the grocery store, but he only came back with chips, dip and beer, which means I need to go back again and buy actual food. I may not have mentioned to him yet that I’m a pretty good cook. Wes seems prepared to survive on take-out, and in Toronto that’s easily done. I’m going to have to acquire some pots and pans and blow his mind one of these days. That sounds like a whole lot of fun, actually.

Meanwhile, we blew each other’s minds (and other parts) in our new bedroom last night. Then we passed out and slept for nine hours in our brand new king-sized bed.

Now it’s Saturday, and there’s still plenty to do. This morning, after breakfast at a diner, I drag Wes around Toronto for a few more necessary

items. By the time we finally get home, Wes is in a state of agitation. I'm pretty sure I'm going to have to calm him down with a blowjob.

"That's three hours of my life I'm never getting back," he fusses as we walk in. His words echo, because our apartment is still awfully bare.

The reason for Wes's bad mood is the fact that shopping took three hours, because we're just a couple of jocks who don't know one store from another. We went into four stores before we found one that didn't look like the Queen of England was planning a visit. That's where we picked out a rug and coffee table, which we bought. But the place didn't stock coffee makers, so we had to keep shopping.

"Good coffee is non-negotiable," I told him while he grumbled. But after I chose a dual drip/espresso machine with an integrated grinder, I started checking out the towels. That's when Wes lost it a little bit, and I gave up and brought him home.

"Oh, the irony," he moans, kicking off his shoes. "My boyfriend dragged me to a fucking *mall*."

"You're right," I say drolly. "That trip was entirely gratuitous. Who needs towels? We can just air dry."

Grumpy Wes stomps into the bedroom and I follow him, because it's one of two functional rooms in our place.

I set down the coffee maker and watch while he throws off his shirt and climbs onto our giant bed. "Would you please get over here?" he whines. "It's an emergency."

"It's a good thing you're so attractive," I mutter as I ditch my shoes. "I had no idea that stepping into a store turned you into cryin' Ryan." I walk over to the bed where a shirtless, ripped man lies waiting for me, his expression burning up with lust.

"It doesn't usually," he mumbles. "But we have a situation." He grabs my hand and tugs.

I climb onto his body, leaning down to tongue his nipple, and he moans. “What kind of situation?” I ask between licks.

He lets out a shaky breath. “I thought it would be fun to wear a plug out to breakfast today. That way you could fuck me when we got home...”

My eyes snap up to his. “Seriously?”

He nods, his expression miserable. “But then you said, ‘Let’s just look at a couple of rugs.’ And that was, like, *hours* ago. Every time I walk across another store, this thing massages my prostate. If you don’t fuck me in the next five minutes I’m going to explode.”

I’m speechless. But my dick has plenty to say. I’m already hard at the idea of Wes being prepped and ready for me. I drop my mouth onto his and he moans again. My tongue glides across his piercing and we’re off to the horny dog races.

We kiss as if there’s a meteor heading straight for the Toronto metropolitan area. Wes’s eager hands roam my ass while I suck on his tongue. His eagerness is like a drug, and I want hit after hit. I can feel how hard he is, even through all of our clothes. He wants me to fuck him, and he’s all primed and ready?

“Mmm,” I moan into his mouth. Sexiest fucking thing I ever heard.

That’s when the doorbell rings.

“Hold that thought,” I say, pushing up on one arm.

“Nooooo!” Wes lifts both his legs to trap me in them. “No.” Kiss. “No.” Kiss. “Don’t even think about it.”

Pinning his hands to the quilt is easy, because he’s horny to the point of distraction. “Stop it, baby. It’s the couch delivery. We’re paying seventy-five bucks for them to show up on a Saturday.”

“I hate you,” he says, but he releases me.

“I can tell,” I argue, squeezing his hard dick as I climb off him. He moans one more time, cursing me, the sofa and also the universe.

I close the bedroom door for Wes's privacy and for my own sanity. I use the intercom to buzz down to the front desk, and I ask the doorman to send the sofa up on the freight elevator. Then I adjust myself and try to think about boring stuff to deflate the tent I'm pitching in my shorts.

But there is no boring stuff. I start my job next week, and I can't freaking wait. Meanwhile, I get to explore this gorgeous city where I'm living with the man whose company I've craved since I was thirteen. And moving in together isn't even scary. If you tally up all the weeks we'd spent at camp over the years, we've actually lived together for more than a year already.

There's a whole lot of sex involved now, of course. Everything is different, and yet it's exactly the same. And it's a whole lot of fun.

When I let the delivery guys in, there are three of them. "Where do you want it?" they ask.

"Anywhere over here," I indicate the living room. "We're going to have to move it when our rug comes, so it doesn't matter where."

"Nice place," the man in charge remarks, cracking his gum. His guys set the sofa in the middle of the space. It's wrapped in a lot of plastic, so I hope it's the one Wes ordered.

"Thanks." I sign for the sofa.

After they troop out, I close and lock the door, then walk over to the sofa and run a hand along the length of it. "Hey, Wesley!" I call loud enough for him to hear me behind the bedroom door. "Getcha ass out here!"

"No!" he counters.

I tug my shirt off. Then I drop my shorts. "I'm naked!"

That does it. He throws open the bedroom door and speed-walks down the hallway, nude, carrying a bottle of lube. By the time he reaches me, I'm sitting spread-eagled on the back of the sofa like a porn star, stroking myself.

Wes spares the couch a single glance. “Dude, my couch is wearing a condom.”

I grab his hips and pull him close to me. “I noticed that,” I say, kissing his jaw. “That’s because it knows I’m about to bend you over it.”

Wes groans. “Promises, promises.” He slips a hand between our bodies and cups it over my hand. We stroke each other while our kisses grow deeper and hotter.

I reach around his body and cup his ass. When my hand finds the toy lodged there, I groan into his mouth.

“Do it,” he pants.

Everything begins to happen very fast. With a firm grasp, I remove the toy, while Wes slicks up my dick. He yanks me off the sofa’s back and braces himself against it. “Go,” he orders.

I come up behind him and grip his hips, the head of my cock sliding between his taut ass cheeks. Just like the other night, I’m floored by the sensation of being skin to skin. There’s no barrier between my throbbing dick and his tight ass, and when I drive deep on the first stroke, we both groan with abandon.

“*Fuck* me,” he demands when I go still.

But I’m too busy savoring the incredible feeling of being inside him without a condom. I roll my hips and he growls like a grumpy bear.

“I swear to God, Canning, if you don’t move, I’m gonna—”

I pull out, then slam right back in. He makes a choked sound, his entire body trembling.

“You’re gonna what?” I ask mockingly.

Rather than answer, he just moans again. Low, agonized. Shit, he’s desperate for it. I guess I would be too if I’d walked around all day with a plug rubbing on my prostate.

I smooth my hand down his strong back, then lean in and plant a kiss between his shoulder blades as I withdraw again. “I like you like this,” I

murmur. “That sexy ass in the air. Having you at my mercy. Hearing you beg.”

He blows out a breath. “You’re a sadist.”

Laughing, I quicken the pace. Three, four frantic thrusts before I slow down again, which draws a strangled groan from his lips.

“You need to learn some patience,” I tell him. But shit, I’m teasing myself as much as I’m teasing him. My balls are so tight they hurt, already tingling with the telltale signs of impending release.

“Screw patience,” he grumbles. “Wanna come.”

“Sulking ain’t helping your cause, dude.”

“No? How about this then?” He pushes his ass back against me and starts fucking my cock, fast and greedy.

Holy hell. There’s no way I can hold back now. It’s too good. I’m too horny.

My fingers dig into his hips as I slam into him, each deep thrust sending me closer and closer to the edge. Our breathing grows labored as our bodies slap together, but I need more. I need... I plant my hands on his chest and tug him up so his back is plastered to me. The new angle makes him cry out in pleasure, and then he twists his head toward me and our lips meet in a scorching kiss that fogs my brain.

We’re joined in every way possible. My cock inside him, our tongues fused together, his powerful body straining against mine.

I reach around him and grip his erection, slowing the movement of my hips. I jerk him in long, lazy strokes that match the languid thrusts of my cock.

“I don’t come until you do,” I whisper. Then I slip my tongue in his mouth and suck on his tongue ring, and that’s all it takes for him to shoot all over my hand.

Wes gasps for air. His ass ripples around my cock, squeezing me so hard it triggers an orgasm I feel in the tips of my fingers and the soles of my feet.

I give in to it, my arms wrapped around my boyfriend's strong chest as I come inside him.

We're both unsteady on our feet, so I pull out and tug him onto the couch. He collapses beside me, his dark hair tickling my chin as we lie there recovering from yet another round of spectacular sex. I don't think I'll ever get used to how good the sex is.

Wes suddenly laughs. "Thank God for the couch condom."

"Wha..." I grin when I realize what he means. "The bareback thing is kinda messy, huh?"

"Messy's fun." His breath heats my shoulder. "But once the plastic comes off, we should probably lay down a towel or something if we're going to fuck on this couch."

"If?" The way we go at it, there won't be a single surface in this apartment we haven't fucked on.

He chuckles again, then releases a contented sigh and nestles even closer.

As it happens, snuggling on a plastic-wrapped couch is not that comfortable.

So we have a quick shower together, then lie down on the bed. We're wet, of course, and our hair is dripping.

"I'm beginning to see your point about towels," Wes says as I kiss a drop of water off his shoulder.

"Now he gets it," I sigh, and then hunt for more drops on his taut skin. I lick the barbell in his eyebrow, and the slightly metallic taste makes me shiver. I love having my own personal bad boy in bed with me.

Wes strokes a lazy hand up and down my back, and it's divine. "We need towels, and a plug for you. So you can walk a mile in my horny

shoes.”

“That was so hot, though,” I concede. “Damn.”

He runs a hand through my wet hair. “Glad you liked it. I wanted to make it easier for you.”

“What?” There’s something serious in his tone, so I stop kissing him everywhere to look him in the eye. “Easier?”

But he looks away. “You know. Easier. When you were with women, it didn’t take them half a fucking hour to prepare for sex.”

A chuckle rises in my throat, but I choke it back because his expression is so serious. “How many women have you fucked, Wes?”

Sheepish, he holds up one finger.

I’m startled for a second, until I remember the summer we were sixteen, when Wes had shown up at camp and admitted to losing his virginity. Getting the dirty details out of him, however, had been like pulling teeth. Now I know why.

“Right, *one*. And you were both too inexperienced to know what you were doing.” I shrug. “*Plenty* of women need a lot of warm-up time. So I have to call a technical foul here just on rules alone. But also—that’s just not the point. We have a lot of quick and dirty times. That’s what blowjobs are for.”

He gives me a weak grin. “Sure. But...”

“But *what*?”

“Well, I’ll never be able give you everything you like.”

Ah. “Dude, stop. I’m not pining for pussy.” That sounded *much* funnier coming out of my mouth than I’d expected it to, so we both laugh. “I’m serious, though. I enjoyed women, but I was never in love with one.” Every time I say it, it seems more obvious. And every time I say it, Wes’s face goes soft. “Can you promise me you won’t worry about this? Because there’s no way I can prove it to you, except by having lots of sex with you.”

“That works.” His cocky smile is back, and I’m happy to see it.

“Good.” I roll over and fit myself against him. “In a little while I have to check my Facebook page.”

“Why?”

My stomach tightens just thinking about it. “Tomorrow is Sunday dinner, right? So I outed myself to them today.”

“On Facebook?” he yelps.

I reach back and give his ass a pinch. “Give me a little credit? My family has a private group. It’s just the kids, their spouses and my parents. I didn’t even tell them your last name.”

He goes very quiet behind me, but his hand traces lazy circles on my back. “Are you worried?” he finally asks.

That’s a fair question. “Not really. They won’t freak about the fact that you’re a dude. But they might be like, ‘Why didn’t you tell us? Is this why you quit the NHL? And why did you leave the country?’ I don’t like to be grilled.”

“When did you post it?”

“This morning before we went out for breakfast. So, like, five hours ago. It’s one o’clock in Cali right now. They’ve probably seen it.”

“Go get your phone,” he whispers.

Wes

I wait on the bed by myself saying an unlikely prayer for Jamie. He is quite possibly the most laidback person I've ever met. I love that about him. But it makes him vulnerable. People can be assholes about smaller stuff than their brother having a gay relationship. If anyone has said something ugly to Jamie on that Facebook page, I'll probably punch something.

He doesn't come back, though. And then I hear a groan from the living room.

That gets me on my feet and running through the apartment. I find Jamie perched on the edge of the condom couch, his face in his hands.

My stomach lurches. I don't want this for Jamie. It's taken me four years to get over my parents' reaction to my coming out. Hell, I'm probably still not over it.

He holds out his phone to me, and I take it with a shaking hand.

His Facebook post is pure Jamie:

Hi all. I feel like a heel doing this over Facebook, but I can't reach everyone by tomorrow. You're all going to discuss me on Sunday, anyway. And in case you think my account was hacked, it wasn't. As proof I'll

confess that I'm the one who broke Mom's Christmas tree angel when I was seven. It was death by baseball, but I swear she didn't suffer.

Anyway, I have to catch you up on a few developments. I've taken the coaching job in Toronto, and I've declined my spot in Detroit. This feels like the right career move, but there's something else. I'm living with my boyfriend (that was not a typo.) His name is Wes, and we met at Lake Placid about nine years ago.

In case you were lacking something to talk about over dinner, I've fixed that problem. Love you all.

Jamie

Beneath the post there's a selfie that we took yesterday. We're in our new kitchen, and the groceries I'd just bought are strewn around. Jamie was teasing me about my shopping habits, and I was giving him shit about something. I don't even remember what. But we'd leaned our heads together, and I'm making the sign of the devil. And we just look so fucking happy, I practically don't even recognize myself.

I scroll down to the comments, and my stomach rolls over in dread.

Joe: *OMG. Jamester, really? You did not just confess to dating a Patriots fan. That is a sin, little brother. I fear for your everlasting soul.*

I squint at the picture and sure enough I'm wearing my Super Bowl 2015 Victory shirt. Whoops.

Tammy: *Joe, you asshole! Don't listen to him, Jamie. Your boyfriend is hot. And Jess owes me twenty bucks.*

Brady: *I'm going to have to side with Joe on this one. What if football comes up at Thanksgiving? If your boyfriend wants to talk about balls, it's going to be awkward!*

Joe: **High fives Brady**

Jess: *I do not owe you twenty bucks! You said he was moping about a GIRL.*

Tammy: *I said “a relationship.”*

Jess: **cough* *bullshit**

Mrs. Canning: *Jess, language! Jamie honey, when are you bringing your boyfriend home for Sunday dinner? And are those Doritos in the background? Is there Whole Foods in Canada? I’m going to look on their website and send you the address.*

Mrs. Canning: *And thank you for telling me about the angel. I knew it was you, though, sweetie. You’ve never been good at deception.*

Scotty: *Jamie, Dad can’t remember his Facebook password. But he says to tell you he loves you no matter what and blah blah blah.*

That’s when I snort, and Jamie looks up. “They’re pretty ridiculous, right?”

“I think they’re...” I have to swallow hard, because I’m so happy for him. “I think they’re great.”

He shrugs. “I spent my whole life trying to stand out from the crowd. I swear to God, I could announce I wanted to live my life as a transsexual vampire yeti, and they’d still say ‘Oh, Jamie. You’re so cute.’”

It’s a challenge for me to swallow again, but this time because of the massive lump obstructing my throat.

As always, Jamie senses my distress. This man knows me, inside and out. He always has. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing’s wrong. It’s just...” I speak past the lump. “You’re really lucky, Canning. Your family loves you. I mean, they really, truly love you, and not just because you’re related by blood and they *have* to love you.”

His brown eyes soften. I know he’s thinking about *my* family, but I don’t give him the chance to make excuses for my folks.

“My mother is a trophy wife,” I say roughly. “And I’m a trophy son. Neither one of my parents ever saw me as anything more than that, and they

never will. It...sucks.”

Jamie tugs me toward him. “Yeah, it sucks,” he agrees. “But here’s the thing about family, Ryan...blood doesn’t mean shit. You just need to surround yourself with people who do love you, and *they* become your family.”

I sink down on the couch beside him, the plastic crinkling beneath my boxers. He slings one muscular arm around me, then brushes his lips over my temple. “I’m your family, babe.” He takes the phone from my hand and taps the screen. “And these crazy maniacs? They’ll be your family too if you let them. I mean, they’ll fucking drive you bananas sometimes, but trust me when I say it’s totally worth it.”

I believe him. “I can’t wait to meet them,” I say softly.

His mouth travels along the edge of my jaw before hovering over my lips. “They’re going to love you.” He kisses me, slow and sweet. “*I* love you.”

I rub the pad of my thumb over his bottom lip. “Loved you every summer since I was thirteen years old. Love you even more now.”

Our lips are millimeters from meeting again when he says, “I need to know something, and you have to promise to be honest.”

“I’m always honest with you,” I protest.

“Good. I’m holding you to that.” Those gorgeous brown eyes gleam. “Did you throw the shootout?”

I know exactly which shootout he’s referring to. My lips quiver, so I press them together to keep from grinning.

“Well?”

I shrug.

“Wesley...” There’s a warning note in his voice now. “Tell me what happened during that shootout.”

“Well.” I hesitate. “I really don’t know. I was terrified to win, because I knew I’d have to let you off the hook. And I was terrified of losing, because

I wanted to touch you so bad, and I was afraid you'd figure that out."

His face is full of sympathy, but I don't need it anymore. It's water under the bridge now. I lean closer and kiss him on the nose. "So, those last two shots? I hardly remember what happened. I was all—*Jesus, take the wheel!*"

Jamie laughs at me. And then he kisses me. I lock my hands at the nape of his neck and tug him closer. Warm skin slides against mine, and I know I'm home.

Because home is with *him*.

EPILOGUE

Wes

Thanksgiving

“Ryan Theodore Wesley! Put that knife down this instant!”

I freeze like an ice sculpture as Jamie’s mother barrels toward me, one hand planted on her hip, the other pointing to the chef’s knife in my hand.

“Who taught you how to chop onions?” she demands.

I glance down at the cutting board in front of me. As far as I can tell, I haven’t committed any major onion-related crimes.

“Um...” I meet Cindy Canning’s eyes. “Well, that’s kind of a trick question. Nobody *taught* me, per se. My parents have a cook that comes in four times a week to prepare meals and—wait, I’m sorry, did you call me Ryan *Theodore*?”

She waves her hand as if the question is inconsequential. “I don’t know your middle name so I had to make one up. Because, sweetie, you really needed to be middle-named for mangling those poor onions.”

I can’t stop the laugh that flies out of my mouth. Jamie’s mother is so fucking awesome. I’m far more relaxed in her kitchen than I expected to be.

Jamie and I arrived in California two days ago, but since I had a game the first night, Jamie went to his folks' place while I stayed at the hotel with my teammates. After the team crushed San Jose, I did the usual post-game press, and then yesterday morning I drove up to San Rafael to join Jamie and his family.

The big holiday meal today will be the real test of their acceptance. I've already met Jamie's mom and dad and one brother. So far, so good.

"These need to be chopped into smaller pieces," Cindy tells me. She smacks my butt to move me aside, then takes my place. "Have a seat at the counter. You can watch while I chop. Take notes if you need to."

I grin at her. "So I guess Jamie didn't tell you how much I suck at cooking, huh?"

"He most certainly did not." She fixes me with a stern look. "But you'll have to learn, because I can't spend all my time worrying that my baby boy isn't being fed over there in Siberia."

"Toronto," I correct with a snort. "And I'm sure you can guess he's the one who's been feeding me."

Now that the hockey season is underway, life is hectic as fuck. Practice is brutal, and our schedule is exhausting. Jamie's my rock, though. He comes to all my home games, and when I drag my tired self home from the airport after an away game, he's waiting there to rub my shoulders, or shove food down my throat, or screw me until I can't see straight.

Our apartment is my safe place, my haven. I can't even believe I considered trying to make it through my rookie season without him.

It's easy to figure out where he got that nurturing gene from, because his mom has been fussing over me all day.

Another snort sounds from the doorway, and then Jamie's father strides into the kitchen. "Toronto," he echoes. "What kind of city doesn't have a football team? Explain that to me, Wes."

"They do have one," I point out. "The Argonauts."

Richard narrows his eyes. “Is it an NFL team?”

“Well, no, it’s CFL, but—”

“Then they don’t have a team,” he says firmly.

I stifle a laugh. Jamie warned me that his family was football fanatics, but I genuinely thought he was exaggerating.

“Where’s Jamie?” Richard glances around the kitchen as if he expects Jamie to pop out of a cupboard.

“He went to pick up Jess,” Cindy tells her husband. “She wants to have a few drinks tonight so she’s leaving her car at home.”

Richard nods in approval. “Good girl,” he says, as if Jess can somehow hear him all the way across town.

I have to admit I was terrified to meet Jamie’s family. I mean, I already know they’re good people. But a father and three older brothers? I had this nagging fear they’d hate me just on principle. You know, for being the guy who’s fucking their baby boy.

But Jamie’s dad has been great, and I’ve already met Scott, who’s staying here at the house. The three of us went out for beers at a sports bar last night, and when the highlights from the previous night’s games played on the TV screens, Scott had clapped his hands against the table and shouted, “That’s my brother!” every time I skated into view. And when the goal I scored late in the second flashed on the screen? Jamie and Scott went nuts.

Yup, my first ever NHL goal. I’m still fucking ecstatic about it. This past month, I’ve been seeing more and more playing time, and last night was a record for me—twelve minutes of ice time, and a goal for my efforts. Life is good.

So good, in fact, I’m feeling more generous than usual, which is why I slide off my stool and say, “Will you excuse me for a moment? I need to call my folks to wish them a happy Thanksgiving.”

Jamie’s mother beams at me. “Aw, that’s so sweet of you. Go ahead.”

I duck out and fish my phone out of my pocket. Fuck, I'm even smiling as I dial my parents' number in Boston. The smile fades fast, however. It always does when I hear my father's voice.

"Hey, Dad," I say gruffly. "Is this a good time?"

"Actually, it isn't. Your mother and I are on our way out. We have reservations at six."

Of course they do. The only time my family held a Thanksgiving dinner at home was the year the president of my dad's brokerage firm was going through a divorce. The guy had nowhere to go, so he invited himself over to our place, and my mother hired a gourmet caterer to cook a fucking banquet for us.

"What did you want, Ryan?" he asks briskly.

"I...just wanted to say Happy Thanksgiving," I mumble.

"Oh. Well, thank you. Same to you, son."

He disconnects the call. Without even putting my mother on the line. Then again, he speaks for both of them.

I stare at the phone long after he hangs up, wondering what I did in another life to lose so royally in the parent lottery. But the depressing thought doesn't have time to take root, because the front door suddenly flies open and I'm assaulted with *noise*.

Footsteps. Voices. Loud laughter and happy squeals. It sounds like an entire platoon has marched into the house. Which is pretty much the case, because holy shit, Jamie's family is huge.

I feel an unfamiliar surge of nerves in my chest.

Within seconds, I'm surrounded, being yanked in all directions and hugged by people I've never met in my life. Introductions fly around, but I can barely keep up with the names. I'm too busy answering all the questions being hurled my way like slapshots.

"Did Jamester give you a tour of the house?" Yes.

“Has Mom shown you the pictures from the Halloween when Jamie dressed up as an eggplant?” *No, but that should be corrected immediately.*

“Do you get a monetary bonus every time you score a goal?” *Um...*

“Are you in love with my brother?”

“*Tammy!*” Jamie sputters as his older sister voices that last question.

I look up and find him in the mob, and it’s like the sun just came out. It’s only been an hour since I saw him last, but he has the same damn effect on me every time.

I used to fight my reaction to him, but I don’t have to anymore. And that’s more shocking than the way his family seems ready to embrace the complete stranger who’s shacking up with their brother. Unless they’re just really good actors.

Jamie slips between his siblings and slings his arm around my shoulder. “Leave the poor guy alone, will ya? He just got here yesterday.”

His brother Joe snorts. “You think we’re gonna go easy on him because he’s only been here a day? Have you met us?”

Jess wiggles her way between me and Jamie and links her arm through mine. “Come on, Wes, let’s get you a drink. I find it’s easier to tolerate these dum-dums when you’re drunk.”

I snicker as she drags me toward the dining room, but Jamie’s mom calls out from the kitchen just as we pass by. “Jessica, I need Wes! Jamie, too. You can raid the liquor cabinet later.”

“I wasn’t going to raid the—” Jess stops abruptly and turns to me, heaving a defeated sigh. “I swear that woman is a mind reader.”

I find myself being ushered into the kitchen again, except this time Jamie is by my side. As his mom gestures for us to wait, he brings his mouth close to my ear and says, “Are we having fun yet?”

“Yes,” I say truthfully. Because fuck, the Canning clan has been great. Maybe I can stop worrying so much. Maybe there’s one corner of the world

where I don't have to prove myself all the time. Okay—two corners. Because life in a certain Toronto condo is going really well, too.

“Okay, boys, here's your housewarming present.”

I look up to see Jamie's mom setting two gift boxes on the counter. One says “Jamie” on the tag and the other “Ryan.”

“Aw,” Jamie says. “You didn't have to do that.”

“My last bird has flown out of the nest.” Cindy sighs. “If I can't see your apartment, at least I can give you a little something for it.”

“You can see it,” I hear myself volunteer. “Come visit.”

Jamie and I lock eyes then, and there's humor in his. Maybe he's thinking the same thing I am—if his mom visits, we'll have to hide all the sex toys in the bathroom cabinet.

“I'll do that!” she says cheerily. “Now open them!”

The siblings crowd us as Jamie and I each open a box. I lift the lid and push some tissue paper aside. Then I pull out a gorgeous hand-thrown coffee mug. It says “HIS” on the side. I hear laughter and look over at Jamie's gift.

Another mug reading “HIS.”

“Mom!” Jess hollers. “The point of labeled mugs is so that they can tell them apart! You should have done their initials.”

“But that wouldn't *amuse* me,” his mother explains, grinning.

“Thanks,” I chuckle while my boyfriend laughs.

I turn the mug over in my hands, imagining Cindy making this for me in her pottery studio. The glaze is glossy and bright, the cup broad and solid in my hands. It's beautiful, and receiving it from her feels like the membership card to a club I really want to join.

Grasping the handle, I turn the mug upside down to see if she's signed it. Sure enough, there's something etched into the unglazed bottom. I have to squint to read the tiny letters.

Dear Ryan. Thank you for making Jamie so happy. He loves you and so do we. Welcome to the Canning clan.

Oh boy. There's a burn at the back of my throat, and I concentrate hard on settling the mug back into the box. I spend more time than necessary tucking the tissue paper around it with the care of someone performing neurosurgery. When I'm finally ready to look up again, Jamie's mom is waiting for me. The warm look in her eye makes the sting in my throat even worse.

I try to give her a casual smile, but I can't quite pull it off. Nobody's ever said anything so sweet to me. Nobody except Jamie.

As if I've summoned him, a warm hand slides onto my lower back. I adjust my stance just a fractional degree, leaning in to that hand.

Cindy is still watching us. She gives a quick wink I know is just for me. Then, just as quickly, her face is all business. She claps her hands once. "Okay, troops! The turkey is in the oven, but there's still some heavy lifting to be done! I need someone to sauté the vegetables for stuffing. I need someone to start the grill. I need two people to whip the cream! And the rest of you get the heck out of my kitchen."

Without ceasing their chatter, the Cannings move around the kitchen, opening and shutting cabinets and passing around bottles of beer. Jamie doesn't leave my side, though. He and I are the calm eye of a friendly, familial hurricane.

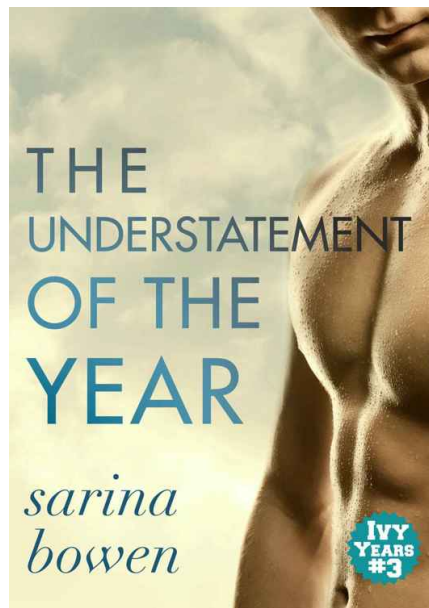
And I hope the storm will never pass.

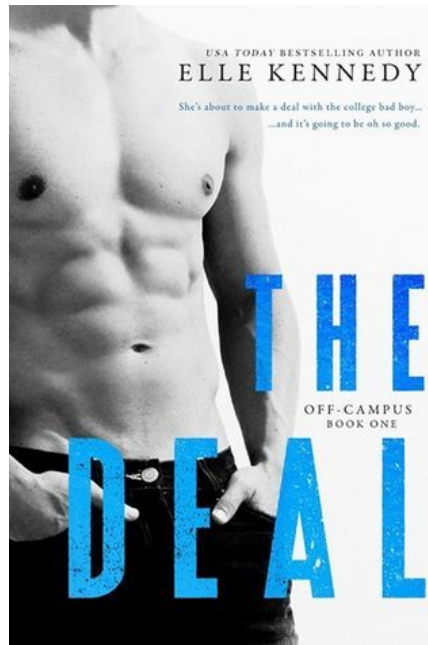
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