



TAKE THE LEAP

AND EMBRACE THE FALL

DON'T LOOK DOWN

BEST LAID PLANS BOOK ONE
JESSICA ANN

DON'T LOOK DOWN

BEST LAID PLANS SERIES

JESSICA ANN

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Don't Look Down

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This book contains mature content.

PLAYLIST

Theme Song

Don't Look Down by Martin Garrix feat. Usher

Body by Megan Thee Stallion

break up with your girlfriend, I'm bored by Ariana Grande

that way by Tate McRae

THATS WHAT I WANT by Lil Nas X

Promises by Calvin Harris, Sam Smith

Talking Body by Tove Lo

Call You Mine by The Chainsmokers feat. Bebe Rexha

Rush by Troye Sivan

Keep Riding Me by ur pretty

Body on My by Loud Luxury feat. brando, Pitbull & Nicky
Jam

Paradise by Meduza feat. Dermot Kennedy

Search & Rescue by Drake

Personal by Point North

Stages of Grief by Awaken I Am

Adrenaline by Zero 9:36

Fix You by Coldplay

Infinity by Jaymes Young

All That Really Matters by ILLENIUM & Teddy Swims

Ain't Nobody (Loves Me Better) by Felix Jaehn feat. Jasmine
Thompson

TUYA by ROSALÍA

You Are The Reason by Calum Scott

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Feel free to skip this section if you don't have any triggers. Don't Look Down is mostly light-hearted, however it does show an on-page death of a non-MC. The characters experience numerous emotions associated with the trauma of the loss. I hope I portrayed these scenes in a sensitive, yet realistic way.

If you would like more details regarding these scenes, please send me a DM on Instagram @jessica_ann_author or an email to jessicaannauthor@gmail.com.

After a few excruciating losses in our family, I fell into a pretty dark place. Writing this story was cathartic and healing for me. If you've ever lost someone, this book is for you.

And for anyone who has ever struggled with crippling fear or anxiety. Don't let fear hold you back. Don't be afraid to reach for your dreams. They might just come true.

PROLOGUE

Fear heights. Be afraid to fall. Don't look down, we're taught, basically from the time we learn to walk. If you fall, you may break. You may just shatter your body, or parts of it, into itty bitty pieces. Pieces that will never fit back together again. And we can't have that.

It's like they want us grounded here on earth. They don't want us to fly. They don't want us to soar or thrive. They want us to be afraid so we fall in line and do what we're told.

Well, guess what?

I've never been good at doing what I'm told.

I'm more of a free spirit and tend to follow where the wind leads me. A bit of a wanderer and adventurer of sorts. I've also learned that if you leap, you open up a whole new world of endless possibilities where fear has no place.

I don't remember being afraid of anything. And so, I continue to choose to be fearless. But that choice may very well have led to the end of me. Or at least the end of the me I've always known.

My name is Skylar, but please call me Sky, and this is my story. Yeah, my name is a bit ironic. I bet my parents didn't plan that, but trust that the irony only gets better from here. You'll see.

This is the story about how I laughed in the face of danger one too many times. Leaping from devastating heights and

taking unimaginable risks. But... I lived, took chances, took those leaps without much thought to the consequences or fallout.

Sans fear.

It's the only way to be.

Because when you're a critical care nurse, you're facing and fighting death daily.

I've witnessed the fragility of life over and over again. Held someone's life in the palm of my hand while performing CPR or administering a defibrillator after a code, only to watch the life leave their eyes anyway.

Whether it's due to genetics, bad luck, or wrong place at the wrong time, death is nondiscriminatory.

I've seen it all. Between your standard illnesses and trauma cases of motor vehicle accidents, shootings, or drug overdoses, I've seen countless lives lost.

I've learned to live each day to the fullest. Like each day could possibly be my last. Who the fuck has time for fear when life is so damn short?

I don't.

Well...

I didn't.

At least not until that dreadful moment when the worst happened. And it didn't even happen to me. Which, honestly, makes it so much worse.

There's another dash of irony for you, considering my purpose is to help people. All those years of training were useless. There was nothing I could do to help. I didn't even get the chance to try. Maybe I could have made a difference.

I care more for other people than I do for myself, but I still couldn't help in that one critical moment.

I should have listened to what they said.

But I didn't.

And in the end, I paid dearly for it. I paid too steep a price. A price nobody should have to pay.

Life knocked me back down to earth and into the darkest depths of despair. All of my insecurities were brought screaming to the surface. Doubts, fears, and sorrow all threatening to overtake and suffocate me. To snuff out the Sky I've always been. The Skylar, I'm supposed to be.

But Landon...

God.

Sweet, precious Landon was there to guide me back out into the light.

He helped teach me, a highly trained, and skilled, if I do say so myself, healthcare professional, how to breathe again. How to take that leap and soar again after I forgot how to spread my wings.

I don't deserve him. I guess that's the beauty of living this life. Sometimes we get to keep our blessings whether we "deserve" them or not. And in the end, who gets to decide who's deserving or undeserving?

Life is beautiful, but short, and so unfair it's not even funny.

Landon

January

“**Y**ou good, Spence?”

The voice beside me barely registers. Spots dance behind my eyelids as I squeeze my eyes closed in an attempt to block out my reality. Trying to breathe through the panic that’s shooting ice through my veins. Second by second, my breath is being stolen by the irrational fear that is turning me into a mess once again.

Wait... Am I even breathing right now? Fuck.

I suck in a gasp of air and acknowledge I’m feeling lightheaded.

Here I go again. When will this bullshit stop?

I force myself to keep inhaling rhythmically. I need to get a grip before I fall into full-fledged panic attack territory. I'm already skating a very fine line.

Skating... for fuck's sake. That's what got me into this mess in the first place.

I try to focus on measuring my breaths. Slow inhale through my nose. Slow exhale out my mouth. Rinse and repeat.

Spoiler alert.

It's. Not. Fucking. Working.

My hands are still clenched in a classic white-knuckle death grip on the arms of the chair. I very well might leave fingerprints indented on the leather armrests.

How's that for an autograph? Landon Spencer was here.

Jesus.

If you can't tell by all the red flags, I hate flying. You could say I'm legitimately petrified of flying. And I get that it's supposedly safer than driving blah, blah, blah. Don't waste your time reciting the statistics. Even Sky has tried, but they don't matter. They don't diminish the terror by one iota. I *know* the stats, but it doesn't help the uncontrollable nerves skittering through my body. Or the trickle of cold sweat slowly inching its way down my spine. It's soaking my shirt at this point.

Usually, I can distract myself from the paralyzing fear with a good playlist, a movie, or talking with the guys. Leigh helps, too. *Sometimes*. And, on *very* rare occasions, I can relax enough to nap. Those unicorn naps tend to only take place when we leave immediately after a brutal series of games and my body is well past exhaustion mode.

Plus, zero turbulence is always good.

But not today.

That shit definitely isn't happening today. I am panic and panic is me.

The fucking turbulence is killing me.

We seem to be on the flight from Hell. Or maybe we're just on a one-way path straight *to* Hell. Just bury me now, please. Put me out of my misery. End it all.

I'm practically bouncing in my seat, teeth rattling in my head from this shit. If I didn't know any better, I would swear we were on a yacht during a hurricane instead of thousands of feet in the air.

My stomach curls and nausea creeps in at the thought of those thousands of feet. I shake my head to clear the visual.

According to our pilot, we'll be experiencing some turbulence for the remainder of our flight. Fucking A.

Why did I decide a career in the NHL was #lifegoals?

What a fantastic way to avoid airplanes, Spence, considering how seldom we fly for away games.

Said no professional hockey player ever.

Luckily, for this series of games, we'd only needed one flight into Arizona and our return flight home. We'd taken a charter bus between games since they'd all been reasonably close to each other geographically. That's a miracle that will probably never happen again.

It's also a miracle I haven't had a heart attack yet. If not for the pure exhaustion of those weeks away, I wouldn't survive this.

You'd think I'd be more comfortable since we're on a charter flight and our entire crew, including pilot, co-pilot, and flight attendants, remains the same, but you'd be wrong. You'd also be wrong in expecting me to be desensitized to my phobia after these last few years in the NHL.

So, so very wrong.

We hit another pocket of air, and my stomach drops right out of my ass.

Seriously. It's gone. I felt that shit leave my body. You know the feeling. Who needs a stomach anyway?

I think it fell out somewhere over Louisiana. Or maybe the ocean, since I have no clue where we are right now, aside from being between San Jose and Florida. And if it's not home, then I don't want to know. Wherever we are is still too far away. My feet need to be on land. As soon as possible.

Trying to pull myself out of this, I open my eyes briefly to squint at the screen in front of me. There's a random movie playing that I'd put on earlier in a distraction attempt. It's failing, though, because my earbuds aren't even in my ears. But I'd had to try something.

You know that little map that shows the plane en route? Well, that shit had to go. It was taunting me with how much longer we still had before arriving at our destination. The countdown made me want to crawl out of my skin.

I can barely bring myself to look at that thing. Just seeing that plane trailing across the screen with our altitude reminds me even more of the fact that I'm currently sitting in an actual death trap with wings.

If only I could have this career minus the flying. It sucks beyond words because I can't think of a better career. This is it for me. It's what I was born to do. And I'll play hockey for as long as I possibly can.

From the time I watched that first game with Pops over twenty years ago, I knew hockey was the end goal for me. I couldn't explain the feeling that had circulated through my body when my grandfather and I sat together in that icy arena. The sense of belonging. Of rightness. Like a lost puzzle piece slotting right into place, I'd found where I belonged.

I'd listened to the cheers of the fans, inhaled the smell of the arena, and listened to the sound of skates slicing across ice and the stick hitting the puck.

Pure. Magic.

Music to my ears. The soundtrack to my life.

At that moment, I knew I was home.

And I've never left.

Pops and my mom made my dream come true. They busted ass to make this happen for me. There's a reason why hockey is known as a rich man's sport. It's expensive as shit, but I never felt like my dreams were a burden to them. Just a joint goal.

And now, being the one on the ice who everyone is cheering for? It's a rush like no other. A feeling that's completely unmatched. Almost electric. Or magnetic. I can't fully explain it.

And so, I try my best to push through the fear, flight after torturous flight.

"C'mon, Spencer. Breathe, buddy. You're about to hyperventilate," my teammate and friend, Lucas Leighton, says from beside me. He's the perfect seat mate since he loves the window seat, while I loathe it. Because fucking duh. He always keeps all of the windows down, except for one that he periodically opens and closes to check out the view. He's completely unbothered by the whole in-the-clouds-a-million-miles-above-the-earth thing. He actually enjoys it.

I don't know how we're friends.

But he gets me. He gives me the space to work through the anxiety my phobia causes. His heart is huge, and he wears it right there on his sleeve for anyone in need.

We've been on this team together for the last four seasons, so he feels more like family at this point. He's truly one of the best guys I know.

Vaguely, I notice that he's gently jostling my shoulder. Who knows how long he's been trying to draw me out of my spiraling. My hands are tingling, and I am deep into fight-or-flight mode here. With no means of fleeing.

Fuck.

"Only another forty-five minutes till we're home, buddy. Now talk to me, Spence. Tell me what your plans are when we're back. Got anything lined up? You gonna see Savannah? Or is she out at a shoot?"

I tilt my head a little to the left and crack that eye open to glance at him, eyes and forehead full on scrunched with incredulity as I grit out between my teeth, “We’re actively falling out of the sky in a giant tin can and you want small talk, Leigh? Really? Our plane is about to go down in a blaze of glory, never to be seen again, and this is what you want to chat about? Maybe we should order some tea to go with? The world will mourn the Bull Sharks who perished as one.”

His eyes roll. “Oh my God, drama queen, bro. Stop it. We’re not falling, and we won’t crash. You *know* this. Listen to that, admittedly tiny, rational part of your brain.” He shakes my shoulder again for good measure, and I notice his own movie is paused and both of his earbuds are out. His body is angled toward me, with all of his focus centered on me. He’s such a good dude. “Now, talk to me. About anything. The distraction technique will only work if you let it. Sooooo, just go with it.”

My brain searches for a topic. Anything, but mostly, my focus is stuck on our season and how many flights we have left. Way too many, in my opinion, but also, maybe not enough, depending on how far we make it this year. We’re midway through the season. If we make it to the playoffs, our flights will increase drastically. And I’ll have to find a way to be okay with that. Obviously, I want to make it there, but the anxiety will be a total killer by then if today’s flight is any indication.

An appointment with my therapist for a refill on my anxiety meds is probably a must. It’s that bad. My body will be functioning on pure fumes and training by then, so in theory, I should sleep through a bunch of those flights, but realistically, I know I can’t rely on that happening. I can’t function like this in the long term. And there’s no shame in needing help. Even though Leigh and the other guys give me shit when I lose my shit, they get it.

Once the season ends, I can successfully avoid flying for a few months before the new season kicks back up again. Somewhere between three to almost five months on solid ground.

Bliss.

But until then?

Pure, unadulterated torture.

Trying to shake away the thoughts of all those future flights, I take another deep, centering breath. It seems we're both surprised with the turn of my thoughts and the words that tumble abruptly out of my mouth. "Sky willingly jumps out of planes every chance he gets. The crazy fucker loves skydiving," I randomly blurt.

Immediately, I regret it.

A heavy, weighty silence follows my statement. Taking a chance to gauge his reaction, I open my other eye and look fully at him. His warm brown eyes are wide, eyebrows raised as he meets my greens.

Huh.

I cringe. This is weird. I made it weird.

Fuck.

My fat mouth decided to spill, so I guess we're talking about Sky now.

"Sky, huh?" he asks me, as a tiny smirk curls his lips. His eyebrows are still raised. Fuck me. Now I've done it.

His expression tells me he has something more to say, but he's holding the words inside. The bastard will give me shit for this later, I'm sure, but my boy has my back when I need him the most. That's what matters at the moment. So I run with the topic I unintentionally started. Might as well. Now that I opened this up, there's no way he'll let it go.

"For fucking fun! Dude. Who does that? Who willingly jumps out of a perfectly good plane to freefall back to earth? Well, not a good plane, because they're all shit, but a plane that's *not* crashing. Just for funsies. He's nuts."

He guffaws, "Um, a lot of people? I'd do it. I want to at least once in my life. I've heard the adrenaline rush is unreal, and you don't even feel like you're falling. The wind force

practically holds you up or some shit and you just kind of glide. Then you pull that ripcord and glide some more. Sign me up. I'd have done it already if it wasn't for my contract."

I recoil. "What? Fuck no. Fuck. That. Shit. I would never."

My brain can't fathom how Sky *lives* for skydiving. He told me he pretty much jumps whenever he has the opportunity. Seriously. And Leigh would do it, too?

What's wrong with my friends?

Well...

Is someone you've never technically met really a friend?

Sky and I have spoken many times on game chats, but we've never actually met in person. He *feels* like a friend. I've learned to be careful who I place my trust in, and that trusting my gut is a must. So I'm running with that, too. Mostly.

"Obviously," Leigh chuckles some more. Yep, at my expense. The bastard. I'll be hearing about this for a while to come. The gleam in his eyes is a dead giveaway that he can't wait to give me shit about Sky.

Why did I open my big mouth?

"Who's Sky anyway? The name doesn't sound familiar. I'm sure you've never mentioned him before." He's not wrong.

"He's this guy I started talking to on *Call of Duty* a few months ago. We talk pretty often now. Sometimes less or more depending on how our schedules line up."

He gasps dramatically like a scandalized virgin maiden. "A COD bromance? And no invite? Say it isn't so, Spence. The betrayal. I thought we were friends. My feelings are hurt. You know I'm always down for some deathmatch. My heart. It hurts." Lucas tosses his head back, one hand to forehead, the other clutched over his heart. Against my will, I chuckle at his antics. He and Sky would get along.

"Not a bromance, by any means, but next time we're on, I'll shoot you a text." Dread fills me at the thought of shooting him that text. Discomfort coils in my chest. It's nothing

against Leigh, but I want those moments with Sky to myself. It doesn't make sense to me, but I'm self-aware enough to recognize my possessive instincts are triggered. I don't want to share him, but maybe I should. This can't be a normal reaction to the thought of introducing your friends to each other.

"Bet. So, any plans for later today?"

"Nothing definite. I told Savannah I'd probably crash at home. These games kicked my ass. She said she'll probably come by for a bit at some point, but she does have an early shoot tomorrow." I shrug. She's a model and takes jobs mostly in Florida.

I guess some would call Savannah my girlfriend, but I wouldn't. In reality, we're friends with benefits. Before you get mad at me for misleading her, stop it. We both agreed on this status quo. It works for us and she's one hundred percent on board with it.

Our careers are our focus. We both respect and understand that. But we have needs, and we trust each other enough to satisfy those needs together. We're the safe choice since we've had our fair share of people who've been interested in us only for our celebrity status. Once you've been burned before, it's hard to trust others on that level. I know she won't take dick pics and sell them for fame, and she knows I won't record a secret sex tape.

It's a win for all involved. Plus, it's beneficial to have a partner I can bring to events.

We don't live together, and we don't plan to. We have our own spaces. Our own lives. Perfect arrangement, if you ask me.

Savannah has been my friend for maybe five or six years, but this arrangement is new in comparison. It's been going steadily for about eighteen months.

We're content at the moment, but maybe we could possibly be more in the future? My insides clench at the thought, but I continue the thought for the follow through. Maybe move in

together and share some bills and all that BS that couples do. Who knows?

My chest tightens. I'm nowhere near ready for that to happen if my reaction is any indication.

Maybe one day.

Either way, we're not there yet.

A beep rings out through the cabin and the intercom kicks on. "This is your Captain speaking. As we begin our final descent into Fort Lauderdale, please make sure your seats and trays are in the upright position and locked, and any carry-on luggage is securely stored. Please keep your seatbelts fastened. Flight attendants will be making their final walk through the cabin to collect any trash and prepare the cabin for landing."

I sigh out roughly with the immediate relief I'm feeling. "Thank fuck. Finally."

"Not all heroes wear capes, bro," Leighton chuckles.

My left eyebrow raises in confusion. "Huh?"

"Me." He thumps his chest in case I don't know who he's referring to. The jackass. "A hero. Just call me Ferris Bueller since I saved your day and all that. Now you'll only have to put up with my shit. You know the rest of the guys would really never let you live it down if you had a full-on freakout again."

"Oh, fuck off." I laugh, but I know he's right. It's never malicious, but these guys are like brothers to me, and they would tease the hell out of me if I had another panic attack mid-flight.

Yes.

Another.

I don't want to talk about it.

"Seriously, though. Thanks for having my back, Leigh," I reach over and clap him on the shoulder.

A mechanical thump and whirring noise have my hand shooting right back to the armrest. My hands grip for dear life

as the landing gear drops under the plane. It's the best and worst sound. It sounds like something vital is falling out under there. It's terrifying, but I'm almost home.

The whooshing of the wind precedes the inevitable, sickening drop in my stomach as the plane begins a more rapid descent. My ears pop and my stomach flips. And yep, I'm nauseous. I guess my stomach is still where it belongs after all.

Fuck this, though. I can't wait for it to be over.

Landing is the actual worst part, in my opinion.

And take-off.

And the actual flight.

Who am I kidding?

It all fucking sucks.

The pilot makes another announcement and asks the flight attendants to take their seats. I know Leigh and I are still talking quietly, but I can't tell you what we're talking about. My brain must have switched into survival mode and blocked out the specifics of the conversation.

The plane shudders and thumps as the tires finally, thank God, *finally* make contact with the tarmac. A little bit of a bumpy landing has my stomach contents threatening to exit via my mouth. Puking would make the perfect ending to this nightmare flight.

The wheels squeal when the pilot engages the brakes, and if not for the ever-present death grip on my armrests, I would've jolted forward in my seat. I release a few panting breaths to alleviate the nausea.

Ugh, too much emotional upheaval.

I am stressed the fuck out and jittery as hell in the aftermath of the adrenaline flooding my system.

Halle-fucking-lujah, I'm home.

For now, at least.

Landon

I stare blearily at the ceiling fan that lazily circles above my bed. The low hum is soothing, but not enough to lull me into sleep. Which is what I should be doing right now. Getting all the rest I can to take advantage of the fact there's no early practice tomorrow. You'd think I would have crashed after such a mentally draining flight. My brain wanders a bit, but there seems to be one prominent subject in my thoughts.

Sky.

He's been in my thoughts since my conversation with Leigh. I can't shake him, even though I'm trying. I scrub my hands roughly over my face. Tired, but can't sleep. Why am I even awake right now?

This deep into the season, my body is hard-wired into hockey mode. Sleep typically comes easily. On any other day, I'd already be passed out cold. My limbs are heavy with the exhaustion weighing me down. Aches and pains are my unwelcome companions, ribs black and blue and throbbing in rhythm with my heartbeat.

I should grab an ice pack or some arnica cream. Mom swears by its natural healing properties. She's a mix of textbook medicine and all-natural herbal remedies. I love the contrast. Admittedly, the arnica seems to speed up the healing process. I just can't be bothered to move to grab either.

It doesn't help my restlessness that a comfortable spot seems to be illusive in this giant bed. Shifting, I slide my arms underneath my head and the lone pillow that currently supports it. A bed full of pillows and yet I sleep with one. Go figure.

A sigh leaves my lips and my thoughts drift away from my bedding and back to Sky. This fixation is maddening.

Squirming, I shift my legs around some more. There has to be a comfortable spot somewhere in this godforsaken bed. If I could crawl out of my skin to rip the feeling away and shut this shit down, I would.

What's Sky doing right now?

It's been a few days since we've managed to link up. While the team was away, I didn't have much of a chance to log onto the gaming chat app, which I'd finally caved and installed on my phone. I'd hoped to catch him online at some point, but no luck so far. Not for lack of want, but lack of time.

Travel, sleep, practice, sleep, game, sleep. And repeat. An endless cycle that barely allows time to breathe, much less socialize. The week had been absolutely brutal, and I'd crashed the second my head hit the hotel pillow.

Which is what I expected to happen today when I hit my bed. Exhaustion, plus home sweet home and all. But nope. Zero rest and comfort to be found.

Just call my brain Benedict Arnold, because I feel very betrayed right now. This anxious, jittery feeling has taken my body hostage and refuses to let go.

I should just send him a message. Put myself out of my misery. It's simple enough to test out the theory. It's about midafternoon on a Wednesday, so Sky should be home at this time of day. Wednesdays are one of his days off.

I don't know why I'm holding myself back.

The more I talk to him, the guiltier I feel for not disclosing who I am.

He loves hockey. He'd be thrilled to know he inadvertently made friends with an NHL player. But not in a skeezy, what-can-your-fame-do-for-me way.

I should tell him. I need to tell him. I'll muddle through and find the right time to open up. I'm sure I can find a moment. I just have to take it, instead of continuing to hide.

Why am I even thinking so hard about sending him a message? I roll my eyes at how ridiculous my thoughts are. I'm fucking delirious from my need to rest. That has to be it.

Jesus.

I reach over and grab my phone off the nightstand. Twisting it and turning it in my hands. *Just send the message, Spencer. It's not that serious.*

If he's able to, he'll message back. It's that simple. Maybe just sending the message will help settle this feeling.

If he's off like he should be, hopefully he has a little time to talk. It would be nice to catch up with him.

Not that I'm checking up on him or anything, and it's definitely not why I have the app in the first place, but according to the timestamp, his status shows last login was about three days ago.

Which isn't even that long ago, for fuck's sake, since it's been longer for me.

Get a grip.

How did I get here? How did I get to this moment where Sky, a man I've never met, is taking up this much real estate in my brain? The man is living there rent-free.

On paper, aside from our connection over *Call of Duty* and hockey, Sky and I are total opposites. Our connection doesn't really make sense, but we still click. Easy conversations and laughter from the first moment we matched. I'm a good judge

of character, and something about him just felt safe from the very beginning. But even though he feels safe to me, I've still held myself back.

My frustrated groan sounds loud in the hushed quiet of my room. Aside from the mostly inaudible sound of the ceiling fan above me. It's circulating at a rhythm similar to my thoughts. Unfailingly.

Rotating my phone in hand, I watch its motion closely, hoping I can focus my thoughts on the device and away from the dilemma I'm trapped in. I guess trapped is a bit of an overstatement, since I could easily come clean at any time. If I'm being honest, I'm worried about his reaction to my news. The last thing I want is for who I am to cause a rift between us. I don't want to lose him. Our conversations mean a lot to me.

Maybe I should just call my mom. She'll tell me straight what to do. She'll help me sort through this mess. Talking to her always settles me. That should help snap me out of this thought cycle.

I'm not ashamed to admit my mom was my best friend while I was growing up. Who am I kidding? She's *still* my best friend, but Sky is competing for that spot, and I'm sure he has no clue.

I mean, I had friends growing up, but I always felt a deep kinship with my mother. She was a teen mom, so we're pretty close in age.

She's my hero, biggest fan, cheerleader, supporter, and confidante all rolled into one.

This is why I'm struggling to process how Sky is somehow becoming that person. When I've. Never. Even. Met. Him. And he has no clue who I really am.

What the fuck is wrong with me?

My mind wanders a few months back to the day we first spoke. I didn't set out to make a new friend that day. It just kind of happened in a moment of divine intervention. An accidental crossing of paths. A moment arranged by the Gods

of Gaming and the Internets. A random assignment to a COD deathmatch team and the rest was history. Or fate, maybe. Somewhere in the midst of flash bangs, headshots, and shit talk, we actually got to talking for real. Who knows what we actually spoke about that night, but we just clicked.

My cheeks reach for my ears with the stupid grin curling across my face as I let myself remember. I'm glad I can't see my face, because I feel goofy as hell. And, quite frankly, I'm glad Savannah hasn't made it over yet.

That woman would call me out for my stupid face.

So here I am.

Just lying in my bed, one hand under my head, phone in hand, thinking back to that day. But I can't help myself, so I just surrender to the memory instead.

An alarm went off through my headset, and I heard skysthelimit curse under his breath. "Damn, I gotta go knock out for a few hours if I plan to be useful to any of my patients tonight. Catch you another time?"

"For sure. But, patients? Are you a doctor?" I noted it was around two in the afternoon my local time, and I wondered what time it was where he lived. He could be anywhere, but I'm almost sure he's at least in the same time zone, if not the same state. He sounded not only American, but Floridian with a hint of Latin flavor. I could be wrong, but I could swear I hear the Florida dripping from each of his words. It's a thing. Florida has its own accents.

"Oh no, honey, I'm a nurse. Send me a friend request if you're down to link up again sometime. This was fun. Later, LandonTheBull."

And just like that, he was gone. One friend request later and the rest is history. A few games in and he'd told me his name was Skylar, but to call him Sky. He said the intimacy of Skylar always made his skin crawl.

Everyone calls me Spencer or Spence, but for some reason I refused to examine, I'd told him to call me Landon. I didn't want him to call me what everyone else does.

He didn't feel like everyone.

He felt different.

Like a *someone*.

So I followed my gut.

It's so rare for people aside from my mom to call me Landon, but Sky does. At least when he's not calling me LTB.

And I don't hate it.

I think I love it.

So now we've established that I didn't set out to make a new friend, but I need to be clear here for *reasons*. I didn't intend to start our friendship shrouded in lies. But...was it really a lie, though? After that first conversation, he was gone so fast I couldn't even begin to contemplate telling him I'm a pro hockey player.

And believe it or not, it didn't come up again in subsequent conversations. When we started talking about loving hockey? Now that's another story. Another golden opportunity when I could have said, "*Oh hey, funny story, Sky, I play for your favorite team. You can call me Spencer or Spence if you prefer, but I'd rather you keep calling me Landon.*"

But I didn't.

I could have said anything to tell him who I am, but I said not one word. Except to agree with him about favorite players, and discuss recent games and awesome plays.

I trust him, but I'm scared he'll see me differently. In my heart, I know he's not like that. But trusting the wrong person has gotten me into trouble before.

So even though I didn't really lie per se, it feels like it. It's a clear-cut case of omission. Lie by omission? Technically speaking. Right? Well, maybe more accurately I should say *lies* by omission, since he also doesn't know my sexuality either.

Ugh.

If I tell him who I am, he'll immediately know my sexuality since he's a fan. All of my secrets unearthed in one shot.

Although, one could argue, we're not entitled to know each other's sexual identity. It's not like I *have* to divulge my sexuality. Straight people don't have to. Regardless, I've also never hidden who I am before. Until now.

My bisexuality isn't a secret or something I'm ashamed of. I've always been an out and proud bisexual man. I didn't hide in the NCAA, and I refused to hide in the NHL. My mom always taught me to love who I am and be proud of who I am. Never hide. I've always embraced that. Until now.

Considering the generation my mom grew up in, it truly surprises me how open, loving, and accepting she was. I should call her and unload these thoughts on her.

Something about Sky put me on guard, which is such a weird feeling, because I've also been very open with him in ways I hesitate with others. At my core, I trust him, but I'm scared. And that just doesn't make any sense to me. I guess that's what has me so unsettled.

We've been talking openly for so long now, but I just can't figure out how to dig myself out of this hole I bury myself deeper in with each conversation.

I have to find a way.

I open the app and pull up our chats, hoping I'll find some answers hidden amidst the endless sea of words. Scrolling aimlessly while overthinking everything.

He's just my friend. Why can't I stop thinking about him? Why can't I settle my thoughts? My heart is beating a touch too fast. Why can't I calm down?

My nerves are all over the place. All I have to do is tell him.

Rip the Band-Aid off. It's not that hard.

It's easy, right?

At least it should be.

For now, I settle on sending Sky a message to check in and ask what he's up to. I have no clue how long it'll take him to respond. He might not see the message for hours depending on his notification settings.

Assuming he's not a psycho like me who downloaded the app for the express purpose of ensuring I don't miss his messages.

I am not a needy man.

This is *not* me, although all evidence currently points to the contrary.

But this shit has me feeling all kinds of fucked up and needy.

For my friend.

Before I let myself overthink it any further, I type out a casual text. Just a simple message so there's no pressure or anything.

LandonTheBull: Yo.

There we go. Perfect. Super casual.

Am I being too casual? Fucking Christ.

Dropping my phone on the bed, I scrub my hands over my face and comb my fingers through my hair until I have a nice solid grip on the dirty blonde strands. There's not much to grab at the moment, since it's close cropped on the sides with a little length on top. Nevertheless, the sting is satisfying.

These nerves are ridiculous. I'm like a nervous teenager for no fucking reason at all. I mean, Sky is admittedly "very gay." His description, not mine. Although I always try my best not to assume, I was fairly certain I'd known he was gay from the jump. Even though we didn't outright discuss it until a bit later on. My gaydar rarely fails me.

I know, I know. Even more reason to be open with him about my bisexuality, at the very least. I can't explain where the nerves are coming from. These nerves and anxiety are not who I am. Outside of heights and flying of course. Otherwise, I am unshakeable.

Looking back, I know the exact moment I fucked up and held myself back. One afternoon, Sky's friend had come over, and I'd blatantly called her his girlfriend. I don't think I could have been any less subtle in my fishing if I had tried.

Through the headset, I overheard a door slam, followed by Sky saying, "Honey, we don't slam doors here, thanks!" and a feminine voice retorting, "Well, how else am I going to announce my presence? Oh my god, I'd ask if you're ready to go, but I can see that you're not."

"Oh, shit, it's that time already? Sorry! I forgot to set an alarm. I can be ready super quick."

"Mhm, sure you can, Skylar."

"Ewww, nope! No ma'am, you will not full-first-name me, Adeline."

"Hey, man, we can pick this back up later. Go spend some time with your girlfriend," I interjected while pausing the game. I know I'm fishing. And what I'm doing is so damn obvious to me, but he doesn't seem to notice. He's too busy gasping out, "My, what? Oh my god, nooooo. Ew. Bahahaha!"

Hysterical guffaws of laughter almost blew out my ear drums and were quickly followed by a thump and some rustling. I loved that about him. He didn't just laugh. Sometimes, like now, he spoke his laugh, and I couldn't help but laugh with him. He's just pure joy and happiness manifested in a person, and it can't be contained. It bubbled out of him with every laugh and chortle through the headset and wrapped its way around my gut.

A giggling feminine voice spoke into the mic, "Hey, sorry, Sky can't come to the game chat right now. He's fallen off his couch and died of laughter. I'll miss him dearly," I could hear him snort at that remark and continue cracking up. "I'm Addy, by the way, the bestie. I assume you're Landon, the COD bestie?"

I chuckled again at that description. I didn't know this woman, but she seemed like a cool person. That didn't surprise

me, since I think Sky isn't so bad himself. It tracks that his friend would be, too.

"Yup, I guess that's me. The descriptor seems to fit."

"Okay, that's enough, woman, gimme," Sky stated in the background, "I am composed now."

"Bye, Landon," she sing-songed.

"Bye, Addy. Nice talking to you." Rustling sounds followed for a few seconds.

"Fine, go ahead and take away the headset and the man with the sexy voice. You didn't tell me he has such a sexy voice! Pure sex on a stick. Yum! You've been holding out on me, Sky babe."

A smirk curls my lips after the sexy voice comment. What guy doesn't love an ego boost?

His answering screech of outrage caused me to cringe like that would lessen his volume somehow. My poor eardrums somehow managed to allow Sky's response to come through clearly, "Nope! We are not doing that, Adeline. Do not call me Sky babe and definitely don't talk about sexy things in the same sentence. It's almost sacrilegious, woman. You have the sheer audacity to bring Luke and Vance into the conversation and call me Sky babe? Nope! No, ma'am. Do you hear me?"

The more words poured out of his mouth the closer his voice got until I could finally tell he had the headset back on. Apparently, it was Adeline's, or Addy's, turn to bust up with peals of laughter.

"Oh. My. Gosh. Landon. She is impossible. I don't even know why we're friends at this point. She hates me. She won't play COD with me or watch hockey, and then she shamelessly shoves Luke and Vance in my face. I. Can't. Even! Can you see the knife sticking out of my back from there?"

"You're ridiculous," I laughed, then asked, "Who are Luke and Vance?" They seemed to be causing him the most distress right now.

“Okay, first, let me jump back and address your earlier comment. Addy is my bestie, for some unknown reason, not my girlfriend. She’s not my type. I like someone more masculine. Her lady bits don’t do it for me-”

Addy mockingly announced in a faux-British accent, “How have my lady bits offended you today, Skylar?”

I couldn’t hold it back if I’d tried. The snort laugh echoed into the mic. God, they were a riot.

“Ugh, ignore her, Landon. I do. Anyway, I’m super gay. No chicks, only dicks. I didn’t think I needed to announce it, since I’ve been told it’s obvious in the past. But if that’s an issue for you, let me know now, because I won’t continue to be friends with some homophobic asshole.”

My tongue was tied, and my chest felt tight. Tension coiled my muscles into bricks. What I wanted to say was locked up. Held inside in some weird-ass attempt at self-preservation I knew I didn’t need. That I’ve never felt before. Knowing that didn’t stop some bullshit mix of truth and misdirection from leaving my mouth against my will, along with a slightly forced laugh. “Hey, man, I’m not the type to assume or judge anyone’s sexual identity or put labels on anyone. We’re cool.”

“Good, now that that’s settled, I don’t know if you’re a reader, but Luke and Vance are one of my absolute favorite same-sex couples in a series by Ellis James. Vance calls Luke ‘Sky Babe’ and Addy knows it makes me swoon. She’s the worst.”

“Sure, she is. She seems fun. But yeah, I’ve been known to read a book or two once in a blue moon. Maybe I’ll check them out.”

“You’d check out queer romance?”

“Sure, why not?”

“Most guys wouldn’t be interested in queer romance.”

“I’m not most guys.” And I’m also queer, too...

“Oooh, okay, sir, color me intrigued. You’ll have to let me know what you think if you give them a chance.”

“I will.”

“I suggest the audiobooks. They’re perfect for me since I can’t stand to sit still long enough to read an actual book. The narrators for that series are absolute perfection. Talk about sexy voices. Total ear porn. Ungh,” he moans, and I ignore the tingle the sound caused in the region of my dick. Thinking of porn and hearing that sound. Fuck. It’s been too long. I should call Savannah so we can work a load or two out of my balls. “Anywho, I digress,” he continues, oblivious to the predicament he caused in my shorts. “Audiobooks are my jam. I can listen when I’m driving, cooking, cleaning, working out... The list goes on.”

“Hmm.” I cleared some of the hoarseness from my voice before I continued. “Well, I’ve never done an audiobook before, but you may have convinced me to give them a listen.”

“Winning! Anyway, Addy is giving me the death glare. I gotta go get ready for our lunch date. I’ll catch you later, LTB.”

“Catch you later, Sky.”

I should have just told him right then, but I felt vulnerable for some reason. Like I couldn’t expose that part of me just yet. No matter how many times I replay that moment and examine my actions I can’t make sense of it. And I can’t go back and change my response. I can only move forward.

I didn’t choose to be a liar. It just happened. Again, it’s a lie by omission, but semantics don’t matter. A lie is a lie is a lie. Either way, his sexuality, and my own sexuality, have no bearing here.

We’re just friends. He may have given me a semi once, but it’s only because I’d needed to get laid. It can’t be attraction, since I don’t even know what he looks like, and it hasn’t happened since. It’s no big deal. Right?

I fidget around, trying to find a more comfortable position while I wait not so patiently for a reply.

A reply that frankly might not come through for hours or days if he’s busy.

I'll just call my mom to pass some time. She should be available. I am her favorite child after all. Her only child, but that's not the point. Surely, I can convince her to join me for dinner. Operation dine and distract.

Yes, please.

That should work.

Clicking her contact info on my phone, I hit the call button. Seconds pass like minutes as I wait for the call to connect.

It doesn't.

Fucking seriously?

Frowning at the ceiling, her voicemail greeting begins in my ear.

"You've reached the voicemail of Annie Spencer." I'm smiling just from the sound of her cheerful voice.

Hmm, maybe she and Sky have that in common? He always manages to draw a smile out of me, too.

"Leave me a message, and I'll return your call as soon as possible. Have a beautiful day!"

"Hey, Ma. I miss your voice, and now I'm feeling neglected over here since you sent me to voicemail." I laugh so she knows I'm not serious. "We made it back home this morning, and I wanted to try to catch up with you over dinner. Maybe we can meet at Luigi's? Call me back or text me and let me know. Love you."

Hitting the end button, the first thing I do is refresh the game chat app to check for a response from Sky. Ignoring the fact I would have noticed if I'd gotten a notification.

Nothing yet. Obviously.

I am hopeless.

Landon

My phone vibrating in my hand startles me awake. With my heart beating a thunderous rhythm, confusion rises, but my senses return quickly. I must have fallen asleep somewhere in the midst of all the overthinking. I can't pinpoint when it happened. My brain must have hit the off switch and decided to put me out of my misery.

Another round of vibrations follows and my heart leaps. Sky? I squint at my phone. It takes a few blinks to clear the sleep-blurred vision from my eyes before I'm able to decipher what's on the screen.

It's not Sky. Disappointment curls heavily through my chest and my heart rate slows. There's a string of texts from Mom, telling me she can meet for dinner in about an hour. And, as an afterthought, she'd added "can't wait to see you, it's been too long!" We saw each other last week. I'm still looking forward to eating a good meal with one of my favorite people, though.

There's a little bit of time to kill before I need to leave. Famiglia Luigi, lovingly referred to as Luigi's, is located about

twenty minutes away from my house and less than five minutes away from Mom's. It's one of my favorites; a quaint little local spot, where I won't get mobbed by hockey fans.

Don't get me wrong, I love my fans, and I definitely love the attention, but I also enjoy a peaceful dinner every now and then. And it's needed today more than ever, considering how unsettled I'm feeling. Although I got some rest, the exhaustion still lingers. I'm incapable of being "on" today. I don't have the mental capacity.

I'm a few minutes early, but she still managed to beat me here. Mom is early everywhere. Early in her mind equates to on time. It's another of her superpowers. All moms have them and you can't tell me otherwise. I try to emulate her ways, and I'm proud to say I'm mostly successful.

Parking my dark blue Escalade next to her Lexus, I can't help the grin that overtakes my face. She wouldn't let me buy her a house, so the SUV was our compromise. I'd only gotten her to agree because I'd convinced her it would make me happy.

It's the least I can do for her after every sacrifice she made for me. I want to take care of her like she'd taken care of me. But she's not having it.

Annie Spencer is nothing if not independent. She'd let me have a piece of her mind that day. Mom informed me very bluntly, I could take care of her when she was old and senile, and that day was not today.

Mom always wanted a brand-new Lexus. She practically drooled over that car, but she couldn't rationalize spending all that money on herself. So I did it for her.

Walking inside I greet the hostess by name and make my way over to our table. You can call us regulars at this point. We know it can get pretty noisy in here. It's always a bit less crowded toward the back, so we prefer sitting at this little table in the back corner.

"There's my baby." Mom smiles up at me.

I lean down to squeeze her in a hug and press a kiss to her cheek. “Hey, Mom. How are you?”

Her eyes sparkle at me in happiness. With my dirty blonde hair and emerald-green eyes, I’m told I’m Mom’s twin, aside from my height. I prefer to think I got my height from my granddad, but I know better.

That characteristic came from my sperm donor, unfortunately.

He’d skipped out on Mom faster than the plus sign showed up on the pregnancy test. Pops has told me more than once over the years that my father disappeared like his ass was on fire, so he didn’t get nailed for statutory rape. The max sentence would’ve called for fifteen years since he was a grown-ass man who impregnated a 14-year-old girl.

My dear old dad was a winner, ladies and gentlemen.

Said no one ever.

We never needed him anyway. To this day, aside from a photo, I can say I’ve never laid eyes on him, and I’m not sad about it.

Thankfully, my grandparents were supportive and helped Mom wherever they could. Gran babysat so Mom could finish high school with an accelerated learning program. She actually finished high school a year early like a boss.

As a teen mom.

Fuck statistics, thank you very much.

Pops helped with all things hockey. I fell in love with the sport, thanks to him.

Although Mom worked a ton while I was growing up, she always made it a point to eat at least one meal a day with me. Breakfast or dinner. Sometimes lunch during the weekends or school breaks. Family was the number one priority and she taught me that through her actions.

And somehow, she *never* missed a single hockey game.

Not one.

Mother magic. It's sorcery, I swear.

Now that I play for the NHL, she makes it to almost all of my home games and a handful of away games when her schedule allows.

"I'm good. Was just missing you while you were away. You boys have been kicking ass out there this season. I'm proud of you!"

"Thanks, Mom. The team's really strong this year and we've been busting our asses in training. Just a few more months until playoffs begin."

"I know better than to say anything else. Y'all are so superstitious, and I'll never pretend to understand it, but I will respect it." She mimes zipping her lips shut, and I chuckle at her antics. I appreciate that she understands me. Superstitions are real.

"Hey, Annie, Spence, you both want your usuals?" Grace asks as she walks up to our table. Mom and I answer affirmatively. She always gets chicken parmesan, while I opt for chicken cacciatore with a side of vegetables.

Within minutes, we have glasses of ice water, a basket of bread, and fresh minestrone soup. Yum.

I dig into the vegetable-rich soup immediately. I'm salivating over the scent of fresh-baked bread. Bread, well, carbs in general, are one of my favorite things, but I sadly won't be eating much today. Just a piece to satisfy my craving. Carbs are fuel for game days.

My self-control and willpower are strong, and I don't overeat or stray too far from my nutritionist's recommendations. I'm able to follow a fairly strict diet, even during the off-season. Otherwise, conditioning during pre-season would be a bitch. My cravings are indulged in moderation.

"Talk to me, son. How are you? How was this series? The flights?" She side-eyes me, showing she knows they didn't go well, as she butters a slice of bread. "Tell me all of the things."

“The flights were pure trash as usual, but this morning’s flight was the worst. Turbulence was a bitch. Leigh talked me down from a panic attack, and I almost threw up. Worst flight in a while.” The truth spills out of me. My eyes shift to my soup and I rub the back of my neck. It’s a bit embarrassing looking back at my reactions this morning. My feet shuffle around under the table. If not for Leigh... I cut that thought off at the knees.

She grimaces and reaches across the table to squeeze my hand. “Oh, honey. I know that was a nightmare, huh?”

“You have no idea. But Leigh was a big help.” She murmurs an acknowledging sound while alternating between bites of soup and bread.

“I’m glad you have him.”

“Me too. The series was pretty rough at first, as you saw,” I continue. “That overtime loss was so disheartening, but we rallied and pulled through with three wins. As a team, we mostly mesh really well. There’s still a little something missing, but we’re much better off than last season.”

Grace removes our soup bowls and tops off our water glasses while we chat some more about the team dynamics. I’m doing most of the talking, which isn’t necessarily in character for me, but it also isn’t abnormal since the conversation is about my favorite subject. I tell her I’ve heard some rumors of some trades possibly taking place by the deadline, but nothing firm.

Grace brings out our entrees, and the savory scent of garlic fills the air, making saliva pool in my mouth once again. It smells too delicious for me to wait for the food to cool. I immediately cut into my chicken. With a quick blow to prevent scalding my tongue too terribly, I take a bite and can barely contain the groan of satisfaction that aches to leave me. Flavors explode in my mouth. The chicken is juicy and tender. Vegetables cooked perfectly. Delicious.

Luigi’s is always on point.

Mom digs in a little more cautiously than I did. Our conversation is replaced with contented sighs and the clinking of silverware on our plates.

We're midway through with our meals when Mom sets down her fork and levels me with a penetrating gaze. The look. Oh God. Those laser eyes that somehow see every little thing about me. It's still intimidating as hell, even though I'm a grown man who towers over her petite frame.

"Okay, my mother's intuition is screaming at me. I can see there's something on your mind. What's going on in that head of yours? I've been patient long enough, but I need you to spill now."

A short, startled laugh bubbles out of me and my eyes close. My muscles tense in reaction to feeling so exposed. I look down at my plate like I might actually have any hope of hiding from her. I can't. Why I'm surprised by her question is baffling. This woman always manages to see right through me like I'm as transparent as glass to her.

My shoulders slump in defeat. She bested me with zero effort. I've already folded and she didn't even have to pry.

Opening my eyes, I look up at her with a resigned smile. "I don't know how you do that, woman. Christ."

She throws her elbow onto the table, props her chin on her fist, and smiles innocently. "It's a mom thing. Now stop procrastinating and spill."

Rolling my eyes, I haltingly begin. "Ugh, okay, I guess. Well...I have this friend...He's an online friend, but I consider him a close friend, nonetheless." We make eye contact for a moment, and she nods encouragingly for me to continue. "He's a *huge* hockey fan, but for some reason, I can't bring myself to tell him who I am. He knows my name is Landon, but not that I'm *the* Landon Spencer of the Florida Bull Sharks. Who just so happens to be his favorite team. And, uh-oh, we can't forget, not only are we his favorite team, I'm one of his favorite players."

Mom sits up a bit straighter. The playfulness leaves her expression and focus takes its place. “Okay, then. Let’s untangle all this.” she gestures at me. I am in fact a mess that must be untangled, so I don’t take any offense. “How long have you boys been talking?”

Leaning forward in my seat, I shove my plate away to make space for my elbows. “Since right around the beginning of the season. Maybe three to four months now.”

“Hmm, that’s quite a bit of time, Landon, for me to just be finding out about your new friend, but I’ll let it slide. In that time, has he given you any reason to believe he’d be the type of person who’d take advantage of you and your professional athlete status?” She takes a small bite of her chicken parm while eyeing me speculatively.

“No, he seems like a super genuine guy. And you know I’m a pretty good judge of character. We matched up on a game one night, and we just clicked right away. I’ve never met anyone like him, where I felt such an immediate connection. He’s queer and he told me straight up that he wouldn’t tolerate any homophobia or other bullshit from me or anyone. And I can respect that. He’s a nurse, like you. He’s a caring individual by nature and very down to earth.”

“Well, from what little you’ve told me about him, he seems like a special person. I think he’d treat you like any other normal guy and not like a hockey star. Regardless of whether you’re on his favorite team or not.”

Mom grabs her water and takes a sip, watching me closely. I grab my water to give my hands something to do, and take a sip of my own to break our stare-down. She has more to say. It’s coming. Silently, I wait for her to continue.

“Now here’s the important question I need you to think about. What are you actually scared of?”

Speechless. I don’t answer her right away. I can’t. Looking up at the ceiling I rub my chin while taking time to consider her question.

It’s caution. I’m not actually scared.

Am I?

Fuck. Maybe... Maybe I *am* scared.

Maybe I'm scared I'll be wrong about him. Even though everything inside me is screaming I can trust him. The one time I ignored my instincts is the one time it led to trouble. I knew better then, but I didn't listen and still decided to trust. It didn't go well. The weight of mom's gaze is heavy while she patiently waits for my reply.

"I don't even know, Mom." My head shakes from side to side. This shouldn't be so difficult to figure out. Especially when I've basically already answered her question. "It doesn't make sense to me. He's a friend, and I don't use that term lightly. He feels worthy of my trust, and yet I hesitate to open up about this."

"I'm not going to push you, but I have to say one more thing. At the risk of sounding like a broken record, always be yourself. You know I understand where your nerves are coming from. You've been burned before, but I think you need to follow your gut here. It's telling you he's safe. And if you do tell him, and he treats you differently, then he's not the person you thought he was, hmm? Either way, at least you'll know for sure. Also, maybe once you're able to answer what you're actually scared of, you'll see things a lot clearer."

You know that head exploding emoji? Literally, me right now. She's successfully blown my mind apart and given me more to think about all at the same time.

After dropping that little nugget of infinite wisdom in her usual fashion, we devour the rest of our food. I'm going to need nourishment for my brain to continue to muddle through everything.

We spend the rest of dinner making small talk, catching each other up, sharing random stories and talking about little things that have happened since we saw each other last week. Nothing has changed besides, you know, thinking about this shit with Sky.

This time with mom is just what I needed and has me in a much better head space. My shoulders are a little less tense, and I'm feeling a bit more relaxed, albeit still unsettled.

Sky is lingering in the back of my mind, but I make an effort to keep my focus on this quality time with her. It's harder than it should be, but we don't need to talk about that.

After dinner, which she insists on paying half of, I walk her to her car. She pushes the remote start button, and I swear her eyes light up like a kid in a candy store. She's practically glowing. It's fucking cute.

She's driven piece-of-shit cars for as long as I can remember. She always told me she didn't need a fancy car; she just needed a car to get her from point A to point B. But it's written all over her face how much she loves her pearl-white Lexus SUV.

A smile twists my mouth as I watch her. My chest puffs up in pride again. She deserves the whole world. My life wouldn't look anything like this if not for her.

Fuck, I love my mom.

We hug and say our goodbyes, then I hold the door open for her while she climbs inside.

"See you soon, sweetheart." She blows me another kiss as she backs out of the parking spot. After she pulls out, I climb into my own SUV.

I hop on the highway and head home, music playing filling the interior. The combination of seeing my mom and the music thumping through the speakers seems to have finally calmed me down. I can breathe again. Even though I now have more questions I need to answer.

The garage door lifts in front of me when I hit the opener. After I park and make sure the garage door closes behind me, I head into the house.

Before I go upstairs, I decide to take a quick detour to grab a glass of water to take with me. I plan to settle in bed for the night. Maybe watch a movie or something until I knock out.

When I get upstairs, I set the glass on my nightstand with my wallet, keys, and phone. Then I kick my shoes off and put them in the closet. Dirty laundry goes straight into the hamper. No clutter of clothes or shoes laying around for me. Things have a place for a reason.

I grab the remote and power on the TV. Pulling back the blankets, I climb onto the Wyoming king mattress.

Wyoming king. Look them up. They're a thing. Who knew?

It's a bit bigger than a California king. It fits in my master suite perfectly, but more importantly, it fits *me* comfortably. I'm no hulk, but I'm a big dude at 6'1", and I tend to sprawl when I'm asleep. I need space.

Hotel beds on the road are not my favorite since they're usually standard Kings. My feet are guaranteed to be fucking freezing as they hang off the bed. To combat the footsicles I develop on the road, I always bring sleep socks. Those are the only pajamas you'll ever catch me wearing. Sleeping naked is the only way to do it. And I absolutely refuse to wear socks when I'm home.

While I scroll aimlessly through the channels, trying to find something to hold my interest, I snag my phone off the nightstand.

My heart bangs erratically against my ribcage. There's a notification. From the Xbox app.

It's from Sky. Fuck. I didn't even hear the notification come in.

Of course I click into the app immediately.

Skysthelimit: Hey, LTB.

Skysthelimit: How's your day been?

Skysthelimit: I took an extra shift at the hospital... Naturally it's been shit. I'm taking a much-needed cookie break to drown my sorrows and get me through these next few hours.

Well, I guess that answers my earlier question about what he was up to all day. A double shift must be draining.

Skysthelimit: Tell me your day is going better than mine. If it isn't, just lie to me a little.

Does he know I'm a liar? He can't know. Shaking that impossibility off, I take a fortifying breath and continue reading.

Skysthelimit: Kidding!

Skysthelimit: But seriously, I hope it's a good one.

The app shows he just sent the last message a minute or so ago. Fuck yes. He's still active. My heart speeds back up a few beats, reverberating throughout my body.

Maybe I should get that checked out. That can't be normal. Coach is going to be pissed if I've developed a heart condition.

It's decided then. Rolling onto my side, I get comfortable with my phone to chat with Sky on his break. And hopefully I'll figure out how to untangle myself from this mess I've made.

Skylar

Fucking hell, this shift is kicking my ass. I mean, I enjoy some rough ass play as much as the next guy, but this shit is absolutely brutal. Not enough lube at all.

Checking my watch, I groan in misery. I'm almost ten hours into a twelve-hour shift, and I can't wait for it to be over. Glancing toward the sky, ha-ha, I mutter a little prayer that the next two hours pass quickly and uneventfully.

Who signed me up for this extra shift anyway?

Oh, right.

I did.

More work equals more money equals more travel for moi.

I make a mental note to check if it's a full moon, or if last night was, because those shifts are always the *worst*. It's like everything that can go wrong will go wrong, and it's one of those nights tonight. Maybe mercury is in retrograde? It wouldn't surprise me.

Luckily, I'll be getting off soon, so if it is a full moon, I can hopefully miss the worst of it all before I come back in a few days to work my regular shifts.

Today's shitshow began with my patient in room 423 ripping out his IV. Not once. Not twice. But three times. *Three!* We're running out of insertion sites. If I have to puncture his vein one more time, I think I'll actually cry.

Or scream.

It's a toss-up. Realistically, I'd probably cry and scream at the same time.

Unfortunately for Mr. Vargas, he's now restrained, but we had to do it for his safety. The infection running rampant in his kidneys has caused a change in his mental status. He doesn't understand he's in a hospital or that we're only trying to help him. He wants to leave and is quite combative. While it breaks my heart, it's in his best interests.

It also doesn't hurt that he's in the best possible place right now. Not to brag or anything, but I'm an employee at Palm County Hospital. It's nationally ranked in providing top-tier critical and trauma care to patients. I'm proud to work here. My job as a critical care nurse is my calling in life. I love it more than I can express. But helping people is fucking hard. Rewarding. But hard.

It's not just physically exhausting but, some days, I'm emotionally and mentally drained. Although I know I can't divulge specific patient information to him due to HIPAA regulations, I'm hoping Landon's online when I get home. A nice little venting sesh and some headshots on COD would go a long way toward relaxing me.

Tonight, I want to wind down a bit before I crash out. Whenever Landon and I manage to link up, he always asks me how my shifts went and, somehow, it always manages to defuse my tension. He calms me down. Which is magic, because I'm always full of energy and on the go. I need to be on the move.

Unless I'm sleeping.

The effect he has on me is weird, though. He's calming, but makes me happy, too.

Is that weird? It seems a little weird.

We've never even met in person.

Yeah, for sure. That's really fucking weird.

Shrugging my shoulders, I continue into room 425, my focus centering solely on my patient and her medical care. She's my only other patient. Depending on admissions, it's not uncommon for me to have one or two at a time, but no more. In this unit, we have a ratio of one nurse for every two patients max.

Ms. Carter is currently in a medically induced coma to allow her brain to heal after an opioid overdose. She'd been brought in by EMS a few days ago with hypoxic brain injury. Per protocol, the crew administered Narcan at the scene, but based on brain scans, her prognosis is poor.

Sadly, it's not uncommon for me to treat overdose patients in this region of Florida. Drugs run rampant down here, and it's getting worse every day. She's only twenty-one, but she looks a decade older. Malnourished. Heartbreakingly frail. She's four years younger than I am and that's a mind-fuck. Focusing back on the task at hand, I review and document her vitals, and double check her medication bags. At the moment, she's stable and only needs a fresh saline bag.

When I finish up in her room, I head to the nurse's station to grab a granola bar from my stash and drink some water. There's a cache of snacks I keep there for easy access. Meals aren't always possible, so I snack when I can.

Chocolate and peanut butter explode on my tongue when I bite into the bar. Mmm. Just what I need right now. As I chew, my mind wanders back to Landon.

It's funny, but Landon and I became friends accidentally. Maybe I kind of claimed it. Spoke it into existence or something. Manifested a new bestie while I was talking to my current bestie, Addy.

Some months ago, I was lamenting that I didn't really have any gamer friends who enjoy COD as much as I do.

Cayden used to play whenever he could, but now that he's engaged to Andrew, those times are few and far between. I'm happy for him, but at the time was feeling sad for me.

Addy used to take pity and indulged me sometimes by hopping on a match here and there, but she really wasn't interested. I love her for trying, but it doesn't beat vibing with someone who gets it. She'd watch me play for hours while we talked, but couldn't care less about actually playing.

I'm filled with an adrenaline rush from it all. The high of sniping your enemy with a headshot. An impeccable kill/death ratio. Successfully evading the enemy.

The irony isn't lost on me. A healer who loves to kill people in his spare time. In a video game, but still. It's fun. I don't make the rules.

Addy also can't stand hockey. Insert eye roll here. Like, how can I even be friends with someone who doesn't like hockey? Aside from the eye candy, she equates watching hockey with watching paint dry. Excuse me. It does not compute.

It should be immediate grounds for unfriending. Do not pass go. Do not collect two hundred dollars. Girl, bye.

Too bad I love her. I giggle a little to myself. I do that sometimes. If you see me laughing to myself, mind your business. It's fun here in my head.

Even though Addy doesn't like hockey, she does tag along to a few games a year. She enjoys ogling the players with me, drinking, chatting and scrolling on her phone.

It's appreciated that she humors me, but attending a game with another fan? It's unmatched. It gives me that same rush.

I'm an adrenaline whore. It's my drug of choice.

I love it all. The icy cold arena. The smell of the ice. The sound the stick makes when it connects with the puck. Hard bodies slamming into the boards.

Mmm, all those hard bodies.

I hum to myself again, a lascivious smirk curls my lips. Leaning back in the chair, I take another bite of the granola bar. Eyes closed, my mind wanders.

Hockey butts. We can't forget those. Sweet, sweet hockey butts.

Yum.

Those asses are one of the best parts. All that squatting and skating surely makes for some delectable derrieres.

Sign. Me. Up.

I could watch butts, ahem, *hockey* all day. Cayden loves hockey too, but his interest in hockey and hockey butts has waned since he can ogle Andrew's ass whenever he wants.

Sigh. I'm not salty, I swear. I make another mental note. It's been too long since I've spoken to Cayden. A call or text to check in with him is a must. Maybe arrange lunch. I miss my friend.

Anywho, Addy and I had that conversation, and then boom.

Landon dropped into my life like fate. Could we, therefore, be considered fated friends? Is that even a thing? I like to think so. At least the fate of the random COD team draw. A random chat turned into an online friendship and regular chats.

Now, I look forward to talking to him more than I should.

There's this itchy feeling crawling inside me, and the itchiness is enhanced by this shit day. Maybe I just need to get away. Go on a jump or something. I'll have to see what I can get into since I cut my four days off short by picking up this shift. Based on the last few days, it's not likely the weather will cooperate for a jump. It's probably impossible to set up a last-minute getaway since I'll need to get some kind of sleep, based on the exhaustion I'm feeling.

Sleep wastes so much time, but it's a necessary evil.

There's not much wiggle room, but I have a little time in there for something, I think. I'll probably just end up at the beach. Answering the call of the ocean should help wash away some of the itchiness. My abuela used to tell me the ocean calls to me because I'm a water sign. That might track.

Nursing is the best career in the world in my opinion. It's a grueling schedule, but there's also a lot of free time too. Usually, I can't complain about my schedule. And I don't. *Most* of the time.

And I have no right to complain since I brought this extra shift on myself. I love how flexible my schedule allows me to be.

I fucked myself this time, because I basically got off work at six this morning, took a nap in the on-call room, showered, then started up again at eight this morning. Fucked, and I didn't even get an orgasm out of it.

Usually, though, the four consecutive days off allow me to travel frequently and indulge my wandering soul. I need it like I need oxygen in my lungs.

The itch is building the longer I sit here. The granola bar is long gone, and I need to refill my water bottle, but my thoughts have me oddly frozen yet fidgety. It's an uncomfortable feeling. Talking to Landon will settle me down a little bit.

Am I becoming codependent?

I don't even actually *know* this guy? This is another level of crazy for me.

Fuck. I drop my elbows onto the nurse's station and sigh out a rough breath of frustration.

"You good, Sky?" Belinda, my coworker and the nurse manager, drops a hand on my shoulder and squeezes.

"Baby girl, this shift is shit." My pout and side-eye game are strong.

"Amen, babe. Something is in the air. Why don't you step away and take an actual breather? Head into the lounge for a

few. I'll check in on your patients." Her brown eyes seem to twinkle at me. Suspicion rises. I tilt my head inquiringly, and luckily, she doesn't keep me waiting. "Go on and grab a cookie. I baked your favorite."

Her words make me the happiest guy on the whole floor, but I still pout harder in an exaggerated fashion of mock annoyance. She deserves it for holding out on me. Plus, I'm me, and hello drama queen.

I live and breathe dramatics, but someone has to do it. It can be hard being this fabulous. Just ask me.

My hands land on my hips when I stand up, and I tilt my head at her accusingly. "B, you've been holding those cookies hostage for how long? How long have they been in there? I've been withering away this whole time, and there you are just watching? You love to see me suffer, woman. The *audacity*."

She cackles gleefully, and her eyes crinkle at the corners. "Always. It gives me nothing but joy. Now go on and take a few minutes." She makes a be-gone motion at me. "I've got this."

After I squeeze her hand gratefully, I back away and mockingly bow at her. "You're the best. After me at least." I blow her a kiss and toss a wink over my shoulder.

In the employee lounge, I grab a triple chocolate cookie—okay, *fine!* I grab two cookies—then settle onto the couch with my feet propped on another chair. I pull out my cell to scroll through the socials, looking for something to entertain me for a few minutes.

A notification on the gaming app catches my eye as my finger hovers over Instagram. I redirect my trajectory at the last second and open that app instead. My pulse speeds up and a smile stretches across my mouth.

LandonTheBull: Yo.

A soft chuckle leaves me because he sounds like such a bro. And that's not really me, but we still click. As I type out a response, I notice he sent the message earlier this afternoon.

Oops. I've been busy. He'll forgive me.

Skysthelimit: Hey, LTB.

Skysthelimit: How's your day been?

Skysthelimit: I took an extra shift at the hospital... Naturally it's been shit. I'm taking a much-needed cookie break to drown my sorrows and get me through these next few hours.

Skysthelimit: Tell me your day is going better than mine. If it isn't, just lie to me a little.

Jeez, Sky, way to sound needy. Like I'm desperate or something and we can't have that. Desperation isn't cute. Not that I'm trying to be cute.

My fingers rapidly type out another two messages.

Skysthelimit: Kidding!

Skysthelimit: But seriously, I hope it's a good one.

I wait a few seconds for a response, when I remember the app shows if a person is online or not. I swear I'm not bummed at all when I see his status shows that he's offline.

But on the bright side, the clock tells me I only have about an hour left to go, and then I'm getting the fuck out of here. Just when I'm about to click into Instagram, my phone vibrates with a new notification.

It's Landon.

Warmth fills my gut, the disappointment fading like a distant memory. What did Belinda put in these cookies?

Strong stuff, whatever it is.

LandonTheBull: Hey, sorry you're having a shitty day.

Skysthelimit: Hey, you. What are you up to?

LandonTheBull: Just lounging around. I had dinner with mom earlier, so now I'm taking it easy. Work has been busy lately, and tomorrow will be more of the same.

Skysthelimit: Ahh! Relatable. It's been a rough night tonight. And I'm antsy as hell.

LandonTheBull: Anything you want to talk about?

Skysthelimit: It's just hard when patients aren't aware of what's going on or where they are and they're fighting you, y'know? I just want to help, but this one patient is fighting us every step of the way.

LandonTheBull: I can't relate professionally to what you're feeling, but I've watched a family member go through a similar situation. Hopefully, it gets a little easier for your patient. I know it's hard.

Skysthelimit: Thanks, boo.

Skysthelimit: ...

LandonTheBull: ...

Skysthelimit: Not to be insensitive considering our subject matter, but...

Skysthelimit: ☐

LandonTheBull: LOL. Just say it, Sky.

Skysthelimit: This is a serious conversation. I'm trying not to make a dick joke. Don't encourage me.

LandonTheBull: 😊 do it already. It'll make you feel better.

He gets me.

It's so satisfying. My cheeks are hurting from the smile on my face.

Skysthelimit: Ok, ok, but only since you insisted.

Skysthelimit: ☐

Skysthelimit: I like it hard ☐☐

Ahh, instant relief. That was so difficult to contain.

LandonTheBull: ☐ there it is

LandonTheBull: Feel better now?

Skysthelimit: Yes. Yes, I do. Thanks lol, but seriously.

LandonTheBull: Anytime 😊 now, back to the cookie break. What kind of cookies are you eating?

Skysthelimit: Triple chocolate ☐

LandonTheBull: Nice. Now I want cookies. Fucking sweet tooth is the worst.

Skysthelimit: So... here's an idea... Go eat one ☐

LandonTheBull: Can't. I'm on a fairly strict diet. My nutritionist would likely murder me.

Nutritionist? My mind immediately jumps to the health implications he could be inferring. As a medical professional, it's the most logical assumption.

Skysthelimit: Is it health related?

Skysthelimit: Wait.

Skysthelimit: Don't answer that. I don't want to pry.

LandonTheBull: No, it's nothing like that. I have to be very disciplined to stay in shape for work.

Huh. At his statement, my head tilts in confusion. I'm sure I know what he does for work, but searching my brain, I come up empty. Blank as can be. Impossible. We must've talked about it before. Right? There was that one time I told him about that patient and he... Nope. And that other time I talked about that other patient and he... Also, nope. How have I never realized this before now?

Skysthelimit: Landon!

Skysthelimit: OMG!

Skysthelimit: Have I been a narcissistic attention whore monopolizing the majority of our conversations and making them all about me? I don't have any idea what your profession is. But you know loads about mine. Please feel free to shut me down in the future. What in the world?

LandonTheBull: What?

LandonTheBull: No way. Calm down.

I don't believe him. There's a delay before his next message pops up.

LandonTheBull: That's not what happened at all. I just haven't been ready to talk about it.

Relief flows through me, but I don't fully believe him. I hate to be that person. The one who talks too much but doesn't listen. But now I'm confused and more than a little curious.

Why wouldn't he be ready to talk about his job? Maybe he's in the CIA or the FBI. I'm being ridiculous, but it's not like it's *not* possible. But it doesn't make sense based on the crumbs of information I have.

Now that this door has been opened in my mind, I need to know. But I can't push him too hard.

Skysthelimit: Ok. You've definitely gotten me extra curious. And you mentioned it now. Does this mean you're ready to share?

LandonTheBull: Not quite, but I'm getting there.

LandonTheBull: I'm nervous. I don't want you to look at me differently.

Weird. Really weird. What occupation would make him hesitant or scared to tell me? It's hard to tell his tone without hearing his voice, so I can't be sure of his exact emotions. Is he embarrassed?

Why would any job that could cause those emotions require a nutritionist? Ahh, curiosity is burning me up inside. Shoving the thoughts down as best as I can, I force myself to lock them away.

He'll tell me when he's ready. And he's almost ready. Hopefully "almost" is soon.

Skysthelimit: I know it's easy to say when I don't know what's making you struggle with this, but speaking from my heart, I honestly don't think anything could possibly make me look at you differently. We've gotten to know each other really well, so I feel confident in saying that. No pressure, though. Tell me when you're ready. Whenever that may be.

LandonTheBull: I know that was hard for you to say, since you're not patient at all lol. But thanks. I appreciate it.

Skysthelimit: Of course, darling!

LandonTheBull: Now, talk to me. Got anything planned for your days off?

Skysthelimit: Nothing concrete yet, especially now that I cut my time short this week. But I've definitely got the itch. I need something fun. I was thinking it's been a while since I've gotten wet.

I'm referring to boating and jet skiing. Those activities, along with skydiving and hiking, are just a few of my favorite things. Land, air, and sea. They're all covered. But wait, what the fuck did I just message Landon?

Skysthelimit: OMG. I mean... Not like that. Well... Definitely, that too, but I didn't mean it that way... This time lol 😊

Fuck, he makes me laugh, even if I'm just laughing at myself, by myself. Hopefully, he's laughing too. Typing a new message, I clarify.

Skysthelimit: I meant that I like water sports. Ugh, my brain is a mess tonight.

Skysthelimit: Obvs not those kinds of water sports lol.

LandonTheBull: LMFAO

LandonTheBull: Obviously. Although, there's no kink-shaming here if that is your thing. Judgment free zone.

My laughter continues at each new message we send.

Skysthelimit: Like. I meant literally.

Skysthelimit: Water sports in the actual water. Y'know? Boating, skiing, jet skiing, kayaking, or even some cliff diving depending on the location. I'd even settle with swimming if I absolutely had to. It's a little too tame for my tastes.

LandonTheBull: Well... All of that sounded awesome. Like, sure, sign me up. Until you wrecked it with the cliff diving. Nope.

Skysthelimit: Why not? It's fucking fun.

LandonTheBull: Heights and I get along as well as flying and I get along.

LandonTheBull: Which means not at all.

Skysthelimit: Oof. Really?

LandonTheBull: Yep. Oof is an understatement, but it sums it up, I guess. And you already know how I feel about flying. Taking a leap off a cliff? NOPE. Sounds like a nightmare to me.

Skysthelimit: Aww, it's not so bad. Promise. And the adrenaline rush is top tier.

LandonTheBull: I'll leave that specific rush to you. I prefer slightly less death-defying activities to get my adrenaline fix, but speaking of heights and flying... Funny enough I have to fly quite a bit for work. I just got back this morning actually. It fucking sucks.

Color me even more intrigued. Maybe I'll put the pieces together before he tells me. It's my new mission.

Skysthelimit: Oh, really? Tell me more.

"Skylar, are you coming back to work, or did you fall into a cookie coma in here?" Belinda's voice scares the heck out of me. My body spasms in fear, a squawk of terror I'm not proud of exiting my mouth as my phone falls onto the couch next to me. I'm one step away from a pearl-clutch, but good Lord, she legit terrified me. I'm so focused on Landon that I apparently didn't hear the door open. And I severely lost track of time. Shit.

"Fucking shit, B! You scared the fuck outta me! God. I just zoned out a teeny tiny bit." I hold my fingers of my right hand up next to my face in a miniscule pinch. The look of disbelief on her face tells me she thinks I'm a lying liar.

She's right. Dammit.

Her eyebrow pops up and her lips purse expectantly.

I crumble immediately under the weight of her stare.

“Okay, okay, I’m coming right now, B, gosh.” I sound like a petulant teenager, but she loves me anyway. Reaching over, I snag my phone and shoot off a final message to Landon.

Skysthelimit: Sorry, boo. Hold that thought. Gotta get back to it, but I’ll hop on for a bit tonight. Maybe in about two hours if you’re able to join. Mwah!

I close the app and lock my phone without waiting for a response. Not with B watching me so closely. I was gone way too long, and I have patients to check on. Where was my head? Jesus.

I exhale to release the remaining nerves, letting out the tension that still fills me. Funny enough, it’s a little too easy to let it all go.

Maybe I’m not all that tense anymore after all. Landon should copyright that shit, because he can work magic.

The Landon Effect has a nice ring to it.

When I enter Mr. Vargas’s room for the last time this shift, there’s a small smile gracing my lips.

Skylar

The next morning, it's earlier than I intended when I wake up. Which is the norm for me, but I'd hoped to sleep in at least a little after such a late night. After I'd gotten home, Landon and I spent way too long online. We'd talked more than we played, but the hours flew by unnoticed.

He'd gently encouraged me to vent about Mr. Vargas, and it had all spilled out. I try not to bring work home with me, but I care too much. Each patient's care is personal. I treat them how I'd treat a member of my family. With my whole heart. I'm doing everything I can to help him, but it still doesn't feel like enough.

Landon shared a little about his own experience losing his grandmother during his final year of college. She'd wasted away from the catastrophic effects of the cancer that ravaged her body. And her mind. He'd talked about how he and his family had to watch her forget everyone she knew. Forget herself. My eyes welled with tears at the pain in his voice.

As I lie in bed this morning, remembering our conversation, my stomach twists itself into knots. I can't even

imagine losing my own abuela like that. Let alone at all. It makes me queasy. Death comes for all of us at some point, but that doesn't make it any easier to think about.

It's the thought of unexpected death that motivates me to live my life balls to the wall. I live my life as much as I possibly can, while I can. Like each day could be my last. Because it just might be.

Landon trusted me enough to share with me, and it warmed my heart, but the heaviness was suffocating. The conversation had lightened after that, thank god. He'd talked about going to dinner with his mom and catching up with her. It's adorable they're so close. He's not ashamed to be a momma's boy. So sexy.

Wait. What?

It's not sexy. It's cute. So, so cute.

He enjoyed my random science facts, but he seems to truly appreciate my nerd jokes. They're my favorite.

"I'm reading this great book about gravity."

"Oh, yeah?"

"It's so great, I can't put it down."

"Oh, Christ, I'm embarrassed to say I wasn't expecting that. I thought you were being serious."

He laughed with me. All signs of our heavy conversation well and truly evaporated.

We'd successfully avoided the subject of his job. I'd wanted to pry *so* bad, but I refrained. We had plenty of other topics to discuss.

It was well after midnight when exhaustion won out. Landon couldn't hold back his yawns anymore.

I really enjoy talking to him. There's an ease about everything with him that I've never experienced before. Not even with Addy or Cayden.

And it doesn't hurt that his voice is so goddamn sexy.

With every passing hour, it had deepened into a sleepy, sexy-as-hell rasp. Not gonna lie, it did something to me. My dick was half hard just from his voice alone. That rasp tickled along my nerve endings and made goosebumps pop up along the skin of my neck. Like he was speaking directly into my ear.

His raspy voice replays in my head and my morning wood twitches. I groan as it lengthens against my thigh. Ugh, if I'm getting hard just from remembering his voice, it's definitely time for some action. Reaching into my underwear, I gently squeeze my cock, enjoying the sensation. Plumping up to full mast. Ignoring the fact that I'm hard from just the memory of Landon's voice.

I don't even know what he looks like. And we're just friends.

There was a time when I'd hook up every other weekend, if not more. But the thrill of hookups has dwindled. And quite frankly, they just don't excite me anymore. Call me crazy, but I cringe at the thought.

Bobby will have to do for now. My hole clenches in anticipation. Yes, Bobby can dick me down just right. It's a need.

My battery-operated boyfriend is a seven and a half inch thrusting dildo with a handy suction cup. Mmm. I'd much rather fuck a flesh and blood man, but he gets the job done.

Oh no, now that I think about it, I'm pretty sure I'd forgotten to plug him in afterwards for a recharge the last time I'd fucked myself. I reach into my nightstand and pull out Bobby and his remote. I'm not surprised at all that nothing happens when I hit power, but I am disappointed. My erection deflates a little and there's a slight twinge in my balls.

Dammit.

Fingering my hole or jacking off are my other options, but my mind is set. I'll have to wait until later, because that thrust function is a must. Nothing else will suffice. When I get the angle right, Bobby pegs my prostate so fucking good it turns

me into a whimpering, shaking mess as I shoot my load. A shiver makes its way down my spine, thinking of hours of delayed gratification.

Since I can't do myself, I need a distraction.

Stat.

Ooh, I'll text Cayden.

After making sure Bobby is securely plugged in and charging, I grab my phone and send Cayden a quick message.

Me: Hey, boo, it's been too long. How are you? I miss your face.

I've barely hit send when my phone vibrates in my hand.

A giggle escapes me at the name that pops up on the ID. It's Cayden.

"Hi, you!" I answer with a smile.

"Hey, stranger, it's good to hear your voice. I'm good. You? What're you up to today?"

"I forgot to recharge Bobby, so I'm not doing what I'd like to be doing."

Cayden's giggle tinkles over the line and makes my smile widen. He's used to my tendency to overshare. "Oh, poor baby. What about that guy you were hooking up with?"

My smile immediately fades, and a grimace takes its place. "Ugh, we're not talking about him. That's been done for a while now. Bobby has taken his place, and I don't plan on any new hookups going forward. I can't even with the whole hookup and dating scene right now."

"Eep, I get it. Some of these boys are pure trash. And you deserve the whole world, my love."

"Mhm." Even I can hear the disbelief and sass equally seeping out of me. "Thank you and I love you, but cry me a river, lover boy. And speaking of lovers, how's Andrew? It's been ages since my last jump, so I haven't seen him in forever."

Andrew is a class-C licensed skydiver who works at my favorite jump spot about an hour north. I met him almost eight years ago when I went skydiving for the first time on my eighteenth birthday. We've always been cordial, our bond mostly centered around our shared love of skydiving. Until Cayden. I'd brought Cayden on one of the tandem jumps I'd needed to earn my class-A license and the rest is history. They've pretty much been inseparable ever since.

"Oof, you must be ready to crawl out of your skin, I bet. I know how much you need that rush. But he's good, love, really good. Staying busy, as usual."

His tone is off. It doesn't match what he's telling me. Some of the happiness has faded from his tone, and I don't like it. Not one bit. Cayden is sunshine and happiness and anything that dims his shine is not okay with me.

Sometimes, I regret introducing them. At the end of the day, as long as he's happy, I'm happy. And I'm not convinced Cayden is happy with Andrew.

I murmur what I hope is a sympathetic, yet agreeable sound. Then I steer the conversation in another direction. My instincts tell me to pry, but I shove it down. Cayden tends to be a more private person regarding his relationship. Especially since their engagement, and I never want to disrespect my friend.

If any giant red flags pop up, I won't be able to keep my mouth shut. For now, I let it be.

"Are you free today? I'd love to get outside and do something."

"I actually am. What do you have in mind?"

"Maybe we can go to North Miami Beach Park and rent some kayaks? Then go for tacos and margs afterwards? I'm feeling like a salty bitch today after the failed orgasm this morning, so I need to match the vibe. Wanna go with?"

He busts up laughing, like I'd hoped he would, and the lightness returns to his voice. Mentally, I applaud myself.

"Yas! I am here for it. Pick me up on your way there?"

“Sure thing. I’m gonna get ready and make a smoothie for the drive. I’ll text when I’m on my way.”

“Perfect.”



SEAGULLS SQUAWK, circling and diving on their hunt for prey. Salt scents the air, waves gently lap at the kayak, and the sun shines brightly overhead. Sunlight sparkles over the crystalline water. There’s not a cloud in the sky.

Since it’s January, the day may have started off cool, but the temperature has climbed to the upper seventies. It’s still a bit cool for this Florida boy, but the heat of the sun makes it comfortable and soothing.

Cayden is ahead of me. He’s paused his paddling and has his camera raised to his eye. He’s a photographer with a passion for the human body and nature. Mostly, his bread and butter is special events, but he also books steamy boudoir and portrait sessions out of his loft apartment. The lighting there is fabulous.

The sun glints off the auburn tones in his reddish-brown hair. Paddling closer, I can see the huge smile on his face as he rapidly takes a few photos. He’s happy. Contentment fills me. I’m so grateful for this moment of quiet beauty. I inhale deeply, feeling very at peace.

It doesn’t last for long, though. My stomach growls insistently with hunger, demanding to be fed. Uh-oh. Red alert. If I don’t eat soon, it won’t be pretty.

We’ve been out on the water for close to two hours now. If I don’t cut this short, Cayden will stay out here for several more hours. He gets into this zone where he’s focused only on the shot. Capturing the scene as accurately as possible. Not missing a single moment.

But, alas, it is time for sustenance. There’re margaritas and at least half a dozen tacos with our names on them. And based on the hunger pains I’m feeling, time is short before I enter hanger territory. I can’t have that monster rear its head.

Picking my paddle back up, I dip one end into the water and alternate with the other, fluidly propelling myself closer to him.

“Cayden, boo, I’m famished.”

His chocolate brown eyes meet mine, his brow scrunched in confusion. He totally forgot I’m here. I smile patiently. It takes a moment, but his eyes finally clear. “Oh my god, Sky.” His eyes widen, and he checks his Apple watch. “We’ve been out here for hours. You should have stopped me sooner.”

Waving away his concern, I tell him, “Stop it. It’s cool. I know my limits here. I was enjoying this time with you. The stillness. It felt nice. But now, I’m hungry, so we gotta get moving.”

“Aw, you’re the best. I always forget how much you love sitting with me when I’m shooting. It’s literally the antithesis of who you are.”

“I know, right?” We laugh together at the irony for a moment. “I’m sure it helps that you’re always shooting by or on the ocean when I’m with you. That’s the Cancer in me. Always at home in the water. Just ask my abuela. She’ll tell you.”

“That sounds just like something she’d say. How is she, by the way? I miss her. And Cuban food. Yum. And now my senses are returning full force. I’m starving, too.” He pats his stomach.

“She’s good. As feisty and stubborn as ever. She misses you, too. But you know my cooking is just as good as hers. She taught me well. I’ll have to have you over for dinner soon. Check with Andrew and let me know when you guys are available. I’ll make *ropa vieja*.”

“Definitely. I’ll have to bring something for dessert.”

Cayden makes the most kick-ass desserts. Just the thought has me salivating and nodding my head rapidly in agreement. “Yes, daddy, bake for me.”

My statement triggers another round of laughter. By this point, we’ve made it back to the rental center. The attendant

closest to us has a smile on her face as we paddle up. She definitely heard me. I must have said that louder than I thought. Oops.

We hand her our paddles, then climb out of the kayaks. Removing our life jackets and grabbing our stuff out of the storage hatches.

After we finish the return process, we hop into my car, and head towards Los Tacos Mexicanos. In this area, we're inundated by Cuban food, which I'll never complain about. Peruvian, Dominican, Puerto Rican, Columbian and Argentinian restaurants are also prevalent. On the other hand, there aren't many places in south Florida where you can get authentic Mexican food, so while their name may be lacking in imagination, Los Tacos Mexicanos tops my list as charming and delicious.

For a weekend, it's not too crowded and the hostess promises to seat us shortly.

Once we're seated, the server places glasses of water, chips, and salsa on our table. "Hi, my name is Anita, I'll be your waitress this afternoon. Can I get you anything else to drink? Any appetizers?"

Cayden makes an after-you motion for me to go first, "I'd like a watermelon margarita on the rocks with sugar on my rim."

Anita writes my order on her notepad before looking to Cayden. He's noticeably holding in a laugh, but his eyebrow is raised.

"What?"

"You're ridiculous. I thought you wanted salt, Sky." With a head shake, his eyes shift back to Anita. "I'll take a strawberry margarita on the rocks with salt on the rim, please. Because I don't crave excessive amounts of sugar like a child."

Rolling my eyes, I smile saccharinely at Anita. "My drinks need to be as sweet as me. Thank you, darling." I smirk at them and dig into the tortilla chips and salsa. *Ay que rico*. The tortilla chips are perfectly salted, thin and crunchy. I scoop up

some more and shovel another bite in my mouth. The spiciness of the jalapenos is balanced by the flavors of tomatoes, onions, cilantro and lime. Ahh, I'm in heaven. So many of my favorite things in my mouth all at once.

She laughs a little at our banter. "I'll put these drinks in for you and be right back to take your order."

Cayden leans forward, elbows on the table to whisper-yell at me, "You! Did you just ask her to sugar your rim?"

My hand automatically finds my chest in a *who, me?* gesture that perfectly matches my wide eyes. I couldn't have. "What? No way." He raises that eyebrow again, and I replay the last few minutes over in my mind. Laughter unexpectedly bubbles out of me.

"Ohmigod, oops, maybe I did."

We dissolve into hysterics. Sometimes my mouth moves faster than my brain. I can't help it.

We munch on chips and make small talk for a few minutes. "You know I miss you on COD, right? You should hop on when you can. I think I've mentioned my friend Landon before, right?"

His face scrunches in thought. "Vaguely, I feel like I remember you telling me I've been replaced by him. So rude!"

That draws a scoff out of me. "Um, excuse me, bitch. You replaced yourself, okay? You're more than welcome to play with me anytime you want. Or us. We'll make it a threesome." My eyebrows bob up and down at him.

His laugh makes my smile widen. "I'll see what I can do. It sounds fun. It has been a really long time since I've been on."

"Yes. Yes, it has. But I'm glad you're with me now. I'd take seeing you in person over a video game any day of the week." Puckering my lips, I blow him a kiss. He blows one right back and winks at me.

It's almost like old times. God, I missed him.

Anita delivers our drinks and takes our orders. We hardly ever look at the menu anymore, since we always end up getting the same meals every time. Today is no different. Our regulars for the win.

My favorite meal is their surf and turf taco combo. I was elated when they added it to the menu, because I always want to order everything. This combo is the best of both worlds for me. Shrimp, birria, and al pastor. Cayden, on the other hand, doesn't like seafood, so he gets their land lover combo. Al pastor, birria, and chicken.

Now that we've ordered, it's time to work on pulling Cayden into deeper conversation. I don't like how deflated he seemed this morning, and I need to figure out why. Gently.

"So, boo, how's the wedding planning coming along?" I ask as nonchalantly as I can, while sipping my margarita. The watermelon flavor is refreshing. Just what I need.

His eyes light up with the excitement this topic brings him. Most people are stressed while making wedding plans. But not Cayden.

"It's going very well. We've picked a venue, but we haven't decided on the exact date just yet. We're planning for the last week of August, or within the first two weeks of September."

"Awesome, there's still plenty of time to finalize all those little details. Are you able to share the venue yet?"

"It's not set in stone, but it will be within the next few weeks. We fell in love with the pavilion at Lighthouse Point. It's perfect. If they have any of our preferred dates available, we'll be paying a deposit. But get this, Andrew wants to make a grand entrance."

"No way!" I rush to cut him off when I see his mouth is already opening. "Let me guess. He wants to drop into his own wedding."

"You know it. I mean, it has the potential to be absolutely amazing." Hesitation enters his tone, so I leap at the chance to dig deeper.

“But...?” I encourage him to finish.

“How do you always do that? You always know.”

I buff my nails on my shirt. “I’m just good at reading your tells.”

“Ugh, you really are. It feels... I guess... Well, it kind of feels a little too ostentatious to me. Weddings are already *look-at-me-I’m-getting-married*, but this is a step further. I guess that’s my issue.” He pauses to take a big gulp of his drink. “But we’re compromising, right? He wants a hall. I want the beach. If we’re married outside, he gets to skydive into the wedding. It shouldn’t be a big deal.”

“I must admit, it sounds super fun.”

Cayden’s head bobs side to side. “To an extent, but either way, we’re spending our honeymoon in Dubai or New Zealand.”

Understanding dawns fully. “So, Andrew wants to hit some of the best skydiving spots on your honeymoon, but he also wants to skydive into the wedding. It seems a bit selfish? Am I right?”

A murmur of assent leaves his lips, he’s currently fiddling with his silverware, eyes downcast. My bubbly friend is not himself right now. Discussing the wedding gives him joy as a whole, but once we get deeper, the joy fades.

Briefly, Cayden meets my eyes before answering. “Yeah. I hate to agree with you, but I feel like he’s picking things that he’ll love, instead of us as a couple. A newly-married couple. I feel like I’m being irrational, though.”

“What? Why?” I lean closer to him, arms folded and resting on the table.

“Am I the one being selfish in not wanting Andrew to parachute smack into the middle of our wedding ceremony? It’s part of his career, and part of who he is. It makes him so happy. Why wouldn’t I want that? Why would I hold him back? And I have always wanted to visit New Zealand and Dubai equally. Either one will tick a destination off my bucket list. So why do I have an issue with this?”

Reaching over the table, I squeeze his hand. “First, you’re not being selfish. Your wedding day is one of the biggest moments of your life. You’ll remember that day forever. It’s not wrong to want things to be special for you or for you to want things a certain way.”

He nods his head slowly in acknowledgement of the point I made. Tick.

“Have you told him how you feel, boo?”

“Yeah, and I’m even more convinced I’m being irrational. It’s not a big deal how he arrives. I just want my man at the head of that aisle, pledging to be my husband. All of the other little details and arrangements will be dream worthy. Exactly how we want them. We’ve picked coral, burgundy, and rose gold for our colors. It’s going to be beautiful.” Cayden looks back up at me, his soft smile returning.

Smiling halfheartedly in return, I meet his eyes. It takes every single iota of self-control I have not to push any further. It’s not that cut and dry. But Cayden, although bubbly and soft spoken, can be stubborn as hell. He’s talked himself out of being upset with Andrew, and if I push, he’ll double down and turn that anger on me. It does need a target, after all. Yes. I’ve learned this the hard way.

Mentally, I visualize zipping my lips.

Right on time, Anita returns with our food. Cayden steers the conversation to safer topics like work and hockey, and I let him as we dig right in.

Landon

I've just finished showering at the Florida Frenzy, our training facility, after weight training. No practice skate today since tomorrow is game day. We'll skate at the arena in the morning, then we have a rare one o'clock game against Ottawa scheduled immediately after. I'm pulling on my boxer briefs when the low hum of a vibrating cell reaches my ears. Seems like it's mine. I reach into my duffel, and sure enough, my phone has numerous notifications from Sky.

Six, to be exact. A smile overtakes my face. Sometimes, there's a few days of radio silence, mostly on my end, because hockey season is brutal. But mostly, my notifications look just like this.

Skysthelimit: Kayaking and margs are the cure for whatever ails you.

Skysthelimit: How do I know?

Skysthelimit: I have paddled the kayak and partaken of the nectar of the agave gods. And voila! My ailments are cured. Poof. Gone. Goodbye.

His messages are generously seasoned with emojis. Some would even say overflowing. I've never seen anyone use as many as he does. It's a talent of his.

Skysthelimit: Next time you're in need of a pick-me-up, I highly recommend this particular treatment.

Skysthelimit: You're welcome for the top tier medical advice 🙏🙏

The emojis make me laugh.

Skysthelimit: COD?

His status shows active, so I quickly send him a reply.

LandonTheBull: Margaritas aren't usually my drink of choice. I'm more of a beer kind of guy.

Skysthelimit: Blasphemy!

Here we go. Let the hilarity commence. I'm very sure most of what comes next is going to be ridiculous. Just that one word reply alone drags a laugh out of me.

Skysthelimit: You take that back right now!

Skysthelimit: You're a blasphemer, LTB. You probably haven't tried the right margaritas. You have to make sure it's legit tequila, not the cheap shit. And get the tequila to lime ratio just right. Watermelon margs are my favorite. They're so refreshing. Tartness of the lime, sweetness of the melon, and the earthy, slightly sweet flavor of agave. I prefer sugar on my glass, but salt complements the flavors very nicely as well. Have you had one before?

Slightly ridiculous. Mostly logical. Thinking back, I can't say that I remember trying one. Or ever having any desire to.

LandonTheBull: Nope, definitely not, but I am intrigued now. You made it sound delicious.

Skysthelimit: Of course. Because they are. Duh.

LandonTheBull: LOL. Savannah loves margaritas, though.

Movement in my peripheral vision draws my gaze. Leigh is walking to his stall, which is situated next to mine. The other guys are either fully or mostly dressed by this point. In a hurry to get out of here and enjoy some downtime before the rush tomorrow will bring.

I'm usually right next to them, however, I'm distracted. Leigh, on the other hand, is always a straggler. He takes the world's longest, and hottest, showers and is usually the last to leave. He has zero sense of urgency. My gaze is drawn back to my phone when it vibrates again.

Skysthelimit: Oooh, a girl after my own heart.

Skysthelimit: How's the not-girlfriend-girlfriend doing btw?

His nickname for Savannah makes me laugh. He knows all about our arrangement. Knows she's not my girlfriend, but he refuses to call her anything else. It's amusing just as much as it's maddening.

LandonTheBull: She's good.

Skysthelimit: Oh, cool. So verbose. Thanks for that. Good talk.

Leigh bumps my shoulder, drawing my attention, "Who're you texting with such a big smile on your face? Sky or Savannah?"

"It's Sky." Answering Leigh reminds me of his request, and the fact I've spaced on responding to Sky's original question. "You up for some *Call of Duty* tonight?"

A big smile immediately lights up his face, and his eyes scrunch up at the corners. His expression is briefly hidden while he pulls on his shirt. The *yes* is written all over his face before the words even leave his mouth. "Hell yeah. I'm always down, but since you mentioned Sky, I'm even more down, and I'll make sure to hop on. I have to make sure this dude is good enough to befriend my brother."

Shaking my head at the mess of his statement, I drop my gaze back to my phone and send a quick message back to Sky.

LandonTheBull: Mind if my friend joins us tonight?

Skysthelimit: What? No, of course I don't mind a threesome. Sounds like a party to me.

Laughter bursts from my mouth. Leigh tries to grab my phone to see what's so funny, but I shove him away. "You're such a child. You always do this shit. Are you sure you're three years older than me? Jeez."

He blows a kiss at me. "You love it."

Skysthelimit: Kidding. Lmk when you'll be on.

LandonTheBull: Will do.

"Okay, we're all set. How soon can you get on?"

"Gimme about an hour."

"Sounds good." When he turns to walk out to his car, it hits me. "Luc?"

He glances back at me.

"I need to ask you for a favor." There's an audible hesitance in my voice.

"Anything."

"Don't call me Spence or Spencer tonight. Just Landon."

A deep furrow forms between his eyes, clearly broadcasting his confusion. "What? Why?"

"Sky doesn't know I'm me. And, for now, I need to keep it that way."

"Um, okay. Is he a hockey hater or something? I thought you said you and your new BFF bonded over deathmatch and hockey stats or something poetic like that."

"Yeah, we did. I just... I can't explain it. I didn't tell him who I am, all those months ago, and it's hard to come clean now. I've had plenty of opportunities to tell him, but I can't spit it out. You know I'm a straight shooter. Not gonna lie, I'm nervous and a bit intimidated, for some reason. I'm going to tell him who I am soon. Not tonight. But soon. I just have to figure out how to come clean."

“Bro.” As I watch, his head tilts to the side and his eyebrows raise slightly. He’s appraising me with wide-eyed focus. Weighing my words. Seconds pass like hours. Finally, a smirk twists his lips.

Gimme a break.

“Not one word, Leigh. I know, I know. Now, can I trust you to keep this quiet?”

“Me? Subterfuge? Sign me up. I got you.”

“Hey, now, that’s a big word for such a tiny brain.” My hand reaches out to tousle the waves of light brown hair hanging in his face.

He knocks my hand away, shakes his hair back, and starts backing up toward his car. Middle fingers up. “Fuck off, *Landon.*”

I laugh and shoot him the bird right back.

Skylar

A laugh bursts out of my mouth. At this rate, my abs will be sore tomorrow. Landon and his friend are a mess and I'm here for it. They're ridiculous in the best way. We've been playing *Call of Duty* for about thirty minutes or so now, and I've barely stopped laughing.

Luc is giving Landon shit nonstop, heckling the hell out of him.

His gamertag is iamNOTyourfather, and when he first entered the game chat, I wasn't ready. Luc Darth Vader breathed into the mic and said some stupid shit to Landon that had us all in stitches.

We're mid-game when it finally occurs to me to ask a very important question.

"So, Luc, are you a Star Wars fan?"

"Totally a fan. Number one fan. Those movies top my list of favorites to fall asleep to. I can't stay awake through one to save my life."

“Bahaha. Oh my god, stop it!” My laugh is practically a cackle, but I give zero fucks. He’s hilarious, and everyone should know it. “Sir! Are you kidding me?”

Landon is laughing a little, but laughs harder at my reaction.

“God’s honest. I’ve tried to watch the saga many times over the years, but haven’t made it more than fifteen or twenty minutes. I try to stay awake, but next thing I know, I’m knocked the fuck out for hours.”

“I can assure you, he’s not exaggerating,” Landon chimes in.

“What about the newer movies? The standalones, like *Rogue One*?” Disbelief, threaded with genuine curiosity, fills my tone.

“Nope. No luck with those either.”

“Huh. So where’d your gamertag come from?”

“I’m not even close to my dad, but when I was a kid, everyone would always joke with me. *Hey, Luc, I’m your father*. Shit got old real quick. I guess it was my way of taking it back. Making it my joke. Saying it out loud, it sounds so stupid, but it’s my reason.” There’s a difference in his tone. His voice has gotten more serious than I’ve heard from him thus far. There’s probably more to this story.

Landon clears his throat. He, too, sounds like some of his humor has faded when he speaks. “I never knew that.”

“It’s not that serious, guys. Kid shit. I wouldn’t even call it bullying, but it was excessive back then. It hurt, but I got over it. And now it’s mine.”

“Well, I love it even more now. It’s hilarious to me that you’re not a fan.”

“Hey, correct yourself, sir. I am the number one fan, remember?”

“Oh, sure, yes.” I clear my throat. “Luc, the biggest of all big Star Wars fans, please, pardon my slight upon your honor.”

“Now, that’s what I like to hear.”

“Don’t boost him up, Sky. His head is big enough already.”

“Yes, it is. Quite massive, if I do say so myself. And your boy Landon can attest to that.”

“Ooh, tell me more. It seems we have somehow shifted onto one of my favorite subjects,” I practically purr into the mic.

“Don’t encourage him, Sky. Luc. Fuck off.”

“You’ve been saying that a lot lately, hmm? He’s protesting too much, right, Sky?”

“He so is,” I agree.

“I don’t look at you naked, bro,” Landon denies. Uh-oh, please tell me this isn’t the *bro* to enhance and stress his straightness. My train of thought vanishes, though, because my brain is itchy.

Something about their back-and-forth is so familiar. Like I’ve heard them arguing before. I can’t quite pinpoint where. Part of the puzzle is missing. It’s right there waiting for me to grasp onto and fit into place.

It has to be a coincidence. Deja vu. The full picture becomes more elusive the longer I try to focus on it.

“I didn’t say you actively look, but you have, in fact, seen me naked. Before you get defensive again, just answer this. True or false? You have seen me naked.”

“True, but-” He’s cut off mid sentence when Luc talks over him.

“Listen, Sky. You know that skit, where she’s singing about needing a big boy?”

“Oh for fucks sake, Luc. Not this shit again.”

We both ignore Landon and I answer, “Yes, boo, but of course.” My face hurts from smiling.

“What you don’t know is she wrote it about me.” After dropping this steaming pile of bullshit, Luc starts singing a

dreadfully off-key rendition of it.

My abs burn, and I can barely breathe from laughing so hard. There are actual tears rolling down my face.

“You’re an idiot, bro,” Landon says. Looks like the verdict is in, and it’s safe to say, Landon and Luc use *bro* very frequently.

After that, our conversation centers mostly on the game. Bits and pieces of conversation take place. But it’s mostly watch-your-back, flashbangs, air strikes, headshots, and accusations of camping.

Eventually, we decide this round of deathmatch will be our last.

“We have to do this again. You two are hysterical, and we make a great team on here.”

“Yeah, man, for sure. I’ll add you as a friend,” Luc says. A friend request from iamNOTyourfather pops up on my screen, and I accept his invite.

It’s official now. “Perfect. Just let me know when.”

“Awesome, alright, I’m out, boys. Catch ya later.” And just like that, Luc is gone.

“I don’t think I’ll make it on anytime soon. I’ll be out of town for a bit, but I’ll message you when I can.” Tension has hardened his voice.

“Okay, cool. Wait. Shit. Does that mean flying?” I whisper *flying*, hoping it won’t send him spiraling.

A shaky sigh leaves his mouth along with his, “Yes.”

“Well. Don’t you worry. I got your back. I’ll make sure to entertain you with all of your faves while you’re gone.”

“My faves?”

“Yep, my faves are now yours. Resistance is futile. You know you’re defenseless since you find me so charming.”

He doesn’t deny it, which draws a larger grin to my mouth.

“Just so you know, I’ll be randomly blowing up your chat with jokes, useless trivia knowledge, or random science facts. It’ll be like a Russian Roulette of faves. What’s Sky going to share today? You’ll never know what to expect.”

“Oh, joy. I can hardly contain my excitement,” he says in the most deadpan tone I’ve ever heard.

It cracks me up. He’s full of shit. He enjoys it as much as I do.

Skylar

Landon wasn't kidding when he said he'd be away for a while. It's been almost a week since our game night. Our contact has mostly been me sending him messages. His replies are sparse.

Sometimes, he'll send me a longer reply. But mostly, I get an "lol," "interesting," "fascinating," or "no way."

I have the perfect fact to send him today. It's practically a two-for-one. I wish I could tell him, but I'll settle for messaging him. I'm not sure when he'll be back home, and I can't hold on to this gem.

It's a good thing I'm home alone right now so nobody can hear me laughing maniacally as I type out the messages.

Skysthelimit: I'm going to preface this one with, yes, I'm a jealous bitch over this fact, but that's not my point here.

Skysthelimit: Did you know pigs have 30 minute orgasms?

Skysthelimit: Maybe that's why bacon tastes so good.

I sprinkle in a nice dose of emojis, including a pig, bacon, melting face, drooling face, crying face, and crying laughing face.

Hopefully it will put a smile on his face.

He's not online now, so I close out of all of my apps except for music. Quickly, I change for the gym, grab my water, and slip my headphones on, heading out the door. I don't bother with keys, since my lock is keyless and there's a gym on the property. It's only a short walk. Scrolling through my playlists, I contemplate what kind of vibe I'm in the mood for.

It's legs and glutes day. Ooh, rap queens for the win. This playlist is full of bad bitches like Cardi B and Megan Thee Stallion. Perfect for working on this body-ody-ody-ody, okurrr.

The gym is mostly empty since it's a Friday morning.

I make my way over to the hip thrust machine and start working through my stretches and warmups. Gotta get these glutes ready to work and grow, thank you.

After I'm all warmed up, I get to work. I run through my routine on autopilot. Hip thrusts, leg press variations, squats, good mornings, reverse lunges, single-leg deadlifts, single-leg cable kickbacks, weighted step-ups. The music combined with the familiar burn of my muscles makes two hours fly.

Endorphins rush through my body. It's such a fantastic feeling.

I may enjoy eating junk, but I still make sure to take care of myself.

When I exit the gym, I pull my phone out of my pocket. There's a new notification from Landon.

LandonTheBull: WTF, man. Idk if this is going to ruin bacon for me or make me enjoy it more.

LandonTheBull: I can't with you.

LandonTheBull: Where do you even find this stuff?

I knew he'd like this one. I'm smiling at his reaction. My heart clenches in my chest. That can't be good.

Skysthelimit: On the interwebs, silly.

Skysthelimit: How are you?

LandonTheBull: Good, but tired. We're super busy right now, and it's taking a lot out of me. I love my job, but I miss my bed.

Skysthelimit: Meanwhile, I can't wait until I can get out of town for a bit lol. None of my plans have been working out lately, but I'm going to nail something down soon.

LandonTheBull: I've got my fingers crossed that it works out. Gotta run. Thanks for the laugh, Sky, I really needed it.

Skysthelimit: Anytime, boo. Anytime.

Landon

The blaring sound of my alarm rudely drags me out of my sleep. The night went by way too fast. Savannah rolls away from me and pulls a pillow over her head with a groan while I reach over and shut off the alarm.

Last night was the first time I was able to see her in weeks. We've been back for a few days now after that brutal string of back-to-back away games. Needless to say, it's been a while, and we didn't get much rest.

Climbing out of bed, I make my way over to my dresser to grab some fresh clothes. Boxer briefs, athletic shorts, a t-shirt, and clean socks. I dress in the bathroom after I piss and brush my teeth. A shower is pointless since I'm getting ready to head to the Frenzy for our morning practice.

When I exit the bathroom, Savannah has shifted again, and her tired eyes catch mine. "Stay as long as you want." A satisfied little smirk accompanies my offer. "I'm sure you can use the rest after last night."

"Full of yourself this morning, are you?"

“You were full of me last night.”

“Don’t be cocky, Landon Spencer. It’s not cute,” she replies unconvincingly. She used my first name to show that serious Savannah is in the building. I still don’t believe her.

“Cock is definitely the reason why you need more rest.” I laugh and grab the cock in question.

“Ugh, shut up!” she laughs and launches a pillow at my head. “I hate you. Why do I even tolerate you?”

Of course I duck and she misses me by a mile.

“Again, the answer is-” I start, and she quickly interrupts.

“Don’t even fucking say it!” She’s giggling. She knows me too well. We’ve been friends far too long for my response to be anything other than predictable. She already knows I’m going to fucking say it.

I’m halfway out my bedroom door when I toss over my shoulder, “Cock. You only put up with me for my cock. It is a thing of beauty. It’s irresistible.”

Her screech of mock outrage and more laughter follows me down the hallway. I guess I shouldn’t have teased her so much if I expected her to get some rest. Once Sav is up, she tends to stay awake.

After a quick detour to the kitchen to scarf down a boiled egg, a few breakfast sausages, and some overnight oats, I’m on my way to the Frenzy. It’s fairly close to our arena, the Richard Cox Arena, which is great, a five-to-ten-minute drive depending on traffic. RCA was named after the man who founded our team over fifty years ago, and surprisingly it hasn’t been changed.

When I first joined the team, our training facility was almost half an hour away. Which wasn’t terrible, but it also wasn’t ideal. Our time is already severely limited. The last thing we need to be doing is wasting precious time driving back and forth across the city.

This is also why I bought a house in one of the gated communities in the suburbs closest to RCA. I can walk there

faster than driving. And I'd definitely walk if it weren't for the fact that it's hot as balls ninety-five percent of the time. Way too hot to walk to the arena in a suit, no less.

We played well on the road, three wins and two losses. Our game has been strong at home, too, but we can't get too comfortable. Our defense coach has some drills scheduled for us to run through. It shouldn't be anything too strenuous since we have another game tomorrow night.

We'll start by watching game film, I'm sure. Part of Coach DeMassi's process requires us to tell him what we did wrong and where we think we can improve. Once we answer, he reviews our responses and provides his feedback as well.

Afterwards, we hit the locker room to dress for practice. I love his approach. It not only allows me to easily see where my skills need improving, but reminds me to stay humble.

Which is important to me. If I lose that quality, then I don't feel like I deserve to be here. Personally, and professionally, my goal is to acknowledge there's always room for improvement regardless of how skilled I am. As a skater and as a player.

And with DeMassi's coaching technique I know for a fact I'm becoming a stronger player each day. Maintaining focus and honing my skills.

My phone vibrates back-to-back with notifications.

I don't hesitate to pull it out and check.

Skysthelimit: COD tonight?

"You've gotta be texting your boyfriend if you have that stupid look on your face. It only makes an appearance when you're talking to him." Leigh drops down onto the bench beside me and tries to look at my phone. Instinctively, I pull it out of his reach.

I was supposed to be dressing for practice, but here I am, completely sidetracked by my notifications.

From Sky. But Leigh doesn't know that. He can't know that. It's just a guess. Shoving my phone into my duffel bag, I

glance at him, “What look? I don’t have a look.”

“The one you’re still wearing right now. Your eyes are all crinkled up around the corners, you’re smiling so big. It’s so cute!” He playfully pinches my cheek with a jiggle for good measure. Like he’s an eighty-year-old granny.

With his annoying presence, I can feel the smile leave my face. Fuck. I guess I do have a look. Shoving his hand away, I direct us back to what’s wrong with what he said. “He’s not my boyfriend.”

Bending down, I start pulling my skates on. Which is what I should have been doing instead of looking at my phone.

His ever-expressive eyebrow shoots toward his hairline. “If you say so, bro. Either way, he seems like a cool dude. And I think it would be a safe bet to tell him who you are. He’s gonna shit a brick when he realizes he spent hours playing with both of us.”

“He seriously will.” My face is torn between a smile at imagining his reaction, and a grimace for the same reason. It could go really well or very badly.

Finished lacing up his own skates, he hops up before leaning down to whisper in my ear. “But Spence? Maybe you should ask yourself how you automatically knew I was talking about Sky. I never said his name.”

My head whips around to glance at him. Is he implying I’m being unfaithful to Savannah? Guilt trickles through my bloodstream. And that pisses me right the hell off. There’s nothing to feel guilty about, so I brutally shut the feeling down.

Savannah and I are exclusive, but we’re not in a relationship. And that doesn’t matter anyway, because these chats with Sky are purely innocent. Leigh knows. He joined that game and participated in that innocent chatting a few weeks ago.

He must be a little concerned at the expression on my face and my tense posture since he raises his hands in surrender.

When he gets to the door, he tosses a “just saying” over his shoulder as he exits the locker room.

Landon

February

Today was a long-ass day; I'm absolutely wiped out after practice. I need some rest to prep for tomorrow's game against Philly. But I'd promised Sky I'd make it on today. At least for a little while.

Shouldn't have done that, but I can't help it.

There's no saying no to him. A few days ago, I'd just returned home from our latest string of away games. Against my better judgment, I'd joined him for a quick match. I should've gone straight to bed, but I didn't. Exhaustion had finally started to kick in, so I'd had to cut our time short. It was then he'd asked me to hop on come Wednesday. When I'd opened my mouth to decline, "*sure thing, man*" had popped out against my will.

What the fuck?

Apparently, I have zero willpower. His voice compels me to give him whatever he wants. Like a puppet on a string, I am powerless to deny him.

So here I am.

Exhaustion won't stop me from following through.

As soon as I got home, I changed into some athletic shorts, and now I'm walking back down the hall to use the living room console. If I'm near my bed right now, I'll likely faceplant straight into unconsciousness. I grab the controller and headset and start up the system.

A groan of frustration leaves me the second I notice the "update required" notification on my screen, but start the download without hesitation. Grabbing my phone, I send Sky a quick message, letting him know I'm a bit delayed by the update. He assures me not to worry.

Since I have some extra time on my hands, I figure I might as well order some food. Practice lasted a bit longer than normal, and I burned a ton of calories that I should replenish.

I fuck around scrolling through my socials a bit to waste some more time. Nothing too exciting to see there. Same shit from the same people.

Not for the first time, I find my fingers hovering over the Instagram search bar. Sky is sure to have more interesting posts. It would be so easy to do a search for him. I'd bet my entire hockey career that I'd find him in a heartbeat.

Something tells me Sky's Instagram handle is the same as his gamertag or very close to it. It's a core part of who he is as a person. It would be so quick and easy. Just a few clicks and there he'd be.

I know it.

But I can't bring myself to do it.

There's no way I'll allow myself to invade his privacy like that when I'm not being straightforward with him. He can't

search for me with how little he knows about me, so I don't have the right.

My conscience won't let me.

Glancing at the TV, I'm shocked to find the update already completed, so I click the icon and load the game. Headset on, I settle in on the couch. I'll be here for a while.

Sky must have been in the game lobby, because he's already inviting me to join his game chat. When I accept his invite, it's obvious Addy is there based on the volume of the chaotic conversation Sky is in the midst of. If I didn't know any better, I would swear they were brother and sister for how much they pick at each other.

It's good-natured and full of love, but they just don't quit.

They're quite amusing, but time is wasting.

"Hey you guys!" I interrupt

Sky rewards me with a guffaw of laughter. "Hey, LTB! How's it hanging?"

"It's hanging so that's always a good sign, right, nurse?" Am I flirting? Nah, it's purely harmless banter between friends. Nothing exciting here.

Why does it feel exciting?

"To answer this accurately, I'd need a visual of how exactly it's hanging but, in my professional opinion," he pauses here and makes a hmmm sound like he's thinking it through, "yes. Yes, it's hanging so that's a good sign. You're a healthy boy, huh?" Is he flirting back? The increased speed of my heart beat tells me yes. And apparently, I like it.

"That I am. I kind of have to be in my line of work."

"That's right! It's been a while since you last mentioned it. You're a bit cagier and close-lipped so I can only assume it's something outrageously scandalous. You dirty boy! Don't tell me. Let me guess. Addy! Help me guess what career a dirty boy like LTB can have. Fit. Healthy. But dirty." He purrs the last word.

“Knock yourselves out. I can’t wait to hear your guesses.” My heart is pounding triple time. Is this my moment of truth? I’m simultaneously amused and casually dying by this turn in our conversation. It’s a good thing, right? It is my fault, but I just had to try to open the door somehow. I didn’t expect to take this long once I decided to tell him. Maybe I can ease my way into spilling the truth? Could it be this simple?

Now that I’ve gotten into this, I can’t decide how I want it to actually play out. Will I tell him if they guess right? Will I just spill and tell him on my own? Or worse, keep hiding?

“He can’t wait to hear our guesses,” he updates Addy.

“This would be a lot more fun if I could hear both sides of this conversation, Sky,” Addy gripes. “Hmm, let’s see.”

Anxiety and nerves cause my fingers to tingle a bit. A brick has settled heavily in my stomach.

“He’s gotta be a stripper! Their goods gotta look *good*, amiright?” Addy chirps in the background.

“Ooh, ooh, or he could always be in porn. He travels a lot. Strippers don’t really travel, do they? But porn stars would totally travel to shoot content. Collabs and such.”

I guffaw. “Wow, you guys are way off, but I’m sure you’re right. At least in regard to amateur porn stars. Business expense the heck out of traveling to film a collab. I’m thinking that’s a hard no on traveling strippers... But I could be wrong since I’m neither.”

“You never know, boo, they might,” Sky replies. “We’re wrong, Addy. Next guess?”

“What about a cage dancer? I’m sure they travel with the DJs they dance for. Like that one hottie from Quench you hooked up with way back when.”

“Oh, yeah! I forgot about him. Felix was hot. And bendy.”

Everything inside me screeches to a halt and freezes. Full stop.

Wait. What? Quench? Like, *my* Quench?

Up until this point, I was laughing at their guess, but at that comment, I am frozen. I've had this feeling for a while now that Sky lives in Florida, especially since he loves the Florida Bull Sharks, and has mentioned the beach more than a few times, but shit. Am I actually right? And does he live closer than I suspected?

A lot of fans have favorite teams that aren't their local team. This is a fact. And there are a ton of beaches in this country. He could literally be anywhere along the East Coast.

It's impossible to keep the question from popping out of my mouth. I need to know.

"Sky, don't answer if it makes you uncomfortable, but I have to ask. Do you live in South Florida, too? I'm sure it's not an uncommon nightclub name, because thirsty bitches are everywhere, but it's just too much of a coincidence for me not to ask."

"Mayyyybe, why?" He pauses, then gasps loudly. "Wait. Shut the fuck up. You said too. *Landon!* Does this mean you're here?"

I have to take a steadying breath. I can't breathe. My chest is tight. What d'you know? That breath doesn't help at all. "Yeah, I sure am." The shakiness of my voice is audible. Does he hear it? "What are the odds? Fucking crazy." My pulse is racing unsteadily, and I'm definitely overheating.

"Holy shit, Landon. What?! Ohmigod, Addy! You won't believe this! Landon lives here too! I'm in Palm County. I actually work at PCH. Is that close to you?"

"More or less. I'm maybe thirty minutes from there." My hands are shaking. PCH is practically right across the street from our old training center. What a coincidence.

"Holy fuck, LTB. Are you kidding me right now? We've been talking only online for *months*, and we live so close to each other. It's a tragedy of epic proportions! We should rectify this immediately."

Holy shit.

I was hoping we'd get to this point, but Sky just jumped in headfirst. No look-before-you-leap with this one. He's fearless.

And me?

I'm currently shitting a brick.

Hesitantly, I ask, "You want to meet me?" I'm fucking shaking. I *knew* I was right. This feeling in my gut has never steered me wrong. I knew down to the marrow in my bones that he was close.

I'm practically vibrating out of my skin with adrenaline, nerves, and pure excitement. I don't think I've ever connected so strongly with anyone before, and it'll be nice to see if that connection is stronger in person or if it's just a fluke.

Don't get me wrong, here. Mom, Savannah, and Leigh are my people. But this feeling is different, and I don't know why. It's inexplicable. Maybe I'll finally find out when I meet him.

When. I. Meet. Him.

Apparently, I've decided we're doing this.

"Ummm, yeah, of course," he answers, and I can clearly hear the *fucking duh* implied in his tone. It makes me smile. This one is full of sass. "We should catch a Bull Sharks game! That would be perfect, right?"

Fuck my life.

I should have seen that coming.

Because of course he'd suggest a hockey game. This guy. Now what the fuck do I say? How do I get out of this?

Or...

Maybe I don't find a way out.

Could this actually work in my favor? Maybe I can surprise him somehow?

"Hmm, yeah, that's a great idea, Sky. That works for me."

"Ohmigod, Landon! How soon can we set this up? Shit, my brain is blanking on the schedule. But there's got to be a

home game that doesn't conflict with my work schedule."

"Ooh, maybe I'll tag along to see if he's as sexy as his voice," Addy chimes in. "And also ensure he's not an ax murderer."

"Tell her she's making me blush," I say.

He snorts at me, but obediently repeats my words to her. She snorts in return. These two already know I'm full of shit.

"Such a bag of hoes, Adeline Marie. And Landon could never be an ax murderer. He's a hockey fan." As if that explains everything.

"Seriously, Sky. Loving hockey doesn't prevent someone from being a killer or a flat-out shitty person."

"Sure, whatever you say. I'll believe it when I see concrete evidence, Addy."

They're about to start bickering again like children, so I quickly interrupt, "There's two home games before the team flies out again. One tomorrow and one Saturday night. If one of those don't work, we can plan for after the team returns. It'll be almost two weeks by then because the first home game is on a Monday. And we know that won't work because of your schedule."

No slipups occurred, which is a miracle, considering how hard it is to refer to us as "the team" instead of saying "we" or "us."

"Tomorrow. Can you make it tomorrow? If not, Saturday is definitely good for me. But it has to be either or. There's no way I can wait two weeks. That's way too far, and I'm way too impatient for that. Let me check for tickets now." Rustling sounds through my headset when he starts shuffling around.

"Awesome, but don't worry about it. I have a hookup, so I'll take care of tickets. I'll grab one for Addy, too, if she can make it, but she has to wear team merch or it's a no-go."

"Landon says you've gotta wear merch, babe. It's a rule. Are you free tomorrow night and Saturday? He's going to see which game he can get tickets to." He pauses briefly before

squealing with excitement. “Ahhh, she can join whichever day. This is going to be so much fun. Save my number so you can text me all the details.”

I grab my phone and open up a new contact. After I give him the go ahead, he rattles his number off. Studiously, I ignore my shaking fingers. Let’s pretend that isn’t happening, because if it’s not acknowledged, then it never happened. I save his contact as Sky’s The Limit, because I just can’t resist, then I send him a text so he can save my number, too.

“Yassss, LTB is now one of my contacts. We’re official, boo.”

“We sure are,” I return with a chuckle. “I’ll send you the details once I confirm which date I can get the tickets for.”

What an unexpected turn of events.

Skylar

Don't even ask me how I managed to focus the rest of the week, knowing I'd be meeting Landon in a matter of days. It's hard enough to sit still normally, but it was impossible waiting for Saturday to roll around.

The excitement coursing through my veins had me antsy as hell. I wanted to take the edge off with a jump, but the weather had *not* cooperated at all. Instead, to burn some of the antsiness away, I'd gone on a cleaning rampage and dusted, scrubbed, and re-organized the whole townhouse.

Twice. And we can't forget the music I'd blasted so I could shake my ass while I cleaned. That's the only acceptable way to clean the house in my opinion. I have a playlist on my phone that I love to shuffle. Some freestyle, reggaeton, bachata, and a mix of rap, EDM, and techno dance music. My tastes are quite cultured and eclectic.

I'd had moderate success at burning away the excess energy.

Now, it's finally Saturday afternoon and it's almost game time. I'm about to be on my way to pick Addy up for the game. She hates navigating event traffic, while it's all part of the excitement for me.

Knowing everyone else is probably just as excited to see their team play as I am. Totally in my element in the crowd. It's funny since traffic causes you, by default, to slow down, and I can't stand slowing down. But in this case, it only enhances my excitement and the adrenaline running through my bloodstream like wildfire.

Since we plan to be there in time to watch pre-game warmups, we might actually avoid some of the traffic. We'll see. Pulling my phone out, I type out a quick text. Because, yeah. Texting is our new normal. Who needs a game chat?

Me: Hey, LTB! I'm about to leave to grab Addy 😊

Me: Where should we meet you? 😊

LTB: Hey, so I'm going to be a bit delayed, but your tickets will be at will call. What're your last names?

Uh-oh. That can't be good.

Me: Donovan. Addy's is Álvarez.

LTB: Perfect. Just give them your names at will call, then I'll see you inside.

Me: Sounds good.

Good maybe, but is everything okay? I'll just ask him so I don't worry. Because I *will* worry.

Me: Everything okay?

LTB: Yeah, everything is great. Stop worrying. I'll see you soon.

He knows me too well.

Me: Ok. See you soon!

Hmm. My spidey senses are tingling. Something is up, but at least he's okay, I guess.

This is a bit weird, but I'll just take him at his word. That's all I can do at the moment. Maybe I'll pry out what was up when we're together later.

Holy crap. We'll be meeting soon.

Shit, I need to get on the road.

I glance in the mirror by the front door, fluff my hair a final time, before snagging my keys and texting Addy I'm on my way. Let's do this.

Landon

In the locker room, my phone is clenched tightly in my hands. Debating the final text I should send to Sky.

Sky's the Limit: We're here ☐☐☐

Sky the Limit: So I was thinking... I know we're going to be sitting together, but you should know who you're looking for. So here we are in all our glory. I'm the pretty one.

He's sent me a selfie with Addy. Decked out in hockey merch like I asked.

Sky. Jesus. He's too fucking beautiful.

I can't allow myself to look too closely at him, so I change my focus to the smiling woman next to him. Dark curls piled onto her head in a messy bun. Golden skin, brown eyes. Huge smile.

My eyes flit back to Sky.

Fuck it all.

I knew, I fucking *knew* he'd be gorgeous. There's no way God would have been so cruel to create someone as awesome as Sky and not bless him with looks.

If I didn't already know that he's Cuban, this photo would have clued me in immediately. His Hispanic heritage is evident. Golden skin, almost the exact same hue as Addy's, and warm hazel eyes that shine with happiness. His beautiful spirit glows from the inside out. A short, well-groomed full beard that accentuates luscious, dusky rose lips. Those lips look delicious. Biteable.

Focus, Spence. What is wrong with you right now?

Looking to the ceiling for answers to all my questions, I squeeze my eyes closed.

Sky's waiting for a response. I have no clue what to tell him.

I should've thought this through a little bit better, but here I am. Stuck in another mess I created.

What should I tell him? He doesn't know it yet, but I won't be enjoying the game with him and Addy. At least not in the way I've led them to expect. Considering they'll actually be watching me, not watching *with* me.

Time is running out here. I have to figure this out, and fast. We're about to head onto the ice for warmups. Puck drop is in about thirty minutes. Nerves have me restlessly shifting back and forth in front of my cubby. I can't sit right now. I'm jittery with a crazy combination of anxiety and excitement.

Sky is out there somewhere.

And now I have a face to match his name and his voice.

Leigh keeps side-eying me. He can tell something's up, but he's giving me space to just be. He'd tried to draw me into light conversation, but that failed. I couldn't string a full sentence together to save my life.

In hindsight, I should have told him. He could have helped me plan this out better.

I love that he cares. He's a great friend, but I just can't share this with him yet.

If I try to speak, I might actually expel my nerves in a rush of vomit. That would be fun.

Am I doing the right thing? Maybe I should have told Sky who I am first? Instead of just blindsiding him like this.

Too late.

My choices are already in motion. I guess I'll just wing it.

Here goes nothing.

Me: So...

I type out message after message after sending that eloquent reply.

Me: Don't kill me.

Me: I promise I'm not standing you up.

Me: I'm here, but I got a bit held up again...

Me: Good news is you'll be seeing me sooner than you think.

As soon as the message shows delivered, I lock my phone and shove it in my cubby facedown. Just in case he responds fast like usual. My brain can't handle a read notification right now. It'll send me into a deeper spiral.

I can't take a chance that I'll see the screen light up and be tempted to read his response. Better to not know for now.

It's go time.

We make our way out of the locker room, down the hall, and into the tunnel.

Don't look at him, Landon. Hold it together. Just wait. I never fully look at the crowd before or during warmups. Only after. It's a habit. I don't even remember when I started it, but I can't and won't change that now. Not for Sky. I have to follow my routine.

I can do this.

The announcer starts yelling about chumming the waters, shark attacks, and blood in the water. Finally, he announces the team one by one.

We skate out onto the ice and work our way through our warmup routine, everyone completing their laps and drills. Taking shots on goal. Stretching and loosening up our legs and hips.

My focus is off.

My head wants to turn, my eyes want to look for him. *I* want to look for him.

I fight hard, harder than I should have to, but I beat the urge. I will not be the reason why our tried-and-true routine isn't followed. Let's call a spade a spade. It's not much in the way of superstitions, but it's mine. I follow it to the letter. No deviations from me. Deviations only lead to problems.

Our warmups come to an end after what feels like endless hours. However, I'm pleased to say that it went off without a hitch. Like the well-oiled machine we are.

Now we have some time to skate around and interact with the audience. Bouncing pucks on the ends of sticks and tossing them over to the tiniest hockey fans.

It's still early so the arena isn't that full.

Lifting my gaze, my eyes track to the section of seats where our friends and families sit. The ones who choose not to sit in our box seating, at least.

Nerves skitter through my veins. I wonder if he'll catch onto what I'm up to on his own, or if I'll need to explain. I take a deep breath and skate toward the boards closest to their section.

And holy fuck, there he is.

Just like in his picture.

Black hair, shorter on the sides, longer on top, but styled back and away from his face. That gorgeous tanned skin.

Happiness radiates out of every pore. Smirk on his mouth. That definitely tracks.

He's wearing a long-sleeved navy, turquoise, grey, and white Bull Sharks official jersey and sitting right next to him is Addy. Addy's wearing merch, too, so I can't complain.

Seeing them smiling and laughing together at my game, fills me with warmth. I feel settled. Some restlessness I wasn't even aware of is soothed just by looking at him. Watching them together. Anyone can see their bond just by observing them.

They're only three rows back. Immersed in each other. Addy is laughing, while Sky is talking. Then they're laughing together again, because that's just who they are. She rests her head on his shoulder. They're adorable.

Maybe he senses the weight of my gaze on him, because he looks up at that moment. My green eyes meet Sky's hazels through the acrylic, and my heart skips a beat in my chest before it starts racing completely out of control.

There it is. That connection. It does exist. A zing. Something. It's alive and coursing inside me. Tethering me to him. Our connection isn't a fluke.

That gut feeling I've had from the first moment we spoke was right.

He's someone important to me.

He can't be more than a friend, though.

Not while Savannah and I are... whatever we are.

What the fuck am I even thinking? These thoughts make no sense, and I sure can't sort through them on the ice.

I probably look fucking crazy, standing here zoned out and staring at them.

A huge, excited smile breaks out across his face when he sees me.

Fuck. Let the record (a broken record at this point) show that Sky is fucking cute. Gorgeous if I'm allowing myself to

be honest. Of course he would be. Because fuck my life.

But that shouldn't matter.

We're just friends.

He stands up, turns around, and flashes the back of his jersey at me. Shaking it in two hands to make sure I read the back.

I see the number eighteen on his back first. And above it, Spencer.

Of course.

Jesus. Christ.

How much more can I take before I break into itty bitty pieces?

He's wearing my name on his back.

That hits me deep for some reason.

Slays me.

My hearing fades and is replaced by a roaring sound that fills my ears and drowns the cacophony of the rapidly filling arena.

Tonight might kill me. If my heart stops, will Sky have to help save me?

The thought is unhinged since we have medical personnel on staff.

Sky is still smiling at me, while I stare at him like a tool.

A spray of shaved ice coats me from the side, and Leigh's voice reaches my ears.

"C'mon, Spencey," he says. "Almost game time."

He jostles me from the side.

"Um, hello. What are we looking at?"

"Sky is here."

"No fucking way, man. You didn't tell me? I'm hurt. Things must be getting serious between dad and dad." Those

eyebrows of his bob up and down suggestively.

A laugh inadvertently escapes me. He's ridiculous. "Fuck off, Leigh."

"C'mon, man. Let's do this, but you owe me a story afterwards."

Sucking in a huge breath, Leigh's words have drawn me back to the moment. I glance at his retreating form, before I turn back to smirk at Sky. He's watching me. His head tilts curiously, like maybe he's discovered a disturbance in the force.

Maintaining eye contact, I skate backward a few paces, then wink at him before finally turning and skating away.

Inhale.

Exhale.

He's really here.

Inhale.

Exhale.

I'm kind of freaking out. Get it together. Interact with more fans. *You've got this, Landon.* The voice in my head sounds suspiciously like Sky.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Don't look at Sky again.

We have a game to get through, and then I'll face him. Own up to the smokescreens I built and finally tear them down.

I hope I'm not wrong in believing he'll understand my actions.

But understanding doesn't necessarily negate anger or hurt feelings.

Just get through this game, Landon, and then you'll see how he feels.

Skylar

I check my phone for the millionth time, but there's no new text from Landon. My leg is bouncing up and down with equal parts excitement and nerves. He's running late, I know this, but is he here yet? Craning my neck from side to side, I look over my shoulders to see if anyone is making their way toward our seats. Everyone seems pretty settled.

It's still a bit early. He'll probably get here by puck drop. But where is he? He can't be far. He said he'd see me sooner than I thought. What does that mean?

I shove my phone in my pocket and resolve to just enjoy this moment. He's always kept his word, so I'll give him the benefit of the doubt.

I take a sip of my beer and sit up in my seat. It's time for the Bull Sharks warmups.

Blue lights flash throughout the arena and music blares through the speakers.

Gah. Here we go.

This is one of my favorite parts. It's so exciting cheering for the home team. Fans cheering as the team skates out onto the ice. It gets my blood going. It's a fantastic feeling. It's a different adrenaline high than I normally thrive on, but just as satisfying.

"Alright, Village Palms, it's time to chum the waters. Let's welcome your Florida Bull Sharks onto the ice!" The crowd, Addy and I included, screams, "There'll be blood in the water!" The blue lights flicker and mingle with red in a simulation of, you guessed it, blood in the water. The crowd screams with bloodthirst.

The cheers grow louder as the team exits the tunnel onto the ice. Addy and I have a great view. I've never sat this close to the ice before and it's magnificent. If Landon ever gets here, I'll have to thank him for this. Hopefully, I don't get too spoiled, because these seats must cost a pretty penny. I'm sure I could treat myself periodically, but I'd rather buy cheaper seats and travel more.

The announcer introduces more players as they exit onto the ice. Oh my gosh, where is he? He's missing all of this. Looking over my shoulder again, I look for Landon yet again. At that moment, "Landon Spencer!" blares through the arena and I stop dead. My gut screams insistently at me. There's no way.

Addy is telling me a story about this guy from work asking her out on a date. It seems I'm responding well on autopilot, and she continues. Shaking myself out of the stupor I'm in, I actively lean closer to her and pay attention to my bestie.

"Boo, why are we talking about Josh from accounting when we could be ogling all that ass on the ice?"

"Stop being fake, you know his name is Jose."

"Whatever." She laughs and triggers my laugh.

My instincts have to be wrong.

"Skylar! You're missing your favorite part. I'm watching all this ice humping on my own."

I'm successfully drawn away from searching the crowd. "It really does look like they're humping the ice, doesn't it?" Honestly, they do look a little ridiculous, but my sex-starved brain also finds it extremely hot. The thrusting? Need it, please and thanks.

"See, boo? Hockey is fun. Hockey butts and hip thrusts."

Once our laughter dissipates, awareness prickles the hairs on my arms. Someone is watching me. The weight of their eyes is heavy.

It's Spencer, one of my favorite defensemen. In my excitement, my earlier suspicion is temporarily forgotten. My smile widens and I jump up to flash the back of my jersey at him. Using both hands, I'm shaking his name and the number eighteen at him.

When I turn back around and resume my seat, my smile grows. One of the forwards skids to a stop inches away from Spence, spraying him with a nice coating of ice. His jersey identifies him as number seven, Lucas Leighton. They talk briefly, Leighton shoots a quick glance at me and skates away.

Spencer hasn't broken eye contact with me. A broad smile spreads across lips I may or may not have fantasized about a time or two million. Then he winks at me while skating backwards to rejoin his team. What was that all about?

My brain implodes with the force of my suspicion roaring back to the forefront of my mind. It body slams me into the boards. Not that I know what that feels like, but I imagine it feels like this. The air is gone from my lungs.

That wink.

Spencer. *Landon* Spencer.

What the what? Have I really been this blind for all these months?

Oh my god.

Knowing explodes in my gut. There's no way I'm right.

But I *know* I'm right.

Landon Spencer of the Florida Bull Sharks.

LandonTheBull.

The final piece of the puzzle snaps into place and steals my breath.

Holy fucking shit.

My head goes fuzzy for a second, before I reach out and grip Addy's arm to steady myself. I might just pass out. I lean over and speak loudly into her ear. You know, because we're at a loud fucking hockey game. "I'm so fucking stupid! Landon is *the* Landon Spencer, Addy! He winked at me! It's all adding up now. There's no way it's not him."

"No way! How do you figure? Because he winked at you? That's not enough evidence."

"Of course that's not the only evidence! Listen to this." Holding up my fist in front of our huddled faces, I start ticking points off on my fingers. "Landon texts me he was held up, but he'd see me soon. Warmups started like right after that." Up goes another finger. "Landon Spencer. The Florida Bull Sharks. LandonTheBull? Like, seriously! How did I miss such an obvious clue?" Another finger. "He has the 'hookup' for tickets. Look at these seats! This looks like a mix of family and friends of the players to me, season ticket holders, and rich folks." Another finger. "He travels a lot for work, and has a nutritionist to help keep him fit." Tick. "And he fucking *winked* at me, Addy! You saw him. What is happening right now?!" I flap my hand, with fingers and thumb raised, in front of her face for dramatic effect. She swats it away and shakes my shoulder.

"Breathe, Sky. Chill out a bit."

"I am breathing, but I can't chill. I'm low-key freaking the fuck out." My breaths are panting rapidly in and out. In and out.

"Nothing low-key about it, Skylar, stop it! If you're right, then he's still the same Landon. He's your friend. He's just a regular guy who plays hockey."

“I’m not wrong. I know it.” The words wheeze out of me. Gasping, another piece falls into place. Lucas fucking Leighton is iamNOTyourfather.

Jesus Christ.

No wonder their banter and vibe are familiar. They’re known for playfully bickering during interviews. I’ve watched the footage for years. Their voices are glaringly obvious right now. How did I miss all of the huge ass neon flashing signs? If those clues had been a snake, they would’ve bit me.

Ohmigod. No wonder why he was so nervous to tell me who he is.

“Okay, then freaking breathe through this and listen to me.” Oooh, she’s strong. She’s shaking my shoulder like a madwoman and my head is flapping like a bobblehead until I shake myself out of her clutches.

“Bitch, I’m fucking breathing, but his fucking name is on my shirt! I stood up and flashed his name at him like a fucking fanboy, and he fucking *winked* at me! What is even happening right now?”

She covers her mouth to hide her hysterical laughter from me, but I see it anyway. Dammit. No.

Covering my face with my hands, I yell at her, “Oh my god! It’s not funny!”

“No, babe, it’s hilarious. You totally jumped up and preened for him to show him you were wearing his jersey. Meanwhile, he’s Landon. And he knows it’s you since *he* got us these seats and you sent him our selfie. I die. This is the best moment of my life. We will relive this moment for perpetuity.”

Shit.

It is pretty funny now that I think about it. I try to contain my own humor, but it’s a little hard right now. Fuck. It is funny, even though there’s a tiny part of me deep down inside somewhere that is dying of embarrassment. I’ll never admit it, though. So please keep that between us, thanks. “Holy shit. I can’t believe this. I’m so glad you came. Otherwise, I

would've been sitting here all alone and you'd never believe me when I told you the story."

"Well, you do love to exaggerate. Who knows what nonsense you would've added. I wouldn't know what to believe."

"Stop it. It's not an exaggeration. It's adding some *sazon* to enhance the story. It adds *sabor*."

"Sure. *Flavor*. That's what we're calling bullshit, now, huh?"

Landon

It will surprise nobody to learn that every moment thereafter passed me by in a fog. I know I played well. There's no other option.

Hockey is inside me. I can play in my sleep, if need be. No arrogance, just fact. Training and muscle memory for the win.

Literally.

Because we did win.

But don't ask me how.

I actually have no idea. Tonight, for the first time in my life, I couldn't wait for the game to be over. And I functioned on autopilot.

Usually, I can't get enough. I'd live on the ice.

But tonight is different.

Sky and I will be meeting soon. Face to face.

Seeing him earlier doesn't really count.

In the locker room, we're removing our gear to shower and head out. Me? I grab my phone to see if Sky messaged. My heart races in my chest, ready to break out and flop around like a fish out of water.

There're quite a bit of notifications on my phone right now. Fifteen, to be exact.

Mom messaged me, and Pops, too, but the rest of those messages are from Sky. I love my family to pieces, but their messages can wait. Seeing what Sky texted is more pressing.

Sky's the Limit: Are you sure everything is ok?

Sky's the Limit: We can reschedule if you need to. No pressure. It's not like watching this game will be a hardship.

Sky's the Limit: You stopped responding... Are you sure you didn't ditch me?

Sky's the Limit: *us

The timestamp shows he'd sent his next batch of messages about twenty minutes later.

Sky's the Limit: OMG, omg, omg! What is happening right now?

Sky's the Limit: Tell me I'm crazy, Landon. LANDON!

Sky's the Limit: I know I'm not, but WHAT?! ☐

Sky's the Limit: Am I right? OMG! Addy took a little convincing, but after presenting the evidence, she agrees.

Sky's the Limit: Are you Landon Spencer?!

Sky's the Limit: Obviously you can't answer if you're him, because you're literally in the middle of a game rn, but I can't even!

Sky's the Limit: It's so obvious now. LandonTheBull. The traveling. I was so blind. It's literally sooooo obvious now. Some fan I am lol 😊

Sky's the Limit: Ok. Woosah. I'm good now. Promise. I'm not going to fanboy all over you like a psycho. I can be

cool.

Sky's the Limit: Addy and I'll hang around after the game to wait for you. Just lmk where we should meet you.

Reading his messages makes me chuckle. He'd sent his last message during first period. There's nobody like this guy. Instead of anger, all I'm sensing is pure excitement. Still, he's had time to process now, so I'll tread carefully to feel him out.

Me: You're not wrong.

Me: You don't seem mad. Are you?

He responds immediately. A sure sign he had his phone in his hand waiting for my text.

Sky's the Limit: Mad? Are you crazy? No!

Sky's the Limit: Where do I find you? I need to hug you. Tell me now if you're not ok with it. Otherwise, I will squeeze you!

Me: LOL. Locker room. Give me 15 minutes and I'll be out. If you hang by your seats I'll send someone to grab you.

I lock my phone and shove it in my bag so I can quickly finish removing my gear and go shower. While I'm relieved Sky's not mad, I still can't get rid of these nerves. It's ridiculous.

Leigh is already showering, and like usual, I settle in the shower stall next to his.

"Bro. What the fuck?" he asks while lathering up his hair. Steam billows around us in thick clouds.

"What?"

He scoffs and gestures at my face. "You tell me. At least now I know the reason for that deer-in-the-headlights-oh-shit-I'm-about-to-get-run-over look you've had on your face all day. Spill. How is Sky here?" He pins me with a narrow-eyed gaze.

"Um, he drove." If looks could kill, I'd be a goner. He flings water at me.

“Well, obviously. But how did this happen? And moreover, why didn’t you tell me? A support system is only effective if it’s given the opportunity to support.”

“Well, a couple days ago, he and Addy were talking about Quench, and we realized we both live in South Florida. We arranged to meet up.”

“No shit,” he repeats. “Just that simple? Does he know you’re you? *The Landon Spencer?*”

“He does now.”

“Oooh.” His eyes are comically wide.

“I told you I didn’t know how to tell him the truth. So when Sky suggested we catch a game together, it felt like the perfect opportunity to tell him. I didn’t quite think it all through. He obviously thought we’d be watching the game together, and I never corrected him. After he told me they were here, I panicked. I told him I was delayed. He put it all together on his own.”

“He’s the one you played statue in front of during warmups? He *is*, isn’t he?” Leigh is laughing while he towels himself dry.

Heat rises in my cheeks, so I stick my face under the water and scrub my hands vigorously through my hair. Hoping to wash away the sheepish expression on my face. I can’t bullshit him, though. He can read me like a book so fuck it. He gets more honesty from me.

“Yes. Yes, he is. I froze when I saw him. It’s ridiculous.” I grab my own towel and drape it over my head to dry off with a swift rub down. Maybe it’ll help expel some of these nerves. Removing the towel from my head, I start the process of drying off my body. Leigh is standing there, leaning against the wall, towel wrapped around his hips, ankles crossed, watching me as is his way. “Leigh, I am freaking the fuck out, and I don’t know why.”

“I see that. Want me to come with? I can be a buffer. Help break the ice if need be.”

My breath whooshes out of me in relief, “Fuck yes, please. I appreciate the assist and will owe you one.”

He claps me on the shoulder and starts walking backward toward the dressing room. “I’ll definitely take you up on that IOU one day. But right now? Hurry it up. Let’s get dressed and get the fuck out of here. I’m starving. We need to get some food.” How the tables have turned. The guy who is never in a hurry is now rushing me.



LESS THAN TEN MINUTES LATER, Leigh and I are posted up by the player’s entrance. In suits, unfortunately, but such is life. Kyle should be here any minute with Sky and Addy.

I’d texted my mom and grandpa back. Mom was here earlier, but she’d had to leave as soon as the game ended. Pops had watched from home, and was sending us congratulations on the win.

Leigh is rambling away. His ability to talk about anything and nothing all at the same time never fails to amaze me. And I hope to God it never ceases to calm my anxiety. Having friends who just intuitively get you and give you the space to just be you is truly precious. It’s impossible to put into words how much I appreciate him.

Shiiiiittttt. It’s Hallmark movie time, apparently.

Shaking my head at myself, I try to tune into what he’s actually saying when I hear voices. Addy’s voice quickly followed by Sky’s laughter. My mouth curves into a smile. There’s no fighting it.

Sky laughs, and I want to join. Without fail. It’s Pavlovian at this point.

Why am I like this?

Anddddd, there he is. Bouncing on the balls of his feet in front of me. Everything inside me stands still. Frozen as I take him in. Cataloging every inch of him.

“I warned you I’m a hugger, LTB. I’d hate to invade your personal space, y’know, but I kind of need to hug you right now. This has to be one of the craziest moments of my life.”

Emotions flicker across his face clear as day. Excitement, happiness, and maybe a touch of nerves. He’s an open book. So honest and real.

This is Sky.

The same Sky I’ve come to know these last few months. And he’s standing in front of me, waiting for my response. Waiting for a hug.

“You’ve seen the physicality of hockey, right? We’re all up in each other’s space all the time. Plus, you’re Sky. Get over here, man.” He throws himself into my open arms and burrows his head under my chin.

He’s enveloped in my arms. Shorter than me by about four to five inches.

Oh fuck, he’s perfect. What I lovingly refer to as fun-sized. Smaller than me, which I’m a sucker for, but built.

He fits perfectly. A warm, solid weight against my chest. His scent washes over me. Like caramel and cinnamon and a touch of something spicier. Deliciously intoxicating.

My head feels floaty, and I’m acutely aware of every square inch our bodies are connecting. My dick twitches in my pants. The remaining adrenaline from the game wants an outlet, and my body is confused. Expecting some action.

Awkward.

You don’t get a boner hugging friends, Spence. Zero naked fun will be had with Sky. Knock it off.

Clearing my throat, I pull away and search for Addy. Kyle is gone. Addy is next to Leigh. They’re both smiling at us like proud parents.

“Aww, look at them. They’re so cute!” This is from Leigh.

“Aren’t they?” Addy tosses in her two cents. Well, I guess we’re not needed for introductions. Those two seem like fast

friends.

“Oh my god, both of you shut up!” Sky admonishes.

A smirk grows on Leigh’s face. “Would you look at that? Just that quick, we’re besties. Now, onto more important matters. Where are we eating? I’m fucking starving.”

Skylar

This can't be my life right now. Cayden is going to lose his mind when I tell him. Addy and I are currently at Break Shot, a sports bar ten minutes from the RCA. Casually sitting across from some of the best Bull Sharks players. It does not compute. Landon Spencer and Lucas Leighton are just regular guys, especially Landon, but it's taking a minute for my brain to catch up.

The waitress drops off our beers, and rushes off to help another table. We ordered loaded tots and a metric shit ton of wings. Tentatively, I take a small sip of my ice-cold beer, bleh. Definitely not delicious and refreshing.

Clearing my throat, I ask one of the questions currently at the forefront of my mind. "In all the years I've been coming to your games, I've never been here before. And I've driven past it countless times. Do you guys come in here a lot?"

Landon is taking a drink from his glass, so Luc answers, "Yeah, not as often as we used to, but at least twice a month, I'd say. Some nights, you'll catch the whole team in here."

“Yeah, we all love it here. Everyone is used to us, so we don’t get waylaid every time we come in. And the food and vibes are good,” Landon adds.

“Seriously. There are so many missed opportunities where we could have run into each other.” My head shakes. So, so many times, I’ve eyed this place and just kept going. “I’m kicking myself, y’know?”

“There’s no sense looking back. Look at us now.”

“Yes. This calls for a toast. To old friends and new, and icy cold brew,” Luc announces. “And the first of many get-togethers.”

“Cheers to that!” Our glasses clink together, joining the cacophony of sounds.

Addy nods. “This place seems pretty awesome, though. I’m glad you guys have a safe space. I imagine the attention can get overwhelming.”

“I don’t mind the attention; it comes with the territory, but-”

Luc is interrupted by Landon’s injection. “But he’s an attention whore.”

“Hey, I resent that remark.” His mock protest quickly dissolves into a good-natured laugh. “But, I’m being serious here. I get stopped all the time. A lot of our fans are locals, and I run into them constantly. An autograph, a photograph, and a quick chat, and I’m on my way. I love that shit. I love that something so small for me can make their entire day brighter.” He glances at each of us in turn, then a shit-eating grin appears. “I say that in the most humble, least conceited way possible.”

Luc deflects the napkin Landon tosses at him.

“What about you, boo?” I take another small sip of beer. Meh. Maybe the flavor will improve when I’m swallowing it down with wings. Our eyes lock, and I pray it’s not obvious that a shiver works its way down my spine at the contact.

His eyes are this gorgeous green. Depending on the lighting, I've noticed they range between hunter, moss, and emerald. I'd kill to see those eyes sparkling like jewels in the sun.

You save lives for a living, Sky, stop thinking about killing people. It's gotta be bad karma or something.

"You hate it, huh?" he asks.

My brows scrunch in confusion. "Um, what?"

He juts his chin in the direction of my beer. "Your beer."

"Oh, um, nope, not at all. It's so yummy. Mmm, beer." The smile on my face is not convincing.

He eyes me in disbelief and flags down our server. "Can we get a watermelon margarita on the rocks, with sugar on the rim?"

Ohmigod, did he really just do that?

"Of course. Give me a few minutes to have them mix it up at the bar and I'll bring it right over." She bustles away.

He totally just did that.

"You didn't have to do that."

"Um, yeah, I did. You weren't enjoying your drink, and now you will. Problem solved."

Luc pats Landon's shoulder. "Daddy Spence over here. Taking care of his people. Get used to it, Sky."

Daddy Spence is not fucking sexy, Sky. What the fuck?

My margarita appears in front of me, and I snatch it up like the life-saving refreshment it is, gratefully taking a huge gulp to cool me down. I moan at the delicious flavor.

Landon is smirking at me when I look up at him. My cheeks heat, and I thank all the gods for my complexion. My blush shouldn't be too noticeable. Shit. I do *not* blush.

But that smirk on those lips. I am melting inside. This should not be happening. He's my friend.

As I watch, he reaches across and steals my beer. He looks at our friends and asks, “Split this with me?”

“Fill her up.” Addy holds her cup up for her portion of swill. Cough, I mean beer. My thoughts scatter as my eyes trace Landon’s forearm and hand while he divides the rest of my beer between their cups. Colorful swirls of ink reach one wrist. *My God the forearms on this man are delish. I want to bite him to see if he tastes as good as he looks. Fucking. Hell.*

What were we talking about?

Shaking my head to clear away the thoughts that keep worming their way in, I redirect the conversation back to the topic at hand. “So, is it really difficult for you on a day-to-day basis, Landon? Do you get mobbed by crazy fans?”

“Not so much in the off season, but it gets worse the closer we get to the playoffs. The further you make it, the more attention from diehard and bandwagon fans alike. It gets overwhelming having to be ‘on’ all the time. But I love it.”

Addy grimaces. “To me, that sounds like torture. In a way, it’s your version of a customer service voice. We all have one. I use mine when I’m showing listings, but those are usually scheduled, and I have time to mentally prepare myself. It’s different for you. You just always have to be ready.”

“That’s a fact, but it’s very easy to turn me on.” Luc’s statement is quickly followed by more laughter. He’s an idiot. I love it here.

“What’s it like traveling so much? On the way to the arena, Sky was telling me you have a few away games coming up. Do you get to sightsee while you’re on the road?”

“Abort, Addy, abort,” I whisper-yell dramatically at her, while eying Landon.

Her eyes bounce around to each of us, bun of messy curls bobbing wildly. “What did I miss?”

He sighs. “It’s okay, Sky, I can talk about it. I’m aerophobic.” At her blank look, he continues. “Scared of flying. It’s pretty severe, which makes traveling with the team

hell. But I push through. We have three flights in five days this coming week. I can't wait." He's gone a little pale.

Luc wraps his arm around Landon's shoulders and jiggles him. "He's got a fantastic support system, though. He'll be alright."

"Oh, wait, don't tell me. It's you?"

"Of course it is, Addy dear. Look at us. We're pretty much besties now. You know me so well already."

"You're so full of shit, I can't even."

He points at her. "You see? You're just proving my point."

Laughter fills the table and some of the tension lightens. Our food is delivered, and we dig in. There're a few platters with different flavors of wings. Sweet Thai chili sounds delicious. I serve myself a few, along with a healthy serving of tots.

Addy's voice is gentle this time. "Do you mind if I ask if there was something that caused your aerophobia?"

Shaking his head, he answers, "Naw, I don't mind. It's kind of ridiculous, honestly."

"Wait, can I tell this story? I can tell it so much better than you."

"What? No. Fuck off, Leigh."

He laughs and gestures at Landon. "Well, get on with it then. But don't expect me to keep quiet."

"Why would I expect that? You never shut your mouth."

"You wound me." Hand to his chest and a mock pout on his face, he leans back in his chair.

"A little back story to start, in case you don't know. My mom had me when she was fifteen. If you ask her, she'll tell you she didn't miss out on what was left of her childhood when she had me, but she definitely did."

"Holy shit. I'd basically have a whole ass ten-year-old if I'd had a child at fifteen. Goodness. What a woman. That

could not be me.” Her expression is full of genuine awe.

“Right? Annie is the greatest,” Luc adds.

Nodding, Landon agrees. “She really is. Anyway, when I was growing up, it was our thing to watch scary movies from her childhood once or twice a month. Our schedules were chaotic, but we found time.”

Addy covers her eyes, obviously sensing where this is going. “Oh no.” I already know this story, so I sit back and enjoy watching the emotions play across his face. His eyes are slightly unfocused at the memory. “Don’t tell me you watched Final Destination.”

“We watched Final Destination.” She visibly cringes at his words.

“Oh my god, Landon! No! That would do it. I didn’t step foot on a plane until I was twenty, and that scene played in my head quite a few times during takeoff. It definitely filled me with nerves that first time. Now, though, it doesn’t even bother me.”

“Lucky. I can’t seem to shut it off. My head knows it’s irrational, but I can’t fight it. If not for me Leigh would sleep through every flight. He babysits me instead.”

“And that brings us to storytime. Thanks for the perfect segue, bro. Does Sky know this part?”

Landon’s cheeks pinken, and he looks at the ceiling, shaking his head. Probably begging God for mercy. If Luc’s smirk is anything to go by, this story is going to be a doozy. “No, but he’s about to, you fucker.”

“Yup. Spence was drafted to the Bull Sharks almost five years ago. As one of the younger guys on the team, I took him under my wing. Had him sit by me on the airplane for our first away game. He decided to keep his fears to himself, and I learned about them the hard way.”

He pauses to glance at Landon and laugh. Addy and I are watching them with rapt attention. Landon seems to be hovering between embarrassment and amusement.

“Flight attendants prepare us for takeoff. I’m chill, leaning back in my seat, ready to nap, when I hear this guy wheezing and practically hyperventilating next to me. I look over and he’s gone pale. No hint of color in his face. Sweat trickling down his forehead. Terror in his eyes.”

Addy has paused eating, her arms folded and resting on the table. She’s leaning toward them. I am, too. “Then what happened?” she asks before I can.

“This fucker asked me, “You good, bro?” and I said, “Dude, have you *seen* Final Destination before? We are going to die.” It was quite dramatic.”

“Stop it right now. Really?” I ask, hand covering my mouth, unsuccessfully stifling a laugh.

“Really, really.” Those fucking gorgeous greens meet my hazels and he smiles sheepishly. My laugh can’t be contained.

“This is when I swooped in to save the day.”

“Of course you did. Tell us more, Luc.” She flutters her eyes at him and he winks.

“This was the first of many times I’ve had to distract him. His breathing was too shallow. He was way too close to a panic attack.”

Landon points at Luc with his thumb. “This genius kept talking about the movie. How he can’t drive behind tractor trailers with pipes or anything that looks like a log because he wouldn’t want to be skewered.”

A gasp leaves my mouth. “He didn’t!” I look over at Luc. “You didn’t!”

He nods unrepentantly. “Talk about all the other scary parts? I sure did. Then I asked him what he thought of Devon Sawa.”

Amusement fills me as understanding blooms.

Together, Landon and I say, “Devon Sawa is fucking hot.”

“Facts,” Addy chimes in.

“Fun fact, Devon Sawa was the first man I was ever attracted to,” Landon announces.

“Aww, the moment you became a baby bi.” My chin propped on my fists, elbows on the table, I bat my eyes at him.

A laugh rushes out of him. “Yeah, that. And of course, it wasn’t awkward at all. I didn’t have to hide a boner from my mom or anything. I almost died from the struggle and the terror of that damn movie combined.”

“You poor thing.”

“Tell me about it.”

“*Anyways,*” Luc interrupts, “you’re stealing my thunder. Back to story time. That question was the icebreaker we needed. It got him out of his head and we talked the whole time. My objective was successful. Calm the rookie and let him know he’s safe with me. I didn’t care if he fucked women or men or both of them at the same time. He loves who he loves. His talent on the ice, and who he is as a person, is all I needed to know. His skills on the ice were blatantly obvious. I needed to dig deeper.”

“There he goes using his big words again.” He’s teasing, but there’s an edge. Possibly hinting at some discomfort in this particular conversation.

If looks could kill, Landon would be in trouble right now. “I’m being serious, Spence. The team knew he was bi when they signed him. Management had a sit-down with us to make sure we knew not to be assholes. Most of the guys were cool. Spencer’s reputation on the ice superseded any misgivings any of the guys may have had about his sexuality. Some kept their distance in the showers, but who wants to perv on those ugly fuckers anyway?” I raise my hand, because, duh, hockey players are hot. He cracks a smile, but continues, “But nobody outright treated him shitty. Right, bro?”

“It’s not natural when you’re this serious, Leigh, you’re making my skin crawl. I’m lucky to be on such an inclusive team. I had more trouble in college, but after I explained that if they were attractive, it was similar to appreciating a badass

car. At least in my case. It looks awesome. Maybe a little sexy, but that doesn't mean I want to fuck it."

Everyone, Luc especially cracks up at this. "Holy shit, Spence. What a visual. My imagination is too vivid for that."

"Anyway. He's right. None of the guys have ever outright treated me differently because I'm bi. Ass slaps still happen in the locker room as much as on the ice. Nobody thinks twice. Maybe it's because I've never hidden it? I'm not sure, but I know other queer players who haven't been as lucky."

Oh. My. God.

"Speaking of! Do you remember the first time Addy came over while we were gaming?" Covering my face with my hands, I peek through my fingers at Landon Spencer. The first openly bisexual player in the NHL. Is there a hole that can swallow me up? "I questioned you so hard about if you were homophobic. I'm such an asshole. You must've thought I was such an idiot. Meanwhile, you're literally a queer icon." My hand flails around in his direction.

Their laughter surrounds me. Mostly Addy, since she most assuredly remembers what happened.

"I understood where you were coming from. It was a legitimate concern at the time."

Luc says, "Oh, I need to hear this story."

Addy takes the lead, while Landon and I fill in details from our perspectives. I have to admit, it's funny now, but I still remember the icy fingers of dread that filled me. Expecting him to drop me the second he found out I'm gay. Been there, done that.

Thankfully, that didn't happen.

The conversation flows easily throughout the rest of the meal. You'd think we'd all been friends for years with how well we mesh. A perma-smile is on my face. My cheeks hurt.

Time starts creeping up on us. It's pretty late, and I still have to take Addy home unless she decides to crash at my place.

“It pains me to say this, but we should get going. I have to chauffeur this woman home.”

“Yes, please. I have a showing tomorrow at noon. I still have a few things to prepare in the morning. But we have to do this again.”

“For sure.” Luc smiles.

When the bill comes, Addy and I insist on splitting it, but Landon outright refuses. The only reason I don’t fight over it is because he concedes with, “you can pay next time.”

We’ve made it outside and are quietly chatting in front of the restaurant. During the next lull, I open my mouth because I just can’t miss this opportunity to drop a gem. “Listen, I’m seriously chill, but part of my brain is lowkey screaming, ‘holy shit, that’s Luc Leighton and that’s Landon freaking Spencer.’ One of the best D-men around-”

Landon’s eyes twinkle as he abruptly interrupts me. “Before you even say it, I’ll beat you to it, because I’m sure I know exactly where you’re going with this. I’ve heard it all. It’s kind of poetic that I’m a D-man who likes the D. Am I right?”

“Bah! Oh my god! Perfection! You get me!” I’m full-body laughing now. “It’s true, though.”

“Totally a happy accident.”

“Pure cosmic alignment. Alrighty, boys. We must go, but before we do, can we get a quick selfie? This night must be frozen in time.”

“Yeah, man, for sure,” Luc answers.

We all scrunch together, my arm extended in front of me. I can’t quite get the angle right. Addy giggles at my struggle. “Shut up. It’s not my fault these guys are too tall.”

My phone is snagged from my unsuspecting fingers. “I got it,” Landon tells me.

Damn, I love it when he takes charge. He can take charge of me any way he wants. Preferably, with a lot less clothes.

My wayward thoughts are interrupted by Landon's soft order. "Everyone smile." He presses the shutter button a few times. Huddling closer together over my phone, I scroll through the images.

"Aww, you guys! Look at us." The smile on my face is so huge it's hurting my face. What a night.

Addy reaches for my phone. "Gimme. You need a pic by yourself with Landon."

Yesss, that would be perfection. Does he want one, though? I'm not one to cower or shy away, but I am definitely feeling shy when I meet his eyes and ask, "Would that be okay?"

He plucks my phone out of my hand yet again and passes it to Addy. This guy is going to make me spontaneously combust, I swear. Or cum in my pants. It's a toss up.

Luc smirks at us from behind Addy's shoulder. She's not quite smirking, but she's definitely smiling. We're such a happy bunch.

"Alright, darlings, all done. I got some good ones. Now, we need to get going."

When I reach for my phone, she pulls it out of range. "Nope. You can look later."

"Ugh, fine. But I won't forget you were being mean to me," I sass.

She waves me away with a roll of her eyes. "Cry me a river. Now let's go before I turn into a pumpkin."

"Alright, I'm being forced to leave with this crazy lady, against my will, let the record show. Now, kiss kiss." I gesture for Addy to say her goodbyes first. Addy hugs them and kisses their cheeks. Luc gives me a bro hug that melts me. *Aww, I've been accepted into their tribe.* In my mind, I wipe away an imaginary tear. My eyes meet Landon's, and he opens his arms for me, repeating his actions from earlier.

"C'mere."

Not one to miss an opportunity to press myself against his perfection, I hurry over.

“It was so great to meet you after all this time,” I say against his collarbone, where my face is currently nuzzled in. His scent fills my nose, and I swear my mouth waters. He smells divine. Edible. I’d bite that collarbone right now if I could get away with it.

My God, this man. I don’t want to let go. He’s so solid and warm. Comforting.

A throat clears, and I peel myself away from him. My lips curl in a gentle smile, and I squeeze his hand. “It’s insane how we live so freaking close to each other. I’m honestly a bit mind-blown by everything, but so, so happy we connected.”

Landon’s gaze is on our hands, fingers curled together. He flicks those gorgeous green eyes up to mine, then gently squeezes my hand. “Me, too, Sky. Send me those pictures when you get home and are settled. Talk soon. Drive safe.”

Landon

The next morning, I'm working my way through a few miscellaneous household tasks. We leave for Montreal tomorrow. As usual, my bag will be packed a day early. It's a good thing that laundry and packing require minimal brain cells since my thoughts are otherwise occupied. Last night replays on a loop in my mind.

Over and over again. It's so surreal. Meeting him in person. There's no denying it now. Our digital connection wasn't a fluke.

Sky's laugh has always tickled me and made me smile. But experiencing it in person? It was truly special. He laughs with his whole body. He's the type of person whose smile and laugh are contagious. They make you want to join in on the joke. It's not just me. Leigh was smiling and laughing just as much as Addy and I were.

It's a struggle not to focus on his looks. Practically an impossibility. He was mesmerizing. If I allow myself to examine my thoughts and my reaction to him, it's obvious I'm attracted to him. Like, *oh, shit, I'm-in-trouble* level attraction.

My thoughts are interrupted when my phone vibrates in my pocket. It's Mom. I answer her on speaker so my hands are free to continue packing.

"Hey, Mom, how are you?"

Her voice is warm and happy, her smile audible. "Hi, honey, I'm good. That was a great game last night. Sorry, I couldn't stay."

"It's alright. I'm just glad you were able to be there."

"Hmm, you're sounding so much better than the last time we spoke. What happened?"

I scoff into the phone, pretending I have no clue what she's talking about. "Quit it. I can't possibly sound any different."

"Landon Spencer! Don't try to bullshit your way out of this. Resistance is futile."

She's a mess. I'm also just giving her shit. It's fun. "You're such a nerd, Mom."

"Mhm, we know this. Now, out with it, son."

My inhale is shakier than it should be, considering how level and calm I feel. "Sky was at the game last night."

Her screech echoes in my room, and I'm so grateful she's on speakerphone and not directly mutilating my eardrum. "No way! Landon! You didn't tell me. Does he live here? How did this happen? Did you meet him? How is he? Is he as nice in person as he is over the game chat thingy?"

My laughter is uncontrollable. "Game chat thingy? Jeez, Mom." She's rapid-firing questions at me like I have any hope in hell of answering them.

"Shut up. It's not funny. Oh my God. Was he in the Bull Sharks box last night and I missed noticing a new face? Did I miss my chance to meet your new friend?"

"Ew, you make it sound like we're children. What would you like me to answer first?"

"You're my child, smartass. Now, start anywhere. Tell me everything," she demands.

“Yes, he lives here and yes we met.” Her gasp is audible over the line, but she refrains from interrupting. “We were playing *Call of Duty* a few days ago, and he mentioned Quench. The dots connected and we set it up to meet at a game. It was a bit tricky since I still hadn’t told him my identity.” I relay the full story to her, explaining how we exchanged texts during the game, ending with Sky and Addy joining us for dinner at Break Shot after the game.

“Oh my goodness. You should have told me, but I know how you get lost in that head of yours sometimes.”

“I was nervous, and talking about it would have made it so much worse. I didn’t even tell Leigh until we were finishing warmups.”

“Oh, honey. I understand. How was dinner?”

I’m smiling again. “It was great. Sky and Addy are great.”

“Mhm.” Her tone is knowing. And I don’t like it.

“Stop it. Don’t do that.”

“I’m not doing anything.”

“Yes, you are. And stop it.”

“You’re protesting a lot here. You’re not making a good case for yourself.”

I scrub my hands over my face, before dragging them into my hair. I squeeze my head in an effort to squash the thoughts she’s stirring up. Thoughts I told myself not too long ago that I wouldn’t think, “Seriously, Mom. Nothing is going to happen. We’re just friends.”

“Okay.” Her tone is dripping with disbelief. She’s placating me.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake.”

“What? I agreed with you!” She laughs as she says it.

“Sure, you did.”

“Alright, I’ll stop. You get my point and that’s all I wanted. Now, are you all packed and ready for Montreal?”

“I’m packing right now, Mother.” She laughs like I knew she would.

Her words, but mostly what she didn’t say, lingers in my brain long after we disconnect. Fuck, did she ever make her point.

I’m determined to prove her wrong, though.

Skylar

My stomach flutters with nervous excitement as I park outside Toast. It's been a week since I officially met Landon, but today will be our first solo get-together. We're meeting for brunch at my favorite spot near the beach. It's something low-key and casual, which is nice.

My phone vibrates as I'm exiting my car.

LTB: When you get here, come to the right. I'm at a table near the back.

I snort. I purposely arrived a few minutes early to lessen our wait time, and this guy already has a table? How?

Making my way inside, I bypass the clusters of patrons waiting to be seated, and follow his instructions. My eyes land on him as soon as I turn the corner. His back is to me, but he's easily recognizable.

Butterflies take flight in my stomach. It's not like this is a date. There's no reason to be nervous. It's gotta be the hunger pains, that's all. He's wearing a long-sleeve shirt that hugs his

back muscles just right. The sleeves are pushed up, exposing veiny forearms. *Delicious.*

Nope, don't go there, Sky.

Placing my hand on his shoulder, I lean down to press a quick kiss to his cheek. “Hey, you. How’d you manage this?” His scent teases me briefly before I round the table and settle across from him.

His teeth flash at me when he smirks. “What?”

“Don’t play coy. You’re already seated, and the wait is usually at least thirty minutes on a Saturday. There’s no way you got here that much earlier than I did just to snag a table.”

He laughs. “You’re right. The hostess recognized me and offered to seat me as quickly as possible. I couldn’t refuse her kind offer.”

“Oooh, perks. I’m here for it.”

Landon smiles then reaches for a glass of water on the table. As he drinks, my gaze is drawn to his Adam’s Apple bobbing with each swallow. My mouth is suddenly a desert as my thoughts try to veer into naughty territory. Dragging my eyes away, they land on another glass of water on the table. I grab it like a lifeline, sipping to quench my sudden excessive thirst.

“So, have you had a chance to look over the menu?”

He shakes his head. “Not just yet. I figured I’d wait for you.”

Be still my heart. Such a gentleman. It's not a date, Sky.

“Aww, thanks, boo.” I lift my menu with a flourish and clear my throat. “Now, what are you in the mood for?” A beat of silence follows, then I lift my eyes to his. Those green orbs seem to burn with fire, then he blinks, and it’s gone.

“What do you recommend?”

“I’m definitely getting a peach bellini to sip on. It’s my fave. I find mimosas too acidic.”

He nods, considering. “Yeah, I’m not a fan of mimosas. I was thinking of sticking with water. I’ve never had a bellini, though.”

Bobbing my eyebrows playfully, I lean forward and bite my lip. “I’ll pop your cherry then. You can taste mine.”

His cheeks turn pink, and a laugh bursts forth. “You’re trouble, aren’t you?”

Oh my god, the blush kills me. So fucking cute. My smirk is nothing short of mischievous. “Maybe.”

“No ‘maybe’ about it.”

My mouth opens to respond, but I’m interrupted by our waiter. Which is probably a good thing. “Welcome. My name is Mack, and I’ll be your server today. Can I bring you something else to drink?”

“I’ll have a peach bellini, please.”

The waiter turns to Landon to ask, “Anything else for you, sir?” then makes his way off when Landon declines.

“What about food?” I ask.

“What do you recommend?”

My time to shine. “Are you in the mood to satisfy your sweet tooth or eat within your nutritional guidelines?”

His eyes close and a pained look crosses his face. “I’d love to indulge the sweet tooth, but I’ll behave.”

My naughty smirk is back in full force. “Behaving is overrated.”

His laugh causes warmth to unfurl in my gut.

“I’m getting the bananas foster French toast with bacon. It’s what I always get, because I refuse to deny my sweet tooth.”

“Fuck, that sounds good.”

My eyes flick up to meet his. The green draws me in, and I momentarily lose my train of thought. “Um.”

One brown eyebrow lifts. He doesn't say anything, just waits patiently.

I replay our last words in my head. "Oh!" My spine straightens as it all comes back to me. A small smile curls Landon's lips, but I ignore it. "If you ask nicely, I'll let you have a few bites of my French toast."

His head tips back and he groans. "Yes. Yes, please."

My elbow hits the table, and I prop my chin on my fist, eyes roving over him. "Ooh, you're so pretty when you beg."

His eyes pop wide, then he chokes on a laugh. That gorgeous blush rushes back to his cheeks and down his neck. *Yum. Fuck. No. Stop it, Sky. Reroute this train back to propriety.*

I tilt my menu toward him, pointing at the last section on the back. "These are their healthier options. Addy and I have tried most of the entrees, and I can assure you, you can't go wrong. If I have to pick, their protein power-up skillet is probably my favorite, aside from the French toast. It's packed with plenty of protein and veggies to fuel those muscles."

His smile is softer now. With a nod, he sets his menu to the side. "That's what I'll get then." His blind trust in my recommendation is gratifying. My chest feels light as warmth spreads through my body.

"Sorry for the delay, we got a little backed up on drinks." Our server places the champagne flute filled with pale peach liquid on the table near my hand. "Can I get some food started for you all?"

Landon nods. "Yes, thanks. I'll take the protein power-up skillet, and he'll have the bananas foster French toast with bacon, please."

Um, what? *Swoon.*

"Sure thing. How would you like your eggs cooked in the skillet?"

"Over-hard, please."

My hand flies to cover my mouth. It's difficult to hold back my giggle, but somehow, I choke it down. Landon looks at me, then back at Mack, handing over our menus. His eyes are twinkling with mirth.

"Really?" he asks as Mack walks away.

My giggle finally escapes. "Yes, really. I am a teenage boy at heart. You can't expect me to remain serious when you say 'hard.' It's not going to happen."

"Clearly. No wonder you and Leigh get along so well."

"He gets it. And he's kind of awesome."

A soft smile curls his lips. "Yeah, he is."

I pick up my champagne flute, which has a fresh peach slice garnishing the edge. "Okay, here we go." I hand it over to Landon. "Taste test time."

"You haven't even had any yet," he protests.

"So? I know what it tastes like. Go ahead. *Prueballo.*" I gesture at him.

My eyes are glued to his mouth as his lips touch the rim of my glass. He takes a cautious sip, followed by a bigger one. His throat works as he swallows. *Mmm.* "Oh, wow. That's actually really good. It's refreshing and light."

He hands the glass back to me. "Right? Do you want one? I can flag Mack down for you."

"That would be great, thanks." I beam at him and order his drink.

I raise my glass to my mouth to take a sip of my own, ridiculously conscious of the fact his lips were in the same spot moments ago. It's oddly intimate for something so innocent.

Toast is very busy so we're waiting a bit for our food, but the time passes easily with good company and easy conversation.

"I'm curious about something."

“Yeah?”

“I know you’re Hispanic,” he begins.

“Yep. My Cuban roots run deep.”

“Donovan isn’t a traditional Hispanic last name, right?”

“Correct.”

“Isn’t it Irish?”

“Also correct.”

He only looks at me expectantly, wordlessly asking me to fill in the blanks. Words spill out of me. “Cuba and Ireland have quite the history. It’s not very well known. You should look it up sometime. Without going too deep, Irish soldiers sought refuge in Spain during the seventeenth century. Some of those soldiers helped defend Cuba in Cuba’s Spanish military.”

“Really? That’s fascinating. I’ve never heard anything about this in history classes.”

I shrug. “I’m not surprised. It’s not part of American history. If you look at a map of Havana, Cuba, you’ll see Irish influences in street names and buildings. For me, though, my Irish roots are just a tiny bit more recent. On my father’s side, an Irish laborer was contracted from New York to help build some of Cuba’s first railroads almost two hundred years ago. He was one of many. Once the railroad was completed, many of those laborers were abandoned in Cuba, and were too poor to leave. He had no choice but to make Cuba his home. The rest is history.”

He nods. “I’ll have to look it up sometime. I love learning random historical facts.”

Our food is delivered, and the scent makes my mouth water and my stomach growl.

“Holy shit, this looks amazing,” he says, while picking up his fork.

“Wait until you taste it.”

A sinful moan reaches my ears, and I freeze with my fork halfway to my mouth. Our eyes meet as he chews and swallows, an odd tension filling the air. I refuse to acknowledge that it feels distinctly sexual, and shove the bite of French toast in my mouth.

“Mmm, here. Try my French toast.” I cut a piece and offer it to him. He leans forward and accepts the bite. Right off my fork. Zero hesitation, his lips making full contact with the utensil I just had in my own mouth.

The intimacy of feeding him strikes me in my gut, tension coiling tighter.

“Oh, wow. Damn, Sky. That’s delicious.”

I have something else that’s quite delicious for you to put in your mouth.

My voice is an odd squeak. “Isn’t it, though?” he hums in response, as he eats another bite of his food.

Change the subject, Sky. Move to safer topics.

“I bet you’re relieved you guys have a few home games coming up, huh?”

He nods. “Definitely. That reminds me. I’ve been wanting to offer you one of my family and friend tickets.”

“What?” I screech.

He laughs and nods. “I have a spare ticket. Mom uses one of my allotted two. Pops used to use the other one, but since he no longer lives in Florida, it’s mostly unused, unless one of the other guys asks for it. I’d rather you have it.”

The squeal I let out right there in the restaurant draws some attention from the other diners. Not to mention a side-eye or two, but Landon doesn’t bat an eye. Only smiles indulgently at me. Warmth fills me, knowing he accepts and embraces me for who I am. “Landon! Oh my god! Yes!”

It should be embarrassing how fast I accept his offer, but I have no shame in this case.

Hello! It’s hockey.

Who am I kidding? I have no shame in most cases.

His smile is huge. I'm so happy I could kiss him, but friends don't kiss friends.

"I'm basically a Bull Sharks season ticket holder now."

"Yeah, basically."

"Thank you so much. I'm over the moon."

His smile softens a little, his eyes tracing my face. "You're welcome, Sky."

Skylar

The last few weeks flew by. A few days ago, I went to the Bull Sharks game against Ottawa. Solo this time, but in no way was I actually alone. I'm a social creature to begin with, and in that arena, I was in my element. Surrounded by other fans. Talking and cheering. Lots of cheering. Our boys played well and won.

Landon got an assist in the second period. It was a beautiful play that made me scream like a banshee. A pass of the puck to LeBlanc, a center, then a badass wrister right over their goalie's shoulder and into the net. He totally made eye contact with me afterwards, a wide smile on his face.

We didn't hang out after the game, but we did hop on *Call of Duty* for about an hour.

My schedule hasn't allowed me to go to more games than that just yet. I would've given my left nut to see them play Boston next, but it wasn't possible. They lost that game in overtime five to four. One point added to their standings is better than none, though. Another step closer to the playoffs.

I've been reviewing their upcoming games, and after All-Stars week, I'll be able to make it to two Thursday games in a row. Excited is an understatement. If I could will time to move faster, I would.

My life feels like it's taken such a turn. It's difficult to wrap my head around everything. I'm friends with Landon Spencer of the Florida Bull Sharks. And Lucas Leighton, too.

How? I pinch myself to see if I'm dreaming, which probably isn't too safe while driving, but the sharp sting assures me this is reality.

I love it here.

Fingers crossed and prayers up to the hockey gods that they'll beat the New York Empires tonight. They're pretty evenly matched based on rank, but I have faith in our boys. New York actually has two NHL teams. They'll be playing the Tycoons at home within the next few weeks.

My wandering thoughts are brought to a screeching halt when a car speeds past me and cuts me off. It narrowly avoids clipping my front bumper. My blood pressure spikes along with my heart rate. "Gahh! *Mojón*. Stupid bastard, you're going to get someone killed. Where's a cop when you need one?"

I'm driving five miles per hour over the speed limit as it is, but that's not fast enough to satisfy these people. Ugh. Reckless drivers piss me off. Yes, I'm technically speeding, but I'm not weaving in and out of traffic like a maniac. After thoroughly checking my mirrors to ensure no other cars are bearing down on me, I slowly start to relax. My body sinks back into my seat as the tension seeps away.

I'm currently driving up to Drop Zone Palm Beach. It's about an hour or so north. Even though there are closer centers, it's my preferred spot, with its spectacular view of Lake Okeechobee. Aside from their center near Key West.

If I wanted to, I could've driven down there for a few days. I should have. It would've been so easy to head straight down after getting off work a few hours ago. It's only a three-hour

drive. But my goal is to be home in time to watch Landon's game live. He seems to enjoy seeing my play-by-play text reactions afterwards. It's my new habit. If I'm not working, I'm watching live and texting him. It makes me feel closer to him, when I can't show my support in person.

That's a perfectly normal friend behavior. Nothing weird here.

I'll just ignore the fact I could easily watch his game if I were in the Keys, too.

This week, for the first time in forever, the weather has been perfect for skydiving. No weather holds today. It's no happy coincidence I'll be seeing Andrew at Drop Zone. I'd texted him to see if he'd be there. My plan is to put some feelers out and get his opinion on the wedding planning, and see when he and Cayden can come by for dinner. Cayden still hasn't gotten back to me on that, even though we have been texting a bit more than usual.

It feels like he's avoiding it, which I hate. Like, why? Just come over and let me feed you, bitch.

Watching him stuff down his emotions and try to convince himself he's on board with Andrew's plan for the wedding? There's been little things here and there that have made me itchy, but this one with the wedding is the worst.

I mean, everyone compromises over which restaurant to eat at for dinner at one point or another. That's not a big deal. But when it becomes a habit? Where Cayden would previously exuberantly express a craving for ribs or a juicy burger, he now quietly picks a place Andrew would love instead. Like a sushi spot. The man doesn't eat seafood!

Am I overreacting? Maybe. But I don't think so. This is just one example. He's shoving himself into an Andrew-shaped box and I want to unpack him so bad.

Maybe Cayden doesn't know how to retain his sense of self? Andrew is his first serious relationship after all.

He's perfect as he is and losing any piece of himself over anyone is a tragedy I refuse to allow. I mean, I'm honestly

trying my best not to meddle. The last thing I want to do is harm my friendship with either man, but I can't quite force myself to let it go.

This is me aiming for a happy medium.

Essentially, I'll be killing three birds with one stone, not just two.

That's a win.

The DZ is located off the highway on a huge field of well-manicured grass. I've been told it's a lot of work mowing the entire property. It's a necessity, though. It's a potential safety hazard if the landing area gets overgrown.

The hangar itself is one of the largest I've been in. All three of their planes fit comfortably inside. They have two Cessna 182s for smaller groups, and one Cessna Caravan for larger groups. It's a long, rectangular steel building, with three oversized hangar doors spanning from the middle of the building to the far left. The doors are all open; they're vertical bifold so they open up and out. On the right side, there's a set of glass double doors and floor-to-ceiling windows for patrons to watch the sky. It's pretty impressive.

After I park my black Midnight Edition Equinox in the side lot, I grab my gear from the back, then head inside through the double doors.

There's a group gathered near the counter. Based on the chaotic buzz of chatter, I label them as first timers. I wave hello to Winston, who appears to be busy with their paperwork. He sends a chin lift my way and shouts over the noise, "Andrew's getting his rig sorted in the packing area."

"Thanks, Winnie," I answer back just as loud, then salute him on my way through another set of double doors leading into the hangar. His scoff clearly reaches my ears as I exit the lobby with a smile on my face. He just *loves* it when I call him Winnie. It's his favorite nickname ever.

There are a few other guys in the packing area, but I spot Andrew pretty quick. His hair is a short mass of unruly bleached blonde curls, but natural black roots are quite visible.

“Andrew! Hiiiiii.” He briefly pauses folding up his parachute to glance up at me. A genuine smile takes over his face, and I can’t help but return it. God, I love this place. Euphoria is so close, I can practically taste it.

“Hey, Sky, glad you made it out.”

“Ohmigod, same. It’s been way too long, and I can’t wait to get out there. It’s busy in there, though. Do you need to assist, or are you good to take a few solo jumps?”

“We may have to alternate between the 182 and the Caravan. We have a few more groups booked, so I’m sure they’ll need me for a tandem or two,” he replies.

Andrew is one of the instructors here. Not only is it his job to teach newbies everything they need to know to safely jump, but he also gets to jump with them. He’s told me in past conversations that he averages between five to fifteen tandems a day. He’s living the adrenaline junkie’s dream.

If all goes well, I should get three solid jumps in. I cannot wait.

“Cool, cool. Sounds good to me. I’d offer to jump in and help, pun intended, but I know I’m too keyed up to have someone else strapped to my chest. It’s highly unlikely I’ll have the patience to help walk them through their nerves or any of that good stuff. I’m liable to snap someone’s head off if they delay my jump. Honestly.”

He laughs, but doesn’t deny it. My adrenaline withdrawals have gotten ugly in the past.

“Looks like we can manage a quick drop in the 182 and a repack before they’ll need me in the Caravan. How’s your rig?”

“Everything looked good yesterday, but I need another thorough check before I gear up.”

“Good man. Can never be too careful.”

I agree. Just because I’m an adrenaline junkie, doesn’t mean I’m reckless or have a death wish. Quite the opposite, actually. Living life fully is the aim.

And in order to do that, I shift my full focus onto my rig check routine. Main handle, cutaway handle, reserve handle, main pin, reserve pin, AAD all look good. The automatic activation device is vital in the event something goes wrong, and I don't, or can't, deploy my reserve canopy.

Once we're sorted, we make our way over to the 182. It feels like my insides are vibrating. My pulse is faster and I'm feeling energized. Buzzing with excitement.

Landon would shit himself if he knew what I was up to. Gasp. Best idea ever. I'll take some selfies to send to him later. With a trigger warning, of course, because I'm not insensitive to his phobia. But I want to share my joy with him. It's a need. Pausing next to the small plane, I take a selfie.

Our pilot, Gary, reaches for my phone. "Gimme. Let me get a better one, Sky."

He waits for me to pose then snaps the photo. Admittedly, his is better than mine. I can't wait to send it to Landon. I won't send them until much later on, though, just in case his anxiety is triggered. He has a game to focus on.

Andrew and I climb into the back of the plane and get settled on the floor. There aren't any seats back here, since it's been modified for the express purposes of being a jump plane. But space is limited. You can't stand back here. Just sit or crouch.

Gary is in the cockpit running through preflight protocol. I shove my phone into the zippered pocket of my fitted athletic joggers. Once we hit altitude, I'll take it out again for some more pictures.

During takeoff, I try to put myself in Landon's shoes. Closing my eyes, I try to imagine the terror and panic he would be feeling if he were here. It's almost impossible to fathom. I could almost crawl out of my skin with the excitement coursing through me. If I was standing up, I'd definitely be pacing right now. My mouth is doing the pacing for me. I'm word-vomiting a mile a minute. Nonsensical shit.

A hand on my thigh shuts me right up and draws my attention to the fact I'm jiggling my legs around like an antsy toddler.

What the fuck? His hand is a little higher than appropriate, in my opinion.

He's never touched me like this before. "Excited, huh?" he asks with an odd huskiness in his tone, his eyes meeting mine.

"You bet. I can't sit still. I feel like I could run laps right now."

He laughs and leans back a little, releasing my leg. "You and me both. I'll never get tired of this feeling. We're alike in that way. It's nice to have someone who understands."

I smile and nod at him, brushing away the unease his touch and phrasing caused. *See, Sky? Chill with the dramatics. He wasn't being weird, just sharing the excitement with a friend who gets it. I'm obviously being oversensitive and reading too much into nothing. Making a mountain out of a molehill. He is my friend. It's fine.*

Projecting my voice, I draw Gary into a conversation about the weather. Andrew joins, and luckily he keeps his hands to himself this time. We talk about how gorgeous the weather is, and how awful it's been. Gary and Andrew lament over the "massive slump in business" it caused. Twenty minutes *fly* by with no more incidents and Gary informs us we've reached our target altitude of 10,000 feet.

Andrew scoots over and kneels to open the door. Cold wind rushes in. It's close to forty degrees colder up here than on the ground. It's fucking freezing. Jesus.

A shiver makes its way down my spine, and my heartbeat spikes. Almost time. *Fuck yes.* Anticipation rises. That first leap is so satisfying, it's hard to put into words. It quiets all the noise in my head.

Pulling out my phone, I hold it out to Andrew. "Can you take some pictures of me real quick? Before we jump."

"Sure. If you're posting them, can you tag us?" His question draws a smirk out of me. It's a running joke that I

have more followers than they do. Turning my nose up and away from him, I pretend to think it over a moment before finally meeting his eyes.

“Negative, Ghost Rider.” He laughs, as I hoped he would; he knows I’m full of shit. He doesn’t even have to ask at this point. I’ll always tag the DZ when I post content. These pictures are primarily for Landon, but a few others will make it onto my feed. “You know I got you, boo. Now, make sure you get my good side.” I place my hand on my cheek and smile while fluttering my eyes at him. Instant regret. I had forgotten the awkwardness from earlier, but it comes screaming back with his next comment.

“You know you don’t have a bad side.” He leans in close and snaps a selfie of us. Pause. *That* tone is back. That definitely wasn’t him being just friendly. “Now smile for the camera,” he orders, snapping another picture. I’m still staring at him in bafflement as he gestures for me to pose.

I’m frozen. Confusion must be evident on my face. And honestly, I’m sure those pictures are going to be extra flattering, with my face showing all kinds of *what-the-fuck*. Because what the actual fuck was that?

I’ve entered an alternate dimension. Or he’s been body snatched. He’s totally eyeing me now. This cannot be reality. He can’t be.

Abort.

Discomfort tenses my limbs, and I shake my arms out to rid myself of it as much as possible.

Because this? This is not what we’re doing.

Moving right along, I’ll just act like he didn’t cross a line. If I ignore it, we can move past it. He’ll take the hint, right?

Moving forward, and distinctly away from him, I grab onto the strut above my head in the doorway, and place my foot onto the step outside.

My fight-or-flight instinct is triggered, and the temptation to toss myself into the ether is high.

But first, pictures for Landon.

Tossing up the shaka sign with my free hand, I wink and stick my tongue out. This one is definitely for him. I pose a few more times for social media.

Andrew nods at me, signaling he got the pictures. I scoot back inside to take one final selfie and secure my phone.

“If you’re done with your photo shoot, get the fuck outta my plane,” Gary shouts back at us. The plane is small, but the rush of the wind is loud.

“Aye, aye, captain.” He can’t quite see, but I send a mock salute toward him anyway. Turning to Andrew, I see he’s still watching me. “All systems go, boss?” *Just a little longer. Keep playing clueless, Sky, and it’ll be over soon.*

“Yeah, Sky, all systems go.” *Ew.* That tone again. Oh, hell naw.

Scooting forward, I again grab the overhead strut and stand on the step just outside the door. I rock my body forward and backward to gain some momentum, then throw myself into a front flip.

Fucking finally.

You know that feeling you get when you feel like you’re falling? Like you’re on a rollercoaster and your stomach drops? That is not what happens here. Quite the opposite.

The drag from the wind immediately catches me like an old friend welcoming me home. My mind goes blank. All of my senses seem heightened, enhanced. The blue of the sky and the color of the grass way down below rush up to meet me.

Lake Okeechobee legit looks like an ocean from up here. It’s huge, which makes me feel like this teeny tiny piece of the great big world. It’s a humbling experience. Everything is so vivid and sharp, even through the lenses of my protective goggles. Because who would want their contact lenses to be aggressively dehydrated during a freefall toward earth?

My blood is rushing through my veins. The sound thumps rhythmically in my eardrums, palpable, but not quite audible

over the rushing wind. That wind is roughly tugging at the strands of hair that have escaped from my helmet. Loose ends tickle around my forehead. I'm numb to the cold, practically sweating from the rush.

This is nirvana. I am weightless, gliding through the air. I'm practically Thor. Or maybe Iron Man is more accurate, since I too need a suit to fly. Giggling, I extend my arms back, and slightly away from my body, in a classic pose. Yep. I am Iron Man. Take that, RDJ.

This feeling rivals an orgasm. I could live on this high forever. Adjusting my position, I slow my descent a tad. I've already reached terminal velocity; I'm not actually trying to break the sound barrier. Adrenaline is coursing, and the high is top tier.

Almost exactly sixty seconds after leaving the plane, my altimeter goes off, signaling I'm close to deployment altitude. I shift to ensure I'm belly down. My arms extend out in front of me at ear level, increasing the amount of my body surface area in the wind. Arms relaxed. My accelerated freefall speed slows considerably. Looking below, the ground is steadily getting closer and closer. Almost to 3,000 feet.

I wave my arms and cross my forearms above my head. Andrew is above me, so he'll be looking for my wave off signaling I'm about to deploy my main. Another notification from the altimeter.

A quick glance above confirms Andrew is a safe distance away. This part is just as thrilling for me. With a *squee*, I pull the main handle. The parachute is ejected behind me and catches the air at a slightly less aggressive pace than usual, thanks to the way I packed my chute.

I'm pulled up into a hanging position by my shoulders. The pressure of the straps around my chest and legs is noticeable, but not excessive or painful. My descent drastically slows to a much more controlled pace. Looking up, I confirm my canopy looks nice and square.

Shifting my eyes down to spot the landing zone, I use the toggles to steer the canopy to make sure I'm on target for

landing, then settle in to enjoy the view.

The itchiness that's been plaguing me for weeks is noticeably absent. My adrenaline monster is temporarily soothed. I smirk. It's soothed, but a few more jumps will hopefully store up some adrenaline reserves, just in case I can't make it out again anytime soon.

Aside from the rush of wind, it's quiet up here. Peaceful.

Miniscule buildings and cars increase in size the closer I get to the ground. Coming in for landing, I've slowed my descent rate and forward motion. I steer into the wind and aim for the landing zone. My feet hit the ground nice and easy, and I still have a bit of built-up momentum so I run out a few paces.

Laughter bubbles out of me with another successful jump in the books. Retrieving my phone yet again, I take another selfie for Landon. My phone is angled just so, my canopy clearly visible splayed out on the ground behind me. I make sure to snag some shots of Andrew's landing with my phone's live function enabled. At least one of them should make a great boomerang to tag them in.

I remove my harness and make my way over to Andrew. "Jumping with you today made me really miss Cayden. I need to have you both over for dinner soon."

"Yeah, that sounds good. He's been nagging me about that lately, but I keep forgetting to set a date." The words fall out of his mouth so casually, like he speaks about Cayden in this way all the time.

Nagging? Cayden is not a nagger. He's a nurturer. But never a nagger. Unless this is a side of him I've never experienced since I've never actually dated him.

"Would you mind coming over with a few of my other friends? I think we'll have a great time. I know hockey isn't your thing, but I befriended two of the players from the Bull Sharks. I'd love to have you all meet." Ignoring what he said instead of confronting it was beyond a struggle, but I'm

following my gut. And my gut is strongly warning me to tread carefully.

He raises his eyebrows at me, looking almost impressed when he asks, “No shit? How did you manage that one?”

“It was totally an accident, but a happy one. We’re like this.” I cross my fingers and hold them up for him to see.

“I believe it. But it sounds fun. Does Cay know?”

“Nope. That’s a negative, Ghost Rider.” I bob my eyebrows.

He laughs at my shenanigans, catching on easily. “So we’re going with a surprise attack?”

“Affirmative.”

He nods decisively. “He’s not going to know what hit him.”

“I’ll text you a few dates that’ll work for me and the guys, and you just let me know which works best for you.”

Now that that’s settled, we finish repacking our canopies and make our way across the field. From the looks of things, the newbies are gathering near the Caravan for their tandem jumps.

Gary won’t be our pilot on this run, Dirk will. Andrew makes his way into the mix. He’s one of six instructors jumping tandem today. I rush over when I notice Frankie is here, too. He’s this gruff, growly retired US Air Force Pararescue specialist, but he has a huge soft spot for me. I’ve learned so much from him over the years.

His black hair is styled in a fresh military crew cut, even though he’s been out of the military for close to ten years. Frankie’s sable skin is smooth, only showing signs of his age in the crow’s feet bracketing his eyes. Right now, his expression is sour, like he sucked on a lemon, but I can see the warmth and affection lighting up his brown eyes.

“Frankie! Missed me?”

He barks a short laugh. “Sure, kid,” he retorts sarcastically. “You gonna make yourself useful today, or just get in my way?”

“Ummm, I’ll take both for a thousand, Alex.” A genuine laugh leaves him this time.

Shaking his head, he grabs one of the GoPros off the table, and starts attaching it to my helmet. “You’ll be on videographer duty. These guys got a family package, so feel free to record as many of them as you choose.”

I snap my heels together and salute him. “Sir, yessir.”

His face tilts up to the sky and he mutters a “for fuck’s sake” before ambling off to wrangle the group into the Caravan. My laughter follows him, and I catch a glimpse of him shaking his head. He loves me. Truly.

This is going to be so much fun. Bouncing on the balls of my feet, I snap a few photos from the back of the group, and another selfie all geared up. I’ll definitely need to get another one in the doorway of this plane, since it’s roomy enough for me to walk around in. I can’t wait to tell Landon all about today’s events.

Landon

Time is ticking down in the third period of our game against the New York Empires. We're currently tied at two goals each with less than three minutes remaining. New York scored twice in the first period, while we scored a goal per period.

Watching the play from the bench is anxiety-inducing. It's a team effort, but I want to be out there.

It's just about time for a line change, and I'm ready. Seconds pass like minutes. My heart rate is elevated, and I'm breathing a little fast. I inhale a measured breath to get myself under control. Taking the ice like this would be a recipe for disaster.

"Leighton, Murdock, and Spence, you're up." Coach Boucher calls the shift. Leigh and I brace ourselves. Thane Murdock is just a bit slower to move. Tonight is his debut as a Bull Shark. He's been out on the ice already tonight, but he's definitely feeling the pressure of the clock.

His hands are a bit shaky around his stick and there's a slightly green tint to his fair skin. He takes a deep breath and squares his shoulders while I watch. Nodding to myself in approval, I reach out and give his shoulder a squeeze. He's a late season trade, only with us for about a week now. We have good chemistry on the ice. We're working on making it great.

As soon as the other defensemen come off the ice, I'm over the boards and skating toward the puck. Murdock quickly follows. The Empires are in our zone.

New York passes the puck from player to player, then shoots a bullet at our net. Murdock bodily blocks it, but gains possession of the rebound. He shoots the puck at Leigh, and we're off, blades slicing across the ice into their zone.

Their center checks Leigh, and there's a scramble for possession of the puck. Leigh manages to slam the puck away down the boards, bringing the play temporarily behind the net.

New York hits the puck, attempting to send it down the ice, but LeBlanc is faster. Skating quickly and taking possession. LeBlanc to me. Me to LeBlanc. I feel and see the play right before it happens. Leigh is in perfect position for a screened shot, blocking their goalie's view of the puck.

And they've mistakenly left the new guy open. Apparently, they haven't discovered his party trick. No idea how his talent has managed to fly so far under the radar. He's a great addition to our line, and he's ready for this.

LeBlanc fires the puck to Murdock, and the defensemen shoots a bullet right over their goalie's shoulder. It goes right into the top corner of the net with some of the deadliest accuracy I've ever seen. Coach acquired a defensive sniper for the record books.

Our bench goes wild, and our scattered fans lose their shit. Murdock's celly is a simple stick raise and a fist pump as he skates in front of our bench.

His first goal as a Bull Shark. Yep, he's going to work out just fine on our team.

The arena gets quiet. A somber mood settling in. It's New York fans realizing their team's chances at a dub are dwindling.

There's a very miniscule chance of them tying it up again.

Thirty seconds remain.

The Empires' defense rallies. They gain possession of the puck during the faceoff. Driving us deep into our defensive zone. They're not going down without a fight.

Neither are we.

Davi drops into the splits, deflecting their shot yet again with his pads. Another player attempts another shot on goal with the rebound. Access denied.

He manages to keep the puck out of our net until the clock runs out.

Fuck, that was a rough game.

We barely squeak by. But we've got another two points.

We're on a high from the win, exhaustion hanging heavy in the air as we make our way to the visitors' locker room. That was a hard-fought win.

All-Star Break can't come soon enough. We need that week off. Not gonna lie, I'm usually butt hurt when I'm not selected as an All-Star. This year, I only feel relief.

And anticipation.

One more game to go.

If things work out like I hope they will, I'll get to spend some time with Sky. Our schedules haven't allowed us to meet up as much as I would have liked. I don't know what I was expecting. I know how chaotic my schedule is. It's a miracle he hasn't dropped me yet. Not many people can tolerate the forced distance of a professional athlete.

Sky not only tolerates it, but he seems to understand. It just increases the urge inside of me telling me I need to be around him more.

After my shower, I'm leaning against one of the locker room walls. Too keyed up after the game, although I'm wiped. Even though I'm ready to head back to the hotel, Leigh is taking forever as usual. The hotel is right next to the arena, so we don't need any form of transportation to get there aside from our feet.

I pull out my phone to catch up on missed calls and messages. Let's be real. I'm expecting messages. It's our habit now. If Sky watches the game, he'll text me stream of thought messages throughout. He texts like he's talking directly to me.

It's cute.

His focus has a way of making me feel seen. Important. Like I'm the only thing on his mind. Which is crazy when he admits his mind is constantly going.

When he's working, there's a noticeable lack of messages. My gut clenches and I lie to myself that the absence doesn't leave me disappointed on those nights. But I can't even fool myself.

Sky has a life. I know this. I'm not foolish or delusional enough to think I'm the center of his world or anything. Even if he does make me feel that way. Like nothing else matters in his world. Just me. *It's not that serious, Spence.*

But damn, does he make me feel special.

Mom and Pops have both messaged. Mom congratulates us on a game well-played and from Pops a message acknowledging how hard we fought for that win. I send them both a quick reply. God, I love my family. They put a smile on my face.

Now that I've been a responsible son and grandson, it's time for Sky.

Sky's the Limit: Guess what I did today?

Sky's the Limit: It's probably better if I just show you.

Sky's the Limit: BUT. Prepare yourself, boo.

Sky's the Limit: Possible trigger incoming. If the first one is too much, don't look at the others.

Sky's the Limit: You've been warned.

He's sent a handful of blurred pictures. *Well, I never would've thought to try to send pictures with the invisible ink function.* Each image is dark gray with a fluid snowy white effect overtop.

"Ooh, okay, Sky, *so* mysterious." My voice surprises me, but the sarcasm in my tone does not. I glance around surreptitiously to see if any of my teammates noticed me talking to myself. All clear so far.

Based on the evidence, Sky must have gone on a jump. That's the only possibility that makes sense. What else would possibly trigger me? I'm unprepared for the way my stomach drops at the thought of seeing him skydiving. He could've gotten hurt. *Do I really want to see these pictures?* Emotions war within me. This is something he loves. It brings him joy, and he's trying to share it with me.

Nerves fill me, I pace back and forth from the wall to the bench. Bench to the wall and back again.

Nut up and at least look at the first one. It's the least I can do. If I can't handle that one, then I won't look at the rest. It's simple.

Inhaling a huge breath, I start swiping my finger repeatedly over the first image until it clears.

It's pretty harmless to start. Sky is standing in front of what has to be the smallest airplane on Earth. Jesus Christ. An actual nightmare come to life.

His pose draws my attention and makes me smile. He's glowing with happiness.

That wasn't so bad. I can do this. I swipe my fingers over the next batch.

Sky doesn't quite look like himself in this one. He's sitting on the floor of what I assume is that same tiny ass airplane. There's a bit of a glare next to him, but it looks like the door is open. There's a tightness around his mouth and eyes. His smile looks forced. Uncomfortable.

It doesn't sit right with me. This is his happy place. He should look happy.

I scroll to the next one, and there's the Sky I expect to see. He's braced just outside the door, one hand holding on above his head. The other is up in a "hang loose" sign. Winking with his tongue out, he gives no fucks that he's thousands of miles above the ground. It's obvious he's excited to jump.

I'm trying to keep my focus on him, but I'm failing. The background draws my attention. A wave of dizziness hits me, and I force my eyes back to Sky. In the next one, he's on the ground, parachute splayed out behind him. He landed safely. Thank Christ.

No shit, Spencer. If he texted, he obviously landed safely. My rational brain knows this, but the piece of me steeped in fear, feels nothing but relief seeing photo confirmation.

My weak knees fold under me and my ass hits the bench behind me. Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck.

A tingling spreads from my fingertips up to my elbows. Inhale through my nose. Out through my mouth. Rinse and repeat.

"You good, Spence?" Of course fucking Leigh would finally finish showering.

My mouth gapes like a fish out of water. His eyebrow raises, and he gazes at me expectantly.

"You're pale. What's wrong?"

I have no words. My throat is tight with the panic that's trying to overtake me. Wordlessly, I hand him my phone. His face clears in understanding and a short laugh escapes. "Oh, fuck yeah. Dude is badass. Oh my god. Look how he sent the messages. That's so clever. Expect invisible ink pics from me going forward." He laughs harder. At my expense, as usual. "Look at this! That view is incredible."

He shoves the phone in my face, and I shove it away. "Saw it, thanks. And now I need a minute to recover."

“Yeah, yeah,” he says absently. Full on distracted. Still scrolling. Fuck. Too much scrolling. This nosy ass is reading our messages.

Standing, I reach out and snag my phone. “Ready to head out?”

He smirks at me unrepentantly, and replies, “Yeah, man. There’s some room service calling my name. I’m starving.”

The rest of the texts will just have to wait until I’m alone in my hotel room.

Landon

L eigh's excitement for room service wanes by the time we reach the hotel lobby. We end up eating in the restaurant, which is luckily open late. About an hour or so later, I'm finally settled in my bed.

Sky's the Limit: I took a bunch for DZPB's IG.

Sky's the Limit: Which reminds me. You still haven't followed me back.

Sky's the Limit: Rude.

Sky's the Limit: Or are you one of those celebrities who has a PR person running their page?

I'm so fucking stupid. Why has this never occurred to me before? It's only logical to think a fan would be following their favorite athlete from their favorite team. It wouldn't have been hard to find, if my conscience would have allowed it. Now I have the green light.

In the Instagram search bar under my followers, I type *Sky* and I'm fucking floored when the first profile that pops up is

his. Literally titled *skys_the_limit*. He's been right under my nose the whole time.

His feed is slightly chaotic, which fits his high-energy personality. He posted some pictures and videos from the drop zone today. There are some selfies of him in gray scrubs. Snapshots of food, mostly sweets, and drinks like coffees and margaritas. Kayaking with Cayden according to both the caption and tags. Cayden has reddish brown hair, a hoop in his nose, and an adorable impish smile surrounded by a small amount of stubble.

Using my thumb, I scroll further, and freeze.

Fuck my life. He's wearing chunky, black-rimmed glasses, a black tank top, a mischievous smile and a whole-ass sleeve of tattoos.

Tattoos are one of my weaknesses. The black ink enhances the curves of his muscles. Deliciously tempting. Any second now, I'll be drooling. *I'd love to trace those tattoos with my tongue.* And who knew glasses could be sexy? Fuck, they are working for him.

Who am I kidding? Everything about Sky just works.

My cock jumps beneath the sheet, begging for some attention. Closing my eyes, I can clearly imagine the smooth glide of my tongue along his tan skin.

My phone vibrates. Regretfully, I drag myself out of the fantasy I shouldn't have let myself start to fall into. Another two notifications pop up at the top of my screen. I swipe down to view the messages, and see both Sky and Savannah have texted me. A laugh escapes me as I read Sky's first.

Oops.

Sky's the Limit: Are you alive, boo?

Sky's the Limit: Or did my pics kill you?

Yes, Sky, they surely have.

Me: LOL, yes, I'm good. Def alive.

Me: Just exhausted. Had dinner with Leigh, and now I'm in bed relaxing.

Sky's the Limit: Samesies. Obvs not for the whole dinner part, just the in-bed part.

Something so simple shouldn't be so funny, but his message cracks me up.

Me: Obvs

Sky's the Limit: Soooo

There's a pause, then the text bubbles show up as he types another message.

Sky's the Limit: You never did follow me.

He's inserted a side-eye emoji.

Me: Give a guy a minute to gather his wits. I'm still recovering from your stealth attack.

Sky's the Limit: ☐ Ok, ok, fine.

I click back into the app. It's still open to Sky's profile. I'd rather scroll down to see more of his feed, but I scroll back up and follow him.

He immediately sends me back an angel emoji and an upside-down smiley face.

Me: Did I make your day?

Sky's the Limit: Totally

Sky's the Limit: I went skydiving

He's included a check mark emoji.

Sky's the Limit: Watched my team win

Another check mark.

Sky's the Limit: My fav player and new bestie followed me on IG.

Another one.

Sky's the Limit: = Best. Day. Ever.

This message was sent with a loud effect and confetti, which makes me laugh.

Me: You're ridiculous.

He simply replies with a smirking emoji. For some reason, it triggers a memory. That look on his face from earlier.

Me: Now tell me why you looked uncomfortable in the picture where you were sitting on the floor of the tiny plane.

Sky's the Limit: What? What do you mean? No I didn't. I was in my happy place, far from uncomfortable.

Me: Just look at your face. Then tell me I'm wrong.

An incoming call comes through. The photo of us, just the two of us, from Break Shot pops up with his name on my screen.

The call barely connects on speaker, and he starts talking before I can even say hello. "Ohmigod, Landon! I thought I did a good job of hiding my discomfort. It's barely even noticeable."

I scoff at that. "No, it's practically a flashing neon sign of 'back the fuck up.'"

A dramatic gasp fills the room. "Take that back! I'm a great actor and my poker face is legendary."

"Legendarily awful."

He gasps so hard he starts choking. I'm cracking up.

"Landon! You are the worst. Why are you being so mean to me?" Coughs interrupt each word.

My FaceTime ringer goes off. "Are you really FaceTiming me right now?"

"Yes," he wheezes. "Pick up, traitor."

The video connects. Sky isn't visible, but his ceiling fan is.

"Have I killed you?" It's my turn to ask.

"Not quite, but it was a close one. Jesus. I had to wipe my face a bit. Choking is always a messy thing in my experience,

if you know what I mean.” After a beat or two, he helpfully adds, “Just kidding, I don’t choke.” A husky laugh fills the space. The sound travels down my body and wraps its way around my dick.

Imagining him throating a dick, mine specifically, isn’t going to keep it in check. Quite the opposite. Blood is rushing to my groin.

Don’t get hard on FaceTime with your friend. Stop imagining him blowing you. Even though he has the perfect mouth for it.

Shifting around on the mattress isn’t helpful either. My naked cockhead brushes against the sheets and a shiver of pleasure travels down my spine.

“Okay, here I am. Wait, are you okay? Your face is weird.”

Apparently, my attempting-not-to-get-hard face is weird. Lovely. Schooling my features, I force them into what I hope is a neutral expression and make eye contact with him on the screen. His face and neck are clearly visible, he’s wearing those cocktease glasses of his, and there’s a hint of that sexy-ass ink on his shoulder.

Why did Sky think this was a good idea? Better yet, why did I even answer his FaceTime call when I’m fucking lying here naked?

He’s looking at me expectantly with those hazel eyes.

“Yeah, yeah, I’m good. Fantastic, actually.” My voice is a little rough. Let’s hope he blames that on tiredness.

His eyes scrunch like he doesn’t fully believe me. “Now, explain yourself. Those were my best pictures today. My smile game was on point.”

I nod in concession, “Yes, it was, mostly. But in that picture, something was definitely off. I could see it.” Just like I can clearly see the confusion twisting his face right now. “What?”

“I just... We’ve seen each other, what? Two or three times now and you can read my face better than anyone. My abuela

is the only other person who can see through me so easily.” He’s staring at me, eyes tracing my face like he’s looking for answers. Answers I can’t provide.

Our connection baffles me. It just is.

I can only shrug my shoulders. “How many times I’ve seen you in person doesn’t matter, Sky. I know you.” My words hang in the air between us. I can feel him absorbing it. What I said reaching inside him and taking root. Becoming part of him, like he’s part of me.

He clears his throat and smiles at me, instantly lightening some of the heaviness between us. This moment matters, but neither one of us seems to be able to acknowledge that just yet.

“So, when do you get home?” Looks like it’s time for a subject change. He deliberately didn’t answer my question. There’s something there that’s still bothering him. “If you’re not too tired, maybe we can take advantage of your time off. I know we have a fair amount of off days that line up.”

Biting my tongue is a difficult thing. I’m a take-charge guy. If something is wrong, I want to fix it. It’s part of what makes me great at what I do. But I have to remember he’s never pried when I’ve needed space. He deserves that same gentleness. He’s more than earned it, even though he didn’t have to.

His thoughts about the break mirror mine from the locker room earlier.

“I may be tired, but not too tired to do something with you. We’ll be in either late Saturday night or early Sunday.” Rolling onto my side, I slide my arm under my pillow. It takes a moment or two for me to get settled. I’ve propped my phone between my other hand and the pillow. When I look back at the screen, Sky’s eyes are wandering my bare skin. Part of my chest and one shoulder are clearly visible. My nipples harden and warmth fills me at his blatant appraisal.

Which we both pretend isn’t happening.

“Cool, cool. If you’re up for it, we can even do something during the day before I go to work.” His voice has a

breathiness to it now. He bites his lip, eyes still roaming.

Dammit, I'm getting turned on again, cock hardening where it rests on my thigh. Fuck. Huskiness heavy in my voice, I tell him, "I'd love that."

It isn't until much later that I realize I never bothered to look at Savannah's message. And it's a little alarming that her offer for video chat masturbation doesn't tempt me at all. Not even a little.

Skylar

Don't ask me what's happening between me and Landon. I have no clue what's going on. All I know is I like it and I shouldn't. There was a deeply flirtatious and sexual undertone during our FaceTime call that's impossible to ignore. It's only growing.

His eyes traced my skin in a palpable caress. My own wandered as much as possible, considering the limited view I had. He's so damn sexy, I was basically eating him with my eyes.

It needs to stop. I can't keep doing this.

We're just friends and he's in a pseudo-relationship with Savannah. And I'm not looking to date anyone right now. I'm off the market.

Is that why this is happening right now? Since I'm not looking, I stumble across the perfect man. I've heard stories of others finding their person when they weren't looking. Is that what this is?

He *feels* like my person. He can't be. It's not meant to be. I'm reading more into this than I should.

I'm slipping and sliding on thin ice. Any moment I'll fall through.

Maintaining an appropriate distance when everything inside of me is drawn to him is impossible. It goes against everything I am. I have tunnel vision when I feel a connection. And I've never felt one of this magnitude. It's hard to stay away.

Landon is kind and funny. He doesn't take things too seriously and laughs at my jokes. He accepts me for the giant thrill-seeking dork I am. He's a good son who loves his mom more than anything. He's got one of the biggest hearts I've ever experienced.

And the cherry on the top? He's a walking wet dream. That body is built for sin. Honed to chiseled perfection through countless hours of conditioning. He's been in numerous underwear ads. I may or may not have them saved for easy viewing. In the least creepy way possible. I've studied every inch of that man that's been published.

That ass is firm and biteable. When I say biteable, I mean I want to shove his knees to his chest, spread his cheeks wide and eat that ass until he shoots his load all over himself. His abs and those fuck-hot cum gutters. The way I want to eat his load off those cum gutters. Ungh, I'm fucking feral for it. I'd spontaneously combust on the spot.

And he's flirting right back. Just as much as I'm flirting with him, if not more.

How am I supposed to resist the irresistible?

Be strong, Sky. Just friends, right?

It would be easier to believe if we hadn't talked for hours the last two nights. On FaceTime. Shirtless and in bed. Totally platonic. Nothing intimate there. Nothing at all.

I'm fooling myself. I know it, but playing oblivious is the only thing getting me through. Just like he pretends I'm not eating him alive with my eyes.

It would also be more believable if we weren't planning to do it all over again in a few hours after this game against New Jersey.

It's probably a good idea to get myself off beforehand. Take the edge off my libido before I stare at him some more.

It's two to one Bull Sharks and the second period is winding down. Landon is on the ice. He's magnificent, flying across the rink. That shouldn't be as sexy as it is. I'm turned on watching this man rough up the opposition.

This is not a normal reaction to watching hockey. I feel like I should be ashamed of my reaction, or embarrassed, at the very least. But I'm really not. My body is purely reacting to Landon. Manhandling his opponent against the boards.

I'd love to be manhandled by him. I'm weak, powerless to deny the fantasy. He'd shove me hard against the wall, while licking and sucking his way from my ear to my neck and shoulder. One arm firm between my shoulder blades, the other gripping my neck. Not quite choking me, but giving me enough of a headrush that I'm close to exploding. I don't trust guys easily enough to allow them to choke me. But I'd trust Landon.

And it would be so fucking satisfying.

Goosebumps would pebble my skin and my nipples would be hard, sensitive peaks. Begging to be pinched and sucked. He'd slide his hand down my back and spread my cheeks, roughly prepping me with hastily lubed fingers. Opening me up wide for his cock.

He'd be thrilled to learn I don't need much prep. My body is ready for him. My cock jumps, a bead of precum dampening my boxer briefs. Reaching down, I give it a squeeze that causes me to shiver with the need for release.

Fuck, I need to come so bad.

The buzzer sounds, signaling the end of the period. It jars me into action.

Time is ticking. Hopping off the couch, I rush upstairs to my room. T-shirt, athletic shorts, and underwear are hastily

tossed aside. I reach into my nightstand drawer and grab a fully charged Bobby and my bottle of lube. After ensuring Bobby is on, set to low vibration and thrust, it's time to get down to business.

Fuck, yes, I need this. I suck my fingers into my mouth, soaking them with saliva. When they're nice and wet, I trail them softly down my body. A nice contrast to the rough pinch I give each nipple.

My fingers circle my navel, lower still until I gently rub my slit, collecting the precum pooled there. I spread my legs wide, ready for the sensation, my hole hungry for penetration.

As it clenches and releases, I firmly rub for a moment before shoving in one finger. Two fingers. Pumping and thrusting. A groan escapes me. *Fuck*, it feels so good.

With my other hand, I cup my balls, rolling and tugging them. Teasing myself.

Grabbing the lube, I pump a generous amount into my hands, before I slick up the vibrating dildo. It looks so realistic; I'm practically salivating with the urge to suck it into my mouth. I love sucking cock, but now is not the time.

Gently, I grip my cock in one lubed hand, and the other presses the tip of the dildo firmly to my asshole. The toy thrusts over and over insistently, asking for entrance. I draw out the tease for a moment before shoving it steadily inside until it's fully seated. *Fucking hell, yes.* My ass is so full.

The dual sensation of the vibration and thrusting makes me moan. Gripping the flared base, I pump the dildo in and out. In and out. Faster. Harder. *More.*

The slick sound of the toy makes my cock impossibly harder. My tip is flushed an angry purple color where it peeks out of my other fist.

The sensations build and my orgasm gets closer.

My mind replays Landon slamming his opponent into the boards. On an endless loop. It's so fucking sexy. Another thrust, and I mercilessly peg my prostate with Bobby.

In and out.

In and out. It pegs my prostate again and again with a firm yet vibrating pressure. Forcefully milking more precum out of my dick, it pools on my abs. In my navel.

The scent of sex is heavy in the air. It's such a deliciously intoxicating scent, it makes me salivate. I'm hungry for it. Starving for a taste.

I dip my finger into the mess, and suck it off. The fluid is slightly salty, but there's a hint of sweetness. "Mmmmm." The moan leaves me against my will.

Fisting my cock again, I start to jack myself off with renewed vigor. I need to come. My orgasm is building with the force of a freight train. It might just kill me. So many sensations all at once.

My head is light from the panting breaths rushing in and out of me.

My toes curl as my orgasm detonates, cock twitching with each violent spurt of cum. A helpless whimper escapes my throat at the pleasure overtaking me. "*Unghhhhh, fuckkkkk.*"

Cum shoots out onto my chest and abs. My body twitches uncontrollably with the spasms. My vision goes white, and against my will, I stop breathing. Breath held until the rush slowly fades.

One final rope of cum dribbles out, and I inhale a huge breath. The tension dissolves from my body, leaving me in a boneless heap of sweat, cum, and lube.

Holy fucking shit. Opening my eyes, I realize I can't even see straight after that orgasm.

For now, I'm ignoring the fact that I've never come that hard before. On my own or otherwise. I'm definitely ignoring the fact that Landon slamming someone into the boards turned me on more than anything else ever has.

It seems a bit twisted and dirty, but my body was wholly on board with it.

My brain is another matter entirely.

I have to force myself to move. Cleanup is a must and surely the game is back on.

After a quick shower, I take my contacts out, change my sheets and settle into bed against my headboard to watch the remainder of the game. I've missed a bit of the third period. From what I gather, it's not going well for my Bull Sharks.

New Jersey has possession of the puck, and the Bull Sharks seem to be struggling to get it back. It's a bit of a mess. Their momentum from earlier in the game seems to be gone. Luc dekes, but the other team anticipates the move and steals the puck for a breakaway that results in a goal.

We can't manage to keep the puck in the offensive zone. Shots on goal go wide. Their passes don't quite make it to their intended target. New Jersey owned this period.

Davi blocks shot after shot, but another shot manages to find the net.

My boys take a three to two loss.

I'm obviously sad my team lost, but I'm crushed for Landon and Luc.

Aside from my own personal intermission, I've been texting Landon throughout the game. I send one final message to Landon.

Me: I'm sorry the game didn't end very well. Next time you all will do better. I'm here whenever you're ready to talk.

Skylar

Before I even process the incoming FaceTime call, I'm already hitting accept. Because this is what we do now. We skip the pretense of a call and jump straight to video.

Who cares that we'll be seeing each other in less than twelve hours. *I need more.*

"Hey, you. How are you?" I ask him softly.

He's already lying on his side, with his phone propped between his hand and pillow. It seems to be his favorite position. He, too, is shirtless again.

During our calls, I'm all over the place. Right now, I'm on my back, phone in one hand.

He sighs, then sends me a small smile. "I'm good. Could be better, of course, but tomorrow is a new day. We win some, we lose some."

I can't help myself; a smirk twists my lips. Because I can read him. "Is that your way of saying you don't really want to talk about it?"

A gust of laughter leaves his mouth. “Yes, Sky, that’s what I’m saying. We’ll rehash the whole game at practice after All-Star Weekend. I need an escape from that right now.”

“I got you, boo. Let’s escape away. Where would you like to go? Anywhere at all.” My free hand gestures around.

He laughs, and I mentally fist pump at my success.

“Bash is having a yacht party on Thursday. Most of the team will be there. Significant others and friends are welcome. Savannah will be there. You should come.” Mikhail Abashev is one of our veteran defenders.

My gasp escapes me without my permission. “Shut up!” Of course, my reaction makes him laugh again. “Landon, really?”

His emerald eyes meet mine. “Yes, really. It’ll be fun.”

Excitement fills me. I’m going to meet more of the Bull Sharks players. What is life? I knew it was a possibility, but now it’s going to happen. I’m cool. Totally chill. No big deal.

A totally uncool, not chill at all squeal leaves my mouth without my permission. I roll onto my stomach, and prop my chin on one fist, knees bent, feet swinging away. Excess energy from the rush of excitement must be expelled.

Landon laughs harder.

“Ugh, shut up. I’m excited.”

“I know you are. You’re adorable.” The look on his face and the heat in those green eyes tells me loud and clear he thinks I’m more than adorable. My dick tries to rally, but thankfully, he’s a bit worn out from earlier.

My middle finger pops up in front of my face. I blow him a kiss with it. “Fuck you very much.”

“Don’t tempt me with a good time.” He looks startled by his words. Heat fills me.

Flirtation level up? Don’t mind if I do. I told myself I wouldn’t, that I’d behave, but he just asked for it with that one. I can’t resist the opening he gave me. Tilting my chin down, I

bite the tip of my finger, and look at him through my lashes. “Does that mean you like getting fucked, Landon?”

His lips part as he sucks in a startled breath. Like he’s surprised at my brazenness. Like he expected me to let his comment slide. Not this time.

His cheeks pinken a little, and I watch his Adam’s Apple bob before he answers, “Yes.”

That’s all he says. But it’s enough to make me smile. “Yassss. Me, too, boo. Prostates amirite?”

He laughs a little, some of the tension visibly leaving him. “Hell yeah.”

“Tell me to mind my business if I go too far. My filter isn’t filtering,” I warn him.

“You have a filter?”

Chuckles escape, but I prod further. “Sometimes. Are you strictly a bottom?”

He shifts around. It’s clear he’s not quite comfortable with the conversation.

“Dammit, Landon. Don’t answer that. I’m being too nosy.”

His voice is a bit shaky when he replies, “It’s not that. I’m one hundred percent confident in who I am as a bisexual man. And what I like and don’t like. I’m just not used to discussing the ins and outs of my sex life. Literally.” We both laugh at that one. “But no, I wouldn’t classify myself as a bottom. I prefer to top, but sometimes I need it. Sometimes I crave more. The indescribable fullness.”

Oh God. Why did I ask? What I’d do to this man if I got him naked. My mind wants to conjure up another full-blown fantasy, but I limit myself to imagining finger-fucking in and out of that tight ass, pegging his prostate. Milking his cum out one thrust at a time.

Oops. So much for being worn out because I’m definitely hard again. My cock is throbbing and hungry for more. Hungry for a taste of Landon’s sweet ass. I classify myself as vers, although I usually prefer to bottom. I’d gladly let him rail

me into the mattress until I can't walk any day of the week. But I'd also jump at the chance to feel him wrapped around my cock.

“Sky?”

Lost in a growing haze of lust, I meet his eyes, “Hmm?”

“Did I lose you there?”

“Nope, not at all. I totally didn't fall into a fever dream of my greatest fantasy brought to life. I'm definitely going to have to make myself come again if I plan on getting any sleep tonight.” *Ohmigod, Sky, shut up. Why would I admit that?* “Oh, Christ, that filter is still gone. Shutting up now.”

His laugh is slightly husky, a raspy sound that tickles along my nerve endings. “Don't do that. Your honesty is refreshing.”

“Great.” Sarcasm drips from my tone.

“So, you already got yourself off today, huh?”

I freeze. “What?”

He raises a dark blonde brow at me, lips quirked in a smirk. “Did you get yourself off today, Sky?” He enunciates each word. The sound of my name on his lips makes a tiny whimper escape unbidden. Green flames ignite in his eyes. He definitely heard it. And he liked it. We're playing a dangerous game here.

“Yes, did I ever. And it was delicious.” A shiver travels down my spine at the memory.

“That good?”

“So fucking good you have no idea. I dunno if it's yours and Savannah's thing, but I can recommend a great vibrator for her to peg you with. It looks and feels like a real dick. And it has a thrust function. Ten out of ten recommend. I came so hard, I damn near saw stars.”

He groans, a pained look twisting his face. “*Sky*, you're killing me.”

I open my mouth, and instead of words, a huge yawn cracks my jaw.

“You should get some rest. It’s getting late.”

“You’re the one who has to travel at the ass crack of dawn.”

He scoffs at me. “Thanks for the reminder. I’ll get a few hours of sleep here, and I should be tired enough to sleep on the flight. I’m trying not to overthink it too much.”

I run my finger down the screen, just how I’d run my hand down his arm if he were here. In a reassuring gesture. “You’ve got this.”

“Are you sure seven isn’t too early for me to come by?” he asks.

“I hate sleep, remember? It’s a necessary evil, but I will definitely be awake. I’ll make us some breakfast.” I’m actually looking forward to feeding him and watching movies. Yes, I know, it’s weird. Since when am I looking forward to vegetating? Since I made plans to vegetate with Landon, I guess.

“Alright. Well, send me your address, and I’ll see you in the morning.”

His phone audibly vibrates with my notification.

“Sent.” Ugh, even I can feel how sweet and gentle the look on my face is. I’m increasingly sluggish and sleepy. Fighting my need for sleep to talk to him.

“Go to sleep, Sky,” he orders.

My dick jumps at his tone. My sleepy smile curls into something unapologetically naughty. “Ooh, don’t boss me around, I enjoy it *way* too much,” I purr at him huskily.

“Good to know.”

“You know a lot about my turn ons for someone I haven’t had sex with,” I inform him. He has a look of concentration on his face. Like he’s truly filing away this detail for later use. “I feel like I should regret giving you that little tidbit so easily, but it can only benefit me in the long run.”

“Unless I withhold my bossiness as punishment.” It’s an empty threat, but it has the desired effect on me. My smile disappears.

His eyes are glued to my lips and the pout that forms on them. Does he want to lick them like I want to lick him? “Oh shit. Don’t do that. Gosh. I’m going to sleep right now. See?” To show him I’m serious, I remove my glasses, then bundle myself up and close my eyes.

“Mhm, g’night, Sky.” His voice is soft. My body is melting into my bed.

“Night, Landon.” And I’m gone.

Landon

Sky and I crossed a line last night. We've been skirting the edges of propriety for a while now, but this time? There's really no denying it, we leapt over it with giant leaps and bounds.

There's something about him that makes me throw caution to the wind.

I'd rather talk to Sky than get off with Savannah. That right there is a giant red flag if I've ever seen one. Something is wrong with me.

And I'm a jerk. I still haven't texted her back. And it's been days. She knows I'm getting home today, so I know I can't avoid her much longer. Either way, I'll be seeing her Thursday. Her best friend Nadia is married to my teammate Bash.

However, I have a more pressing matter at hand.

What am I going to do with this growing sexual tension between me and Sky?

We're just getting back to the RCA. After I grab my bags, I'll be on my way to Sky's. Can we act normal around each other after everything that was said last night? Do I want to act normal? I know the answer. I don't want to, but I have to. There's no other acceptable alternative.

There's not much chit-chat between the guys when our charter bus parks behind the arena. We're all wiped and ready to get the fuck away from each other for a bit. Just because we have our own hotel rooms while we're on the road, doesn't mean we have much personal space. I love these guys, but I need some distance.

My cup runneth over and I need a break for real.

On that note, I have no business taking my ass to Sky's. Quite frankly, I should be heading home to sleep for the next twenty-four hours. Minimum.

This opportunity is too good to pass up, though. Sacrifices must be made when our schedules rarely line up.

I'm near the back of the bus, the guys ahead of me already standing in a mad rush to get home to their families. I'd rather avoid the crush. Pulling out my phone, I send Sky a quick text. He assured me he would be awake, but I'm still concerned.

Me: Hey, GM. Just got to the arena. I'll be on my way in about ten minutes or so. Just gotta grab my shit and toss it in the truck.

The text dots pop up right away.

Sky's the Limit: Good morning ☺

Of course he included a smiling sunshine emoji.

Sky's the Limit: Hungry? I can get started on breakfast.

My fingers are tapping out a message telling him not to trouble himself, when my stomach growls loudly.

Me: Honestly.

Me: I'm starving.

Sky's the Limit: I gotchu. I was thinking of making a traditional breakfast. Eggs, bacon, and hashbrowns. Sound good?

It sounds so good, it makes my stomach growl some more.

Me: Yes. That. All of that.

Sky's the Limit: Scrambled ok?

Me: Yep. Thank you!

Sky's the Limit: 😊

Sky's the Limit: See you soon. Drive safe.

Yes, dear. The domesticity of our exchange strikes me right in the chest. Twisting and churning. Is this how it feels to have someone waiting for you at home?

The bus has finally cleared enough for me to stand up. When I do, I see Leigh is watching me like the creeper he is from across the aisle. He's been doing it a lot more lately. Inspecting me more than normal, usually catching me off guard. I sigh before following him off the bus. "What, Leigh?"

He shrugs a little, before he answers. "That Sky?"

This time, I sigh harder. "Yes, Leigh."

"Are you going to see him?"

Meeting his eyes unflinchingly is hard, but I do it. I have nothing to hide here. "Yes."

"Right now?" he prods.

"Fucking hell, Leigh. Yes, right now. What's with the inquisition?"

He bites his bottom lip, taking a moment to process his thoughts or whatever the fuck. "I hope you know what you're doing."

"What the fuck is that supposed to mean?"

He raises his hands in surrender. "Don't get defensive, bro. Just be careful. I don't want either of you to get hurt."

My defenses are definitely triggered, but his words make me pause before I answer him. “Neither one of us can get hurt in this scenario. We’re just friends.”

He gestures back and forth between us. “You and I? We’re just friends, Spence. Whatever you and Sky have isn’t this. It’s more, and you know it.” He cuts me off before I can speak. “Nope. Don’t say anything. Tell Sky I said ‘hey’ and we gotta hang soon. Later, man.” He grabs his bags and leaves me standing there.

This guy. My brain is already a mess, and this is what he does?

“Yo, Spencer. Get your shit so we can all go home already.” Kyle’s tired voice startles me into motion.

Once I’m in my truck, I type Sky’s address into the GPS and hit the road.



SKY’S NEIGHBORHOOD is located in this busy suburban area interspersed with a mix of stores, restaurants, small office buildings, and residential buildings. On my drive over, I passed a bunch of houses too. It seems to be a nice combination of suburban living meets city life.

It reminds me of the college town where I went to school. At a glance, it’s easy to see he’s within walking distance of anything he could possibly need.

Sky gave me the gate code, so I punch it into the keypad and the gate swings open. Directly in front of the gate, I pause at the stop sign to get my bearings. The sun hasn’t fully risen, but there’s enough sunlight to see everything clearly. Immediately inside, there’s a large building. The sign out front labels it as the clubhouse and gym. There’s a tennis court and basketball court as well. A playground, picnic tables, pavilions, and pools beyond that.

It looks like a huge entertaining area from what I can see out my window. The areas are deserted right now since it’s still early, but I imagine it gets crowded during the day.

To my left are some traditional apartment buildings. My GPS directs me to make a right and continue straight until I reach my destination on the left. On this side, there's a long row of two-story townhouses. Each one has its own driveway and one-car garage. There's also a spot in front of each home where one car can parallel park. It's not the most parking I've ever seen, but it seems adequate.

My GPS notifies me I have arrived at my destination. There's a sporty little Chevy SUV parked at the curb. His driveway is empty, so I pull in and shift into park. When I get out, my eyes take in my surroundings. Farther down the lane, there's a clearly marked visitors parking lot near another set of pavilions, picnic tables, and grills.

It's easy to picture Sky here, surrounded by so many things to do. Plenty of ways to interact with his neighbors. From prior conversations, I know he makes use of the gym and pool frequently.

Sky opens the door before I can even knock. The scent of bacon greets me, and I'm drooling at the scent. "Hey, boo," he says as he places his hands on my shoulders, pops up on his tiptoes, and brushes a gentle kiss on my cheek. Warmth spreads at the contact. Before I've even fully processed what happened, he's backing away.

His scent lingers in my nose. Yep, it's official. He definitely smells better than the bacon he's cooking. Fuck, I could eat him alive.

Nope. Stop it, Spencer. You got here five seconds ago. How are you going to last hours with this little self-control?

He gestures for me to come inside. I've just been standing in the doorway, staring at him.

My eyes wander the space. His space. The entryway is cozy. There's a set of stairs to my right. Movement draws my attention. His hands partially cover his eyes, and caution fills his words as he asks, "How was the flight?"

My face twists in remembered pain. "Takeoff was just as traumatic as usual. Thankfully, the skies were clear and there

was a blessed lack of turbulence for once. Leigh's services weren't even needed this time. I was wiped, so I knocked out not long after we reached max altitude. The landing gear dropping out scared me shitless, though. That was a fun way to wake up."

He grimaces, then starts making his way down a short hallway; his bare feet gently sound across the tile floor. I toe off my shoes and pad after him in my socks.

"Sounds like a very rude awakening. But it's great you were able to sleep and avoid most of the torture, right?"

"Definitely." I pass a door that can only lead into the garage. Sky's in the kitchen, puttering around back and forth from the stove to the cabinets.

My eyes bounce around the space as he dishes up our breakfast. A home says a lot about a person. His is an open concept, with an island separating the kitchen from the living room and dining area. It's modern and fresh and open. Just like Sky.

Clean lines with white, gray, stainless steel, and black. And because it's Sky's home, there're fun splashes of color mixed in on kitchen towels, throw pillows, photos on the walls. Even his pots and pans are a bright shade of blue. Mine are black. If not for Mom's input, my own house would be dreadfully lacking in color and life.

Not Sky's. His home is just as fun and vibrant as he is.

He makes his way over to the dining table and sets our plates down. "Uh, want me to grab us some drinks?" I've been standing here daydreaming, while he's been working hard on our meal. "Put me to work. I'm not great in the kitchen, but I can handle that much. Where are your cups?"

I'm opening cabinets aimlessly, when I feel his warmth against my back. My breath catches and I freeze. His arm brushes past mine, and he reaches into the proper cabinet to take down two glasses.

"I've got this. You go sit." He hip bumps me out of his way and shoos me with an honest to God pat on my ass.

“Fine, fine.” There’s a bit of huskiness in my voice from the contact. There’s no way something so innocent should be affecting me this much. I need to just rub one out already. Or call Savannah over like she’s been asking.

The thought doesn’t excite me at all.

My ass barely touches the chair, when I’m scolded, “Not that seat, Landon, that’s my chair.”

Oh, shit. I jump up so fast. His laughter shouldn’t surprise me, but it does. His shoulders are shaking from the force of his laughter. The little shit. My nerves are too tightly strung for this right now. “Fuck you.”

“We’ve already had that conversation, Landon. Now sit down and relax. You’re so tense, I couldn’t resist.”

My shoulders droop, all tension immediately gone.

Nervous? Yes.

Awkwardly tense? We can’t have that.

My breath leaves me slowly. “I don’t know why I’m nervous.”

He flaps his hand around in the air, “Psh. Calm yourself. Everything is super chill. Is water good? Or do you want orange juice? I make a bomb café con leche.”

His accent thickens on the words. It shouldn’t be as hot as it is, but here we are. *Gimme an extra serving of that please.* He can talk to me in Spanish all day.

“Water, please.” That’ll help with the desert that is now my throat.

Sky sets our glasses on the table, then folds himself into the chair next to me. Full-on cross-legged on his seat. Fucking adorable. I watch him scoop a bit of scrambled eggs into his mouth. When he glances up, our eyes meet. His eyebrows scrunch, before he hastily chews and swallows his bite. Hesitantly, like he’s expecting judgment or admonishment, he asks, “What?”

Clearing my throat, I smile at him. My head shakes from side to side, then I reach for my own fork. “Nothing, I’m just happy to be here with you.”

His relief is apparent. His smile is back. He squeezes my bicep with one hand, “Aww, me too, boo. Now eat so we can veg out.”

The food is delicious. The eggs are light and fluffy and the bacon and hashbrowns have just the right mixture of softness and crunch. Sky made enough for an army. It would be rude to waste his efforts. I grab a healthy second serving.

A little while later, we’re settled on opposite ends of Sky’s overstuffed sectional. He’s tucked into the corner, legs folded under him. It seems to be his favorite position.

He picked *Casper*, which is only the beginning of what he insists will be an epic movie marathon of Devon Sawa’s best movies. I’m looking forward to watching *Idle Hands*. It’s been years since I’ve seen it.

I’m decidedly less than thrilled at the idea of watching *Final Destination*.

For now, we watch Carrigan and Dibs get chased out of the mansion by Casper’s uncles. We’re sitting in companionable silence, laughing periodically. The movie is a touch ridiculous, but it’s still funny after all these years.

Kat is introducing herself to her class in the movie. The scene is one that causes slight secondhand embarrassment. All those awkward feelings from teenage years.

“Andrew was acting weird the other day.” Sky’s soft voice is an unexpected interruption. I don’t say anything, just turn my body toward him, giving him my full attention.

“He was making flirtatious comments and getting in my personal space. He’s marrying one of my best friends in about six months, but he crossed a line. I kept telling myself I was overreacting or reading too much into it.” He fiddles with his phone, then slides closer so he can hand it to me. “But I know I’m not wrong. Something was way off. Look at him.”

The weight of his eyes are heavy. He's watching me as I inspect the photo. At first glance, Sky could be looking at a partner. He almost looks lovestruck. But it gives me major ick vibes.

The bleached blonde dude with black roots is clearly too close for Sky's comfort. But if you bother to look deeper than his breathless expression, it's easy to see the tightness around his mouth and eyes. His shoulders are pulled up close to his ears, clearly portraying his need to pull away.

He's definitely not simpering at the douche next to him.

Andrew is happily oblivious. He's got a huge grin on his dumbass face, which is pointing right at the camera. His arm is around Sky, fingers visibly squeezing the shoulder he's cupping.

"He had his hand on my upper thigh at one point, but he removed it as fast as he grabbed me."

He did what? My blood boils. *This fucking guy*. What made him think he could put his hands on Sky without permission? "Did you tell Cayden? He needs to know his fiancé is a piece of shit." Most of the time, I'm perfectly content to be a pacifist. If I'm off the ice, I don't need to settle issues with my fists, but in this case, I'd make an exception.

This guy disrespected Sky and Cayden. His own fiancé. The guy he's supposed to be pledging to love and cherish for the rest of his life. Sky's hands grasp my balled-up fist. He carefully pries the fingers apart to thread his fingers through mine.

The feel of our skin sliding and twining together is an erotic tease, awakening my nerve endings in an unexpected way. A shiver tickles down my spine. *I was today years old when I discovered my fingers are an erogenous zone.*

His hand is a little smaller than mine, but fits perfectly.

My gaze is glued to our hands. Mine are fair, with a slight tan. Sky's is this rich golden color. The contrast is striking. Gorgeous. The image of our naked bodies writhing together in an urgent rush to pleasure fills my head. I'd totally fuck him in

front of a mirror. So I could watch us together. Blood surges to my groin and my cock throbs against my thigh.

It's such a vivid picture, I can almost feel my body against his, taste the salt of his skin on my tongue, hear his cries of ecstasy in my ear.

Because, let's be real. Our chemistry is strong. That's an undeniable fact. We'd be fire in bed.

Fuck my life. I shouldn't be thinking about fucking Sky. Especially not right after he shared about his friend overstepping his boundaries.

"Don't be mad on my account. I can handle it. And I will," he says firmly. "I just wanted to tell you about it since you clearly picked up on it after seeing the photos. And now I've had time to mentally process everything, I needed to vent a little. I haven't quite figured out how to talk to Cayden about what happened just yet. Or if I should just go straight to the source and talk to Andrew on my own. Just to clarify everything and explain how he made me feel. And let him know what he did is not okay."

I take a deep breath and hold it in for a few seconds, forcing myself to let go of some of the anger. This shit isn't okay, but I trust he can handle himself.

"Okay?" He jabs me in the ribs with his index finger.

"Shit, Sky. Yes, okay," I tell him with a slight chuckle.

"Good." He claps his hands. "Now's the perfect time to tell you, he and Cayden will both be here for dinner on Wednesday. You're coming over, right?" he asks me like it's a given. Like I'd always planned to come over for dinner. Like we've discussed the plan many times before. We haven't, but he wants me here, and I want to be here. I wouldn't miss it.

Our eyes meet again. Heavy with the weight of words better left unsaid. "Yeah, I'll be here."

His smile lights up the room, and my heart thumps heavily in my chest. It's quite possible I'll do anything to make him smile. "Yay. I'm planning to invite Luc. Do you think he'd want to come? Addy will be here, too."

“If it involves food and new friends, Leigh will be all over that.” He bounces with excitement. We’re so close, I bounce with him, which makes him laugh.

“I need you to play nice with Andrew. I’ll handle it in my own way. In my own timing.”

It goes against everything in me to agree to what he’s asking. He’ll have to accept a compromise. “The best I can do is promise I’ll behave as long as he does. If he does anything to make you uncomfortable in front of me, or if he oversteps in any way, all bets are off.” I refuse to let any of that shit slide. I don’t care if I’m technically the new guy here.

His head tips back in exasperation, “Ugh. I hate that that’s fair, but I accept your terms.”

I nod decisively. That’s settled. “Good, now lean back and finish the movie.” I punctuate my words with a tug on his hand.

“So. Bossy.” He makes himself comfortable next to me. This time, much closer than before, our hands still entwined. I don’t know what I’m doing here, but I still don’t pull away. His hand feels like it belongs in mine.

After *Casper* finishes, I convince him to put on one of his favorite movies. Of course it’s *Top Gun*. Maverick was a daredevil and so is Sky. There’s enough action to satisfy his antsy ass. He quotes most of the movie under his breath.

That’s another thing I’ll be adding to my growing list of Adorable Shit Sky Does. It’s doubled since I’ve been here.

He’s such a unique blend of quirky, nerdy, and smoking hot. I don’t quite know what to make of him. But I truly enjoy being around him. Absorbing his energy.

We take a lunch break a few hours later. Sky offered to cook again, but I insisted on ordering sandwiches and salads from a local deli. He has to go to work soon, and I highly doubt he rested enough before his shift. Twelve hours sounds draining. He doesn’t need to spend his energy cooking for me again.

After we eat, we resume our positions on the couch, side by side. *Top Gun: Maverick* is our next choice. I'm all for it. Tom Cruise is extra hot in these movies, so it's no hardship.

We're about an hour into the movie when Sky rests his head on my shoulder. His bodyweight a warm, gentle pressure against my side. His breathing steadily deepens with sleep.

Carefully, I turn my head to gaze down at him. His face is peaceful at rest. Not a hint of tension to be seen. He's so beautiful. His full lips are slightly parted, chest rising and falling with his breaths.

There's an alarm going off, but I can't seem to make it stop. My snooze button isn't cooperating. The warm body on my chest stirs, and I freeze. *Oh shit.* I'm still at Sky's. The rhythm of his breathing and his comforting warmth must have lulled me to sleep. And at some point, we ended up tangled together on his couch.

He sits up, sliding off me onto the floor. He locates his phone and shuts off his alarm before looking up at me, "Oh, fuck, shit, sorry, Landon. I'm a total cuddle whore." The chagrin on his face is visible. His voice is husky with sleep.

Of course he sounds sexy. Everything about this man gets to me.

"I see that." My smile deflates some of his obvious tension. I reach down and help him stand up. "I'm gonna get going so you can get ready for work. Thanks for having me over."

His head bobs up and down in a nod. Sleepiness is heavy on his face, but his smile is bright and just for me. "Of course. You're welcome any time. *Mi casa es su casa* and all that." He's not the first person to ever utter those words, as I'm around a large volume of Spanish speakers in South Florida. But the Spanish flowing from Sky's tongue melts me all over again. I want to taste the words as he speaks them.

Fuck, I need to get out of here.

"Thanks again. See you Wednesday." I run out of there like my ass is on fire, barely remembering to grab my shoes.

Skylar

Spoiler alert. We ended up meeting up for lunch on Monday afternoon. And Tuesday he invited me over to his house for lunch. I should have said no since I'm working tonight.

I didn't.

It's a fact I'm completely incapable of denying this man anything.

Which is exactly why I'm on my way to Landon's house. After work, I went home for a shower and a quick nap. I can't show up at Landon's looking like dog shit. I'm used to little sleep, but the slight shift in my routine has me feeling more tired than usual.

Landon lives near the arena in a boujee looking gated community.

The guard comes up to my window. "Good afternoon, sir. I'm going to need your license. Name of the resident you're visiting?"

“Sky Donovan for Landon Spencer,” I announce while handing over my ID.

A smile spreads across his mouth. “Ah, yes, Mr. Spencer added you to his approved list a few days ago.” *A few days ago? We didn’t have anything planned, but I guess he decided to be proactive. It warms my heart. It shows me he wants me here.* “Let me just log your vehicle and license plate for next time and you’re all squared away.”

He writes some notes on his clipboard, then rounds the back of my car.

A few moments later, I’m on my way. I navigate through a few turns before locating his house. It’s not quite a mansion, but it’s sizeable.

I was expecting something much more ostentatious. His driveway can fit at least six cars, and aside from mine, it’s empty.

The front door opens as I’m walking up to it. “Hey, I didn’t even punch a code in. Did they announce my arrival like royalty?”

“Pretty much.”

“I love it. I have arrived.” I strike a pose with a flourish. When he closes the door behind me, I automatically kick my shoes off next to the entryway. “You practically live in Fort Knox here. Very secure.”

“Yeah, I heard some horror stories, and I wanted to avoid recreating them.” Shaking his head, he recalls, “In my rookie year, some of the veteran players told me how some of the more aggressive puck bunnies were tracking them down at home. To avoid that possible scenario completely, I just decided to go straight to a secure neighborhood.”

“I don’t blame you at all. My place isn’t this locked down, but it’s guarded enough that I feel safe there. And the amenities suit my needs.”

I follow him through a large sitting room. “Are you one of those boujee folks who has a formal living room and an actual living room? This room doesn’t look too cozy.”

He shoots me a sheepish grin over his shoulder. “Nailed it. This is more of an entertaining space. My actual living room is basically a nicer version of a man cave, thanks to mom.” We pass a few doors on our way down a hallway “Downstairs guest bedroom and bath are in here. It’s a great space. Here’s another full bathroom.”

“How many rooms do you have in total?”

“It’s four bedrooms and four bathrooms. Admittedly, a bit bigger than I need, but if I’m here long term, it has so much growth potential. Two of the bedrooms upstairs are also set up as guestrooms.”

Growth potential. A family? Is he picturing a family with Savannah? Seems like the not-girlfriend-girlfriend is a whole lot more than he’s said. For a ridiculous split second, I almost can’t catch my breath. My hands tingle and there’s a tightness growing in the center of my chest.

Meanwhile, we’ve made it into his kitchen, which smells absolutely delicious. My stomach growls, completely unsympathetic to my inner pain.

Landon has been talking the whole time I’ve been spiraling.

“Do you like Italian? I didn’t even think to ask.” His eyes are trained on my face, waiting for my answer.

Make a joke. Don’t let him see your pain. “Love Italians. Yum.” I smirk at him. It feels a bit forced to me, but I guess I have a better poker face than he thinks. He laughs, and it doesn’t seem like he notices my turmoil. That’s a blessing right now.

He moves toward the counter, where he has plates, silverware, and napkins laid out. “I’ll take that as a yes.”

“A very emphatic yes.”

My eyes roam his space. Off to the right of the kitchen is his obviously well-used living room, with a huge TV and an equally huge sofa. He can probably fit eight hockey players on that thing.

To the left is a dining room with a giant-ass table, with a massive painting hanging above a sideboard. His whole team could probably fit around it. I'm probably exaggerating, but not by much.

The kitchen island might be the largest I've ever seen in person, stools lining one end. Nobody could ever accuse Landon of not having ample seating.

My jaw drops when my eyes land on his stove. Six burners. And a legit griddle in the center. Double ovens. Black stainless-steel appliances. I'd kill to cook a meal in this kitchen. It's literally a dream.

"It's almost wasteful having a kitchen like this when I don't cook much. But it felt like a need when I saw it."

"Yes. Just yes. Oh my God, Landon. It's amazing. You have to let me cook for us one day."

His smile grows. "I know the owner. I'm sure if I put in a good word for you, that can be arranged."

He grabs some towels off the counter and reaches into one of the ovens to pull out some foil containers. Shamelessly, I watch his juicy ass when he bends over. Sue me. It's a masterpiece. I may still be dying inside picturing Landon and Savannah as a happy family, but I will appreciate a gorgeous sight when it's so perfectly presented for my viewing pleasure. I bite my fingertip. *I'd really like a side of that ass for lunch, but that's not happening.*

"I ordered some food from Luigi's. My mom and I eat there all the time. It's my favorite when I'm in the mood for Italian."

It's cute he ordered us their favorite foods for lunch.

Making a big show, I inhale deeply and rub my stomach. "It smells fantastic. I'm sure whatever you got us will be amazing."

He juts his chin toward his fridge. "Can you grab the salad for me? I was thinking we could eat outside at the patio table. It's nice out."

He laughs at me when I moan in appreciation. “Listen. Your whole entire kitchen is like nirvana. I appreciate the simple things, but boo. This kitchen?” I bring my fingers to my lips in a chef’s kiss. “You have no idea. My abuela and I would have a field day cooking together in here. *Vamos a cocinar una tremenda cazuela de arroz con pollo*. Oh yas. *Y maduros tambien. Ay que rico*.” When I’m done ogling his fridge and grabbing the salad, I turn around and he’s staring at me. “What?”

His cheeks pinken. Clearing his throat, he smiles shyly. “It’s cute how excited you are over a kitchen.”

“Whatever, Landon.” I sniff and turn my nose up at him haughtily. “Now lead the way. I’m starved.” His entire back wall is glass, and he leads us through the centermost panel. Stepping over the threshold, I see the tracks seem to continue along both sides of the glass. “Is this whole wall sliding doors?”

“Yeah, the multi-slide doors are a favorite of mine. I’d keep this open year-round if not for the excessive heat and mosquitoes.”

Of course the outside is just as magnificent as the inside. If not more so. It’s an outdoor oasis. The smooth travertine pavers are a gorgeous sandy shade that gives the space a beachy vibe.

His pool has a sun shelf with built-in loungers and an umbrella on one end. A hot tub.

“Oh, hi, this is me letting you know, I’ll be coming over and swimming in this beauty one day. And boiling myself in your hot tub.”

His laugh is the best thing ever. “Definitely. I can grill some burgers or something. That’s well within my capabilities.”

Hence the fabulous outdoor kitchen and grill.

Fucking hell. He wouldn’t even have to ask me. I’d willingly cook every single meal here for the rest of my life.

Instead of begging him to let me live here, I open my fat mouth and ask something I shouldn't. "Please tell me you sunbathe naked and skinny dip like a proper hedonist. Your privacy fence literally begs for nakedness."

"Yes, he does." The feminine voice makes us both jump in surprise, our eyes darting to the door. She walks over to me, hand extended for a shake, with all the confidence and hip swaying of a model walking down the runway. Well, hello, Savannah Atwood. *Damn, she's even more beautiful in person.* "You must be Sky. Spence has spoken about you often."

I can't say the same about you. Ugh, that's an ungracious thought. I stand to shake her hand and give her a kiss on the cheek. Her perfume is light and flowery. "Nice to meet you."

"Likewise." She turns her ocean blue eyes on Landon. "Hello. Fancy seeing you here. Glad you're not dead. Care to explain why you've been ghosting me?"

A gust of wind partially drowns out Landon's mutter, but I'm pretty sure I heard a "*fuck.*" His cheeks pinken.

Interesting.

What's all this?

"Sorry, Sav, been busy. I knew we'd be seeing each other on the boat soon. I figured we'd catch up then." His voice is steady, but his tone is...off.

Those eyes of hers could kill. "Then just say that. *Hey, Sav, I'm crazy busy, but I'll see you soon. I'm not dead. 'Kay, thanks, bye.* Simple. It's simple, right, Sky?"

I wag my finger at them. "Nuh-uh. I'm not getting in the middle of a lover's quarrel. I'm minding my business."

Her eyes flick back to Landon. "Do better next time, 'kay?"

I giggle when he rolls his eyes at her like a properly scolded boyfriend. "Okay, woman, I get your point. Now, would you like to join us? We're just about to eat some lunch."

"Is that Luigi's I smell?" she asks.

“You know it.”

“I’ll have some chicken and salad.”

Ugh, of course the not-girlfriend-girlfriend is perfection on mile-long legs.

She’s tall, slim, and gorgeous. Sweet and funny. But tough as nails with a take-no-shit attitude. I like her. I don’t want to, but I do. They’re perfect for each other. They’re chatting comfortably, passing the containers back and forth with the ease of familiarity.

The conversation flows easily and the food is delicious.

At one point, their eyes meet, smiling softly at each other. And their future together in this house is clear as day in front of me. One day, they’ll have perfect chubby blonde babies. One with her blue eyes. One with Landon’s green. My heart crumbles into pieces. The teeny tiny spark of hope deep inside me, the one I’ve been trying so hard to ignore, withers into a pile of bitter ash. It rises up and coats my throat, cutting off my airway and making it hard to breathe.

What’s your problem, Sky? You don’t even want a relationship. Shake off this weird disappointment and let it go. Flirting does not a happily ever after make. It meant nothing. Nothing was going to happen.

We’ve finished our meal and it’s getting a bit late. We’ve been talking a lot longer than I intended. As I say my goodbyes, an idea forms. If Savannah is part of Landon’s life, I need to accept that and welcome her with open arms. I’m actually the new one here, but in my mind, she’s new to me. “You should join us for dinner at my place. A few of my friends are coming over tomorrow. Landon and Luc will be there. I’m making some traditional Cuban food.”

Her face falls. “Aww, babe, I’d totally be there, but I have an evening shoot tomorrow. But we should definitely get together at some point.”

“Sky’s joining us on Bash’s boat.”

Pure excitement fills her face. “Yas, Sky! Spence has mentioned your affinity for margaritas. You’ll be my drinking

buddy. Make sure you have a designated driver, sweetheart, because it's on."

"Oh, hell yeah." I've been looking forward to it ever since he invited me, but I'm honestly more excited now. I hate how much I like her, but I guess it's a good thing since she's there to stay.

When I back out of Landon's driveway, my eyes land on her car. She's staying while I'm leaving. It feels oddly symbolic.

And even though I'm buzzing with how much I enjoyed lunch with them, I can't help feeling slightly deflated. It's obvious they're a lot more involved than he's said.

My chest tightens, stomach twisting into a knot. I take a few deep breaths to steady myself.

We're just friends, Sky. How can something be lost if you never had it in the first place?

Landon

March

After Sky left yesterday, Savannah was on my ass. Giving me the third degree. She's relentless. She insists there's something between me and Sky.

No matter how many times I told her we're just friends, she wouldn't listen. She says I'm lying to myself.

I am.

It's clear as day to me and anyone who knows me. But although I might feel like there's the potential for something more, it won't happen.

It can't.

I didn't tell her any of this. Just deny deny deny.

She even sent me a text a little while ago, telling me to give Sky a kiss for her. The thought of her lips on him curdles my stomach with unfounded jealousy. She just said it to get a rise out of me.

The fact it worked is maddening.

Savannah's observant blue eyes had met mine over Sky's shoulder yesterday. My expression must have been a dead giveaway of the territorial feelings I was experiencing. I shouldn't have cared one way or the other when he kissed her platonically on the cheek.

But it had infuriated me. I wanted to step between them, beat my chest and tell her Sky was mine. I'm going to have to find a way to tone it down a notch. He's going to be meeting a lot of people tomorrow. It's a traditional Hispanic greeting, and a lot of my teammates have Hispanic partners. Logically, I know the probability is high I'll see him press his lips against a few more people.

Just the thought makes my blood pump faster through my veins.

It's such an unexpected feeling. This irrational jealousy. The possessiveness I feel.

Tonight should be much easier.

When I arrive at Sky's for dinner, two cars are already parked side by side in the narrow driveway. One is Leigh's. Looks like he showed up a little early. I bet the bastard did it on purpose to sneak some one-on-one time with Sky. The other car in the driveway is unfamiliar, so I'm not sure how successful he was.

I park at the curb in front and grab the red wine I bought, before making my way to the door. Addy lets me in and relieves me of the wine bottles. They should pair well with the beef Sky said he's making. She's dressed casually in skinny jeans and a fitted tee. *Good call.* I'd spent longer than I care to remember picking my outfit for tonight. I'd settled on something casual, but nice.

It's not like this is a date. I'm wearing a dark green V-neck tee that mom and Savannah insist enhances the color of my eyes, with my comfiest, and oldest, pair of jeans. Chucks complete the outfit. They're not on for long, though. I kick them off at his front door, next to a few other pairs of shoes.

The rich, delicious scent of meat, garlic, and onions hits my nose, and I moan loudly. "Oh my god, what's he cooking?"

"Right? I'm dying. Sky's a great cook. He's making *ropa vieja*. Have you ever had it?" Addy asks.

Shaking my head, I answer, "No. And correct me if I'm remembering elementary school Spanish wrong, doesn't that mean old clothes? Nothing in the name sounds like a beef dish." My face is scrunched in confusion.

Her giggle is immediate. "You're not wrong."

"Why would anyone think that's an appealing name for their dish? It doesn't sound appetizing at all, but whatever it is sure smells fantastic."

"Right? Absolutely awful name, but totally delicious."

We enter the kitchen and there's Leigh, standing at the stove right next to Sky. He's practically salivating over the pot he's stirring under Sky's watchful eye.

"Hey, fucker, what are you doing here already?" My question is directed at Leigh and he looks over his shoulder at me with a massive shit-eating grin on his face.

"Sky said I could come over early if I wanted to."

"You asked to come over early, didn't you?" It's such a Leigh thing to do.

His grin grows, "Yup." He pops the 'p'. "And Sky said yes."

Shaking my head, I turn to Sky, my lips turn up in a gentle smile. "Hey, Sky."

"Hey, boo." He flashes straight white teeth my way, those luscious lips smiling widely. He places his hand on my hip and kisses my cheek.

When he turns back to the stove, the peanut gallery is staring at me, both grinning like jackasses. *Oh my god*. Is everyone against me?

Addy breaks the silence. “So Luc here asked to come over early so he could learn all about cooking *ropa vieja*.”

“Yeah, Landon, he asked me what I was cooking for dinner and when I told him, he offered to help in exchange for me teaching him how to cook it.”

Leigh’s nodding like a bobble head, full of childlike excitement. “Fuck yeah. *Ropa vieja* is one of my favorites. I dated this Cuban girl years ago. She refused to teach me how to cook it. Like that would make me stay and deal with her toxic behavior. Pfft. Sky is making my dreams come true.” He places his hand on Sky’s shoulder and gives him a gentle shake.

“Okay, so what is it?” I look over Sky’s shoulder into the pot. Fragrant steam hits my face. The scent has me salivating. “And what’s that leaf doing in your pot?”

He swats my shoulder like I’m being ridiculous. It’s a legitimate question.

“It’s a bay leaf. *Ropa vieja* is shredded flank steak simmered with garlic, onions, and green peppers in a tomato sauce. Served over rice, preferably. Personally, I drench my plate in the sauce.”

“Me too,” Addy chimes in.

Leigh raises his hand. “Me three. So fucking good.”

“I did bring salad, though, to kind of balance out the heaviness,” she adds.

The doorbell rings, and Addy bustles off to grab the door. “That’s gotta be Cayden and Andrew.”

“Duh.” Sky rolls his eyes behind her.

“Fuck off, Skylar.”

“Right back at you, Adeline Marie,” he calls sweetly.

Cayden is just as adorable and gorgeous in person as he is in pictures. He's just a tad shorter than Leigh. And Andrew looks just as sketchy in person as he did in his photo. But I acknowledge I may be biased, based on what I know. I shake their hands. Cayden looks a bit shell shocked when he actually looks at Leigh and me.

He gasps. "No fucking way! Are you shitting me?"

Andrew sets a hand on his lower back and glances at us. His smile is polite, but vacant. Zero recognition on his face. "What's going on, sweetie?"

What? Is he serious? I remember Sky telling me he'd given Andrew a heads up we'd be here.

Leigh holds his hand out to Cayden. "I'm Lucas Leighton. Landon and I play for the Florida Bull Sharks."

His voice cracks, and he nods. "I know who you are. Cayden James. And this is my fiancé, Andrew Adams." He's staring at Leigh, and Leigh's smile grows. He loves seeing the different reactions from different fans.

"It's a pleasure to meet you," he tells Cayden.

"Likewise." Leigh shifts and holds his hand out for Andrew to shake, while I greet Cayden.

He seems to have regained some of his composure. "Sky could warn a guy. Fuck's sake. When he told me I'd be meeting his infamous new friend Landon, I never would've guessed it would be Landon Spencer of the freaking Florida Bull Sharks. Jesus Christ. I thought for a minute I was hallucinating."

Andrew scoffs. "Stop being so dramatic."

Cayden's hand tenses in mine before he draws it away. "Anyway, it's so nice to meet you both." And there goes his composure. His voice is soft and lost again.

This. Fucking. Guy.

My eyes flick automatically to Sky's. He's practically shooting laser eyes at me to calm down. I don't want to be calm. Everything Sky has told me about this guy, combined

with his behavior two point five seconds after walking in the door, has me ready to detonate.

For Sky, I'll try my best to chill.

Addy senses the need for an icebreaker and orders, "Alright, boys, scoot. This cheesecake needs to be put in the fridge and all of you fuckers are in my way. Respectfully."

It's just what we needed. Laughter fills the room. "*Respectfully*," Sky mocks, but he's the first to jump into action. He grabs the pot of rice and sets it in the center of the table. Once he's done, he turns to us. "Come on. Get comfortable and have a seat." Making my way over to the table, I see that each place setting is ready for our meal.

Sky sets the huge pot of *ropa vieja* in the center of the table and directs us to start serving ourselves. Addy brings over the salad. And in an unexpected twist, Leigh fills our water glasses and offers the wine.

I hold my glass up for him to fill. "I'll have a glass."

"Me too, please." From this angle, it looks like Cayden is looking up at Leigh through his lashes. Leigh looks perplexed for a second before he glances back over his shoulder to ask Addy and Sky if they'd like any wine. He pours some wine into each glass, before setting the bottle in the center.

"Would you like a beer, Andrew? I have some bottles of that IPA you like."

"That would be great. Thanks, Sky."

"You got it."

I watch their interaction as Sky hands over the beer. I'm really not liking the vibe he's sending. Andrew is eyeing Sky like he's dinner and dessert combined. In an attempt to calm myself down, I look up and make eye contact with Leigh. His whole face is full of the same *what the fuck* I'm feeling.

Addy and Cayden are making small talk about their jobs. Houses she's sold and currently has listed. Cayden shares some fun events he's shot and has coming up.

Sky finally sits down across from me, and his eyes bore into mine again. He's noticed this shit, too. But his eyes still plead with me to keep my cool. "What do you think of the *ropa vieja*, Landon?"

Shit. Everyone is eating except me.

Scooping up a bite of rice covered in sauce, meat, and veggies, I shove it in my mouth. The moan I let out at the explosion of flavors is shameful. Pure pleasure. The balance of garlic and onion. Flavorful meat. My eyes roll back into my head.

Leigh's laughter is the loudest of all. "It's life changing, right?"

My mouth is already full of another bite, so all I can do is vigorously nod my head.

Sky is beaming at me, his chin is resting on his fist.

"You gonna eat, Sky?"

"Yeah, Luc. I'm just taking a moment to bask in the fact I have a table full of some of my favorite people, eating a meal I prepared. Cooking is one of my love languages. I'm enjoying the feeling. Gah. I'm happy." He flaps his hand around at all of us.

Addy throws a napkin at him. "Aww, you're such a sappy goof. I can't with you."

"Leave me to my sap, okay? I am wallowing in sappiness." He's smiling as he says it. He shifts and folds his legs up underneath him, then digs into his own plate.

As he sips his wine, he meets my eyes. Sending me a wink, he toasts me with his glass. I wink back.

The heaviness from before lifts, and we all settle in and enjoy our food.

After dinner, Cayden moves into the kitchen to dish up the cheesecake he made.

Andrew announces, "Cayden made a *dulce de leche* cheesecake with a Biscoff crust. He made it a few weeks ago,

and I knew you'd love to try it." He's looking at Sky and Sky only when he speaks. Cayden is either oblivious to Andrew's flirtatious behavior, or he's so used to it at this point that he pays him no mind.

I guess it would sound innocent enough to me, too, if my back were turned.

Addy takes a dainty bite of the dessert, then proclaims she needs *una colada*. "Anyone else want some coffee with their cheesecake?"

Leigh raises his hand immediately. Dude is like a bottomless pit.

"I'll take some, too," I say.

Cayden declines, and Andrew accepts.

"¿Quieres que lo haga?" Addy asks Sky in Spanish.

"Sí, como no. ¿Sabes dónde están la cafetera y las cosas para hacerlo," he replies in kind. The words wrap themselves around my cock. I recite multiplication facts in my head, think of homeless people, the growing crisis in our country. *Anything* that will keep me from popping a boner at Sky's dinner table, surrounded by our friends.

But fucking hell. Sky speaking Spanish will likely be the death of me. Leigh is smirking at me like he can read my mind. *Why did I agree it was a good idea to invite him? He always seems to catch me slipping.*

Addy is moving around in the kitchen and the rich scent of Cuban coffee scents the air. Sky inhales deeply through his nose like an addict getting his fix.

"I want some so bad, but I'd never go to sleep if I had some right now. I keep telling myself to buy some decaf for those nights when I want a cup, but I refuse to bring that swill into my house."

Cayden leans forward. "You know the flavor doesn't change when the caffeine is removed, right?"

He bats at the air with his hand like he can toss the comment away, "Bah. You can't convince me otherwise."

Cayden presses, “There’s also still some caffeine in the grounds. It’s not completely decaffeinated, just mostly.”

Sky still refuses to listen. “I know you don’t have a choice, boo, but I will not let my caffeinated coffee go.”

That draws my attention. Leigh’s too. He asks, “Why wouldn’t you have a choice?”

Skylar interrupts before Cayden can even attempt to answer. “Pish posh.”

Cayden scrunches his whole entire face at Sky. “What the fuck? Did you time travel back three hundred years? Who talks like that?”

“*Hablo asi*, Cayden.” Sky answers.

“How much wine did you give him, Lucas?” Cayden asks Leigh, an accusatory tone in his voice.

Leigh points at himself. “Me? I gave him a glass of wine. *One*.” He shrugs and points at Sky with a shrug. “He refilled it once or twice.”

Andrew’s heavy sigh causes tension to stiffen my limbs. It’s put upon like we’re all grating on his last nerve. Leigh flicks his eyes to me, then to Andrew, before turning his attention fully on Cayden. Cayden’s lips are pursed. He sets down the two plates of cheesecake he’s holding, and looks at Andrew for a moment. He nods decisively, then finally meets Leigh’s eyes.

“Caffeine is one of my migraine triggers. It also gives me palpitations and jitters. It literally makes me feel like shit.” Cayden’s chest rises and falls with his deep inhale and exhale. “Which really sucks because I love coffee. I’m limited to decaf, which is just fine, in my opinion. I don’t think it tastes any different. I can have my coffee without the misery.”

Andrew’s eyes are rolling before Cayden is done speaking. I want to reach across the table and rip his eyes out from the root. Or nerves. Whatever.

I really don’t see one redeeming quality in this guy.

“You’re exaggerating again, sweetie.” His tone is condescending. “Cayden loves to embellish. It’s really not that bad. And he tries to make me drink that trash along with him.”

Something is seriously wacked with Andrew. Dude seems super upset. Over coffee. It doesn’t compute. And I might not be the smartest guy out there, but I do know everyone is different. What affects one person doesn’t necessarily affect another person in the same way. It’s common sense.

Andrew is an idiot and an ass.

What tipsiness Sky was feeling seems to have dissipated in a rush. Leigh shifts restlessly next to Sky. His chest has puffed up, and I can see the fire in his eyes. A hardness that he usually reserves for the ice. He’s livid. It’s very rare I’ve seen Leigh upset. He’s the most chill guy I know. Seeing that look off the ice is a bit alarming.

“*Ya está listo,*” Addy announces in a sing-song tone.

The woman has a knack for interrupting tense moments.

She serves us our coladas in tiny coffee cups.

The shot of Cuban espresso combined with cheesecake is divine.

I smile at Cayden. “This cheesecake is delicious. It’s light and fluffy, but creamy at the same time. I’ve had so many dreadfully dry cheesecakes. This ain’t that.”

His cheeks flush from the praise.

Sky meets my eyes, gaze intense. He’s barely blinking. Whatever he says next, I’m rolling with it. “Cay, do you have any shoots set for tomorrow?” That’s all he has to say, and I know where he’s going.

Cayden’s eyes flick to Andrew, then to Sky before he answers. “Nope, no shoots tomorrow.”

Leigh’s eyes are bouncing back and forth between the four of us like a ping pong ball. He’s not as mad as before, but his shoulders are still stiff with tension. He stays quiet.

“Bash is having a bunch of us out on the yacht tomorrow. If you’re free, you should join us.” Taking a sip of my drink, I utter the next words begrudgingly. With a jut of my chin in his direction, I invite, “You too, Andrew.” So he knows my invitation is sincere. Mostly. It only is because Sky wants Cayden there, so I want Cayden there. He’s a nice guy, whose better half is an enormous ass.

Andrew has been giving major territorial vibes all night and there’s no way in Hell he’d “let” Cayden go without him.

“Most of the team is going to be there. Addy’s coming too.”

She props an elbow on the table and smiles devilishly. “Hey, if there’re any single guys, I’m definitely down for one of them to make me come.”

Our laughter is immediate. Cayden’s seems a bit awkward and forced. Andrew merely smiles.

“Addy, you know I’m a single man. Say the word, sweet cheeks, and I got you,” Leigh offers. “All the orgasms you can handle.” He bats his eyes.

She throws her napkin at him. “Ew, shut up! You’re way too deep in the friend zone for that now.”

“I’d like to be deep in your friend zone.” His leer has grown significantly, but he’s added an eyebrow bob for good measure. Addy exaggerates a gag, which causes another round of laughter.

After our laughter dissipates, Sky turns to Cayden and Andrew. “So, can you make it?”

Cayden’s smile freezes in place, and his eyes turn down to gaze at his empty dessert plate. Andrew leans over and rests his arm over Cayden’s shoulders, pulling him into a side hug. “We’ve got plans tomorrow. Cayden didn’t tell you? We settled on a date, and we’ll finally be paying the deposit at the venue. We hit a few snags and it’s been a bit rocky trying to nail everything down with them. So after a few delays, we’re making it official. We’re so excited, right, sweetie?”

The look on Cayden's face should be a smile, but it looks more to me like a grimace. Or a cry for help. I'm sure it's both. His voice is completely devoid of emotion. "Right, Andrew. I can't wait."

A brief scan of everyone's faces tells me nobody at the tables believes him, except for Andrew.

Landon

Thoughts about last night are forefront in my mind during my drive to Leigh's. I'm picking him up on my way to the marina. We're carpooling even though neither one of us plans on getting wasted.

Dinner at Sky's last night was moderately successful. Considering I refrained from smashing Andrew's face in, it's a definite win.

Everything about that guy rubbed me the wrong way.

Cayden seems like a sweet, funny guy. And based on what I've seen, he and Andrew don't seem to suit each other. They clash instead of mesh. Their interactions were jarring and uncomfortable to watch.

Infuriating.

Andrew seems to speak without considering Cayden's feelings, and his words made Cayden shrink into himself.

At one point, he'd held himself strong and spoken with confidence, then Andrew still managed to poke holes and deflate him.

It makes no sense to me how someone can claim to love another person, yet they do everything to bring that person down instead of lift them up.

Make it make sense.

I pull up in front of Leigh's. He's waiting outside since I'd let him know I was on my way. He practically leaps into the passenger seat.

"Bro, what the fuck is up with that guy? I wanted to rip his head off."

Well, then. He's been stewing. I raise my eyebrow and stare at him. "First, hi. Hello. I'm great, thanks. You're welcome for picking you up."

He flings himself against the seat. "Hey, Spence. Thanks for snagging me." He pauses, and his inhale is audible. "Also, that guy is a fucking douche."

"Listen. You have no idea."

His eyebrows are scrunched. Breaking eye contact, I check my mirrors and pull back onto the road. "What's that mean?" he asks.

"It's not my story to tell, but yesterday only solidified my opinion of him. I was trying to reserve judgment until I met him, but meeting him made it so much worse. Which sucks because he's Sky's friend. But it is what it is."

Leigh shifts in his seat to stare at me. "He belittled his man every single chance that he could. What kind of piece of shit does that? Fucker."

His anger is warranted, but it still surprises me that he's this upset.

An incoming call comes through on the Bluetooth. It's Sky. In my periphery, I clearly see Leigh lean forward and make a big show of reading his name on my screen.

"Aww, you have him saved as Sky's the Limit? Like his gamertag?" His whole tone has shifted. Anger dissolved, just to give me another heaping pile of shit over Sky. Why won't these fuckers let it go?

“Obviously.”

His voice is pitched a little higher. “You guys are so cute! You better hurry and answer your boyfriend.”

I shoot him a quick evil eye.

Pushing a button on the steering wheel, I connect the call. “Hey, Sky.”

“Hi, Sky,” Leigh says loudly.

“Hello, boys. What a lovely greeting. The more men the merrier, right?” Addy giggles and her voice comes through the speakers next. “Right!” These two make me smile. So ridiculous. “Anyway, I was just calling to let you know we’re on our way. Addy finally picked me up.”

“We should arrive right around the same time then. I just picked up Leigh.”

“Okay, boo, we’ll see you soon.” He ends the call.

Leigh’s eyes are a heavy weight on the side of my face. My sigh is heavier.

“Please, Leigh. I can’t with your shit right now. Savannah’s already been picking at me nonstop since they met a few days ago.”

“When? How did that happen? And why am I just hearing about it now?” This guy with his rapid-fire inquisitions.

Quickly, I dart my eyes over to him then back to the road. “You’re the biggest gossip, man.”

“It’s not gossip if I’m not sharing it with anyone else. I just want to know what’s going on with you. I’m highly invested in the *Landon-falls-for-Sky* saga.” He emphasizes my name.

Rolling my eyes heavenward, I inhale a bracing breath of air. “Leigh.”

He laughs. “Too much?”

“Always.” I tell him about Savannah showing up when Sky and I were having lunch at my place.

He groans like he’s in pain. *Here we go.*

“No invite? I like food and I like Sky. I’m seriously hurt, bro.”

Some of my tension from the conversation seeps out of me with my laugh. “You’re such a pain in my ass,” I tell him.

“Hey now. Don’t say that around Sky. He might get jealous.” He bounces in his seat. “Better yet, please say it around Sky, so he can get jealous.”

“He won’t get jealous.”

“Oh, okay. Sure. Let’s try it and find out which of us is in denial and which of us is actually right,” Leigh challenges.

My mouth opens and closes. *Shit.*

“Mhm. You can’t even refute it.” Leigh sits back in his seat, arms crossed over his chest. Smug bastard. He hasn’t even been proven right yet.

Landon

The first thing I notice when Sky gets out of Addy's car is his smile. It's back in full force. He's beautiful. That fucking gorgeous smile of his makes my heart jump in my chest.

The second thing I notice is the ink peeking out the bottom of his short swim shorts.

Third is how snug those shorts are. They're cupping his cock and displaying a decently sized bulge. I almost swallow my tongue.

I'd rather swallow him. He probably has a pretty cock. With a nice juicy cockhead for me to choke on. It's been way too long since I've sucked a guy off.

A groan leaves my mouth, completely against my will.

Leigh loses control and cracks up laughing. He shakes my shoulder, and leans in. "Dude, did you just come in your pants? That was a porn-worthy moan."

"Shut the fuck up, Leigh," I whisper-yell at him, as Sky and Addy are getting closer.

“You’re so fucking dick-whipped for this guy.” Thankfully, he says this much quieter than his other comment. *Christ.*

My eyes trace Sky from head to toe at a more leisurely pace, savoring and appreciating this time. He’s wearing a stylish pair of sunglasses and his dark hair is blowing in the breeze. The full sleeve on his left arm is completely visible today. It starts at his wrist and cups his shoulder at the top before line work leads into his shirt on his chest. *Work in progress?*

He shifts a bit to look around the marina and it’s official. I’m going to die. There’s no way I’ll survive this torture. Sky is going to be the death of me.

Saliva pools in my mouth. I’m fucking drooling like a starving animal over this guy.

I want to trace every inch of him with my tongue. Follow the lines of ink up into those tiny-ass shorts to discover just how high it goes.

Is his ass tattooed? Or does the ink end at his cheek? Lovingly cupping the roundness. *Fuck it all.*

To further fuck with my head, Addy and Leigh now have their heads together, chatting away. Their eyes are bouncing back and forth from Sky to me and back again. That can’t be good.

It definitely seems like there’s some plotting going on.

Sky meets my eyes and smiles wide. “Hi!”

He acts like this is the first time we’ve talked today. “Hey, Sky. You both have everything you need?”

Flicking my eyes to Addy, she nods. We make our way over to the luxury yacht Bash booked for today. It’s a ridiculously ostentatious superyacht, but it’s a shitload of fun. He might as well buy it at this point, he rents it so often. But he insists it makes more sense to rent it only when he “needs” to. Whatever turns his crank, I guess.

We make our way onto the boat. There’re a few levels, but I’m familiar with the layout. I show Addy and Sky where they

can leave their bags in one of the cabins. Or if they'd rather hang onto them, there's plenty of space on deck. Lots of loungers and tables. Storage nooks and crannies. This boat goes on for days.

Sky sets his bag on a side table where a few others are already stored. When he reaches for the hemline of his shirt and begins to tug it off, I immediately avert my gaze. Watching him strip is dangerous for my sanity. And my unruly dick.

Sky comes up next to me. "Okay, I'm all set." I glance down at him and look away just as fast. The piece on the left side of his chest is definitely unfinished. The outline highlights his defined muscles.

As subtly as possible, I inhale a huge breath. *It's just skin, Spence. You've seen naked chests a million times before. This shouldn't be any different.*

Out on the deck, I see Bash standing with his girlfriend and Savannah. Bash is barefoot and wearing only swim shorts. He has a beer in one hand and his other arm wrapped around Nadia's bare waist. The swimsuit model is decked out in a tiny bikini and heels. Women's fashion makes zero sense to me, but I can appreciate the fact that she's a stunner.

Savannah is in an equally miniscule bikini, but she's barefoot. She loves a good heel, but she's also practical.

Currently, she's animatedly talking to Bash and Nadia. Her arm gestures wildly. For a split second, it reminds me of Sky. A few of our other teammates are lingering in various areas of the deck.

Leigh throws his arms wide and loudly announces, "The party has arrived! And by party, I mean me."

Laughter follows. Everyone is already used to Leigh's shit. Acting the part of a good host, I escort Addy and Sky around and introduce them. Everyone welcomes them with open arms. We may work together, but at the end of the day, we're still one big family.

Sky and Addy seem perfectly content talking to Bash, Nadia, and Savannah. It's close to cast-off when Davi looks at the door and shouts. "There he is! We were beginning to think you'd stand us up, kid."

A glance over my shoulder confirms he's talking to Murdock.

The petite woman next to him smiles sheepishly. "Sorry! It's my fault. I got really nervous and changed a million times. For a yacht party! It was ridiculous, but I couldn't help myself."

The look on Murdock's face can only be described as lovesick. "Everyone, this is my wife, Megan."

A wave of nice-to-meet-yous and hellos circulate as she waves at everyone.

Bash turns to Sky and Addy. "Drinks are over there. Just let the bartenders know what you'd like, and they'll grab it for you. Right now, there's fruit and hors d'oeuvres to snack on, but there'll be more substantial food a bit later on. Just let me know if you need anything and I'll make sure you get it." He claps Sky on the shoulder before moving off.

"There's a bar and buffet set up on each level, by the way. So you'll never be lacking," I tell them.

Sky's eyebrows shoot to his hairline. "Shit, I'm going to be spoiled rotten after this."

"Don't worry, I'll keep you humble," Addy assures him.

"Facts," he responds.

It's a humid day and the sun is beaming. It's about eighty degrees. Sweat trickles down my back, and I need to cool down. "I'm gonna head down to the lower deck to hop in the pool. Anyone wanna join?"

Sky nods vigorously. "Yes, please. I'm melting."

Addy declines and points her thumb at Leigh. "I'm gonna hang with this guy and get my bearings a bit more first."

I smell a rat, but we leave them and make our way down. Music is thumping on this level.

Sky's shoulders start to shimmy, hips swinging as we head to the bar.

After he orders a frozen margarita, he looks at me, catching me watching him. The way he's swinging his hips should be illegal.

"What? I love music. I feel *el ritmo* in my hips and I can't resist it."

Don't fucking say it, Spencer. Don't say it.

"You look like you swallowed a lemon. What's that face for?" He pokes my cheek.

"I'm trying to behave."

Sky makes a *pffft* sound. "Behaving is overrated." He takes a tiny sip of his drink, then a bigger gulp. Smacking his lips, he blows the bartender a kiss. "Thanks, boo. *Tan delicioso.*"

She smiles back at him. He seems to have that effect on everyone.

"Behaving is a necessity." I tell him.

His eyes widen and he smirks. "Oh, okay. Have fun doing that." A big smile breaks out on his face. Savannah is on the makeshift dance floor and is making a come-hither motion at Sky. She knows not to bother with me. I have two left feet when it comes to dancing.

Taking another huge gulp of his drink, he hands it to me. "Keep this safe for me? I need to go shake my ass with your woman."

He's off before I can refute his words.



WE'RE ANCHORED out at sea. There's an inflatable slide leading from the top deck into the water. Sky shoots huge

puppy dog eyes at me. “Is there any chance at all you’d slide with me?”

“Not one,” I answer matter of factly. Because nope. Ain’t no way.

His crestfallen expression makes me a little sad that my fear of heights would prevent me from doing something as simple as sliding off a boat into the ocean.

It really shouldn’t be this big of a deal, but it is. And I hate it. “Leigh will do it.” I offer my friend up on a silver platter. “Let’s go ask him.”

We pass by Davi and Antonov and they tell me Leigh is inside the cabin.

He’s a hundred percent on board with the slide. “I’ll go up with you, but I’m not going anywhere near the railing. And there’s absolutely no way I’ll go down the slide.”

Sky and Leigh whoop and yell the whole way down. It sounds like they’re having a great time. Good for them. That won’t be me. Just being up here has my heart racing. Palms sweating.

After a few more trips down the slide, Sky decides he needs more of an adrenaline rush. This time when he returns, he has Bash with him. “Bash is going to jump in with me.”

“Sky.” Just the one syllable is all I can manage. My throat closes at the thought of him jumping from so high. The slide was nothing compared to a jump.

People have gotten seriously injured falling or jumping from heights like this into water.

But that doesn’t stop the crazy fuckers.

Sky perches on the rail, then leaps over the side. My heart drops out of my ass. I rush to the edge and see he’s laughing with Bash.

The dizziness is instantaneous. I’m going to puke. I back away just as quickly as I rushed up, if not faster.

Yep. I'm done up here. I can't do this. Off to the bottom deck I go.

This vantage point is another form of torture. Sky climbs the ladder back onto the swimming platform. Water droplets slip and trickle their way down his chest and abs, eventually meeting the waistband of his shorts.

The droplets beg to be licked off.

Voices draw my gaze off to the side. Addy and Savannah have their heads together. It makes me want to scream.

Lord save me from intuitive, meddling people.

People who see right through me.

Can a guy keep anything to himself? How can I live comfortably in denial if none of my people leave me here in peace? They've all blown my denial to Hell and back.

Can I just get a minute to adjust?

Fuck.

I back away from the rail, intent on hitting the head. I need that minute to myself.

Grabbing a fresh beer, I make my way back on deck. When I get there, Sky is on the dance floor with Savannah and Nadia. Leigh and Addy are dancing. Every movement of Sky's body is sinful. Hypnotic.

Backing away from the sight, I turn to sit on one of the L-shaped benches off to the side. I'm not feeling the vibes right now. If I go any closer, I'll be tempted to press my body against his. I'm not a good dancer, but he makes me want to try. To match my rhythm to his.

Savannah catches sight of me and raises an eyebrow. I send what I hope is a reassuring smile her way. It must work, because she continues dancing. Sky bends over in front of her, twerking his ass back and forth to Drake singing about rich baby daddies.

And damn. It's mesmerizing.

Jealousy rises. That could be me. I could be out there dancing with him, instead of sitting here essentially moping.

The song changes and Savannah takes the opportunity to break away and head over. She plops herself onto my lap, an arm thrown around my neck. To anyone observing us, I'm sure it looks like she's whispering naughty things into my ear. In reality, she's berating me about my attraction to Sky.

Again.

She blurts, "You totally think he's hot."

"What? We're friends." Because that's a valid response to what she said.

"That's not a denial," she counters.

"Dammit, Savannah." She just smirks at me. Fuck. "I mean, I have eyes. Of course he's hot."

"You're sitting over here stewing for no reason. You know that, right?" She pulls away to meet my eyes, then leans back to speak into my ear once more. "You know it's okay to want more. To want him, right?"

"What do you mean?" I ask.

"Spence, you literally can't take your eyes off him. And I don't blame you. He's the flame and we're just moths. He just has that sparkle. I see it on your face every time you look at him. And he looks at you the same way when he thinks nobody is looking."

Hope tries to ignite in my chest, but I try to squish it down. "Sav..."

"No. Just know it's okay. *I'm* okay." She kisses my cheek. "You're so deep in denial you don't even see the way he looks at you. Just wait until he sees me sitting on your lap. He's going to hate it. I've been observing him every time we get close. He'll shake it off quickly, but it's there if you look. He's just as into you as you are into him. You guys need to get out of your own way and let it happen. Stop pretending you're doing it for me. You're scared and you have no reason to be."

As I watch, Sky turns his head and catches sight of Sav on my lap. And damn if she's not right. As she predicted, his bright smile falls as soon as he sees us. A moment later, his fake smile makes an appearance. He turns his back to Nadia and presses his front against Addy.

I hate seeing that look on his face. But it's proof he definitely isn't happy seeing us like this. That hope begins to unfurl.

I don't know what to do with this information.

"You saw his face, right?"

My head nods. I can't speak.

She wasn't wrong.

She continues, "Look at how sexy he is. Don't you want him? Under you. On top of you. Those lips of his are delicious. Imagine them stretched wide with your cock. Or his cock in your mouth. You know you want that." *Goddamnit, I do. So bad.* Damn me for being so open with her. She knows what I like. And she's using it all against me.

She whispers into my ear. The sensation of her breaths tickle and leave goosebumps in their wake. I shiver. "And look at the way he sways his hips. Fuck, Spence. If he was straight, I'd want to fuck him."

Each word makes my breaths come faster. My cock is hard and pulsing against her ass. She rocks against me and I groan. The pressure and friction feel fucking fantastic, but we both know I'm not hard for her. And I haven't gotten hard for anyone other than Sky in weeks.

"His thigh tattoo disappears into his shorts." *How high does it go?*

"Totally fuck hot." She replies.

"And he's a tad crazy. Did you see him? He jumped off the yacht like it was nothing." I pause, shaking my head in consternation. "He jumps out of airplanes like it's no big deal? What the fuck?"

"It only makes him hotter," she insists.

I hate that she's right.

"Now. Say 'Thank you, Savannah.'"

Confusion twists my whole face. Were we having two different conversations? "For what?"

A devilish smile appears on her face. "You're gonna have the answer to one of your most burgeoning questions." Sav wolf whistles and yells Sky's name. "Bring your sexy ass over here."

"What are you doing?" I mutter as he starts to head our way.

Murdock and his wife sit down next to us. He's sipping a beer, and she has a bottle of sparkling water.

Sky bows mockingly in front of Savannah. "You bellowed, milady? How may I be of service?" His eyes meet mine on the last word, and my breath catches.

I have quite a few ideas. We can service each other. Preferably at the same time.

"Babe, where in the actual eff have you been hiding all that ink?" Her hand gestures to his chest, then his leg. "Seriously, Sky! Do a little turn. I'm gonna need to see how high it goes. Unless you're shy?"

"Who, me?" He strikes a pose with a hand perched on his chest, the other on his hip. "Shy?! Boo, have you met me?" He turns away from us and his ass is just about level with my face as he slides the edge of his swimsuit down, baring his round left ass cheek.

I don't know if I want to choke Savannah or thank her. His smooth tan skin is most definitely tattooed.

His ass. Is tattooed.

My hands dig into Savannah's hips, holding her in place on my cock. It's throbbing. Begging for relief.

My dick flexes and a bead of precum leaks out the head. I can feel the moisture in my swimsuit. Savannah shifts to let me know she felt my cock jump against her ass.

This is such a mind-fuck. She's turning me on on purpose. Getting me all worked up for Sky.

I'm not sure what she's playing at.

"Excuse me, sir. You're delicious. Practically tatted from head to toe. I could just eat you up."

Sky's eyes jump to mine when she says that. Like he's worried "my woman" said something that would piss me off. Quite the opposite. It just makes me think about how badly I want to carry him off somewhere so I can peel those shorts all the way off and eat him up myself. Wring him out and drain him dry. I'd swallow every last drop.

"Hey," Megan's voice interrupts my X-rated thoughts. "Your line work looks familiar. Who's your tattoo artist?" She's leaning forward, examining Sky's tattoos.

Sky's head swings to face her. "Maverick King. Know him?"

Megan and Murdock both smile. "I knew it!" she proclaims. "But yeah, I know Maverick. He's my brother."

"No shit. He's awesome."

She glows with happiness. "He really is talented. And an amazing human on top of that."

"Her brother is her favorite person," Murdock adds. "Just in case you couldn't tell."

She twists toward him, tickling his ribs. "He's *one* of my favorite people. You're both tied for that honor."

Murdock is trying his best not to laugh at his wife's antics, but it's a losing battle. He finally grabs her hands and pulls her onto his lap for a kiss. She melts into him, and he grabs a handful of her ass cheek, pulling her against his dick for a slow grind. Her moan is quite audible.

Sky is fanning himself as he watches them make out and grind against each other. "Oh, yum. Even this gay boy can appreciate all of that."

Is there no mercy for me? I may die of blue balls.

A wolf whistle pierces the air. “Hey, nobody told me the newbie was putting on a free show. I would’ve been first in line.” Leigh’s words are like a bucket of ice water. Murdock and Megan break apart. I barely catch a glimpse of her swollen lips before she hides her flushed face in Murdock’s shoulder.

Murdock shoots a totally unrepentant smile our way. “Fuck, sorry guys. My wife is irresistible. I forgot myself for a moment.”

“Hey, don’t let us stop you.” Savannah gestures at them. “Please. By all means, continue.”

Megan pops up. “On that note, I’m quite parched. I need more water. Anyone else want anything?” She rushes off to grab the drinks.

Murdock shrugs. “She’s a bit shy, but I’d be down.”

“Ooh, an exhibitionist. A man after my own heart,” Leigh jokes.

Landon

Sitting in the sun for so many hours yesterday was draining. I should be sleeping right now. But I'm restless. Savannah is asleep, curled up next to me, breathing deep and rhythmic. The sound is comforting and soothing. It should help me sleep, but it doesn't. I'm wide awake.

Leigh drove Addy home in her car, then caught an Uber to his place. It turns out they live the closest to each other.

Sky is here, asleep in the downstairs guest room. We decided it would be easier than driving all the way to his house and back since we'd gotten back to the marina much later than planned.

In case it's not clear, he's in my home.

Sleeping by himself.

In a bed that's not mine.

The thought doesn't sit well. It feels wrong. Something is out of place.

Damn Savannah and Leigh for adding fuel to the fire. I was handling my attraction to him so well on my own, ignoring it as much as I could. Now, their meddling has only made things more difficult for me. They're giving me hope that I can actually have something real with Sky.

I'd convinced myself I was okay with us just being friends. But now I'm seeing possibilities. My thoughts and desires are a consuming swirl in my head. These desires I have no business feeling for my best friend.

"Jesus Christ, you're thinking so loud you woke me up. Are you thinking about how to pull your head out of your ass and get your man?" Savannah's voice is heavy and thick with sleep. She stirs and shifts next to me before settling on her stomach, head resting on her arm. Her blue eyes watch me unflinchingly.

Groaning, I roll onto my back and cover my eyes with my hands. "It's too early for your shit, Sav."

"It's too early for you to be thinking this hard, Spence. It's simple," she persists.

Tossing the covers back, I stand and pull on a pair of athletic shorts. She grabs an old shirt of mine and follows me downstairs while pulling it on.

If she's going to continue with this, I'm going to need fuel. I make my way into the kitchen and snag a container of overnight oats. I set it on the island and move toward the pantry for some almonds and dried berries to throw on top.

She's staring at me as I move about the kitchen. It's driving me insane. "Stop fucking looking at me like that, Savannah."

"How am I looking at you, *Landon*?"

"I don't know." I gesture at her face. "Like that. Just fucking stop it."

She just watches me. Eyebrows raised, waiting for me to cave.

“Fuck.” My eyes raise to the ceiling. Hands in my hair, I give the strands a tug. Finally, I force myself to meet her eyes. “You’re looking at me like you see too much.”

“That’s because I do. I can see how much you want him, Spence. Anyone with eyes can see it if they actually look at you. You watch him like you can already taste him. And you haven’t even noticed it’s been weeks since we’ve had sex. We slept naked. *Naked*. And nothing. You don’t want me anymore. Not like you want him.” Her hand rests on my arm. “And that’s okay. We knew this was temporary. We’ve run our course, but now you have to go after him.”

“It can’t be that simple. We have to talk about this. “

“No, we don’t. It’s honestly just that simple.”

It’s infuriating how calm and logical she’s being. I turn to pace away from her, but she pulls me to a stop. *Dammit*. She tugs my arm until I turn around to face her.

“What?” The word is practically a growl.

“Listen to me, Landon.” She only calls me by my first name when she’s serious. Her tone straightens my spine. “You know I love you. You’re one of my best friends in this world. I want you to be happy. Don’t use me as an excuse to hide.”

“I’m not hiding. I don’t hide.”

“Aren’t you doing exactly that?” There’s zero judgment in her voice as she calls me on my shit. “I see this chemistry between you two. It’s magnetic and intense. And we both know that’s missing for us. We were fun while we lasted. But maybe you’re meant to be more than friends with Sky. But clearly, we aren’t. You owe it to yourself to try. I’ve always understood and respected your bisexuality. It has nothing to do with me not being enough for you and everything to do with me just not being *who* you need. He makes your heart and soul shine through your eyes. And Landon?” Sav uses my name again to ensure I’m still paying attention. And God knows I’m. Paying. Attention. “That’s beautiful. And priceless. You have to leap. Who knows if you’ll ever have this chance again.”

Hands on hips, I tilt my eyes to the ceiling. Lord save me from insightful, well-meaning friends.

I can't answer her. As much as I want to refute what she said, I can't.

Because what if she's right?

"Be real here. We knew this wouldn't be forever, Landon. So stop pretending otherwise."

"You're being quite brutal this morning."

Her voice pitches higher and tears fill her eyes. "Because I can't be the reason you miss out on a chance to be truly happy."

"Oh, God, woman, alright. Come here." I pull her into my arms and place a kiss on top of her head. "I love you too."

"Sorry to interrupt." Sky's unexpected voice in the quiet kitchen startles us both. His tone is odd. Something I haven't heard before. His bag is over his shoulder, his face is tight, and I'd say he looks a bit queasy. Is this hungover Sky? It had seemed he was only tipsy, but maybe I was wrong. "I'm just going to head home and get sorted. We're still on for Quench tonight?"

Savannah replies before I can, "Yes. Definitely. You better be ready to shake that ass with me."

"You know me, I'm always ready to shake some ass." His smile looks like a mask. Brittle. It doesn't match the enthusiasm in his words.

She pulls away from me to press a kiss to his cheek. "See you later, okay?"

He nods at her as she exits the kitchen. We stare at each other. Nothing but awkward silence fills the space between us. It feels like miles.

The odd, subdued look on his face is killing me. But I don't know how to fix it. I don't know what I'm doing here. I scramble for anything to ease this new tension between us. "Want something to eat before you head out?"

His smile is small, but it's there. It's a real one this time. "Are you going to attempt to make me breakfast, Landon?"

"I would if you asked." I'd give him everything. Anything he could ever ask for.

He shakes his head. "No. But thank you for offering. I will take a bottle of water for the road if you have one."

"Yeah. Sure." I make my way over to the refrigerator and pull out a large bottle of alkaline water. His eyebrows rise when I hand it to him.

"Ooh, now this is some fancy-ass water." He eyes the one-liter bottle at different angles.

I shrug. "Sponsorships."

This time, a more genuine smile makes an appearance on his face. "Perks of being a badass NHL player, huh?"

"Yeah, you won't catch me complaining."

"I should hope not." There's a bit of normalcy here. But the odd tension between us still lives and breathes.

We're both scrambling to act normal. But something is wrong. I don't like it. I don't know how to fix it, because I don't know what changed.

He looks down at his phone, then meets my eyes before backing away. "I'll see you later, okay?"

Nodding, I say, "Yeah, sure. Later, Sky."

And then he's gone. I'm not sure how long I stand there like a statue.

Abruptly, I remember Sky doesn't have his car, and I want to kick my own ass. "Fuck." He has to know I would have taken him home. It's another sign that things are unsettled between us.

I have to fix this. I have to fix us.

Skylar

I t's an odd feeling to have a broken heart in the middle of a bustling club, but here I am.

At Quench, in the VIP section, with some of my favorite people. And a small chunk of the Florida Bull Sharks team.

I love you too.

Landon's voice has been echoing in my head on an endless loop that constantly stabs my heart. Over and over again ad nauseum.

I knew their relationship was deeper than he said. They were all over each other yesterday and their exchange this morning only solidified that fact.

It hurts he didn't share that with me. And it hurts worse because the tiny crumbs of hope that we could be something died an instant death when I heard him say those three little words to Savannah.

Technically, he said four, but what the fuck ever. Those words broke me.

Shattered me into a million pieces all over his gorgeous porcelain tile. Savannah's shrewd assessing gaze watched me, cataloging every nuance of my expression. Somehow, I managed to hold myself together and escaped as quickly as I could.

I'd never been more grateful for an Uber driver in my life. I don't think I could have focused on getting myself home safely after that.

After a few hours of feeling sorry for myself, I dragged myself down to the gym for a cathartic sweat sesh.

It helped work some of the burgeoning feelings out. I'm functional, but still broken inside.

I need a drink or ten. Messy drunk is not my aim, but I need to dull the sharpness of the ragged edges that keep slicing me open.

I have no idea how I got here. Hanging with hockey players like it's a normal occurrence. And devastated that my deep crush on one of them, on my best friend, is unrequited.

Oh look, my glass is empty again. Time for a refill.

I scooch forward on the sofa and reach for the margarita pitcher. The pitcher Landon ordered for me as soon as we sat down. His consideration was another knife in the wound. He cares. He pays attention.

The way this man makes me feel seen? And valued. Cared for. It's such a great feeling. It's freeing. I feel secure in our friendship. I just wish it could be more.

It's ironic how accurate that saying is. Love will find you when you least expect it. You always find your person when you're not looking for them.

Too bad I found my person and he's already spoken for. The irony is cruel.

I'm not saying I'm in love with him. But I feel like I could be if we had the chance to explore our connection.

But he can't be mine.

And I have to wrap my head around that fact. I'd rather have him as a friend than nothing at all. I just need time to mourn the loss of something I didn't even think I wanted. Something I convinced myself I didn't need.

Not just the loss of a relationship. But the loss of a relationship with Landon.

Let it go. Enjoy this moment. Be present with your friends. Then go home and bawl your eyes out.

The bass is thumping, the sound of my favorite songs filling the space. And I'd rather be anywhere but here.

Shake it off, Sky.

My phone vibrates in my pocket.

Cayden: You still at Quench? Andrew and I are heading over.

A genuine smile curves my lips at the thought of hanging with Cayden. Andrew is an unfortunate companion, but I'm sure I can avoid him.

Me: Yasssssss, boo.

I lean over and set a hand on Landon's shoulder. Raising my voice to be heard, I speak into his ear. "Cayden and Andrew are on their way." His shoulder tenses beneath my fingers. In automatic reflex, I massage the area gently. "Are they on the list?"

He turns his face to me, and I present my ear to him so I can hear him better. As his lips brush my ear, a shiver travels down my spine and goosebumps form on my neck. *Fuck.* "Yeah. I added them just in case."

A while later, Cayden and Andrew join us. After ensuring they both have drinks, we're all just vibing and chatting.

During a break in the conversation, Leigh leans forward in order to be heard over the thumping bass. "We missed you on the boat yesterday. Did you guys get everything sorted with the wedding venue?"

Oh, thank God. I'm glad Luc steered the conversation in this direction. I didn't want to be the first one to mention the wedding.

Cayden opens his mouth to speak, but Andrew answers first. "Yeah, we did. All set for the second Saturday in September.

"So Andrew..." I drag out his name. Hopefully, he'll see my reluctance to bring up the topic, but also how much I genuinely care about them. Both of them. Even though it seems like the Andrew I know has been body snatched. "Cayden says you're making quite the entrance for the wedding."

"Was he bitching about that again?" I open my mouth to respond, but his eyes turn hard, and he turns to glare at Cayden. "I don't know what's the problem. You've always trusted me before. Trust me now, too. Everything will be fine. You'll love it." Andrew wraps his arm around Cayden's shoulders. His glare disappears as quickly as it appeared. It's such a quick flip, it gives me whiplash. Something niggles in the back of my brain.

Andrew presses a rough kiss to his temple. The smile on Cayden's face is tight, clearly evidencing his discomfort. Damn my big fat mouth.

And damn Andrew for not seeing how clearly unhappy Cayden is. He holds on to his mask for dear life, but it's slipping. His emotions are practically a neon sign flashing on his forehead.

Landon and Luc have equally turbulent expressions on their faces. Neither one of them cares for the way Andrew responded. Or for how quickly Cayden withdrew and shrank into himself.

Luc's fists clench and unclench. It's obvious he wants to punch Andrew, but he's holding himself back. Landon is tense and puffed up. He's giving storm cloud vibes, ready to unleash thunder and lightning on Andrew.

The situation is not amusing in any way, but the imagery in my brain has given me an inane urge to giggle. It's cut off when Landon speaks.

“Bro, don't be such a fucking dick.” *Oh, shit.* Andrew's chin lifts and his nostrils flare.

Okay, this is not good.

Defuse, defuse, defuse.

Landon and Luc could get in a lot of trouble. And it's becoming abundantly clear that Andrew isn't worth the trouble fighting him would cause.

Honestly, I'd love to knock the shit out of Andrew myself, but this won't get us anywhere. Cayden is my main concern. And I note his glossy, blinking eyes, his slumped posture, and how rapidly his chest is rising and falling.

“God, I miss fucking dick.” Yep. I went there. It was the first thing that popped into my head. *For fuck's sake, Sky.* Cayden sends me a look heavy with gratitude and humor. “I'm having quite the dry spell now that you mention it.”

Laughter and tipsy shrieks erupt around me. Oh yay. Addy and Savannah have returned from the dance floor, just in time to hear my proclamation. Fantastic.

Landon laughs. His shoulders are a little less tense, but the look he sends me is scorching. Filled with both anger and heat. He's visibly still angry over Andrew. But the heat? It doesn't make sense. I glance over my shoulder, but Savannah isn't in his sight. Just me.

He professed his love to her, like, five minutes ago.

Did I just have a stroke?

Savannah screeches, “Oh em gee! Spence. That reminds me. Do you remember that guy from college? Oh my god. What was his name? For like a week after you guys hooked up you alternated between flinching and shivering every time you sat down. I swear your eyes would glaze over. I felt I was watching you have a private moment.”

Jesus Gay Christ. My poor little heart might not handle the palpitations.

A dirty smile appears on Landon's face. "Danny."

"Yessss. Danny. He was on the hockey team with Landon," she tells us. Her smile is huge and I'm so fucking confused.

What planet am I on? I need another drink. When I reach for the margarita pitcher, Landon grabs it before I can and fills my glass.

His green eyes meet mine, and I feel them on me like a caress. His eyes flick to the group and he nods. "Yeah, he was the one and only teammate I've ever hooked up with."

Luc shoves Landon's shoulder. "Get the fuck out, dude."

"No lie."

Andrew is eyeing all of us like we're nuts. He's not wrong. Or maybe it's just me.

I'm liable to agree with him, and I'm essentially the one who started this shit. It just seems to have gone sideways.

His eyes bounce back and forth like he doesn't know where to start. They finally settle on Landon. "Are you bi?"

Savannah rolls her eyes at him. "What planet have you been living on? Landon is one of the first openly bisexual players in the NHL. He pretends like he's not a huge deal, but he so is."

"I wouldn't say I'm a huge deal, per se. I know living my truth authentically as a queer athlete is one of the most important things I'll ever do in my life. It's important for children to see queer people thriving. We have every right. The NHL is making huge strides and proving to be an ally for our community."

Andrew nods in understanding.

My fat mouth runs away with me. "He's like a unicorn. This rare, special creature."

Landon rolls his eyes. He's already expecting my next words to be ridiculous.

I giggle. “Seriously, Landon. You like pussy, dick, and ass. It’s like a trifecta. Ergo, you’re a unicorn.”

Yep, tipsy Sky has entered the building. I’m still giggling. Landon smiles at me like he thinks I’m too fucking cute.

Fuck him. “Someone come dance with me. My ass looks too good in these jeans to be smashed on this seat all night.”

Of course Savannah would be the one to accept my offer.

Skylar

Thankfully, everyone seems to get along after that. The drinks flow freely, music is thumping, and I'm shaking my ass with Savannah and Addy. I'm actually having a great time. The dance floor is one of my happy places.

Thoughts of Landon and Savannah are on the back burner, right along with thoughts of Cayden and Andrew.

Andrew must have gone to the bathroom. Luc has his phone out and he's leaning down speaking into Cayden's ear. Cayden's brows are scrunched in thought, but he nods along to whatever he's saying. Luc slides away to come dance behind Addy, just as Andrew returns.

He meets my eyes and shrugs in response to the eyebrow I raise at him.

Okay. What was that?

Savannah brushes up against my chest. Leaning forward, she loudly speaks into my ear. "Just go with it, okay?"

That doesn't make sense. My ears have to be failing me. "What'd you say? I can't hear you too well."

She smiles. "I'm gonna grab a drink. Be right back."

Shrugging, I turn to face Addy. She's dancing and grinding between me and Luc.

A moment later, a warm, hard body presses against me. I look down at Addy to give her the is-he-safe-or-a-creep look. Her eyes are wide and bright. Satisfied. Luc has a shit-eating grin on his face.

Hands grab my hips and gently pull me back. A toned chest grazes my back. And there's definitely a hefty bulge pressing against my ass as he sways his hips, matching the rhythm of mine.

Um, okay, hello. My dance companion is hung.

And happy to see me.

The pressure on my ass is delicious. It's time to see what my mystery man looks like.

The woodsy scent of pine greets my nose before my eyes make sense of what I'm seeing. My fucking heart stops dead in my chest.

Full stop. I'm gonna need a defibrillator.

Landon's green eyes are full of fire. There's no denying he wants me.

He's grinding against my ass like he's trying to press inside me through our clothes.

Oh God, yes please.

Savannah slides up behind Luc. He's sandwiched between her and Addy and he's not sad to be the meat between them.

Me, though. I'm super confused.

Just go with it.

Huh. Is this what she meant?

Savannah meets my eyes and smiles at my obvious confusion. She winks at me.

What the fuck is happening? Am I drunk? Did someone spike my drink? Did I black out?

What alternate reality have I entered?

“Call You Mine” by The Chainsmokers and Bebe Rexha thumps through the speakers. And I know I’ll never forget this song. This moment forever burned into my brain.

“What is happening right now? We can’t do this, Landon.” My protest is weak, even to my own ears. My body is a million percent on board, but my head tells me it’s more complicated.

“Yes, we can. I’m done trying to fight this. If you want me to stop, you need to say so because you make me fucking crazy.” His lips graze my neck. “For the love of God, say yes, Sky.”

My heart is racing triple time. Nope, no defibrillator needed here. Just Landon.

Just go with it.

Our friends are the biggest schemers on the planet, but I love them for it.

My throat is so thick, I can’t speak. I nod instead.

“Thank fuck.”

His warm, wet tongue licks a stripe behind my ear, before he gently nips my earlobe with his teeth. His hard cock rubs my ass with every rock of his hips.

I’m burning up.

I can’t breathe.

A moan works its way out from deep inside my chest. Goosebumps. He’s giving me goosebumps. My cock fills, and I grab his hands where they’re holding my hips. My own rock back, and I press my ass against him.

He lied. He can definitely dance. He has plenty of rhythm.

Now that I know what he feels like, there’s no going back.

I force my eyes open to look at Savannah again, because there’s no way she’s okay with her man doing this with me.

She's still smiling at us. It's insane. She is so happy, it's giving proud mom vibes. Like she wants this for us.

Just go with it.

My eyes move to Addy and Luc. The three of them are all watching us with matching expressions. I should probably be embarrassed by our shameless grinding, but I'm too far gone to care.

Landon's hand slides up my abdomen and onto my chest, lightly grasping my throat. Goddamnit. I'm panting and moaning for him. He hasn't even touched my dick and I'm ready to come in my pants.

Right here in Quench.

In front of our friends. There's a one hundred percent chance everyone can see how hard I am for him.

And I don't give a fuck.

Landon's lips brush my ear, his voice is deep and husky. The sexiest rasp. "I can feel you moaning for me, Sky. Just wait until I lay you out. I'm going to eat you alive. I'll fuck you so good, baby. Don't expect me to stop. I don't think I'll ever get enough."

The *baby* does me in. My ass clenches in anticipation. "*Yes. Please. Fuck me.*"

I'm sweating and shivering. If we're this hot dancing, although it's really dry fucking at this point, I don't think I'll survive fucking him. But you can trust I'm going to try.

And if I die trying, I'll die happy.

Twisting, I turn to face Landon. Our eyes meet, and I feel our connection lighting up inside my chest.

This feeling is what I've been searching for.

His cheeks are flushed, lips are parted, and I can't resist them. As I press a gentle kiss to the corner of his mouth, he gasps. His chest rises and falls rapidly where it's flush against mine.

His hands flex, and he pulls me back against him. One hand cups my ass, massaging and grinding our cocks together. My eyes roll, and I whimper as my forehead hits his sternum.

“We need to get out of here. Now,” he says. “I need to kiss you properly. And I’m not kissing you for the first time in Quench.”

Words fail me. When I nod, he threads his fingers with mine and drags me behind him.

We barely manage to wave goodbye to the peanut gallery as we rush out of the club.

Landon

We were glued to each other in the back of the Uber the whole ride to my house. My heart is pounding. His hand is trembling where it's clasped in mine. I haven't let him go. And I don't plan on it. He's biting his bottom lip, and I can't wait to lick the spot and soothe it with my tongue. Periodically, he shakes his head and looks at me, almost like he's making sure I'm really here with him.

The anticipation and confusion pulse off of him in equal waves.

I smile and trace his cheek with my thumb. His eyes close and he lets his breath out slow and measured.

My heart swells in my chest. He's so fucking beautiful. And he's here with me right now, in this moment, as much as I am.

Fucking Leigh and Savannah are going to be insufferable after being proved right.

When we get to my house, I walk us in the front door. We kick off our shoes, and I lead him upstairs to my room.

As I set my keys and my phone on my nightstand, Sky is frozen right inside my bedroom door, staring at my bed.

“What’s going on in that head of yours?”

His mouth opens and closes as he hesitates.

“Sky.” He shuffles his feet, then raises his hazel eyes to meet mine. The uncertainty on his face cracks my chest wide open. He needs reassurance. And he’ll get it. “It’s me. You can say anything you want. Ask me anything. Nothing could possibly make me look at you differently.” I mirror his long-ago words back to him. They made an impression and I’ll never forget them. Or how accepted and seen he made me feel.

His face softens. He remembers the conversation just as much as I do. “Oh God, Landon. What is happening here? You were just with Savannah last night and now...”

“And now?” I ask softly.

“And now I’m here to what? Fall into her place?” His voice pitches higher with each word.

I take slow, careful steps until I’m standing in front of him. With my thumb, I raise his chin so he’s meeting my eyes directly.

“Savannah and I had an agreement. Friends with benefits. That’s it. We knew what we had wasn’t a long-term arrangement. We mutually decided to end it. And yes, she slept here last night. All we did was sleep. I haven’t had sex with her in weeks. Since before we met at the arena.”

He bites his bottom lip, his eyes searching mine. “Really?”

“Really. I haven’t wanted anyone but you since then.”

His breath leaves him in a rush. His relief is obvious.

“Now, I need to kiss you. I need to know what your lips feel like pressed to mine.”

“*Ay dios*. Yes, please.” The words are a breath, spoken so softly.

I move forward, backing him up until he’s against my bedroom door. My lips hover above his, drawing out the

moment. Savoring it. He shivers when my lips finally press against his. Gently at first, then again, harder. It lights me up from the inside out.

His lips part on a gasp as my tongue flicks out to lick along his lips, which his own eagerly meets. My hands trail from his hips, up, up until I cup his jaw in one hand and his throat in the other, exerting just enough pressure to hold him still.

His moan has me throbbing and ready to fuck him into the mattress.

But that won't be happening tonight.

For now, I fuck his mouth with my tongue, thrusting and retreating. He wraps his leg around my hip, rocking his rock-hard cock against mine. I groan when he draws my tongue deep and sucks on it.

God, I want his mouth wrapped around my dick. Sucking and swallowing every last drop of my cum. Like he can't get enough.

But we need to slow down. Sky is definitely still tipsy. And as much as we both want this, I can't take advantage of him right now. I pull back, and he chases my mouth with his. He's so fucking cute. I smile against his lips. "Baby, we need to slow down."

"Nooooo. Gimme your mouth. I need it. Need your cock," he whines.

His words wrap themselves right around my cock and stroke. Resisting him right now is one of the hardest things I'll ever do, but it's a must. Just a little while longer.

"Trust me. You'll get my cock soon enough. But not tonight." He clenches his leg tighter around my hip. His kiss-swollen lips are more pronounced with his pout. "We're going to take a shower." He perks up at the *we*, but then deflates when I continue. "*Only* a shower. Then you're going to climb your sexy ass into my bed and go to sleep with me wrapped around you."

His breath hitches. "Okay."

I smirk at him. I forgot how much he likes it when I get bossy.

“Ugh, shut up, Landon. I already told you I’m weak for your bossiness. I think I just came. Why don’t you check and see.”

My laughter fills the room. Based on the tent he’s still sporting in his tight jeans, there’s no way he came.

I pull him away from the wall and gently push him toward the bathroom in front of me.

“I can’t wait to see you naked. In my shower. In my bed. You have no idea how bad I want you there.”

“Trust me, if it’s anywhere near as badly as I want you, I do.”

The self-control I’m gonna need to get through this... I turn the shower on, letting the water warm up, stripping off my shirt and dropping my jeans. My cock springs free when I let my boxer briefs fall to the floor. Sky’s eyes trace my body hungrily, eating up every inch of skin.

“*Fuck*, Landon. Can’t I just blow you? Please. I need your cock in my mouth. I might just die.”

My cock flexes, begging for his mouth. “Not tonight.” His hand drops to his bulge and squeezes. He moans. “It’s official. *Me voy a morir*. I’m going to die, Landon. Put it on my headstone: He did not die doing what he loved. He died of blue balls. It’ll be great.”

I never expected to laugh so much in a moment so full of sexual tension. But here we are. I shake my head and smile at him, resting my ass back against the vanity with my arms crossed. “You’re so dramatic.”

The man flings his hand to his forehead and fake swoons. “It is I, drama, at your service.” He flutters his eyes at me, and I crack up.

After I compose myself, I harden my gaze and tell him sternly, “Take off your fucking clothes, Sky.”

He moans, “*Jesus Gay Christ*. How do you expect me to keep my hands and lips to myself if you keep tempting me. I’m liable to tackle you and hop right on that dick. Be warned.”

“Don’t threaten me with a good time.”

“Fuck. Fuck, fuck, fuck.” He reaches down and tugs his shirt over his head, baring miles of beautifully inked skin and firm, sculpted muscles.

I’m definitely going to need him to manhandle me.

Wrestle around the bed and then hold me down while he fucks me.

And soon. Fuck yes.

He drops those tight jeans to the floor. He’s wearing short boxer briefs, the head of his cock clearly outlined. There’s a damp spot of precum. He’s so fucking sexy.

“Come here,” I order him.

Every step he takes toward me ramps me up higher, an innate sensuality in each movement. It’s such a tease.

When he reaches me, I pull him closer for a quick kiss and brush my thumbs against his hip bones. His Adonis belt isn’t as pronounced as mine, but it’s there. I want to sink my teeth into that muscle.

I’ll have to hold that thought. If my mouth gets anywhere near his cock, I won’t be able to hold back.

He shivers when I tuck my thumbs into the waistband of his underwear. Our eyes meet. “Do it,” he urges.

I slide them down his hips and thighs. His cock bobs up, the head brushing mine. The sticky residue of his precum leaves a cool trail in its wake. It lights me up inside.

When his boxer briefs hit the floor, we’re panting. Hard and heavy.

Fuck, I want him so bad.

With my lips pressed against his, I tell him, “In the shower, Sky.”

Pouring soap onto my loofah, I lather it up, then hand him the soap. My hands wash my body briskly, but his eyes follow every movement greedily.

I watch him just as hungrily.

He turns his back to me and watches me over his shoulder. Seeing his ink unimpeded makes me want to shove him against the wall. I want to trace my lips from his shoulder to his upper back, following the ink down to his round ass and ending above his knee.

His hands wash his lower back. Bending over to wash his feet, he trails his hands up the backs of his thighs. He grabs his cheeks and spreads them wide, ensuring I catch a glimpse of his hole that wrings a moan out of me.

I can't wait to spread him open. Slide my tongue inside and finger him. Get him ready for my cock.

There's a banked fire waiting to rage out of him. And fuck I want to burn with him.

He smirks at me. His finger traces his hole, and he moans. My hand drops down to squeeze my cockhead, holding back my orgasm. It's been way too long, and I'm too close to the edge.

My voice is rough. “Rinse off. It's time for bed.”

“Things were just getting fun.”

“Too fun. There'll be time for that tomorrow.”

Sky perks up. “Promise?”

“I promise I'm going to spread you wide and eat your ass until you're begging for me to fuck you. In the morning.”

Leaning back against the shower wall, he starts to slide down the tile. “Fuck, I think I just spontaneously combusted. You might need a shovel to scoop me out of here and into your bed.” He laughs at himself, then stands up. A quick rinse and we're out and drying off.

“Oh, shit. Won’t your contacts be a problem?”

He shakes his head. “Nope. Most of the time I take them out, but with my work schedule I use night and day lenses. They’re safe to sleep in, which is useful.”

“Huh.” His smile is soft and sleepy.

I hand him a spare toothbrush, and when we’re done brushing our teeth, we head to my bed.

Sky’s eyes are heavy. He walks around and climbs in on the right side of my bed, making himself at home. Right where he belongs.

He curls into a ball on his side, and I lift the blankets and slide up behind him. Wrapping myself around him like I said I would. My legs tangle with his, my arm crosses at his waist, my hand at his chest. His breathing deepens, and he moans sleepily. He fits perfectly in my arms.

“Landon,” he murmurs, burrowing deeper into my arms.

“I’m here, baby.” I press a kiss on his temple. My words are already slurring with sleep. “Get some sleep.”

And the darkness overtakes me.

Skylar

There are a few things I notice as soon as I wake up. I'm not in my own bed. I'm naked. I have a raging boner. And there's a naked body pressed up against me. A very warm, *hard* body.

Mmm.

Rhythmic breathing tickles against my ear and neck. The scent of pine fills my nose.

Landon.

I freeze. *Maybe last night wasn't a dream after all.* Jesus. Did I really bend down and flash my hole at Landon in the shower?

Yep. Totally did that.

And I have no regrets. I seem to remember him making some promises about this morning. Cracking my eyes open, sunlight meets my eyes.

Oh, would you look at that.

It's morning.

I'm gonna need him to wake up and get to work.

I don't quite know what the fuck we're doing here, but I am one hundred percent on board with fucking.

But if I'm honest with myself, everything feels like so much more with him.

His cock is wedged between my cheeks. When I rock my hips back against him, he throbs, and moisture leaves a trail on my skin. He's leaking for me in his sleep. That's so fucking hot. A whimper escapes my lips.

I'm sweating, our bodies generating enough heat to set his mattress ablaze. I need more. He moans in protest, but I manage to pull away enough to roll over. God, he's gorgeous. Inside and out.

With my hand, I trace his cheek. "Landon, wake up."

His eyes flutter. His soft, sleepy smile melts me into a puddle of goo.

My heart twists and clenches in my chest. I consider myself fearless, but I'm fucking terrified that I'm falling for this man. If I'm being honest, I'm pretty sure I fell a long time ago.

"Hey, baby." He leans forward and presses a gentle kiss to my lips. It's the sweetest fucking thing I've ever felt in my life.

"Hi," the word leaves me in a breathy rush of air.

"God, Sky, you're so fucking beautiful and you don't even know it. Your heart. Your energy. Your compassion. Just... you, Sky. I'm drawn to you and I can't resist you anymore."

"Resist me? Of course not. You know I'm irresistible," I joke with a smirk. My heart is fully open and exposed, beating right there for him to see. I'm safe with him, but still scared he's going to see my vulnerability.

Our lips press together again. This kiss is deeper than the last. My breathing speeds up, chest brushing against the firm hardness of his pecs. A shiver rushes through me, and my nipples harden.

Doubt tries to creep in. “Am I remembering everything clearly? Are we really doing this? Are you sure about this? About us?”

He meets my eyes unflinchingly. “I’ve never been more sure of anything in my life outside of hockey. And besides, who are we kidding? You’ve been mine since day one, just as much as I’ve been yours. It just took us a long time to realize it. As far as I’m concerned, we’ve been Landon and Sky since that first conversation. Months of building our foundation. Our friendship. Our *relationship*.”

Damn. Tears fill my eyes. I nod and kiss him again, adding tongue this time. I need this man more than my next breath.

My hands wander, down his pecs and six-pack, tracing his cum gutters. A shiver wracks his body next, and it’s empowering knowing I can elicit such a reaction.

My fingers graze the head of his dick, swirling and pressing, collecting the moisture from his slit. I break the kiss and meet his eyes, drawing my fingers up and licking his precum. I moan at the flavor of him exploding on my tongue.

Shoving me to my back, he straddles my hips. His tongue is deep in my mouth before I can process the shift in position. His hard cock rubs and nudges mine as he rocks his hips above me.

His lips never leave mine, but I notice the shift in his body and hear a drawer opening and closing. I moan in anticipation of what comes next.

A cap clicks open, and then his lubed hand grips our shafts firmly, jacking us together. His hips buck and writhe and we both moan.

My orgasm gets closer and my toes curl.

Right when I’m about to come, he backs away.

“No, fuck, what? Why’d you stop?” My protests spill out of me.

A devilish smile appears on his face, and he licks his lips. “I seem to remember making you a promise. And I always

keep my promises.”

My brain melts at his words. “Oh, *fuck me*. That was hot.”

“I intend to.” He grabs my legs and presses my knees back and into my chest, leaving my cheeks spread wide. My hole right there for him clenches in anticipation, and he groans. “Fuck, baby, look at that ass.” He presses a fingertip gently against my rim, and I push out against him, ready to let him in.

Then he’s leaning down and sucking the head of my cock into his mouth. I whimper as he sucks hard, then releases me with a pop and licks his way down my balls. Down my taint, and finally his tongue traces my hole, fluttering and pressing. Over and over again until I’m soft and open. My eyes close of their own volition.

His tongue slides in, and holy fuck I see stars. He moans, and I feel the vibration along his tongue. He’s eating me like he’s starving. One lubed finger presses and slides in along his tongue. Then another. Thrusting in and out, in and out, and stretching me wide. He grazes my prostate and a thick stream of precum leaks onto my abs and chest.

I force my eyes open, and fuck, the sight that greets me is one of the sexiest I’ve ever seen. The head of my cock is flushed purple, steadily leaking beads of precum each time he pegs my gland.

He slides a third finger in, and my eyes cross. I’m not going to last much longer.

“Fuck me, Landon. Do it now.”

He rips a condom open with his teeth and slides it down his thick cock.

Without waiting a second longer, his dick notches at my opening. Our eyes meet and hold as he slides deep inside me in one go.

The stretch and burn of his cock splitting me wide is quite possibly the best sensation I’ve ever felt. Our groans are loud in the quiet room.

Sex with Landon just might kill me.

Landon

Sky's head is thrown back as he rides me. Hard. I'd rolled us over as soon as I'd slid inside him. I needed to see him on top of me.

It might just be the best thing I've seen in my life.

A rough groan erupts from his throat. The slick heat of his hole engulfing my shaft with each rhythmic pump of his hips steals my breath. Sex with Sky is indescribable.

How is this different? What's different with him?

My thoughts scatter when he changes tempo, sliding up my cock slowly until just the tip remains inside him. His beautiful hazel eyes meet mine, and I feel the contact in my chest, before he slams back down with purpose. Those gorgeous eyes roll back, and he moans. It's a filthy sound. Fucking music to my ears.

"Holy fuck, Sky," I breathe on another moan.

"Mmmm. Landon." Sky's hips rock with hedonistic abandon. This guy. I don't think I've ever experienced anything like this. There is nothing or nobody like Sky. I'm

burning alive in an inferno. An inferno of our creation that I never want to extinguish. I'll burn with him forever.

“Why is this so much better with you? It's never felt this good before. Sky, Jesus. *Fuck*. You're killing me.”

His hips falter the barest fraction, and the sexiest smirk curls those kiss-swollen lips. I want that smirk in my mouth. Need to feel it on my lips. To taste it. Breathe it into my lungs. Make it mine until Sky is so firmly entwined in my DNA, I don't know where I end and he begins.

This man is an addiction I don't ever want to give up. I'm drowning in him. Completely over my head, and I'm okay with that. Because I have him.

“Don't worry, Mr. Hotshot Athlete,” he says as he leans forward and presses that sexy fucking mouth of his to mine. He licks at my lips, sucking my tongue when I stick mine out to meet his. My cock jumps inside him, and he gasps, then whispers into my ear. “I know a few tricks to kickstart your heart.”

Jesus fucking Christ. I groan. He is torturing me in the best way. It takes every bit of willpower I possess to hold back my orgasm. His words alone almost make me come. Just from that. Like a fucking rookie.

His skin is soaked in sweat, but I manage to grab his neck and hold him steady to guide his mouth right where I want it. On mine. I grip his hip tightly for leverage and thrust up into his ass on his downstroke.

Swallowing his moan as our tongues tangle together, the vibration from the sound tickles my hand, enhancing the sensations coursing through my body.

Fuck it all. I'm going to come soon. But not without Sky. I need to get him there. I bend my knees and brace my heels on the bed. Pumping faster. Gently, I squeeze his throat the tiniest bit.

Fuck. Yeah.

Based on the keening wail that tears from his mouth, I'm nailing his prostate good.

“Right there.” His words escape on a gasp mixed with his moans. “Just like that. Don’t stop.” I could live with the sounds of his pleasure as a soundtrack for the rest of my life. Although that could get awkward because I’d have a permanent boner.

“Never. Come on, baby. Gimme it. Come on my cock. Let me feel you shoot your load all over me.”

His face turns red, his hands gripping my shoulders and his nails digging in. The bite of pain sends a rush of euphoria through my body. Apparently, a side of pain with my pleasure gets me off. Who knew?

A long moan escapes Sky, and he tenses on top of me, a hot rush of cum splattering on my abs with each spurt of his cock. He smashes his mouth to mine, forcefully opening my mouth and sucking on my tongue as he rides out the aftershocks of his orgasm.

That’s all it takes. I couldn’t hold back my orgasm any longer if I’d tried. I let go. My own orgasm unleashes in a throbbing hot rush in his ass. That was the hottest thing I’ve ever experienced in my life. He came hands free. On my cock.

Crazily, I wish the condom wasn’t between us. Wish my cum was filling him up and overflowing. I want it to leak out onto me. I want him marked because he’s fucking mine.

Well, that’s different. These primal tendencies I’m feeling right now are new and intense.

Sky kisses me, rocking up and down on my dick until my own aftershocks subside.

Best fuck ever. We need a repeat STAT. I laugh to myself. I’m talking like Sky even in my head. I’m well and truly fucked. Figuratively and literally. So gone for this guy.

Sky’s still sitting on my dick, but he’s risen up to look down on me. Yep, he needs to live there from now on. Right there. On my dick. Sky tilts his head and smirks smugly. There’s a goofy ass grin on my face, but I can’t stop it. “Babe, I think I fucked your brains out. Are you good?” he asks.

Smiling up at his beautiful face, I answer, “Yeah, I’m good,” then pucker my lips for more of those delicious kisses. He indulges me with a little peck before he lifts his hips to let my cock slide out of his ass. When he winces a little, I frown, “How about you? Are you good, Sky? Was I too rough?”

“Naw, baby, I’m better than good.” Hearing him call me baby makes my heart swell. I’ve been letting the endearment fly left and right. “Just a little sore, but zero complaints here. My ass will ache, and I’ll still feel you inside of me for days.” He rolls his eyes and mock-swoons. My dick half-heartedly twitches at the thought, but there’s no hope of a repeat just yet.

Skylar

It should be alarming how quickly Landon and I adjust from just friends to boyfriends. But I'm quite comfortable with the turn of events.

Things haven't changed much. We're still texting and FaceTiming as much as possible between our work schedules and hanging out at each other's houses. We've just added sleepovers and sex to the mix.

God. The sex.

And you won't catch either of us complaining. Landon told me both Luc and Savannah had been picking at him constantly to get his head out of his ass. Apparently, they'd seen right through both of us.

My mind is still struggling to wrap around the fact his not-girlfriend-girlfriend seriously was just his friend with benefits. Their arrangement lasted a long time, yet neither one of them caught feelings. *How?*

I guess it really is possible.

Cayden has been distant since the club. His texts have been super dry and he's not taking my calls. I still haven't talked to him or Andrew about my concerns. If I put myself in their shoes, everything I imagine saying seems confrontational, judgy, and quite possibly a little self-absorbed. Like, what if Andrew really is just being overly friendly? Is my ego seeing things that aren't there?

So I'm floundering for a way to approach this.

At the moment, it's a non-issue since we're barely talking again.

I hate this distance between us. Regardless, Cayden has to know whatever is going on with him and Andrew isn't right. That man shouldn't be treating him like that.

Even amidst the euphoria I've been living, my mind never strays too far from them.

Over and over again the thoughts repeat. Running rampant during my shift. Considering my patients are in the CCU, they're both relatively stable at the moment. Vitals are strong and improving each day. Uncomplicated, thank God. They should be transferred to the step-down unit within the next few days if improvement continues.

My watch buzzes on my wrist. Landon's game is starting. I can't watch it in full, but I intend to check in during my breaks. The Bull Sharks are currently in Ohio playing Columbus. It's their first game after All-Stars week.

I wish I could be there, but not this time. I can't make it to all of the games, but I can manage two of his next away games.

It'll serve multiple purposes. Scratching my itch to hop on a plane somewhere, get my fix of hockey, and allow me to squeeze in a little bit more time with my man.

Excitement fills me at the thought of surprising him. My flights are booked, and it honestly sucks I have to wait almost two whole weeks to see his reaction.

Luc helped me arrange tickets to the games. Landon's friend is still finding ways to conspire and bring us together. I

love it.

“What are you smiling about?” Belinda asks me. “You’ve been all smiles for a while now.”

I lean back in my chair, watching the screen, monitoring my patient’s vitals as they roll across the screen. “Well, if you must know, I’m smiling because I’m happy. That’s usually how it works, B.”

She sucks her teeth at me. “Boy, obviously. Now, what’s gotten into you?”

That changes my smile to a smirk. “You should be asking *who’s* gotten into me.”

“Skylar Donovan!” She gasps like a scandalized maiden.

“You asked!” My smile radiates pure innocence.

“I didn’t need to know all that, hun.” She tsks.

I sniff at her, unbothered. “Well, his name is Landon.”

“Ooh, your friend Landon?”

“Yes, one and the same. We’re together now. And I really am happy, B.”

Her face softens, and she smiles. “I was just giving you shit. I’m glad you’re happy, hun. He lights you up. You’re practically glowing. That’s a rare and beautiful thing to find.”

About an hour or so later, I’m finally able to take a quick break to check in on the game. They’re tied zero to zero and it’s the first intermission.

I send Landon a text so he knows I’m following along and thinking of him, wishing I was there to support him.

Me: Keep up the good work on defense boys. You’ve got this.

A few hours later, I check back and see they’ve won. One to zero. A shutout for the win.

That game must have been amazing to watch. Maybe I can convince Landon to watch it with me tomorrow. He’ll be getting home super late this evening.

The team should actually be on their way to the airport by now.

A text pops up.

LTB: Almost to the airport. Want to come to my place when you get off or do you want me at yours?

He melts me into a puddle. I send him a string of emojis. No words. Melting emoji. Happy eyes filled with tears.

LTB: What's that for?

Me: I'm being ridiculous. Forget it.

LTB: Skylar.

I cringe. Not Skylar. Oh nope. No sir.

Me: Nope. Who is this Skylar you speak of? 😏

LTB: *sigh*

LTB: Sky.

Biting my lip, I smile. I love making him exasperated.

Me: It's just expected for us to get together right when I get off work. I love it.

Me: I'm happy.

Me: That's all.

LTB: Don't downplay your emotions with humor.

Me: *gasp!* Did you just call me out?

LTB: Yup. Now pay attention.

Oh, hi, bossy Landon. My smile is huge.

Me: God, I love it when you get bossy. It makes my dick hard.

LTB: You have a one-track mind.

LTB: Mine or yours, Sky?

Me: Only where you're concerned.

Me: Yours. It's closer.

LTB: Now get your ass back to work.

I send him the saluting emoji and the winking kiss and get my ass back to work.

Skylar

For the first time in ages, I don't bother changing clothes in the locker room at the hospital. I'll just snag a quick shower at Landon's. Maybe he'll even join me. Once I'm done with my end-of-shift reports, I grab my bag and fly out of there. Belinda shakes her head and smiles fondly at my rushing.

My man is waiting for me, okay?

It's only been a little over a day since I saw him, but even that feels like too long.

Me: omw

I can't be bothered to text more than those three letters.

He hearts the message.

When I get to his house, the garage door is already lifting in front of me. I pull in and park, leaving my bag in the back when I get out. My car is safe here, so I don't even bother setting my alarm.

Opening the door, I walk straight into Landon's kitchen. He's sitting at the island, his sleeve of colorful swirls of ink on display for me to ogle. My man is shirtless. I can't wait to press myself against all of that deliciousness. But first thing's first.

"Hi, babe. I'm gonna grab a quick shower and I'll be right back." I bob my eyebrows at him and leer. "Unless you wanna join me? You scrub mine and I'll scrub yours."

I've kicked my shoes off, and am pulling off my scrub top.

"Leave the shirt and come kiss me." His voice is already husky with want.

Oh no. I can't resist that tone. Blood rushes to my cock and it starts to plump up, ready for all the dirty things his voice is promising.

"I'm all gross with hospital cooties. I'll be quick," I assure, as my shirt hits the floor. I reach for my waistband, straight up stripping in his kitchen.

He smiles like I'm ridiculous, but his voice is completely lacking humor. "Sky. Get your ass over here and fucking kiss me. I need your mouth."

My chin tips back and I moan, eyes rolling to the ceiling. "Holy shit, baby. It's ridiculous how hot that was."

"Now, Skylar." Ooh, someone is getting impatient. I like it.

I huff like he's being so difficult, but the smile on my face is a dead giveaway for how much I'm loving this. "Oh my god. I'm coming."

"Not yet, but you will be."

The whimper I let out is quite possibly the most embarrassing sound I've ever made in my life. I have not one fuck to give, though. My man wants my mouth, and he's going to get it.

With his legs spread in invitation, his cock is thick, a hard ridge in his athletic shorts. *Yum.* My hands graze his thighs as I slide between them. We're almost the same height with him sitting on the stool. I easily press my lips to his. They meet

over and over again, before finally I let my tongue out to play, flicking his lips and dipping into his mouth to play with his tongue.

I want to devour him whole.

“You looked so fucking sexy in those scrubs. And the first thing you did was start stripping them off.”

It makes me laugh, but fills me with heat. “My scrubs got you all hot and bothered?”

“You.” He punctuates the word with another kiss. “You got me all hot and bothered. I’ve been on simmer since you said you were on your way. Then seeing you in those scrubs lit me on fire.” His lips reach for mine.

I’m dizzy from our kisses, but I need more. I need my hands on him. My mouth on him. Slowly, teasingly, I slide one hand to rub and squeeze his cock. Tracing the head with my fingers, my big, tough athlete shivers in my grasp, and it’s intoxicating. I’m drunk on him. Drunk on this feeling.

“I’m also gonna need to fuck you in my jersey. From behind, so I can watch my cock split you wide. Watch your ass jiggle with each thrust. My name across your back.”

Holy fuck. “Oh, God, yes. That. We have to do that.”

Retreating a little, I lick his bottom lip. “But first, I need you in my mouth.” Another lick. “Wanna feel you so deep in my throat, I can’t breathe.”

He groans and his hands grip my hips so tight I’ll probably have bruises. *Yes.*

Nipping his lip, I slowly start to slide my way down his neck and chest, licking and sucking each patch of skin I encounter.

He’s delicious.

“You have no idea how much I missed you. It’s insane.” When I’ve reached his navel, my tongue dips inside. Thrusting and licking, he gasps and grasps the back of my head, fingers threading through my hair to hold me in place.

“How does that feel so good?” His voice breaks on the words.

“Lift your hips.” Grabbing his waistband, I start to slide his shorts out of the way. His hard dick springs free next to my cheek. I can’t resist pressing my face into the crease between his cock and his thigh. I inhale deeply, drawing the scent of pine and *man* into my lungs. I can’t get enough of it. Of him. Something uniquely Landon that makes me salivate.

I’m on my knees in front of him, his legs splayed wide, his cock bobbing with every heartbeat. His balls are heavy and full, ready for me to work a load out. I need it in my mouth.

Looking up, I meet his eyes and smirk before engulfing his entire length. His cockhead hits the back of my throat, and I concentrate on breathing through my nose, opening my throat. Taking him deeper. Deeper.

I swallow, throat constricting around him.

His moan of pleasure is loud in the quiet kitchen. I’m buzzing, high from the rush of making him feel so good.

“*Ungh*, fuck, Sky.” The words sound like they’re being wrenched from his chest. Forced against his will.

Sliding back, I pop him out of my mouth and pull the front of my scrub bottoms down. Making sure he sees me pull my cock out of my boxer briefs, I raise a cupped hand under his mouth and tell him, “Spit on it.” His eyes roll, but he complies. Using his saliva, I pump my cock, pulling and stroking. After a beat or two, I meet his eyes again and order, “Fuck my mouth.”

“*Christ.*”

I suck him back down. Bobbing up and down on him, his hips pump up to meet me. Fucking in and out of my mouth. He’s deep in my throat, so deep I can’t breathe. *Yes*. Lightheaded and dick drunk, my eyes roll, and I moan around his length.

With my free hand, I tug his balls.

His fingers tangle in my hair, pulling the strands and stroking my scalp in alternating motions. The contrasting sensations take me higher.

Closer to orgasm.

Saliva leaks out of my mouth, soaking him, soaking us.

On my next downstroke, I swallow around him again. His cock becomes impossibly harder, pulsing out a steady stream of precum.

He's close.

My hand flies up and down my dick. I need to come with him.

His hips stutter and his body stiffens. His grip on my hair tightens to the point of pain. The burn lights me up. Trembles overtake him and he comes in my mouth with a shout as I moan around him. Swallowing down every last drop of the thick fluid as my own orgasm overtakes me, my load shoots all over his kitchen floor. When the aftershocks subside, I look up at him and shrug sheepishly.

"Oops." My voice is raspy and hoarse after throating him so roughly, but I can't be bothered to care.

His head tilts to one side, and he purses his lips before shaking his head at me. "Oops?" he says. "Like I give a fuck you got cum on my floor. It'll wipe up." He slides to the floor in front of me, cupping my face in his hands. He kisses my swollen lips softly. Reverently. "You're amazing, you know that?" My hands rise to grasp his. He kisses me again, then rests his forehead on mine. Eyes closing, we kneel together for a moment.

He stands and reaches a hand down to pull me up. "Let's clean up and go take a shower. Then do you want to take a nap with me or watch a movie?"

Pulling back slightly, I look him over. "Um, definitely both, please."

He nods. "Anything you want. Do you have to go home before you go back to work?"

A smile blooms on my face, and I bounce up and down on my feet. Ridiculously proud of myself. “Nope,” I pop the ‘p’. “I brought a bag just in case. I figured if I didn’t need it today, I would need it one day soon.”

After our shower, we end up eating some of Landon’s overnight oats topped with nuts and berries. It’s not my favorite breakfast, but it was edible. Hearty and filling.

We lay out on his massive couch downstairs. Landon has his back and head resting against the plush arm of the couch. We’re each wearing a pair of his athletic shorts. It was too much effort to grab my bag out of the car. That’s a later Sky problem.

I’m doing my best impression of a blanket. Personally, I think it’s the best seat in the house. My head is on his chest and our legs are tangled together.

The steady thump of his heartbeat is soothing. Oddly enough, I don’t feel like crawling out of my skin like I normally do. Landon calms me like no other.

We decided to watch another movie in our Devon Sawa marathon. This time, it’s *Idle Hands*. Admittedly, the movie is pretty terrible, but we find ourselves laughing at the ridiculous storyline.

We’re nearing the end of the movie. Molly, played by Jessica Alba, is strapped to a car in her underwear and there’s a mad rush to save her. What happens next is pure chaos. None of it is believable by any means, but their obvious stress and anxiety has my heart racing.

Landon and I both crack up at the ending. “God, I forgot how awful that movie is.”

My eyes trace the roundness of his pecs. So tempting. I lean down and nip him. He yelps and I laugh. “Oh my god, right?”

“So, so bad. It was still fun to watch it with you, regardless.”

Nodding, I smile at him angelically. “Watch the game with me?”

His eyebrow raises. “You still want to watch it even though you know the outcome?” he questions.

My eyes roll at him. “Duh.”

He pulls up the game recording and hits play.

Watching with Landon is a totally new experience. He narrates what’s going through his head during the game. Talks about plays and mid-game line change-ups. Constantly working and fighting to get that goal.

We hit the first intermission tied zero to zero. Second period starts up immediately, thanks to fast forward. Even though I know the outcome of the game, my stomach feels tight with nerves and my heart is beating a bit fast, waiting for the scoring play.

Every time Landon’s on the ice, my chest fills with pride. His talent is magnificent.

His strong legs power across the ice, defending the net from the opposing team. Luc’s stick snags the puck from a Columbus player, smooth as you please. He takes off crossing the blue line into the neutral zone and into the offensive zone, aiming for the Columbus net. Columbus brings the pressure. He gets pinned against the boards.

Antonov frees the puck, firing it along the boards. Murdock to Landon. Landon dekes left, faking out Columbus. He fires a wrister. Pad save and the puck is deflected. Antonov gets the rebound, then shoots the puck to Murdock. Murdock’s arm comes back, stick in hand, and he shoots a laser right between the knees of their goalie.

The lamp lights up, signaling a goal for our boys.

“Yesssss! Thane’s kind of badass.” My chin tips up. I’m too close and cuddled up to him to actually see his face, but I try.

“He is. Murdock’s trade couldn’t have come at a better time for us. He’s proving to be an asset.”

On the screen, Thane skates off along the bench, hockey stick raised in his right hand, fist bumping his teammates.

“Aww, just look at him! Baby Bull Shark is thriving, huh? Kicking ass and taking names.” On screen, his smile is huge and completely adorable. The camera zooms in on Luc placing a hand on Thane’s helmet and shaking. These guys with their makeshift noogies.

Landon’s chest and stomach bounce under me with his laugh. “Baby Bull Shark?”

“Uh-huh.” I nod against his sternum.

He chuckles. “I’m telling him you called him that. I’m pretty sure it’s going to be a thing. I’m gonna make sure of it.”

“As it should be.”

“Leigh is gonna be pissed he didn’t think of it first. But he’s gonna run with it.”

“Such a shit-stirrer that guy. He’s so much fun.”

Landon fake gags under me. “Meh, I guess he’s alright.”

Not bothering to lift my head, I playfully slap his shoulder. “Stop it. You love him.”

His smile is so bright I can hear it in his words. “Yeah, he’s basically the brother I never had.”

“So. Cute.” Each word is said with conviction.

His chin brushes my hair. “Whatever.”

We finish watching the rest of the game. The Bull Sharks play consistently and cohesively during the final period.

My body feels heavier, and my breathing is deepening. With my face mashing against his pec, I burrow my head into him. He’s so comfortable to cuddle on.

Landon tilts his head to catch a glimpse of my face. “Tired, babe?”

I nod lethargically against his chest. “Mhm.”

“Okay, up we go. Let’s head upstairs and we’ll nap in my bed.”

He shifts until I roll off him and against the back of the couch. Once he stands, he reaches down to help pull me up,

threading his fingers through mine.

“C’mon.” I groan in response, and he laughs. “What happened? All the wind left your sails.”

“Crashing. Fading fast,” I tell him. “I didn’t sleep well without you. Must sleep.”

His eyes soften as he smiles at me. He takes my hand and leads me upstairs. His hands drag the shorts down my thighs, and he guides me into the right side of his bed.

Warmth surrounds me, his arms hugging me tight to his chest and I’m gone.

Landon

My phone chimes with a text, and I smile because I know it's Sky. I'm at the Frenzy for weight training and a light practice afterwards.

Tomorrow is game day. My stomach tightens. It's also the day Sky will be meeting my mom. Sky is a bundle of nerves, but he's pretending not to be. He jumps out of planes but is worried about my mom.

She's thrilled. She can't wait to meet him.

She hasn't yet *I-told-you-so'ed* me, but I'm sure it's coming. In her roundabout way, she'd been trying to tell me I wanted Sky from the beginning. Fear was blinding me. Had me all fucked up.

I understand completely now. It took me way too long to admit it to myself. I'm just glad I finally woke up.

Better late than never and all that.

There're a few minutes left before I have to be in the weight room. I pull out my phone to read his message.

Sky's the Limit: NSFW, listen with caution.

His text has me grabbing my earbuds with a smirk. What is he up to?

Sky's the Limit: And just so you know... This song makes me think of you.

Sky's the Limit: And your... hockey stick. Mmm. I see some self-care in my future tonight. HBU?

Hockey stick and an eggplant emoji.

Me: Self-care?

Sky's the Limit: 😊🍆

Me: You won't need self-care when I'm there to get you off, babe.

Me: Unless you want me to watch you get yourself off? That I can do.

I press play on the video and watch the singer ask for a man to keep riding him. Spreading his cheeks and making him scream, creaming inside him and pounding his ass. The song is dirty as hell. Heat spreads, blood rushing to my groin. Images of pounding Sky's ass after I spread him wide.

Fucking hell. Sky will pay for the raging hard cock in my pants. I'll take it out on his ass.

Me: Fuck

Sky's the Limit: 🍆 am I in trouble? Tell me I'm in trouble. Yassss, papi 🍆 Will you spank me? I've been soooo naughty."

The *cream inside of me* gets lodged in my brain. Does he want that? Me. Bare inside of him. Shooting my load deep. My dick throbs insistently. Maybe it's soon, but it's definitely time for a conversation.

Me: Fuck me.

Sky's the Limit: Yes, please.

Me: You're ridiculously fucking hot.

Me: I'm fucking surrounded by jocks, and your naughty ass gave me a hard-on when I can't do anything about it.

Sky's the Limit: Something to look forward to.

Me: I always look forward to being with you

Sky's the Limit: Stop it! I'm blushing.

Me: Liar

Sky's the Limit: Fair.

Sky's the Limit. Not blushing, but I'm a shameless hussy and I need your cock.

My eyes close on a groan.

"Dude, you're so fucking whipped." I open my eyes and look over at Leigh. Denial is futile, so I simply shrug.



AFTER PRACTICE, I found more messages from Sky. Stirring me up, egging me on. I'm on him as soon as I get through his door. We stumble our way to his room and out of our clothes. It happens so fast, it barely registers in my brain.

"Don't be gentle with me, Landon. I can take it. Manhandle me. Shove me." He pauses to shove my shoulders a little. Sparks go off inside my brain.

"Jesus, fuck, Sky."

"Do it. Hold me down. Choke me a little. Fucking let yourself go with me." Our eyes meet. Desperation and fire fill his gaze. "Please, baby."

The *please baby* fucks me up good. My control snaps almost audibly.

"On your knees." He complies immediately. Kneeling on the bed on all fours, facing away from me. That ink goes on for miles. Trailing from his left shoulder, lining one side of his spine, onto his juicy ass and curving onto his thigh.

The round curve of his cheeks is too tempting. Using the flat of my hand, I smack the fleshy bottom side of his right cheek. His moan is long and drawn out. I trace my fingers across the blush that appears, and he gasps. “Feels good?”

“Yes.” The word is a hiss of sound. His hips rock, instinctively searching for the sweet relief of friction, the contrast of sensations driving him wild.

I kneel behind him and curl myself around him, my chest brushing against the smooth, muscled skin of his back. Reaching around him, I pull him up with me so we’re both kneeling. My nails drag up his chest and squeeze his throat. Not too hard, but harder than I normally do.

He moans, and I feel it rumble from my hand and down my arm. It’s quite possibly the sexiest thing I’ve ever experienced. I squeeze a little harder and marvel at the goosebumps visibly breaking out across his skin. Over his shoulder, I can see his nipples are hard points, his cock is hard, skin tight, head flushed an angry purple.

And fuck me, I’m helpless to deny him anything.

The urge to brush kisses across his shoulder is irresistible. I give in to the desire and bite for good measure. Sinking my teeth into the firm muscle, sucking and licking the spot.

My other hand swirls and teases around his nipples. Back and forth. I tug one firmly, and his gasp is music to my ears. My hand slides down to jack his dick a few times.

“Fuck. Fuck me, Landon. *Yes.*” His hips are rocking, mimicking sex, begging for me to breach his hole.

I release his throat in exchange for the lube.

My fingers trace his crease, rubbing and circling the wet, puckered skin of his rim. He’s already slick and ready for me. My teeth sink into my bottom lip, and I groan. My cock pulses out a bead of precum.

“Fuck, baby, what did you do? Did you get your hole nice and ready for me?” My words are deep, husky. Whispered into his ear, he shivers in my arms.

“Yesss.” He moans the word. My fingers easily breach him. His hole is nice and soft, already stretched. A groan leaves me when I feel how slick he is inside. Fuck, I want to feel it on my bare cock. No barriers. Just Sky.

That conversation I planned gets bumped up to urgent status on my to-do list as I slide a condom on.

My hand grasps my now sheathed cock, and I aim the head at his ass. It clenches and releases, hungry for me.

My cockhead breaches his tight ring of muscle and he takes matters into his own hands. He slams his ass back on my dick, engulfing me in one go. Head thrown back onto my shoulder, he shouts his pleasure.

Our groans are animalistic, primal in the quiet room. The scent of sex is heavy in the air. It’s fucking delicious.

His hips rock, throwing his ass back onto my cock, forcing me in and out of his tight channel. I’m not moving, Sky is doing all the work. He’s essentially jacking himself off with my hand and fucking himself onto my dick.

Sweat drips down my face, dripping into my eyes. It trickles down my back and between our bodies. His back slides slickly against my chest and abs.

His movements are sinuous and cause sparks to detonate along my nerve endings. It’s too hard to resist. My hips pump, in and out.

Sky’s sweat-slick skin beckons me, and I draw my tongue up his neck to his ear. My teeth tug at his flesh as I pound my cock into him.

Using one hand, I find the space between his shoulder blades and push, shoving him down until his chest meets the bed. His ass is lifted high, wide open and taking everything I’ve got. Adjusting the angle of my thrusts just so until I find it, I wait.

“Oh, God, yessss,” he rasps out as his ass tightens around me. Got him. I keep my thrusts steady on his prostate and pound harder. His ass grips my cock tighter. Slick heat surrounds me. I’m on fucking fire.

I could live in Sky's ass. I swear it was made just for my cock. *He* was made for me. Fucking hell. This man is everything.

His body undulates. How he manages to roll his hips like that is a mystery.

Sky reaches back and grabs my ass, pulling me deeper inside him.

He shimmies against me, needing more, and I pull him back up, one hand firmly around his throat again. His arm flings back and circles behind my head. Fingers thread through my hair and tug, the sting amping me up.

Holy shit, that's hot. I watch him, mesmerized by the sight of his tattoos flexing and shifting with every thrust. His back rasps over my nipples, lighting me up even more.

Over his shoulder, I can see his cock looks ready to explode. Precum leaks in a steady stream from the swollen, purple tip. My mouth waters for a taste. I dip my other hand down and drag my thumb over his sensitive cockhead, and he shivers against me.

He moans in protest when I release him, but his head tips back to watch my hand. When I suck my thumb, his eyes roll back with a groan. His flavor explodes on my tongue.

I slide my hand back down and start jacking him. My baby needs release. I'm so close, and I need him to come with me. I need it more than I need my next breath.

My teeth sink into the cord of his neck, flicking the skin gently with my tongue, then sucking. I alternate between pumping his cock and rubbing my thumb through his leaking slit. Thrusting relentlessly into his ass, in and out.

Tension tightens his body, and I tighten my hand just a little more around his throat.

"Ungh, mmm, ohhh fuccckkkk," he breathes, cum gushing all over my hand as he spasms and shivers through his orgasm.

Fuck yes. Achievement unlocked. His ass pulses around me. I can feel him coming on my cock. He squeezes me harder than I've ever felt and sets off my own orgasm.

I twitch and shiver, my cock throbbing and pulsing into the condom. I resent the hell out of that latex barrier.

I want him marked and covered in my cum. Want it leaking out of his hole.

He's mine.

My vision whites out as I finish with that image in my head. My soul may or may not leave my body for a minute there. Fucking intense. Jesus.

Sex with Sky has been fire since day one. But this is some next-level shit. Nobody could ever compare to this man.

The moans leaving his mouth will live in my mind for eternity. The sexiest fucking sounds on the planet. His moans even beat out the sound of skates on ice. A stick connecting with the puck.

It's official.

I. Am. Fucking. Gone. For. Him.

Ropes of cum continue to spill all over my hand and onto the bed. My hand pumps, jacking him through his aftershocks and rocking into him gently. I release his throat to swipe my fingers through the mess of cum.

Bringing my fingers up to his mouth, I order, "Open your mouth for me, baby. Suck my fingers, but don't swallow." My dick twitches when he obeys instantly. Tongue flicking out, hungrily lapping at my fingers before sucking them into his mouth. His tongue is warm and slick. "Good, now gimme your mouth, Sky. Kiss me."

Our tongues tangle and his flavor fills my mouth. He gently tugs my hair and moans. His body twitches as he trembles in my arms.

He was made to be in my arms. My perfect counterpart.

I can't stop kissing him. That connection to him is vital. I have never felt closer to someone than in this moment. Like I know both myself and him on a deeper, more intimate level. My stomach flutters and my muscles tighten, feeling vulnerable and exposed.

But safe. Sky is safe. He's mine.

Carefully, I pull out of him, making sure not to lose the condom. Since he's wrapped so tightly in my arms, I feel the flinch he tries to hide. I break the kiss and look down into his face. The blissed-out smirk and his closed eyes should calm my worries down. But I can't help it. I'd dicked him down harder than anyone I've ever been with. I'd never forgive myself if I hurt him.

I cup his cheek gently and raise his face to mine. "Did I hurt you, baby?" His eyes open to meet my concerned gaze.

"Mmm, you hurt me so good, *papi*," He teases. *Papi. Christ.* He giggles at my expression and pats my cheek. "You didn't hurt me. I'm good, I promise. In all seriousness, I'll be sore for a few days, but it was worth it. And honestly, I look forward to feeling you in my ass every time I sit down. That's a memory I'll relive for life. Absolute fire." He smacks a kiss to my lips. "Definitely going into my spank bank." After I wrap the used condom in a tissue from his nightstand, he reaches for me, pulling me to lay down next to him. "Now, we nap. Later, join me in a warm bath? That'll be soothing for both of us."

"Perfection." And I mean it. Wrapping him in my arms for a nap after that epic sex session is the epitome of perfection. And a bath afterwards would soothe both of our sore bodies. I hate to sleep away some of our precious time together, but we both need the rest. Shadows bruise the tender skin under his gorgeous eyes. He's had a rough week.

I spoon behind him, wrapping him in my arms. He backs his sexy ass right into my cock as I tuck my nose into his neck and breathe him in. His scent fills my lungs and calms me. Caramel, cinnamon, spice, sweat, and sex. Sky's scent is one of my favorite things. It reminds me of happiness.

Skylar

I t's kind of embarrassing, but I'm actually nervous to meet Landon's mom. His favorite person.

I've heard only good things about Annie Spencer. In theory, I shouldn't be nervous. She sounds like someone I'd enjoy being around. Good-hearted and kind and has a sense of humor according to Landon.

And her son is amazing, so she can't be too bad, right?

Regardless, my guts are twisted into knots. It's such an odd thing to experience since I don't get nervous very often, if at all. I shake my hands in front of me, hoping it'll alleviate the tingly feeling.

What if she hates me?

She won't. That answering voice in my head sounds suspiciously like Landon.

My breath leaves me in a rush. *You can do this. She's only a human. Meeting someone new is not that scary.*

Maybe if I keep repeating it enough, I'll believe it.

Opening my door, I climb out of my SUV and bleep the locks behind me. Consciously, I try my best to measure my steps to walk calmly across the RCA parking lot. The last thing I need is to get sweaty.

That would make a lovely first impression.

Annie and I have been texting back and forth, and we'll be meeting at our seats before warmups begin. It's still early, but we wanted a little time to chat before the team hits the ice.

I make my way into the arena, passing restaurants and bars the whole way. My eyes longingly rest on The Sandbar. A drink would loosen me up, but I'd also probably chug it with the way I'm feeling right now. And tipsy is not a cute look for me when meeting the boyfriend's mom. I can't help my automatic cringe.

Powering forward, I make my way into our section and carefully navigate down the stairs towards the glass. My legs are like jelly, for fuck's sake. My hand grips the railing, and I watch my feet as I make my way down. I'm about midway down the stairs, when my eyes flick up to survey the area.

I've seen Annie on TV, on Landon's Instagram, and in pictures. So I know who I'm looking for. My eyes land on her blonde head right away. Holy fuck. There she is. The woman is earlier than I am, just like Landon warned me would happen. I'd purposely arrived earlier than I planned, and she still beat me here.

Annie made sure we're sitting along the glass in the corner of the arena. This end will be our defensive zone during the first and third period.

My body is barely in the row when her head turns, and Landon's green eyes turn and land on me. It's trippy. Seeing his eyes in this woman. *His mother.*

My stomach flutters, and my heart starts galloping away in my chest.

The moment of truth.

Her face lights up with her smile. She rushes over to me. "Hi!" She's a few inches shorter than me, but she snatches me

into her arms for a quick hug. Her perfume surrounds me, something light and floral. Warm and comforting. “I’m Annie. It’s so nice to meet you!”

Her enthusiasm eases me. Unfurling deep inside and spreading. Instant acceptance from this woman who means the world to Landon, and I haven’t even spoken a word.

I kiss her cheek and clear my throat. “Skylar Donovan, ma’am. Please call me Sky.”

Her eyes narrow and she swats my shoulder. I’m under a spotlight or x-ray vision. It’s unnerving. Like the woman is looking through each and every hidden part of me and examining it under a microscope. *Dear lord, please don’t find me lacking.*

“Okay, Skylar.” She winks at me. And fuck. My heart pinches in my chest. I don’t have it in me to correct her. “And none of that ma’am business. Call me Annie, okay?”

I automatically nod at her no-nonsense tone. There’s no denying this woman.

“So you’re the one keeping my son away from his mother.” It’s not a question. My eyes fly up to hers. They’re still narrowed on me in contemplation.

“What? I... Um. No. I would never,” My words trip all over themselves.

The sparkle in her green eyes gives her away right before she busts up laughing. My tension leaves me in a rush, shoulders finally dropping away from my ears when my laughter joins hers.

She rubs my arm. The look on her face is soft and kind. “Better?” I nod. “Good. Now take a breath and relax, okay?”

I’m powerless to do anything but follow her directive. My chest rises with my inhale, and I hold it in, then slowly release it. And repeat.

“Much better.” Her smile is huge. Proud. “You were so tense it was stressing me out. I had to pull you out of it somehow.”

She has me laughing again and I've only been standing here for about two minutes. I think I already love her.

"Oh my god, did it work! I'm not a nervous person. I can talk to anyone, but I was low-key freaking out."

"Nothing low-key about it." She sends me a mocking side-eye that makes me laugh.

I sigh. "You'll forever call me on my shit, huh?"

"No doubt about it." She smirks.

My grin lights up my face, my cheeks trying their best to reach my ears. I probably look crazy, but oh well. "Fantastic. I think I'll keep you."

She rests her head on my shoulder. "Likewise. Anyone who makes my son as happy as you do will always have a special place in my heart." Her voice is a little thick with emotion and her fist is clenched above her heart. "He deserves the world."

My voice softens and thickens with matching sentiment. "Yes. He really does. And I intend to give Landon everything. He's the best person I know, aside from my abuela."

She nods against my shoulder. Affection seems to come easy to her. It's obvious this is where Landon gets it from. My heart swells.

"I'm going to need to meet her."

I smile. "Yes, *claro. Ella me matará-*" Abruptly, I remember and cut myself off. "*Ay*, sorry, it's automatic sometimes when I'm thinking or talking about her. It's a habit. But she'll kill me if I don't introduce you all."

She turns her head and looks up at me. "Speak freely. I understand a lot more than I could ever speak. I've picked up a lot working in the medical field. If anything goes over my head, I'll just ask you to translate for me." She sends me a devilish smile. "And I know for a fact, my son is obsessed with you speaking Spanish."

That gets me. Landon is the cutest fucking thing ever. He told his mom? My smile is equally devilish, and I pull out a

fake southern accent. “Why thank you kindly for this ammunition, Miss Annie. I shall endeavor to use it against our dear Landon every chance that I get.”

Her smile grows.

Honestly, it’s crazy to think I was nervous to meet her. Our conversation flows effortlessly. We have so much in common in regard to our careers. Movies. Our love of hockey. Even music.

I’m relaxed back in my seat, completely in my element and enjoying every second of my time with Annie.

The Bull Sharks take to the ice for warmups with the usual fanfare. The New York Tycoons are introduced sedately in comparison.

Landon studiously avoids looking anywhere at us during his warm up routine.

“Superstitions.” I shrug at her.

“I know, right?” she retorts.

Landon is on the ice stretching, limbering up his hips with frog stretches and that damn thrusting. Dammit.

I can’t watch.

His mom is right next to me. Either I’m extremely obvious or she’s very observant. She meets my eyes and laughs at me. “You can watch your man, you know.”

My head shakes back and forth. “Nope, sorry. Not when he’s thrusting his hips like that, I can’t!” My cheeks heat. I don’t blush, but damn if I’m not blushing next to Landon’s mom.

She pats my leg. “It’s safe now.”

Chuckling, I turn back to the ice. “Thank God.”

The team runs through passing drills, taking shots on goal. Once his routine is done, Landon skates over to the glass in front of us and knocks on it with his stick. Luc is right behind him. He places his hockey stick between his hip and his elbow, mouths what looks like “*marry me*” to Annie, and raises his

hands up in a heart shape that has her cracking up laughing. “Stop being ridiculous, Lucas.”

He nods at her and smirks. “Yes, ma’am. Right away, ma’am.”

Landon’s face is a storm cloud, a furrow between his brows. He shoves Luc’s shoulder. “Fuck off, Leigh.”

Luc hands Landon a warmup puck. Landon balances the puck on the blade of his hockey stick, bouncing it a few times. His eyes meet mine. “Ready?” he asks me.

“Oh, yay! Yes.” Warmth spreads in my chest. It’s something simple, but I’ve never gotten a warmup puck before. He nods and tosses the puck over the glass on his first try. It lands neatly in my cupped hands, and I whoop and hold up my spoils. He winks at me and waves at us before turning and skating away.

My eyes track his movement until he’s off the ice. Finally, I look down at the puck. My heart squeezes in my chest. Now I’ll have something tangible to remember tonight.

When I finally raise my eyes, Annie is watching me with a soft smile on her face.

The arena is starting to fill up; it’s getting closer to puck drop. We decide now is a good time to grab drinks. There’s a bit of a line, but nothing too crazy just yet. Nothing like the lines during intermission.

Annie and I both order hard seltzers and a bottle of water each. We make our way back to our seats just in time for the lights to dim and the National Anthem. My heart beats faster in my chest. This feeling will never get old, but it’s enhanced by sitting in this arena next to my boyfriend’s mom. My boyfriend. The pro hockey player.

The team intro is played, and the Bull Sharks enter one at a time to circle the ice like predators ready to devour prey. Annie is bouncing and shimmying to the music.

She leans over to yell, “I love this intro; it was the smartest thing for them to use this song.”

“*Blade* is iconic and this song at the beginning is elite.”

She beams at me. “Yes! I love that movie. And our boys are ready to cause a bloodbath out here.”

The announcer calls, “Introducing your Bull Sharks starting lineup! Your starting forwards, number 9 Chris LeBlanc. Number 7 Lucas Leighton. Number 6 Gilbert Jenkins. Your defensemen Number 18 Landon Spencer. Number 87 Thane Murdock. And we have number 30 Viktor Davidoff in net.”

The audience screams loudest for Davi. He’s been on the team for around ten years.

The volume surprises me. It vibrates through my chest. It must be a headrush hearing the crowd when you’re actually playing the game.

Annie and I whoop and shout along with everyone else. LeBlanc faces off with one of the Tycoons at center ice. The linesman drops the puck, there’s a scramble of sticks, and LeBlanc gains the first possession.

It’s a whirlwind of movement, but from this vantage point, I have a clear view of all of the action. I can see both nets pretty well from here. I’m sure I’m forever spoiled. I don’t know how I’ll ever go back to higher seats after experiencing this magic.

Watching the game with Annie is getting added to my list of favorite things ever. She understands the game more than Addy, Cayden, and I combined. It comes with the territory of being a hockey mom, I guess.

The lines change frequently. One of the Tycoons trips Bash and gets sent to the penalty box on a two-minute minor, giving the Bull Sharks the first power play of the night. Anticipation rises along with the volume of the crowd.

A chant begins, “Let’s go Bull Sharks, let’s go!”

New York scrambles in their attempt to kill the power play, but the boys bring the pressure. Murdock’s bullet is deflected by an arm. Bash snags the rebound and it’s a goal, the puck passing right under the goalie’s outstretched arm.

The goal horn sounds and it's mayhem. My excitement can't be contained. I'm out of my seat cheering. Murdock rushes to hug Bash and thump him on the back, then Bash strums his hockey stick like it's an air guitar and drops to one knee. Celly done, he rises and skates off to fist bump his teammates on the bench. Cow bells, clapping, whistling, and shouting. Pure chaos. And I'm obsessed with this feeling.

New York manages to tie it up with thirty seconds left in the first period, but we score two back-to-back goals in the second period that New York can't recover from. The Bull Sharks win three to one and I'm buzzing. High with the vibes in the arena. And happy to have fully immersed myself in the moment with Annie.

It's easy to see us doing this frequently and not getting bored.

The arena clears out quickly, but we remain in our seats for a bit. Finally, Annie stands and jerks her head in a follow-me motion. She leads the way out of the stands, and I follow her to a hallway. We pass staff members who smile and nod at her. Some wave while others greet her by name. I have no idea where I am or how I got here, but everything looks familiar from when I first met Landon.

She leads me farther down the hallway, and we sit down on a bench close to what is obviously the locker room. The locker room full of a bunch of potentially naked jocks.

Jesus Gay Christ. Send help.

People are bustling up and down the corridor, but nobody bothers us, aside from the random greetings here and there.

"Landon should be out any minute. He always comes out faster when he knows I'm here waiting for him. Otherwise, that son of mine would sit there fiddling on his phone, waiting for Lucas all night."

A sympathetic sound leaves me, "Yeah, Landon has mentioned Luc's tendency to linger about."

"It would drive me nuts. I don't know how he manages to wait so patiently."

I laugh at that. “Same! I’m too impatient and antsy to sit around and occupy myself, but Landon does it.” Her mouth opens, and I raise my hand for a pause. “I’m completely occupied talking to you, so this waiting doesn’t count.”

Her mouth purses to the side and her eyes narrow infinitesimally. “If you say so.”

My nod is quite firm and decisive.

A moment later, Landon comes out, head turning to the side until he spots us. He smiles and makes his way over. We both stand, and Annie pulls Landon into a hug.

“Um, hi, babe. I love your mom. She’s awesome.” I wrap my arm around her shoulders and pull her into my side. She’s so petite like Addy. So cute. “I think I’ll keep her. I’m adopting her.”

Landon decides to play party-pooper. “That’s not how it works, Sky,” he says.

“Um, do you think that will stop me from trying? And do I look like I care?” I retort playfully.

Annie cracks up laughing. “Do *we* look like we care? The adopting will be entirely mutual.”

Landon’s shoulders shrink in a cringe so hard, we both crack up. “That sounds way too incestuous for my comfort. You two are trouble together,” he tells us, his eyes bouncing back and forth between us. “What have I done?”

“But you love trouble,” I tell him.

His mom nods at him.

“For fuck’s sake.” His eyes roll heavenward, his lips moving. Like he’s praying to God for mercy. “You will forever be a team against me, huh? Is this how I can expect all future interactions to go?”

Annie’s smile widens when he says future, and she winks at me. “Yes, definitely.”

“I’ve gotta get going, boys. We need to meet for lunch soon, okay?” Her eyes meet mine. They show nothing but

earnest excitement. Acceptance and love. We just met, but I wholeheartedly feel like I'm part of her inner circle now. Completely. No half measures with Annie.

“Okay, Mama Spencer.” Her cheeks flush a light pink, and she nods.



ANNIE and I meet for lunch on a day Landon has practice. He's texted each of us numerous times to check in and see how everything is going, which is funny since he was the calm one the day I met her.

We send him a selfie, our heads together and smiling, eyes bright.

He sends back heart-eye emojis and a smiling emoji.

It finally seems to calm his freak out.

The conversation flows easily between us. Almost as easily as it always does with Landon and me. My smile hasn't left my face since I sat down with her.

There's just something about these Spencers that wraps its way around my heart and doesn't let go. I'm in deep. It's fucking terrifying but I'm going to hold on to this feeling as long as possible.

A slight media frenzy breaks out after I sit with Annie at the next home game. It's been a week since the last time we met up here, but this time she picked me up, so Landon can drive us to my place afterwards.

Apparently, we'd had eyes on us at that game, too.

Speculation rises about Landon's mystery man. It tickles me that everyone is so intrigued. *Who is this mystery man who's so close to Spence's mom? Where has Savannah disappeared to? Has their romantic entanglement ended? Has she been replaced with a new beau?*

Yes. Yes, she has. All this attention on little ol' me?

Pictures surface from the yacht party. The club. Events we all attended. Savannah and Landon look close. Involved. The next photos are of us. Heads together on the yacht. Dancing at the club. Hand in hand rushing out of the club and into the waiting car.

The club photos are quite damning.

I'm honestly shocked there aren't any photos of us at brunch. Can you imagine the media frenzy if photos got out of me feeding Landon?

Now the articles and posts run rampant. I've gotten a slew of new followers since we arrived at the game tonight. My DMs are full, and I've had a few calls from unknown numbers.

It's mind-blowing how easy it is to find someone. I'm not hard to find, but still.

After the Bull Sharks beat Pittsburgh, Landon and I head to my place. He's parked behind the arena so there's no media access. We're able to make a smooth escape.

His tension seems to grow with each vibration of my phone on our drive home. As soon as we get inside, he takes my hand and pulls me to sit next to him on my couch.

His lips are pressed together, and he threads his hand through his dirty blonde hair. His green eyes are dark and somber. "I don't know why I wasn't expecting this. Expecting them to catch wind of us so soon. We never even discussed going public and now you're getting swamped with attention. I'm sorry the choice was taken away from you. It really wasn't like this for Savannah."

Reaching over, I take his hand and bring it to my lips. "Baby, I'm not bothered by any of this. In case you're unaware, I'm all in here. The attention doesn't scare me or bother me at all. The notifications are a bit much, but a few setting changes on my apps and that'll be that. I don't care who knows about us. They can shout it from the rooftops while I dance down the street for all I care."

That gets a smile, his muscles slacken, and his tension visibly drains away. My chest swells. "How about we post a

selfie of our own? Something that we choose to share?”

His smile grows, and he nods, scooting closer to me on the sofa. He wraps his arm around my shoulders, our heads are tucked together. We take a few so we have some options. We look through them when we're done, and one thing is glaringly obvious. We look so happy. Cheeks flushed, eyes bright, smiles wide.

God, I'm obsessed with this man, and it clearly shows.

I think he's a little obsessed with me, too. Inner me squeals with delight. Outer me has cheeks that ache from smiling.

Together, we decide to post a selfie of him pressing a gentle kiss on the corner of my smiling mouth. Both of our eyes are closed, but our affection is a neon flashing sign.

“May I do the honors?” I ask with a head jerk toward his phone.

Wordlessly, he hands me his phone. Selecting the photo, I tag myself, then start typing out a caption. Hashtag my new beau, friends to lovers, gamers to lovers, and finally LTBSTL as an inside joke.

“Now we're Instagram official.” Nodding, I hand him back his phone.

There's satisfaction in his smile. He cups my cheek, thumb rasping over my facial hair in a caress so sweet I might just melt. “Come to bed, boyfriend. I need your body against mine.”

I'm off and running up the stairs to my room in a flash. His laughter erupts behind me.

Landon

I t's the third period in our game against Carolina and I'm fucking wiped. Antonov is out with a suspected injury, so my shifts on ice have been more frequent. We're scrambling to compensate and it shows. Carolina leads three to two.

Carolina slides another puck past our defenses and right into the net. Davi's shoulders crumble, but he shakes it off quickly, ready to defend the net against the next shots on goal.

We try to rally, but it's not enough at this point in the game.

The locker room is a very somber place tonight. I hit the showers as quickly as possible, ready to wash away the failure. It's our second loss in a row on this road trip. It's crushing. We haven't lost back-to-back games since January.

I may be wiped, but I'm already looking forward to practice so we can work through what went wrong and move forward. St. Louis is a strong team, and we need to bring our A-game.

If we play them how we played tonight? It won't be pretty.

After my shower, I dress and pull out my phone. Mom and Pops have both texted. I send them both a quick reply and dive into Sky's messages. He's texted his usual stream of reactions to plays, linesmen calls, and goals. He'd sent a final message that boosts my spirits.

Sky's the Limit: You played your asses off tonight, but I'm gonna need yours back, okay?

It's ridiculous, but it makes me smile. He'd included a heart.

Me: Miss you, babe.

Sky's the Limit: Miss you too 🙄

That's definitely one of his favorite emojis.

Leigh finishes his shower and pulls on his clothes, then takes out his phone and starts whistling. His chest is way too puffed up for someone who played a losing game tonight.

"What's your deal, bro? You're way too cheerful right now."

Leigh looks over at me and winks playfully. "You're welcome. I brought you a gift and it's not even your birthday yet."

What?

"What are you babbling about?"

He jerks his head in the direction of the exit. "C'mon. Someone special is waiting for you."

No way. He can't mean Sky, could he?

We exit the locker rooms, and he leads me down a hall to a sitting area. Sky's dark hair catches my eyes immediately. His head is down, eyes on his phone. His legs are curled up on the chair, and he's doom scrolling while he waits.

My hungry eyes drink him in. He's so fucking beautiful.

"Fuck, Leigh. How did he manage to get here without a media frenzy?"

“He flew in at the ass crack of dawn.” He gives me a shove. “Now go say hi.”

My legs move, automatically following Leigh’s directive. Sky’s eyes flick up at the movement, and a breathtaking smile fills his face. White teeth shining, full lips curved happily.

He reaches for me, and I scoop him into my arms for a scorching kiss. It’s slow and dirty and delicious. I missed my man and fuck anyone who doesn’t like what they see.

My arms are crossed under his juicy ass, his body pressed tightly to mine. He moans in my arms, and I pull him tighter against me. My cock takes notice, but everything inside me settles.

Home. He feels like home to me. Pulling my lips away from his, I just tuck my cheek against his head. “Leigh helped you set this up? He couldn’t wait to brag,” I murmur into his ear.

He nods against me. “He sure did. He did good, too, picking a nice seat where I could see everything, but not too close, where you’d see me. I’ll also be traveling to St. Louis. Wanderlust is mostly satisfied.” He says it with a chuckle.

Leigh moves closer to us, speaking quietly. “Now, I know you guys can’t wait to get to the hotel and fuck all night, thank you very much, by the way, but you’re going to need to make an appearance at the bar. The boys are helping us sneak Sky into your room.”

My head rears back with surprise. “They’re in on it, too?” He nods, beaming and puffed up like a proud peacock. “The way everyone gossips, I’m surprised nobody let it slip.”

We end up making our way to a local bar. We’ve been here before. It’s a nice, chill place to hang and grab a bite. Sky orders his requisite margarita on the rocks, and I stick with water. We’ve ordered enough food to satisfy a ravenous hockey team. Or at least part of it.

We’re laughing and talking, food and drinks flowing. Sky is tipsy, and it’s the cutest thing. He’s gesturing and talking with his hands, more so than usual, if you can believe that.

Discreetly, I ask the server to bring him water next. Tipsy Sky is more than welcome. Drunk Sky? Not so much. Drunk Sky can't participate in dirty hotel sex. I'd be satisfied if all we do is cuddle tonight, but he's wearing my jersey and I seem to remember some plans I have for him and that ass.

The guys are talking over each other, but my man sinks a little into himself. "What's wrong, baby?" My lips are against his ear. He nuzzles against me a moment, then turns toward me.

"I've barely heard a word from Cayden. He's still not taking my calls. Even Andrew is being shifty and dodging me." The sadness on his face is hard to see. He's always so bright and happy. "I'm just really bummed out. I thought we were all closer than this. This vibe makes me miss my friends."

Leigh's voice draws our attention. "Where's your favorite place to jump, Sky?"

He perks up next to me, momentarily distracted from his thoughts. "Drop Zone Palm Beach and Drop Zone Key West are my local faves. California, Oregon, and Utah were pretty badass. The landscape is breathtaking."

Leigh is hanging on his every word, leaning forward in his seat. Sky takes another sip of his drink. I slide his glass of water closer to him, and he sends me a side-eye with a smirk. He knows what I'm up to. Shrugging my shoulders at him, I gesture for him to continue.

"I've never skydived, and I have no desire to," Thane shakes his head when he says it.

"Here, here." I raise my glass of water in toast. "It's a miracle I drag my ass into a plane as often as I do. Flying sucks. Heights suck."

"I suck." Sky bobs his eyebrows at me, then winks. Shit. My fucking cheeks heat up with a blush, and my teammates lose their shit laughing.

Sky is beaming proudly. I'm not shy, but he does something to me.

LeBlanc leans in. “What’s it like?”

Sky props his chin on his fist and leans forward. “Sucking? Wel-” I wrap my arm around him and cover his mouth. He licks my hand, and I jerk it away.

“Dude.” I laugh at his antics.

LeBlanc is trying not to laugh, but his shoulders are shaking. He’s losing the battle. “No. I mean skydiving.”

Sky nods. He sits up, crosses his hands on the table, and closes his eyes. Clearly gathering himself.

Here we go. Angling my body to face him, I lean back in my chair, a soft smile on my face.

The guys watch him, fidgeting and sharing looks while they wait.

He clears his throat. “There’s no greater feeling than embracing the human audacity to leap from a plane.” The Shakespearean accent surprises everyone and laughter rolls around the table. His arms gesticulate. “We are not limited to the skies, but freed by them. To dance upon the air. In the sky. Amidst clouds and daydreams while plummeting in a freefall toward this wondrous planet.” He stands, arms widespread like a bird, gently flapping in a mimicry of flight. “To glide like a bird. Soaring and exploring. Yet still. In freefall. And yet, our equipment is a welcome companion. A canopy, a tool, a sure necessity to slow our fall and guide us gently back into the waiting arms of mother earth.” He sits back down next to me with a flourish.

Tears. I have tears from laughing so hard. My friends are in a similar state.

Sky is such a unique human. My heart thumps in my chest. I’m head over heels for him. Every part of him calls to me.

Afterward, we make our way to the hotel a few blocks over. It’s a short walk and we get there quickly. Nobody is lingering on our floor and it’s ridiculously easy to sneak Sky in. My eyes land on his bag in the center of my bed. “Leigh responsible for that, too?”

“Yup,” he pops the ‘p’. He’s already barefoot. His hands dip to the waistband of his jeans, popping the button and slowly sliding his zipper down. “Special delivery for Landon Spencer. He forgot his most important *package* at home. But alas, we have rectified that error.” He drops his pants and boxers in one go. Cock springing free, it peeks out from beneath the hem of my jersey. My mouth waters for a taste.

“His package has arrived.” He backs up and leans against the dresser, hand around his cock. Jacking himself in a slow, sensual motion.

My shoes and socks are the first to go. Jacket, shirt, pants, and underwear not far behind. I can’t strip slowly right now. Only efficiently. I need my skin on his.

“You got lube in this bag?” He nods, biting his lip. “Good.”

I retrieve the bottle and pour some directly on the head of my cock. Using my hand, I coat myself in the silky liquid. My chest brushes against the rough material of the jersey.

And when my dick rubs against his, I shiver. He wraps his hand around our shafts, jacking us together in his strong grip. Pleasure ignites a path down my spine and straight into my balls.

Reaching between his legs, I find his bare, puckered hole with two fingers. Pressing and massaging.

“Ungh,” he grunts and moans. I need to taste it, swallow his sounds deep inside of me. My lips press to his, tongue darting out to dip into his mouth. His flavor explodes on my tongue. The salty-sweet taste of margarita, tequila, and an essence that is uniquely Sky. My head spins. Drunk and dizzy on him and the passion rising between us. Our facial hair scrapes, a stinging burn that amps me up.

My fingers breach his ass, swallowed by his warmth. He gasps, hand stroking our cocks faster.

My orgasm is approaching way too fast. Pulling out of his grasp, I lift him onto the dresser. I spread him wide, one leg bent and spread out, the other resting over my shoulder. His

dick throbs where it rests on his abs, balls hanging heavy. He reaches down to lift them out of the way.

His hole flexes and pulses. I pump some more lube onto my fingers and work them back inside.

Curling them, I rub his prostate gently with every thrust. Stretching him and scissoring them open, ensuring he's ready for me. He whines when I remove them, but moans when my cockhead insistently prods his hole, "Gimme your cock. *Lo necesito.*"

What Sky wants, Sky gets. I slam inside him, and his warmth surrounds my bare cock. We're waiting for more recent results before I shoot my load inside him, but both of us confirmed we were negative on our last physicals.

My hips pump, sliding in and out of him.

One of his hands is clenched on the dresser, the other helps brace his thigh. I grip the jersey in my fist, lifting it so I can see his abs ripple and tense with each movement. I thread my other hand behind his head to grasp the short hair there. Bringing our mouths together, tongues thrusting in time with our hips.

The dresser rhythmically thumps the wall, and I can't find a single fuck to give. Fucking Sky is all that matters. Being with him. Loving him with my body. With my soul, if I'm honest. My heart swells in my chest, ready to burst with the realization.

This man is everything to me. And I need to see my name on his back. Proclaiming him as mine. Only mine.

I pull out and help him down. Grasping his hips, I turn him away from me, putting him right where I want him. I spread his ass cheeks and find his hole again. He's open and ready for me. I thrust inside, easily slamming home.

My hands grab his shoulders for leverage. The giant number eighteen on his back is forefront in my vision. With one hand, I shift the material around, making sure Spencer is fully visible.

“Fuck yes, baby.” My hips pump faster, the dresser thumping the wall continuously. “You’re fucking mine, Sky.”

“Yes, *ungh, soy tuyo.*” He’s panting, moaning, and grunting with each pump of my dick in his ass.

It takes every single ounce of self-control I have to hold back my orgasm when Sky comes. His hole clenches my cock, shivering and shaking with the force of his release. His moans push me over the edge. Pulling out, I hold his jersey in one fist, and jack my slick cock in the other. My cockhead is red, angry, and ready to explode, brushing his ass cheek with every pump.

His hole is open. Red and puffy. Slick and irresistible. Carefully, I use my thumb to rub it, jersey still clenched in the fingers of that same hand. He moans again and I come. Exploding, shooting my load in hot ropes along his cheeks.

I groan, “Oh, fuck, *yes.* You’re so fucking hot, baby. Look at that ass covered in my cum.” My hand drags my cock along his ass cheek. Shivers and aftershocks wrack our bodies as I wrap myself around him.

“Mmm, I love Toaster Strudels, but I’d rather be a Twinkie.”

My laugh bursts out of me. “Jesus, Sky.”

There’s a thump against the wall in front of us and I can hear someone clapping. “Bravo, guys, good show.” The voice is muffled, but Leigh is easily recognizable.

He’ll never let us live this down, but I still can’t find one single fuck to give. Sky is all that matters.

Skylar

The next morning, we're up early. Luc's smirk won't leave his face, but there's something more there.

It doesn't bother me at all. He'd be lucky to have a sex life as great as ours.

We're in the elevator, on our way down to the restaurant. His eyes are bouncing back and forth between me and Landon. He has a considering look in his eye. He's got something on his mind. "It's a bit weird, guys. I now know what both of you sound like when you come. You're very vocal."

Landon's cheeks pinken. He says he's not shy, but he blushes quite often. It never fails to warm my chest and make me smile. I love putting that look on his face.

Luc shifts from foot to foot.

Landon sighs and leans back against the elevator wall. "Spit it out, Leigh. Jeez. You're making me antsy."

Luc's lips press together, and he looks down for a beat. He nods, then raises his eyes to look at us. "Does anal sex really feel that good? It sure sounded like it."

My first instinct is to laugh, because he can't be serious, but his face tells me he's very serious.

"Yes, for me, it really does. Not all men find it pleasurable, but I love it."

The look on Landon's face is hard to describe. He looks mostly caught off guard. His green eyes land on me, then shift back to Luc.

He sighs very heavily, but answers the question seriously. "Yeah, man. Prostate stimulation is on another level. And if you're with a partner who's down to try it, prostate play when you're getting sucked off or ridden is amazing."

I nod. "Mind-blowing. Toe-curling. Best orgasms of my life."

His eyes widen and he nods slowly. Then he changes the subject as abruptly as he brought it up.

I grab breakfast with the guys, then we all head to the airport. I'm on a separate flight, but I'll be meeting them in Missouri soon.

They take the ice against St. Louis the next day. Right away, I notice there's a shift in the guys. They're definitely on tonight. Whatever threw them off their game, quite literally, the other day, seems to be gone.

It's an all-out slaughter and the Bull Sharks beat St. Louis six to one.

Landon

When I get home, I smile as I park next to Sky in my garage. We end up here most days since it's closest to the arena, training facility, and the hospital. A bunch of his clothes have found their way into my closet and dresser, and his toiletries into my bathroom. It's more domestic than I'm used to, since Savannah never left anything here, but I love seeing his things mixed with mine.

Sky was getting home from work this morning around seven, just as I was leaving for the Frenzy. Today's weight training session was light to prep for tomorrow night's game against Buffalo.

We're so close to the playoffs, I can almost taste it. It's practically a given at this point, but I know better than to take things for granted. Every game is a fight, a battle bringing us one step closer. It helps that we played Winnipeg the day before yesterday and won.

The team has a practice skate a few hours before the game, but tonight? It looks like Sky and I have a free night.

I'm hoping to coax him out on a date. Thanks to an offhand comment made by Leigh, I realized we've never really had one. I intend to rectify that oversight immediately, even though, to me, it feels like we've been dating since day one.

Sky didn't respond to my "otw" text, so I fully expect to find him asleep, but my bed is empty.

I make my way back downstairs, and find the living room and kitchen are also empty. Faint music reaches my ears, and I make my way over to the sliding doors. Sky's swimming, his arms rhythmically breaking the surface of the water with his strokes. He reaches the far end, then turns and continues back across to the other end.

Sliding the door open, the volume of the music increases. The tempo is upbeat, but chill. I walk over to the lounge chairs where Sky left his towel, flip-flops, sunblock, and a bottle of my boujee water. My eyes land on a scrap of burgundy material on the deck. The brand name of his favorite boxer briefs is clearly visible along the black waistband. *Fuck.*

Suddenly, a swim seems like a fabulous idea.

I remove my shirt, athletic shorts, and underwear.

Sky pops up at the opposite end of the pool, shoulders heaving as he catches his breath, holding on to the side.

"Enjoying your skinny-dipping session?" I ask, while walking down the stairs in the shallow end and into the water.

He screeches and whirls around at the sound of my voice, water splashing with his movement. "Landon! *Me asustaste!*"

My shoulders shake.

"Fuck, it's not funny. I didn't hear you come out. I think you scared five years off my life." I can see the moment he realizes I'm just as naked as he is. His hazel eyes seem to glow with hunger as he begins to swim toward me. "Oooh, my my my," he sings softly with the music. "Mhm, paradise indeed."

"What?"

"Paradise. That's the name of the song. And it's accurate. I'm in paradise right now."

He wraps his arms around my neck, strong legs around my waist, and presses a gentle kiss to my lips. My hands instinctively grasp his perfect ass, and hold him close. Every inch of him presses firmly against me, and I gasp at the sensation. I'll never get tired of feeling his skin on mine.

We're both hard, but the kiss stays gentle, unhurried. When we break apart, he rests his head on my shoulder.

"Hi," he says.

I smile and rest my cheek on his head. He's so fucking cute. "Hey, Sky."

He sighs happily and burrows closer.

"So, I have an idea."

"Mhm?" he murmurs.

"I'd like to take you on a date. We've never really had one."

He gasps. "A travesty!"

My chuckle causes him to bounce a little in my arms. "I thought so, too."

"Landon." His voice is heavy, thick with emotion.

"Yeah, baby?"

"I'd really love that."

My smile is impossible to hold back. "I want to take you to Luigi's. It's nothing fancy, but-"

"Shh!" His head pops up, and he places a finger over my mouth. His hazel eyes sparkle with moisture. "It might not be fancy, but it's perfect."



WE END up swimming for hours, playing and wrestling in the water. Talking and sharing more languorous kisses. Sex would be fantastic, not gonna lie, but just *being* with him is one of my favorite things.

This time with Sky is precious, *he's* precious, and I want him to feel it. I'm not in this just for the sex.

He brings out some food he prepared earlier, and we have a light lunch poolside. After our swim, we head inside to take a shower and dress for Luigi's.

He pulls on a pair of tiny white boxer briefs that outline his cock perfectly. His dickprint combined with his fantastic ass makes my temperature rise, and I'm sure I can feel my brain melting. My tongue sticks to the roof of my mouth.

Blood rushes to my groin. Nope. No time for that right now. I step into my closet and pull on a pair of dark-wash jeans and a light purple V-neck tee Sky bought me. The outfit will pair nicely with the all-black Vans I have downstairs.

After I'm dressed, I step out into my room. He's wearing his glasses, black skinny jeans, and a dark red, fitted ribbed tee. He smiles when he catches sight of me.

"Ohmigod, look at that color on you. I knew it. Your eyes are practically glowing."

"Is that why you got me this? Is this color supposed to 'make my eyes pop?'" I smirk.

He nods rapidly. "Yes. And, baby, it is working for you." His eyebrows bob playfully.

I press my lips to his in a soft kiss. "Ready to go?"

"Yep. Let's do this, boyfriend."



OUR DATE at Luigi's is perfect. We're seated at my usual table. It's near the back, and provides us with just the right mix of privacy without having Sky feel like we're too secluded. Grace is just as smitten as I am, doting on him every chance she gets.

We order soup and an antipasto salad to share, and for dinner I order my usual since there's a game tomorrow. He opts for baked ziti, because "carbs and cheese, yes, please."

The food is delicious, and we devour every last morsel.

“Would you boys like any dessert?” She’s beaming at us like a proud mom.

Sky perks up in his chair, so I smile indulgently at him. “Go ahead. Order something. We’ll share.”

“Yes! We’d like the dessert sampler platter, please.” My eyes widen. I should have expected that. He sends a mischievous grin my way, and it’s obvious he’s enjoying my reaction.

“Your boyfriend here is a man after my own heart, Spence.” Grace beams. “I’ll have that right out for you.”

“Thank you, Grace.”

Shaking my head, I smile ruefully. “Not quite what I expected, but I’m down for it.”

He shrugs. “I couldn’t decide what I wanted, and now I don’t have to. Some of each, amirite?”

I laugh. “I can’t fault your logic.”

A few minutes later, Grace brings out our dessert platter with a slice of tiramisu, a giant cannoli, and a small bowl of chocolate gelato with fresh raspberries on top.

“Enjoy,” she says before bustling off to check in with another table.

Sky dips his spoon into the gelato first, scooping up a bite with a raspberry on top. My eyes are glued to his mouth as he chews and swallows. He moans and licks his lips. I need a taste. As I lean forward, his eyes track my movement. His lips curl, like he already knows what I want. Sky meets me halfway, our lips touching in a gentle kiss.

Mmm. Delicious.

Without a doubt, if I’m with Sky, I’m enjoying every moment.

Landon

April

The playoffs are right around the corner. The regular season is winding down. Our ticket to the playoffs is guaranteed at this point. It's been our best season yet.

We can't be complacent. Just because we made it this far, doesn't mean we can take it easy.

We didn't come this far, just to come this far.

We're on a four-game winning streak. Two home games away from the end of the season.

My body is mostly in survival mode. Sleep, travel, hockey, Sky. Repeat. I barely know which way is up. And it'll only get worse. As it is, I'm riding the edge of my limits. Stress is high and I need to get out of my head.

Sky has made it his mission to distract and occupy me whenever he can. And he's been doing a great job, but that doesn't fully satisfy the ache I feel for him. I miss him.

Leigh's voice startles me.

"Huh?" My brow scrunches. I didn't hear a word of what he just said.

"We're already in the air and you didn't freak out during take-off. You're so gone for your guy, you didn't even flinch. He makes you happy, bro." He nods in approval. "I like it."

I look around and notice the flight attendants are already walking around the cabin with the refreshment cart. Leigh's right. I was so preoccupied with thoughts of Sky that I hadn't even noticed take-off.

I'll take the cure for aerophobia for one thousand, Alex. Holy shit.

Although, now that he mentioned it, my nerves try to rise up and choke me, but I work hard to breathe through it.

Focusing on my phone, I continue texting Sky. He's made it his mission to text me as much as possible when I'm away, but especially when he knows I'm flying. He's been extremely successful, apparently.

My muscles feel tight. Tensions are high, and I'm going to need my man to rough me up a little and take my ass. I need the head rush. The total loss of control.

We haven't really dabbled in ass play for me. We've been more than happy playing with Sky's, but today, I need it.

He's going to be pleasantly surprised, but I may or may not have prepped for the occasion. I could feel the need rising with every passing day we've been on the road. I've been using my fingers to stretch and loosen me up a little. This athlete won't be entering the game unprepared.

Anticipation rises, skittering along my nerve endings. Sky's cock is so pretty; I can't wait to feel it inside me. Feel his hips rocking in that sinful way.

I bite my lip to hold in the moan. Leigh already has enough ammunition to last a lifetime.

Sky's the Limit: Why did the 🍆 go crazy?

Sky's the Limit: Someone was messing with his head
🍆😁🍆

How ironic. An eggplant emoji and a dick joke.

Put it in me coach, I'm ready.

Skylar

Landon will be back today, and I can't wait to cuddle my man and love all up on him. I've taken on a slew of extra shifts after traveling to his away games. I'm another level of exhausted since none of this is part of my regular routine. Working another shift always leaves me feeling a little discombobulated and out of sorts.

The Bull Sharks have officially clinched their way into the playoffs. Third overall in the Eastern Conference.

I'm beyond proud of them, and I can't wait to take some time off and fly to as many games as possible. This is huge for Landon and the team, and I plan to stand by him as much as I can manage.

My shoulders sag on my walk to the employee lounge. A nap with Landon will work wonders. And sex. We can't forget sexy times. I need him to sex me up in the worst way. Dick me down hard. I want him so bad, I swear I can feel him inside me already.

Swallowing a moan, goosebumps rise on my skin and my dick tries to perk up.

Patience, Sky. Be patient a little longer.

I open my locker and grab my bag. These scrubs need to go. STAT. They're not touching my car. After a quick shower, I hurriedly pull on my joggers. My t-shirt is halfway over my head when my phone vibrates on the bench behind me. I don't even glance at the screen, expecting it to be Landon. Completely forgetting it's still a little too early for his flight to have landed.

"Hey, babe." Silence greets me. I finish pulling my shirt on, then glance at the screen and see that it's Andrew.

That's odd. After over a month of cold shoulders? From both him and Cayden?

Okay, I'll play this game.

I hold my cell between my ear and shoulder so I can finish pulling my shoes on and packing my shit up. "Shit, sorry, Andrew, I thought you were Landon."

I need to get home. *Now.*

That's what I'm feeling. It's a living entity coursing through my veins.

It feels like ages since I've seen Landon, and adding to it, this last shift had been utter shit. We'd lost a patient. Emotional turmoil fills me like a pressure cooker.

"You there, Sky?" Andrew's voice catches my scattered attention. Fuck. I'd zoned out just that fast. Packing my bag on autopilot, starting the trek to the employee garage, completely forgetting I had answered the call. Hot mess express, at your service.

"Shit, sorry, yes. I'm a space cadet right now. Just finishing a double shift. What's up?"

"Perfect timing then. I'm glad I caught you. Let's set up a jump soon. I miss you out there."

Is he fucking serious right now? I look at my phone in confusion. This is sounding like the old Andrew. Not the creepy Andrew who wants to eat me alive. Okay, definitely seeing where this goes then. And if he acts creepy one more time, I'll confront him, for sure.

No more letting that shit slide. Their wedding is way too close for him to try anything. And I won't hold back anymore. He gets too close for comfort, then treats me like gum on his shoe? We'll see about that.

"Yesssss." I let the excitement leak out in my voice, anger left simmering on the back burner for now. "Just what I need. I'm totally antsy for it. When?"

"Nothing concrete, but maybe your next day off?"

"God, yes. Pretty please. That would be nice. I'll find something that works, and we'll make it happen. Honestly, my schedule has been super crazy what with the playoffs and trying to get to as many of Landon's games as possible. The NHL schedule is grueling." I sigh. "Our days together pass so quickly. It's crazy."

"I get it, man. Cayden's jobs are mostly local, but when he's away, it's not easy. Nothing like a professional athlete's schedule, but I can still empathize." His voice is soft and kind.

This conversation is reminding me of the old Andrew.

I really did miss my friend. Maybe we were all seeing something that wasn't there?

After closing my car door, I start the engine. I wait for the Bluetooth to connect the call to my speakers, then tuck my phone away.

"Who knew relationships make you crave more time with someone? Who am I even?" I ask him. "Like, really?"

Andrew laughs with me. "Right?"

It's no secret amongst my friends that I love sex. I've never been shy about that fact. Looking for a forever guy has never really been exciting to me. Relationships and

commitments? Not Sky. At least not the *old* Sky. New Sky could actually get used to this.

Correction: has gotten used to this, is loving it here and has the t-shirt to prove it.

More accurately, I have the jersey to prove it.

Andrew's voice draws me away from the delicious memories. We spend the rest of my drive making small talk and catching up. Hopefully the weather will cooperate with our plans for a jump next week. Fingers crossed.

When I get home—yes, I'm referring to Landon's home as mine, mind your business—I'm feeling very optimistic yet slightly off balance about the one-eighty personality shift Andrew had.

I'm barely in Landon's door, when words start tumbling out of me. "Can you believe this shit? Andrew called me out of the blue. Completely nonchalant and invited me on a jump. Like nothing weird has taken place. What the fuck?"

His eyebrows raise. "Really?"

"Yeah!" I recount the whole conversation for him. He listens without interruption. When I finish, I ask, "What should I do? He's been blowing me off for weeks. Maybe I shouldn't go unless I confront him. Do you think I should cancel?"

I shift my weight from foot to foot.

"Is your gut telling you to go?"

Slowly, I nod. "Yes. But it's also insisting something is still off here."

"That's all I need to know. Go with your gut. If he acts like a dick one more time, then I suggest you set him straight right then and there." He kisses my lips gently, then meets my eyes until I nod. "Then call Cayden." He kisses me harder, pulling me closer with his hand on my hip.

Yes.

I nod again. My lips follow his as he pulls away.

“Now that that’s settled, I need something from you, Sky.” He licks my lips and thrusts inside my mouth, fucking with sure strokes of his tongue. He breaks away again and meets my eyes. Pure molten need is burning in his emerald gaze.

Running my hands up his bare chest, I cup his neck in my hands. My stomach flutters with need. “Anything,” I whisper, standing on my tiptoes to nip at his lips and slowly sliding down to bite his Adam’s apple. It bobs beneath my lips, and he groans.

His breath rushes in. “Sky-” his voice breaks.

“Yeah, baby? I got you.”

“Need you to fuck me. Need you...” His words leave in a hot rush. He’s panting, like just the thought of me inside of him has him ready to lose control. “And don’t be gentle.”

My mind goes blank, and I swear I almost come in my pants. I grip my cock roughly to hold back the orgasm. Just the thought of sliding into him has me walking a razor’s edge.

Gripping his arm, I turn him and swat his ass. “Get upstairs and strip for me. I’ll be right there.” He rushes out of the room so fast it would be comical if it wasn’t so goddamn hot. He’s needy for my cock.

I grab my hair and raise my face to the ceiling, taking some deep, bracing breaths. Getting my raging dick moderately under control. I have to make this good for him. And I can’t do that if I shoot my load as soon as I get him under me.

When I get upstairs, the sight that greets me makes my hands ache to touch him. Miles of bare skin for my eyes to feast on. He’s slowly stroking his dick from root to tip. Moisture gleams in the lighting. My eyes note the bottle of lube next to this thigh. He spreads them wide, lifting his balls and using his other hand to trail down and circle his hole.

“Mmm,” he moans.

“Fuck, baby, you’re killing me. I might not survive this.”

He smirks. “Well, hurry over here before we both die. I need you so bad it hurts.”

My clothes hit the floor with zero finesse. Landon’s hips are pumping with every glide of his fist on his cock, each press of his fingers on his hole. He gasps when he presses into his opening.

I kneel at his feet and kiss my way up his body. His leg hair tickles along my lips and lights me up. He’s so masculine. So fucking strong.

So fucking mine. And he’s submitting beneath me, letting me take him. Begging.

I’m never letting this man go. His eyes are heavy with lust, but I meet his gaze, kneeling between his spread thighs. When I trail my fingers up the sensitive skin of his inner thigh, he hisses and tenses. My eyes drop down to admire my handiwork. His cock is visibly throbbing, pulsing out streams of precum. His nipples are hard pink points.

Shifting, I kneel over him, rubbing our chests together. Nipples rasping gently, it only heightens our hunger. Landon thrusts his chest up, head thrown back. His neck is exposed to me. I grasp it in my hand and hold him down for a scorching kiss. It’s rough. Dirty. Full of teeth and tongues. My teeth catch his lip, and the metallic taste of blood fills my mouth. He groans in pleasure, and I squeeze harder. Snatching his lips away, he gasps for breath. “More, I need you, baby. Fuck me now. Split me open. Need your cock.”

His fingers are deep inside his hole, thrusting roughly. He’s ready for me. He’s big and heavy, but I manage to flip him onto his stomach. “Fuck, yes,” he gasps.

I slap his ass hard with my palm, and he gasps again, “Face down, ass up, Spence.” His hips rock hard against the bed once, twice, before he finally complies.

Using my knees, I spread his legs wide. He’s splayed out on his bed in an X-rated version of that fucking hip stretch. I’ll never be able to see him warm up again without picturing him naked and begging for me to fuck him.

Grabbing the lube, I pour a generous amount onto my hand and make sure I'm good and slick. His fingers were deep inside his ass, but my dick is still a bit thicker.

Grasping my shaft, I slide forward, nudging my cockhead against his hole. I grab his hip to hold him steady.

His hips rock back, engulfing the head of my cock. "Do it, Sky. Fuck me." He's so fucking tight. The pressure is perfection, his heat pulling me closer to the edge.

My hands grip both of his hips, I punch my hips forward, slamming into him hard. He fucking screams for me. Shouting his pleasure, his hands scramble and clutch the bedsheets. He manages to get some leverage and fuck himself back onto my dick.

That's the only green light I need. Shifting, I position myself half kneeling, half standing behind him, my hand pressing him down into the mattress. My hips rock and roll, fucking into him, pounding his ass. Grunts and groans fill the room, the slick slap of my thighs hitting his. We're soaked in sweat. Drowning in pleasure.

His ass clenches around me, and I know I'm close. "Jack yourself off for me, baby," I order Landon. "I need to feel your ass squeeze me while I paint your insides with my cum."

He shifts enough to shove one arm under his body to reach his shaft. He gasps, and I know he's stroking his dick for me. I pump inside of him faster.

"*Ungh*," he shouts, his hand flying over his dick. "Fuck, fuck, fuck. Oh *shit*. I'm gonna cum."

He gasps, then groans, "I'm coming." His ass spasms around my cock, and I lose the tenuous grasp I had on my control. My vision blanks out, toes curling. My cock shoots spurt after spurt of hot cum deep inside of him. He's moaning the whole time.

Jesus, fuck. Sex with Landon is the best high. It quite possibly tops skydiving. Gently, I pull out, and collapse next to him. He rolls and melts into my arms, nuzzling his face deep into my neck.

Our chests rise and fall with our slowing breaths.

A beat or two passes. Landon tenses, then laughs. His shoulders shake.

Rearing my head back, I look at him, smiling softly, “What?”

“Your cum is dripping out of my ass. It’s a bit trippy. That’s not something I ever expected to feel.”

My shoulders shake and my laughter joins his. This is the first time we’ve had sex since getting our fresh set of negative results.

I raise my nose and sniff. “Well, someone insisted on having the honor before I could.” I raise my hand. “I call dibs next.”

His head nods against me. “Yes. Definitely, yes. I’m going to need to watch my cum leak out of you.”

Fuck. It’s impossible to get hard after that, but damn if my dick doesn’t twitch against my thigh.

Landon

After a trip to the bathroom for some cleanup, I don't bother dressing. I find Sky on his stomach on my bed. He's naked, his phone in his hands, while he doom scrolls. I crawl partially up the bed to rest my head on his lower back, and wrap an arm over his ass.

His body shakes beneath me as he laughs. "Are you hugging my ass?"

"I might be, but I mean, can you blame me? It's a fantastic ass."

His smile is audible, when he responds, "Thanks, I work hard for these *nalgas* to look this good."

He flexes his cheeks, making me laugh. Using a fingertip, I trace some of the ink on his skin. Goosebumps rise in my wake, and he shivers. "How awful did this feel?"

"Pretty terrible, honestly, but healing was so much worse."

"Oh, fuck. That itching goes soul deep, and you can't scratch it." I grimace in sympathy, remembering the feeling when my own tattoo was healing.

“Yup,” he replies. “Too bad I love tattoos. I have more planned and still need to finish out my chest piece and leg sleeve.”

Thane’s brother-in-law pops into my head. “Maverick, right? He’s your artist?”

“Yeah. He’s the only person I’ve ever let ink me. His work is immaculate.”

I hum in agreement.

“You should come with me to my next session. I’ll book something that’ll work with your schedule.”

“I’d love that.” He starts to shift beneath me, and I lift up so he can roll over. I rest my head on his lower abdomen. His hazel eyes meet mine, soft and heavy. “Aside from Andrew’s unexpected call, what else was on your mind earlier?”

Sky’s eyes roll. “How do you always know?”

I raise one eyebrow at him and wait.

He tips his head back and huffs. “Okay, fine. You know me.”

His mini tantrum makes me smirk. “Yes, I do. Now tell me.”

Face crumbling, his eyes fill with unshed tears. “We lost a patient today, and it hit really hard.” The look on his face crushes me, and my chest tightens with sympathy.

I slide up higher and pull him into my arms, and he nuzzles his face into my chest. “Oh, baby... I’m so sorry.”

“Goddamnit. I’m normally not a crier, but it was a rough one.”

“You’re allowed to feel sad. Your profession isn’t easy, Sky, and you’re allowed to feel those losses.” Tears wet my chest, and his shoulders shake as he softly cries. I trail my hand up and down his back.

“I just need a minute.”

“Take as many as you need. No rush.”

“Ugh, you’re the sweetest.”

Shaking my head, I kiss the top of his. “You are. I’m here for you, baby.”

A few minutes pass, and his tears finally start drying up. “I didn’t realize how bad I needed to let that out. Thank you.”

“You’re welcome. Do you want to talk about it?”

He sighs. “My patient was in a motor vehicle accident a few days ago. He’s been in a coma and on a vent since the accident, but was showing some promising signs of recovery. His prognosis shifted from poor to fair a few days ago. He coded in front of his family today. We couldn’t bring him back, Landon. And he was so young.” He shakes his head. “His life slipped through our fingers while his family watched. It was awful.”

“Fuck, I hate that happened.”

“I wish I could save them all, but I know it’s not possible.”

“You amaze me, you know that?”

He lifts his head, and his eyes are red-rimmed. “What? Why?”

“You’re so fucking strong, Sky. I could never do what you do. But you handle it with grace, compassion, and love. It takes a special kind of person to be a nurse. You’re amazing.”

He smirks. I cover his mouth before he can say a word, and meet his eyes directly.

“I’m serious, Sky. Don’t try to play this off with a joke, okay?”

The smirk leaves his face, and his eyes sparkle, but he nods, then presses a slow, tender kiss to my lips.

Our kiss is full of softness and gratitude and something more. Something that fills my heart to bursting.

Skylar

“Be careful out there today. I’m going to try my best not to lose my shit just thinking of you jumping. Last time we were just friends, and I had no idea you were leaping out of a plane at that very moment. Seeing the pictures still scared the shit out of me, but...” Rubbing his forehead, Landon shakes his head at me. “Now... Now, we’re so much more. The thought of you getting hurt wrecks me.”

“I’ll be fine. I’ve done this a bunch of times,” I assure him.

He purses his lips at me, head tilting a little to the side. “Yeah, not making me feel any better. I’ve played hockey a bunch of times and that hasn’t kept me from getting hurt.”

Shit.

“Okay. Fair point.” Leaning forward, I blow a kiss at my screen. “I’ll text you updates.”

Andrew and I weren’t able to meet up as soon as we’d hoped. It’s been about two weeks since we made our plans.

April is coming to a close, and the first round of the playoffs are underway.

Landon is on the road. The Bull Sharks played and won game two last night and will be heading home a bit later today. They're leading the series two to zero.

My drive to DZPB passes uneventfully, aside from my solo car concert, and I send a quick text to Landon, letting him know I've arrived. He sends me a kiss and thumbs-up emoji.

Based on the time, they should be loading up to head to the airport any time now.

Making my way inside, I wave hello to Winnie. The lobby is empty. It looks like a slow day. Mental fist bump. No groups linger, which means we'll have plenty of jump time. "He in the hangar?" I ask, pointing at the double doors.

"Hey, Sky. Yeah, go on out, he's almost ready."

I don't see Andrew when I make my way into the hangar, so I take advantage of my moment alone to inspect and pack my rig.

I'm just about done when Andrew and Frankie make their way out of one of the upstairs training rooms. Their raised voices draw my gaze, noticing both men's body language convey tension.

"So you're just going to ignore me, man?" Frankie asks, following behind Andrew. "You're better than this."

Andrew waves his hand over his shoulder. "Stop it, Frankie. You're exaggerating. Nothing is wrong."

My eyes follow their path down the stairs. Andrew's steps falter when he catches sight of me. His shoulders straighten and he continues quickly down the stairs and into the packing area.

When he smiles at me, it seems forced, like he's donned a mask. "Hey, Sky. Good to see you." He claps me on the shoulder and grabs his own rig off the rack, beginning the process of gearing up.

Frankie stands there glaring at him.

"What'd I miss?" My eyes bounce between them. Andrew stiffens and freezes. Again, he straightens his shoulders. "He-"

Andrew abruptly cuts off Frankie's words.

"Nothing." Andrew's eyes harden, and he returns Frankie's glare. "Frankie's being ridiculous. Are you ready to go, Sky?"

There's obviously something happening here. I'm torn. Unsure if I should interfere or not. I nod.

Andrew nods once. "Good, let's go. Gary's waiting."

Frankie's eyes turn up, hands on his hips. "Fuck. Gimme a few. I'm coming with you."

"Then hurry the fuck up." Andrew snaps and starts making his way outside to the runway.

Frankie begins inspecting and packing his own canopy. *What is happening here?* My gut tells me to follow Andrew outside.

"Hey." My hand wraps around his forearm, tugging him to a stop. "Are you sure everything is alright?"

A genuine smile curls his lips. He grasps my hand in a quick squeeze of reassurance. "Yeah, Sky. I'm sure."

Nothing creepy or flirty so far, which is a good sign.

Frankie joins us, and we climb into the small Cessna. It's a bit tighter fit than last time I jumped with Andrew in this exact plane, but it's not uncomfortably cramped.

Tension fills the space between us, radiating off Frankie in waves.

Conversation is minimal, limited to Cayden. Andrew gushes about the wedding and it warms my heart to hear how excited he is.

Gary yells, "Get the fuck outta my plane, guys."

All three of us laugh. Typical Gary.

Frankie pushes between us in the limited space and scoots to the door. He grabs the upper handle and moves out onto the step. My hair tickles my face, the wind loud, tugging and pulling at my clothes.

Then Frankie lets go, dropping backward into a backflip. Andrew salutes me and leaps out into a front flip.

They're immediately gone from sight. My stomach drops. My hands tingle and dread fills me. *Something's wrong.*

Creeping closer, I lean out. Logically, I know I won't see them, and I'm right. Nothing but fluffy clouds and glimpses of the ground below.

The longer I hesitate, the farther apart we'll be.

"Sky!" Gary's voice makes me jump. "Git, if you're gonna go."

Inhaling a breath, I take the leap. Jumping into the air, gliding. Embracing the fall. That familiar feeling is welcome. The rush fills me up to the brim.

My dread momentarily disappears.

I flip in the air a few times, enjoying the moment, walking on air. Finally, I shift into the belly down position, slowing my descent. I need eyes on Frankie and Andrew. The last thing I need to do is plummet into one of their canopies because I'm not paying attention.

Looking down, I spot Frankie's. My eyes trace the sky, searching.

I don't see Andrew's parachute. My heart skips a beat, my eyes frantically searching for him.

A pop of color off to the side catches my attention. My breath leaves me in a whoosh when I realize it's his canopy being deployed. His descent slows.

All is well. My altimeter beeps, and I deploy my own canopy, then settle in for the blissful cruise back to earth.

The closer we get to the ground, the more apparent it becomes that something's gone wrong. Andrew isn't steering toward the drop zone.

Frankie, on the other hand, lands right on target. His canopy slowly settles behind him.

Andrew still isn't changing directions. I grab the toggles and adjust my direction and speed, trying my best to reach him to see what's wrong.

We're too close to the ground. Descending dangerously fast. The ground is rushing up to meet me. There's a fine line between helping Andrew and putting myself in danger.

Slowing my speed, I adjust my trajectory to land in the drop zone. I won't be right on target, but I'll be pretty damn close.

Frankie is running across the bright green grass. The color is oddly vivid. His arms wave at Andrew, but still, Andrew's canopy travels aimlessly closer and closer to the ground.

Too fast. He's going too fast.

Time stands still. I brace myself for an impact that's not mine.

Andrew's canopy collapses, along with my stomach, when he slams into the ground. My heart fucking stops beating in my chest. I'm done for. My vision tunnels and I temporarily lose hearing.

Is this what a panic attack feels like? Self-preservation and training rise up.

My heart resumes a rapid-fire beat. I'm panting, nearly hyperventilating. Fuck, fuck, fuck.

My hearing returns abruptly with the whooshing of the wind in my ears.

Frankie is screaming. I can hear him. I'm almost there.

Finally, fucking finally, I land. As quickly as possible, letting my canopy come to rest behind me. My legs are shaking so fucking viciously, they almost give out underneath me.

But I can't afford to falter. Andrew needs me.

I need to remove my friend hat and put on my professional hat.

Work mode, Sky. There'll be time to fall apart later. Holy fucking shit. What the actual fuck just happened?

Unclipping my rig, I take off running full speed across the grass, making my way toward Frankie and the heap that's Andrew.

He's not moving. I'm not surprised, but it shakes me to my core.

Get it together, Sky. This is what you've been trained to do.

Frankie's hand hovers over Andrew, scared to touch him. He's on the phone, begging for an ambulance to fucking get here as soon as possible. His words are cracking, filled with hysteria.

I dig deep to compartmentalize. Hearing his words, but not processing them. That's for later. Andrew needs me. Reaching down, I carefully shift the canopy farther off Andrew.

Compartmentalizing my emotions is easier said than done.

The compound fracture of his femur is quite possibly the gnarliest thing I've seen.

A gag fights to be set free, but I swallow it down.

Fuck. Oh fuck.

The sight will forever be burned in my brain.

Squeezing my eyes shut, I wish I was anywhere, but here. But if wishes were horses or whatever the fuck that saying is.

My eyes trace his body, looking for any sign of life.

Nothing.

Oh God.

Holding myself together is the hardest thing I've ever done.

Looking at my watch, I automatically note the time. Twelve forty-one.

It plays in my head on a loop. The time matters.

Cayden will want to know.

I already know, but I have to check to be sure.

I don't want to.

You have to, Sky.

Goosebumps rise on my skin, nausea roiling. Using two fingers, I grab Andrew's wrist and feel for a pulse I know won't be there.

Nothing.

Time of death, twelve forty-one.

Sirens fill the air, coming closer and closer, screaming and echoing morbidly across the field.

Giving zero fucks, the paramedics drive over the well-maintained grass. As close as possible to us.

My eyes fill with tears that I try to force myself to swallow down. Meeting the eyes of the EMTs, we share a knowing look.

Still, they fight to preserve a life that is no longer. Carefully loading him onto a backboard, to a stretcher and into the ambulance.

Twelve forty-one.

The paramedics allow me to climb into the ambulance and ride to the hospital. I'm a nurse and Andrew is my best friend's fiancé.

Cayden. Cayden needs to know.

The paramedics work as they're trained to do. Just in case there's any hope at all of saving his life.

"Clear!" I flinch when the defibrillator shocks Andrew's lifeless body. I want to avert my eyes from the terrifying scene, but I can't force my eyes away.

I'm in an odd limbo of numb disbelief and sheer terror. This has to be a dream.

A nightmare, rather.

Andrew's chest rises and falls way too easily when they switch to compressions. It's not a good sign.

His body is visibly broken from slamming into the ground at such high speed.

As a nurse, I know what this means.

I've seen death.

And I wish to God I wasn't a witness to this one.

It fucking hurts.

My throat clogs with the sob, my vision blurs with tears that I roughly wipe away.

There's no coming back from this. I don't get to cry.

A bump in the road causes Andrew's head to shift. His lifeless eyes land on me. His pupils are blown. And yet, the paramedics don't give up.

They don't call time of death. But I know it.

And I'll never forget it.

Twelve forty-one.



AFTER WHAT FEELS LIKE HOURS, we pull into the emergency bay of the local hospital. The EMT, 'Riggs' his badge says, updates the hospital personnel. "Adult male, mid to late twenties. Multiple blunt force injuries post skydiving incident. No signs of life. No return of vitals en route."

The nurse closest to me meets my eyes. Sympathy fills them. She knows what I know.

The stretcher is wheeled into the ER. After a quick exam and assessment of Andrew, the physician raises his eyes to the clock. "Time of death--"

My voice surprises everyone, including me. "Twelve forty-one."

Backing away, I reach down to pull my phone out of the zippered pocket of my joggers. It takes a few tries to retrieve. My hands are shaking.

“Hey, you. How was the jump?” Addy’s voice catches me off guard, and I pull my phone away and check the screen. I’d hit her name instead of Cayden’s.

“Sky? Are you there? Hello?”

Placing the phone back on my ear, I try to speak. A ragged gasp leaves me. Urgency fills her voice. “Sky, answer me. Are you alright? You’re scaring me.”

“Addy...” Her name is broken.

“Sky, babe. You have to tell me what’s wrong? Where are you? Share your location right now.”

A sob leaves me, and she yells, “Sky! Take a breath and talk to me right now. I need you to talk to me. Let me help.”

It takes a few tries, but I manage to get the words out, “Bring Cayden. It’s Andrew.”

“What?! Is he going to be okay?”

That does it. My tears overflow, my cries audible.

Her breath catches. “Sky. No.”

“H-he’s gone, Ad-addy.”

Skylar

Time passes at a snail's pace. My hands are trembling, and I can't make them stop. I'm curled up in a chair in the corner of the deserted waiting room, knees pulled up to my chest. The guys from DZPB have come and gone, dropping off my gear and car and sitting with me for a few.

Addy texted me a while ago that she'd picked up Cayden and they were on their way. Just the thought of looking him in the eye causes nausea to swirl in my gut. I'm tempted to leave. I let his fiancé die.

I flinch when a commotion in the hallway reaches my ears. I stand on shaky legs to greet Addy and Cayden, my hands are trembling, so I cross my arms tightly over my stomach.

Cayden enters the room first, his normally well-groomed hair disheveled like he's spent the last hour running his hands through the strands and holding on for dear life. His face is pale and tear streaked. His face crumbles when he sees me, eyes filling with tears.

“Sky—” his voice breaks, hand covering his mouth as he shakes his head. “This isn’t really happening. He can’t be dead. Tell me there’s been a mistake.”

My mouth opens, but the words fail to leave my mouth.

Twelve forty-one.

I shake my head, and Cayden sways. Addy rushes up behind him, wrapping her arm around him and rubbing his back. I should join them, but I’m frozen, caught in this moment witnessing my friend’s devastation.

My fault. I could have stopped this. Why didn’t I ask Frankie more questions?

Addy’s tear-filled eyes meet mine, and she shakes her head at me. My hands cover my mouth to hold in my own sobs.

Cayden’s shoulders heave, but he gulps in a breath and lifts his head. “What happened? He’s been skydiving practically every day for over ten years. He knew what he was doing. How could this have happened? It doesn’t make any fucking sense.”

Stick to the facts, Sky. That’s the only way you’ll get through this.

“It wasn’t a skydiving accident—”

“What?! What else could it have been?” he interrupts, disbelief heavy in his voice.

“Based on what Frankie and I witnessed, it seems like he had a medical emergency not long after deploying his canopy. He missed the dropzone and hit the ground full speed.”

“Oh god.” His eyes squeeze closed, and he shakes his head. “That doesn’t make any sense at all. This has to be a joke, Sky. What could have happened? He was *healthy*.”

“Cayden, honey, I wish to god this was a joke. I’d take it back if I could. But it does happen. Considering the circumstances, there will be a full autopsy to confirm the cause of death. The results should be back in a few weeks.”

He shakes his head again, glances at Addy then insists, “There wasn’t anything wrong with him.”

Addy and I share a look. Walking closer to him, I reach out and grip his arm in a gesture I hope is comforting.

“Looking back, in hindsight, there were signs something neurological was going on.” I say the words quietly, and as gently as possible.

“Like what?”

“I think we can all agree Andrew hadn’t been acting like himself for a while now.” Addy nods, but doesn’t say a word.

He expels an audible breath. “That was just wedding planning stress, though.” His eyes dart between us. “Wasn’t it?”

I shake my head slowly. “Maybe not.”

“So that means he could have needed help for months and I ignored the signs? I knew he wasn’t acting right, but I didn’t say anything.”

Addy moves up to his side. “You can’t think like that. Nobody would have guessed something was wrong. You can’t beat yourself up.”

I can, because I do know better. I should have known better. It’s not his fault, it’s mine.

“Boo, look at me.” Cayden’s eyes are overflowing with tears as he gazes at the ceiling. Like he’s looking for answers on the ceiling tiles. How can he find comfort, though, when his fiancé is dead? His eyes meet mine. “I am so sorry, Cayden. I tried... I tried so hard to bring him back to you, but I couldn’t. I’d hit the rewind button faster than you could blink if I could.”

A sob bursts out of his mouth and the tenuous hold he had on his emotions crumbles in front of me. My throat and eyes burn. I don’t deserve to cry with Cayden. This nightmare is my fault, but I can’t hold the tears back any longer. Silently they leak from my eyes.

A throat quietly clears, and we all turn to see a nurse in the doorway. Her voice is soft when she speaks.

“Family of Mr. Adams?”

Cayden chokes on a sob, but nods. She informs us Andrew has been moved down to the morgue, and my stomach revolts. Any remaining color in Cayden’s face is gone. He swallows hard, while she continues.

“Take all the time you need here, sweetie. We’re not rushing you, but when you’re ready, let us know. We have some arrangements to discuss.”

“Okay, thank you.” His eyes widen. “Oh my god. I have to call his parents.”

Her eyes soften. “If you’d like to wait for them to arrive, we can do that as well.”

Addy wraps her arm around Cayden’s waist and rests her head on his shoulder.

The nurse leaves the room as quietly as she arrived. Cayden’s next words shatter my heart into pieces. “How am I supposed to plan his funeral when I should be planning our wedding?”



THE DRIVE HOME passes in a fog of self-preservation. By some miracle of my mind and muscle memory, I navigate safely to Landon’s house and manage to park in his garage. I should be alarmed. I can’t remember the drive.

Using voice-to-text, I send a message to Addy, letting her know I made it safely. She stayed with Cayden while he waited for Mr. and Mrs. Adam’s to arrive. They’re going to help with paperwork and making the arrangements to transfer his body to a local funeral home.

My brain short-circuits on that thought, and I rush out of my car.

I don't bother grabbing my backpack from the seat next to me. There isn't anything in it that will help me right now. I just need Landon.

His familiar scent surrounds me. I'm home. It's almost a balm on my wounded heart, but not quite enough.

I close the door softly behind me when everything inside me really wants to slam it. I want to slam it so hard that it shatters like my heart and soul. It's funny that you can outwardly be whole but completely obliterated inside at the same time.

Nobody who looks at you would ever see the difference. They'd never know how broken you are.

Music runs through my head like a soundtrack. I've always found comfort in music. And it makes sense to my traumatized brain that a song would linger in my mind. It's on repeat like a soundtrack playing in morbid harmony with today's devastation.

"Stages of Grief" by Awaken I Am. The death of a friend. A death I wish I can erase. Take it back so that it never happened.

I wish I could go back in time and hear Frankie out. If I had listened, maybe I would've paid more attention to the warning signs. Frankie was concerned, but I wasn't. I was too relieved that Andrew seemed like himself again. In actuality, that was another red flag signaling his impending medical crisis.

My mind won't stop racing. If I had done something differently, I'm sure I could have prevented it from happening. Helped somehow.

I'd thought he was a creeper, when, in reality, I should have been concerned with his behavior. I was scared to blow up his relationship with Cayden, and I'd hesitated. A slew of medical diagnoses run through my head as the probable cause of his personality changes and today's accident. If I had confronted him sooner, or talked to Cayden, maybe we would have realized something was wrong. I made the wrong call and

missed the signs. Meanwhile there was a ticking time bomb inside Andrew.

Twelve forty-one.

Nausea curls in my gut.

Maybe Andrew would still be here, planning his future with Cayden, if I had paid more attention. But now Cayden is left suffering the loss of his partner. His fiancé. His love.

They'd been engaged for ages, never rushing their wedding plans. They both took things at a leisurely pace like they had all the time in the world for their happily ever after to begin. Now that happily ever after is just gone. Out the door. Crushed into dust.

In a matter of seconds, their lives were irrevocably changed. Nothing will ever be the same.

Andrew's dead and no matter how hard I wish and pray this wasn't happening...

This is reality, and goddamnit, I know there's no coming back from this.

He's gone. Dead. End scene. No more pages or chapters will ever be added to the book of his life. The end...

Deep inside, red flags are waving at me, telling me to pump my brakes. I know I'm spiraling into a dark place. These thoughts are toxic, but my grief and guilt are blinding. Suffocating in their intensity. As a healthcare professional, I *know* sometimes terrible things happen and there's no way back from it. It just *is*.

My breaths are panting in and out, rapid rises and falls of my chest. My hands and feet tingle. I'm well on my way to panic attack territory. I am fucking drowning in this feeling. Drowning in waves I can't see through.

My throat is clogged with a tight knot of sobs I try like hell to hold in.

Do I even deserve to cry when this is my fault?

Tears pour down my face. I bury my face in my hands and sink to my knees in Landon's hallway as I finally lose the fight and let the sobs go.

Landon

As soon as we land, I know something is wrong. For once, I'd had my phone in airplane mode since Coach Boucher decided the flight was a great time to review game film.

There are way too many notifications from Addy.

Nothing from Sky. His last message was hours ago when he'd arrived at DZPB.

Giant red flag. Texts, calls, voicemails. All from Addy.

Something is seriously wrong. We only text sometimes, but I can't recall a single time that she'd had to call me when I wasn't with Sky.

My forehead scrunches with the worry shooting ice through my veins. A cold sweat sheets my skin.

I don't bother reading the texts or listening to the messages. I click on a missed call notification and call her back.

“Landon.” Addy’s voice breaks on my name. Sniffles greet me, and I try to patiently wait for her to continue, but I can’t wait for her to shatter my world. I need details. Now.

“What’s wrong? What happened? Is Sky hurt? Is he okay?”

The panic in my voice is evident as I fling questions at her. The weight of Leigh’s concern draws my gaze to his as he watches me.

“Not Sky. Andrew.” Relief fills me. She exhales shakily. “Andrew was in an accident. He didn’t make it. I’m still at the hospital with Cayden and Andrew’s parents. I can’t get in touch with Sky. I know he made it home safely, because he texted me, but that’s it. He’s not answering my calls.”

“Fuck!” My hand threads through my hair and I’m pacing. My exclamation has drawn more attention. Turning away, I ask, “Was Sky there when it happened, Addy?”

“Yes.”

Oh God. My stomach roils with nausea. What the fuck happened? And what did Sky see? Fuck.

I need to get home.

My breath whooshes out of me like I’ve been slammed into the boards. I cover my face with one hand and raise my face to the heavens. Goddammit. I hadn’t known Andrew long, and quite frankly, I didn’t like the guy, but I feel his loss. I know Sky is hurting. My heart hurts for him and Addy. And for Cayden. “Fuck!” I shout again. Blood pounds in my ears. My eyes fill with tears.

Guilt fills me. I feel like shit. My first thought after Addy told me was to thank God it wasn’t Sky. Sky’s okay.

But fuck it all. Andrew is dead.

Where’s Sky? And why isn’t he answering Addy? He shouldn’t be alone right now.

And Cayden... My God. How’s Cayden holding up? I need to get the fuck out of here and get to my man.

Checking my security app, I see there's a garage door notification from about an hour ago. It says there's a person at the door. Sky's home. I just need to get to him. I relay the information to Addy.

"Jesus. I don't even know what to say right now. I'm just so fucking sorry." I pinch the bridge of my nose to hold the tears back.

Even to my own ears, my voice sounds hoarse. I can't let them go just yet. Not until I get to Sky. Anxiety twists my gut.

"Does Cayden need anything right now? His parents? Do you need anything?" I pause to take a deep breath. "I need to get to Sky, but anything you guys need, I'll make it happen."

Leigh is in my space, my shoulder gripped in his strong hand. I meet his eyes again, and he nods, "Obviously, some shit went down. I've got you. Whatever they need. Whatever you need. We got you."

My team, my brothers, are gathered close, expressions somber. Ready to drop everything even after our brutal schedule and hellishly long flight. These guys are my family. They have my back. And fuck, I need them right now.

"Just get to Sky for now. I'll keep you updated, if anything." She says.

"Okay, thanks, Addy. It looks like he's at my house, but I'll let you know when I'm with him."

"Thanks, honey." We disconnect, and I call Sky immediately. He doesn't answer, and a trickle of fear tries to twist its icy fingers around my heart. "Sky..." I don't know what the fuck to say. "I heard about Andrew. I'm on my way home. I'll be there soon. God, baby, I'm so sorry." I disconnect the call and order an Uber before shoving my phone into my pocket.

"Shit, can you guys grab my gear and luggage? I'll pass by the arena and get my car later. I can't... I just... If it's not in my carry-on, I don't need it right now."

"Yeah, man. If you give me your keys, I'll drop your truck and everything at your place on my way home," Murdock

volunteers. “I know Meg won’t mind.”

“Thanks, man.”

Leigh asks, “Are you good, bro? Want me to ride with you?”

I shake my head, “Yeah, I’m good for now. I just gotta get to Sky.”

“Text me when you can.”

Nodding, I rush off and ask security to escort me to rideshare pickup.



THE UBER DRIVER understands the assignment. I tell him I have a family emergency and need to get home quickly, and he delivers. I’ll have to make sure to tip him generously.

It’s dark and quiet when I let myself in the front door. Eerily quiet.

The silence is almost suffocating in its intensity. A heaviness in the air, like death is a presence that has made itself known. Even here. In my home, which, thanks to Sky, is always full of sunshine. It doesn’t fit. This shouldn’t be happening.

I make my way down the hall, intent on taking the stairs to my bedroom and stop short when I find him at the end of the hallway near the kitchen. My lungs fill with the breath I didn’t realize I was holding. The relief that fills me is too overwhelming to describe. Seeing him now...I can finally breathe again. I knew he was okay, but I needed to physically see him with my own eyes to *know* he was *okay*.

Sky’s on his knees. Head down, he seems to be staring sightlessly at the floor. Or maybe his hands? His face is dry, but tear streaks are covering his beautiful face.

“Skylar?” A slight twitch of his shoulders is the only sign he even registered my arrival. “Baby, I’m here.”

I sink down on my knees behind him and scoot closer until I'm able to wrap myself around him. To blanket him with my body. Anything to try to give him some of my strength. Some comfort. Anything.

He shivers. Sobs wrack his body. Like my arrival, my touch, gave him permission to let the floodgates free. Sobs wrench from deep inside his soul. Guttural sobs like nothing I've ever heard before and I hope to God I never hear them again. This is what breaking sounds like.

He's shattering in front of me, and I don't know what to do except be here and hold him. His pain cuts me like a knife and my eyes well with tears. "I've got you, baby. I'm here. I'm so, so sorry." I rock him in my arms.

I don't fully understand his pain, but I want to... No. I need to. I need to be here for him and help him in any way that I can.

Skylar is one of the strongest people I know, and he's shattering into pieces in front of my eyes. I'm drowning in his tears and sorrow, wishing I could somehow take away his pain. Make it better.

In the comfort of my arms, he curls into a tighter ball. Collapsing into himself. His shoulders are shaking, head bowed forward. He's hugging himself tightly as if he's afraid he'll shatter into a million pieces if he lets go. I curl my arms tighter around him, shielding his body with mine.

His smaller frame is almost engulfed by me. Seeing him this way is one of the most painful things I've ever experienced. It feels like my soul is shattering right along with his.

I crouch slightly and lift him into my arms. Naturally, like we've done this a million times before this moment, he tucks his face into my neck and his legs wrap tightly around my waist. I carry him up the stairs and into my room. It's tricky to lie down with him wrapped around me, but I manage.

Arms around each other. Legs twined together. His tears drip copiously down my neck and soak into my shirt.

Soothingly, I skate my hand up and down his back while the other cups his neck to hold him close. Gasping sobs fill the room. He's close to hyperventilating, and I just so happen to have a little experience in this area.

I press gentle kisses to his temple, the top of his head. Anything I can reach. I'd do this forever if I needed to.

“Shhhh, Sky, just breathe for me, baby. I've got you, but I need you to breathe.” I meter my breathing and tilt his chin so his eyes meet mine. His gorgeous chocolate eyes are red and awash with tears. But he meets my gaze and tries to breathe with me. First, he inhales my exhales. I'd give him the very breath from my lungs if it'll help him through this.

After a few more slightly erratic breaths, he finally matches my rhythm exactly. We breathe together. Breathe for each other and with each other. Almost like two broken halves of a whole that was incomplete without its other piece. I didn't know I was broken, until I found him and he put me back together. I only hope I can complete him like he completes me.

It really hits me how much I love him. So much more than I ever thought I could love another person. This love is different from anything I've ever felt before. Of course, I love my mom, but this feeling surpasses that. It's unique. It overflows and overwhelms me in the best possible way. It soothes and calms my soul, at the same time it makes me feel slightly chaotic. Like I can handle anything. I've felt it for a while now. I think I've loved him since the moment I met him. My soul recognized his, and everything clicked into place. He just made sense because he belonged. He belongs with me.

And right now, it feels like I'm losing him. He's in my arms, but each tear that escapes his eyes, each sob that leaves his body, is another piece of Sky I'm losing. Falling away with his grief and sorrow. Leaking out of my arms, I can feel him pulling into himself, even as he calms. It's not a physical thing, because he's allowing me to comfort him, but I can still feel it. A disconnect I've never felt from him before, and it terrifies me.

It shakes me to my core, but I can't show it. Not right now. This isn't about me. He lost someone, and I'll be there for him in any way he allows me. If he needs time or space to process this, then that's what I'll give him. Because I'll give Skylar any and everything he needs. Every last piece of me. But I will never give up on him.

Landon

The next few days are a whirlwind of activity. I'm doing my best to be there for Sky, Addy, and Cayden while juggling my professional commitments. I barely have time to eat or sleep, and I'm running on fumes. But exhaustion doesn't matter. Being here for Sky is my priority.

Leigh isn't faring any better than I am, because he's barely left our sides. He's been sleeping in the guestroom, insisting he needs to stay close in case we need him for anything. He tagged along tonight to Cayden's, and ordered some dinner we picked up on our way over.

Sky had spent the day organizing a file of pictures and videos for Cayden. He's working on a video for Andrew's services. Now, they're sitting on the couch looking through them, while Leigh and I hover in the kitchen. By silent agreement, we begin cleanup. We're giving them some space, but we're close enough to show our support.

Leigh packs up the leftovers and stores them in the fridge, while I do the dishes. Cayden has a dishwasher, but this keeps me occupied longer. Their laughter rings through the air,

interspersed with sniffles. It brings back memories of losing my grandma.

I remember how those memories can make the grief that much sharper.

My eyes automatically search for Sky. The distance between him and his friends is obvious to me, but it doesn't seem like they've noticed. Addy is curled up against Cayden's side. The look on Sky's face can only be described as vacant. It worries me. Andrew's death is hitting him hard. He won't talk about it, even though I've caught him quietly crying a few times now.

I know better than to push. He's shut me down when I've tried talking to him about it. It's disconcerting seeing him so still and checked out. I'm trying to give him time to process his emotions, but I want him to know he's not alone. I've been making it a point to sit quietly with him wrapped in my arms.

"He's struggling, isn't he?" Leigh rests his hip on the counter next to me, speaking quietly.

"Sky or Cayden?"

He shrugs.

My eyes bounce from Sky to Cayden and back again.

Without clarifying which one of them I'm talking about, I say, "Yeah."



LATER THAT NIGHT, I'm in bed scrolling on my phone. Leigh is settled in downstairs, and I'm waiting for Sky to come out of the bathroom and join me in bed. He's been in there for a while now, and although I'm worried, I give him some space.

The door clicks open. My eyes follow him as he turns off the light and makes his way over to his side of the bed. He sets his glasses on the nightstand then climbs in. My breaths come easier having him next to me, but they freeze in my lungs when he turns his back to me, bundling into the blankets.

Nope. Fuck that.

After setting my own phone down, I roll over and cuddle up behind him. Pressing my nose into his neck, I inhale his familiar scent. “You don’t have to say a word, but I need you to hear me.” His breath hitches on his inhale, but he doesn’t respond. “I see you. I see you’re struggling, and I want to help you, but most of all I want to understand. I want to understand why you’re withdrawing, and that can’t happen unless you talk to me. I’ll give you time, all the time you need, but I won’t be frozen out. I love you, Skylar, and I’m not going anywhere. Metaphorically speaking, since I’m in fact leaving for a game tomorrow.”

He gasps and chokes on a laugh that sounds more like a sob, his shoulders trembling. He wiggles and burrows back against me, cuddling deeper into my arms. My heart swells and my chest expands with a breath of relief.

Skylar

This is too much. I don't know how to move past it. I've never lost someone so close. I've always considered myself empathetic. I feel the losses of my patients. I give myself a night to be sad, but then I move on. Compartmentalizing the grief, because unfortunately it's part of the job.

But I can't seem to move on from this. Andrew's death hits deep in a way I didn't expect. Like, dude, my name is Skylar and I cry over commercials. I guess I'm new here because I honestly shouldn't be surprised that I'm fucked up right now. I feel stupid for feeling so blindsided, but this guilt is a feeling I can't shake.

I'm not ready to say goodbye to my friend. Today is Andrew's celebration of life. Andrew would've hated a funeral, would've deemed it too morbid and depressing. He never would've wanted tears shed over him, but it's part of our grieving process.

My head rests against the passenger seat window. It's a bright, sunshiny day. How the sun shines when it feels like the

world is falling apart baffles me.

Landon is driving, and Luc is in the back seat. He's barely left our sides, insisting on staying at Landon's and showing his support for me and Cayden. Between the two of them I can barely breathe.

The Bull Sharks fly out later this evening for game five in the series. They're tied two and two after losing both home games since Andrew died. Their schedule has been hellish since they've been trying to juggle hockey duties and everything with Andrew's services. I think it's affecting the team, but both of them ignore me when I suggest they're doing too much.

Let's not even talk about the guilt I feel over that. They're distracted when they should be focused on the game.

The services are being held in a large informal room at the funeral home. Addy hovers close to Cayden, while I cling desperately to Landon throughout the speeches Mr. and Mrs. Adams give. This man is unshakeable, a steadfast anchor in the storm. *He loves me, and I couldn't say it back. I wanted to. So fucking bad.*

My brain retreats to a safe space while Andrew's parents speak. I'm here, but not really.

Time passes in a foggy haze, but I make every effort to be present for Cayden when it's his turn.

He's pale and shaky, eyes full of tears, but he stands before us, with his head held high.

"I tried to plan a speech for today, but it was impossible." His gaze falls to his hands. He shakes his head before looking back up at us. "How do you find the words to say goodbye to the person you planned to spend the rest of your life with?"

Bitter guilt clogs my throat, making it hard to breathe. Tears well in my eyes, and I bite my lip to hold them in. Landon's fingers thread through mine and squeeze.

Cayden inhales deeply, then continues. "Did you know he planned quite the entrance for our wedding? This man wanted to jump out of a goddamn airplane and land at the venue. You

know I thought he was crazy, right?” His watery laugh mixes with the laughter of the crowd. He talks some more, sharing some stories about their first date and engagement. Cayden’s gaze catches mine. His eyes bore into me, and I freeze, unable to look away. “I know it sounds like a meaningless platitude, but Andrew died genuinely doing what he loved. I’m trying my best to find comfort—” His muffled sob interrupts his words. He covers his mouth while tears begin overflowing. Mr. Adams reaches over to squeeze his shoulder. Cayden’s eyes close, his chest and shoulders rising with his deep inhale. Finally, his eyes open and he continues. “I’m finding comfort knowing his last lucid moments were likely filled with pure joy. Enjoying the wind rushing around him while he glided closer and closer to the ground.” He reaches up and squeezes the hand on his shoulder. “This is what gives us comfort. We shed tears of sorrow over our loss, but we smile with joy over the countless precious moments we were blessed to share with Andrew.” Cayden is a juxtaposition of broken but composed. He’s so fucking strong.

His words strike my heart and try to take root, but I can’t stop replaying that day in my mind. Wishing I could go back and see things differently.

He shouldn’t have died doing what he loved. I should’ve listened to Frankie and helped him get the medical help he needed, and none of us would be living this nightmare right now.

My chin tips toward my chest, as my gaze lowers to the floor. My shoulders are slumped, and there’s a tightness in my chest. Landon wraps his other arm around my shoulder, his hand absently caressing me and pulling me into his side. He’s not even looking at me, but he still reads my energy effortlessly, sensing I’m close to falling apart.

After the speeches, we socialize and eat some hors d’oeuvres. At one point, my eyes land on Cayden. Luc is standing close to him, head bowed. The two are talking amongst themselves. A small smile glows on Cayden’s lips before it quickly disappears. He nods and Luc pats his shoulder and walks over.

“Looks like we’ve gotta get going. Coach will shit a brick if we’re late.”

I nod. “I’m going to go tell them we’re heading out. I’ll be right back.”

He sees me coming. “Sky.” His voice is soft.

He opens his mouth to say more, but I cut him off. “We have to get going.” I point at them with my thumb, like there’s any question of who I’m referring to.

His lips are pressed together, like he’s forcing himself to hold something in, but he nods.

After a quick hug and kiss for Addy, I turn to Cayden. Pulling him into my arms, I squeeze him in a hug. His arms wrap around me, squeezing just as tightly. “I’m so sorry, Cayden.” My voice is thick, heavy with unshed tears.

A hand lands on my shoulder. Cayden raises his head, then pulls back. His watery gaze jumps between Landon, Luc, then back to me. “Thank you all so much for coming. It means the world to me.”

As we’re walking away, Luc murmurs to Cayden.

“Don’t forget what I said, okay? I’ll be around if you ever need a friend or anything.”

Landon’s mouth tweaks into a small smile as we make our way to his truck. Seems like Luc is making another friend.

Skylar

Watching the Bull Sharks win game five is a bittersweet feeling. On the one hand, it confirms that I've been a distraction to Landon and Luc while they've been home. It affected the whole team. And on the other hand, I'm thrilled because they're one step closer to Round Two.

I should be there to witness this win in person, but I needed some space to breathe. Just a moment on my own to sit with the guilt I've been drowning in. Landon and Luc were there every time I turned around. And I am so grateful for them, but my mind is a mess of chaotic thoughts that I'm trying to untangle. The irrational, emotional side of my brain is at war with the rational, scientific side, which has caused one huge mind-fuck. I'm working on it, but it's not easy.

For once, I find myself craving quiet, and it's an odd feeling. My chest feels hollow, like there's a piece of *me* missing, and I'd like it back.

Scrambling for some normalcy, I pick my phone back up. I'd set it beside me earlier and have only sent a handful of messages to Landon. Nothing like my usual.

Neglecting Landon is the last thing I want to do. I open our text thread, ignoring the new messages from Cayden.

Me: Congrats on the win, babe. I'm so proud of you guys. You played your hearts out and it shows.

Me: Call me when you're settled in at the hotel.

My focus turns back to the post-game interviews and analysis on TV. My brain flips into autopilot, and I zone out, listening and watching, but taking nothing in. I startle when my phone vibrates twice in my hand. He replies with a heart and winking kiss emoji. His response penetrates the brain fog, a small, satisfied smile curling my lips. I've definitely rubbed off on him. A new message pops up.

LTB: I already miss your face. Talk soon, baby.

Oh shit. I need a shower. I've been lounging around the house today and it's obvious. I grab a bottle of water, and shut off the lights then head upstairs.

I spend way too long in the shower, even brushing my teeth under the spray. The hot water and steam warm me from the outside in. It doesn't fix what's broken, but I'm feeling slightly refreshed.

When I'm done, I curl up in the center of Landon's gigantic bed. Seriously. It's massive. I surround myself with all of his pillows so I don't feel so alone and adrift. I hate sleeping here without him, but I love burrowing into sheets that smell like him. It's a comfort.

Has Andrew's scent started to fade?

A lump lodges in my throat, cutting off my airway.

My FaceTime notification goes off.

Fuck, Cayden will never smell Andrew again. Spots dance in front of my eyes as they fill with tears.

The call rings out before starting back up again. Shit. I swipe my finger across the screen to accept the call, but point the camera at the ceiling. I don't want him to see me like this again.

“Baby?” Concern fills the word.

I try to speak, but I can't breathe.

Andrew is dead.

Landon's tone becomes more urgent. “Skylar! I need to see you. You don't have to talk, just let me see your face.”

With tingling fingers, I pick up my phone. Landon's gorgeous face fills the screen, green eyes pulling me in.

“Breathe with me, baby, okay?” He says it calmly, but with enough bossiness I can't help but comply. His hand is splayed on his bare chest, shoulders rising and falling with each inhale and exhale. It takes all my focus to match his breaths.

Finally, I'm able to breathe again. My eyes stay glued to his. How did I get so lucky with this man? It boggles my mind.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I shake my head. His eyes drop and he takes a deep breath, before meeting my eyes again. “If you won't talk to me, I think you should talk to someone. A professional who can help you navigate these feelings. I'm not going to push you, but I will encourage you to think about it. Can you do that for me?”

His words make sense on some level, but I'm not ready to talk to anyone about what happened.

“Just think about it, okay?” he persists.

I nod and some of his tension melts away into a smirk.

“Call of Duty?” he asks.

The question is so unexpected, a laugh escapes me. “What?”

His eyebrows bob. “Wanna play with me, baby?”

A curl of heat shoots through my veins, reminding me we haven't had sex in almost two weeks. “Yes, I'd love to play with you.”

“Do you have the mobile app? We can play on there since I obviously don't have my console.” He looks over his shoulder at his hotel room.

I don't have the app, but that's very quickly solved.

Once we're both logged in and ready to go, we disconnect FaceTime and talk to each other through the game chat.

We decide to play a round of Deathmatch. We're matched and the game begins. The routine and habit of strategizing to take out the enemy melts some of the tension in my body. The longer we play, the more my shoulders loosen, and the knot in my gut dissolves.

"Bro, these dudes are campers!" The shout from one of our fallen teammates is loud and echoes in the room.

"Where were you killed? We'll take 'em out," Landon says.

And that's just what we do. Moving through the map together, killing enemy after enemy.

We play another round of Deathmatch, then switch to Search and Destroy, until Landon's exhaustion becomes too obvious to ignore. We exit the game, and say our goodnights on FaceTime.

"Get some rest, babe," I tell him when another yawn threatens to crack his jaw.

"You too." That tone is back. It's my favorite.

"I will." I meet his eyes. "Thank you."

"You're welcome. Anytime. Goodnight, Sky."

"Night, Landon." For the first time in days, there's a lightness, I'm able to smile.

Landon knew just what I needed to draw me out of the darkness. At least for this moment.

Skylar

A hand on my thigh shuts me up and draws my attention to the fact I'm jiggling my legs like an antsy toddler.

What the fuck? His hand is higher than appropriate.

"Excited, huh?" he asks with an odd huskiness in his tone, his eyes meeting mine.

"You bet. I can't sit still. I feel like I could run laps right now."

He laughs and leans back a little, releasing my leg. "You and me both. I'll never get tired of this feeling. We're alike in that way. It's nice to have someone who understands."

There's a flash and I'm holding my phone out to Andrew. "Can you take some pictures of me real quick? Before we jump."

"Now, make sure you get my good side." I place my hand on my cheek and smile while fluttering my eyes at him. Instant regret.

“You know you don’t have a bad side.” He leans in close and snaps a selfie of us. Pause. That tone is back. “Now smile for the camera,” he orders, snapping another picture. The flash is blinding.

When my vision returns, Andrew is still watching me. “All systems go, boss?” I ask.

“Yeah, Sky, all systems go.” Ew.

Scooting forward, I grab the overhead strut and stand on the step just outside the door. I rock my body forward and backward, then throw myself into a front flip into the clouds. My vision is obscured by clouds. Next, I’m back at the dropzone, talking to Andrew. My subconscious recognizes the dream, but I can’t wake up.

“Would you mind coming over for dinner with a few of my friends? I know hockey isn’t your thing, but I befriended two of the players from the Bull Sharks. ” Ignoring what he said was beyond a struggle, but I’m following my gut. And it’s strongly warning me to tread carefully.

He raises his eyebrows at me, looking almost impressed when he asks, “No shit? How did you manage that one?”

“It was totally an accident, but a happy one. We’re like this.” I cross my fingers and hold them up for him to see.

“Does Cay know?”

“Nope.” I bob my eyebrows.

“So we’re going with a surprise attack?”

“Affirmative.”

He nods decisively. “He’s not going to know what hit him.”

I blink and I’m home. Everyone is here for dinner, and things are already awkward. Andrew sets a hand on Cayden’s lower back and glances at us. His smile is polite, but vacant. Zero recollection of our conversation visible on his face. “What’s going on, sweetie?”

What the fuck? I remember telling him they’d be here.

Luc holds his hand out to Cayden. "I'm Lucas Leighton. Landon and I play for the Florida Bull Sharks."

His voice cracks and he nods. "I know who you are. Cayden James. And this is my fiancé, Andrew Adams." He's staring at a widely grinning Luc.

Cayden seems to have regained some of his composure. He shoots an accusatory look my way. "Sky could warn a guy. Fuck's sake. When he told me I'd be meeting his infamous new friend Landon, I never would've guessed it would be Landon Spencer of the freaking Florida Bull Sharks. Jesus Christ. I thought for a minute I was hallucinating."

Andrew scoffs. "Stop being so dramatic." He rubs his temple, then shakes his head and disappears, the scene fading into the DZPB.

"So you're just going to ignore me, man?" Frankie asks, following behind Andrew. "You're better than this."

Andrew waves his hand over his shoulder. "Stop it, Frankie. You're exaggerating. Nothing is wrong."

"What'd I miss?" My eyes bounce between them. Andrew stiffens and freezes. Again, he straightens his shoulders. "He-" Andrew abruptly cuts off Frankie's words.

"Nothing." Andrew's eyes harden, and he returns Frankie's glare. "Frankie's being ridiculous." My vision fades to black, then bright green grass suddenly appears.

Frankie is running as fast as he can. Andrew's canopy travels aimlessly closer and closer to the ground.

Too fast. He's going too fast.

Andrew's canopy collapses, when he slams into the ground.

I already know, but I have to check to be sure.

Goosebumps rise on my skin, nausea roiling. Using two fingers, I grab Andrew's wrist and feel for a pulse I know won't be there.

Nothing.

Time of death, twelve forty-one.

Sirens fill the air, coming closer and closer, the paramedics driving over the well-maintained grass.

My eyes fill with tears that I try to force myself to swallow down. The EMTs carefully load him onto a backboard, and get him transferred into the ambulance.

Twelve forty-one.

I climb into the ambulance and watch while they work, using every scrap of knowledge to try to save his life. But it's too late.

"Clear!" I flinch when the defibrillator shocks Andrew's lifeless body. I want to avert my eyes from the terrifying scene, but I can't force my eyes away.

Andrew's chest rises and falls way too easily when they switch to compressions. It's not a good sign.

His body is visibly broken from slamming into the ground at such high speed.

I know what this means.

A bump in the road causes Andrew's head to shift. His lifeless eyes land on me.

I awaken with a gasping sob, sitting up in a tangle of sheets. I'm drenched in sweat, chest heaving as I cry.

Landon sits up next to me, hands already reaching out to comfort me.

I recoil, "No!"

He jerks back from the verbal slap of the word. His face scrunches in confusion, and hurt.

"Baby—" he tries again.

I raise my hands to ward him off. I'm still too raw from the nightmare. If he touches me I'll break into a million pieces. "No, Landon. Please don't."

"What? Sky, you're trembling, please just let me help you."

I shake my head. *I can't.* Tears continue to flow.

Deep inside, I know I'm being irrational, but even though I know this, I can't make it stop. I can't force myself past the nightmare and make myself listen to reason.

A few weeks have passed, and I'd thought I was doing better, but clearly I'm not.

I'm doing my damndest to shut down, but he isn't entertaining my bullshit. Even now I can tell by the set of his sexy-ass jawline that I love to kiss and bite, that he's not going to let me push him away. He squares his shoulders and breaks me with every word that passes his lips.

"Baby, I get that you're struggling, but whatever the fuck you're trying to do right now, I'm not allowing it. I'll be by your side through anything. Whatever hurts you, hurts me. You just don't get it, Sky. I'll *always* stand by you. You're mine. My man. And I take that seriously. Nothing will get between us. Not even you. You're it for me," he vows. Leaning forward and cupping my tear-stained face in his hands, he presses a tender kiss to my lips. "I know you might not be ready to hear this again, but I have to say it. I think you need some help. More than what I can provide." He pauses, his eyes watching me close. "I'll give you some time to process whatever you saw in that nightmare, but make no mistake, I will not walk away from you. I'll be right here with you. You're too important, and that's worth fighting for. I'll say it again: you just don't comprehend what you mean to me, but you will. I love you, Skylar, and I won't fucking let you push me away."

And with that final mic drop Landon, sweet, precious, *understanding* Landon, rolls over and lies back down.

The silence that follows his declaration is oppressive, threatening once again to drown me. I drag my fingers into my hair and squeeze my head in my hands. Maybe that'll hold me together. God only knows I'm on the verge of losing my shit.

Gasping breaths escape my mouth and my chest heaves with sobs I can no longer contain. His back is tight, muscles defined in stark relief as he fights every instinct inside that

tells him to comfort me. I want his arms around me, but I just can't take it right now.

How is it fair that I get to keep Landon when Andrew is dead? Cayden lost his happily ever after and it's all my fault.



WHEN I WAKE the next morning, there's a text from Landon telling me he'd gone to see Luc and he'd be home later. There's a new batch of unread texts from Cayden, and a few missed calls. I should call him back, or at least text him, but my brain revolts at the thought.

I can't.

The house is quiet, but the lack of sound is welcome.

Grief is a funny thing. As a medical professional, I *know* this. I'm letting the grief win instead of working through it, but that's the thing, we all work through the grief in different ways. I was doing so much better until that nightmare. Now, I'm currently being flattened by anger, guilt, and depression. But I can't make these feelings stop. That's not how this works.

After a quick trip to the bathroom, I make my way back to bed. It might be gigantic, but it feels like home. Wrapping myself into a bundle in the blankets and a wall of pillows, I stare at the wall, looking for some modicum of comfort since I decided to chase away the only person I actually find comfort in. I want to wrap myself in his arms and cry for days, but I don't deserve that privilege.

I must have fallen back asleep because a sound startles me awake. A few hours have passed, I realize, since the sunlight has shifted quite a bit from when I crawled back into bed to wallow. My head is pounding in a classic crying-hangover throb, and I groan. A loud knock sounds through the house, and I rapidly deduce that's what woke me.

I try to get up but am hopelessly tangled in blankets. The knocking sounds louder and a bit more urgent. Somehow, I

manage to escape my cocoon and climb out of bed before rushing downstairs to the front door.

If Landon is back already, I won't be able to resist the comfort he's offering. I'm not strong enough to send him away again. He's my other half, and I'd already shredded my soul when I asked him not to touch me earlier. I won't be able to do it again.

My tired brain misses the fact that he would've just let himself in if it was Landon, since it's his house. More knocking, so I call out, "Just a minute!" as I make my way down the stairs. My voice is hoarse with tears and sleep.

I open the door, and words die on my lips. It's Cayden. My insides freeze.

"Hey, Sky, can I come in? There's something I need to talk to you about."

Sheer panic bubbles up in my mind. Oh shit. Nope. Not doing it. I can't do this. Not today. Not ever, actually.

"You've been dodging my calls and texts so I decided to pop over and see you." Cayden must read my intent to close the door on him, because he muscles his way through and into my space.

Stupid shitty poker face. I swear I used to have a good one.

Cayden heads straight to the living room and plops himself on the couch like he's done it many times in the past. I swallow the lump clogging my throat and follow him into the living room. He's looking at me expectantly, but also with eyes full of love and compassion. For *me*.

He's lost his partner and he's looking at me with sympathy. I note the tiredness present in the shadows underneath his eyes and a slight tightness around his mouth, but overall, he looks good. He leans forward, elbows on his thighs, hands clasped and dangling between his knees. He meets my eyes and sighs out, "Why are you avoiding me, Sky? And where's Landon?" He looks questioningly down the hallway like he expects Landon to come out at any moment.

“He’s not here,” I answer his second question and hope he doesn’t realize I ignored his first one.

“Why not? You need him right now just as much as I need you. Maybe more.”

“Cayden...” My voice trails off. Nothing deflates me faster than Cayden calling me on my bullshit. We all process grief in our own way, but that’s no excuse for my behavior. “Fuck, I’ve been a shitty friend.” I plop next to him and lean my head on his shoulder. “I’m so sorry, boo. I’m struggling. I don’t know how to get past this, but I’ve been so selfish and self-absorbed that I didn’t let myself worry about you. How are *you* doing?”

He grabs my hand, holding it tightly. “You’re not a shitty friend. Trust me, I know losing Andrew isn’t just hard on me. We all lost a friend, but I didn’t expect to lose you at the same time. We’re supposed to circle the wagons in a time of tragedy. I didn’t expect you to go ghost. And I get it, Sky. I do. I know his death is hard on you in a way it isn’t hard on me. For some reason, you’re blaming yourself, and I need you to know it wasn’t your fault.”

I recoil, my knee pulled up on the couch between us so I can face him. “How can you say that to me? I should have seen the signs, or been able to help him. To get to him before he hit the ground. I should’ve demanded he get help.”

“Stop it, Sky! Just stop! Could-haves won’t help any of us. I lived with him. *I* should have known something was terribly wrong. I saw him every day.”

“Cayd—”

“No. If I can’t blame myself, then neither can you. And it’s conclusive now. The autopsy report says there was no saving him. Listen to your medical training. There was *no* saving him. He had an aneurysm in his brain, and when it ruptured... it was fatal. Period. He was dead before he hit the ground.” He’s crying, but he hasn’t looked away from me once.

I take a few breaths and look helplessly at the ceiling as my own eyes fill with tears. I open my mouth to say...I don’t

know what. Nothing will come out.

“You have to accept it, Sky. It’s a fact now. I wish you hadn’t witnessed it. I’m so sorry you had to see it. It must have been awful.” He chokes on a sob, and I feel like the worst human on the planet. I slide over and wrap my arms around my friend as he cries over his lost love. Cayden had sought me out time and time again, and I blew him off while he was suffering on his own.

Who does that? My eyes overflow with tears, and I allow myself to cry with him. We cry for our lost friend, the future they could have had, and the unfairness of it all. Death is coming for us all, whether we want it to or not, and we never know when our moment will be. Each moment is precious, and we have to hold our loved ones close.

And here I am, ignorantly pushing mine away.

Never again.

I lose track of how long we cry together. Eventually, our tears dry up, and Cayden turns to face me. “I’m going to jump again. Andrew wouldn’t want his death to keep me grounded. Come with me?”

I’m so surprised by his invitation that a feather could knock me over. That’s probably the last thing I expected him to say. The surprise slowly fades, replaced by all kinds of hell no. I’m shaking my head before I even fully wrap my head around this turn in the conversation.

“I can’t, Cayden. I don’t know if I’ll ever jump again. Life is too short for me to keep asking for trouble.”

His face crumbles. “Don’t say that. Life is too short to be afraid to take risks. It’s too short to hold yourself back from the things you love. And you love skydiving. I’m not going to pressure you. I just ask that you think about it. Let me know if you change your mind. I’d love it if you could be there.”

I know he’s right. But I just don’t think I can do it again. He’s watching me intently, waiting for a response, so I nod. I’m not planning on changing my mind, but Cayden doesn’t need to know that. I’ll go to the drop zone, but I won’t jump.

“Okay, I’m gonna get going. If you’re struggling or just want to chat, anything, you know I’m always here. Don’t be afraid you’ll make me sad. We have to be here for each other. Love you, Sky,” He presses a kiss on my cheek, and I’m alone again. Alone with only my thoughts for company.

Landon

I'm still at Leigh's. Davi and Murdock are here, and we're all watching game film. My phone buzzes in my pocket. I'm not too proud to admit I snatch it out as fast as I can and pray it's Sky. I'd spent the day in a bit of a fog after leaving him home alone this morning. I know I didn't actually *leave* him, but it honestly felt like I had. He needed his space and some time to process, but he also needs *me*.

He can have all the space he needs to breathe and think and grieve, but he can have me too. They aren't mutually exclusive to each other. Sky's my person and I'm his. But I can't force him to reach out and admit he needs me. Right now, what he needs is the space he asked for. So I decided to give it to him for a bit.

Then I'll be all up in his space again.

I just pray he reaches for me before I have to push him. We don't even need to speak. I can just hold him, we can watch TV or movies, catching up on our interrupted Devon Sawa marathon, listen to music, stare aimlessly at the ceiling... Anything. I just want to be with him in his sorrow. Help him

and carry him through. My hands are reaching for him, but he has to reach back and take hold. Take hold of *me*.

My heart skips a beat, and then pounds in my chest when I see the text notification from him.

Please reach for me, Sky.

Sky's The Limit: Hey, you.

That's it. Really? I don't know what to make of it. Text bubbles pop up and disappear as I watch. I wait... Then when nothing else comes through, I type out a reply. I overthink using an endearment, but in the end, I send it. It's a little scary, putting myself further out there when he basically tried to blow me off, but he's worth the risk.

Me: Hey, baby.

Sky's The Limit: Cayden came by today.

Me: I want to ask how he's doing, but that's a stupid question. Did you have a good visit?

I settle deeper into the corner of Leigh's couch, my phone held close. If he wants to talk, I'm here. My heart beats a little faster, hope taking flight. Could this be him tentatively reaching for me? I'm ready to grab his hand.

Sky's The Limit: I don't think he's getting much sleep, but he seems to be coping. We had a long talk and an overdue cry.

Me: I wish I could take this pain away from both of you, but I know it's not possible.

Me: I'm glad you guys were able to be there for each other.

Sky's The Limit: Yeah...

Me: I'm here for you. Always.

Sky's The Limit: I know, babe, and I love you for it. More than you know.

Did he really just profess his love over text? I smile. It's oddly fitting, since we met over a video game. Technology and

all.

Me: I love you too.

Sky's The Limit: I'm just trying to wrap my head around everything he said. I'm processing.

Me: Anything you want to talk about?

A few minutes pass with no response, then the text bubbles pop up.

Sky's The Limit: Can you come home?

Joy rushes through me and my heart feels so full it could burst. I reach out and take his hand.

Me: omw

I'm out of there so fast I don't think the guys know what hit them.

I find him bundled up in bed, arms curled around my favorite pillow. A hank of wavy dark hair partially obscures his face. His gorgeous brown eyes are swimming with tears, but he manages to give me a weak, watery smile.

"Hi," he says.

"Hi, baby." I sit next to him, my thumb caressing his face, and tucking back the lock of hair.

"So Cayden said it's official. A ruptured cerebral aneurysm killed him before he hit the ground." The words are a bit shaky, but he says them calmly. "He also called me on my bullshit for being a shitty friend."

I shake my head. "There's no way he said that."

"He didn't, but I feel it. He said I'd gone ghost, and he felt like he lost both me and Andrew at the same time. It was the kick in the ass I needed to wake the fuck up." His chest rises and falls, eyes welling, but he meets mine. "I'm still going to have hard moments, but I won't try to shut you out or push you away again. You mean too much to me. I love you, Landon."

God, he's so fucking beautiful smiling at me even in his sorrow.

"I love you, too, Skylar." His eyes soften. He still hasn't corrected my use of his full name and my smile grows.

Even though he's struggling, he's the one person in this world to fill me with such hope and joy. So much love. More love than any person could ever hope to find in their lifetime. I'll never take him for granted. I want to spend my life making him smile. Making him happy. Making him *mine*.

Jesus. I'm overwhelmed with the feelings that thought evokes. Husbands... Would Sky agree to be my husband? I'll need to bide my time as we weather the storm of grief, but I can easily picture us married. I believe with my whole heart and soul that Sky will say yes one day.

I lean down and cup his jaw, my thumb rasping against his facial hair. When I press a kiss to his lips, it feels like coming home. It's been way too long since I've felt this.

Sky moans, then flicks his tongue out to trace the seam of my lips, seeking entrance.

His tongue dives inside, our tongues tangling, our breaths coming faster.

A hand on my chest pushes me back. My eyes open in confusion.

He smiles. "I need you to make love to me. And I need these blankets off me. I'm suffocating."

I smirk at him and help him untangle himself from the blanket burrito. Standing up, I remove my shirt slowly, Sky hums his appreciation. My shorts and boxers hit the floor in one smooth motion, my dick springing free.

He reaches for me, and I climb onto the bed, straddling his hips, then reach into the nightstand to grab the lube. His hands rove my abs and chest, thumbs brushing across my hard nipples. My cock twitches where it rests on his abs.

His hazel eyes are sparkling up at me, lips swollen from our kisses. I dip my head down and kiss him some more. I

could kiss this man forever, and never tire of it.

There's a *click*, then Sky's lubed hand wraps around my cock.

"Yes, baby, just like that. Get me wet for you," I order. He adds more lube, soaking me before stroking my cock from root to tip. Circling the head, he pumps some more.

Shifting, I position myself between Sky's legs. He greedily spreads them, and all the while his hand never falters. I trail my fingers through the lube and precum soaking me, then slip them between his legs, caressing his sac, down his taint and to his hole. He moans for me, thrusting his hips up to meet each press of my fingers. My fingers match his rhythm on my cock, bodies moving in unison.

His hole pulls me in, and my fingers hunt for his prostate.

"*Ungh, yesss,*" Sky whimpers. I don't think I can hold back any longer. He pulls his legs back, positioning himself perfectly.

I grasp my shaft and use my cockhead to circle his slick rim until he's moaning, begging me to slide inside him.

My hips thrust forward, and I swallow his gasp. He took my whole cock in one thrust. He takes me so well, there's no doubt he was made for me. We rock together, our bodies working in perfect harmony.

"Landon." His words come out on a gasp. "I love you much. You, *ungh*, you mean the world to me." Sky tilts his head up, lips pursed for a kiss, I don't hesitate to give.

My heart races in my chest, ready to burst.

I make love to both his mouth and body. One hand curls around his jaw and neck, the other trailing down to work his cock.

"I fucking love you, Skylar." His body tenses beneath me, under the onslaught of sensations. I'm so close to coming, I have to fight to hold the orgasm back. "Come for me, baby. I need to feel it. Let me feel you sucking my cum inside you."

A few more strokes, and his whole body stiffens, then trembles. His breath catches, his cock pulsing jets of cum between us and all over my hand. It sets me off and I shoot inside of him.

My face lands in his neck, and I turn partially to the side so I don't smash him. I inhale his familiar scent, his hands gently rubbing my back until our aftershocks subside.

Our breathing deepens.

"He invited me on a jump." Sky's voice startles me out of semi sleep.

"What?"

"Cayden—" He breaks off with a shaky inhale before he continues. "Cayden invited me on a jump. In memory of Andrew, but I can't do it. I won't skydive again, Landon." The bed jiggles from the force of him shaking his head. "I *can't*. He asked me to think about it, but there's nothing to think about."

This is a surprising turn of events...

"But you love skydiving."

His lips mash together. "Loved. That's an important distinction."

"Okay, you loved skydiving, but maybe Cayden is right, and you should give yourself some time to think it over. You might change your mind," I gently encourage him, trying not to press too hard.

"I refuse to live frivolously. I've always said fuck fear, because what the fuck is that, but I can't live like that anymore. I can't keep throwing caution out the window and blissfully risking my life. Look at Cayden. He's alone now. I know they jumped together sometimes, but I can't willingly risk my life when I have so much to live for. *Te amo. Eres mi vida entera*. It would kill me if I hurt you."

Fuck. My throat closes up. This guy wrecks me so easily. "I love you, Sky, and that's why I'm going to ask you to just

think about it. If you don't go, that's fine. But don't count it out just yet. Marinate with it for a while and then revisit."

He bobs his head a few times, before saying simply, "I can do that."

Landon

Leigh and I are spotting each other in the Frenzy gym. We have a game at the RCA tomorrow and a practice skate in the morning. Sky's at the hospital working another double.

He's still pushing through his grief. Some days are harder than others, but he's never far. And he hasn't tried to push me away again since our breakthrough.

"That dopey, lovesick smile on your face makes me want to barf, Spence. Get it together, man. You're so dick-whipped. it's hilarious."

I laugh and flip him off, per usual. "Shut the fuck up, Leigh. Don't be jealous. Just know if you had dick this good, you'd be smiling too."

He purses his lips and blows a raspberry. "You know I'm straight, I just give good dick." He thrusts his hips like a teenage boy to emphasize his point like it wasn't already blatantly obvious. "I'll leave the dick-taking to you and your

man... And the lovely ladies who warm my bed.” We burst out laughing. I can’t help it. We’re ridiculous.

“You know you don’t have to actually take a dick to make friends with your prostate. We had this talk with Sky a long time ago. You don’t know what you’re missing, man. Life. Changing.” I shiver dramatically for effect as he watches me, but I’m definitely not exaggerating. Prostates are the best.

Leigh laughs, but I can swear curiosity lights in his eyes for a split second, and then disappears. “I’ll leave that to you and your boo thang. Also, the shiver was a bit much. The sound of you moaning replayed in my head.” He fake gags, making my shoulders shake with humor.

“You’re an idiot. And never say boo thang again in your life, mkay? Thanks.”

Our laughter subsides gradually, and we move onto another machine.

“Speaking of Sky... How’s he doing? Does he need anything? Cayden? I’m here for all of you guys.”

Leigh’s expression is something I’ve never seen before. I can’t really get a read on him, but something’s off.

“He’s struggling. Sky is struggling. Sky is finally starting to come to terms with the fact nothing that happened that day was his fault. He’d been blaming himself, but Cayden finally got through to him. He knows it fucking sucks that Andrew is dead, but we have to keep living. We *deserve* to keep living.”

“Damn, Spence, that’s heavy. But, for sure, you all deserve happiness. You’re like the brother I never had, and Sky is one of the best dudes I know. I’m always here if you need me. Anytime, I got your back. Sky’s too. If you’re my bro, he’s practically my brother-in-law, since you’re all domestic and shit.”

My chest swells and warmth spreads. “Thanks, brother, I appreciate you.”

After that, the conversation turns to more mundane topics, and I participate, but my mind wanders back to Sky. Like usual. Hopelessly stuck on him.

It's been a few days since Sky told me about Cayden's invitation. Sky and I had managed to get back into our usual routine. We didn't discuss it any further, although it's the elephant in the room. I just can't shake the feeling that I need to do something to help him. On the surface, he's coping, but deep down, he's still struggling.

He refused to skydive ever again. He's suffocating his own spirit and holding himself back. And he can't even see it. I don't like it. I refuse to let my man dim his shine for anyone. Even himself. And right now, he's his own worst enemy.

A crazy idea has been spinning in my head. I'm just not sure what I'll do if he turns me down. I need him to get through it as much as he'll need me. That seems to be our running theme. At the root of everything, we're together. We need each other in equal measures. Two halves of a whole.

Interrupting Leigh mid-sentence, I fill him in on Cayden's invitation and Sky's response. His eyebrows raise higher with every word.

"Leigh, talk me off the ledge. Tell me I'm crazy and this shit is a bad idea." I'm practically begging.

His smirk speaks volumes before he shakes his head at me. "Never that. You know I'm a ledge-walker. Whatcha thinking?"

"I'm thinking I'm the craziest motherfucker on the planet, and my guy definitely has my whole fucking heart. I just might not survive what I've gotta do." My legs are weak, and I'm queasy just thinking about it.

With Leigh egging me on, I pull out my phone and text Cayden.

When we're done working out, we hit the showers.

I dress and wait for Leigh. He's taking forever, so I head over to the showers and call his name. He's nowhere to be found. Pulling out my phone, I send him a text.

Me: Where'd you go, fucker?

Leigh: Had somewhere to be

Interesting.

Skylar

I don't know how we got here. Figuratively speaking. We're all at Drop Zone Palm Beach. Cayden is jumping today in remembrance of Andrew. Landon and Leigh tagged along, and now they're both talking crazy.

They both think they're jumping out of a plane. They've completed the training and everything. If they go through with it, it's a giant breach of their contracts. They're not supposed to participate in any activities that could severely injure them.

And these two knuckleheads both plan to complete tandem jumps. When game six of round two of the playoffs is two days away. The Bull Sharks lead three to two.

It's Landon's birthday, and this is the last thing I ever would have expected him to want to do. It's oddly sweet that he thinks he's going to jump out of a plane to convince me I'm not broken. His fear of flying and his fear of heights tell me this won't happen. He alternates between looking ready to puke and passing out and the plane hasn't even left the ground.

Leigh, on the other hand? He's bouncing around with excitement, unable to sit still.

I brought my rig. Old habits and all. I pack it for the pure joy of completing the routine. Suit up along with the guys.

I have zero intention of jumping. Nobody seems to believe me, but I know better.

Landon squats down, knees wide, head bowed. Uh-oh.

"You don't have to do this, you know?"

I crouch next to him, and he raises his green eyes to mine. "I know, baby, but I'm going to. You can do anything. You're not afraid of anything. And your love has shown me I can do this too. I might be shitting bricks right now, but I'll make it through this."

His words choke me up.

"Andrew wouldn't have wanted this for you. As much as you hate it, and as much as you wish it didn't happen it doesn't negate the fact that he died doing something he loved. And not everyone will get to have that. All those stats you've spewed about skydiving and flying being safer than driving? I listened," He cups my face in his hands and shakes gently. "Hear this. I'm scared to death, Sky. I don't want to do this without you. I trust you more than anyone else in this world. I know you'll have my back always, but if you can't do this? I won't make you jump, but I hope you will. I hope you'll jump with me, even though I'm terrified. I know you are too, but fear isn't who you are." He pauses, letting his words soak in. "This fear you feel? It's a temporary setback. You're meant to be fearless, Sky. Your fearlessness has always inspired me. It's probably the first part of you I fell in love with. Before I even knew I was falling. Even when I was too scared to take the leap, deep down, I wanted to be like you. I wanted to jump then, but I couldn't. I'll do it now. For you. Hopefully, with you. I'll show you we can get through this. Together."

Fuck. I have no words. He's ripped them away with his speech.

I can't do it.

Gary calls for us to load up the Airbus. I hold his hand during takeoff. His eyes are scrunched closed, his fingers gripping mine hard.

He's breathing fast at first, but manages to regulate his breathing on his own. Shooting a smile my way, he's so fucking brave. I'm so proud of him.

We're almost to target altitude, when Frankie makes his way over to Landon. "Come on. Let's get you all strapped in." Frankie knows what he's doing, but I can't resist helping them get all strapped together. Landon keeps his eyes averted as we all make our way over to the hatch.

I'm just observing, though.

Cayden solo jumps first. Leigh and his instructor make their way over next. We watch as Leigh positions his hands appropriately and they drop forward out of the plane.

"Oh fuck, oh fuck, oh fuck."

"Ready, Landon?" Frankie asks.

"No. Fuck, no. I'll never be ready for this, but I'm going to do it." He looks back at Frankie. "Fair warning, I might shit my pants, but it's happening." Frankie cackles. Landon beckons me over, softly kissing my lips and brushing his fingers across my cheeks. "I love you, Skylar. I'll see you soon."

Frankie lightens the moment. "That almost felt like a threesome for a minute. I was scared things were gonna get awkward." Landon's laugh loosens some of his tension.

"I'm ready," he says. He assumes the position, eyes tightly closed. "Don't look down, don't look down, don't look down," he mutters.

Time slows as they tilt forward. Landon's eyes open wide, and they jump.

Oh my god. He really did it. He fucking jumped out of a plane for me. My feet are glued in place. I'm frozen. I should follow him, but I can't. This view normally excites me, but I

feel sick to my stomach. My heart isn't racing with excitement, but with nerves. What if something goes wrong?

My hands tingle and my legs are shaky. Rationally, I know I can do this. I've done it a million times, it feels like, but I can't stop remembering Andrew's lifeless body. His blank eyes. I wasn't fast enough to save him.

But... What if Landon needs me? I'm twiddling my thumbs in this fucking plane. He's way ahead of me at this point. I have to do it. I have to jump.

Landon's in good hands, but things happen. He needs me. I need to be there for him like he's always there for me. I make my way toward the hatch. I've got this. Everything is going to be okay.

"I'm going, Gary," I yell.

"Fuck yeah!"

After one final check of my equipment, I fly.

Adrenaline courses through my blood. The wind catches me like a long-lost friend. I'm flying. Gliding in the sky, freefalling closer to the earth below. Slightly hysterical laughter bubbles up out of my chest. I visualize the fear that's still present, but I consciously box it up and shove it further back into the recesses of my mind. I don't have time for fear.

I'm looking for Landon and Frankie.

Their parachute deploys, springing up above them and slowing their fall.

Fuck yes. No issues with that, thankfully.

Two other canopies are fully deployed. All of my people are safe in their glide to the ground.

My altimeter beeps a warning, and I slow my descent, bracing for deployment. A little farther, and I pull the ripcord. I cackle like a crazy person.

A broken piece of my puzzle slots itself into place.

Fucking Landon.

God, I needed this. Cayden, Luc, and Landon made this happen.

I'm nowhere near healed from the trauma of the day Andrew died, but I feel a little bit more like myself, and I don't hate it.

Their canopies approach the landing zone, and my heart takes off in my chest. Visions of Andrew landing flash before my eyes. Their landings are smooth, but I come to the realization that Landon has been right this whole time. I need help.

Professional help.

It's time I take care of myself and my mental health. I need therapy to help me work through the memories, the lingering guilt I shouldn't be feeling. There's a lot to unpack, and I can't do it on my own. I'll be strong and take that step.

My feet hit the ground a few moments later, my landing smooth as can be. Landon's arms are around me before I can even process. He's trembling, shaking in my hold. Laughter bubbles out of him.

"Holy shit, babe, that was insane. Fucking terrifying. Awesome, but insane." He kisses me again. "And I'm never fucking doing that again."

EPILOGUE

Landon

Sky seemed to hit a breakthrough after our jump. He scheduled an appointment with a therapist. He'd opened up about scenes from the accident replaying over and over in his head. In his nightmares. It's completely understandable. He witnessed something tragic, something nobody should ever have to see. His grief still tries to drag him down.

I see his struggle. There are days when he's not his usual sunshine-y self. On those days, I cuddle him extra close, but don't rush his process. There's no easy fix for what he's experiencing. I'm ready to listen to him on days he wants to talk about it. They're few and far between, but it's amazing seeing him share. Therapy is helping.

Somehow, photos from our skydiving venture ended up online. They went viral instantly. Fuck you very much, social media.

Coach Boucher and the GM were livid. Red faces, screaming and yelling, spit flying.

It wasn't pretty.

Essentially, our punishments were hefty fines. Nobody was willing to terminate either of our contracts. Neither Leigh nor I were injured.

A stern warning, slap on the ass, and a fine.

And I'm okay with that.

I regret nothing. And I know for a fact, Leigh doesn't either.

He'd told me later that night, "Fuck a fine, bro. Anything for Sky and Cayden. They needed that. Did you see their faces when we hit the ground?" Days had passed, but he was still buzzing from the adrenaline rush. Not me. Falling out of the sky at terminal velocity, it's quite possible I didn't breathe until Frankie pulled the ripcord. My stomach fell out of my ass.

He can't wait until the day he can jump again. Me, on the other hand, never the fuck again.

I'm glad I did it, but I'm even more glad it's behind me. Seeing the ground rush up to meet me was exhilarating, but literally my worst nightmare come to life.

The Bull Sharks are still in the running for the Cup.

It took all seven games to clinch our ticket to the Eastern Conference finals. Whichever team wins this round advances on to battle it out for the Cup.

We're the first team in franchise history to make it this far.

Tonight is game one of the conference finals at the RCA. We have the home-ice advantage, so game two will also take place here in two days. Rolling over carefully in bed, I smile at Sky. It's early and he's still sleeping, his breathing slow and steady.

He's going to meet Pops today. He flew in last night and is staying with Mom for the duration of the series. Mom and Sky both took time off from work and will be at every game.

My heart is full to bursting. So much love.

The dream is to win the Cup, but if that doesn't happen, I'm still a winner.

If you'd asked me last year what my life would look like, this definitely isn't it.

Reality is better than anything I could have dreamed up.

Who knew a random video game matchup would lead me to my better half?

I didn't then, but I know now.

THE END

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

If you've made it this far, I'd like to sincerely thank you for taking the time to read my debut book baby. It has been a *very* long time coming, and I'm thrilled you took a chance on a new author. As an avid reader, I know time is precious and TBRs are LONG.

A little over two years ago a random video on social media planted a seed in my mind. I felt it in my soul that these boys needed their story told. Skylar came to me first, but Landon was right there yelling just as loud for his story... And right behind them, were four more men shouting for their stories. Just like that a series was born.

Thanks to Katie for coming through with the perfect name for this series. Trust me. The previous one was awful lol. You were a fantastic alpha, and provided so much guidance. I would have been absolutely lost without you. You brought Shann into my life, and I am beyond grateful to both of you. This book wouldn't be what it is today if not for your feedback.

I have to thank my main cheerleaders, my family, for always believing in me and encouraging me every step of the way. Ris has gotten excited over every single book I've started writing (and never finished) over the last twenty plus years. After endless years of edging, you finally got to read a completed book! You're welcome. But seriously. You guys truly lit a fire in me, and helped me believe in myself. My daughter kept me on task like a proper drill sergeant. "Mommy, are you working on your book? Why are you on your phone?" And my son anytime I talked about any book: "Your book? It's done?"

Their belief in me kept me going.

I did it! I WROTE A BOOK!

Thank you to the old and new friends I've made within this community. You've given me a safe space to be myself unapologetically. It's such a great feeling having people who understand and share my love of books and love stories.

Gare! Your enthusiasm for my boys helped pull me out of a hole of self doubt. The closer the release date got, the worse my head space was. Your graphics and our talks mean more to me than you'll ever know.

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Neysi! We know my Spanish skills are extremely limited. My North Carolina comes out more than my Cuban. Without your assistance, the language would have fallen flat. You were essential in helping bring Sky and Addy to life.

I feel truly blessed to have worked with some great people for this release. I had the best team possible for this debut. I tried so hard to be organized, and it didn't quite go as planned. Nisha at Passion Author Services is the queen of handling all of my curve balls with grace and patience. Kenzie at Nice Girl Naughty Edit whipped these boys into shape, despite delays on my part. Any lingering mistakes are my own. Ashley, you saved my ass with the formatting. You all made my life so much easier, and I appreciate you so much.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jess is a South Florida resident. She's lived here over twenty years, but loves to mention that she was born in North Carolina. With a name like Jessica Ann, are you surprised? She grew up with an imagination overflowing with ideas, scenarios, and stories, and a HUGE love for all things romance. These two combined and birthed a need to write and share those stories. She writes about love. Period. She doesn't plan to limit herself. No boundaries, just love.

If she's not reading, writing, obsessively listening to the same bands on repeat, mindlessly scrolling social media, or checking in patients at her day job, you can expect to find her spending time with her family.

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