



*Forward*  
**ENTRY**



AURORA CRANE



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Books by Aurora Crane

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I never thought that I would write a sports romance, or have so much fun doing it. I had the absolute best time during the creation of this novel and I couldn't have done it without the help of the amazing team around me. You know who you are. I love you to bits and pieces, all of you.

As always, a special thanks to Briar, who will forever be my muse, my inspiration and my sanity, all in one amazingly shaped best friend and soulmate.

## Authors Note

This novel is a gay sports romance focused around the Australian Football League (AFL) which may be better known as Aussie Rules.

**Aussie Rules**, or footy, is the illegitimate and scientifically-improbable love child of rugby, soccer, basketball and the UFC. Played under the banner of the **AFL** (Australian Football League) and commonly described as “a mass brawl with a ball”, it is Australia’s national sport and has been for over a hundred years.

I grew up around this sport, as most Aussies do, and have found a whole new level of love for it during the research for this book. I have done my best to keep everything as accurate as possible, but some minor creative licenses were taken during writing (kept as minimal as possible)

While I have tried to explain the game in detail throughout the book, you can also find a glossary of AFL terms in the back of this book. It is not an exhaustive list but does include all the terms that are used in the book, for your convenience.

**HAPPY READING**

**\*insert ball joke\***





## First Quarter

NOAH WALKER REMEMBERED THE day he'd been drafted into the Australian Football League. At eighteen years old, he'd been thrust into the world of professional footy with little preparation. His first match, he'd come out of the race that led to the field into the sound of screaming fans at the Sydney Cricket Ground. He'd been green as hell, wearing the Sydney Swallows guernsey—the now-retired logo flat across his chest, the same blues and greens they still sported—with a sense of pride and accomplishment. Terrified, already sweating from the unsteady beat of his heart, so eager to prove himself.

He'd had one of the worst-recorded debut matches in the history of the AFL. The very next week, he'd been sent back to their reserve league, the VFL. He'd spent half the season there until a key forward at AFL level had been injured, and they'd called him up again. He'd done better the second time and earned his place in the twenty-three-man main lineup; he hadn't played another VFL game for his entire career.

At a solid one hundred and ten kilograms, and hitting just over six foot five, Noah had honed himself into a key forward for the Swallows, and he was a force to be reckoned with. Every time he played, he proved *why*, even at twenty-eight, he was still playing.

Most of the guys he'd played with back in the beginning were now retired, or had been traded to other teams, or were coaching or commentating, or had just been forgotten in the wind, where so many players that didn't make legend status ended up. Noah was still a Swallow, but the makeup of the team was a hell of a lot different than when he'd been younger and dumber. Maybe just younger. Maturity was an unpredictable beast, and it could be hit-and-miss.

Walking out onto their indoor training field in Moore Park wasn't quite the same as a game-day walk, but the sense of accomplishment was still the same. He'd been living his dream of playing footy at the highest level for ten years now, and the privilege of still being good enough to play couldn't be taken for granted. Especially at his age.

Noah eyed two of the men standing in the middle of the fake grass. They were the most mismatched players on their entire team. Wren Monaghan—a midfielder with dark-red hair, who stood at only five foot six and could take down a guy three times his size—and their ruckman, Darcy Timms—who was the complete opposite in not only his nature but his structure; at six foot ten with a solid frame and short blond hair that curled at the ends, he towered over Wren. The two of them

were trying to balance footballs on their noses. Noah could not even begin to understand why.

“I want to get a BB gun and play target practice,” Cooper Thorne, one of Noah’s closest friends and a fellow key forward, murmured next to him. He rested his arm across Noah’s shoulders. “Ten points if we hit the ball. Two hundred fifty points if we hit Wren.”

“And if we hit Darcy?” Of the two, Darcy was the bigger target.

“Negative fifty. We’re not animals.”

That was highly debatable, but Noah wasn’t going to argue. He’d learned to pick his battles. This one wasn’t worth the energy.

“Cut it out, you two,” Forest, their captain and Coop’s twin, yelled from behind them. Noah and Coop both jumped and whirled around. For a big guy, he moved like a fucking ghost.

“It wasn’t me,” Coop said automatically. Noah bet that was a response he’d learned quickly growing up. Especially considering his best friend.

“And you?” Forest asked Noah.

Noah admired Forest and his tenacity. It had been a unanimous agreement to make him their skipper, and Noah would follow him out onto the field any day. He was also more aware of when Forest was yanking his chain than Coop was. As an only child, he had less sibling trauma. “Saying anything at this point is just admitting my guilt,” he said casually.

“Whose side are you on?” Coop asked, jamming his elbow into Noah’s side. Noah grunted. That was going to bruise. It would match all the other bruises he got on game days that took all week to heal.

“Not yours; I like winning. Besides,”—Noah turned Coop around to face Darcy and Wren, pointing at them over Coop’s shoulder—“he was talking to them.”

“Oh.”

Forest laughed and slapped Coop on the shoulder as he passed. “Hey,” he called out, causing Darcy to unbalance and drop the ball. “Stop dicking around. What on earth are you two trying to do?”

Noah shoved Coop forward by his nape and out onto the field.

Mid-April was always a strange time of year. Third week of the regular season and only just getting back into the swing of things after the end of the off-season and pre-season.

Five years ago, key players for the Sydney Swallows had retired and moved on, and they’d gotten a string of green players—Coop and Forest among them—and the rebuild that had come from that had been messy and long. Noah had hopes for this year. Hopes that they were out the other end and moving forward into a new era for them. The kind where a premiership flag wasn’t completely out of the question come September.

They'd only *just* missed the finals last year, and Noah was determined that this year would be different. The start of their current season had been promising, with two nice, easy wins under their belt. Now it was time to make sure that the drills and practice they'd been putting in for months, *years*, took them where they needed to be for the match against the rival Sydney team in five days. The Showdown, where the entire city rallied and tensions were high. There were always two a year, but the second one wasn't until the second to last game of the season, in the middle of August.

Noah would enjoy wiping the floor with the North Sydney Wombats both times. There was a particular thrill in watching them walk off the ground, defeated and dirty. Their native animal's deadly butt wasn't going to help them win this match.

"First," Wren said loudly. His stature didn't hinder his ability to carry his voice as if he was the size of a giant. "We *were* doing it."

"And second?" Forest asked, reaching them. "You can't have a first without a second."

"Or third," Coop added unhelpfully.

Noah wished they had off buttons. He'd seen them all naked, unfortunately. If any of them had one, it was well hidden or in places that Noah had no desire to go.

"Second?" Wren blanched. He planted his hands on his hips, chin tilting stubbornly. "And *second*, Mr. Captain, is that the Sherrin makes it easier because they're less pointed than the dumb NFL footies that are trying too hard."

“What does that have to do with the price of eggs?” Forest asked.

“Having good balance is important for football skills,” Darcy chimed in. “It helps to allow for a full swinging arc of your leg when kicking.” He demonstrated with his leg. “And it helps to maintain a consistent centre of gravity.”

Noah pursed his lips, attempting to hide his smile.

“Balancing with your *feet*, Darce, not your *nose*,” Forest said, somewhat patiently, partially exasperated.

He was more patient than Noah would be. He’d never wanted a leadership position, and this was Exhibit A for why.

He scooped up a nearby stray footy and moved away from them, closer to where their forwards coach, Eric Jackson—Jacko—was speaking to Trey Rivoli—Ravioli—and gesturing wildly. Ravioli had been an eighth-round draft pick the year before, and Noah knew he was going to be a promising asset to their forward line even if he was young and greener than Noah could remember *anyone* ever being. He had real potential, and they’d all been working with him to nurture it.

“We’re working on poor disposals and marking targets with the midfielders first thing,” Jacko said in greeting. “Hope you ate your Cheerios.”

“I try to avoid eating pure sugar for breakfast,” Noah said dryly. He couldn’t think of anything worse to fuel himself with first thing in the morning. He was a big guy, and a bowl of

sugar wasn't going to help him make the most of a lengthy training session.

“You get a five-percent allocation for bouncing off the walls,” Jacko said, nodding to himself.

“... Thanks?” Noah had no idea what that meant. A frequent occurrence for their forwards coach. He was brilliant at tactics, strategy, and football. Less so with basically anything else in life. Noah sometimes wondered how he got to work every day in one piece. Maybe he lived nearby and got lucky.

“What did you have?” Ravioli asked curiously. “I had pancakes, with strawberries, cream, and strawberry jam.”

“You're gonna puke your guts up before we get to lunch,” Noah warned. And he wasn't cleaning up the mess. Especially not when it was self-inflicted based on a terrible breakfast choice on training day.

“Colour me surprised that you don't eat pancakes,” Ravioli said. “I bet you had a really grown-up breakfast of like oats or something.” Ravioli rubbed his stomach. “Besides, this baby is made of steel.”

“It should be made of enzymes and digestive juices to break down your food,” Jacko said. “If it's made of steel, you should see one of the club doctors.”

“And be careful when walking through airport security,” Noah suggested.

It was only an hour later that Ravioli was curled around one of the bins near the training field, emptying his stomach. A



new record.

“You did warn him,” Coop tutted, glancing up from the phone in his hand.

Noah snorted. “Too little, too late. Sometimes they have to learn the hard way.” He took a long drink of his water before pouring the rest over his head. It was heating up inside, they were training hard, and Noah suspected their overhead lights were heated. It was the only explanation.

Noah gestured at the phone in Coop’s hand as he shook out the water in his hair. He had no idea where he’d gotten it since there was a strict no-phone policy that their anal-retentive wanker coach, Dorian Novak, had put in play when he’d first come on board at the start of last year. Phones were meant to stay in their lockers. A treatment better reserved for teenagers, not adults. “You’re going to get that confiscated.”

Coop scowled. He checked it once more and then hid it under his jacket. “It’s like being in high school again,” he grumbled.

“Why do you keep looking at it? Seeing someone new?” Noah teased. “Your boyfriend can wait till you’re done.”

“What? No.” Coop frowned. “Bry is ignoring me.”

“That codependency is a good look on you,” Noah said. Bryce Monaghan was a midfielder and captain for North Sydney. He also happened to be Wren’s little brother and Coop’s childhood best friend, so he tended to hang around them like a bad smell whenever they had activities that weren’t

team specific. He irritated Noah, especially since he couldn't seem to get away from him, and he was impossible to ignore.

“We're not codependent,” Coop argued, following Noah back out into the centre square, where the rest of the forwards were waiting for them to finish the second half of their morning training. They'd break it down further and individualise their exercises after they'd eaten lunch. Tomorrow's training would be more intense than today's, but Noah always left feeling sore anyway.

“Says the guy who keeps checking his phone every two seconds.” It was new behaviour, even for Coop And Bry's weird friendship.

“They say that some electric signals from our phones are strong enough that they could affect the brainwaves that resonate in our cerebral cortex,” Jacko said, nodding. He cupped one hand around his mouth and leaned in. “And if Novak catches you, he'll go all red and puffy.”

Wren, who was spread out on the ground, stretching his legs with his arms reaching back and bracing him, threw his head back and laughed so loud that Coop flinched and kicked his thigh.

“Noise level,” Coop growled. “We're not over in the barn.”

“What barn?”

“Why are you checking if he's responded now?” Noah asked. “He'd be in training too.” Sometimes he wondered if

Forest and Coop shared a single brain cell between them—and if Forest had full custody of it.

“Well, he’s not in lockdown during training, is he? He’s allowed to check his phone on breaks,” Coop hissed. “Stop looking at me like that.”

“I’m not looking at you like anything.” He was. Not responding within a few hours of sending a text was not as big a deal as Coop was making it out to be. “Forest doesn’t really use his breaks, does he?”

“That’s because people always want to talk to him.”

“Because he’s captain,” Noah said slowly. He wasn’t going to point it out any more than that. Forest was captain: so was Bryce. Hence, the likelihood of him not having time during a break to check his phone even if they weren’t made to keep them out of sight.

Coop flipped him off.

Noah gripped the back of Wren’s guernsey and lifted him off the ground and onto his feet. He was done walking Coop through his whatever was happening. “Time to work some of that excess energy off.”

And his too. He’d make sure they all slept well that night, with minimal mouthing off.



BRYCE MONAGHAN KNEW THAT avoiding his best friend was going to bite him in the ass at some point. He just hadn't expected Coop to enter enemy territory to ambush him. That seemed like an unfair tactic and needed to go in the rule book with an underlined "NO" at the top. The Sydney Olympic Park was for the North Sydney Wombats, not Coop's poser Swallows team. What kind of bird was that anyway?

"Why are you avoiding me?" Coop asked bluntly before Bryce could even say "hey." He slapped a hand against the wall beside Bryce's head, effectively trapping him in.

There weren't any exits that Bryce could get to while maintaining a pace that would allow his dignity to remain intact *and* be fast enough to get away from Coop. Coop had longer legs. Another unfair tactic.

"I'm not avoiding you," Bryce said quickly. Too quickly. "We've texted every single day since last week. More than once. Every day." He'd made sure to keep communication lines open so that Coop would know everything was fine. Or more importantly, *wouldn't* know everything was not fine.

Coop nodded thoughtfully, and Bryce knew that face. He'd been too specific in his argument, and now this was going to hurt. He should have run.

Coop pulled out his phone and opened it, turning it so that Bryce could see the screen.

Bryce winced when their message history popped up.

Coop read off Bryce's responses. "Okay. Thanks. No worries. Okay. Thumbs up." He got a look for that one, and Bryce gave that to him, because that had been... bad. Not one of his finer moments. "This one is in French, I think. You don't even know French."

"I know Google." That message had been pure reactionary panic.

He deserved the look that Coop gave him for that one as well.

"Why did you Google a word to write in French?" Coop asked. "I don't know French either. Were you expecting me to copy and paste it into translate?"

Bryce wasn't sure what the word had originally been or even if it was French; he was sure that it was completely butchered, and any native speaker would lop off his head for the blatant misuse. He kind of liked his red curls where they were, but he wouldn't blame them. Might even cooperate when they tried.

Coop pocketed his phone. "So," he said.

Bryce winced. The single word was like a gavel coming down on a judge's bench.

"Now you're gonna stop being a moron and tell me what's going on."

"I saw him," Bryce blurted out. His cheeks heated. He bet the spattering of freckles that covered his entire face were the horrible dark colour that they went when he blushed.

“You saw who? If I have to drag this out of you, Bry, we’re both going to be hurting afterward,” Coop warned.

“I saw Noah,” Bryce said, forcing the words out of his mouth. “In your shower. I let myself in, and I heard the shower, and I just figured it was you, and so I... I went up and...” He and Coop had lived in each other’s pockets for years. Their families were friends, and they’d known each other from the moment they’d been born. It wasn’t as though Bryce waltzing into Coop’s apartment unannounced was unusual. It was just the first time that the shower had been occupied by *someone else*.

“Did he say something to you?” Coop asked darkly. “I’ve told him—”

“No! He didn’t even notice me there. I left. I wasn’t... I didn’t *watch* or whatever.” Maybe for a minute or two. Not long. He wasn’t going to share that tidbit of information. A few minutes had been all it had taken to make the earth shift out from under his feet.

Coop blinked. “Okaaaay?” he said, dragging the word out. “I’m not sure that facilitates ignoring me and acting like a fucking idiot.” He crossed his arms over his chest. “He didn’t say anything to you, and you left. Big deal. I don’t understand what the problem is. You see naked guys all the time. You saw one more. Congratulations?”

Bryce closed his eyes and let his head fall back against the wall with a thud. “It wasn’t that.”

“Then what was it? Jesus fucking Christ, Bryce. Spit. It. Out.”

“Have you ever had a single moment change everything that you thought you knew about yourself?” Bryce asked. He opened his eyes and met Coop’s. “Something that made you question a fundamental part of yourself?” A single moment that had been more akin to a sledgehammer to the face.

Coop ran a hand through his short dark hair and pulled it slightly. Bryce had that effect on people. “I need more context than that. Did you fall down the stairs or something?”

Bryce glanced around. The hallway was deserted, but his whole team was there, along with the coaching staff and some keen fans that had been watching their training session from the stands. The last thing he needed was for this conversation to somehow be recorded. He’d like to figure out how *he* was feeling about it before the rest of the world got to have a say.

He took Coop’s arm and tugged him into a nearby room. That it was a supply closet was coincidental.

“There’s a joke in here somewhere,” Coop said with a quiet laugh.

More than Coop knew. “He was... Noah was...” Bryce had no idea why it was so hard to say out loud. It was something they all did. Totally natural, and the shower was the best place for it because the mess cleaned itself up.

Coop’s mouth dropped open. “Was he...?” He made a lewd gesture with his hand. Bryce’s face must have given him away

because Coop snorted out a laugh. “So? C’mon, Bry, I’m sure you jerk it all the time.”

The act itself wasn’t the problem. Bryce’s *reaction* to it was. “I... got hard,” Bryce said, keeping his voice down.

Noah was *huge*, in *all* ways. Bryce didn’t even have to close his eyes to see Noah’s large hand stroking his big thick dick; it was imprinted in his brain. Bryce had always known that Noah was big—the guy was a goddamn fucking tank on the field—but he’d never thought about it on a personal level. Even his face had been breathtaking under the spray of Coop’s shower. Eyes closed, drops of water clinging to his eyelashes. Strong jaw, thick bowed lips, ears that were too much of a good thing, short black hair that flirted with the tips of his them.

For the first time in his life, Bryce had gotten hard *because of another guy*. And that wasn’t a part of himself that he’d ever questioned before. Coop had come out when he’d been like five and Bryce had never thought “hey, maybe I am too?”

Bryce had known Noah for years, since Coop had been drafted into the Swallows five years ago. They’d been drafted together—Bryce with North—and they were too close for there not to be overlap in the teams and who they knew.

Noah had made him feel a lot of things in those years: irritation, anger, exasperation, frustration, maybe a little admiration; the guy was a beast, he played footy like a king, and Bryce remembered looking up to him once upon a time when he’d been a teenager on track to be drafted out of high



school, and Noah had been at the top of his game as a Sydney Swallow. What Noah had *never* made him feel before was lust.

Coop's eyebrows rose almost to his hairline. "I'm sorry, what?"

Bryce shrugged helplessly, embarrassment clogging his throat. "I don't even *like* him, Coop."

"I'm aware of that. Obviously, it's not stopping you from wanting to watch him get off." The amusement in Coop's light-blue eyes was uncalled for. It figured that he'd be best mates with the evil twin.

"I don't want to watch him get off!" Bryce protested. "I don't... think." He'd left before Noah had reached the end of his performance. Watching his muscles flex, the strength in his shoulders as he'd fisted himself, had been a whole experience that Bryce hadn't totally recovered from yet. That didn't have to *mean* anything. It would fade. Memories always did. "Stop laughing at me!"

"I'm not laughing at you."

If that wasn't laughter, then Bryce had been doing facial expressions wrong his whole life.

"Riiiiight." Bryce drew out the word. "Good talk. Let's pretend this never happened and go on with our lives like normal." Hell would freeze over before Bryce said a word about this to Noah. The asshole would laugh at him and tell him to take a hike. No, he'd probably be a dick about it, and Bryce would never hear the end of it for the rest of his life, and

if he died before Noah, Noah would carve it into his tombstone so it followed him into the afterlife.

“Do you want to climb him like a tree? It’s okay if you do.”  
Coop’s grin was smug.

“I do not. But I’m so glad that you find this amusing.”

“It’s that or get pissed off that you were avoiding me just because you got a hard-on for my teammate. You find him hot. So what?”

“I don’t find him hot!” That sounded hollow even to him. The problem was that he didn’t know what was accurate. “I don’t know what I feel. I’m not... I don’t suddenly feel gay.”

Coop stared at him for a beat before bursting out into a full, belly-deep laugh.

Bryce scowled at him. “The fuck, Coop?” It wasn’t that bloody amusing.

Coop bent over, bracing his hands on his knees. “You don’t *feel* gay?” he wheezed, slapping his knee.

Bryce hated everything about this conversation. He wished he’d been sneakier about hiding. Put a cap over his fire-engine curls or something. Coop shouldn’t have even been allowed here. Wasn’t there some kind of cross-contamination rule? He’d never seen a Swallow here before. One had never been traded here, and none of them had ever had a reason to grace the place with their presence. Even he and Coop had always met up in other places. It was just... it was *some* kind of rule, wasn’t it?

“I don’t think I’m suddenly into guys. I don’t even think I’m suddenly into *him*.” Not saying Noah’s name made Bryce feel marginally better even if they both knew who he was talking about.

“Okay, let’s try something.”

Bryce squinted at him. “Try something?” That sounded ominous.

Coop nodded and gestured at Bryce with his hand. “C’mere.”

“Why?” Bryce asked suspiciously. He didn’t trust any of this.

“Just get over here.”

Bryce sighed. He spread his arms in a “now what?” gesture once he did as he was told. The next second, before Bryce had time to react, Coop had snagged his training T-shirt and tugged him forward into a kiss.

Bryce froze with his best friend’s lips against his. He blinked into the semi-darkness, the outlines of shelves and their contents all around them suddenly fascinating. This must be where they stored the toilet paper and the disinfectant wipes. Cool.

Was it awkward to keep his eyes open? It felt awkward. Should he close them? Would that make it *more* awkward? He didn’t know what to do.

Coop’s lips were warm. Nice, he supposed. Soft. They were lips. If it was supposed to be something more than that, he

didn't feel it. He put a hand on Coop's shoulder tentatively. He needed to relax. There was no way he could. This felt like kissing his brother. He grimaced at the thought of Wren being in his place. Great. Now he was going to have nightmares. Was that the point of this experiment? Because if so, A-plus.

He breathed a sigh of relief when Coop pulled away and wiped over his mouth.

"Well?" Coop asked.

"Well, what? That just took the top spot on my list of 'most awkward encounters ever.' Completely knocked off the water-park incident when we were six." Thinking about that still made him cringe, and it had nothing on right now.

"Hard same," Coop said with a nod. The twist of disgust hadn't quite left his face. "Let's not do that again."

"Agreed." He'd even spit in his hand and shake on it if they needed to solidify the pact. Anything that ensured this never occurred again.

"And that didn't really answer your question," Coop said.

"I forgot what the question was." He didn't even care what the question was anymore.

Coop snickered. He slung an arm over Bryce's shoulders and herded him back out into the hallway. The sun streaming in from the skylights was glaring after all that time in the dark. Like walking out of a cinema after a long movie. Horror movie.

“C’mon, let’s go get some lunch,” Coop said. “I’m fucking starving. You done for the day?”

“Yeah.” He thought so. He’d get a swim and a jog in later, but official training was done. Tuesdays were mostly for position-specific practice and getting their muscles moving again for the upcoming weekend, and the coaches were careful not to overload anyone. Tomorrow was when they’d get put through their paces. Hardcore training before their rest day, Thursday. Then Saturday was the big “Showdown.” Against Coop—and Noah’s—team, the Sydney Swallows. Bryce both lived for *and* dreaded the rival matches. He was dreading it a little more than normal for reasons that had nothing to do with the game itself.

“My treat,” Coop offered.

Bryce vowed to order the most expensive thing on the menu even if he had to pack it up and take half of it home for later.



NOAH LOOKED UP FROM where he was strapping his shoulder and arm for the Sydney Swallows versus North Sydney Wombats match to find Coop watching him intently. Again.

Coop had been staring at him *all fucking day*, from the moment they’d all arrived at the SCG, and it was starting to get on his nerves.

He scowled and refocused on what he was doing so that he didn't fuck it up. While it had been years since a trainer had done it for him, he still needed to concentrate.

Focus was hard when Coop kept staring at him like he had something on his face.

As far as he knew, Coop wasn't pissed off at him for something. He'd gone hard in training on Wednesday but not enough that Coop would still be giving him the side-eye today. If he were that mad, then he would have ambushed Noah on their off day, Thursday. Noah had spent that day with his dog, Rufus—a giant six-year-old, grey-and-white Old English Sheepdog—on the beach, cooking meals for the week while catching up on a new album from his favourite band, and then being lazy on the couch, playing horror video games.

There had been ample opportunities for Coop to bring up an issue. Picking *game day* was the shittiest kind of timing, and Noah thought better of him.

He put down the strapping and tested his range of motion, making sure he hadn't done it too tight before shrugging his guernsey on over his head. He waited until Coop had gone back to concentrating on writing on the inside of his sock—the weird-ass ritual he did before every game—and then stood, shaking himself out before approaching.

Noah lifted a foot and planted it firmly between Coop's knees, forcing him to stop.

Coop jerked in surprise. “Damn it, Noah, you made me spell ‘soup’ wrong!”

“Why are you writing—Don’t answer that, I don’t care. Why do you keep looking at me?”

Coop batted his eyelashes. “Because you’re so pretty.”

“Mate.” They’d known each other for the better part of half a decade, and that shit wasn’t going to fly with him. Coop didn’t *stare*; Noah wasn’t in the mood for whatever this was, and Coop had better start talking.

“You came over here, *mate*, not the other way around.” Coop frowned at his sock. Sighed. Put it down and grabbed a new pair, setting them beside himself.

“You have a screw loose.”

Coop capped the permanent marker. “Just one?” he asked absently. If he thought the uninterested act was going to work, he had another thing coming.

“Multiple. Thousands,” Noah said, frustrated. “You’re made of loose screws. Now tell me what the fuck is going on.”

“All right. Sheesh. Don’t shoot the messenger.”

“You’d have to *have* a message to *be* a messenger.” If Coop didn’t get to the point soon, Noah was going to strangle him. Then they’d need to call someone up from their VFL team to replace him on short notice. They’d done it before, they could do it again.

“You know how you have a thing for redheads?” Coop asked, a smile playing on his lips.

Was that a rhetorical question? “I do not”—Noah glanced around and lowered his voice, leaning down closer—“have a thing for redheads.” That’s why Coop had been staring at him all day? His preference in men? The fuck did that have to do with anything?

“I think you do.”

“I think you need to shut up.”

“I could, but I think you want to hear what I have to say.”

“I really don’t think that I do,” Noah said dryly.

“We’re both doing an awful lot of thinking,” Coop said with a shit-eating grin.

“That’s never been a problem of yours, your entire life. Instead of getting ready for the bounce, you’re writing bullshit on your socks.” Coop had never shown anyone what he wrote. Now Noah knew that at least one of the words tonight was “soup.” And that... gave him more questions than answers. Was it always soup? Was he writing a recipe in there?

Coop hadn’t even changed into his game gear yet and was still sporting their warm-up T-shirt, and a jacket, and the sweatpants he’d changed into once they’d gone back inside after the captain’s run-training session. Layering up because he got cold at the drop of a hat.

“It’s not bullshit.”

Noah snatched Coop’s spare socks and lifted them out of reach. He knew that Coop couldn’t wear the others, not now



that he'd fucked them up. Athletes were a superstitious bunch. And Noah wasn't above holding clothing hostage.

“Hey!”

Noah raised them higher when Coop stood and stretched up. Coop wasn't short by any means at six foot three, but Noah was still a couple of inches taller, had longer arms, and was motivated.

“There's a redhead that thinks you're hot,” Coop said quickly. “Now give me back my socks.”

Noah shoved them against Coop's chest, still processing the words. “If you say it's Sammy, I will punch you, and you can explain to the press why you were sporting a black eye before the game even started.” Their teammate might be a redhead, but he wasn't anything close to Noah's type. The mullet was the first, and most valid, reason that they'd never work.

“Telling them you punched me wouldn't take many words. It's like”—Coop counted off with his fingers—“Noah. Punched. Me. Because. He's. A. Tool. Seven words. Eight if you count 'he's' as two words.” He tilted his head in contemplation. “Would you count 'a' as a word?”

“Why are we friends?” Noah asked.

“Forced proximity. It was you or Wren.” Coop snickered. “Or Ravioli.”

“You play on the same team as your brother,” Noah pointed out.

“Being friends with your brother is pathetic, don’t you think?”

Coop acting like he wasn’t close to his twin was an absolute lie. “You have two minutes to explain what you’re talking about, so start talking.”

“Do you remember when we played golf about a fortnight ago?”

Noah wouldn’t have called what’d happened a fortnight ago “playing golf,” considering. “When you and Darcy cheated?”

“I can’t believe that you’re still blaming Darcy for that.”

“You made him *lookout*,” Noah burst out. Their ruckman was gullible, and honest, and earnest, and all of the things that should never have been put in the hands of any of his teammates. Let alone the ones who cheated at *golf*.

“You can’t prove that.”

Noah raised his hands and squeezed, imagining that they were wrapped around Coop’s throat. “I’m so close, Coop; don’t tempt me.”

Coop laughed so loud he snorted. “You were close then too,” he cackled.

“What?”

Coop made a jerking-off motion with his hand. As if that was any kind of rational explanation.

“Are you drunk or something?” Noah asked. Coop wasn’t normally the type of guy to make bad decisions—not like that

—but Noah had no other reason handy.

“You had a shower when I was getting dinner that night, and you had a *great* time. Or so I heard.”

Noah narrowed his eyes. “Excuse me?” That had not been what he’d been expecting to come out of Coop’s mouth. “Do you have cameras in there? You creepy motherfucker.”

Coop laughed even louder, and Noah was tempted to throw his marker out the window so he couldn’t write on his socks anymore. Or hide all of his socks for the rest of his life so that he had to go sockless for every match. See how he liked the blisters that would inevitably form.

“I don’t,” Coop said. “My creepiness factor doesn’t extend that far. But you *did* have a voyeur. A redheaded one.”

“Who the hell could get into your apa—*Bryce*?” Noah’s foot slipped from the bench, dropping to the floor with a *thud*. “Fuck off.” There was no way that Bryce Monaghan—who happened to be *straight as fuck*—had stopped to ogle Noah getting off in Coop’s shower.

“Bryce,” Coop confirmed. “And he liked it.”

“I swear to God, Coop, if you’re drunk, I’m telling coach.” Their asshole coach would have a field day with that one, and not even Noah could fault him for it.

Coop threw his ruined sock at Noah, and Noah caught it one-handed. “Nice try.”

“Where would I even get booze?” Coop asked.

Noah tossed the sock at Wren, who happened to be turned away from them and was the closest target. The shorty squawked when it hit him in the back of the head, and he twisted, glaring at them both.

“I think you’re supposed to psych the *other* team out before a game, Coop, not your own fucking teammate.” Coop was obviously pulling Noah’s leg. He just couldn’t work out why.

Noah might have a preference for certain hair colour on his men, but that didn’t mean anything when it came to *Bryce Monaghan*. His tolerance for the redhead was based on his connection to Noah’s teammate, not because of his *looks*. And he certainly hadn’t ever looked at him *like that*. At least not for more than a point of a second before his brain caught up.

Not to mention, Bryce was one of the only midfielders currently in the AFL that had the ability to get successfully under Noah’s skin during a game. Being annoying as fuck was only a perk in those sorts of situations.

Sometimes North didn’t have Bryce tagging him—he was a midfielder that was well-rounded and spent a lot of time all over the ground unless he was following Noah around like a bad smell. Half of Noah hoped that today was one of the afternoons he wasn’t, and the other half hoped he was. He couldn’t help the curiosity that was sprouting.

Bryce thought he was hot? Noah still wasn’t convinced Coop wasn’t just having a yarn because he was bored. Or needed more fodder for his sock essay.

“You think throwing shit at me is funny, Thorne?” Wren growled. “Your arm needs work.”

“Your face needs work,” Coop retorted.

“My face is a work of art.”

“The kind that parents put on their fridge and lie about how good it is?”

Bryce had liked seeing Noah naked?

Maybe Noah had woken in an alternate universe.

He shook his head and left Coop and Wren bickering. He needed to forget about it and get his head in the game.

THE MATCH WAS A scrappy fight from the very first bounce. There was more than just the four points for a win on the line. Their pride as a team, and the bragging rights as the best Sydney team, were up for grabs. Last year, North had won both; this year, Noah would see them eat the Swallows’ dust.

North was playing well—as much as only two matches so far in the season could show—but so were the Swallows.

They started strong, with good pressure stopping North from getting a solid foothold in their forward fifty. Noah was proud of their defensive line, especially since they were younger, and a lot of their wins in the last season had been won only when they could keep the footy near their own goals; once it was turned over to the opposition, getting it back had been difficult for them, with a lot of rookie mistakes that had frustrated

Noah to no end. He hoped this was a good indication for the season to come.

Noah didn't have much of a chance to observe Bryce during the first three quarters. That in itself was unusual enough to be interesting. Was Bryce *avoiding* him? Because it sure seemed like it.

Instead, Oakley Aspen had been tagging Noah, with Bryce further down the field, closer to North's forward line. Noah needed to be closer to decide whether Coop was telling the truth or not. He'd believe that Coop had a camera in his shower for Only Fans before he would believe that Bryce had watched him wank and liked it.

North rotated some of their players in the last quarter, and Noah suddenly found himself face-to-face with Bryce. He gave himself permission to look, focusing first on the bouncy red curls that stood out like a beacon and then to his shoulders and chest. He wore a unique guernsey that only a few in the league wore: one with a single black sleeve, tight around his toned muscles. It blended well with the dark purple of the North logo. His left arm was bare and covered with freckles.

Bryce had a mixture of mostly smaller freckles with a few bigger and darker ones that completely covered him, like a dot-to-dot that Noah had never really taken *too* much notice of before—looking wasn't a crime, and Bryce was somewhat attractive. For a Monaghan.

Bryce caught him looking and sneered, shoving him with his shoulder as he got into position for the first bounce of the

quarter. Their rucks, Darcy for the Swallows and Locke Bartlett for North, faced each other, waiting patiently for the umpire to step forward and bounce the Sherrin high into the air to start the play.

Bryce settled his sleeved arm on Noah's chest, and Noah rested a hand on the small of Bryce's back as they jostled and waited. Noah had done it plenty of times—to other players *and* Bryce himself. Hell, he was sure Bryce had done it to him a time or two or twenty. Except this time, Noah pressed a little harder and splayed his fingers so the tip of his little finger rested on the skin peeking out from under Bryce's purple, white, and black guernsey.

Bryce shot him an accusatory and suspicious look. He didn't move away, though. Or elbow Noah in the gut—which he'd done before when he knew an umpire wasn't looking their way.

Maybe Coop hadn't been talking out of his ass after all.

Locke won the bounce but didn't get a good enough clearance from the centre square, and it got swallowed up by players. He scrambled with Darcy and Wren. Ravioli dove into the fray and somehow made it out with the footy in his hands. He was quickly tackled by Oakley before he could get it clear and was taken down. It became a pile on of bodies after that, and Noah tensed, waiting in case someone somehow came out of it with the prize. If they did, he would be ready to take advantage.

They didn't, and the umpire blew the whistle for a stoppage. It would be thrown up since no one had fouled and given away a free kick.

Darcy got it away from Locke, but it was fumbled by Wren. Oakley snatched it up and kicked it away. It soared down the field toward North's end, far away from the Swallows' forward fifty and their goals.

Noah wasn't a forward that would go charging off down the ground—Ravioli and Coop were already halfway there—and he stayed back to guard their goals and be ready when it came back. With a little time on his hands, he got bold and settled his hand on Bryce's back again, shifting further down and sneaking another finger onto Bryce's smooth, freckled skin.

That touch garnered Noah another look. And then a shove as Bryce twisted to angrily face him. "He told you!" he spat.

"Told me what?" Noah hadn't expected to have actual confirmation. He wasn't sure what to do with that. *Bryce* had liked looking at him naked? Enjoyed it enough to tell Coop about it? That didn't fit with anything that Noah knew about the guy. Granted, that information wasn't even enough to fill an A4 page, but the facts still didn't add up.

Bryce scoffed, his face twisted in a sneer. "Don't ever quit your day job to go into acting. Spoiler alert: you fucking suck at it."

"Don't be embarrassed that you want me, Monaghan."

"I *don't* want you."



Liar, liar. “That’s not what I heard.”

“I’m going to kill him,” Bryce seethed, pushing Noah hard enough that Noah stepped back to balance himself. Impressive, considering Bryce was a few inches shorter and a good twenty kilos smaller. “And you.” Another shove. “You first.”

“You want to fight me?” Noah asked, smirking. This part was familiar, at least. It was nice to know that *some* things didn’t change.

Bryce didn’t get a chance to answer as the Swallows’ midfielders got the footy back towards them. The Swallows were ahead by fourteen points, and it was up to Noah, and the rest of the forward line, to make sure they widened their lead and kept control of it. Noah wanted this particular win, so badly he could choke on it.

He jerked into action, slipping away from Bryce and looking to open some space for Wren, Darcy, and Sammy to get the footy to someone who could take a shot at the goals.

Darcy was tackled from behind, and he barely managed to handball it to Wren before he hit the ground. Wren flicked it over his shoulder—to who, Noah had no fucking idea since no one was even there—before flying into the North player that had taken Darcy down. That had barely been a handball, and Wren had been lucky not to have turned it over to North because of an incorrect disposal.

Bryce’s fuming face followed Noah as he moved again, getting into position in a direct line from where Coop had

scooped up the footy. Coop could try for a goal from where he was—he was close enough and on the right of the posts, which was his best angle—but the Wombats were putting on the pressure, and three of the assholes were closing in on him. He kicked it low instead, right into Noah's waiting arms.

Bryce shoved him in the back, and he stumbled forward. He threw a grin over his shoulder just as the whistle signalled his mark. Bryce muttered something under his breath as the umpire told him to get on the mark, standing directly where Noah had caught the footy.

There was always a second of relief at the sound, knowing that at least for a few scarce moments, the pressure was off. He could pause and *think*. Footy was reactionary from start to finish, and these moments were precious. And good for when there wasn't a lot of time left on the clock and they were in front—and wanted to keep it that way.

Noah faltered as he backed up.

Bryce was bent over, hands resting on his knees. Face flushed, freckles dark, and his cheeks a rosy pink as he glared. His front curls were wet from sweat and clinging to his forehead. The ones on top of his head hadn't lost any of their bounce. Noah wasn't sure he'd ever noticed quite how... lively they were.

It was at that moment, as Bryce's hazel eyes remained locked on him, that the realisation finally sank in properly, and an even worse one rose from it.

*Bryce Monaghan had the hots for him.*

And Noah didn't hate that. In fact, he kind of liked it.

What the hell was he supposed to do with that?



BRYCE SHOULD HAVE SAID no to the Sunday invitation. The Thornes—Coop and Forest's parents—had a barbecue at least once a month, every month; it was always footy season in the Thorne household. Bryce's parents had been close friends with them his entire life. Bryce's older brother, Wren, had been drafted into the AFL two years before him, and Bryce, Coop, and Forest had all been drafted together when they'd turned eighteen. To different teams—because the twins were traitors—but it had been a dream come true for all of them.

Bryce had missed a few of the barbecues over the years—they all had; they had lives—but this was the first year he'd been tempted to beg out for a not-quite-legitimate reason.

He doubted *I don't want to go because Noah will be there* would fly. There would be questions, it would get awkward. Wasn't worth the hassle.

Noah wasn't always there, but it was the first barbecue during the regular footy season, and so the majority of the Swallows would be there. They made a point to all show up for the first one. Bryce didn't invite any of his teammates, so he was surrounded by traitors.

All three of his parents were wearing Swallows guernseys. Abby, his Mum 2.0—his parents' long-term partner—was

even wearing one that was three sizes too big. If it had “Walker” on the back, Bryce would lose his shit. Bryce’s big brother Wren played for the Swallows, but *Bryce* didn’t. He had a team too. With a way-more-kickass animal.

Bryce took one look at the crowd on the back patio and turned right around, going back through to the kitchen. One of the men out there was Noah. Bryce wasn’t properly prepared to deal with that yet.

Abby was in the kitchen by herself. She smiled that warm smile she’d graced him with from the moment they’d met all those years ago. Without the panic and nervousness. Bryce remembered the first time he’d met her: he’d been thirteen years old, and their parents had sat them down the day before and explained that they’d been seeing someone they loved like they loved each other, and they wanted Bryce and his siblings to meet her and to be nice.

When Bryce had learned she was a science teacher he’d been sold, and he’d been barely able to sit still, thinking of all the things he’d wanted to ask her. He’d fallen in love from the moment she’d walked into the family home, and it had only grown in the years since.

“Hi, honey,” she said warmly, leaning forward to catch his kiss on her cheek. “Did you see my cupcakes?”

If by cupcakes she meant the butterfly monstrosities that were on the dining table with the other pre-lunch snacks, then yes, he had. “They look great,” he lied, beaming.

“You can sneak one in after lunch.”

They weren't going to taste better than they looked, but he'd scarf *at least* three down to make her happy and keep that smile on her face.

His OG mum—Lana—slid open the back screen door. “Bryce, there you are,” she said as she made a beeline for Abby. “You’re late.”

“Was there a starting time?” Bryce asked, raising an eyebrow. He wasn't *late*. There was no set time to be there. From what he'd seen out the back, they hadn't even started cooking the meat. He could have waited an hour to get there, and he *still* wouldn't have been late. There were so many people—he shuddered thinking about how many of them were Swallows—in the backyard, they might not have even noticed if he'd just not turned up.

Lana kissed Abby's shoulder and asked, “Where did you put the marinated chicken? In here or...?”

“They're in the shed fridge,” Abby said. “This one is full of salads and beer. And wine. All the dessert and meats are in the shed.”

“Bryce, honey, can you go get them for me? Oh, and the vegetable kebabs. And the steaks. And—”

“I'm going,” Bryce interrupted. His mum snagged him for a cheek kiss and a half hug before he could slink out. Too slow. His coach would be ashamed.

He hummed a few bars of a catchy tune that he'd heard on the radio that morning—couldn't remember the lyrics but the

tune had been like an ear worm all day—as he closed the shed door behind him, drowning out the noise of the party. Maybe he could dawdle in there and spend the next two hours hiding. There was a pool table and a dart board. Plenty to amuse himself.

He was bent over, head in the fridge as he tried to find the magically disappearing marinated chicken pieces that were somehow *not here* among the other meats, when someone came into the shed, the loud hum of conversation breaking the silence and then cutting out once more as the door shut behind them.

There went his plan to stay in hiding.

He tensed when Noah's amused voice rumbled in the quiet space.

“Were you waiting for me, Bryce?”

Bryce gritted his teeth and straightened, slamming the fridge door shut. “You know what? Fuck you, Noah.”

Strong-arming someone Noah's size was always a hit-and-miss endeavour, but Bryce gave it his best shot. Noah was between him and the door, and he wanted to leave.

Noah stopped him short, fingers sliding around Bryce's elbow. Bryce yanked his arm away. Or tried to. Noah's grip was like a steel weight holding him tight.

“There's no need for—”

“For what? Deciding that I'm not interested in being your punch line?” Bryce asked angrily. “I don't know what the fuck

is wrong with me and why looking at you... doing that... affected me the way it did. But you making fun of me about it isn't cool. Now go shove your head up your ass and stay the fuck away from me."

Noah's smile fell. "Bryce—"

"Fuck off."

"Bryce, I'm sorry. I wasn't trying to—"

"Trying to what? Make me feel worse than I already do?" The heat prickling behind Bryce's eyes was unwelcome, as was the thickness to his voice.

"There's nothing wrong with you," Noah said quietly. "I apologise if that's how I made you feel. I was only trying to —"

"At least you have something to laugh about now," Bryce said sarcastically. "You and Coop. Real good laugh at my expense." He would never have thought Coop capable, but Bryce couldn't think of why else he would *tell* Noah about any of this.

"Are you going to let me speak?" Noah asked patiently.

Bryce rolled his eyes. "Yeah, sure, why not." Couldn't make it any worse than it already was.

"I didn't know that you were serious, Bryce. Yesterday I was only trying to see if Coop was being a shithead. You're not..." Noah trailed off, seeming unsure.

“Gay?” Bryce said helplessly. “I’m not. I don’t... I don’t think I am. I don’t know, okay? Looking at you made my dick hard, and that’s all I know. But thank you so fucking much for making me realise that not only does it definitely *not* do it for me, but for reminding me what a colossal piece of shit you are.”

Noah swallowed visibly. “I’m sorry.”

“Whatever,” he scoffed, not believing a word of it. What the fuck else was Bryce supposed to say to that? It was the truth. Bryce had been unbalanced, and all Noah had done was push him over and then laugh as he struggled to get back up.

Noah took Bryce’s chin in his large hand, holding strong, forcing Bryce to look at him.

“I’m sorry, Bryce,” he repeated softly.

The sincerity was plain to hear in Noah’s voice and to see in his brown eyes. Bryce had even less idea how to respond to that. If he threw it back in Noah’s face, then *he’d* be the asshole. He’d expected Noah to shove back, for it to turn into something bitter and ugly. Not... this.

“You liked watching me?” Noah asked.

If there’d been even a hint of amusement in that question, Bryce would have punched him. There wasn’t. And now Bryce was at a complete loss with the way the conversation had done a one-eighty. “I... watched for a minute or two,” was all he could think of to say. It might have been a tiny bit longer than that. It wasn’t his fault Noah had the situational



awareness of a gnat. Did gnats have situational awareness? What even was a gnat?

The corner of Noah's mouth lifted, and Bryce's gaze flicked to it. He had a nice mouth. Thick lips, dark stubble, strong cheekbones. Bryce had never thought about whether Noah was handsome or not. But in one single moment, Bryce's entire world had flipped, and now everything about him was fascinating and mesmerising and better looking than Bryce had ever given him credit for.

He had no idea where this was coming from. He didn't find men attractive. He didn't *look* at them. Not the way he'd looked at Noah. Or the way he was looking at him *now*.

"I'm flattered. If you'd wanted to stay and watch, I wouldn't have minded," Noah said.

"You're flattered, but—"

"No but."

"What?"

Noah swept his thumb across Bryce's jaw. "I'll be your experiment if that's what you want."

Bryce's lips parted in surprise. Nothing about this conversation was anything like he'd thought it would be. "Why would you do that? You don't even like me."

"No," Noah agreed. "You're very fucking annoying. But it wouldn't be a hardship to let you touch me. And I wouldn't say no to a kiss."

Bryce's brain short-circuited. Noah wanted to *kiss* him? That... what? "Coop did that already," Bryce said without thought.

Noah paused. "And... how did that go?"

*There* was the amusement. Bastard already knew how it had gone. "We're not talking about it. Ever again. If I had a *Men-in-Black* light thing, I'd use it." Erasing other memories would be worth forgetting about that one.

Noah chuckled, the deep sound reverberating through Bryce's chest.

"A shame." Noah gestured towards the fridge. "I was asked to help with getting the food? They're ready to start cooking now." He brushed past Bryce, and Bryce was suddenly acutely aware of how much bigger Noah was than him.

Bryce had never considered what that meant... off the field.

Had Noah been serious when he'd said that he wanted to kiss Bryce? "I want you to," he said in a rush, whirling around. If he had been serious, Bryce couldn't miss this chance. To see *properly*. Coop was never going to be able to give him the answer, because whatever was going on with Bryce wasn't directed at him. It was directed at *Noah*. Bryce had no idea why, but this was his shot to figure it out.

"Want me to what?" Noah asked absently, fridge door half open. He paused, tilted his head, and then closed the door, turning back to face him. "Want me to what, Bryce?" he repeated, his voice too knowing to be anything but deliberate.

Bryce scowled and crossed his arms over his chest. He wasn't saying it. They both knew what he was talking about.

And there was that cocky smirk again that made Bryce want to punch Noah. Except now it was tinged with something else. Something nameless that made heat pool in his belly.

“You want me to help you carry the stuff?” Noah asked. He pointed at the fridge. “Or do you mean help you play pool?” He pointed to the pool table. “No? You might need to be more specific.”

Bryce bit down on his tongue, a zing of pain racing across his mouth. “I fucking hate you.”

“You still want me to kiss you, though.”

No. Yes. He just needed to know if he was imagining this whole thing. In which case, he could go back to his regular life, where he wasn't questioning everything about his sexuality. If this ended up anything like his kiss with Coop had, then he felt fairly confident that his question would be satisfactorily answered. Zero out of two seemed like enough evidence.

So maybe it was nothing. Maybe Noah would kiss him, and it would be just as bad as kissing Coop had been.

Bryce opened his mouth. Nothing came out.

Noah softened, his features seeming less big and out of reach. “Coop didn't tell me so that we could laugh at you. Deep down, you know that because he's your brother in all but

blood, and he loves you. He told me because he wanted me to know.”

“Why?” What difference did it make if Noah knew? Bryce still had no fucking clue what Coop had been thinking. He hadn’t anticipated Coop *telling* Noah, and Noah actually acknowledging it. He’d done that by being a *dick*, but that was Noah’s default setting. Bryce was in uncharted waters and drowning.

Noah moved closer, and Bryce was forced to tip his head up. “Because you’re exactly my type.”

“Straight?” Bryce asked dryly. That seemed like a terrible way to find guys. No wonder Noah was grumpy all the time.

“Not quite.” Noah settled a hand on Bryce’s hip and slipped his thumb under the T-shirt, rubbing against his skin and sending a shiver across it. “More... red hair...” He leaned forward, lips whispering across Bryce’s jaw. Bryce’s breath stuttered. “Freckles.”

“Oh.”

“I want to hear you say it, Bryce.”

“Say what?” Bryce murmured. What they were talking about? All he could think about was how close Noah’s lips were to his. How easy it would be to close the distance and get a taste.

“Say it.”

Were they still talking about this? “You already know I want it.” *So just fucking kiss me already.*

“This isn’t about consent.” Noah’s hand rested across the hollow of Bryce’s throat. “I want to hear you tell me how much you want it.” He ran his tongue across Bryce’s bottom lip. “I want to taste it.”

*Jesus.* Bryce shuddered, his gut clenching. “I want you to kiss me. I might die if you don’t.” Dramatic, but hell if he didn’t mean it. This wasn’t anything like Coop. Bryce *needed* this, could feel it tightening inside him like a dull throb.

Noah’s eyes flared with heat, and then he closed the distance between them.

The first touch of their lips was a breathless moment of panic. Bryce didn’t know what he was more afraid of: that it would be nothing, or that it would be *something*. Something that he couldn’t take back. Once it was out of the box, there was no putting it back.

Noah shifted, his lips settling Bryce’s lower lip between them, warm and soft.

Bryce’s stomach fluttered. His hands lifted, hovering over Noah’s sides, not quite touching but enough to feel the heat of him. He didn’t know what to do with them. Should he touch? *Could* he?

His breath hitched at the first touch of Noah’s tongue against his own. He’d been kissed before, and it had never been quite like this. The rush of fear and pleasure mixed together to torment Bryce’s senses.

Noah pressed harder, slanting their mouths firmly together. Arms slid around Bryce, pulling him tight against Noah's wide chest. Bryce moaned as heat spread through him like wildfire. He scrunched his hands in Noah's shirt, twisting the fabric between his fingers.

Noah took control of the kiss with sure, steady strokes, and every wet slide of his tongue had sparks shooting inside Bryce. He had no choice but to be a passenger on this ride. An eager, willing, greedy passenger.

Noah's large hand splayed across Bryce's cheek, thumb caressing his skin and making him dizzy from all the sensations bracketing him.

There was a hardness pressing against Bryce's stomach that couldn't be mistaken for anything else. *That* was a new sensation. Noah was hard because of *him*.

Noah, who was a beast on the footy field and one of the best key forwards in the AFL. Part of every team's strategy when facing the Sydney Swallows was about how to keep Noah contained.

And *Bryce* was turning him on. There was something intoxicating and wholly powerful about that.

Noah lifted his head slowly, lips wet, eyes glazed over. "Well," he said, his Adam's apple bobbing enticingly. "That was unexpected."

Bryce needed to say something. He knew he did. Anything. His lips parted. Nothing came out. That was becoming an

unnerving pattern around this man.

All he could think to do was lift his head, seeking another kiss. Words were hard; this part seemed easier.

Except that when he did, Noah leaned back, out of his reach, and Bryce faltered.

Shit. Had he done something wrong?

Had Noah meant *bad* unexpected? Just because it had blown Bryce's mind didn't mean that it had done the same to Noah. That honestly made more sense than the alternative.

Noah searched his face, and Bryce flushed again, heat spreading over his cheeks. He hated how easily it happened—in all kinds of situations, to add insult to injury—and how obviously it showed up on his pale face.

Bryce sighed in relief when Noah closed the gap again, taking his lips in a caress. Noah kept it shallow, moving their lips together so gently that Bryce's stomach fluttered. His hand slid down Bryce's neck, settling in the curve like a hot brand that seared into his skin.

By the time Noah opened his mouth and invited Bryce's tongue in, Bryce thought he was going to explode. His body was on fire, his cock was aching, and he didn't even know where to begin to get relief. He wasn't ready for anything below the waist, for what wanting that meant. But he wanted *something*. Something that had him reaching up, twining his arms around Noah's neck and pressing so hard against him

that he was sure Noah could feel the furious thumping of his heart.

“Are you guys getting—Oh!”

Bryce pulled away in shock. He twisted, eyes going wide in horror at the sight of Coop standing in the doorway with a Cheshire Cat grin on his face.

“You should put a sock on the door, guys. What if that had been one of our parents?”

Noah slid an arm around Bryce’s waist, a comforting weight against him. “What’s up, Coop?” he asked casually, as if everything was business as usual.

“We need the meat so we can eat the lunch,” Coop said. “As much as I hate to interrupt, you’re kind of in the way. If I can just scootch past, you can, uh, continue once I’m gone.”

Bryce looked between Noah and Coop, who were both acting like this was an everyday occurrence. Nothing out of the ordinary, totally normal and fine.

None of it was.

He’d just kissed Noah. *Noah. Walker.* His best mate’s teammate. It had never crossed Bryce’s mind to kiss *any* guy, let alone this particular one. The worst one.

What the fuck had he done?

“Can you—you can—you have enough hands,” he stammered. He pushed past Coop before they could respond and made a beeline for the biggest crowd of family in the



backyard, sliding in between where his older brother and sister were seated at the long outdoor table.

Monica, the oldest of the three of them, raised an eyebrow at him. There was no way he was ready to talk about any of the things he'd been struggling with, let alone what had just happened. She seemed to sense his reticence and leaned an elbow on his shoulder without a word, not faltering for a moment in her conversation.

Wren pulled Bryce into a conversation with Darcy about whether blueberries, blackberries, watermelon, or strawberries were superior. The blackberries were winning, but Darcy was holding strong to his delight with watermelon.

Bryce pointedly made sure not to look over when the shed door opened again.

Maybe they were right.

Everything was fine and normal, and nothing had changed.

Nothing.



THE FIRST LOSS OF the season always hit Noah hard. For him, it was a harsh reminder that the Swallows current lineup was so fucking *young*, and that no win was ever a guarantee. The victory over North Sydney two weeks ago had been in another lifetime and wouldn't carry them for the rest of the season.

He'd agreed to go to the beach with the team on Sunday during their active recovery period because it was easier than staying at home. His dog, Rufus, loved hanging with the guys and the other dogs in the Swallows family. And surfing—or just floating on a board in the water, like he currently was—helped clear his mind.

Noah gripped his surfboard between where he straddled it, to keep his balance as Ravioli popped up out of the water like a dolphin. “Christ, Rav, where did you come from?”

Ravioli beamed at him, water streaming down his face. “My secret underwater bunker.”

“The water comes up to my shoulders here.”

“That’s how it gets you. You’d never know it was here.”

“Uh-huh.”

Ravioli had stepped up and shown what he was made of in the first five weeks of the season. An asset for the team even if he was a bit weird.

“Hey, isn’t that Bryce?” Ravioli asked.

Noah turned his head to look back towards the shore. He was right. Those bright-red curls had to be Bryce. Their teammate, Sammy, wasn’t the same bright-red shade as Bryce’s, and he had zero curls to his name—the mullet was a total eyesore. Even if Coop had invited some of the North players to join in their friendly game of volleyball, Oakley’s red was more similar to Sammy than Bryce. Even Wren’s red had nothing on Bryce’s.

Noah wondered if something was in the air. He rarely spent any time seeing Bryce during the season. Coop and Bryce hung out a bit, especially on their Thursday off days, but Noah had his own rituals for his downtime. Maybe once a month, he saw the redhead's freckles up close. That was usually only if Noah chose to make an appearance at the Thorne barbecue.

Yet in the span of a month, he'd seen Bryce twice already. This made it three times. But who was counting? He wasn't.

Ravioli splashed Noah, and Noah jerked in surprise, almost sliding off his surfboard. "The fuck, man?" he spluttered.

"I called your name three times," Ravioli said. "After the third time, all friendly rules are forfeit."

"That is not how that works." Would anyone notice if he dunked their midfielder and just... kept him under there for a little while?

"Should I have screamed 'shark'?" Ravioli wondered.

"Sure, if you want every man and his dog to panic." He was going to regret this, but—"I'm going back to shore; you want a lift?"

"Ooh, yes please!"

It took a bit of a manoeuvring for Ravioli to get behind Noah without toppling the whole thing over—though it was close.

He only took Ravioli as far as hip depth. If he couldn't walk himself out of the water after that, they needed to find a new teammate. He *did* fall over three times and insisted loudly

there was some seaweed that had touched his foot, but he made it to the shore with relatively minimal incident.

Bryce turned at the commotion and caught Noah's eyes. Noah's gaze leisurely drifted over him. The board shorts Bryce had on were baggy, but all it would take was a stint in the water to have nothing left to the imagination. There were plenty of other things to ogle anyway. Those goddamn freckles across his chest were Noah's kryptonite. Bryce didn't just have a lot of freckles. He was *covered* in them. One giant freckle made of hundreds of tiny freckles.

Noah remembered eating chocolate freckles as a kid. He hadn't had one in years, but he was sure they still existed. He wanted a different freckle now, and the idea that maybe this one wasn't so out of reach was a little unreal. And a lot hot.

He crooked his finger. Bryce glanced around, said something to whoever was standing beside him—Noah had no idea who, he was still admiring the absolute smorgasbord of freckles across Bryce's hairless chest and flat stomach—and then jogged over.

“What?” Bryce called at the edge of the water. The dying waves licked at his feet, reaching for his calves eagerly.

“Get over here.”

“I don't surf.”

Noah patted his surfboard. “He doesn't mean that, don't worry,” he soothed.

“Did you just—?” Bryce sighed and then made his way through the water. It rose and lapped at his skin as he got deeper, the splashes of water on his skin gleaming in the sunlight.

“I’m serious; I don’t surf,” Bryce said. “Does it look like I’m a fan of breaking my neck?”

“Lucky for you, there aren’t nearly enough waves to surf properly today,” Noah said. “But it’s a great chance to learn how to stand up.”

Bryce crossed his arms over his chest. “Why are you being nice to me?”

“I’m always nice to you.” He’d never been *mean*. They had a mutual friend and had been forced to play nice because of it. That wasn’t the same as not being nice.

“That’s a lie.”

“I think I was pretty nice to you at the barbecue.”

Streaks of red spread out from Bryce’s chest, and Noah was utterly fascinated by them. His blushes started at his *chest*? And it moved around the freckles like a painter’s brush strokes on a canvas. Damn, Noah wanted to trace it with his tongue. Wanted to lay Bryce out on his surfboard and taste every inch of him.

“That’s irrelevant.”

Noah begged to differ. It was incredibly relevant. “I’m offering to teach you to stand on the surfboard because I want to touch you again,” he said bluntly.

He didn't think being vague was going to work here. He knew for a fact that Bryce was a smooth ladies' man that didn't really date anyone for more than a couple of months at a time—trash online articles seemed to like taking him out and turning him over like a shiny bauble every time he was seen out with someone new—but that didn't seem to translate here. He was out of his depth, and Noah could recognise a sinking ship when he saw one. It was only polite to offer a raft. Or a surfboard.

Bryce's arms sagged, coming undone to fall at his side. "I don't understand you."

There wasn't much to understand. Noah was a simple creature. And he'd made his intentions pretty damn clear. "We kissed."

"I remember."

A relief since Noah couldn't stop thinking about it. "And I'd like to do it again." Did he need to get it tattooed across his chest?

"You'd like to do it again..." Bryce said in disbelief. "Is that why you ignored me for two weeks?"

Is that what Bryce thought? That Noah had been *ignoring* him? Noah couldn't have done that if he'd tried. "I don't even have your number," he pointed out. "It's not as though you messaged me, and I just didn't respond. I don't know if you can count it as ignoring when we don't generally talk like mates, Bryce. We don't braid each other's hair or say good night with little hearts when we go to bed. I'm not Coop."

“I’m well aware.” Bryce paused. “And we don’t do that.”

Noah bet if either of them had longer hair they would. Though Bryce’s curls were very... curly. What kind of effort would it take to braid his hair? To do anything with it, really. The curls were tight and bouncy. Like... some other parts of him.

“I was just trying to give you some space,” Noah said, shaking himself out of his thoughts. He could daydream about curls and freckles later.

“What makes you think I needed space?” Bryce asked, looking genuinely confused.

Noah snorted. Was he serious? “You mean other than the panic on your face every time you looked at me at the barbecue? The way you went out of your way to avoid me all afternoon? When you made sure you were at the complete opposite end of the tables while we ate? Or maybe, it was when you used your siblings as a shield for the entire time and then left early.”

“... Yes, other than that,” Bryce said weakly. “You noticed that?”

Noah normally wouldn’t have if he was being honest. Bryce had never been on his radar. Not quite to that degree, anyway.

He’d always acknowledged that Bryce was attractive, and the red hair, curls, and freckles hit all of Noah’s buttons like a sexy trifecta. But he was a realist, and the reality was that Bryce was straight. And that made him off-limits. Maybe

some men got off on seeing if they could turn a straight guy, but Noah had always found that approach tacky and not something he wanted to add to his repertoire. The difference now was that *technically* Bryce had come to him. Did that make him fair game now?

Not so much, in Noah's books. He needed a little more than that before he'd freely partake even if he itched to get his hands all over that body. "If you don't want to, or it's not your thing, then that's cool. The offer to teach you to surf is still there. I'll even keep my hands to myself."

"What if I unbalance?" Bryce asked, raising a judgemental eyebrow.

"Then you fall."

"Nice."

"Can't catch you if I can't touch you." His logic was sound.

"How convenient."

Noah grinned. "Isn't it?"

Bryce huffed. "Fine. Here?"

"Nah, we gotta go further out," Noah said. He held out a hand. "You can jump on back."

Bryce hesitated before sliding his hand into Noah's. The first touch of skin against skin was electric. Noah had a feeling that keeping his hands to himself was going to be a lesson in torture. And restraint. Restrictive torture. That was a thing.



Bryce hiked himself up and onto the board a hell of a lot more smoothly than Ravioli had. His core strength was impressive.

“Already a natural,” Noah said thickly. Their thighs pressed together, and Bryce’s body heat radiated against his back.

“I want to,” Bryce said as Noah turned them in the water and headed further out.

“Want to what?”

“You already know what I mean.”

“Do I?” Noah teased, twisting so he could look at Bryce. Of course, he did. He understood context. But watching the red spread across Bryce’s cheeks and the freckles darken was too good an opportunity to pass up.

“You’re doing this on purpose.”

“Well, yeah.”

“I hate you.”

“I think I’ve heard that before,” Noah mused. The entire conversational thread was very *déjà vu*. Bryce had a hard time articulating what he wanted. Noah was happy to help him along.

“Repetition doesn’t make it less true,” Bryce argued. “I want to kiss you again. Happy?”

Was that a rhetorical question? “Am I happy that you want to kiss me again?”

“God, you’re an asshole.” The tips of Bryce’s fingers brushed against Noah’s thigh. Noah bit his lip to stop his groan.

“Guess it’s a good thing that I can’t talk while you kiss me,” Noah said. Not if they were doing it right.

Bryce laughed, and Noah’s grin widened in response.

“Time for you to put your mouth where your money is,” Noah said. He shimmied backward on the board and then slipped into the water. They were far enough out now that he couldn’t stand up in the water, which was perfect.

Bryce might have been a natural at getting on the board. Standing on it turned out to be a whole other ball game. Not the kind that Bryce could play. The second his feet were firmly on, and he was upright, he unbalanced and went toppling into the water. Once. Twice. Again. And again.

Noah laughed and swallowed some sea water when Bryce landed on top of him for the third time, taking them both under.

Bryce came up spluttering and cursing, curls sticking to his forehead and looking angry as he did. “If I get injured, the entire coaching staff is going to be looking for your head. Why the fuck do people *like* this?”

“It’s more fun when you can stay on the board. Do you want to boogie board? I have one in my car.” Rufus loved the water, and Noah always had one to take him out on. He loved

swimming, and he loved lounging on the board as well, floating around like he was King of the Sea.

“No, I do not want a *boogie board*,” Bryce spat. “Fuck off.”

Noah chuckled. He slid an arm around Bryce’s waist, and Bryce’s mouth snapped closed, hazel eyes wide. The colour was brighter in the sunlight. It made them more of a golden glow than brown. They were an interesting colour. Perfectly in tune with the freckles covering his face. They got smaller around his nose and larger as they spread out from there. There was a noticeably darker one just above his left eyebrow. Noah wanted to lick it.

“I’ve been surfing since I was a kid,” Noah explained, drawing lazy circles on the small of Bryce’s back. Good thing that treading water came naturally to him at this point because Bryce was hell on his concentration. “Coop can’t do it, either, if it makes you feel better. It just takes time.”

“I came out for a quick punt with the volleyball, not surfing lessons. I told Coop he had an hour, tops. You’re eating up that time.”

“Hot date planned?”

Bryce glared. “I have work to do.”

“It’s Sunday.”

“I know what day it is.”

Noah walked his fingers up the middle of Bryce’s back. He almost missed the barely audible hitch of Bryce’s breath. Heat curled in his chest. All he wanted to do was lean forward and

taste those lips again. “Not supposed to do anything strenuous.”

“Surfing and volleyball aren’t?” Bryce asked sarcastically.

“Not the way they’re playing it,” Noah said, his lips twitching. None of them knew how to play volleyball, and it was more accurately described as “how hard can I piff this ball at my opponent’s head?” None of them could be accused of having an abundance of brains.

Surfing was a different matter. The waves weren’t harsh enough to be at risk of doing any serious damage. Noah was more careful than that, especially at his age. He found comfort in the ocean, in the steady movement, the smell, the sounds. Not knowing what was under his feet when he was far out. It put things into perspective in a way little else could.

Bryce pursed his lips, and Noah knew he was trying not to smile. “I don’t have strenuous work. I have coursework, and I need to get some of it done before we fly out tomorrow morning.”

“You study?” Noah asked in surprise. “Huh.” Closet nerd. Why was that so fucking hot?

“Bachelor of Science, with majors in chemistry and mathematics. My mum... one of them, she’s a science teacher. Guess it’s genetic... even though we’re not genetically— anyway.” Bryce shrugged. “It’s genetic.”

Noah knew about his second mum, Abby. Despite looking nothing alike, and not being actually related, Noah had always

seen the connection and resemblance between them. She was quieter than Bryce, but they had similar expressions.

“Look at us, learning new things about each other,” Noah said, the corner of his mouth quirking.

“Is that part of this?” Bryce asked.

Noah was curious to know exactly what Bryce thought “this” was. “You’re thinking too hard, Monaghan.” He slapped Bryce’s thigh. “Back up you get. You’re gonna stand on this board if it kills me, or if we’re here till midnight.”

“Full moon tonight, so at least we’ll be able to see.”

A laugh slipped out. “Do you want to know how cold the water will get?”

“... no.”

“Then you might want to speed learn how to balance properly.”

Bryce mumbled something unflattering as he climbed back onto the board on all fours—giving Noah a very nice view of his rounded ass, fully displayed with his board shorts clinging—and then got to his feet in a wobbly fashion.

It took at least thirty seconds before he fell this time. It was progress.

And Noah had fantastic eye candy to help pass the time.



BRYCE LET HIMSELF INTO Coop's third-floor apartment. Yesterday when he'd shown up at the beach, before Noah had stolen him for *surfing lessons*—Bryce had already decided that surfing was not his thing—they'd organised to have lunch after they'd finished all their game reviews with their teams Monday morning. By six thirty a.m., he'd been too impatient and bored out of his brain to wait any longer. Luckily, it was barely a five-minute drive with minimal traffic, and there would be plenty of time for them to scrounge up some breakfast or find somewhere nearby before they had to leave for their respective training grounds.

It was quiet downstairs, with only the quiet hum of the fridge and the heat lamps working in the frog enclosure at the end of the kitchen-island bench. Bryce stopped and said hi to Ed, Edd, 'n' Eddy. Ed was near the pool of water at the bottom, and Edd and Eddy were snuggled together in the branches that encompassed more than half of the large terrarium.

Bryce grabbed a small handful of grapes from the bowl next to them and popped them into his mouth one by one as he took the stairs two at a time up to the mezzanine that held Coop's bedroom and the master bathroom.

There was a giant person-shaped lump of blankets in the middle of the bed.

Bryce finished the last grape and then crawled onto the mattress. The lump made a vague, muffled noise but didn't move.

It took Bryce a second to find some kind of opening among the pile of blankets. The first attempt was a dead end, with a sheet blocking his way. Finally, he felt warm skin and was able to burrow his way under.

“Satub’ce?”

Bryce snorted out a laugh. “I don’t speak Coop this early, sorry, buddy,” he said quietly. He blinked at the hip in his face. Which direction was Coop sleeping in?

Bryce pushed up the blankets to make a kind of arch over himself so he could spy Coop’s body better. Coop made a grumpy noise and twisted, almost kneeing Bryce in the face. Bryce pushed the leg down and then swung one of his own over it and slid himself up Coop’s body until their faces were close together.

Coop blinked blearily up at him. “Bry?”

Bryce grinned. “Hey, sleeping beauty. Is this where we kiss again?” He nuzzled Coop’s cheek. Maybe he was ready to joke about it now. “Not a fan of morning breath, but I’ll take one for the team.”

“How magnamonis of you.”

“That’s not the word,” Bryce said with a huff of laughter.

“F’ck’ff.”

Bryce shifted to the side and settled himself around Coop’s large frame. “Sleeping in today?”

Coop groaned and turned onto his side, facing Bryce. “Wait. What time is it?”

“Like two in the afternoon. Guess you missed your meetings. What did you do last night?”

Coop’s eyes widened. “What?”

Bryce’s laugh turned into a grunt when Coop elbowed him in the gut. “It’s just after six,” he wheezed. “I got bored.”

Coop moaned and squeezed his eyes shut. “I thought you and Noah were doing the horizontal tango now. Why can’t you annoy him this early in the morning? Did he not tire you out enough to sleep in?”

“We’re not having sex.” They’d kissed. *Once*. Then admitted they wanted to again yesterday—which was still something that was tumbling around in Bryce’s brain—but hadn’t actually done it again. All he’d done was almost get drowned, trying to stand up on a board that was sentient and hated him. “But I am hungry.”

Coop made an unintelligible noise.

“You’re supposed to feed me; what kind of host are you?”

“The kind that didn’t invite you,” Coop mumbled sleepily.

That was rude. He poked Coop’s side. “Feed me?”

Coop groaned. “Why are you so annoying?”

“You love it.”

Coop groaned. “Get out of my bed.”



“Not before you feed me.” That didn’t get him a response, so he tried again. “I want to talk about Noah.”

Coop huffed out a sigh and flipped the blanket off his face. He stared at the ceiling like it had personally offended him. “I hate you so much.”

“That’s a lie. You were the one that followed me around like a lost lamb when we were kids.”

“That was *you*.”

“That’s not how I remember it,” Bryce said innocently. Coop was one hundred percent correct. Memories that old were hard, but he distinctly remembered thinking he liked Coop’s haircut. He’d asked his dad to cut his the same way. Too bad curls were not that easy to manipulate, and they’d been more unruly then than they were now.

Coop groaned, pushed off the blankets, and scrambled out of the bed.

Bryce got untangled and glared at the closed bathroom door. “Don’t think I’ve forgotten about breakfast!” he yelled out.

The shower turned on, ending the conversation abruptly.

Bryce shoved the blankets off the floor as he rolled off the bed. He had never known anyone to use so many. It could be thirty-five degrees outside, and Coop would still be cold. It took Bryce twice as long to make Coop’s bed as it did at home; separating the blankets was a marathon exercise and then deciding on which order to put them on took time. He couldn’t find the second pillow until he realised that he’d

buried it and had to go ferreting around, fucking up his hard work.

Eventually, it was satisfactory, with everything in place, and the sheets tucked in.

Coop came out of the bathroom, drying his hair with a towel. He threw it on the bed before looking through his wardrobe.

“Coop, don’t be an animal,” Bryce said with exasperation.

“What?” Coop said, somewhat muffled.

“Wet towels get hung up in the bathroom. You’re such a slob.” Bryce did it for him because he knew Coop would ignore him. By the time he got back out—he’d had to wipe down the sink and arrange the products thrown haphazardly across it—Coop had tugged on a pair of loose-fitting sweatpants and a heavy woollen jumper. It was autumn, not fucking winter, and the air was a nice comfortable temperature. The hell did he need a jumper for?

Bryce flicked the heavy material. “Take that off; you’re making me hot.”

“I’m cold,” Coop complained.

“I’ll turn the heat up,” Bryce muttered. He stopped at the bottom of the stairs and did just that. Central heating was their friend.

Coop sighed and pulled the jumper up and over his head, draping it on the stair banister as he passed Bryce.

Bryce stared at the ceiling for a moment before grabbing it and taking it back upstairs, making sure to hang it up just right.

Coop was moving ingredients from the fridge to the counter when Bryce got back downstairs.

Coop pulled out a mixing bowl and whisk and set them on the counter. “Are you planning on helping or...?”

“I hadn’t planned on it, no.” If he’d wanted to make breakfast himself, he’d have stayed at home. There was leftover something he could have had, he was sure. Cooking wasn’t his strong suit. It wasn’t Coop’s either, but at least Coop didn’t generally burn anything.

“Get out the capsicum, bacon, and cheese from the fridge. I think there might be some cream in there too. If not, grab the milk.”

Bryce sighed with an exaggerated groan. “Your service sucks. Zero stars on Yelp, man.”

“We don’t have Yelp.” Coop awkwardly cracked an egg into the mixing bowl.

“Don’t ruin my analogy.” Bryce gathered the ingredients and dumped them next to the now half-empty carton. He spied the contents of the bowl. “There’s shell in there.”

“I’ll get it out when I’m done; I’m sure there’ll be more.”

Bryce was rethinking this. “We could have gone out.”

“We don’t have time to go out, and I’ve already broken the eggs. You’re going to eat it, and you’re going to like it.”

Bryce shuffled things around in the cupboard, inwardly cringing at the absolute mess that was Coop’s kitchen organisation, and finally found a plastic cutting board. Luckily, the knives were safe in a block on the bench beside the stove.

Coop grabbed the remote from the fruit bowl—Bryce was *not* going to ask, mostly because he wasn’t sure he wanted to know—and flicked on the large TV in the living room section of the one-room floor. The sounds of *The Today Show* wrapping up filtered through the air.

“I miss the days of *Rage*,” Bryce mourned as he cut up the capsicum and bacon. “Or *Cheez TV*. What I wouldn’t give to be putting on my school uniform while I watch Goku give it to Vegeta.”

“I don’t think that’s how it went,” Coop said. “Goku lost more fights than he won.”

“How could you tell? One fight went for like thirty episodes.”

“I paid attention. *You* were always doing your homework in the morning over your Froot Loops while Monica and Wren fought over the heater and threw things at you.”

“We rarely ever got Froot Loops, I’ll have you know. Dad said they rot your brain, and I had nightmares about my insides turning to goop. *And* that homework was my extra stuff

that I asked for, not regular homework. I got all that done the day it was given to us.”

“You’re such a nerd.”

Bryce tipped all his chopped ingredients into the bowl of eggs.

“Bryce,” Coop said with exasperation. “I hadn’t gotten the shells out yet.”

Oh. “Oops?” He laughed when Coop poked him in the side. “Hey, ticklish!”

“They’re gonna be crunchy scrambled eggs,” Coop said. “And it’s your fault.”

“I didn’t put the shells in there!” That was hardly his fault. Maybe if Coop knew how to crack an egg properly, they wouldn’t be in this situation. “Aren’t they nutritional or something?”

“I have no idea, Bryce,” Coop said with mock patience. “I don’t generally eat them.”

“Then maybe you shouldn’t put them in your food.”

Coop rolled his eyes. He flicked the bottom-left stovetop on as he went past and pulled a fry pan from the cupboard beside it. Bryce winced when something crashed. Sometimes he had to actively avoid thinking about the mess that Coop invited into his life twenty-four seven.

“Butter?” Coop asked.

“Knife.”

“Knife?”

“The counterpart to butter,” Bryce said reasonably.

“Wouldn’t the counterpart to a knife be a fork?”

“Then who does the spoon get?”

“... a plate?” Coop got the butter out of the fridge himself and dropped a chunk of it into the fry pan. It sizzled as it melted.

The rest of cooking the scrambled eggs was at least uneventful, and they managed to get it into bowls with relative ease. Bryce grabbed napkins and wipes before he joined Coop on the couch. It was inevitable that he would need them.

“So,” Bryce said, settling in. He pressed his thigh against Coop’s and even dragged the throw blanket from the back of the couch and hauled it over their laps, careful not to get fluff in his food. Egg shells were enough damage; he drew the line at fluff. “Would it be weird if I started having sex with your teammate?”

“I thought you already had,” Coop said. He stretched his legs out and rested his heels on the coffee table, balancing his bowl on his considerable thighs.

“It was just a kiss.”

“That was like a fortnight ago.”

Bryce snorted out a laugh. “How fast do you think I move?” Not to mention that free time was in short supply during the footy season. If he wasn’t training, he was studying. If he

wasn't studying, he was sleeping. And if he wasn't doing any of those, he was either getting ready for game day, or on a plane heading somewhere for the weekend match. And most of the time he used the travel time to study, so it was technically included with that.

“Noah doesn't do celibate.”

“Well, I guess then he found someone else to fuck over the weekend?” Bryce said dryly. Because it hadn't been him. He was positive he would have remembered an experience like that.

“Nah, we were in Melbourne this weekend and next door to each other; if he'd had guests, I would have known about it.”

“I... don't want to know what that means.” Was *Noah* loud, or did he make his partners loud? Nope. No, he was not thinking about that.

Coop shook his head and shovelled more food in. “I don't know if it would be weird, Bry, because it's never happened before.” He turned to face Bryce, bracing his shoulder against the back of the couch. “You really want to sleep with a guy?”

“I dunno. Maybe?” He'd been thinking about it a lot more since that kiss. He couldn't say that he *wasn't* interested. He was intrigued. “I want to find out, but how do you say ‘hey, I want you to be my experiment’?” Technically, Noah had said that first. Did that make it okay?

“Exactly like that?” Coop leaned forward and put the bowl on the coffee table and then settled back into the couch. Bryce

moved it to a coaster, putting his own inside Coop's and then wiping the spot he'd left. What was the point of coasters if they weren't even used? They weren't there for decoration.

"Exactly like that?" he questioned.

"Noah's a big boy. If he doesn't like the idea of you using him for your sexual exploration, he'll say so."

That was true. Getting Noah to do anything he didn't want to was akin to pushing a hundred-year-old oak and expecting it to fall over. The roots were way too deep for that. And stubborn.

"Just ask him," Coop said, shrugging.

"Just ask him," Bryce repeated.

He could do that. Probably. Maybe.

Seemed simple enough.



WAKING UP TO HIS dog going off his tree and barking like the world was ending was not how Noah had planned for his Thursday rest day to start. Resting did not mean falling out of bed and then stumbling to the front door wearing nothing but the briefs he'd luckily remembered to tug on. It had better not be Wren and Darcy, or Coop. He liked to think that they were smarter than that.

The last person he expected on his doorstep was Bryce. He blinked. Was he still asleep? If this was a sexy dream, it wasn't quite how he would have started it, but he could be flexible.



“Morning!”

Not even his dreams could conjure someone that perky at stupid o’clock in the morning. Had to be real. “Shouldn’t you be on a plane somewhere?”

“Saturday match, so we’re leaving tomorrow. And we’re going to Brisbane. Not even changing time zones.”

Noah jammed his palm into his eyes, pushing hard until stars appeared. “Okay. Uh. Coop’s not here?”

“Why the fuck would I be coming *here* to see Coop? I know where he lives.”

Noah had no idea. It was too fucking early for rational thought. And Rufus was shoving his big wet nose against Noah’s exposed thighs, and he was not equipped to deal with any of this within a mere few minutes of waking.

He opened the door wider. “Get inside or go away.” They were the only two choices available.

Bryce got to one knee and loudly greeted Rufus, giving him scratches and talking to him like he was a toddler learning his syllables.

Noah briefly closed his eyes, wishing he was back in bed. He slammed the door shut and headed to his kitchen.

“Aren’t you going to get dressed?” Bryce asked, following him.

“I am dressed.”

“You’re in your underwear.”

That was still dressed. “Didn’t take you for a prude.”

“I’m not a...” Bryce scowled. “I’m not.”

“Everything that needs to be covered is covered.” Noah looked down at his chest and frowned. Maybe Bryce didn’t like the fact that Noah didn’t have an “athlete’s” body. He had muscles, and he could play just as well as the guys in their early twenties; his stats proved that. But he wasn’t twenty-three anymore, and the slight curve of his stomach showed that. “If you’re looking for billboard washboard abs, then you’re barking up the wrong tree, kid.”

Bryce narrowed his eyes. “What?”

Noah sighed. Was it rude to go back to bed when he had a guest? Did Bryce count as a guest? Too many existential questions. Not enough coffee or brain food. “Give me a second to get changed. You know how to use this?”

“The coffee machine?” Bryce warily glanced between Noah and the appliance. “Uh... is it still under warranty?”

That wasn’t reassuring, and Bryce was not going anywhere near his baby. He’d paid a small fortune for his espresso machine and wasn’t about to let an amateur hurt her.

“Don’t touch anything until I get back,” he said firmly. He ran a hand through his hair and muttered something even *he* couldn’t understand. Some cussing in there, hopefully. Some kind of ritual to summon a demon to devour anyone who tried to wake him early.

“Wait a second,” Bryce said, snagging his arm before he could leave the room. “Let’s get a few things straight...” His face flushed. “Um, relatively speaking.”

Relatively speaking. Was he for real?

Bryce’s fingers, curled around his forearm, were a heavy weight that Noah couldn’t have ignored even if his life had depended on it. “Sure.” Not like his morning could get any worse.

Bryce stood a little straighter, his eyes hardening. “I am *not* a prude. Don’t ever call me ‘kid’ again. And I don’t want washboard abs. I know what you look like, Noah. It’s *distracting*, okay? I came here to... talk, or whatever, and all I want to do is touch you, and I don’t even know if I’m ready for that, so could you please just...” He gestured at Noah’s chest. “Cover that up, okay? Thank you.”

Not exactly elegantly put, but the idea that Bryce found him that attractive enough to be distracting was definitely making him want to puff out his chest and strut around like a peacock. He *wouldn’t*, but he’d be lying if he said the urge wasn’t there.

“Let me get changed,” he repeated, both to Bryce and himself; he needed the extra reminder and pep talk. “Then I’ll make us some breakfast, and we can talk.” If a month ago, someone had said he would have Bryce Monaghan eating breakfast at his house without Coop as a mediator, he would have told them they were clearly drunk and needed to sober up. Even *with* Coop there it would have been strange. They didn’t “hang out.” How did Bryce even know where he lived?

By the time Noah came back wearing a loose-fitting Sydney Swallows shirt and light-grey sweatpants, Bryce had dragged Rufus's toy box from the lounge into the kitchen. They were going through each one—with Bryce holding two up to Rufus, and Rufus, after careful deliberation, touching one with his nose. Two piles were being made on either side of them.

“The fuck are you two doing?”

“Are you always this grumpy in the morning?” Bryce asked pleasantly.

“Yes,” Noah grunted, heading straight for his coffee.

“Now I get why you and Coop are friends.”

“We're friends because we both play forward positions, and we've been in each other's pockets for almost five years. The fact that we speak in single syllables until we've woken up properly is merely a bonus.” The best kind of bonus. There was a reason they got along when they travelled for a game. Ravioli, Darcy, and Wren were forbidden to speak to them until more reasonable times of the morning.

“That was pretty damn articulate for someone who hasn't woken up properly.”

“Do I need to make a rule about how early you're allowed to show up here?” By the sounds of it, he needed a whole whiteboard. He could put it up right near the front door so that Bryce could see it as soon as he walked in. Hell, it could go on the porch for before Bryce had even set foot in the house.

“Depends on whether you care if they’re abided by or not. I’m not into punishment stuff, FYI. And I’m a morning person.”

Noah had already worked that out. He let out a long sigh. Maybe he’d get lucky, and Bryce was a cuddler, and he could be contained that way.

He flicked his coffee machine on and went through the motions of making his caffeinated goodness. He even made one for Bryce, which he thought was generous of him. Golden star next to his name for that one.

“You eat eggs?” he asked as he got the egg carton out of the fridge.

“Yes?”

“Don’t answer a question with a question,” Noah said. Deciphering speech was not part of his skills, especially not this early. He put two fry pans on the stove and turned up the heat.

“It was a stupid question.”

“We have guys on the team that are allergic, and some who don’t like them,” Noah said. “Your own brother hates them with a boiling rage I have never been able to understand. What’s to say you don’t have the same very strong opinions about demon chicken spawn? It wasn’t a stupid question.”

“Yes, I like eggs,” Bryce said, rolling his eyes. “Wren hates them because Mum served him undercooked eggs *once* when he was nine. He has a memory like an elephant, and he holds

grudges. He loves Mum, so the only other logical conclusion was to turn that hate on the eggs. He's an idiot."

Noah grunted at that. He couldn't disagree.

"You know," Bryce mused, "sometimes when you open your mouth, I want to punch it."

"The feeling is entirely mutual, Monaghan."

Bryce flipped him off and went back to... whatever it was he was doing with Rufus. Noah's dog *liked* everything in the box, so the exercise itself was pointless.

"Is it a captain thing?" Noah asked, once the scrambled eggs were sizzling in the pan. He chopped two tomatoes into quarters and spring onions into pieces, then placed them into the second fry pan with some bacon, two large portobello mushrooms, and a healthy serving of oil and garlic.

"Is what a captain thing?" Bryce asked, glancing up. Rufus took the opportunity to grab the stuffed penguin Bryce was holding and brought it over to Noah. He looked like he'd saved the universe and wanted scratches as his reward.

"Not while I'm cooking. Be good, and you can have some bacon," Noah told him. He turned his attention back to Bryce. "The morning thing," he clarified. "Forest is a morning person too." Not an annoyingly chirpy morning person like Ravioli was, or a perpetual-sunshine morning person like Darcy, or even aggressively chipper like Wren—which Noah was still convinced he put on just because it pissed people off—but the point still stood. If he rolled back over all the captains that the

Swallows had had over the years that Noah had been playing, he couldn't think of a single one that had been grumpy, "don't fucking talk to me" in the morning. Not an unreasonable pattern. They were *supposed* to be approachable. It was why Noah had never wanted it. He just wanted to play footy.

"I don't... think so? It wasn't in the paperwork, but it could have been in the fine print. I'll check next time I'm at training." The grin he wore was impish.

"Grab the salt and pepper from the cupboard and some cutlery," Noah said. "Breakfast is ready."

Bryce lifted his head and smelled deeply. "Damn. I hope it tastes half as good as it smells. I had no idea you were a chef, Walker."

Noah wasn't answering that. He'd already given Bryce more words than he would have given anyone else at this time of the morning. That had to count for something.

By the time he'd eaten half his plate and downed his entire coffee, he was starting to feel more human. Through some divine miracle, Bryce didn't have the ability to eat *and* talk. Noah wouldn't have been surprised if he could, and he was thankful that he couldn't.

"You wanted to talk," Noah said, pushing away his plate and leaning back in his dining chair. "So, talk." He grabbed a piece of bacon and waited for Rufus to give a paw and shake before he handed it over.

"I don't know if I'm gay."

That wasn't surprising. Bryce had been open about how confused he was with the whole situation. "Okay."

"Okay? That's it?"

"It's not up to me, Bryce," Noah said. "Only you can decide that. If you need a warm body to touch while you figure it out, I'll take one for the team." An absolute hardship to let the redhead get his hands all over Noah, but Noah was a good guy like that.

"I don't want to use you. I don't... I don't know what I want."

Did he think he had to keep repeating it? "I get it, Bryce," Noah said firmly. "It's hard to admit that you want something. It's hard to think that maybe there's something about yourself that you've missed all these years. Maybe you didn't miss anything, and you're going through a quarter-life crisis, or your dick was just in a particular mood that day. We feel things for different reasons, and sometimes those reasons can't be explained." He tapped the side of his mug with his index finger. "We can take it slow. And at any point, if you decide that it isn't for you, that you *don't* like it, then that's okay too." Bryce was annoying and way too good at his job on the field, but Noah knew that he was a good person. He didn't think Bryce was the type of person to jerk anyone around. He was confused, and Noah understood that. It wasn't like he'd shouted to the rooftops that he was gay. His dad didn't even know. Even when someone *did* know who they were, being open about it was something else entirely.



If he could help give Bryce some kind of clarity? He was happy to be of service. It helped that he was extremely sexually attracted to him. It wasn't as though he was offering because he was forced to. He was getting something out of it too.

Noah drew Bryce closer, the legs of the chair loudly scraping across the wooden flooring. "Think of me as your own personal jungle gym."

Bryce laughed quietly, letting Noah bring him into his space, lips hovering close together. "As my what?"

Noah rested a hand around Bryce's lower back, his fingers playing with the hem of his shirt. "You might not want to use all the equipment, but it's there if you feel like it."

"That's the weirdest analogy I've ever fucking heard," Bryce said. "I can't tell if you're trying to tell me that you're well used, or that I'm—"

Noah took Bryce's lips in a soft kiss, taking his time to enjoy the shape of them against his own before he deepened it. Bryce gasped, and then fingers tugged at Noah's hair, sending jolts of pain that ended in zings of pleasure across his scalp.

"I don't know if I'm ready for more than this," Bryce blurted out, pulling away. "For... taking clothes off. That's why—before—clothes on."

Bryce's inability to complete full sentences when he was flustered was intriguing, adorable, and sexy all at once.

“There’s plenty of things that we can do with clothes on.” Noah checked his watch. “The only thing I was planning to do today was a light swim, movies and video games. Join me?”

“I need to do coursework after we swim; I have an assignment due next month and a few finals touches to put on it.”

“Do you need to go get it...?”

“No, it’s in my car.”

Noah quirked the corner of his mouth. “You just keep it in your car?”

“I never know when I might have a spare minute to work on it,” Bryce said defensively.

Noah kissed his cheek, the corner of his mouth, and then settled over his mouth for a few long heartbeats. “There’s a tub of toys in the laundry for Rufus; get them for me? I’ll find you a towel.” He looked down at what Bryce was wearing. “And something to wear. I think Coop left some of his swim trunks here. They’ll still be big, but they won’t fall off your hips; mine will.”

“Is that your not-very-subtle way of reminding me that you’re bigger than me?”

“Facts are facts, Monaghan.”

Bryce rolled his eyes and pushed away from the table. Instead of asking where the laundry was—which Noah had been waiting for—he began stacking all the dishes. Noah watched in amusement as Bryce carefully piled them on the

sink, wiped down the benches, and started the water in the sink.

“You and Coop aren’t the same,” Noah observed.

“Why did you think we were?” He started rinsing and washing the dishes as the sink filled up.

Noah shrugged. “Just figured you were the same.” Bryce and Coop *were* similar in a lot of ways, which was a product of having grown up so close together. In situations like that it was only natural that they’d picked up some of each other’s habits. They would have soaked up each other’s personalities without even meaning to.

“I pick up my towels,” Bryce said, scowling. “And my dishes. And water my plants.”

“Coop doesn’t have plants.” Noah didn’t spend a *lot* of time at Coop’s place, but he was sure he’d never seen anything that was a real plant. Outside of the frog enclosure. There was a fake one—singular—that would have been covered in dust if Coop didn’t have a cleaner.

“That’s because Forest took all the green-thumb genes in the womb and left Coop with precisely zero. He’s not *allowed* to have plants in his house. Except the ones for his frogs. He pays a professional to come in and clean their enclosure. And feed them when he’s away.”

Unsurprising. “You want some help?” Noah asked, leaning back in his chair and kicking his legs out.

“You cooked.”

“And...?” What did that have to do with anything? Did Bryce think he just never did dishes since he cooked all his meals? He wished he had magic animals that cleaned his house, but he was no Snow White.

“And the cook doesn’t clean. Didn’t your parents teach you that?”

Noah shrugged. “It’s just me and my dad,” he said. “My mum died when I was seven.”

Bryce paused, a plate in one hand and a scrubber in the other. “Oh.” He carefully slid the plate into the water. “I’m sorry.”

“Ancient history. We muddled our way through. I don’t really remember her besides what Dad tells me. And pictures, of course. I’m sure she would have taught me that, though. Dad and I both did the cooking and the cleaning up together. He worked two jobs, so a lot of the time it was the only time we had together.” Losing his mum early had shaped the way that he’d grown up and how his dad had raised him.

“My siblings and I always had to do the dishes,” Bryce said. “Even after we got a dishwasher, it was only really used when we had guests, or if Mum 2.0 was going through a science phase. Washing was the coveted position, of course; it meant you were done quicker, and you didn’t have to put anything away. Monica bullied us, so Wren and I always had to dry.”

Noah could see it. All the Monaghan kids had inherited some Irish fire. Bryce *looked* the part more than the other two, but they had all inherited the actual traits.

“I have two questions,” Noah said, holding up two fingers.

Bryce glanced at him, glass in hand, and winked. “Fire away.”

“Why do you call her that?” Noah asked.

“Who? Abby? She’s my second mum; what else would I call her?”

Noah should have expected that answer. “Aren’t you worried that makes your mum feel second best?”

Bryce paused, brows furrowing as though it had never occurred to him. It probably hadn’t. “No? I love all my parents.” He shrugged. “I dunno, I’ve always called her that. Calling her Abby never fit, ’cause she’s my mum. And calling her Mum was confusing ’cause I *have* a mum. Mummy was out for... so many reasons. Mum-A just sounds weird. Mum-Abby is too much of a mouthful. Mum 2.0 rolls off the tongue.”

“You’ve put a lot of thought into this.”

“I don’t think my thought process was quite that smooth. It fit, so we called her that? She loves it. That was more than two questions.”

“That was only my first question.”

“Figures you’d cheat at questions.”

“You can’t cheat at—” Noah cut himself off. “I asked two questions if you want to be technical. And I didn’t realise that there were *rules*. Shouldn’t we establish those up front?”

“That’s no fun. I like making them up as I go.”

Noah had no idea why he wanted to sleep with this man. Was wanting to know if the drapes matched the curtains worth it?

“I have a third question, Your Majesty,” Noah said with a roll of his eyes. “Is that all right?”

Bryce pretended to think about it. He better be pretending, or Noah was kicking him out. He could ask as many questions as he wanted to. Especially in his own house.

Rufus sat at his feet, a toy rope hanging from his mouth. Noah took one end so that they could play tug-of-war. It was one of his favourite games. Of course, it also felt like Noah’s shoulder was being wrenched out of his socket as Rufus jerked the rope around. Not the prescribed way to stretch his muscles.

“Guess so,” Bryce eventually said. “It’s about the science experiments, right?”

“It definitely is.” Did it count as a question if he didn’t *ask* the question? Implied questions seemed like a grey area.

“I told you she’s a science teacher.”

“I’m still curious as to how that translates to food, and whether or not you *ate* said food. Though that would explain a lot.”

“Cute.” Bryce stacked the last plate on the rack and dried his hands on a tea towel hanging from the oven door. “It was mostly all edible.”

“Mostly,” Noah repeated. “Did you inherit this mostly edible trait? Because if that’s the case, you are never allowed to cook for me. There’s a rule we can establish up front.”

“You’ll have to find out.”

“Great,” Noah deadpanned. If he had to explain to his coach why he had food poisoning, he was making Bryce go with him. They could both be scolded like children.

“She likes trying out obscure foods and ones that have reactions.” Bryce scratched the back of his neck. “Like... have you ever seen those lava cakes? Where the insides ooze out? She also tried making gummy bears. Glow-in-the-dark jelly.”

“Glow—what?” Bryce was making this up. Had to be.

“She tried making butter by shaking heavy cream. We all had to help with that because her arms got tired quick. There was a period where she was obsessed with trying to get foods and drinks to have that dry-ice fog effect?” He made waves with his hands, and Noah figured he was trying to replicate the effect. Badly.

“I hate to break it to you, but being a mime is not going to be a career choice for you.”

“Damn. And I’d already put my job application in too.”

Noah snorted. “You all had life insurance as kids, didn’t you?”

“Probably. We didn’t have to use it, though!”

Only seemed like half the battle. “Unless you *did*, and now you’re just a hallucination,” Noah pointed out. “I’m not completely ruling that out.”

“A lot of people are having the same hallucination, then.”

“I’m sure there’s a study out there somewhere about mass hallucinations.”

“There is, actually. It’s called the Mandela Effect.” Bryce looked around the kitchen, checked the bin, and then spread his arms. “Okay. Clean. Swimming?”

Noah bit back his smile. “Do you need to shower before you swim?”

Bryce narrowed his eyes. “I know you’re making fun of me, but you’re supposed to do that. They even have it on signs at the swimming pool. Nobody reads signs anymore!”

Noah burst out laughing.





## Second Quarter

BRYCE FEINTED LEFT AND then right, but North's key defender, Andrew Pittman, still managed to catch up, wrapping him in a mock tackle without taking them to the ground. Last thing they needed was a random injury during the captain's run. Especially not the *actual* captain. Bryce still sometimes wasn't sure why they'd wanted him in the position, or how he'd kept it for two years without some kind of mutiny happening.

"Too slow, chump," Drew said, giving him a squeeze before letting go.

"And I've been practicing my stamina," Bryce deadpanned.

Drew took the footy from him and twirled it in his hands. "You're on edge today, why?"

"I'm not," Bryce said. He was always jittery before a match. There was something different about playing as a captain. It was about more than just where he was and where his line was. He had to watch all of the others, and think about more

than just himself. Like Drew's kicking during drills. "I was watching you before. You keep drifting left, and it's windy as fuck today, so keep an eye on that."

Drew smirked. "Sure thing, captain."

Bryce rolled his eyes. Drew tugged him closer and hugged him from behind, crossing his arms across Bryce's chest. Bryce laughed, ignoring the people watching them from the stands and the click of the cameras. He'd gotten used to all the screens being pointed his way a long time ago. A weird thing for someone at twenty-three to be used to, but he'd grown up in a football family. His dad hadn't played, but his grandfather had, and the expectations had been a lot for a while until he'd learned to charge forward as his own kind of player. His grandfather had been a ruckman, and Bryce had tried hard to follow in his footsteps, but it was never going to be a position he excelled at. He was better at running the footy down and putting pressure on unsuspecting opponents, and didn't have the height anyway.

"Canoodle in your own time," Reid Calhoun, their midfield coach said, joining them. "Bry, I want you on Lewis tonight. They're moving him to forward, and that left boot of his is lethal." Calhoun pointed at him. "Make sure he can't use it."

Bryce nodded. "You got it."

"Drew: Lewis and Leggett, all right?"

"Why do I get two?" Drew complained, though Bryce could hear the smile in his voice. He liked a challenge. "Wait, Legs is a defender. Did I become the hare when I wasn't looking?"

“What?” Bryce asked, twisting his head to look at Drew.

“You know, like the hare and the tortoise race?”

Bryce snickered. “Didn’t the tortoise win?”

Drew flicked him in the forehead. “The point is that the hare is fast. I can’t be in two places at once, Coach.”

Bryce elbowed him in the gut in retaliation.

“Children,” Calhoun reprimanded. “Save it for the Cassowaries tonight.” He tapped his clipboard with his pen. “They’ve moved Leggett to midfield tonight, and I don’t know why. I don’t like it, I don’t want it, and whatever they’re doing, I want you two to stop it.”

“You got it,” Drew said.

“I hate this team,” Bryce muttered. Creepy fucking animal aside, why would they put Leggett in the midfield when he had such great pressure in their defensive fifty? It sounded like either a terrible decision or some kind of masterstroke of genius, and Bryce hated not knowing which one it was.

“Locke is rucking it tonight,” Calhoun continued, “so keep an eye on him.”

Locke had only been drafted at the end of the last season, but Bryce had known that he’d be shining in the spotlight before long. He had natural talent and a single-minded focus that was borderline terrifying. Not to mention a weird yoga obsession.

It turned out that they had nothing to worry about. Bryce and his team put the pressure on right from the first quarter and

didn't let up, taking the lead at the end of the first half and into the second. Leggett got subbed out at the start of the third quarter with a suspected hamstring injury—that made Bryce wince just thinking about it—and North ran with it, dominating the rest of the match. Bryce even managed to kick a goal and assist in three others, and they won by an easy sixty-three points. Some games felt like more of a battle than they were, and it wasn't always reflected in the final score, but tonight wasn't like that. They'd won more easily than Bryce had hoped for, and while they were sore, bruised, and tired, there wasn't that bone-deep exhaustion that sometimes came with games that were physically and mentally demanding.

The obligations after a win when travelling were less than when they were on home ground; only a few family members and friends made the trip, and beyond doing the regular fan press and interviews—Bryce, as captain, couldn't get away from it even if he'd wanted to—they didn't have to spend too many long hours in the stadium afterwards. It was only roughly two hours after the game ended before the team was able to get away. They all ate dinner together in the hotel's restaurant, eating enough that Bryce wouldn't have been surprised if the place had no food left to serve anyone else.

Bryce was pleasantly—and comfortably—full by the time he finally made it back to his hotel room. He got out of his clothes and hung them up in the wardrobe before padding across to the bed with just his black briefs on. He unplugged his phone from where he'd left it charging on his bedside table. He didn't like to take it with him for a game, not since

the time he'd lost it and spent a week panicking that some weirdo fan had it and was going through all his personal shit. He had a passcode, facial recognition, and fingerprint, and none of that had helped calm his nerves. He'd found it in the bottom of his bag. And he still hadn't lived that down. So now he left it in the room. It wasn't like he needed it.

He had a message from his siblings and one from his dad; that was from all his parents. Just a variation of different congratulation and celebratory texts.

The one from Wren simply said, "You didn't totally suck. That goal was sloppy."

And one from Coop that said, "Damn. They putting you in the wrong position?" Then an obscene GIF that had a guy getting sucked off. Bryce didn't even want to know where he'd found that, or why the thought of Noah sucking *him* off flashed through his mind and raised the temperature in the small room. They hadn't done anything like that yet. Just making out on his couch instead of watching a movie.

The one he hadn't expected was from Noah. Heat rushed over Bryce when he opened the message despite the fact it was two boring words.

**Noah:** Good game.

Bryce snorted.

**Bryce:** So articulate.

**Noah:** What were you expecting? Should I get my poetry book out?

**Bryce:** Do you *have* a poetry book?

What kind of poetry would Noah read?

**Noah:** No

A man of few words over text. It was like pulling blood from a stone. Bryce bet he *called* people.

As if on cue, his phone started ringing in his hand. Bryce scrubbed his hand down his mouth and did a little shake of his head as a smile erupted over his face.

“Nobody calls anybody anymore,” Bryce answered.

“What are we doing right now?”

“You are such a dinosaur.”

“I’m only five years older than you,” Noah said, sounding put out.

“That statement had nothing to do with your age, old man.”

“You talk too much.”

“Did you call me so we could just not talk to each other?” Bryce asked sarcastically. He sat on the edge of the bed and opened the drawer to get his headphones out. He hated speakerphone, and he didn’t want to hold his phone to his ear all night.

“I hate texting.”

“And I hate phone calls. Guess we’re at an impasse.”

“I think I could change your mind.”

Bryce's heart skipped a beat at Noah's lowered voice. "Are you talking about what I think you're talking about?" Everything in him hoped it was a resounding *yes* even though he'd never had phone sex with anyone before.

Travelling was just a part of his career, and whenever he'd been dating anyone, they'd just... mostly texted a few times and then waited in silence to see each other again. No pressure and no real... urgency. It sounded worse now that he was thinking about it. It had seemed normal at the time.

"That depends. What am I talking about?"

"If I have to say it, I'm hanging up."

Noah's low chuckle was sexy as sin. "I want to listen to you get yourself off. I want to hear your breathing quicken and your groans in my ear. I want you to come all over your hand to the sound of my voice. Is that what you were thinking?"

"It's—uh—" Bryce's voice broke. "Close enough." Yeah. He was on board with this.

He shifted down the bed, propping himself up on the pillow before grabbing himself through his shorts, squeezing lightly as he rubbed up and down. He bit down on his lip as a small sound escaped.

"Are you touching yourself?" Noah asked hoarsely.

"Are you?" Bryce countered.

"Do you want me to be?"

"Yes." He wasn't going to do this alone.



Bryce licked his lips at the sounds of Noah shutting a door and then shuffling like he was getting out of clothes and getting on the bed.

Fuck. *Yes.* Bryce grabbed the lube from the drawer and pushed his briefs off and then coated himself, spreading it around with his fingers. It was messy, and he was going to need a shower. He didn't care.

"Damn," Noah moaned. "Knowing you're touching yourself is making me so fucking hard."

Bryce squeezed his eyes shut as he pulsed in his hand. He knew that Noah looked like hard. Could see it in his mind, memory conjuring the image.

"Are you hard for me?"

"Yeah," Bryce breathed out.

Noah chuckled. "That's all I'm getting?"

"I can't—I—" Bryce couldn't *think*, let alone figure out words to say. Of course Noah was a mouthy bastard. Texting, he sucked at. This... not so much. That did not surprise Bryce one bit.

"On me, then? That's okay. I can rise to the challenge."

Bryce added pressure, sliding his hand down his shaft and then up again.

"You already are," Bryce said, the last word ending on a light moan.

"Spread your legs for me."

Bryce gasped, pushing his head back against his pillow, his knees falling apart of their own accord.

“I want to be between your legs,” Noah groaned. “Hot and heavy, pressing you into the bed.”

A phantom weight settled over Bryce, and he bit his lip to stop the obscene moans from falling out.

“Now, now,” Noah chastised. “Don’t do that; I want to hear everything. I want the guys in the next room to know just how hard I make you, how much you get off on this. Spread them wider for me.”

*Fuck.* Bryce moaned louder as his legs spread to accommodate Noah’s large phantom bulk. His legs were weightless and lethargic, as though they no longer belonged to him. They didn’t. Right now, they belonged to Noah and everything he was doing to them.

“Cup your balls; roll them between your fingers.”

Bryce’s body moved without thought, pulled on a string by Noah the master puppeteer. His knees bent, feet pushing into the bed as he fondled himself.

“I want to take them in my mouth,” Noah said, and Bryce’s breath punched out of him. He was so turned on he couldn’t believe that he hadn’t come yet. “Drag my tongue around them and down to your ass and lick you out. Ever been tongue fucked before?”

“*No,*” Bryce moaned. That hadn’t seemed like such a travesty. Had barely crossed his mind. Now it felt like a sin.

“The sounds you’re making are driving me crazy,” Noah said huskily. “I want you here in my bed so I can touch you.”

“Me too,” Bryce breathed out. He wanted Noah to teach him how it felt to be held by a man.

“Stroke yourself slowly,” Noah said. “Nice and... slow.”

“Are you—” Bryce cut off with a groan, just the thought of it enough for him to reach that much closer to the edge. Too close; he didn’t want it to be over yet.

“I’m right here with you,” Noah said. “My hand’s wrapped around my dick, and I’m thinking of yours around it, or your hot mouth.”

*Fuck.* Bryce knew what Noah looked like. How big he was. He wanted to see again, and touch and smell. It was easier to admit that he wanted those things when he didn’t have to deal with the *reality* of wanting them. They were miles apart; Bryce didn’t have to put his wants to the test.

“Reach behind you. Slide your finger around your hole. Don’t slip it in, just apply pressure. Speed up your hand.”

Noah’s voice was so close to him, almost as though he were right there, and Bryce was panting now, Noah overwhelming all his senses. He did as he was told, pressing against the muscles of his hole, where he’d never been. Where no one had. His legs trembled as he pressed against the muscles, the intense ache something he’d never experienced before. Pre-cum mixed in with the lube as he balanced on the precipice.

“Yeah, that’s right. Let me hear it.”

“Noah,” Bryce moaned.

“*Christ.* Damn, that sounds good. Say it again.”

Bryce couldn't do anything but whatever Noah wanted.

“*Noah.*”

“Come for me.”

Bryce scrunched his eyes, his head pressing down against his pillow as he cried out and came so hard he saw stars, his entire body shaking as it ripped through him like a freight train. He twitched from the aftershocks, weightless and utterly spent. His groin tightened at the low, guttural groans of Noah coming with him.

“We should—we should do that again,” Bryce said, trying to catch his breath.

“I'm not twenty-three anymore; we might need to wait an hour.”

Bryce laughed.

Yeah, they would definitely have to do that again. Maybe in the same room, with hands all over each other. Bryce felt readier for it now, steadier than he had been before the phone call. Something about Noah's voice calmed him, kept him balanced as he walked the rickety bridge.



THE NEXT GAME THE Swallows played was against the Adelaide Kestrels. They lost by six points in a high-scoring

game that left Noah angry and frustrated. Lost opportunities throughout the game had cost them.

The training session after a loss was always somehow more brutal than any others. Losing when they should have won, based on *all* the stats in the game, made it even harder. The coaches worked them longer, and harder, and the mental strength required to stand up and keep pushing was heavier, the loss a weight on their shoulders they were all trying to shake.

Going into the ninth round of the season, they had three losses and five wins. Not a ratio that Noah was happy with, especially when the losses had been the last three of four games. It was something they needed to fix before they got into the back half of the home-and-away season.

It was almost three hours after the time they *usually* finished for the day, during the intense Wednesday full-team match-practice session, when Coach Novak finally said that they were done for the day. Noah breathed a sigh of relief, sweat running down his temples and in some uncomfortable places.

Noah didn't agree with most of the decisions that Novak had been making this season—or last if he were being honest—and this was one he was against. Making them work harder and longer when they were beaten down and tired wasn't going to work; they needed to work *smarter*, and that didn't necessarily mean merely putting in more hours in training.

Coop flopped down onto the fake grass, spreading out like a starfish and letting out a groan. “Shower. Food. Trash TV.

Food. In that order.” He nudged Noah’s foot with his own.  
“You in?”

“Tempting,” Noah said dryly. Was the fact that it *was* tempting too pathetic to admit?

Wren sank face down next to Coop. He mumbled something that Noah couldn’t decipher. Coop half-heartedly hit his shoulder, and Wren lifted a hand to smack him in the stomach. Must have used up his energy reserves because he left it there.

Darcy sat down beside them and crossed his legs with more grace than someone who was all leg should be able to. His smile was tired but pleasant. Nothing ever seemed to dampen his spirit. Not even a gargantuan training session that had clearly been designed to leave them all dead on the ground. Noah was pretty sure he was an alien.

Ravioli dropped to his knees even more dramatically than Wren’s face-plant, like he’d been shot and was acting out his death scene. “I think I’m dying,” he huffed. “My bruises have bruises, and they’re making babies. Baby bruises. Bruise babies.”

“Bruises don’t work like that,” Darcy said. “They actually \_\_\_”

Ravioli reached out to put his hands over Darcy’s mouth and made soothing *shh* noises. Darcy blinked, and then his eyes crinkled as he smiled.

Noah didn’t have the energy to engage with any of them, and luckily, he didn’t have to since one of the only other old-timers

left on the team, Jaryd Remington, waved him over from where he was standing on the sidelines.

“Walk with me,” Jaryd said, heading back towards their locker room.

“What’s wrong?” Noah asked, on instant alert.

“Coach wants to move me.”

Noah sneered. It wasn’t the first player he’d moved around recently. Novak reminded him of when new managers come in: making changes just to say they’d done something, not because they were useful or strategic masterpieces.

“Where to?” he asked warily.

“Forward-ruck.”

“We have a forward-ruck,” Noah said flatly. “Kira backs Darcy up.” Kira might be quieter and not much of a team joiner off the field, but he and Darcy were a well-oiled machine that only an idiot would pull apart.

“Right,” Jaryd agreed. He held open the side door and waited for Noah to go through before following behind him. “He wants to move Kira too.”

Noah pushed his palm against his eye and resisted the urge to scream. “If you say Novak is moving Kira to defence, and he just wants to switch the two of you like some dumbass reenactment of *Parent Trap*, I swear to you I will fucking lose my shit.”

“Be prepared to lose your shit, then.” Jaryd paused. “*Parent Trap?*”

Noah waved him off. He wasn't getting into a movie-explanation discussion. It wasn't his fault that Jaryd got basically no movie references since he didn't watch them. Noah was way too pissed off.

He pushed through the locker-room doors, made sure that Novak wasn't there—or anyone else in the management hierarchy—before bursting out, “Kira doesn't play defence! He's better without being restrained. He and Wren feed off each other, and they get the footy where it needs to go. He and Darcy stack up more clearances between them than any other players in the league. Sticking Kira in the back pocket won't do anything but mean we're down solid defence where we need it, and *you* have to learn to kick straight.”

Jaryd snorted. He sat heavily on the bench and lifted a leg, bending his knee and planting his foot to unlace his boots. “I can kick straight.”

“When you're punting it to the midfield.” Jaryd's accuracy and ability to kick it between the right goal posts was questionable. A different kind of pressure than he preferred. Which was why *defence* was the perfect position for him. Jaryd wasn't a big guy, more a lean swimmer at five foot nine, but he could out muscle and out manoeuvre their opponent's forward line any day of the week.

“You're a terrible motivational speaker,” Jaryd said, laughing. “I've kicked plenty of goals.”



Noah wasn't going to pull out the stats. "Just because you *can* do something, doesn't mean you should. It's not where you thrive, and it's not where Kira does either."

"Preaching to the choir, man. I told Coach my concerns, and he—"

"Dismissed them," Noah finished. He bet he could recreate the entire conversation. Novak wasn't interested in hearing from his players even if they'd been playing a decade and might have half a clue what they were talking about. Jaryd had been playing for the Swallows for ten years, same as him. Noah would have thought that they might be aware of what position suited them best at this point. Apparently, they were wrong.

"Right between the goals. Damn, you should play forward. If you can learn to kick straight." Jaryd's lips curved. "Oh, wait."

"Fuck off," Noah said, giving him the bird.

Jaryd nudged his thigh. "I've talked to Coach Adams, and we'll get some extra training sessions in."

Their midfield coach at least had more sense than Novak. And made more sense—most of the time—than the forward coach. Brilliance and sanity rarely went hand in hand.

"Tell me when; I'll be there. So will Forest."

"I don't need hand holding," Jaryd said with an eye roll. "I'm older than you."

Noah snorted. "By three days; let's not get ahead of ourselves." He fished his phone out of his bag to check it

before he hit the showers.

There was a message waiting for him from Bryce. Heat rushed over him at the words. He shifted, tilting his phone so no one could see.

**Bryce:** What's the protocol for dick pics with your fuck buddy?

**Noah:** What makes you think there's a protocol?

Is that what they were now? Fuck buddies? Noah could work with that.

**Bryce:** I'm hard and touching myself and thinking of you. Should I send you a pic?

*Jesus.*

Noah glanced around. No one was paying him any attention. Jaryd had disappeared, and only Forest and two others were still there; Forest was twirling a footy in his hand while he spoke to them. Super-secret squirrel captain stuff, probably.

**Noah:** No, don't send anything.

He followed up quickly with, "Where are you?" so that Bryce was aware it wasn't a rejection. Hell fucking yes, he wanted to see it, but the first time he saw Bryce's dick wasn't going to be through a camera. It was going to be close enough that he could get his hands and mouth on it.

**Bryce:** At home. Did you think I was jerking it at training?

It was followed by a thinking emoji, as though he were contemplating it. Imagining Bryce with his hand on his dick,

surrounded by people in the shower room, trying to be quiet so that no one would notice, was way hotter than it had any right to be.

**Noah:** Send me your address. And take your hand off your dick. Don't touch it until I get there.

**Bryce:** Bossy.

Noah didn't reply.

He got another message just as he was throwing his bag into the boot of his car. It was a frontal shot of Bryce, with a loose-fitting North Sydney T-shirt and shorts hiding the goods. Even the choice of attire couldn't take away the allure of it. Or the bulge.

An address followed the picture. It was an apartment building not that far from Coop's. Figured. Noah knew he was close by but had never cared enough to know specifics.

Right now, it was the only thing he cared about. That, and how fast he could get there without breaking any road rules.

THE SECOND THAT BRYCE opened the door, Noah pushed him inside, slamming their lips together. He palmed Bryce's rock-hard dick, and Bryce gasped into his mouth as he canted his hips.

"Door," Bryce gasped. "Close the—door."

Noah reached blindly behind himself until his fingers caught on the edge of the wood, and he swung it shut. He barely

registered the click of it before he was crowding Bryce against the wall, covering his smaller body. He smoothed his hand around Bryce's hip and wedged it between the wall and his ass, squeezing the firm roundness.

“You took your shirt off without me.”

“Wanted to”—Bryce's breath hitched when Noah slid his tongue across his Adam's apple and down his throat to the hollow of it—“make it easier for you.”

“You think I have trouble taking someone's clothes off?” Noah circled Bryce's freckles with the tips of his fingers as he moved down his chest, tracing around the edges of them like drawing the waves of the ocean. He wanted to follow along with his tongue.

“Didn't want to take any chances.”

Noah cupped Bryce's face. Freckles dotted his nose, the smooth expanse of his cheeks, up around his forehead, and down to his chin, small circles covering up his pale skin like sprinkles on a cake. “If I do anything that you don't like, if you're uncomfortable at any point—”

“I'll say something. I get it. You don't want to push me—yada, yada. Shut up and kiss me, please.”

Just for that smartass response, Noah teased him, hovering above his lips without giving him what he wanted.

Bryce tried to follow, but Noah placed a hand across the curve of his collarbone and pushed, keeping him against the wall and out of reach.

Bryce's frustrated groan was a beautiful sound.

Noah lifted Bryce's leg, coaxing him to rest it hooked around the curve of Noah's hip, opening him up so that he could slot them together better. The first slide of their cocks had them both groaning.

It wasn't enough and too much at the same time. It was intoxicating, knowing that he was the first man to ever lay his hands on Bryce.

Bryce clutched at him, mouth open and panting. "Okay, that's..." He trailed off with an obscene moan as Noah ground into him.

Bryce was hard against him, and *fuck*, it felt good. It made Noah throb with need, ache to get his hands everywhere and make Bryce feel good.

Bryce made a startled noise as Noah gripped his other thigh and hiked him up into his arms. His legs were like a vice around Noah's waist, ankles locking together against his ass.

Bryce stared down at him, lips parted, pupils dilated. His hands slid across Noah's back, and he groaned low in his throat, chest vibrating. "You're all sweaty."

"Haven't showered yet." He'd been too interested in getting there as soon as humanly possible. An excellent idea, though. Noah secured his arm under Bryce's ass before he leaned in and tasted the smooth expanse of skin across his shoulder. "Where's your bathroom?"

“I have no idea,” Bryce breathed out. He twined his arms around Noah’s neck and gripped the back of his head with both hands, dragging him back up for a kiss.

Noah made sure he had a solid hold on Bryce’s considerable frame and then stepped away from the wall, taking him with him. It wasn’t unmanageable, and the feel of Bryce in his arms like this was worth every second of the strain in his biceps.

Bryce’s throat bobbed as he swallowed, eyes glazed. “I’ve never had someone carry me before,” he said in a strangled voice.

“No?” That didn’t surprise Noah. Bryce was a big guy, and most women couldn’t lift someone his size. Hell, most men wouldn’t be able to. Luckily, Noah had spent his entire adulthood throwing around guys his size and bigger. It helped that he was also taller and outweighed Bryce in muscle.

“Not like this. Not—not sexually.”

“I’m getting so many of your firsts,” Noah teased.

Bryce hummed and tugged Noah back in for a kiss. Noah was more than happy to oblige.

Through sheer dumb luck, the first door Noah pushed through was the bathroom. He blindly reached for the light switch. His brain cells were more interested in the way that Bryce’s tongue was playing with his. It was hard to concentrate on anything else.

Noah settled Bryce on the sink and slanted his lips to deepen the kiss. Bryce moaned, pulling him closer and trapping him

between his legs.

“Your mouth drives me crazy,” Noah whispered huskily. “And these freckles.” He kissed Bryce’s nose, his cheeks, his chin. They were fucking everywhere. He wanted to spend hours memorising every single one, creating a map in his mind of where they all were. Like a star map, but tastier. A treat map.

Noah splayed his hand across Bryce’s chest and leaned him back, arching him and stretching him out for Noah’s pleasure. He licked the freckles all the way across his collarbone, a delicious pattern on smooth skin. He moved down Bryce’s chest, treated his nipples like his own personal large freckles, lathing them generously with his tongue.

Bryce had a body made for worshipping. Sharp edges, and flexing muscles, strength and agility, all wrapped up in one sexy-as-sin package.

Noah’s fingers moved after his mouth, across the hard lines of Bryce’s muscles and through the light hair trailing from his belly button down to his prize.

“Time to answer the age-old question,” Noah said. He traced the edge of Bryce’s waistband, biting his lip as Bryce’s skin quivered under his touch.

“The meaning of life is forty-two,” Bryce quipped. The last word ended on a strangled gasp as Noah palmed Bryce’s dick through his shorts.

“I’d rather know: does the carpet match the drapes?” Noah said. He kissed the V of Bryce’s hip, nipping gently.

“You never asked Coop?” Bryce asked with an impish grin.

“I like a little mystery,” Noah said. “And unwrapping presents is so much better when I don’t know what’s inside.”

“I should be offended you don’t think my hair is natural.”

Noah grinned and then slid Bryce’s shorts down, trapping them around Bryce’s hips. “Well, look at that,” he said thickly. It wasn’t as bright a red as the curls on Bryce’s head, but the red was still prominent and fucking stunning. As was the hard cock nestled among the curls, with a gleaming pearl of pre-cum at the tip just asking to be tasted. He was the perfect girth to fit in Noah’s palm and a nice length for his mouth. He wrapped his hand around it and licked the tip, a salty tang bursting on his tongue.

Fucking delicious.

Noah took his time wrapping his lips around the head and moving down, the heavy weight against his tongue making his own cock twitch. He bent until the red curls tickled his nose, and the strong musky scent of Bryce was all around him.

“Oh *fuck*,” Bryce moaned.

Noah bobbed slowly a few times before pulling off completely. He flicked his tongue over the mushroomed head and then pushed his tongue into the slit, moving it in circular motions.



Bryce gasped, bracing his hands on the edge of the sink, knuckles going white against the porcelain.

“You like that?” Noah asked on a husky whisper. He licked the vein on the underside, lapping up the musky taste.

Bryce moaned. A hand rested on the back of Noah’s head, fingers tangling in his hair.

Noah swallowed him down until it hit the back of his throat.

Noises spilled out of Bryce’s mouth in a melody of pure sex.

Noah pulled off and took a breath before repeating the movements, leisurely sliding on and off Bryce’s hard length. He used his hands in tandem with his mouth, one rubbing the shaft as he bobbed, and the other cradling Bryce’s balls and rolling them in his palm.

He sped up his hand, jerking faster as he quickened his pace. Bryce got louder as Noah took him closer to completion. Fuck, he was beautiful. Noah couldn’t help his sense of pride, knowing he was the one reducing the redhead to this.

Noah took Bryce right to the edge with his teeth, tongue, and hands and then swallowed every drop as Bryce yelled Noah’s name and emptied into his mouth. The loud cry echoed in the small, tiled room.

Noah continued to suck even when there was nothing left, licking the length of Bryce and making sure he thoroughly cleaned every inch, not missing a single drop.

Bryce quivered. The hand on the back of Noah’s head slid down to skim around the curve of Noah’s ear and then to cup

his cheek, lifting his head. He smoothed his thumb across Noah's bottom lip, and Noah flicked his tongue out to taste the tip of it.

"I need to shower," Noah murmured, moving back up Bryce's body. The sweat from his training session was drying on him, and he was eager to get Bryce under the water's spray, watch it cover him, droplets moving around his freckles. "Are you joining me?"

Bryce hesitated. "I'm sorry, I don't..." He trailed off, glancing between the shower and Noah, concerned. "I don't know if I can *do* anything with you. Touch, I mean. I *love* looking, and I want to... you know, but I—"

"Hey," Noah said gently, tipping Bryce's chin up. "If you want me to shower by myself, I can. If you want to get in with me and just look, that's okay too. More than okay."

"Kissing is easy, right? If I close my eyes, you could be any gender. We don't have different tongues. A mouth is a mouth is a mouth."

Noah bit back a smile. "There's a compliment in there somewhere, I'm sure."

"I'm just saying that kissing you is great, and you basically sucked my brains out of my dick, and I... will be dreaming about that forever. But I don't know that it's the deciding factor on whether I like guys? And I'm scared," he admitted. "I want to try. I just don't know *what* I want to try."

Noah softened and brushed his knuckles across Bryce's cheeks. "You don't need to force it. There are no rules here. Let me make you feel good, and if you want to reciprocate, I won't say no. If you need to build up to touching my dick or work out that you like looking, but you don't want to touch—window shopping is a pastime everyone can enjoy—that's okay too."

"You're being too understanding, and I'm sure there's a catch here somewhere."

Noah straightened and ran a hand through his short, sweaty hair. "There's no catch. I get being hesitant, Bryce." He shifted on his feet. "My dad doesn't know that I'm gay," he confessed.

Bryce was showing vulnerability, and Noah wanted to do the same. Here, with just the two of them, they were in another world. One where footy didn't exist, and all their years of being on opposite sides dropped away, and all that was left was two men who wanted to learn everything about each other.

"I'm not ashamed," Noah said, "and I don't *hide* it; we just don't ever talk about it. Probably some part of him knows or has seen things that make him question it. But it's one of those subjects we've never really touched on. I don't think that he'd *not* be okay with it, but sometimes it's easier to pretend that everything is okay instead of facing what the reality *could* look like." He ran his fingers gently up Bryce's spent length. "You don't have to be anything other than what you want to be. And that's allowed to take as long as you need it to. In the meantime..." He splayed his hand across Bryce's stomach and

slid it up and around his side, curling his fingers against Bryce's strong back. "I'm here to be of service."

Bryce pressed into his touch, biting his lip. "You offer this service to all your friends?"

"Only the redheads."

"Knew you and Sammy were close."

Noah kissed Bryce's stomach. "I think you're hot; don't let it go to your head."

"So, this is just physical?"

Noah grinned as he circled Bryce's nipple with his tongue. "I'm sorry, did you want to *date* me, Bryce?" he teased.

"Fuck no."

Noah rolled Bryce's nipple between his teeth, then soothed it with his tongue and then did it again before moving across to the other side of Bryce's chest until Bryce was squirming underneath him, more small noises spilling from his mouth.

"You need to get naked," Bryce blurted out.

Noah pulled back, lips quirking. "Not going to buy me dinner first?"

"You can't shower with your clothes on," Bryce countered reasonably.

"I *can*; it's just not advisable." And made the clothes a lot harder to get out of after. "Can't discount how hot a white shirt looks wet."

Heat flared in Bryce's eyes as he traced Noah's form. Noah had been with people who admired what he looked like, but somehow having someone like Bryce Monaghan look at him like he was a snack that he wanted to gorge on was a new level. One that made him feel attractive and wanted. Being with Bryce like this was an ego boost like Noah had never experienced before. "Yours isn't white."

"Maybe next time."

Noah took his time removing his clothes, letting Bryce look his fill.

Bryce visibly swallowed.

"Still how you remembered?" Noah teased.

"Yeah." The breathless whisper sent a shiver across Noah's skin. Bryce was utterly debauched where he sat on the sink, and it floored Noah, knowing that he was putting himself in Noah's hands, trusting that Noah wouldn't steer him wrong.

"Can I—?" Bryce slipped off the sink and gestured at Noah.

Noah spread his arms wide. "Jungle gym, Bryce."

Bryce licked his lower lip. "Right."

The first touch of his fingers against Noah's chest was electric and punched the air from his lungs. Bryce curled the fingers through the light dusting of hair on Noah's chest and then circled his nipples. He flicked a thumb over them, and Noah's gut clenched. Staying still was more difficult than he'd anticipated. All he wanted to do was drag Bryce closer.

Bryce followed the hair down to Noah's stomach. He flattened it, feeling across and— “Are you rubbing my stomach?” Noah asked, a laugh escaping him.

Bryce smirked. “What of it, Walker? I get to do whatever I want with *my* jungle gym.”

Noah's laugh faltered as Bryce stepped closer, chests almost touching, lips tipped up to hover under Noah's chin.

“Dashboard abs have nothing on what you've got, Noah. I see bodies like that every day, and none of them have ever made me question who I am. *You* did. Looking at you makes me question everything even if I'm not ready to fully explore what that means.”

What could Noah do after that but kiss him?

Noah walked Bryce backwards towards the shower and fumbled with the taps, unable—or more accurately, *unwilling*—to pull away from Bryce. He hoped he got it right as they moved under the spray.

It took less than a second to realise he'd severely miscalculated.

Bryce cried out and laughed half manically as the freezing-cold water hit them. He pulled away, eyes alight with mirth. “Fucking *hell*, Walker, that's cold! Are you trying to see how much my dick shrinks?”

Noah's laugh was mostly the air leaving his lungs as the cold invaded. Their skin clung to each other as Noah reached around him to fiddle with the taps and fix the temperature

before they turned into an ice Popsicle. “Size doesn’t matter to me,” he replied, smirking.

“Oh, good,” Bryce said, still laughing.

It didn’t take long for the hot water to win the battle, and finally they were standing under a far more pleasing heat.

“Think I could get away with not getting in the ice bath after that?” Bryce asked.

Noah kissed his shoulder, mouthing at his freckles. “Worth a try.”

“We can both ask and compare notes later on about how it worked for us.”

“I love a good review session,” Noah murmured, focus already shifting to the way Bryce felt in his arms. Also because *fuck* review sessions. Unlike most of the guys, who were normal, Noah spent hours replaying their game the day of. He was masochistic like that, and liked to have notes so everyone else could be as miserable as he was.

This was a much nicer use of his time.

He gathered the soap, and with thorough strokes, made sure every single inch of Bryce was clean. He ended up on his knees, and the sight of Bryce hardening again between his curls was enough for Noah to ignore the hard tiling under him.

He kneaded Bryce’s ass. “Turn around for me.”

Bryce’s curse was like a prayer, and then his round ass was right in Noah’s face. Noah would have been lying if he said he

hadn't admired it a time or two in the North Sydney shorts during a game. The fabric was always tight and firm, and Bryce was always getting bent over during matches because he dove headfirst into any fray that was in his vicinity, with zero fear.

Having it bare and within licking distance was a million times more satisfying than a cursory glance. Just like the rest of the redhead, his ass was covered in freckles. There was one larger one, dark and tempting. Noah couldn't resist the allure and tasted it, sliding his tongue across and around it.

Bryce groaned loudly. His ass clenched and revealed a dimple.

*Christ.* Had they ever made anyone as perfect as this man? Noah hadn't met them.

He bit and licked over Bryce's ass, paying special attention to the freckles that called to him like a perfect shot at goal. His eyes closed to avoid the spray of the water, drops clinging to his lashes.

The litany of curses and sounds coming from Bryce covered them both, and Noah was getting close to blowing his load from simply listening to it.

He blinked the water from his eyes and spread Bryce's cheeks. There were even freckles on the inner curves. He rubbed his thumb over the puckered entrance. His groin pulsed as the muscles quivered beneath his touch.



Noah leaned forward and flattened his tongue, sliding it from the top to the bottom.

“Oh, *fuck*,” Bryce moaned. “That’s—yeah—do that again.”

Noah had been planning to do just that, but after that beautiful begging, there was no way that he would have been able to say no regardless.

Bryce got louder and louder as Noah feasted, licking and sucking around his hole. He loosened the muscles with his tongue before slipping it inside.

The glass rattled as Bryce’s knees buckled, and he lost the battle with gravity, leaning heavily on the shower wall to brace himself.

Noah snuck the tip of his finger inside Bryce’s entrance, moving in and out with shallow movements.

“Please,” Bryce whimpered, the words spilling out like music. “I need—I need—” He sounded so unsure, like he was standing on the edge of a cliff, looking over and afraid to jump.

Noah slid in to the third knuckle, staying still to give Bryce time to adjust to the foreign feeling. He palmed Bryce’s thigh, moving back and forth across the hard muscles in soothing motions. He mouthed Bryce’s ass cheek, tongue slipping out to trace more freckles. Dot to dot had never been so fun.

Bryce’s heavy panting was linked directly to every nerve in Noah’s body, feeding from them and begging for more.

“Good?”

“I think—yes?” He moaned low as Noah pulled out and slid back in, fucking him slowly with one digit. “Yeah. Yes. Good. Great. Fucking *spectacular*.”

Noah grinned. It widened at the strangled gasp that Bryce let out when he wrapped his fingers around Bryce’s cock.

Noah pumped his length and bit into the curve of his cheek. “I think you have another one in you,” he rasped. “I’m going to lick you clean, and you’re going to come for me again, alright?”

Bryce whimpered, his legs trembling and knees pressing more firmly against the glass.

Noah grinned and buried his face between Bryce’s cheeks, hungrily eating him out and getting drunk on the taste of him and the noises he was dragging out of Bryce. He massaged the muscles that were sucking his finger in, speeding up and pressing deeper. He hooked his finger, pressing on—there. Bryce yelled loudly what *could* have been Noah’s name but also could have been a whole other language. His cock pulsed in Noah’s grip as he came, coating the glass.

“Holy *fuck*,” Bryce said with heavy breaths. “I think—broken—good. Shit.”

Losing grasp of basic sentence formation could only be a good thing in this situation.

Noah stood—wincing as his knees cracked, his limbs protesting him having been stationary on them so long—and pressed his chest to Bryce’s back. He was smaller than Noah

had thought he was. On the field, Bryce was bigger than life, moving everywhere and always getting in the way. It was easy to forget that he wasn't a big guy, and Noah's body covered him.

He slid his cock between Bryce's cheeks, the head catching on his rim on every upward slide. Bryce dropped his head back on Noah's collarbone, mouth open in a silent gasp. Noah kissed his cheek as he continued to rotate his hips.

"I want to be inside your ass," he whispered, mouth open against Bryce's skin. "Feel you squeeze me tight when I make you come, fill you up so I'm all you can think about."

"You're—dirty talker," Bryce mumbled, eyes sliding closed. "Had no idea. I love it."

Noah nipped Bryce's jawline. "You like hearing me talk about how much you turn me on?" He teased Bryce's entrance with his dick, adding the tiniest amount of pressure to the loosened muscles. He wasn't planning to fuck Bryce just yet, but he couldn't resist skirting the line and edging them both. "How hard you make me? How unbelievably fucking sexy I think you are?"

"Yes. To—to all of that," Bryce gasped out. "Are you going to come on me?"

"You want that? Want me to paint you with my cum? My own personal canvas."

"Best kind of paint," Bryce mumbled. "Do it before I lose my mind."

Noah bit down on the curve of Bryce's neck, causing another cry to fall from those gorgeous red lips. He covered one of Bryce's hands with his own, the glass cold against his fingers.

He fucked harder between Bryce's cheeks, the friction dragging him closer to his release. The force of it rattled the glass, Bryce's loud cries accompanying it like Noah's personal symphony.

All of it brought his orgasm rushing through him, and he bellowed as he came, emptying himself over the small of Bryce's back and the curve of his ass. He sucked hard on the skin between his teeth, uncaring that it was going to leave a mark. *Good.* Let everyone see it and know they weren't the ones who had brought Bryce to pleasure like this.

Noah had.

The sounds and the orgasms that Bryce had given him tonight belonged to *him*.

Bryce's fingers tangled with Noah's as they both came down from their highs. Noah pressed his forehead to Bryce's shoulder, not wanting to move away from the heat of Bryce's body just yet.

"I don't know how clean we got," Bryce said, snickering.

Noah huffed out a laugh.



BRYCE PUSHED INTO COOP'S apartment the second that Coop opened the door. "I have a problem." He stopped at the nearby island bench and whirled around to face his mate.

"Did you forget your key? Why did I have to get up to let you in?" Coop grumbled. "I'm missing *Pawn Stars*."

Bryce's eyes widened. "You're watching *porn*? Why did you get up and answer the door?" Noises were still coming from the TV, and while Bryce wouldn't have called them sex noises, what did he know? Maybe Coop was into weird shit. "You could have turned it off first!" He wasn't going to look down. What if there was a wet spot? Nope. No. He drew the line at seeing that.

"What?" Coop rolled his eyes. "I'm not watching porn. It's '*Pawn*' *Stars*. The TV show? P-a-w-n," he spelled out. "You've watched it with me before; why are you being so dense?"

It finally registered what Coop was talking about, and Bryce decided he did not care at all. Definitely not enough to start an argument over it. "I want to have sex," Bryce blurted out.

Coop blinked. "No... thank you?" he said slowly. "I said I wasn't watching porn, Bry. And I thought you and Noah were bumping uglies. Why do I have to be a sacrifice?"

"Not with *you*, you fucking idiot. I want to have sex with Noah."

"You could have been a bit clearer with your wording." Coop crossed his arms over his chest and leaned back against

the wall. “He’s not here,” he said. “Couldn’t you have organised your hookup at one of your places?” He paused. “Wait. Have you not *had* sex yet? What have you been doing? Playing chess? I wouldn’t; Noah cheats.”

“How do you cheat at—Coop, shut the fuck up. We haven’t like... not like penetration,” Bryce stuttered. “Just... other stuff. I’m not outlining what we’ve done, it’s private!”

“And telling me you’re about to go fuck isn’t?” Coop asked dryly. “News flash: that is definitely in the TMI category. I didn’t help you two sort your shit out so that I could *hear* about it.”

“I need help.”

“You are way too old for the birds-and-the-bees conversation,” Coop said. “You have *three* parents. One of them didn’t sit you down and talk to you about it? I can’t help you with that. Do you need a condom? That, I can hook you up with.”

“I don’t know what to do.” He was two seconds away from either hyperventilating or smacking his best friend in the face. He was good at multitasking. He could do both.

Coop pushed off the wall and grabbed Bryce’s shoulders. “Okay, calm down. You are not a virgin. You’ve had sex before.”

“With a chick! The mechanics are a little different!” Bryce could hear his voice was borderline hysterical, and he didn’t know how to bring it back down to a normal range.

He wanted it. Because he *ached* for it every time Noah was near him. He wanted to be that close to him, with a piece of Noah inside him that wasn't a finger or a tongue. He wanted to know what it was like to have Noah fuck him and have all that raw strength wrecking him.

In his fantasies, it was hot shit. In reality... it was more panic inducing than anything.

“Not that different, mate.”

“What if I'm not good at it? What if it's horrible? What if Noah hates it and tells me I'm the lousiest lay he's ever had?”

“You've never done anal?” Coop questioned.

“No!” Bryce sputtered. He hadn't slept with *that* many people, and while it had been great, and he'd never look back and say, “Hey, that was boring as shit,” it hadn't been adventurous. No anal, either side of the fence.

“There are so many things to unpack here,” Coop muttered. He led Bryce to the couch and forcefully sat him down and then flicked off the TV. He crossed his arms and looked down at Bryce. “Noah, contrary to popular belief and *yours*, is not an actual asshole... most of the time. He would never say any of those things to you.”

“Doesn't mean he won't be thinking it.”

“I don't think that's true either. If he thought it, he would say it. When has Noah ever held his tongue when he had something to say?”

Bryce needed a translator for this conversation. “Now I’m confused. Is he an asshole or not?”

Coop pinched the bridge of his nose. “Bryce, if he thought that you were a lousy lay, you wouldn’t still be in his bed. He’s pretty discerning about bed partners and doesn’t date.”

“We’re not dating.”

“You’re focusing on the wrong things here. Deep breath and listen to what I’m telling you. You are still in Noah’s bed because he likes having you there. Noah has no issues finding people that want to sleep with him. He’s hot, and he plays a sport professionally. Ergo, he’s already decided you are not, in fact, a lousy lay. Let’s move on from that stupid. The next thing: Noah is not a virgin.”

“I’m aware,” Bryce said, frowning. “What does that have to do with anything?”

“He’s not going to just let you flounder. Let him lead; he kind of knows what he’s doing.”

“How do *you* know that?” Bryce asked suspiciously.

Coop groaned dramatically and dropped his head backwards, like he was praying for strength to the ceiling. Bryce could relate. He would also like for some unknown deity to grant him strength. And maybe a bit of courage too. Couldn’t hurt to ask.

Coop grabbed out his wallet and pulled something from it, slamming it against Bryce’s chest. Bryce blanched at the condom wrapper and let it fall to his lap instead of taking it.



“Go, have fun, try not to talk too much. Shoo.”

“You are the worst friend in existence.”

“I’m going to spend the rest of my night desperately trying not to think about the fact that my two best friends are fucking,” Coop said darkly. “The only thing you should be doing right now is saying, ‘Thank you, Coop, for being such a great wingman and getting me laid.’ Now get out.”

“Thank you, Coop, for being such a great wingman and getting me laid,” Bryce said cheekily. He threw the condom at Coop. “Keep it. You might need it.”

“For what?” Coop muttered. “My right hand?”

“Safe sex, always,” Bryce sang joyfully as he waltzed out the door.

BRYCE’S JOYOUS MOOD ONLY lasted halfway to Noah’s house, and the panic was quick to seep back in. He hadn’t been lying. What if he *did* suck? And not in the “yes, wrap your lips around my dick and take me to heaven” kind of way.

He pulled into Noah’s driveway on autopilot, getting out and walking up to the front door without thought. He knocked before he could talk himself out of it. Everything was fine. If Noah were going to reject him, he would have done it already, right? Even Coop had said that, and he *knew* Noah.

The second that Noah opened the door with an open, welcoming smile, Bryce blurted out, “I think we should have sex.”

Noah’s nostrils flared, and he gently tugged Bryce inside before shutting the door and then pushing him against it. He laid a hand flat against the wall beside Bryce’s head and hovered over him.

“You *think* we should?” Noah asked, raising an eyebrow. “What’s the rush? Are you close to getting bingo?”

“Har har, very funny. Are you taking that show on the road?” Bryce curled his fingers in Noah’s shirt. “I *want* to have sex,” he amended. “Like, yesterday.” If time travelling were a thing, maybe he could, then it would be done by now, right? He could tick off the first-time jitters, and then they could have loads more sex without the panic about the unknown.

“Have you been drinking?” Noah asked.

“What? No! I drove here.”

“Just checking.”

“Sometimes I have no idea why I chose *you* to want to have sex with,” Bryce said. Harsher than he’d meant to. The panic made everything sharper, scarier, *louder*. He needed this to go well. Needed to prove to Noah that he wasn’t wasting his time, and that Bryce was good for it.

Maybe he hadn’t touched Noah’s dick, but was that a requirement? The colossal thing would be going in his ass, not his hands. Or his mouth.

“But I’m sure glad you did,” Noah said, closing the distance between their mouths.

Bryce forgot about everything except the taste of Noah sliding across his tongue, the smell of him sinking into his pores, and the feel of him wrapped around Bryce’s frame.

It didn’t take long until Noah had him splayed out on the bed, both of them naked, skin sliding against each other as he rocked their hips together. He moved down Bryce’s body, worshipping every inch of him with teeth and tongue.

Noah drove him crazy with his tongue, fucking him with it as Bryce fisted the sheets, squirming as sensations exploded across him like a supernova. How he’d gone so many years never knowing this pleasure was completely beyond him. Noah’s tongue was magic.

The first slide of a finger inside him was just as he remembered it from their shower session. A strange intrusion of a foreign object that took mere seconds to morph into something that not only belonged but something Bryce would beg to stay there. That was even before Noah started rubbing against his prostate, and all of his nerve endings fired and went into overdrive. He was aching and leaking and so fucking turned on he was melting from the inside.

A second and then a third finger entered him. It was more uncomfortable and took a little longer for him to get used to. The generous amount of lube that Noah was using helped, as did the way that he talked Bryce through it, telling him all the filthy things that he wanted to do to him.

Noah's voice had been made for dirty talk. Deep and gravelly, reaching inside Bryce's chest and squeezing tight until all that was left was pleasure and bliss.

The problems started when Noah covered his body again, the head of his cock nudging against Bryce's hole.

He couldn't help it when he tensed as it pushed in slowly, breaching muscle. He knew, just from having spent time looking at it, that Noah had a big dick. He'd learned pretty quickly that he fucking *loved* looking at Noah's naked body. There was something about it that spoke to everything in Bryce.

This felt bigger than that. Was Noah trying to shove his whole *fist* up there? Bryce felt like he was being split in two, pain moving up his spine and a dull ache taking root in his ass.

Bryce bit his lip to stop from crying out, his fingers digging into Noah's shoulder as he burrowed his head against Noah's chest, curling in on himself. This had to be temporary, right? If it hurt this much, then *no one* would do it. He just had to get through this part, and then it would be fine. Then Noah would make them feel good, make this worthwhile. Noah always knew how to make him feel good.

"Relax," Noah said softly in his ear. "Bear down on me and stop tensing so much."

"I'm trying," Bryce gritted out. Relax. *Just relax*. He could relax. Relaxing was easy. He did it every day, camped out in front of the TV. When he went to sleep. Hell, he'd learned how to still his mind and let all the tension seep out as he froze in

ice-cold water every week after a game. This couldn't be worse than that. This was going to lead to something fucking incredible, he knew.

Noah pushed in a little more. The whimper that came out of Bryce was involuntary and filled with the pain he was trying so hard to hide.

“Bry?”

“Just keep going,” Bryce said in a strained voice. Maybe it wasn't going to get better. It certainly didn't feel like it was. But he would endure it. He wanted this to be good for Noah. He wanted to... He didn't know what he wanted. But Noah didn't deserve to be dragged along for Bryce's is-he-isn't-he marathon.

He protested with a loud, “No!” as Noah pulled out. He tried to drag Noah back. “Noah, it's fine. It'll pass, right? I can do this. I *want* to do this.”

“Those are words that every guy wants to hear during sex,” Noah said. “If this is hurting you too much, I need you to tell me, Bryce. I have to trust that you'll tell me.”

It was on the tip of Bryce's tongue to lie. To say it was fine and to keep going. He deflated. It had hurt a lot, his erection was gone, and he didn't know that he wanted to continue. He *did*, but for Noah and not for himself, and Noah was right that it wasn't fair to him to be untruthful about that. “I'm sorry,” he said brokenly.

“For what?” Noah asked, sounding genuinely confused. He rested his forearm beside Bryce’s head and settled his free hand across Bryce’s collarbone.

“For not... being able to handle it. It’s just like that, isn’t it?” Bryce asked. “It hurts, then it’s good.”

“Sometimes,” Noah said. “But generally speaking, it shouldn’t be. I prepped you enough that the pain should have been fleeting. You weren’t relaxing, and if you stay that tense, it’s not going to get better.” Noah brushed the hair from Bryce’s forehead. “The aim here is to make it good for both of us. You weren’t enjoying that, so I’m not going to enjoy it.”

“I...” Bryce closed his eyes and leaned his head back, burying it in the pillow. “Tell me how to fix this.”

“There’s nothing to fix, Bryce.” Noah kissed him gently, lips sliding together in a caress.

“There is!” Bryce burst out with frustration, eyes flinging open. “I need to—I need to be *better*.”

“Better than what?” Noah asked. There was amusement in his deep-brown eyes, but a gentleness as well, and a touch of confusion. A swirl of emotions that Bryce couldn’t even begin to sift through because his own were threatening to overwhelm and drown him. “Bryce, you’re doing amazing.”

“I’m doing amazing?” Bryce scoffed in disbelief. He’d completely fucked it all up. “I failed.”

“Failed at what?”

“You know.” Bryce was not saying it out loud. It was mortifying enough in his head. He half-heartedly lifted his hand and then flopped it back down on the sheet, scrunching the material in his hand. “This.”

“This,” Noah repeated. “Bryce, you have shown so much courage with all of this. You dove headfirst into all of it, even when you were unsure. You were willing to set aside everything that you thought about yourself, to walk down this path and see if it was right for you, when most people would run screaming in the other direction. Have, I’m sure. With prejudice.”

“It wasn’t like that.” Noah made it sound way more of a feat than it had been. Having a gay best friend helped, even during his worst moments. And Noah, after the first hiccup, had been nothing but kind and considerate.

“It was like that,” Noah insisted. “You had a moment where you weren’t sure, where who you thought you were maybe shifted a little to the side. Instead of ignoring it, you chose to face it even though you were scared.” Noah turned Bryce’s face, and he had no choice but to look at him and the earnestness in his eyes. “I am in awe of how you’ve challenged me at every turn, and how you faced the idea that a fundamental part of you was different than you thought it was, with your head held high.” He kissed Bryce so softly that Bryce held his breath, terrified of breaking the spell.

“This is only the tiniest fraction of what it means to be gay, and for some it’s not even part of it. Not liking anal doesn’t

make you more or less gay. Or bisexual. You still have so much more exploring to do.”

“Not ready for my gay card yet?” Bryce quipped, hoping the hysterical edge to his voice had subsided enough that it wasn’t completely totally obvious anymore.

“Not even close, Bryce,” Noah said, his lips twitching, the hints of a smile peeking through. “Didn’t you get your beginner’s pamphlet with a checklist?”

Bryce burst out laughing. “I guess Coop forgot to give it to me.”

Noah kissed the corner of his mouth. “C’mon. Time to get up.”

“Why?” Bryce asked curiously. Noah helped him sit up and slide to the edge of the bed. He winced as an unpleasant twinge ran from his ass all the way to the top of his spine. That was a kind of ache he wasn’t used to, and he knew that some of it was the mental pain from the recent memory of how he’d gotten it. Mind over body was something that as an athlete Bryce was intimately familiar with.

Noah took his hand and led him out of the bedroom and down the hall to where the main bathroom was.

“Where’s Rufus?” he asked. He hadn’t seen him at all since he’d gotten there. He’d been preoccupied, but the big Old English Sheepdog was hard to miss.

“With Dad. He has sleepovers there.”

“That’s adorable.”



Noah snorted. He pushed open the bathroom door, kissed Bryce, and then gently coaxed him inside.

“Your house is so fancy,” Bryce mumbled as they stepped inside. Low-key fancy, not in-his-face gaudy. A quiet, comfortable *home*, not a mausoleum like so many people with too much money had. There was colour, and vibrancy, and warmth.

Bryce loved Noah’s bathroom. The large, tinted window that was most of the outside wall let in natural light during the day and beautiful moonlight during the night. The fact that it showed the magical garden in the backyard and not the metropolis just on the other side was a bonus. The standing rectangle spa bath was big enough to fit at least three Noahs and had been centred so it was directly beside the window as its own feature piece. It was tranquil, and Bryce had wanted to get in it the moment he’d seen it. He’d never found the right “in” to be able to ask and not sound weird.

“Something wrong with yours?” Noah asked. He kissed Bryce while he walked him backwards, teasing his lips with only enough pressure to have Bryce craving more. Bryce forgot what they were talking about. Apples?

“Yes,” Bryce answered. Hopefully it was the right answer.

Noah nipped Bryce’s jaw gently and reached behind him. Bryce twisted his head to see Noah pressing buttons on the shower thermostat. Water rushed out from the showerhead, already warm and at the perfect temperature.

A horrible thought occurred to Bryce. “Is this where you make me shower and kick me out?” he asked, his heart sinking into the floor.

Noah kissed down Bryce’s shoulder as he took Bryce under the spray. “Why would I do that?”

“I ruined our night.” Did he really have to spell that part out? He’d come here wanting one thing and hadn’t been able to deliver.

Noah paused with his lips pressed to Bryce’s skin. “Is that what you think? That since you couldn’t bend over and take it, that I’m just going to kick you out?” He pulled back, frowning. “I know that you’ve never particularly liked me, but is that what you really think of me?”

A twinge of guilt sat uncomfortably on Bryce’s chest. “I didn’t mean—”

Noah silenced him with a kiss. He coaxed Bryce’s mouth open and pulled out a long-drawn-out moan, sending sparks of pleasure rushing through Bryce.

“I don’t bottom,” Noah said, lifting his head. “I tried it once, and I hated it. Haven’t bottomed since. I’ve dated people who didn’t either, and all that meant was that we adjusted how we showed affection. Anal isn’t the be-all and end-all of being gay. I don’t know why you think it is, or who told you that.” He brushed Bryce’s wet curls off his forehead. “If you never want to try it again, that’s okay. If you want to try it again, we’ll try again. It’s not going to make or break whatever it is you’re trying to do or discover about yourself, Bryce.”

“And what am I trying to do?” Bryce wasn’t even sure anymore. He’d started this because he’d wanted to know, and considering how hard Noah made him, and the things he made him feel, he thought that would be enough to work it out. What was he searching for now?

“That’s a question only you can answer.”

Noah took hold of the soap and began washing Bryce with soft strokes, lathering it into Bryce’s skin. Bryce tipped his head back, eyes closing as Noah cleaned him. He was thorough and even washed between Bryce’s cheeks, which was both a little embarrassing and somehow the most intimate thing they’d done so far. Noah’s hands were big and gentle and made Bryce feel like he was something precious to be taken care of. No one had made him feel like that before.

Even when Bryce was sure that he was totally clean, he let Noah continue. He’d let Noah keep going forever if he could. Live in the shower and let Noah pamper him all day long. Or at least until their skin started to wrinkle. That wasn’t a good look on anyone.

“Stay here under the warmth,” Noah murmured against his ear.

Bryce’s eyes snapped open, and he squinted as Noah left him and went to the bath, turning it on. “What are you doing?” he asked.

Noah squirted a considerable amount of bubble bath into it. Bryce assumed it was bubble bath. There was a giant rubber

duck on the packaging of the container and bubbles rising from it. If it wasn't bubble bath, it was terrible marketing.

"I've never understood how people use a bath to get clean," Noah said instead of answering. "You're just sitting in your own filth? Seems counterproductive."

That was a fair point that Bryce hadn't considered before. He didn't have a bath in his house, and the only time he went into water was to die of hypothermia in the ice baths after a game, and swimming, so it wasn't something he'd spent a lot of time dwelling on. He wasn't sure he'd had a *bath* bath since he was a kid.

"So, we're getting clean and then we're getting comfortable."

"Are we having a bath together?" Bryce asked, a grin forming. That sounded very sweet and nothing like the man standing in front of him.

"Romantic, isn't it? Don't say I never do anything for you."

"I don't know," Bryce mused. He rested his forearm on the shower glass and leaned out the doorway, admiring Noah's silhouette. "Where are the rose petals? The candles?"

"The rose petals I can't do, sorry. You want me to get you candles?" Noah asked, the corner of his mouth tilting.

"Yes." He didn't really care, but he was far enough down the rabbit hole now. And he was curious whether Noah would actually get candles or not. He owned candles?

Noah left the room, with the bath slowly running. Bryce stayed under the shower where it was warm.

Was he getting candles? Bryce grinned. What kind of candles did a man like Noah have? This was intriguing.

Noah came back with a large clear-plastic container he carried in both hands and a box of matches sitting on top. When he put it on the sink and opened it, Bryce noted that there were at least thirty candles in the large container, ranging from small to big and in various different colours.

“I hesitate to ask why you have so many candles.” But he really wanted to know.

“My mum liked candles,” Noah said, pulling a few out and setting them on the porcelain. “I don’t remember what she sounded like, or even what she looked like, without pictures, but I remember the smells. Lemon, lavender, pomegranate, and there was another one. I can’t recall what it was, and neither can Dad. So I...” Noah glanced between the candles and Bryce. “I started this hobby because I was trying to see if I could recreate it,” he finished. “I can’t. Or I couldn’t. Haven’t. Pointless to try, but I kind of liked it, so I kept doing it.”

“You... you *made* these?” Bryce asked, both eyebrows raising. *Noah Walker* made candles in his spare time?

Noah nodded, looking guarded.

Bryce turned the shower off and didn’t care that he was leaving a trail of water behind him as he went over to Noah. He brushed the tips of his fingers over Noah’s chest, and then

down to the curve of his stomach, the soft padding a delight to so many of Bryce's senses. Every time he saw Noah, he wanted to get his hands on it, and him.

"You're full of surprises," Bryce said, peering into the box to get a better look.

"I didn't make these ones," Noah said, pointing to a corner of the box that held hideous candles in warped shapes. "Those are my dad's. He's not great at it, but we do it together sometimes. He started it with me, and I think he just does it to indulge me now, but it's something we do together... sometimes." He cleared his throat. "Uh, pick a few that you like or want."

Bryce took two of the warped ones and three of the prettier ones in pinks and reds. "What about these?"

"Sure. Grab two more and then put them on the floor around the bath and light them for me?"

By the time he'd done that, Noah had stopped the bath and turned the lights off so all that was left was the flickering of the candles and the myriad different scents wafting from them. They were strong, and Bryce was impressed. He had no idea what even went into making candles. Was it hard? He bet it was fiddly. Trust someone with giant hands to pick a fiddly hobby.

"How many times have you done this to impress someone?" Bryce asked teasingly as he stepped into the bath and sank into the warm water. It was a sizzling heat, and Bryce moaned as it warmed him all the way to his toes. The bubbles fizzled as

they settled around him. It felt like a cleanse of the mistakes he'd made that night.

“Take a bath with them, you mean?” Noah asked. When Bryce nodded, he said, “You’re the first. I’m not really into sharing my bath time. And definitely not with my own candles. Coop doesn’t even know I make them.”

Bryce’s heart skipped a beat. “Are you telling me I’m special, Walker? That’s so sweet.” He used the humour to mask the way his cheeks heated. He would blame it on the water if Noah said anything about it. And the shower. The combination of the two. Something that would seem plausible. He’d think of something if he needed to.

“Come here,” Noah said huskily.

Bryce closed the distance between them, careful not to let any of the water or bubbles slosh over the side and wet the candles. He straddled Noah’s strong legs, breath hitching as Noah cupped his ass and pulled him forward, their cocks sliding against each other. A hard length against his own was something he wasn’t quite used to, but he knew that he liked it. The adjustment had been easier than he’d anticipated, and he had no idea if it was because he’d always been predisposed to men, or if it was Noah himself that made the whole world open for him.

“Thank you,” Noah said, swiping his thumb across Bryce’s cheek.

“For what?”

“Trusting me with this.”

“You were just the first guy I caught wanking in the shower,” Bryce joked.

Noah’s chest vibrated as he chuckled deeply. He shifted, nestling his cock between Bryce’s cheeks. Bryce bit his lip and experimentally rocked his hips. It left a pleasant tingle against his hole and made his legs weak. *This* part, he knew that he liked.

Noah held loosely to Bryce and let him take the lead. His half-lidded eyes were watching Bryce, content and satiated. Bryce didn’t know how, after the disappointment in the bedroom.

Bryce bent to kiss him. This he could do. He loved the way Noah kissed, so sure of himself, with an unwavering presence. Solid, and dependable, and exactly what Bryce had needed when his world had shifted.

He let out a small sigh and wrapped his arms around Noah, holding him close and burying his face in the crook of his neck. Calm washed over him as he closed his eyes, basking in the warm heat of the bath and the feel of Noah wrapped around him, nestled against him, with his steady beating heart pressed against Bryce’s own.



THERE WERE SO MANY things wrong with the scene that Noah walked in on that he didn’t even know where to start.



Even starting at the beginning might be nightmare inducing. No might about it. It *would* be.

“You need to get straighter,” Wren said, holding Darcy’s legs. His... upside-down legs. Wren barely reached Darcy’s thighs, even with Darcy in a handstand. He had hands wrapped around Darcy’s knees, keeping him steady. Relatively steady. “Don’t bend your knee!”

“I’m not.”

“You are.”

“Oh.” Darcy looked genuinely confused.

Forest and Coop came up behind Noah, bracketing him and leaning their shoulders against his as they watched the spectacle. Now Noah was stuck, with no way to retreat.

“If one of them gets injured, do you think I’ll get into trouble?” Forest murmured.

“Stop bending your knee, Darce,” Wren said. “Reach for the sky. Not with your hand, with your foot!” He snatched Darcy’s calf and pushed it back into the air. It was a small miracle that he was only half exasperated. Wren’s temper could be lit from an ember. It was only ever this level of cool with Darcy.

“You’re the captain,” Coop said with a snicker. “So, yeah. Guilty by association. And you’re not stopping them.”

“It’s like watching a train wreck you can’t look away from,” Noah said.

Forest nodded. “Anyone who met this sorry bunch would acquit me, I think.”

“That helps you sleep at night, doesn’t it?” Noah said.

“It’s the *only* thing that helps me sleep at night,” Forest replied.

“Bry’s sister works for a pretty good lawyer if you need one,” Coop offered.

“Thanks, I’ll keep that in mind,” Forest said dryly.

“Okay.” Wren said loudly. “I’m going to let go now; are you ready?”

“Yes,” Darcy responded. His voice was steady and confident, unlike the rest of him. Noah would have advised Wren to not let go—Darcy clearly wasn’t ready—but he was too curious to see what was going to happen. Sometimes watching the chaos unfold was too amusing to stop it.

Wren kept his hands up as he stepped back. “Not bad,” he said appraisingly. “Solid for—” He cried out when Darcy unbalanced and went toppling backwards, landing directly on top of him.

“Would you three get out of the doorway?” Jaryd said, joining them.

Noah, Forest, and Coop moved out of the way so the rest of the senior team could file in. The first half hour would be their review, and then the rest of the guys that made up their forty-four-man team would join them after.

It was Noah's least favourite part of the week if only because he rewatched games already the night of. An unhealthy habit he'd taken with him right through his career. A lot of the guys enjoyed footy for what it was instead of dissecting it like a rat in a lab the way that Noah did—though he knew he wasn't the only one that did it. Some players didn't watch any footy at all in order to maintain their love for the game. Politics, and the ins and outs of the behind the scenes in the league, could suck the fun out of anything. Noah understood why they preferred the head-in-the-sand mentality, so they could keep playing and not lose the enthusiasm that had brought them there in the first place. Noah himself had never been able to shut it out like that. He lived and breathed it because he didn't have anything else.

“Uh... what are you two doing?” Jaryd asked, blinking at Wren and Darcy, tangled on the ground.

“Team bonding,” Forest said.

“I think I broke something,” Wren said in a wheeze. “Darcy, get off.”

Darcy twisted, eyes wide. He began patting Wren down from his shoulders to his waist and then further down.

“You better be joking,” Forest said. “If we have to put you on the injury list this week for something this stupid, I will make sure that you spend the rest of the season in the VFL. And the next season. Maybe the one after that if I'm still pissed.”

“Rude.” Wren pushed Darcy’s hands off him when he stuck them under Wren’s jumper. “Ah! Cold hands! What are you doing?”

“Checking for breaks.”

“I wasn’t being literal. And if something were broken, I’d be screaming.”

“What do you think you’re doing right now?” Coop drawled.

Wren flipped him off.

“Okay, everyone up,” Noah said, elevating his voice so there was no mistaking he meant right fucking now. “I want to get out of here as fast as humanly possible.” He offered a hand to Darcy and lifted him to his feet. “Did *you* hurt yourself?” Wren could look after himself. Darcy was a lamb in a wolf den.

“Handstands are harder than they look,” Darcy said, smiling cheerfully. “Exhilarating! But hard.”

“Wren is just a terrible teacher,” Noah replied.

“Hey!”

“You should find someone who actually knows what they’re doing and isn’t already so close to the ground if you want to learn.”

Darcy’s face turned speculative, and he nodded thoughtfully. He walked away and was about to head right out the door when Forest called out to him.

“Where are you going? Review meeting, Darce.”

“Oh. Right.” He did a one-eighty and came back, sitting himself in one of the rows of plastic chairs that were set up for the players.

“Where were you last night?” Coop asked Noah as they settled. “I stopped by to see you, and you weren’t home.”

Noah shifted in his seat. “Uh. What time?”

“I don’t know. Like... eight? Why?”

“Why didn’t you just send me a text?” He’d been fingers deep in Bryce and sucking him off around that time, Noah was pretty sure if he had to guess. Bryce might not have been able to handle Noah’s size, but they’d proven since that first disastrous attempt last Thursday that he liked at least two fingers in his ass. It was a good start, and if that’s all it ever was, Noah was more than happy to keep doing that. Whatever allowed him to keep his hands and mouth on Bryce was good by him. It didn’t have to look like anything but what they wanted it to.

“I was out for a jog. Wanted to pick you and Rufus up on my way.” Coop’s grin turned sly. “Were you at a booty call?” He leaned forward, and Noah resisted the urge to cover Coop’s face with his hand and push him away. It was close. “Were you at *Bryce’s*? Are you and he still...” He wiggled his eyebrows suggestively.

“Why don’t you ask *him* these uncomfortable questions?”

“What makes you think I don’t?”

“Because then you’d already know.” And he wouldn’t have to deal with the abundance of questions thrown at *him*.

“You’re more fun to tease. He’s learning some important stuff about himself. You’re just you.”

“Thanks,” Noah said with a roll of his eyes. He got it, though. He was a lot less likely to get defensive about the teasing than Bryce. “We are. Happy now?”

“Are you treating him right?”

Noah gave in to the urge and planted his hand on Coop’s face. It covered almost the entire surface. “Do you want me to record it for you?”

Coop grabbed Noah’s hand with both of his, trying to pull it off. “It’s all fun and games till someone gets out the camera,” he mumbled in Noah’s palm.

Noah lifted his hand. “Why don’t you go ask Wren about his sex life?”

Coop’s face twisted. “Because I don’t want to know about his sex life?” He huffed out a breath. “In all seriousness, Bryce is loud, but he’s sensitive, so you can’t treat him like—”

“Like what?” Noah asked, frowning. “I’m not wining and dining him, Coop. He asked for my help with a very specific thing that I am helping him with. If he wants swoon and romance, he went to the wrong person, and I’m sure he’s well aware of that.” Noah had opened up to Bryce more than he had to almost anyone, but this was something private between the two of them and not any of Coop’s business.

“All right. Jeez. Don’t need to bite my head off.”

Noah shook his head in disbelief and kept his eyes forward as the coaching team and Forest stood up at the front. They began talking while someone set up the screen. Noah had no idea how Forest put up with their deadbeat head coach. His diplomacy was out of this world. Noah would have punched someone by now. There were reasons he’d never been captain, and why he’d opted out of the leadership team last year, and Coach Novak was all of them.

After a few minutes, Noah said quietly, “I’m looking after him.”

Coop squeezed his knee. “Thank you.”



BRYCE’S FIRST THOUGHT AS he froze on the threshold of Coop’s apartment was that he should have messaged first, and the second was that he should have waited before blurting out, “I need help,” in what he was sure was a hysterically high-pitched tone.

Because now he was staring in horror at Coop, Forest, *and his fucking brother*, who were all looking expectantly at him.

“Never mind,” he squeaked and turned around. He could come back later. After he’d texted and gotten confirmation that Coop was alone.

“Hold up,” Wren said loudly. “You can’t leave us hanging like that. Get in here.”

*Crap.* Definitely should have checked that Coop was alone first. He never had before, but if there was ever a reason to start.

“Hello,” he said awkwardly, doing a little half step as he jumped inside and closed the door behind him. “Nice weather we’re having.”

They all glanced at the window, where the rain was coming down hard.

“If you... like rain,” he finished lamely. “Which, I do. And you don’t. Someone please stop me now.”

“Why? This is funny as fuck,” Wren said. He stretched out on the couch, knee pressed against Coop’s thigh. “The hell is going on with you?”

“What’s going on with *you*?” Bryce countered automatically.

“Okay, children, recess is over,” Coop said dryly. He patted the spare seat beside him. “Come sit down.”

Bryce really didn’t want to. He wished he’d run when he had the chance. The door had been open, and he could have made a smooth exit. Now it would look too obvious.

He sat and grabbed the water bottle that was half empty on the coffee table, taking a long drink. “Did I miss a family meeting?” he quipped.



“I keep telling you to check your email more often,” Wren said.

“Says the one who never checks his,” Forest said dryly.

“I do too!”

“You have itinerary schedules for away matches from three years ago that you still haven’t opened.”

“I’ve never missed a flight, ever,” Wren said.

“There was that one time,” Coop said.

“I didn’t miss it.”

“If I hadn’t picked you up and literally carried you *sleeping* to my car, and packed your goddamn bag for you, then you would have.”

That was impressive for Coop, considering that Bryce knew he shoved everything haphazardly into his bag on the morning of their flights instead of the night before like a normal person.

Wren waved his hand dismissively. “We’re not talking about me.” He turned to Bryce, and Bryce wished they were talking about Wren because he didn’t want to talk about himself.

“It feels like months since I saw you last,” Wren remarked. “You been hiding somewhere?”

There was more truth to that than Bryce wanted to acknowledge. “We message,” he said defensively. He hadn’t been *hiding*, but he’d definitely been preoccupied.

“Sure, but I haven’t seen your *face* since we kicked your team’s ass in April.”

“He’s been busy,” Coop said absently.

Bryce nudged him with an elbow. Could he make that sound any more suspicious? The only thing that could have been worse than that was if he’d added “with Noah” at the end of it. Coop pursed his lips, his eyes saying sorry. Meaningless; it was too late to put it back in the box.

Bryce emptied the rest of the water. He wished it were vodka.

Forest glanced between Bryce and Coop, and Bryce knew they were so busted. He’d always been too good at reading the two of them. Even as kids they couldn’t get away with anything when Forest was watching.

“All right, you two, spill. What’s going on?”

Coop turned to Bryce, letting him take the lead.

That would have been nice of him to do *before* he had run his mouth.

Bryce ran his tongue over his teeth. “I... am...” He had no idea why this was so hard to admit. He’d thought he’d struggle with touching another man, struggle to follow through on the things that his brain had latched onto when he’d seen Noah naked in the shower. Kissing Noah, touching him, had been so much easier than he could have imagined. Maybe the anal part had been hit-and-miss—mostly miss and why he was here now—but the rest of it? Being with Noah felt as natural as playing footy was. Like he’d been born for it.

So why was *saying* it in front of people, people he trusted with his life, so hard?

“I... haven’t told you,” he said to Wren, stalling. He hadn’t told Forest either, but this omission seemed more important. Only Coop and Noah knew as far as Bryce was aware. He hadn’t exactly been shouting it from the rooftops that he and Noah were fooling around because Bryce wanted to know if he was bisexual. Maybe it would have been easier if he’d just rented out some billboard space. The one on the highway that Wren drove on every morning on his way to training.

“You can tell me now.”

He could. He should. It was a good time, and it wasn’t like he could get out of this without saying *something*. And if he lied and said it was something else, and Wren found out later that he’d been lying, that would make it so much worse than if he just ripped the Band-Aid off now.

“I’m sleeping with Noah,” he blurted.

Wren’s brows furrowed. “You’re... what?” His mouth dropped open, and Bryce could see the cogs working. Wren could speak Bryce; he’d work it out. “You’re sleeping with Noah?” he said in disbelief. “As in Noah *Walker*?”

Bryce pursed his lips and merely nodded. He didn’t take a crack at the question since there were like three Noahs playing in the league at the moment. Of course, he *could* have been talking about someone who didn’t play footy. But he’d said it like Wren would know who he was talking about, which ruled out most of the population because Wren wasn’t much for

socialisation and... Bryce forced his brain to stop thinking because he was giving himself a headache.

And the silence was growing awkward. Bryce didn't know what words were, and Wren's face was still "where's the joke?", and Bryce kind of wished right now that it *was* a joke. Except that would mean taking back what he and Noah had done together, and he didn't want to do that. So here he was, in an awkward stalemate with his brother. With no way out.

"Noah with a dick. Noah, our teammate," Wren clarified, looking at Bryce like he'd grown two heads. "Key forward for the Sydney Swallows."

"I think we all know who Noah is," Forest said.

Wren gestured manically at Bryce. "I don't think he does!"

"It sounds like he knows a *lot* about Noah, actually," Forest replied. "Calm down before you give yourself an ulcer."

"You don't even like guys!" Wren accused. "How long has this been going on?"

Bryce gritted his teeth, biting back his first response. "Since April."

"Since *April*?" Wren blustered. "Are you kidding me? Noah's been sleeping with my baby brother for *months*? I'm gonna kill him." He turned an accusatory look at Coop. "You knew! You knew, and you didn't tell me."

"Because it's none of your business," Coop said flatly. "Bryce has a right to be private about his personal life, even

with his family. He doesn't *have* to tell you anything; be grateful he's telling you now."

Wren's upper lip curled. "Oh, fuck off, Coop."

"Remember this when he chooses not to tell you anything again," Coop said, narrowing his eyes. "And be very careful where you point that temper, Monaghan."

"*He* is right here," Bryce said loudly. "Everyone shut the fuck up." He stood and fisted his hands on his hips. "I didn't tell you because I wasn't ready to tell you. I... am not even sure that I'm ready to tell you now, but I need your help. So can we please just shelve this"—he gestured between them—"whatever."

Wren scowled and sat back heavily against the cushions with a huff. Bryce knew that the conversation wasn't over. He didn't blame Wren for being upset, and if they needed to, they could hash it out later. But right now, he needed *help*, not an argument.

"Help with what?" Forest asked. "Are you proposing?"

"What?" Wren sat up as he squawked in outrage.

Bryce closed his eyes and told himself that prison food was terrible. "Wren, if you can't keep it zipped, you can get out. I don't need *your* help."

The hurt look in Wren's eyes was enough for a twinge of guilt to nestle in Bryce's chest but not enough for him to take it back. He was dealing with enough; he wasn't interested in

taking a jaunt through Wren's theatrics. There was a time and place for it, and this was neither.

Bryce pointed at Forest. "You're not helping either."

"The vague thing you've got going on is what's not helping," Coop said. "How about you get it out, and we'll keep our mouths shut"—he looked directly at Wren as he said it, and Wren made a face at him—"and hold our questions until the end."

"Thank you."

Except that now the spotlight was completely on him, Bryce was at a loss as to what to say. *I couldn't take Noah during anal because it hurt too much, and I need to work out how to do it* sounded bad enough in his head, let alone speaking the words out loud. Especially now that his brother was looking at him in a challenging way that made him bristle.

"Noah and I tried to... have sex... last week," Bryce said weakly. "And I couldn't. It hurt, and I... we stopped." He sounded like an idiot. They were simple sentences, and he had no idea why they were so hard to get out. They'd tried, and he hadn't been able to finish it even if Noah had been amazing about it. And had still invited Bryce in next time. And played with his ass in a way that Bryce was more than on board with even if he hated the fact that doing more had been so unsuccessful.

"Was he rough with you?" Wren asked menacingly.

“What?” Bryce asked, shocked. “No! You really think Noah would be rough with me?”

“I don’t know what kind of sex Noah likes,” Wren said, grimacing. “It’s not part of my daily thoughts.”

“Is *anything* part of your daily thoughts?” Coop asked.

“I think daily of setting you on fire,” Wren said with false pleasantries.

“Would you two shut the fuck up and do your weird foreplay thing another time?” Bryce snapped. They both needed a timeout.

Wren glared. Bryce turned away from them both because he did not have the capacity to deal with their shit.

“Did you like the other stuff?” Forest asked.

“The other stuff?” Bryce asked, mind blank.

“Yeah. Blow jobs, hand jobs, kissing, touching. Have you done any of that?”

Jesus Christ. Bryce’s face had to be on fire at this point. “Yes,” he said so quietly he wasn’t sure *he’d* heard it. He didn’t think he’d ever been so embarrassed in his life. Why did his *brother* have to be here? “Why?”

“It’s important to narrow things down to work out what the problem is. We can now say with certainty that it’s not the fact that Noah is a guy. It’s okay if you’re not into anal play,” Forest said. “Lots of guys aren’t.”

“I know. And he told me that. I’ve heard the speech. I would like everyone to stop telling me *it’s okay* like I need my hand held. This is not about consent, or that I didn’t like it. I *do*. I think I do or *could*. I liked it when he...” Bryce trailed off, his face burning. Did he have a fever? It felt like he had a fever.

“I’m not a prude, you can say it,” Wren said.

“You’re my brother. It’s weird.” It was *beyond* weird. They were way past that point.

“You think I haven’t had sex before?”

“Not with a guy.”

“It sounds like neither have you,” Wren said, with a snort.

Bryce rolled his eyes. “Fine,” he said stubbornly. “He fingers me and licks my ass and I like it. A lot.”

Wren grimaced, and Bryce gestured at him. “I fucking *told* you it was weird.”

“I’m never gonna be able to look Noah in the face ever again,” Wren muttered.

Coop tugged on Wren’s earlobe, who smacked him away. “You asked for it.”

“Shut your face, Thorne.”

“So anal play isn’t the problem,” Forest said. “Just... what, his size? Not enough lube? Is he doing it wrong?”

Bryce could not believe how calmly Forest had just asked that. “He’s not doing it wrong!” Noah was fucking fantastic in bed, and he wasn’t going to let anyone think otherwise.



“I already know what the problem is,” Coop said smugly.

“Why don’t you share with the class?” Wren asked sarcastically.

“If you’re looking to go into this weekend’s match with a black eye, you’re halfway there,” Coop warned.

“Can you two lovebirds wait until I’m gone to bicker?” Bryce asked. “Focus. One problem at a time.”

“The problem is that you built it up so much in your head that you couldn’t relax,” Coop said. “And if you’re nothing but tense when you get into it, it doesn’t matter how great Noah is in bed, or how much lube he uses, it’s not going to work.”

“Please tell me your advice is not ‘just relax,’” Wren said.

“What’s yours, then, hotshot?”

“Do I need to sit between you two?” Forest asked.

*Oh my God.* Bryce buried his face in his hands. “Good talk, guys,” he mumbled. Relax. It wasn’t terrible advice. He thought he *had* been, but it wasn’t outside the realm of possibility that he’d gone into it with a lot of... thoughts.

He could try it. After he’d successfully scrubbed this conversation from his mind. “I need to go... brush my hair.” Wasn’t a total lie. His curls always needed maintenance.

Bryce could hear them talking furiously as he turned and left. Which one would be made “it” to follow him? He hoped none. If only he were that lucky.

A hand shot out just as the elevator doors were closing, and Wren's face appeared.

His brother would not have been his first choice. Any of his choices.

"Did you kill the others?" Bryce asked. Had to have. It was the only explanation.

"It was close," Wren said as he stepped inside.

"I'm not going to apologise," Bryce said stiffly. He jammed his finger into the ground-floor button again. Then once more, just in case, as he willed it to go faster. "Like Coop said, it's none of your business."

"*You* don't need to apologise. But *I* do."

"Coop hit you," Bryce guessed. "Do you need to get checked for a concussion?"

"You could have told me," Wren said.

Bryce shuffled, placing his hands on his chest, then his stomach, and finally in his pockets. What did people normally do with their hands? What did *he* normally do? "I know. I wasn't—I'm not—ready to tell everyone. I don't even know if there's anything to tell."

Wren turned to him in disbelief, jaw dropped open. "You're having sex with *Noah*, and you didn't think there was anything to tell?"

"I don't know if you were part of any of that conversation, or if your brain was just stuck on 'attack Coop' mode, but we're

not having sex.”

Wren shrugged and shoved his hands into his pockets as well. He looked as awkward as Bryce felt. “I think that if your mouths and dicks are anywhere near each other, it can probably be considered sex.” He bit his lip. “Uh—Relaxing probably seems like a good plan. Coop wasn’t totally full of shit. Don’t tell him I said that.”

Jesus Christ. “Can we just say that you’re being very supportive and a great big brother and never talk about this again?”

“Yes.” Bryce was sure he heard Wren say, “*Thank God,*” under his breath.

The elevator hit the ground floor, and the doors opened. Neither of them made a move to get out.

“If he hurts you, let me know, and I’ll punch him,” Wren said.

The size difference between Noah and Wren was borderline hilarious, but Bryce nodded anyway because he appreciated the sentiment. Wren’s unwavering loyalty was rough around the edges, but he meant well, and it was comforting to know that he would always be in Bryce’s corner. “Okay.”

“Okay.”

They stepped out in time for the doors to close behind them. Bryce was glad no one was around to witness the complete and utter awkward he and his brother had turned this into.

“You’re flying out tomorrow, right?” Wren asked. “You have a Friday night game?”

“Yeah.”

“You got plans right now? We could go get dinner,” Wren said at the door to the apartment building.

Bryce had been planning to see what Noah was doing, but it had been a while since Bryce had spent any substantial time with his siblings. During the season, time was a rare commodity, and Bryce had been spending a lot of it with Noah.

“I’ll call Monica,” Bryce offered. It was the only peace offering he could think of.



“WHERE ARE YOU TAKING us?” Bryce asked suspiciously. He’d thought when Forest had rocked up at his place after Wednesday training and said to get in, that he was taking them... for dinner, or to a movie, or something. Or to the new candy shop, Sweet ‘n’ Spicy, that had opened in the city. It was the only reason he’d invited Oakley and Locke, who were hanging at his place, instead of telling them to go home. And because if Forest was going to read him the riot act for something, then he wanted witnesses. Darcy—who was apparently also along for this ride—was not a reliable witness, especially not when it came to his own team. He’d say the sky was green if one of the Swallows asked him to, and he’d smile

while doing it, with the absolute belief that he was saying the right thing just because his team had said so.

Darcy was on his phone in the front seat, humming along to a tune only he could hear, clearly unconcerned that Forest was *taking them out of the fucking city*. If he knew Forest as well as Bryce did, he would have more reason for concern.

“Are we being kidnapped?” Oakley asked. “I wish I’d worn different underwear.”

Bryce was too curious not to ask. He turned from the window to eye him. “What kind of underwear?”

“You mean what *would* I have worn, or what am I currently wearing?”

“... both, I guess?” Now he wasn’t sure he wanted to know the answer to either question.

“It’s laundry day, man.”

“That’s not actually a thing,” Bryce argued. “You cannot have so few pairs of underwear that you can *run out* if you don’t do laundry.”

“You can if you don’t do laundry often.”

“Your house would be stanky as fuck if you didn’t wash your workout gear multiple times a week. And Locke is staying with you, and I trust that he wouldn’t want to live in filth, you nasty fucker.”

Locke snickered, and Oakley shoved him. “Fine. I only have my boring ‘bite me’ undies on.”

“Your... your what?” Forest asked, twisting around to glance at him before focusing on the road again. “Those are your... boring undies?” He let out a laugh. “I think you’ll be fine where we’re going.”

“Nice! The first point in kidnapping goes to me.”

Bryce sighed and closed his eyes, leaning back against the headrest. “This is the weirdest kidnapping I’ve ever been involved in.”

“As opposed to all the others?” Locke asked.

Forest stopped shortly after that, pulling into the car park of a large, nondescript industrial warehouse. A black building with no signs to indicate what kind of place it was. There was only one other car there. The streets were quiet, and the businesses across the road were all closed up tight. Where the fuck were they?

“Is this where you’re holding us for ransom?” Oakley asked, jumping out of the car.

“Not quite,” Forest said as he led the way into the building, using a key to unlock the front door.

Bryce’s mouth dropped open as they walked inside, through to a small entryway and behind a black curtain. “Oh my God. Did you bring us to a”—he lowered his voice to a hissed whisper—“sex shop?”

“Why are we whispering?” Oakley asked, also whispering.

Bryce grabbed Forest’s elbow, halting his movement. “If someone sees us in here, the media are gonna have a fuckin’

field day.” He was fucking *captain* of an AFL team. He couldn’t get caught in here.

Forest just grinned and tugged on a curl. “Relax, Bry, you’ll get wrinkles.”

“Forest!” a booming voice called out.

Bryce flinched and whirled around. A huge guy with a beard that was honestly the most impressive thing that Bryce had ever seen in his life was walking towards them with open arms. Like a bear stalking its prey and luring it in with false pleasantries.

The giant shook Forest’s hand and drew him in for a one-arm hug. “These your friends?” he asked.

Bryce blinked, more than half terrified. Was the guy’s voice just set to *loud* or...? He had no idea they made them bigger than footy players.

The big toothy grin *should* have helped calm Bryce’s nerves. It didn’t. “Mi casa, su casa, friends. Have a look around, make yourselves at home.”

“In a sex shop?” Bryce asked. What exactly did “make themselves at home” entail? Did he want them to test out the merchandise or something?

“Don’t touch that,” Forest said.

“I didn’t touch anything!” Bryce balked. He wasn’t planning on *buying* anything. The fuck?

Bryce twisted in the direction that Forest was looking. Oh.

Darcy let the padlock on the choker chain fall back against the display, smiling innocently at them. “It seems small for a belt. Do you think it’s for dolls?” he asked.

Bryce scrunched up his face in disbelief. A *belt*? “That’s not a—”

“That’s not for you,” Forest interrupted. He gave Bryce a look, and Bryce lifted his hands in surrender. He wasn’t the one that had brought them on this terrifying excursion. He wasn’t interested in giving Darcy an education in *sex toys*. He wasn’t Darcy’s captain, and that was outside of his job description. Hell, it was outside of his job description for his *own* team.

Darcy shrugged, nonplussed. He shoved his hands into his pockets. “What’s that smell?” he asked. “It’s nice.”

“The smell of plastic and my burning brain?” Bryce suggested.

“Are you trying to say that your brain is made of plastic?” Oakley asked, snickering.

Darcy’s smile faltered. “I think I have a Band-Aid,” he said, peering down as he searched his pockets.

“I don’t need—Darce, it’s fine,” Bryce said with a sigh. There were times during a match he had to turn his brain off and disassociate from what he knew about *this* gentle giant. Otherwise, he’d never be able to shove him out of the way.

The giant man beamed, and it was not as reassuring as he might have meant it. Like a mountain man trying to lure



someone into his cabin. “Cookies! I like to bake. It’s welcoming, and the scent is comforting.”

“Do you mean biscuits?” Darcy asked. “What flavour?”

“What if people *see* us?” Bryce hissed, grabbing Forest’s bicep. Who gave a shit about *cookies*?

“Do people think athletes don’t have sex?” Forest asked. “You wanted my help.”

“I was talking to *Coop*, first of all; you just happened to be there. And when I meant I wanted help, I meant”—Bryce lowered his voice even more and leaned in so no one could hear him—“like help with loosening up when he sticks it in, not like... whatever the fuck this is.” His eyes widened at the row of paddles on a display near them. He could not believe he was in a place like this. “I’m not kinky.”

“Neither am I.”

“You brought us to a *sex shop*.” Bryce knew at this point that he sounded hysterical, but what the hell else was he supposed to say to this? Forest knew where he’d brought them, right? He’d been the one driving. He hadn’t even used GPS. He’d already known the way!

“You don’t have to be kinky to enjoy toys, Bryce.”

Bryce took a deep breath and glanced around. Oakley and Locke were showing Darcy different sizes of anal beads, and Bryce was about to lose his mind. And the giant mountain man serial killer—probably—was pretending he wasn’t listening to Bryce and Forest, but he totally was.

“Do you want Noah here?” Forest asked.

“No!” Noah’s smile brushed his mind. “Yes?” Noah in a sex shop with him. His cock stirred. *Fuck*. “No.”

“You don’t seem sure.”

“What am *I* even doing here?” That was the real question.

“You like it when he fucks you with his fingers, right?”

Heat flooded Bryce’s cheeks. He glanced at where the giant was being even *more* obvious about not-listening listening. He couldn’t believe they were talking about this in public. All it would take was someone hiding behind a shelf recording this, and his entire life would be over. The media would have a goddamn parade with this kind of sound bite.

“There’s no one else here, Bry,” Forest said. He tugged on one of Bryce’s curls again.

Bryce shoved his arm away in annoyance. It took too long to get them into some semblance of order as it was, without people taking liberties with them.

“Everest has closed up the shop for us,” Forest said. “You can relax.”

Everest. Even his name was big.

“I still don’t understand why you brought me here.” Knowing they were alone and someone wasn’t waiting around the corner with a camera did make him feel marginally better. At least Forest wasn’t a *total* moron. But he was also still

standing in the middle of a sex shop, talking about Noah fingering him.

“It’s not about having something in there that you don’t like, it’s the size, I’m guessing, based on what you’ve said? Noah’s a big guy.”

“I don’t want to know how you know that.”

“I’ve played professional sport with him for almost five years, Bry. Did you think I hadn’t seen his dick?”

Bryce hadn’t thought about it, because it was a weird thing to think about. The whole team had probably seen it. That was also something Bryce wasn’t going to think about. His whole team had seen *his*. He’d seen theirs. Why was this suddenly turning into some kind of weird orgy porn in his mind?

“We could have just gone to see a movie,” Bryce said weakly. “Not... not like... A regular movie, with regular people and... clothes.” He swallowed and clamped his mouth shut, mortification flushing over him.

Forest bit back a smile. “You can work your way up to being able to take him easier if that’s what you want. There are dildos and plugs that are different sizes. You could get a few, get used to them.”

“Uh...” It wasn’t a *bad* idea. He just wished that none of this conversation was taking place at all. He jumped a foot in the air when his phone vibrated in his pocket.

He almost dropped it when he saw the name. “It’s Noah.” He looked up at Forest, panic thrumming in his throat.

Forest raised an eyebrow. “Aren’t you going to answer it?”

Hell no, he wasn’t going to fucking answer it. “I’m standing in a sex shop right now.” Why did he have to keep repeating that? Maybe if he said it enough the illusion would disappear. Then he’d just be back at home, sitting on his couch, listening to Oakley and Locke argue about the health level of kale and whether it was worth the torture.

“I’m well aware,” Forest said with amusement. “He won’t know that.”

He would. Bryce had no idea how, but he would. He’d be able to hear the pure panic in Bryce’s voice. He bet aliens living on Mars could hear it.

“Do you want to leave? We don’t have to stay. I just thought it would help.”

“It—thank you.” Bryce glanced around at the rows and rows of sex items surrounding him, some he couldn’t even name and some that looked downright impossible. He *wanted* to be able to take Noah. For himself, more than anything. Maybe he was someone who didn’t like anal penetration during sex, and Noah had said that was okay. It *was* okay. But Bryce couldn’t accept that was him without trying. Trying more than once and without all the noise in his head. He was way too stubborn to quit so quickly. It couldn’t always be that painful, could it? He just needed to relax. This place was not helping him relax, but maybe something in here could? He couldn’t leave now without at least looking. Even if he might die from burning to a crisp from embarrassment.

“We can stay. Now go away.” Bryce made a shooing motion. His phone was still ringing in his hand, and he wasn’t answering it with an audience.

Forest chuckled, and he and Everest gave Bryce some much-needed privacy. Oakley was now carrying a fucking *basket* that was already half full, and Bryce really didn’t want to see what was in it. He did not need to know what the veteran player got up to in his spare time.

“Hel—” Bryce cleared his throat. “Hello.”

“Hello to you too,” Noah said with amusement. “What’s with the formality?”

“Nothing.” That hadn’t been a squeak. “Everything is fine.”

Bryce’s heart skipped a beat as Noah paused. He couldn’t *actually* know. He checked his phone quickly to make sure that he hadn’t accidentally turned video on or something stupid like that.

“Uh-huh,” Noah said. “Do you want me to call back?”

Bryce’s fingers squeezed the phone. The sound of a person’s voice shouldn’t be like a physical balm. Noah’s deep rumble rushed over him like a cold breeze on a summer day. The pain pricks of panic that had been needling him from the moment they’d stepped inside the warehouse eased, and all that was left was the smile on his face. “No. What are you doing?”

“Well, right now I’m on the phone to a pain-in-the-ass redhead that thinks he’s more subtle than he is.”

Bryce narrowed his eyes. “I am plenty subtle.”

“You wouldn’t know what subtle was if it did a specky off you.”

“I’d notice that!” Getting a knee to the back or the neck from a guy using him as a ladder to mark the footy was pretty noticeable.

Bryce winced when Darcy held up a large pink dildo, eyes wide as he shook it and it wobbled. He turned around so he didn’t have to watch the disaster unfold.

He yelled in surprise as he almost ran right into Everest and a plate of cookies.

“Sorry. You alright?”

Bryce nodded wordlessly. He was fine. His heart had jumped out of his chest and was flopping around on the ground, but he was totally fine.

“Cookie?” Everest asked, holding up the plate.

“Uh... no. Thank you.” He wasn’t sure he could swallow it. His throat was dry, and his panic button was being stroked. With a sledgehammer.

“Where are you?” Noah asked. “Who’s making you cookies?”

“No one.” Bryce cleared his throat. Maybe Noah hadn’t been wrong about the subtlety comment.

Noah paused for another beat. “Are you with someone?” There was a hint of something in his voice that Bryce couldn’t quite work out.

“No!” *What?*

“It’s okay if you are.”

Was it? Was Noah being with other people? Maybe he had been because Bryce couldn’t give him what he wanted. They didn’t see each other every day. They didn’t even *talk* every day. They got busy, and they didn’t play on the same team. Like passing ships in the night. Did Noah warm his bed with someone else when Bryce wasn’t there?

Why did Bryce even *care*? Not once in all the months they’d been doing this had either of them specified exclusivity. That was a conversation they should have *before* Bryce got all He-Man.

“I’m—I’m not,” Bryce said. “I don’t want to?” More of a question than he’d meant. He definitely didn’t want to. He was a “one person at a time” kind of guy. Who had the time for more than that? Not him. He barely had time for one.

Noah’s voice softened. “Where are you, baby?”

Bryce swallowed hard, his heart thumping rapidly in his chest. “F-forest took us to a sex shop.”

A strangled sound came from the other end of the phone. “Forest,” Noah said. “Forest took you to a *sex* shop? Wait, who is ‘us’?”

“Locke. Oakley. Darcy.” The weirdest combination of people that Bryce could think of.

“Forest took Darcy to a sex shop?”

“Yep.” Maybe if they all kept repeating it, it would somehow make some kind of sense.

“What’s it called?”

“Oh. Uh.” Bryce looked around, searching for some kind of branding to indicate where they were. Having proof that Forest took them on an ill-advised group excursion seemed like a good idea. “I have no idea. Wait—” Bryce picked up a business card from the main counter in the large space and read out, “Summit.” There was a tagline underneath the name. “It’s not about reaching the top, but how you get there.” Bryce wasn’t saying that out loud.

“Stay there for me?”

“Right where I’m standing?” Bryce asked with a drawl.

Noah chuckled, and Bryce shivered at the sound. “If you want. Don’t look at anything until I get there.”

He was *coming here*? Why did that make Bryce’s gut clench and his heartrate speed up even further? Why did Noah even want to come here?

“What am I supposed to do?” Bryce asked. It would take Noah a while to get there.

“Eat a cookie,” Noah suggested before hanging up.

Eat a cookie. Right.





NOAH SENT FOREST A text that simply said, “Let me in,” and waited for his friend to come to the front door of the building that the address for the shop had taken him to.

Thinking about Bryce standing around in a sex shop while he waited for Noah had done things to him that were almost impossible to hide behind his zipper.

Forest opened the door with a sly grin. “Was wondering when you’d show up.”

“I could have shown up earlier if you’d told me what the fuck you were doing. How did you find out?”

“Bryce came to Coop for advice, and Wren and I happened to be there.”

Wren knew. Noah winced. *Shit.*

Forest’s grin widened. “I’m surprised he hasn’t said anything to you yet.”

“He was tackling me harder than normal in training today, but I just figured he was in his regularly scheduled bad mood.” It was impossible to filter through all the reasons why Wren might be aggressive. Noah hadn’t even bothered to try. Fucker. Those tackles *had* been deliberate. Noah wasn’t going to tell Wren he knew that he knew. He wondered how long the little spitfire would keep it in until he cracked. Noah wasn’t going to make it easier for him if he wasn’t going to be direct about it.

“Wait. Advice? About what?” For a newbie, Bryce was adapting pretty damn well to touching another guy. Like a fish

to water. What did he need advice for? “Is this why you brought him here?” If he’d wanted to explore more or be more adventurous, it was Noah’s job to introduce him to that, not fucking *Forest*.

“What are you doing with him?” Forest asked.

“He didn’t tell you that?”

“I want to know what *you*, specifically, are doing with him. What are you getting out of it? You’re not so hard up that you need to walk someone through their bisexual questions.”

Noah didn’t take offense. Forest had grown up with Bryce, same as Coop had. They were brothers in all but name. It was bound to get back to them at some point, and this result was inevitable. If Noah couldn’t handle the pressure, then he’d picked the wrong career. And the wrong guy.

“I’m the reason he started thinking about it; I think I have a right to be part of it.”

“Still not what I asked. Though I do have some questions to ask later.”

“You haven’t answered mine,” Noah pointed out. His were more important than how it had all started, or why Noah had chosen to pursue it. As though Forest wouldn’t know. There was a reason Coop had told him about it. Freckles and red curls; enough said.

“He told us about your first attempt at penetration.”

Noah ran his hand through his hair. “It was never going to be all smooth sailing.”

“Not an accusation, Noah,” Forest said with a smirk. “Sounds like you were the perfect gentleman.”

“We know way too much about each other’s sex lives.” He wasn’t in any way surprised that Forest frequented a place like this or knew where to find it. Or brought *teammates* here. It was always the quiet ones.

“He wants to learn how to take you.”

Noah’s lips parted in surprise. “He said that?”

“In so many words, yes. That’s what he was asking.”

“I told him—”

“That he didn’t have to like it. Yes, I know. The problem isn’t you; it’s his ability to relax, and I suggested he build up to it.”

“You can leave the sex advice to me,” Noah growled. Something dark prickled at the back of his neck at the thought of Forest speaking to Bryce about any of this. “Next time, come to me, and *I’ll* talk him through it.”

Forest raised an eyebrow, and Noah refused to answer the question in his gaze.

“Where is he?”

Forest gestured with his head and walked back towards the interior of the building. Noah followed, his eyes adjusting to the blanket darkness as the entrance door closed and blocked them in. “He’s having cookies with Darcy.”

“I can’t believe you brought Darcy here.” That was more mind-boggling than the Bryce thing. Darcy was an otherworld creature that had probably never even touched his own dick, let alone walked into a den like this.

“He’s been having a great time.”

Noah’s question dried up in his throat as they passed the threshold, and he spotted Bryce. He was mid-laugh, head thrown back at whatever Darcy was doing with the two cookies in his hands. Bryce’s freckles stood out on his face, the red of his cheeks darkening them. The side angle as he leaned against the counter gave Noah the perfect view of his round ass being hugged by his jeans, his shirt sitting snug just above the curve.

Noah was surrounded by fit, athletic guys every day and had been most of his entire adult life. None of them had ever done to his pulse what Bryce was currently doing to it.

Bryce’s laugh faltered as he turned, his hazel eyes meeting Noah’s. His smile was tentative, his cheeks reddening further. Noah was utterly fascinated with how much Bryce blushed, considering he was a footy player. Locker rooms were the epitome of vulgarity, and how Bryce somehow maintained enough innocence to be constantly flushed was a question for the ages.

Noah ignored everyone around him—including two of Bryce’s teammates who were looking at nipple clamps—and moved towards the only person in the room that mattered in that second.

He couldn't help himself; the moment that Bryce was within reach, he snagged him around the waist and kissed him, coaxing a small sigh from those stunning lips.

"I told you that what we're doing is more than enough for me," Noah murmured. So much more than enough.

"Maybe it's not enough for me," Bryce said teasingly. He chased Noah's lips, and Noah gave him what he wanted, cupping the back of his head and deepening it, sliding their tongues together for a few long, wet moments.

"X-rated shop doesn't mean live sex shows," Forest said, interrupting them. "There are rooms for that."

"Are there?" Noah asked, lifting his head. What kind of place was this?

"They're called change rooms," the giant man on the other side of the counter said. "For trying clothes on."

Noah highly doubted that. And even if that was their intended purpose, he doubted they were *only* used for that.

Noah tangled his fingers with Bryce's and kissed the back of his hand. "Come with me."

"Uh..."

Noah didn't give him a chance to protest, taking him down the aisles until he found the section he wanted. The place was well labelled, at least. And clean. All good things. Sticky floors were a sign that wherever you were, you wanted to keep your clothes on and your hands to yourself. And a packet of wet wipes in your pocket.

“You could have told me you wanted to do this,” Noah said.

“I didn’t!” Bryce protested. “I was brought here against my will.”

Noah tucked Bryce in front of him, wrapping an arm around his chest and holding him close as he perused the plugs and dildos on the shelves and walls. He kissed the curve of Bryce’s neck, smelling the fresh scent and hint of salt. “You didn’t say anything about wanting to try toys.”

“I... it wasn’t about that. I want to be able to—This is so embarrassing. Do we have to talk about this?”

“It’s important to be open about these things.” He couldn’t give Bryce what he wanted if he didn’t *know* what he wanted. He wasn’t, unfortunately, a mind reader. It would be a handy trait to have on the field. And right now.

Noah slowly kissed his way up Bryce’s neck, his pulse jumping when Bryce moaned low in his throat.

“I like when you play with my ass,” Bryce said, his voice barely audible, like he was trying to make sure no one heard him. It made Noah smile against his skin.

“Don’t be embarrassed,” he whispered against the shell of Bryce’s ear. “Knowing what you want, you verbalising it, turns me on.” His cock was already straining against his zipper, knowing that Bryce was here *for him*.

“I’m not... used to it,” Bryce said. “Having to... *say* it all the time.”

Had no one ever asked him what he wanted? Asked to communicate and let him be free with what he wanted and how he felt? An absolute shame. Noah enjoyed it best when Bryce let go and told him exactly what he wanted.

“I love the sound of your voice, Bryce.” He kissed behind Bryce’s ear and then grazed his teeth down the sensitive curve of his neck. “Tell me.”

“I want—I want you to be able to fuck me. *I* want to relax so that I can feel it. I want to be that close to you.”

“There are a lot of ways we can be close that don’t involve that,” Noah said. It was important that Bryce understand that their relationship, or whatever they were doing, wasn’t just based on whether he wanted this one particular part. “It isn’t the end game if you don’t want it to be.” He paused, lips pressed to the pulse in Bryce’s neck and feeling it beat rapidly against him.

“I want it because I want it,” Bryce said, “Not because I think I should want it. Aren’t I allowed to want it?”

There were a lot of “wants” in that sentence, and every single one made Noah’s pulse jump. “Of course you are.”

“I need you to help me get it,” Bryce said, turning his head, their lips brushing against one another’s. “I want it to be good for both of us.”

“You want me to fuck you with one of these toys? Open you nice and wide until you’re ready to take me?”

“*Fuck,*” Bryce breathed out.

Noah skimmed his hand down Bryce's chest and palmed him through his jeans. He was more than half mast and growing. "I think you do." He squeezed, and Bryce gasped, his head dropping back against Noah's shoulder.

Noah picked a perfect-sized butt plug for beginning with and led Bryce towards the "change rooms," snagging a pump bottle of water-based lubricant and a packet of wipes on his way. They'd get a few more things, but he had something else to do first.

"What are you doing?" Bryce asked. "You have to buy it first. The register is that way." He tried to turn, but Noah tightened his hold, maintaining their forward momentum.

"I will," Noah said. "But how do I know that I want it if I don't try it out?"

"That's not"—Bryce's breath hitched as Noah pushed him into a small cubicle that was barely big enough for both of them—"how it works. You can't just put it back if you don't like it!"

Noah had no intention of the plug leaving the building in the packaging or going back on the shelf.

Bryce's pupils were dilated, wide and hungry, when he turned in the small space. Noah couldn't keep his own gaze off him even while placing his items on the bench lining the side. He blindly reached behind himself, flicking the lock on the door. He doubted they'd be interrupted, but he wasn't taking any chances.



Bryce's pulse jumped in his neck, and Noah wanted to taste it. He pushed Bryce back against the wall and latched on, sucking hard as Bryce moaned.

He slid a hand up under Bryce's shirt, moving up to play with his nipple while he used his free hand to unbuckle Bryce's belt and jeans zipper. He swallowed Bryce's protest.

As soon as Bryce's jeans were undone, Noah dropped to his knees, mouthing Bryce's hard cock through his briefs.

"Can you see me in the mirror, Bryce?" He looked up through hooded lids, meeting Bryce's gaze in the mirror.

Bryce's lips were parted, fresh red spreading across his cheeks. He was fucking stunning.

"Watch me," Noah said huskily. "Watch how much I want you."

"*Oh God,*" Bryce breathlessly moaned. Hands tangled in Noah's hair, cradling him as Bryce canted his hips forward. Noah kept his mouth open as he moved around Bryce, wrapping his lips briefly around Bryce's covered head before shifting down and nuzzling his balls.

Noah brushed his fingers through Bryce's red curls as he lowered his briefs. He sucked Bryce into his mouth as he pushed the rest of his clothing down, encouraging Bryce to step out of them. Bryce thrust into his mouth, and Noah twirled his tongue around the silky smoothness of him.

He squeezed Bryce's cheeks, loving the plump roundness under his grip. Bryce had an ass made for grabbing. And Noah

would be the only one who got to.

Noah's index finger skimmed Bryce's hole, massaging gently against the puckered muscles. Bryce's breath stuttered, his thrusts faltering, fingers tightening in Noah's hair.

Noah stood, taking Bryce's lips in a bruising kiss before lifting Bryce's shirt up and over his head. The curls on his head bounced and fell into a haphazard mess from the treatment. He didn't need his shirt off for this, but Noah loved to look at his chest, and seeing the pattern of freckles. Loved even more that he had the right to kiss and touch and lick them whenever he wanted.

"Lift your leg," Noah ordered hoarsely. He ran a hand under Bryce's thigh and then gently lifted, helping him raise his foot up onto the bench. It opened him up beautifully for Noah. He bit his lip as he leaned back so that he could admire Bryce splayed open for him. He turned to look at his hand on Bryce's skin in the mirror.

The trust that he was putting in Noah right now was fucking unbelievable. Noah's chest ached. Bryce had shown this level of trust in him from the very start, and Noah had no idea what he'd done to deserve it, but he would hold it like a precious jewel that couldn't be dropped.

He poured a generous amount of lube on his hand and then fisted Bryce's cock, stroking it and spreading the slick around. The freckles peppered across it made Noah's mouth water whenever he thought about them.

He found that Bryce was invading his thoughts more and more lately, even when they were apart. It was distracting and far too heady.

Bryce dragged Noah forward into a kiss, and Noah leaned into it, angling his head and getting as deep as he could go.

He circled Bryce's rim with a single digit, loosening and softening it. "Good?" he whispered against the corner of Bryce's mouth.

"You make my brains fall out," Bryce said with a strained voice.

Noah was going to take that as him being good. Bryce had already shown that he could be trusted to say "stop" if he was being pushed too far, and that he wouldn't take more than he could handle just to prove that he could. Noah appreciated that more than Bryce would ever know. Noah was a big guy, and men trying to be brave and macho and all that bullshit had caused him more than one issue in his sex life in the past.

Knowing that Bryce was man enough to admit when he couldn't take something was a fucking *gift*. It gave Noah the confidence to slip a finger inside Bryce, starting with short shallow thrusts, massaging his inner walls and relaxing them.

Bryce whimpered, pushing back on him. "I want you," he whispered.

"Baby, I always want you," Noah admitted. That admission at least didn't feel like he was peeling back too many layers. Bryce was a treat, and Noah wanted to gorge himself.

“Me too. More, please.”

As if Noah could say no when Bryce pleaded so beautifully. Lust pooled in his belly like a heavy weight pressing down on him as he pushed a second finger in, a little more resistance this time. He took his time, opening Bryce up to receive the plug.

He kissed Bryce as he played with him, quieting the small sounds he made. He didn't know if sound carried in here, and he was sure everyone was already aware of what they were doing. No need to bring any more attention to themselves.

And Bryce's sounds were for him alone, not for sharing.

Noah gave Bryce's lips one more lick and removed his fingers, stepping back. Bryce panted softly, using the wall behind him to keep himself upright. He looked utterly debauched, and Noah ached to bury himself inside him. To touch and caress every inch of him and bring out more of that beautiful red.

“Don't move,” Noah said. “Fuck, you're gorgeous.”

Bryce's stomach quivered as his breathing picked up. Noah was waiting for—there it was. A red flush going down Bryce's chest, travelling like water along a river. Each freckle lighting up like a sky of stars appearing one by one. Noah couldn't help but trace the journey with the tips of his fingers brushing across Bryce's skin.

Bryce's nostrils flared, and his nails scraped along the wall, the muscles in his arm bunching and flexing. The veins that

ran across his forearm were delectable, a row of lines that Noah wanted to taste.

He admired Bryce's heaving chest as he carefully unpackaged the plug he had chosen, sliding the dark wooden box out of its packaging and unclasping the front. Pricey, and the most Noah had ever spent—or would, when he bought it—on a sex toy, but it was small and elegant, all smooth stainless steel, with a slim stem and an angled, bulbed head. It was barely the size of three of Noah's fingers. Bryce was worth every cent, and it was perfect for what Noah needed it for.

Bryce licked his bottom lip, his eyes heating as Noah coated the plug with lube. He spread the sticky slick with his fingers, warming the metal at the same time. He wanted Bryce to be as comfortable as possible.

Noah kissed the corner of Bryce's mouth and then across his jaw, pressing his lips against the curve of Bryce's ear. "I'm going to fit this nice and snug in your ass," he whispered. Bryce shivered, and Noah's dick twitched in response, all but begging for attention. "Then I'm going to make you come all over my hand, and your ass is going to tighten around it." He licked the shell of Bryce's ear at the same time he circled the tip of the bulbed head against Bryce's hole. "I want you to imagine it's my cock in there, just like I'm going to imagine I'm buried balls deep in you." He bit down on Bryce's lobe, and Bryce let out a strangled gasp-moan. The tip of the bulb slipped in, and Noah pressed it in and out, a featherlight touch as he twirled it in circles. "Right where we both want me to be."

“Fuck,” Bryce cursed. Arms fell across Noah’s shoulders, fingers scrambling to find purchase on his back as he bent and took one of Bryce’s nipples into his mouth. He pushed through the first ring of resistance inside Bryce, going slow while he licked and sucked on Bryce’s pebbled nub.

Bryce let out a low keening cry as the plug slipped inside him, settling snugly, nice and deep.

“Shh,” Noah whispered. He didn’t need everyone else to hear it. That one was definitely for him alone. He wrapped a hand around Bryce’s dick, squeezing lightly as he slid up over the ridge of his cockhead, pulling. “You need to be quiet.”

“You be quiet,” Bryce groaned deeply, nails scraping so deep that they stung even through the fabric of Noah’s shirt. “How the fuck am I supposed to be quiet?”

Noah wriggled the end of the plug in Bryce’s ass and then had to move quick to muffle the sounds that came out of Bryce’s mouth. Bryce whined and arched against him. Noah had never heard such a perfect sound. He grazed his fingers across the underside of Bryce’s cock and over the sensitive spots that had more noises coming from Bryce. They were pure sex and had Noah leaking in his pants.

“How does it feel?” He kissed Bryce’s throat, using teeth and tongue to make small red marks across his pale skin and between his freckles. “Feel good?”

“I—yes.” Bryce gasped, sliding his hands up Noah’s back, his neck, and around to twine across the back of his head. His

hips moved, pushing into Noah's hand as he spoke. "I'm so *full*."

"Think how full you're gonna be when I'm inside you, when you're relaxed enough that I just slide right in."

Bryce bit down on Noah's shoulder, his cries vibrating against Noah's skin. The sting only urged Noah on, and he sped up his strokes, increasing the pressure, the obscene wet sounds loud in his ears.

"Say my name," he demanded roughly, remembering the way it had sounded over the phone and vibrating with how much he wanted to hear it now. Wanted it whispered right next to him in Bryce's low, guttural voice.

"Noah," Bryce panted, not hesitating for even a second. It sent a thrill through Noah, travelling through him and right down to his dick.

Noah lifted a knee, pressing it between Bryce's legs and pushing up against the wide finger loop of the plug, keeping it firm and secure against Bryce's ass. When he moved his knee in a circular motion, Bryce cried out and pulsed in Noah's hand.

Noah knew he was right on the edge. "Say it again."

"Noah," Bryce gasped. He thrust his hips harder, faster, all but fucking himself into Noah's hand.

Noah sped up further, feeling the strain in his forearm as his movements turned frantic and desperate. He thrust his fingers into Bryce's gorgeous curls and pulled his head back, forcing

Bryce to look him right in the eye. His pupils were blown wide, cheeks deliciously red and lips wet and swollen.

“Again,” he growled. It was more than a need inside him. It was *necessity*.

“*Noah!*”

“Come for me.” It was a pointless request; he could already feel Bryce tensing against him and warmth coating his hand. He kissed Bryce through it, indulging himself completely.

Bryce sagged against him, limp and wrung out. Noah wrapped his arms around him, careful to keep the worst of the mess on his hand out of the way. He pressed an open mouth against the sensitive skin below Bryce’s ear.

“You—I need to—” Bryce tried to pull away from Noah, but Noah held strong.

“Don’t worry about me. Maybe I’ll give you a show later.” He wouldn’t trade anything right now for holding Bryce in his arms like this. He could come anytime he wanted to, even while he was alone. This was better than that. It was more.

“I need a nap,” Bryce said with a quiet chuckle, relaxing again.

“I’ll take you home now, and you can sleep,” Noah murmured, kissing his temple. He reached for the packet of wipes so he could clean them both up and make them somewhat presentable before they went back onto the shop floor. “But you’re keeping the plug in.”



Bryce's fingers tightened against his chest. "Th-that sounds good," he said, a tremor in his voice.

It sounded better than good. Noah would get a few more, of varying sizes. If Bryce needed it, he would spend as long as necessary to get him used to the feel of something inside him. He knew it would be more than worth the wait.



WATCHING A LEISURELY SUNDAY footy match was usually something that Bryce enjoyed. He always put them on if he wasn't playing that day and had it on while he got some coursework done.

He found it less leisurely if the game was going badly for a team he liked. It had always been an experience that had Bryce's heart racing. Somehow, watching a match that was going badly for a team when he was sleeping with someone *on that team* was infinitely worse. Not something he'd ever put much thought into before since he'd never dated or slept with anyone on the womens' teams.

A midfielder ran straight into Noah on Bryce's screen, and Noah yelled something at him, shoving him. It was like a train wreck that Bryce couldn't look away from. There were only eight minutes left in the last quarter, and the Swallows were too far behind to pull a win out of their ass. Not even if they suddenly all remembered how to play. They could eat up some

of the distance in the score, but they'd already lost, and every tense line in their faces said they knew it.

Noah looked two seconds from exploding, Coop was clearly done with everyone's shit—including his own team's—and Forest was trying to hold up the rest of the team, but they were all flagging. Bryce knew that feeling. Morale was hard given a metaphorical kick in the teeth like that.

The Swallows' losses this year were stacking up.

Bryce bit his lip as he watched the rest, forcing himself to because the whole team deserved more than him switching it off in their darkest hour. It didn't get any better and definitely wasn't any easier to watch despite knowing the outcome. He waited until at least half an hour after the game to send Noah a text. It went unanswered.

He had a back-and-forth emoji fight with Coop, who moved it across to the chat that Bryce shared with Coop, Wren, and Forest, which then turned into an all-out war. It helped amuse them all for an hour.

No one said anything about the match.

Bryce waited until almost eleven, but Noah still hadn't returned his message. He'd *seen* it but hadn't responded. Bryce didn't take it personally. A loss was hard, and a lot of guys needed to be alone afterwards. Bryce rarely wanted to interact with anyone either when it happened. His team had only lost one match so far that season—to the Swallows—and that desperation that clung to your every pore after multiple losses hadn't been something he'd had to deal with this year.

Last year, North had been three rungs from the bottom of the ladder at the end of the season, so he was pretty familiar with the feeling. It wasn't how he'd wanted to end his first year as captain, but no one had mutinied, and they'd even wanted him to keep the title. He didn't think he was doing too badly with the second year.

There was still no response when he brushed his teeth and got into bed. He debated sending another message but left it alone. Noah had his number if he wanted to talk.

BRYCE'S EYES SHOT OPEN, and he blinked blearily at the ceiling. What was that? A knock sounded, and he flinched. Someone was at the front door.

What time was it? His phone said just after midnight. Fucking hell. Had he ordered pizza or something?

He cursed when he knocked his knee on the corner of his bed, stumbling around in the dark. He pulled a pair of sweatpants out of his drawer—unlike Coop, Bryce didn't leave clothes lying around on the floor to attract spiders—and flicked on the dimmed kitchen lights on his way to the front door. His apartment was bigger than Coop's but only because it didn't have a mezzanine, and he'd looked for a place that had a decent kitchen. It had nothing on Noah's place, but he doubted Noah was renting. After a decade as a professional athlete, Bryce doubted he even had a mortgage.

Maybe he *had* ordered pizza. He'd only been in bed an hour. Sometimes they forgot orders and ended up delivering stupid late. It was farfetched, but honestly, unless one of his neighbours had a sudden craving for cake and didn't have sugar or flour to make it, he had no idea why someone would be at his door. If it was an emergency, someone would have *called* him. Was the building on fire? No, he had a smoke alarm that would have gone off. Someone's would have. He'd be hearing some kind of warning noise.

He pulled open the door and froze.

*Noah.*

He looked worn out. His hair was a mess, there were bags under his eyes, and a fading scratch just under his left eye. One hand was in the pocket of his jeans, the other holding the leash that Rufus was on.

Noah shrugged wordlessly, looking a little helpless and lost.

Bryce's lips parted in surprise. He reached over and grabbed Noah's arm, pulling him inside. He made sure that Rufus's tail wasn't in the way when he closed the door.

Noah wrapped an arm around him, dragging him close and burying his face in Bryce's neck. Bryce gently dragged his nails across Noah's scalp and shifted his foot, keeping his balance as a lot of Noah's considerable weight leaned against him. He coaxed Noah to let go of the leash he was holding so that they could wrap themselves around each other more easily. He was getting used to Noah against him and how much he liked it.

Bryce's eyes slid closed as he let the calm of the night settle over him, with nothing but the sounds of Noah breathing in his ear and the *click clack* of dog nails on the tiling floor.

"I don't know if you're allowed to have dogs here," Noah mumbled. "We can leave if—"

"It's fine," Bryce said. He had no idea if it was or not. He'd never had a dog, so he had no idea what the rental requirements were. He also didn't care. If they wanted to kick him out for having Rufus at his place one night, he'd take that on the chin.

"Are you hungry?" he asked. "I can make something?"

"Already ate."

Was he here for sex? Bryce didn't think so. Not if he'd brought Rufus. Not if all he was doing was *holding* Bryce. He looked like a man who needed sleep, not an orgasm.

"I have bedding and his bowls and stuff in the car," Noah said. "I just wasn't sure if..." He trailed off uncertainly.

If Bryce was going to turn him away at the door. Even if they weren't doing whatever they were doing, he would never do that to a friend. And maybe they weren't *friends*, but they were close enough Bryce figured it counted in instances like this.

When Bryce had asked him to stop midway through a fuck. Noah had taken a bath with him, surrounded by candles he'd made to remember his mother by.

Whatever they were, friend was a good enough word substitute.

Bryce took off Rufus's leash and showed him the rooms—all three of them if he counted the bathroom—so Rufus could check them out while Noah went downstairs to get the stuff. He found some leftover meat from a few nights ago that was still good and gave him some, along with a handful of grated cheese.

When Noah returned, they set up the dog bowls with some water and dry food and put Rufus's bed in Bryce's bedroom.

They stood awkwardly at the edge of Bryce's bed, and Bryce wasn't sure what the next move was. Were they just sleeping? Noah had never stayed the night before. Did Noah want to sleep on the couch? It was big enough for a guy his size to get a fairly decent-ish sleep.

Except Noah hadn't come there to sleep on Bryce's couch. If that was all he wanted, he had every single guy he played on a team with that he could have chosen. He could have even chosen Coop's bed since Bryce knew they'd shared a few times when the situation had called for it.

No. He'd come to *Bryce* specifically.

That was... Bryce's throat felt thick, and he had to swallow around the lump in it.

He hovered his fingers across Noah's chest, not touching. The heat radiating from Noah's body was like its own sauna.

He settled his hand over Noah's belt at the same time that he tilted his head. Noah's lips moved over his, warm and soft.

Bryce took his time undressing Noah, kissing every inch of his skin as he went. He'd seen Noah naked before. It had been what had started this entire thing. He'd spent a lot of time since then touching him. He was learning all the differences between the softness of a female and the softness of Noah. He wasn't a picture-perfect six-pack kind of athlete, and Bryce was glad for it. He loved the curves, and the padding of his stomach, and the strength in his thighs. The way that he was unapologetic about who he was and what he looked like. He didn't try to adhere to some kind of unrealistic standard and was comfortable in his own skin. Bryce admired that and enjoyed reaping the benefits of that confidence.

He slid to his knees to get Noah's pants off and spent some quality time nuzzling and kissing Noah's stomach. When he trailed his fingers behind Noah's knee, his leg twitched, and he made a noise.

Bryce grinned up at him. "Are you ticklish, Walker?"

"Just sensitive there."

Bryce kissed his knee. He laughed when he got to Noah's shoes and socks. "Forgot to take these off first."

"You're too old to only just be learning how getting undressed works."

"Better late than never."

Once Noah was completely naked—and his clothes were folded and placed on top of the chest of drawers—Bryce led him to the bed. Bryce made himself the big spoon, turning Noah over and wrapping him up like an octopus. He trapped Noah's legs beneath his as he swung his own around them and crossed his arms around Noah's chest from behind.

Every exhale of breath brushed across Bryce's forearm. He rested his forehead against the back of Noah's neck and closed his eyes.

A sudden weight at the end of the bed made them both freeze.

Noah groaned. "Rufus, down."

"No, it's okay," Bryce said. "He can stay." He didn't have any hang-ups about animals on the furniture. Okay, the idea of them making it dirty was a little bit twitchy for him, but if they were going to make it a habit, he would just get a throw blanket to put over it.

And something for his couch.

Maybe check his vacuum and get an upgrade if he needed to.

Noah ran the tips of his fingers across Bryce's arm, giving him goose bumps. He laced their fingers together and squeezed.

Bryce fell asleep with a dog draped over their legs and the comforting rise and fall of Noah's chest.





FINISHING THE THIRD QUARTER thirty-one points down at their home ground was not what Noah wanted to do with his Friday night. Especially not after the disgraceful loss two weeks earlier and the *draw* last week—Noah fucking *hated* draws with every fibre of his being.

This particular game should have been a cinch: they were playing a team three rungs lower on the ladder, who were on a three-game losing streak; the atmosphere of the crowd was with them—they were practically bursting at the seams with Sydney Swallows fans, a sea of blue and yellow in the stands—and the weather was great. It meant that no one had more of an advantage in terms of wind, or rain, or losing grip. That meant the one advantage there was—*home ground*—should have been theirs.

Going into the fourth quarter down by five goals and a behind, when it should have been theirs, was pissing Noah off. They'd had more shots on goal, spent considerably more time in their forward fifty. Instead of making the most of those opportunities, they'd completely fucked them up. Between the ball curving to the right—always the fucking *right*—and hitting the post more than should have been humanly possible, Noah was about to lose his fucking mind. They'd all played for long enough to work out where the fucking posts were. They didn't *move*.

Frustration ate at Noah like bugs under his skin. They were better than this. He *knew* they were better than this. Kira was performing better in defence than Noah had anticipated, but the same couldn't be said for Jaryd. He wasn't meant for the midfield, and his age was starting to show. It was a young man's game, jumping from one end of the field to the other like it was a mere steppingstone. The decision to move him had been a major fuckup, and they were all paying for it.

“We're better than this,” Forest said as they huddled together at three-quarter time, plucking the words from inside Noah's brain. “We can't be missing set shots like this. The pressure in our back end is tight; great job, keep it going. Wren, I want you to move forward more, get it to us in the pocket. Next time Laurence bumps you, *ignore* it. He's trying to get under your skin, and I know you want to give it back to him but give it back to him by getting the footy to us.”

Wren was a firecracker, on and off the field, and had a lot of the Monaghan traits that made him dangerous on the field. But his ability to know when to turn it off was impressive. Noah could see the fire in his eyes, the frustration and anger eating at him just like they were the rest of them. But he didn't backchat or mouth off. He nodded fiercely, determination set in his jaw, fingers tightening where he held Coop and Darcy on either side of him.

Forest gave him a tight smile and then looked at their ruckman. “Darcy, I want you finding open spaces, even when we don't need them. They're following you like a bad smell; give them something to chase. While they're focused on you,

we're going to set Jaryd up, in closer to us. Move it between us, keep it moving, keep it strong, don't bend to the pressure, make smarter decisions. Coop, Ravioli, if you don't have a good shot, or you aren't confident about it, hand it off. Find someone who is. We all have the angles we're best at. Let's get to those positions, give it to who we need to. It's not time to be selfish. It's a basic attack: one, two, three, pop it in." He looked around the huddle. "We can do this. Twenty minutes. Five goals. Let's make the crowd roar."

Noah felt pumped going into the fourth quarter. Five goals wasn't an unmanageable margin. They'd done it before. They could do it again.

They worked more seamlessly as a team, though they weren't perfect by any means. Still more fumbles than they should have. Missed marks, split-second decisions made by pure panic and pressure from the Brisbane Crocodiles' guys. Enough behinds to make Noah want to garrot himself.

They barely managed to even the score with thirty seconds left. They won by a point when Ravioli's after-the-siren kick veered right of centre. It hadn't been his best kick, but it hadn't been a miss either, and that's all they'd needed. They swallowed Ravioli up in a full-team hug, everyone reaching for him, and Wren getting through to the middle to lift him up from behind.

It felt fucking *good* to get a win, but the victory still didn't taste the way it should. They went through the motions on the field, but the atmosphere as they walked down the race and

back into their outer locker room wasn't the jubilation that normally accompanied a win. They'd lost the last two—Noah didn't count a draw as anything close to a win—and only just scraped through with this one.

They hadn't played their best, and it had almost cost them, and they had no one but themselves to blame for the poor effort. The festivities with family and friends in the room, and the media, were subdued and nothing like a win should have felt.

Noah could see his dad in the crowd, speaking to Darcy's parents and Ravioli's mum. He couldn't even begin to fathom what they could be talking about and honestly wasn't sure he wanted to know. It could have been world domination for all he knew.

They all ignored the lacklustre speech from Coach Novak in the inner locker room. It sounded like it had come from a manual written seventy years ago. He didn't know his asshole from his elbow, and Noah was thoroughly sick of how much he was fucking the entire team over. He was ready to pin someone's murder on him. The Swallows weren't the best team in the league, but they weren't contenders for the fucking wooden spoon either. The award given to the team on the bottom of the ladder at the end of the season had belonged to Port Melbourne the last two years, and they were heading that way again this year. The Swallows were middling, at best, but that didn't mean they didn't deserve a better coach than Novak.

“Darcy. Coop, Forest, and I are going to eat our weight in pizza. You in?” Wren asked. He slammed his locker shut and glared at it like he wished his leg were long enough to be able to lift and kick it for good measure. Should have taken a bottom one, then.

“Having dinner with my dad,” Noah said. He’d be waiting out in the parking lot by now, probably. “But have fun.”

“I’ll think of you when I’m holding Darce’s hair later while he pukes.”

Noah glanced to where Darcy and Coop were taking selfies and making stupid faces behind Forest, who was turned away and hadn’t noticed them. At least some of them were celebrating. “Thanks, I appreciate the thoughtfulness.”

“That’s me, so thoughtful.”

“Uh-huh.”

NOAH AND HIS DAD ended up at a place just around the corner from his dad’s house. It was a frequent haunt for them because they sold great pasta and beef burgers. It was important for Noah to refuel his body after a game—especially one that had taken everything from him like this one, and where he’d spent considerable time on the field—and so he ordered a burger, some chips, and a bowl of the pesto carbonara.

“Good game,” Patrick grunted, taking a long drink of the beer that he’d ordered. Some local brew on tap. Noah had

already had some chocolate milk at the stadium, so he decided on water. The idea of drowning his frustrations in alcohol was too tempting to risk it.

“Good game?” Noah repeated. He raised an eyebrow. In what realm had that been a good game? They’d been fucking *lucky* to win, and getting lucky wasn’t going to get them a flag.

“You don’t need me to tell you where the team went wrong,” Patrick said. “You’re a smart kid; I think you can work it out on your own.” It was the same philosophy he’d had when Noah had actually *been* a kid. Sometimes Noah wondered what it would have been like with his mother there as well. If her softness would have balanced out his dad’s gruffness. Would *Noah* have turned out differently? Would he be someone else entirely?

They were pointless questions but ones that occasionally kept him up at night when the rain on the roof made him restless.

“I want to tell you something,” Noah said, the words like knives in his throat.

“Okay? Go for it.” Patrick paused. “Don’t tell me you want to get traded to a Victorian team. Do you know how much airfares are? I’d have to move. Noah, I’d have to get a cat.”

Noah scrunched his face up in confusion. What? “Why would you have to get a cat?” The only animals they’d had when Noah was growing up were a bird that liked to bite the ends of Noah’s fingers and fish.

“It’s what you do when you make big life changes when you’re old.”

Noah still wasn’t following. “... since when?”

“I read it in a magazine.”

“Which one? Cat Lady 101?” Noah asked with a laugh.

“Is that a magazine? Do you think I can get it online? They have subscriptions online. Now *that’s* crazy. You can get anything online. Even—”

“Dad.”

Patrick cleared his throat. “Sorry. What is it you wanted to tell me?”

Noah had a momentary reprieve to gather his thoughts as their food was delivered. He smiled in that awkward, polite way as the server placed everything in front of him and murmured a quiet, “Thank you,” when they were done. He didn’t go as far as begging them to sit and stay with them, but it was close.

The second they were alone again—and he was so glad they’d chosen a quieter corner away from the other customers—he said, “Dad, I’m gay.” Easing into it wouldn’t work; he’d just chicken out. And Noah didn’t like to think that he was a coward.

Patrick faltered, fork midair. He stared at his food for a moment, nodded to himself, and then sat the fork on the edge of his plate. “You’ve been holding that in a while.”

At least that gave credence to Noah's theory that his dad already knew. "Yeah."

"Did you meet someone? Is that why you've decided to come out with it?"

Noah had to think about how to answer that. He and Bryce weren't serious. They weren't *dating* or falling in love. They were just having sex while Bryce was figuring things out. Falling for him would be one of the stupidest things Noah had ever done. "Uh. I met someone who made me want to be brave," Noah settled on. "He's... more courageous than I've ever given him credit for. He's true to himself in the moment in a way that I don't think I've ever been."

Patrick nodded. "He sounds like a good bloke."

"He is." Which was something that Noah hadn't thought he'd ever say in his lifetime. A compliment for *Bryce Monaghan*. Somewhere in the world, something was icing over that shouldn't be.

"You could have told me."

"I know." And he did know. His dad had been nothing but supportive of him his whole life. And Noah couldn't think of a single moment where he'd said or done anything to make Noah think that he wouldn't be supportive in this either. He'd always been an ally. Not just to the queer community but to the world in general. Helping those weaker, lifting those in need, encouraging Noah to always speak kindly because one never knew what people were going through. They were all



traits that Noah had always admired and looked up to. Ones he had always tried to emulate.

Fear was rarely rational or logical.

He'd known, but he hadn't been *sure*. And if he never said anything, then it couldn't go wrong.

"When I was twenty-three, I was living on campus at university," Patrick said, pushing around his chicken. "And I met someone there. Not your mum. That was after. And they... you think that the lightning-strike kind of love only hits you once in a lifetime."

Noah twirled some carbonara around his fork and stuck it in his mouth as he listened. He had no idea where his dad was going with this.

"I loved your mum, more than life itself. There's a hole there that won't ever be filled. But I've been hit twice. With lightning."

"I haven't—what?" He didn't want to get struck by lightning. That sounded painful. And messy. "Why are we talking about the weather?"

"Falling in love," Patrick clarified.

"Right... maybe could we use a different analogy? Without deathly weather?"

Patrick laughed. "Okay. Yes. That's fair."

Noah put his fork down. "I don't understand. Why are you telling me this? If you were so... struck... in love or whatever.

You married mum. You had me.”

Patrick nodded. “I did. We did.”

If Noah was supposed to be following here, he was completely lost. “Did you find them again? Are you telling me you’re dating or something?” What did that have to do with Noah being gay?

“No, no.”

“So, then...?”

“I’m getting to the point.”

Was he, though?

“Sometimes the timing isn’t right.” Patrick shrugged. “He had big plans, and I had... smaller ones.”

Noah almost bit his tongue. “Ex-excuse me? Did you just say—?”

“I wish that you had felt like you could tell me. And I’m sorry that I ever made you feel like you couldn’t. I’ll always love you, no matter what. And if your mother were still here, she’d say the same thing.”

Noah bit his lip and stared down at his food, heat prickling at the back of his eyes. He wasn’t going to cry in public, because it would be just his luck that that was when someone would take a picture, and then it would be in the paper and become a *thing*. “Cool. Uh—thanks, Dad.” Nothing at all strange to learn, at twenty-eight, that his dad was bisexual. “Are you—dating someone?” Fuck, this was awkward.

“No, nothing like that.”

“Okay.” *Good?* Noah didn’t know if that was good. His dad wasn’t that old. He didn’t know how he’d feel about it, but it wasn’t like he wanted him to spend the rest of his life alone.

Noah took another bite of his pasta so he didn’t have to think of something to say.

Patrick cleared his throat. “Okay. Good talk.” He chewed absently on a piece of chicken. “Do you think I should get a cat?”



## Third Quarter

NOAH CHECKED HIS WATCH for the seventh time in half an hour. Bryce wasn't answering his phone, and he wasn't going to admit that he was starting to worry. Bryce wasn't a stickler for being on time, not in the way he was about wiping the benches sixteen times a day, but he wasn't normally *late* late.

Rufus stood, sat, stood again. Wagged his tail and looked questioningly at Noah.

"This is not my fault," Noah said. "We're giving him five more minutes, okay? And then we'll go. I'll even do an extra lap for you."

Rufus had no idea what Noah was saying, of course, but he knew the word "lap," and his tail furiously wagged in response to it. Noah patted his head. He let out a heavy sigh and pushed off his car. He popped the boot and dragged the bag he kept all Rufus's run toys in towards himself. Rufus jumped up into the back and sniffed his hands as he found the tennis balls and pocketed three of them. He pulled out a dental chew next and

gave it over to Rufus. Rufus stretched out across the blanket laid out for him and chewed on it, happy as a lark.

*Finally*, Bryce's car came into view, squealing into the parking lot of the park they'd agreed to meet at. Bryce smoothly slid into the spot next to them and jumped out, looking like he'd gone a few rounds with electricity. And lost.

"I slept in," he blurted out. "My alarm didn't go off. Okay, it might have, but sometimes I turn it off in my sleep? I keep telling myself to get one where I have to get up and go to the other side of the room, but then I forget and—" He stopped abruptly when Noah tugged him forward by his waistband.

Noah smiled at the sight of him.

His bright red curls were sticking up in every direction, and there was a smear of dried toothpaste at the corner of his mouth. Hints of sheet lines were visible on his cheek, giving his freckles an almost 3D look.

"Your shirt is inside out," Noah said. "Let me help you." He took his time sliding his hands down Bryce's back, feeling every muscle and dip. He scrunched the hem of the shirt in his hands, holding tight there for a beat as he pressed their bodies together. Bryce stared wide-eyed at him, a flush across his cheeks and lips parted tantalisingly.

Noah brushed his knuckles up Bryce's spine as he dragged the shirt up. Bryce made a small sound that had Noah licking his lips. Bryce was so responsive to everything that Noah did. It was an ego boost.

Pulling the shirt over Bryce's hair only made his curls stick up even more. They were an absolutely chaotic mess, and Noah didn't want to do anything to fix them. He liked watching them bounce in... more than one situation.

"I thought you were a morning person," Noah said.

"I am... when I want to be."

Noah smiled as he fixed the shirt and then dropped it back over Bryce's head. The second his head emerged again, Noah kissed him, tasting the surprised gasp. Hints of mint and what might have been strawberry yoghurt burst on Noah's tongue. Refreshing and sweet.

Rufus barked at them, and Bryce pulled back with a laugh. He ran a hand through his hair, which only made it worse, and said sheepishly, "Sorry. I was going to text, but I... can't find my phone."

"Can't find your phone?" That didn't sound like Bryce at all, who had a place for everything and was anal about cleanliness.

"Coop had it. Don't ask. I'll need to go over his place with a fine-tooth comb later. What is this place anyway?" Bryce asked. "I'm not telling Coop I went somewhere called 'Cooper Park,' by the way."

"The name is pretty self-explanatory," Noah said as he locked his car. "It's a park."

Bryce just looked at him.

"You've never been here?" Noah made sure that Rufus's leash and chest harness were secured and not twisted or sitting

uncomfortably. Or too loose. Last time they had been too loose, the little bugger had worked it out and waited until the right opportunity to slip out of them. The “right opportunity” being when he’d seen a rabbit and given chase. The rabbit had easily gotten away from the lunatic dog but getting him back and settled had been a nightmare.

“Have *you* been everywhere in Sydney? You’ve lived here longer than me.”

Since they’d both been born and bred here, Noah knew there was an underlying tease to his words. “Is that an age quip?”

“A little bit, yeah.”

“I’m five years older than you, Bryce, not fifty.” He had enough trouble keeping up with some of the younger guys on the team and their ever-changing language and trends. Bryce wasn’t in that category, and Noah would prefer it stay that way. “This place has a great running track, and dogs are allowed. If I come up in the afternoons, there’s a turfed sports ground that Rufus can run in unleashed. Barracluff Park, about ten minutes from here, is off leash all day, so we’ll jog through here and then up that way, where he can have a run. And then head back, full circle. Think you can handle that?”

“Are you challenging me?” Bryce asked with a devilish grin. “Do *you* think you can keep up with *me*?”

“It’s a friendly jog, Bryce.” Noah was only competitive when he walked out through the race, not in any other aspects of his life. And that five-year age gap could make a hell of a difference when it came to how important Thursday rest day



was. A jog and a swim, and sometimes a massage, were as much as Noah would do before he rested the remainder of the day. His muscles needed it before the lead-up to the weekend.

“Why don’t you just go to Sydney Park?”

“Here is closer.”

“By what, five minutes?” Bryce asked with a laugh. “Aren’t there places closer than here?”

“We like it here,” Noah said, irritation pricking at him. “Do you want to jog with us or not?” Bryce could have just said he didn’t want to when Noah had invited him.

“I’m here, aren’t I?” Bryce fell into step beside Noah and bent a little to pat Rufus as they walked.

“Late.”

“I said I was sorry. Do you need, like, a coffee? Or a hug? A cug?”

“A what?” Maybe he needed to rethink the language age barrier.

“A coffee and a hug.”

“You just made that up.” He definitely had. Noah wasn’t *that* far out of touch. He hoped.

“I did, but doesn’t it sound great?” Noah heard the smile in Bryce’s voice without having to look over at the redhead.

It didn’t matter if it *sounded* great or not. How would it even work?

“C’mon,” Noah said. “Rufus is going to bite our legs off if he doesn’t get going soon.”

Bryce laughed as they began their jog, slow and steady while Rufus took the lead.

The silence grew as they made their way down the track in Cooper Park. He and Rufus liked it because it was as close to a national park as they could get since dogs weren’t permitted in those areas. Rufus liked sniffing all the trees, and Noah loved how much it felt like they were somewhere else entirely instead of in the heart of Sydney, with all of the bustle of city life around them. If he blocked everything else out, all they had left were trees, foliage, blue skies, and the heat of the sun following them.

“So, hey,” Bryce huffed as they jogged. He was barely winded, and Noah wondered how much it would take to get him to start sweating. The idea of a sweaty Bryce almost caused Noah to trip. That was what he needed: to have to explain to his coach that he twisted his ankle because he was too busy having sexy fantasies to concentrate properly whilst on a run.

“Hey, what?” Noah asked, shaking himself out of it.

“What are you doing for the bye weekend?”

Noah took his time answering. Most of his team knew he went away for the weekend that they got off in the middle of the season, when all the teams rotated having a week off in a four-week block. It was his weekend to be by himself, without the pressure that playing professional sport brought with it.

With the ups and downs of the current season, Noah needed it more than ever.

“I go camping,” Noah said eventually.

“Cool.” Bryce let the subject drop after that, and the relief inside Noah was somehow tinged with a level of guilt, nudging at his tender spots.

Bryce kept the chitchat to a minimum as they made their way through the park and then up towards Barracluff Park. Noah preferred it that way; talking and running weren't his favourite way to exercise. He liked running with Coop because they were of the same mindset. It was nice to have someone next to him, but conversation was a line they didn't cross. Darcy was frustrating to jog with because he stopped to look at everything. The easiest way to avoid it was to take him to their training ground and do laps of the oval with him. It was a double-edged sword: he didn't get distracted, but it was pretty fucking boring. Wren didn't stop talking, and Jaryd liked to critique Noah's technique, as if the two of them hadn't been jogging together for almost a decade.

Bryce was a pleasant in-between. A few spurts of conversation here and there but nothing that made Noah want to trip him. Listening to his voice was soothing, and Noah liked his company.

They let Rufus off his leash at Barracluff and found a spot to stretch while he ran around and chased flies. Noah checked the rapidly greying skies, keeping track of the way it was darkening. The sun had disappeared about ten minutes ago.

The last thing they wanted was to be caught in the downpour on their way back to their cars.

“Do you want to come with me?” Noah asked before his mind could shut the question down.

“Come with you where?” Bryce glanced at him, stretched down his leg, fingers wrapped around his foot, and pulled his toes backwards. “Oh. Camping?”

Noah nodded, eyes tracing Bryce’s straining muscles. Fuck, he was beautifully built.

“When you say ‘camping,’ do you mean full-out roughing it or like a campsite with running water and cabins?”

Noah burst out laughing. “Roughing it, Bryce.” He nudged Bryce’s side with his shoe. “It’s not camping if you sleep in a cabin. You’ve never gone camping in your life, have you?”

“No,” Bryce said with a scoff, twisting to stretch across the opposite leg. “Can you see the Monaghans camping, seriously? First sign of a snake or a bug, and we would be out of there.” He grinned. “Either because Wren decided he wanted to wage war on the wildlife, or Dad wouldn’t get out of the tree. And as Australians, I think we embarrassed ourselves enough when we *lost* the emu war, okay? Let’s not add to the disgrace.”

“You’re so spoiled.” Why Noah found that endearing was a cause of great concern.

“What do I need to bring?”

Noah assumed that was a yes, then. He'd never invited anyone with him before, never *wanted* to. He wanted to show Bryce the places he hiked in Mystery Bay, where he always set up camp, the places that Rufus liked to spend quality time sniffing. The sights and smells and sounds of the outback surrounding them. He wanted to share those things with Bryce.

And *that* was a big problem.

Noah ran his fingers up through Bryce's curls, cold softness running across his skin. "I'll bring the necessities, and we'll do a shop for food when we get there; I like to shop locally when I go, and it saves having to keep it cold and safe during the long drive. All you have to do is bring yourself, your clothes, and toiletries." He was digging his hole willingly and couldn't seem to stop.

"Long drive?" Bryce asked sceptically. "Aren't there places nearby?"

"Yeah." He was sure there were even if he'd never visited any of them. "But that's not where we're going."

"Vague. Nice. That's hot."

Noah chuckled and bent across, kissing Bryce slowly. "Relax. I'll even help you pack."

"Well, in that case, how can I say no?"

Noah smiled against Bryce's mouth. He knew that he was losing the ability to say no to this man, and his brain was screaming "danger" while the rest of him was screaming "yes."

He had a bad feeling about which one was going to win out.

It didn't matter. That was future Noah's problem. Right now, he would enjoy it for what it was.



BRYCE COULD NOT BELIEVE that he was staring down at an actual paper map. “What am I supposed to do with this?”

Noah chuckled. “Nothing.”

Bryce glared and then haphazardly folded it, shoving it back into the glove box. “You're an asshole.”

“You're the one that believed me,” Noah said, glancing at Bryce before laughing at whatever expression he saw on his face.

“You said you needed help!” Bryce said defensively. He'd asked Bryce to navigate, and Bryce had been willing to give it a go. There was an almost one-hundred-percent guarantee he would have gotten them lost, but he would have made a valiant effort. That had to count for something.

Noah cleared his throat. The cheeky smirk on his face didn't go anywhere, though. “I appreciate that you were willing to do that for me. I go here every year, we don't need directions, and we're not going to get lost, promise.”

Bryce sat back in his seat with a huff. Pleasure raced up his spine as the plug in his ass shifted. His fingers twitched. He glanced at Noah under his eyelashes, hoping he hadn't noticed.

The hungry look in his eyes said he'd noticed. Damn.

“Are you wearing it?” Noah asked slyly.

“No,” Bryce lied. Quite convincingly if anyone asked. When Noah had asked him over the phone to wear a plug while they travelled, he'd said an emphatic *no fucking way*. Even that husky, deep voice of his that never failed to turn Bryce on—how he'd listened to it for *years* and not turned into a puddle of goo he had no idea—hadn't convinced him to put something up his ass for a five-hour trip in the car.

None of that had seemed to stop him from awkwardly bracing himself with one foot on the closed toilet lid while he lubed himself up and put it in that morning. It was bigger than the first one they'd bought. Two sizes bigger as he'd been wearing them for a few hours a few times a week on his active recovery days and was working his way up. Noah enjoyed putting it in for him, but since he hadn't been planning to let Noah know until much later that he was even wearing it, he'd had to improvise and work it out himself.

It had been nice, and he'd even gotten hard and stroked himself to orgasm. Even so, it hadn't been anywhere near as satisfying as it was when Noah was wrapped around him and whispering filthy things in his ears.

“You're lying to me.”

“You can't prove that.” The one in Bryce's ass was the biggest they'd bought, and while smaller than Noah's considerable size, it was the closest to the real thing. Thinking how close he was to convincing Noah that he was ready to try

again had heat flushing over him. Movement, including all the potholes in the road and the gravel coating some of the rougher stretches, reminded him that it was there and had him aching.

“Which one?” Noah asked. “The one I fucked you with last night?”

Fucking *dammit*, he hadn’t needed that reminder when he was struggling to keep himself under control as it was.

“I just told you—”

“I can tell you’re wearing it, Brye.”

“How?” Bryce scoffed. He could fucking not, the liar.

“You’re blushing.”

“I’m always blushing.” It was basically his default setting, and he blamed his pale skin for it. His response to anything that made him feel any kind of emotion was to turn a bright, putrid red.

“Yeah, but they’re different,” Noah reasoned. “You have the happy blush, then the angry blush, the flustered blush, and my favourite, the turned-on blush.”

“You’re making all of this up,” Bryce muttered.

Noah stretched an arm across the back of Bryce’s seat, trailing the backs of his fingers down Bryce’s neck. The flush deepened, and his groin pulsed. It was an automatic reaction now, every time Noah got within a foot of him. The fact that Noah was so expertly guiding the car with one hand on the



wheel was not a factor in how hot he was to Bryce that second. At all.

“It’s a different red. Sweeter.” Noah’s fingers slid across the front of Bryce’s throat from behind, circling his Adam’s apple. “Tastier.” He pulled his arm back, switching to the other side of Bryce’s neck so he could palm Bryce’s chest and move further down. He’d cupped Bryce in his pants before Bryce could react or think to stop him.

“I’m not lying about the blushes, but the boner you’ve been sporting since we got in the car is a dead giveaway.”

“Fuck off.”

Noah massaged him, and Bryce bit back a moan as lust flooded him. It had been difficult enough to ignore his erection without Noah making it worse.

“We’re not doing *anything* while you’re driving, you maniac!” Bryce spluttered.

Noah laughed. “Relax. If I want to fuck you, I’ll pull the car over and do it in the back seat.”

“Rufus is in the boot,” Bryce hissed.

“He’ll only look mildly concerned that I’m hurting you.” Noah’s smile was full of sinful promises. “While you scream.”

Bryce could feel himself blushing again even while internally scoffing that he didn’t have different *types* of blushes. What a load of horseshit. “We are not having sex while your dog watches!”

“So many rules, Bryce.”

“Just focus on the road.”

“Bossy today.”

Bryce rolled his eyes. “Are we there yet?” he drawled.

Noah craned his neck to look at the centre console screen.

“Only another four hours.”

Ugh. It felt like they’d been driving four hours already, and it had only been one. “Why do you go so far away?” he grumbled.

“We used to take trips here when my mum was alive. After she died, Dad didn’t make the effort anymore. Visual reminders of memories are hard, and when it’s fresh it’s worse. And then we just never picked it back up. After I graduated high school and I was drafted into the AFL, I took off one weekend and found myself there, and now I visit every year. Dad buries the reminders, but I like to hold them close.”

“I guess you wouldn’t have as many as him.” Seven was young to lose a parent.

“No.”

“He doesn’t talk about it much?”

Noah shrugged. “It’s hard for him.”

It sounded like it was hard for Noah too, except that he embraced the pain instead of shying away from it. Bryce had never lost anyone close to him and didn’t really know how it felt and whether what Noah was doing was better or worse

than what his dad was doing. Bryce chewed on his lip.  
“Sorry.”

“It’s all right. It’s a long trip. We’re about half an hour from Wollongong, and we can stop there and have a bite to eat, stretch our legs, and take Rufus for a quick walk.”

“Sounds good.”

Noah twined their fingers together and kissed Bryce’s hand before resting them on his thigh. Bryce looked out the window, wondering absently what his blush said about him right now. Probably something stupid.

He watched the landscape go by, accompanied by Rufus’s panting out the window and the barely audible sounds of whatever radio station Noah had put on.

Even with the plug in his ass, and his cock aching, he drifted off to sleep in minutes

SEVEN HOURS LATER, AND Bryce was beginning to work out why his family had never chosen camping for their holiday activity. The trip to get there had taken at least twenty years. They’d spent a good half an hour longer than necessary at the shops because Noah had to stop to talk to everyone. He wouldn’t have pegged the guy for a social butterfly, but he stood corrected. It was like trying to get his parents to stop talking to all the other parents when they picked him and his siblings up from school. It should have been an Olympic sport: who could get their parents in the car the quickest. Bryce

wouldn't have won, but Monica had been getting pretty good at it by the time they'd all graduated. Too bad she'd graduated earlier than them and hadn't shared her secrets.

Once they finally got to the campsite—after stopping to buy firewood from the caretakers and spending extra minutes *also* talking nonstop—there was still so much to do. Putting up the tent had been a lesson in restraint, and Bryce had been ready to put the pegs somewhere unpleasant inside Noah not even halfway into it. Rufus kept jumping on the tent every time they were ready to get another piece up. Of course Noah had a complicated tent that was basically a small house with fabric walls.

Bryce thanked the footy gods that Noah had a pump for the queen-sized blowup mattress because if he'd had to do that by blowing in a hole—he was too tired to even insert a fun joke in there—he would have died. It was like Wren's twelfth birthday, when he'd insisted on a roomful of balloons. They'd tried their best, and Bryce wouldn't have been surprised to learn that their family home still had balloons floating around from that party. Ghost balloons, haunting the premises forever.

Bryce flopped face-first on the now-made-up bed. He'd had no idea that anyone used *sheets* when camping, but here he was. A blowup mattress with a sheet, two large extra-insulated sleeping bags zipped together in one monster sleeping bag, and pillows that honestly looked like heaven right now. He would have killed someone to get his hands on them. Luckily, they were right here for the taking. No bloodshed required.

Bryce blindly reached up to find one and dragged it towards himself, propping it under his head and neck. Maybe Noah wouldn't notice if he just went to sleep here. There couldn't be much more to do, surely? The big guy was getting the fire pit ready, and the fire started, and setting up the table and chairs and shit. Maybe he was building another house out there. Bryce had no idea, and he didn't really care.

Rufus shoved his wet nose into Bryce's cheek, and Bryce growled in annoyance. He grimaced as a tongue licked across his face.

"Gross," he complained, wiping his cheek with the back of his sleeve. "Rufus, go... chase a kangaroo."

"Chase a kangaroo?" Noah said from behind him. "He's on a leash. It's long but not that long. How far do you think he'd get?"

"Don't care," Bryce mumbled. There was a mild burning on his face that let him know he hadn't put enough sunscreen on. He hated the outdoors. Why had he agreed to come here? The sun wasn't even out, and he knew he was going to burn. Even if they got rained on—which was a possibility since Noah had chosen the weirdest time of the year to camp—he would *still* get burnt.

Noah said, "Rufus, on your bed. Take a nap. We'll go for a walk in a bit," followed by the sounds of a zipper. Noah must have been putting Rufus in the entrance section of the tent. Of course, the tent had an *entrance*, like they were in some kind of palace.

They could go for the walk by themselves. Bryce wasn't moving from this spot.

"Tired, baby?"

"F'ff." Full words were too much work. He was tired. Hungry. Cranky. All the movement kept shifting the plug in his ass, and he wanted to take it out and maybe have a super-quick wank, but there hadn't been any *time*. So many terrible choices had been made leading up to this point.

Warm hands ran up Bryce's calves, massaging them lightly. Bryce moaned, his fingers fisting in the pillow. Damn, that was good.

Noah's hands moved up his thighs and stopped on Bryce's ass. A thumb brushed over the base of the plug, and Bryce shivered.

"How's it feel?" Noah asked, voice deep.

"Tender." Fucking unbelievably sensitive and so good.

"Why don't I take care of that for you?"

Bryce lifted his hips a fraction so that Noah could pull his shorts and underwear down his legs.

"Turn over for me?"

"Now you want me to *help*?"

Noah chuckled. "Just once, and then you can sit back and relax."

Okay, that was... acceptable. It took some effort, but Bryce rolled himself over, exposing himself to Noah. The way that

Noah was looking down at him, heat and awe in his gaze, made Bryce's stomach flip.

Noah pushed Bryce's shirt up his chest and then kissed and licked across it. Bryce felt worshipped, and it fuelled the lust that was quickly taking over his entire system.

The plug was pulled out halfway, and Bryce squirmed, a mixture of empty and full in his ass the strangest sensation.

Noah pushed it back in, and Bryce moaned. *Fuck*. Noah did it again. Bryce scrambled to find purchase on the air mattress as pleasure made him dizzy. His walls were tender and pleasantly sore, and every thrust of the plug in and out was ecstasy and torture. His cock was smearing pre-cum over his stomach, and he couldn't bring himself to care.

He twisted onto his stomach and then lifted himself up onto his knees so he could raise his ass higher and beg for more.

"You want something else, Bry?" Noah asked huskily, sliding his hand across the curve of Bryce's ass.

"I want you to fuck me," Bryce gasped. He wanted to feel Noah inside him, hot and heavy and moving. Wanted a piece of Noah inside him, owning him.

The plug slid out, and Bryce's ass clenched involuntarily, like it was trying to keep it in. After having it in so many hours, Bryce was empty, and he needed something more.

Noah's fingers replaced the plug, at least three of them, and Bryce bit his lip on a cry, bowing his head forward and pushing his hips back, wanting Noah deeper and harder.

“It’s not—not enough,” Bryce choked out.

“You want another finger in you?” Noah asked. He smothered Bryce, his large body pressed against Bryce’s back. The weight was a comforting presence that only made Bryce harder and the need stronger.

“I want your dick,” Bryce said, the words falling out of his mouth the same way his brain was coming out of his ears. “I want your cock in my ass.”

“Look at you, trying to talk dirty.”

“Fuck off,” Bryce bit out. He didn’t care what he sounded like, how desperate and needy, so long as Noah gave him what he wanted. He’d been stretching out his ass for weeks for this moment, and he didn’t want to wait another second longer. He wanted it *now*.

Noah mouthed Bryce’s ear, his tongue tracing around it. “It’s fucking hot, Bryce. Next time one of us travels, I want to hear it in my ear, I want it wrapped around me while I get myself off to the sound of your voice.”

“Good—good plan,” Bryce said on a shudder. Yeah, that was—they were definitely doing that in a few weeks when Bryce headed to Melbourne again. “Right now, I have other plans.”

Noah kissed the back of his neck and then dragged his tongue from the top of Bryce’s spine all the way to the bottom. Bryce trembled so hard the bed wobbled, and his knees almost gave out. “Not yet, Bryce. Soon.”



“Fuck your soon,” Bryce protested. “I need—*ah*”—Noah’s bite on his cheek was a pleasant sting, and he rocked back into it—“I’m ready, Noah. You have to trust that I wouldn’t say that if I wasn’t.” He hadn’t meant for that to sound as serious as it had, but it was the truth. If Noah couldn’t trust that Bryce knew his own boundaries, that he had learned from their first attempt that forcing it wasn’t going to work, then they needed to rethink what they were doing. Bryce refused to be less than equal in this arrangement. He’d started it, and he was part of it, and Noah didn’t get to decide on his own how it all shook out.

Noah’s forehead pressed against Bryce’s lower back, breath hot against his skin. His fingers retreated from Bryce’s ass.

Bryce twisted around, anger flickering. “Now we’re just not doing anything?” he asked incredulously. “Are you fucking serious?”

Noah cupped his cheek and kissed him. Bryce should have turned away, pushed him away, done anything except accept it with reckless abandon. Bryce had become weak for these touches, for the way Noah made him feel like they were the only two people in the universe when they kissed. Did Noah feel that way when they kissed? Was it earth shattering for him, the way it was for Bryce?

Were they in this together?

“Okay,” Noah said. “First, let me set up something on the floor.”

Bryce shifted, turning to sit more comfortably on the mattress as Noah stood. “Why?” he asked. He shifted when

Noah gathered the giant double sleeping bag, gently tugging it out from under Bryce.

Bryce was aching, tender, and wanted Noah's cock in his ass right now. Why was Noah moving *away* from him?

"Have you ever had sex on an air mattress?" Noah asked.

"... no?" He assumed there was probably a trick to it, but the one that Noah had was good quality. Unless Bryce moved too much, it felt like a regular mattress.

"Let's not tick that off the list for your first time."

Bryce leaned back, arching his chest and bracing himself on his hands. "Okay? Noah, I don't even fucking care right now. Hurry up, so I can get your cock in me."

Noah visibly swallowed and sped up his movements. Bryce watched through half-lidded eyes as Noah laid a sheet down on the ground, then the sleeping bags, layered over four times.

Apparently satisfied, Noah turned his attention back to Bryce and lifted him to his feet, kissing him greedily. Bryce moaned and gathered Noah's shirt against his back and then lifted it. The second it was up and over Noah's head, their lips crashed back together.

They fell awkwardly in a tangle of limbs against the pile that Noah had made, both unwilling to let go. It was an issue that was becoming increasingly problematic. The second that he touched Noah, his brain turned off, and all he wanted was another fix.

Bryce pushed Noah to his back and straddled his hips. “Can we do it this way?”

Noah’s fingers tightened almost painfully on Bryce’s hips. Bryce would wear the bruises with pride. “Can we—” Noah cleared his throat. “You want to ride me, Bryce?”

Bryce shuffled down to Noah’s hips so that his cock was right there for his viewing pleasure. It was rock hard, dripping and hovering above Noah’s stomach. The sheer size of it made Bryce’s mouth water. He hadn’t been able to appreciate the size in his ass the first time they’d attempted this, because Bryce had been too far in his own head about the entire thing.

He had plans to make up for lost time, and he wanted it in him now.

Bryce picked up the lube from where it had fallen during Noah’s floor-bed-making jaunt and flicked the top open. “Condom?”

Noah froze, and then his eyes closed in horror. “*Fuck.*”

Bryce’s mouth dropped open. “You don’t have any on you?”

“I wasn’t planning on having sex this weekend. Why would I bring condoms?”

“You brought lube!” Why would he bring lube and *not* condoms?

“Rubbing one out is not the same as having sex.”

“I didn’t say it was.”

“Why are we arguing right now?”

“Because I want your dick in me yesterday, and you didn’t bring condoms!”

Noah ran a hand down his face. “There are other things we can do. I’ll make it up to you, I promise.”

Bryce didn’t want *other things*. “Are you... is it... can we...?” Bryce licked his bottom lip. “Can we still do this?”

Noah’s dick twitched. The pearl of pre-cum on the mushroomed head was distracting, and Bryce wanted to lick it.

“We both get regular medicals. We’re not being irresponsible.”

“We’re being extremely irresponsible,” Noah said. “I’ve never had sex without a condom.”

“Neither have I.”

Bryce’s eyes stayed locked on Noah’s as he drizzled the lube over Noah’s hard dick. “We’re about to.” It wasn’t like they were strangers. They had known each other for years. Bryce hadn’t always particularly *liked* Noah. That didn’t seem to matter anymore. He trusted Noah. He didn’t know why or how it had started, but he knew it with absolute certainty, and he wanted this.

Heat flared in Noah’s eyes, his pupils dilating. “We should wait until we get home. It’s only two nights.”

“We should,” Bryce agreed. They weren’t going to. He could see it in the way that Noah was looking at him. The desperate need was mutual. Waiting wasn’t an option.

Bryce spread the lube down Noah's impressive length. He might have gone overboard with the lube, especially since his ass was already well lubed and stretched out from having the plug in it all day, but he didn't want to take the chance that it would hurt again, and he would have to stop. From the research he'd done, it wasn't *supposed* to hurt—unless that was the point, but Bryce was pretty sure he wasn't into that kind of thing—and he wanted it to feel good. The plugs had felt great, and he knew that Noah was going to feel a million times better.

“I want this,” Bryce whispered hoarsely. The question was clear in his voice. *Don't you?*

“Ride me.”

That was all Bryce needed. He braced one hand on Noah's chest, the other wrapped around Noah's shaft as he lifted himself up. Noah kept him steady with the grip on his hips, holding tight and taking some of the strain from Bryce's legs.

Bryce bit his lip, unable to look away from the warm brown of Noah's gaze as the head of his cock slipped past the muscles of Bryce's ass. His legs shook as he lowered himself excruciatingly slowly, feeling every thick inch of Noah against his walls as he was filled.

They were both panting when Bryce's hips settled flush against Noah's. Bryce's pulse beat wildly in his throat. He was so fucking *full*, and it was incredible. Like the plugs, only so much fucking better. It was like every pleasure point in his

body had all moved to the one spot, and Noah was pressed right on it.

Noah shifted, and Bryce cried out at the sudden cascade of pleasure that rolled over him. “Wait,” he groaned out, throwing his head back as he shuddered. *Fuck*. Why had they waited so long to try this again? “Give me—I need a minute.”

Noah froze. “Does it hurt? Bryce, we don’t have to—”

“No,” Bryce said, voice strained from the tightness in his throat. “It isn’t that. I just—I’m gonna come, and I don’t want to. Not yet.”

Bryce rolled his hips and almost blacked out. *Holy fucking Christ on a cracker*.

A hand ran up his chest, tweaked his nipple gently, and then moved further up to palm the side of his neck. “Come here,” Noah said hoarsely. He lifted his upper half as Bryce bent down, and their lips met in the middle. Bryce kissed Noah desperately as he moved up and down on Noah’s dick, the constant empty-full-empty-full feeling overwhelming. His dick was leaking like a sieve and right on the edge, flirting with the precipice. The buildup from having his ass pleased all day, and being surrounded by Noah, was going to have him blowing his load way too soon. But he couldn’t help it. The smell of Noah, the feel and heat of him, was fuel for every desire he hadn’t even known that he’d had. Noah was oxygen itself, and Bryce was starting to need him more than was healthy.

Noah cradled the back of his head as Bryce moved, taking every inch of him inside, over and over. He wished he could sink deeper, needed everything that Noah had to give.

Bryce wrapped his arms around Noah, hanging on as Noah took over, fucking up into him from below in slow, steady strokes. He lifted his knees, pressing them against Bryce's back and changing the angle of his dick.

“*Ohfuckfuckfuck,*” Bryce cried out, open mouth against Noah's shoulder as Noah hit the spot inside of him that had him seeing stars. “*Rightthere!* Please, please,” he begged, uncaring how unhinged and delirious he sounded. “Don't stop.”

Noah took his mouth in a wet, all-consuming kiss and rolled them over, pressing his weight against Bryce. Every thrust was a direct line to Bryce's dick, and he was so fucking close he could feel it in his chest. *So close.*

The first touch of Noah's hand around his dick was all it took for him to explode. He arched his back, yelling Noah's name for the entire campsite to hear as he came. Noah fucked him through the aftershocks, Bryce's entire body trembling as the head of Noah's cock swept against his sweet spot on every snap of his hips.

Bryce gathered Noah closer to him, wrapping arms and legs around him, their sweaty chests sliding together as Noah reached for his own release. Warmth flooded him as Noah buried his face in Bryce's neck and groaned loudly, his hip movements hard and jerky as he emptied himself inside Bryce.

Bryce had never felt more powerful than he did in that moment. Having Noah's weight on top of him, dick inside him, and his cum coating his walls... there was something obscenely powerful about it. Something that no spectacular goal, or game win, or even premiership flag, could top.

Here, in this moment, with Noah sweaty and panting against him, hot breath and tangled limbs, Bryce found a piece of himself he hadn't even known was missing.

He was content and happy and fulfilled. He never wanted to let go.

And that was a dangerous thought. That wasn't part of their arrangement. Noah had offered his body, not his heart, and Bryce couldn't afford to give his own by himself.

Bryce ran his fingers up and down Noah's back, the tips tingling from the contact. "I think that was a much better attempt," he remarked in an effort to shake himself out of his thoughts. They were unhelpful and not worth thinking about. No one's hearts were getting involved. His imagination was running away with him.

Noah laughed, chest vibrating against Bryce's. "Something we can agree on."

"That doesn't mean we shouldn't have more baths." Bryce's fingers paused. "Right?"

"They aren't only allowed in traumatic situations."

"It wasn't traumatic. Don't be so dramatic."



Noah carded his fingers through Bryce's hair, catching lightly on his curls. "I hurt you, Bryce. It was traumatic for *me*."

Bryce tipped his head back and pushed at Noah's chest, forcing their eyes to find one another. "It wasn't like that. Yes, it hurt. But it wasn't... No one was at fault. I rushed it because I thought it had to be a certain way, or you wouldn't want to keep doing it. Which is on me—don't even try to interrupt me."

Noah's mouth closed though it curled up at the sides like he was trying not to laugh. "Not interrupting."

"That was an interruption."

"I was interrupting to tell you that I wasn't going to interrupt."

Bryce laughed. Noah's quiet humour was a bright light. Everything about him was. Yeah, he was hot and had a body worth salivating over, and Bryce wasn't sure what he was going to do when they went their separate ways, and he wasn't allowed to touch anymore, but it was Noah himself that Bryce had a feeling he was going to miss. That humour, his dry wit, the way he could turn anything into an argument, the dedication to his career, to the memory of his mother, and his weird love of camping, which Bryce didn't think he was ever going to understand. Even his annoying habit of channel flicking.

"Why is it called Mystery Bay?" he asked suddenly.

Noah brushed his fingers up and down Bryce's arm, goose bumps sprouting in his wake. Bryce traced his face with his eyes. The moonlight cast shadows across him, and his brown eyes were like looking through vibrant stained glass. "It used to be called Mutton Fish Bay," Noah said.

They shifted until Noah was on his back, Bryce curled into his side. Bryce propped his chin up on Noah's chest so he could keep looking at his face. He loved Noah's face. And his big ears.

"Did they change it because it was a ridiculous name?" he wondered. He would have changed it. And cursed the person who named it for eternity. Or found someone to curse him. He didn't know enough about curses to be sure it would stick. It was best to call on experts for that kind of thing.

"It was called that because of the abalone fishing."

"Boring. Wait, so why did they change it?" He would still believe it was simply because it was a weird name, but there were a lot weirder-named places in Australia, and "Mutton Fish Bay" didn't even make the list.

"It was changed in 1880, when a holey fishing boat was found on the rocks. Just over that way." Noah gestured in a direction that honestly could have led anywhere. Bryce would believe him and not think too hard about that one. "It was connected to the disappearance of a geological surveyor that was here for the goldfields and the four people that were with him."

"You know way too much about this."

“It was a huge thing. The bodies have never been found, and no one ever discovered who did it. Also, I picked up a local history book once a few years ago when I came here for the first time.”

“Soooo, there could be a killer roaming the woods. Nice.” That was what he needed to hear. He just knew he was going to wake up at a stupid hour of the morning, needing to take a piss, when it was dark and there were way too many weird noises happening around him for him to ever be able to sleep comfortably in the first place, and he would remember this conversation. Because now he had to worry about kangaroos coming to gut him *and* serial killers. Probably a yowie too. He could never remember where they were supposed to live. Maybe they migrated. Who knew?

“It was over a hundred years ago,” Noah said dryly. “I think we’re safe.”

Oh. Right. “We should cuddle close anyway. For safety.”

“For safety.”

“Yeah. Safety in numbers. Duh.”

Noah chuckled. “Well. If it’s for a good cause.”

“Always.” Bryce’s stomach gurgled. Okay, his body had other plans. A reminder that he hadn’t eaten in a few hours. “I think I need food.”

“We can see if the fire has enough coals in it to make some baked potatoes, or we can have something on the portable stove.”

“Should we have left that unattended?” Bryce wondered. He had almost literally no idea how any of that worked. He created warmth by turning the heater on, and the only fires he dealt with were gas burners and even then, actually cooking something himself was rare.

“It’s the middle of winter, it’s in a steel fire pit, and I didn’t put much fuel on it. I wouldn’t be surprised if it’s gone out.” Noah kissed his temple. “We’ll check it, get the potatoes ready, and then go have a shower.”

“Good call.” They were both sticky, and Bryce’s ass was a little uncomfortable. A shower and a clean sounded like the best idea. There were toilets, showers, and taps just up the road from where they’d put up camp, so it wasn’t much of a walk. There was even a spot to tie Rufus up, so he could have a little walk around while they got clean.

The closest campers that they’d seen were way on the other side of the campsite, thank fuck. Bryce hadn’t thought about that while Noah had been rearranging his insides.

At least their sort-of neighbours weren’t aware of *who* was camping here. That was the last thing they needed in the newspapers. “*Sydney Swallows Key Forward Makes North Sydney Wombats Captain Scream His Name During Fun Camping Trip.*” It would depend on who wrote the article too. Some were more scathing than others, depending what team they followed. If they were an Adelaide Kestrels’ supporter, they’d throw in something about a loss that happened sixty

years ago because they were still butthurt. They might even include the most recent thrashing that North had given them.

They were able to shower without incident—other than Rufus barking a few times and them peeking outside to check no one was around, and he was all right—and had baked potatoes with cheese, coleslaw, and garlic butter in front of a roaring fire that was toasty warm.

Maybe this whole camping thing wasn't totally terrible. He could see himself doing it again. With Noah.



NOAH HAD NEVER TAKEN anyone with him on a camping trip before. It had been something special to him ever since he had first started it after his mother had passed. He'd been eighteen years old, flying high from the start of a promising footy career, wishing that she had been alive to share it with him. He'd been halfway here before he'd even realised. He'd thought about it before, of course. Even mapped out a route. But it had been the first time he'd actually just thought *fuck it* and done it.

Not even his dad had ever come with him. Or Coop, or Forest. It was sacred to him. A time where he revitalised and rested his soul.

He didn't know why he'd invited Bryce, what part of the deepest sections of his mind had thought it was a good idea.

He was glad he had. The memories he was making with Bryce this weekend would stay with him forever, long after Bryce had moved on.

“Now what?” Bryce asked, eyes bright and triumphant at the ingredients he’d managed to sort of measure and get in the bowl with minimal fuss. Meaning less than half the contents of the flour and sugar poured over the ground. Bryce needed to come with a warning label before he could be allowed to set foot in a kitchen. Even an outdoor one.

Noah was sceptical they were following the recipe properly at this point.

“Now you need to rub it together until it’s like breadcrumbs.”

Bryce stared at the contents of the bowl, then at Noah as though he’d just asked him to kick a goal from the centre square and if he missed, then he was getting kicked in the nuts. “How is this supposed to look like breadcrumbs? It’s *butter*. With sugar and flour and salt. That’s... that’s not how things work!”

Noah chuckled. He settled in behind Bryce and urged him to scootch forward so they could both fit on the thick log. It was a tight fit, but they managed. He slid an arm around the metal bowl and took one of Bryce’s hands, putting it into the bowl. “Trust me.”

“If I’d known the offer was to go camping with a crazy person, I would have said no, just FYI.”

Noah kissed his cheek. “You’ve never had damper before?”

“I’ve vaguely heard of it; I’m not completely un-Australian.” Noah could hear him rolling his eyes. He didn’t need to see it to confirm. He and Wren were similar in a lot of ways. Uncomfortably so on some occasions. Some characteristics were identical. “It’s like bread, cooked on an open fire. *This*”—he gestured at the bowl, almost upending it—“is I have no idea what.”

“Just rub it together like this.” Noah demonstrated and then took Bryce’s hand, helping him mimic the movement.

They finally got it where it needed to be, taking twice as long as it would have if Noah had just done it himself. Noah didn’t mind; he liked the feel of Bryce in his arms, and there was something intimate about cooking together so close. Like a food version of the scene in *Ghost*. He looked at the smear of flour and speck of butter on Bryce’s face. It was almost as messy too.

“I still don’t think that these are anything like breadcrumbs,” Bryce grumbled. “When we get home, I’ll show you what *real* breadcrumbs look like.”

As if Bryce knew better than Noah what breadcrumbs were. He wouldn’t be surprised if Bryce had only seen them on prepackaged meats.

“Pass the milk,” Noah said, lifting the bowl out of Bryce’s lap.

Bryce leaned forward, stretching to reach the esky that held their cold foods. The ice was still holding strong; it was almost too cold to go camping, but it was Noah's favourite time of the year. There weren't many tourists and sitting around the fire was an enhanced experience when the warmth was *important*.

Having an excuse to snuggle close to Bryce wasn't bad either.

Bryce's shirt and jumper slid up as he stretched, revealing a strip of his pale skin and freckles. Noah ran his fingers across it, not even attempting to resist. Why would he? Bryce liked it when Noah touched him, and Noah more than liked it. It was becoming a drug that he craved. The smell and feel of Bryce haunted him.

Bryce smirked at him as he passed the bottle over. He tugged his shirt back down, and Noah winked at him. It was all right. He'd taste Bryce later and maybe use the plug he'd travelled here wearing. It had been washed and was sitting snug in Bryce's suitcase. Noah wanted it snug somewhere else.

"I'm going to start pouring while you mix it in."

"That sounds messy."

Noah nuzzled the back of Bryce's ear. "I'll clean you up after, promise," he whispered.

A full-body shiver ran through Bryce. "Promises."

"I always keep my promises. Now hold the bowl steady."

Half of the milk ended up at their feet and more on Bryce's face—Noah was sitting right there, and he still couldn't work



out how that happened—but eventually they had a passable soft dough. Noah had reservations about how it would turn out. The journey getting there was too enjoyable for him to care overmuch. They had more than enough food if it wasn't edible.

Rufus trotted over, gave Bryce's face a sniff, then the bowl, wrinkled his nose, and proceeded to lick the milk off the dirt.

"Rufus, don't do that!" Bryce said, laughing. "Gross!"

"It won't hurt him," Noah said, shaking his head.

"He's gonna shit, like, leaves and sticks," Bryce protested.

"There aren't any sticks there. And trust me, weirder stuff has come out in his business."

"His business," Bryce mocked. He held up the dough. "Put it on the fire now?"

Noah bit his lip to stop from smiling. "You have to knead it first. Let me show you."

"I know how to knead dough. Piss off."

"You've made bread before?"

"I watch TV. You just... roll it with your palms. I got this."

Noah highly doubted that, but he lifted his hands in surrender and let Bryce butcher it. If it came out hard as a rock, they didn't have to eat it. Noah didn't always make damper when he was here by himself, but he couldn't resist making it with Bryce. He wanted Bryce to experience all the parts of camping that he'd missed.

“Tell me about your family,” Noah said as Bryce kneaded the dough.

“You already know about my family,” Bryce said. “You’ve been friends with Wren for years. You come to our barbecues.”

“I know Wren’s family. Tell me about yours.”

Bryce looked at him like he had two heads. “We have the same family.”

“Wren is closest to your mum, right?”

“Yeah?” Bryce’s confused face was too adorable, and Noah couldn’t help but lean in and kiss him softly, tasting the flour that had somehow made its way across his cheek and the corner of his top lip.

“But you’re closest to your second mum, Abby?”

“Yeah.” That one was more confident. It was easy to see the strong connection he had with his parents’ partner.

“Everyone experiences things differently, even down to our families. Tell me about *yours*.”

Bryce stared down at his hands. “Oh. Uh. Okay.” His forehead wrinkled as he thought.

Noah’s thoughts wandered as Bryce began to speak. He was listening more to the soothing quality of his voice, the almost lyrical way that he pronounced words—even the vulgar ones. They were pieces of Bryce that Noah had never experienced before.

He had a real connection with his family, in so many ways, and it was breathtaking.

Bryce paused mid-sentence. “What?” he asked defensively.

Noah brushed his knuckles across Bryce’s cheek. “I like hearing the smile in your voice.”

Bryce’s lips parted, and red spread across his cheeks. He could never hide what he was thinking or how he was feeling because it was always written on his face. It was beautiful.

Noah kissed him, their lips moving softly against each other. The small sigh that left Bryce’s lips was a song that Noah was falling in love with.



RETURNING TO REALITY WAS harder than Bryce had thought it would be. Sleeping in a bed that didn’t have Noah beside him, or Rufus snoring nearby, had become *weird*. Even spending an evening that they both had free *not* in each other’s company felt strange.

Bryce loved Coop like a brother, and they hadn’t hung out nearly as much as they usually did since Bryce’s new obsession with Noah had occupied him. So he should have been enjoying it for what it was. And he *was*. But the Noah-shaped hole beside him was impossible to ignore. As though he didn’t spend most of the week apart from him when they were both busy with training and travelling.

“I can’t keep watching this, but I can’t look away,” Coop said, eyes wide as he stared at the TV.

Bryce liked food as much as the next person, but—“What he’s doing to that chicken is a crime.” He looked down at his pizza. Did he still have any appetite left? The answer was undecided.

Coop grimaced. “Agreed. I bet the judges love it.”

“I bet they do,” Bryce agreed. “Their tastebuds are not anything like my tastebuds.”

“Maybe they don’t have any tastebuds left?”

Bryce could agree with that too.

Coop sighed heavily and stretched out on the couch, putting his head sideways in Bryce’s lap. “Wanna build a blanket fort and eat gummy bears?” he asked. “Or are you ditching me for a booty call soon?”

“I don’t... think so?” Bryce said, not really sure. “He’s having dinner with someone, and he hasn’t said anything about later.” They didn’t *actually* live in each other’s pockets.

Coop paused, then sat up. “He’s having dinner with someone?” he asked.

“Yeah. A friend from the Brumbies.” The team would have flown up yesterday for the Friday night match. Bryce and his team were heading down to Melbourne tomorrow morning for their Saturday match.

“Are you talking about Ryan?”

“Yeah, think so,” Bryce said. He was pretty sure that was the name Noah had mentioned in his text. He’d have to check if Coop really wanted specifics.

Coop’s forehead crinkled. “And you’re okay with that?”

Bryce glanced at Coop as he picked the pineapple off his pizza and ate it by itself. He liked the way it tasted after it had been cooked *on* the pizza, but he didn’t like it *with* the pizza. “Why wouldn’t I be? I don’t have a monopoly on him. He’s allowed to have dinner with friends. I have dinner with you all the time and with my teammates. If Noah started telling me I couldn’t do that without him, we’d have a problem.” Even if they were more than fuck buddies and like *boyfriends* or whatever—which they weren’t—it still wouldn’t be cool to be that controlling.

Bryce could not even begin to decipher the weird look Coop was giving him. “What?” he demanded.

“He didn’t tell you, did he?”

“Tell me what?” He moved a bit of ham and plucked out the piece of pineapple that thought it could hide from him.

“He and Ryan have an arrangement.”

Bryce paused, the pineapple halfway to his lips. “What?” That couldn’t mean—No. No way. “Arrangement?”

“The naked kind,” Coop clarified. “Whenever they’re in the same city for a night, they... get together to...” Coop clasped his hands together. “Get together.”

Bryce stared down at the small yellow fruit, a heavy feeling forming in the pit of his stomach and growing quickly. “Uh. They’re in the same city tonight.”

“I bet they’re not having dinner via Zoom,” Coop said. “I was wondering why you were so calm about this.”

Bryce put the food down. He suddenly wasn’t very hungry. “He didn’t say anything,” he said numbly. Of course, he didn’t *have* to. They’d never talked about exclusivity. Hell, Noah could be fucking someone new every weekend, for all Bryce knew. There were at least two nights each weekend they were in different cities for the round. Noah had said when he’d called Bryce at the sex shop that it would be okay if Bryce was with someone. And then they hadn’t really talked about it again.

Noah had taken him camping, when he’d never taken anyone else. Had showed him his candles. Had... made Bryce *feel* something. Was that not enough grounds for exclusivity?

The sick feeling that was settling in the bottom of Bryce’s stomach said they should have talked about it.

“What are you going to do?” Coop asked.

What was he going to do?

Bryce stared at his pizza. It was his second, and there was still half left. He’d never been an emotional eater, so finishing it wasn’t happening. His stomach couldn’t take it. Alcohol was out for the same reason. Also because his coach would absolutely tear him a new one if he turned up at the airport

hangover—or still drunk. And it wasn't a good look for the captain to show up in that kind of state. He had to be better than that.

Even if it was all he wanted to do right now.

“Nothing,” Bryce said.

“Nothing,” Coop repeated. “You're really okay if he gets naked and sticks his dick in someone else tonight?”

“Do you have to say it like that?” The sick feeling increased, and he pushed his pizza away. No way could he eat anything else now. Just the thought of Noah taking someone else's clothes off, of him getting them ready and then—He halted the thoughts. He couldn't even think them. The jealousy and anger were burning hot inside him, his heart aching at the idea of Noah giving someone else what he gave Bryce. He didn't think that casual fuck buddies were supposed to feel like this, but here he was.

“I'm trying to get my point across.”

“Well, point made!” Bryce said angrily. He closed his eyes as heat pricked at his eyes, and a flush ran over his cheeks.

“I'm serious, Bryce. He's gonna be making someone else come tonight, and you're okay with that?”

“No!” Bryce burst out. Just the idea of it made his stomach churn. Noah was *his* right now. No one else's. Not for the duration of *their* arrangement. If Noah wanted to get off, he should be coming to Bryce, not some other asshole who was a second-rate defender on a team that couldn't find the goal with

a GPS and a guide. North Sydney had already faced them weeks ago and decimated them by one hundred and three points. He wished they hadn't yet, just so he could do it now. And smash the smug asshole's face into the dirt.

"I'm not okay with that," Bryce said more quietly. "He should have talked to me about it. I think I deserve the courtesy of knowing when he's getting naked with someone else. Has he been sleeping with people when you travel? Or taking people home when *I* travel?" He was definitely going to be sick. All his food was sitting uncomfortably.

"I... don't think so? But that's probably a question you should be asking him."

"You're right. I should. Let's go."

"Let's go?"

"He told me the restaurant he was going to." He didn't think the direction of his thoughts were rocket science. "So, let's go."

Coop grinned. "Road trip to smack Noah. Let's do it. Should I get gloves?"

"Gloves?"

Coop rolled his eyes. "Yeah, so that we don't leave fingerprints anywhere."

Bryce blinked. What? "We're not going to commit a crime, Coop."

"Just in case?"



He looked so hopeful that Bryce couldn't burst his bubble. "Fine. Get your gloves." On second thought, he yelled out, "And a pair for me," as Coop took the stairs to the mezzanine two at a time.

Someone might get punched tonight. It might even be Noah.

BRYCE HAD NO IDEA how it had become a party of *five*. Jaryd had called Coop in the car, and Coop had told him the plan, and he'd insisted on coming along as mediator—which Bryce scoffed at. They did not need a *mediator*. What exactly did Jaryd think they were going to do?

He thought about the gloves and... maybe it was a fair point.

Then *Wren* had called, and he and Darcy had joined the pack. The possibility of going in low profile was well and truly gone. None of them blended in particularly well.

Bryce easily spotted the two men from the entrance. Noah had his back to them in the booth, and he instantly recognised the other as Ryan Harding, key defender for the East Melbourne Brumbies. Bryce had never had a feeling about the guy one way or another. He didn't spend a lot of time in his forward fifty; he spent most of it helping out their defensive line to stop key forwards like Noah from bullying Bryce's team and scoring too many goals.

Right now, he hated this man with everything in him. How dare he think he got to touch someone that belonged to Bryce? Bryce didn't care if Ryan had been there first; Bryce was there

*now*. If Noah was interested in fucking other people while they were fooling around, then he should have *said* something.

Darcy stopped near the door, fiddling with the zipper on his jumper. Wren, Coop, and Jaryd were all forced to pause and help him. Eight hands were not better than two in this instance, especially when Wren and Coop started bickering about which way it was supposed to go. It was a zipper. He was putting it on, not taking it off. Therefore, clearly it went *up*. That shouldn't even be a discussion, let alone an argument.

Bryce brushed past them and moved inside. It was the worst idea he'd ever had, but he was there now, and he would see it through. He wasn't going to wait until the two men had fucked before he said something. If Noah was more interested in someone else, then Bryce would move on and find his own someone else. Or something. Maybe he'd just hit someone. The plan was flaky at best. But he was sticking with it.

Bryce held his head high and walked forward, determination and stubbornness in every step. He was allowed to be here, and he had a right to be here, and dammit, he had things to say.

Noah and Ryan looked up as he approached. Noah smiled, his eyes lighting up, when he recognised Bryce. There was none of the “oh shit, I've been caught” or guilt that Bryce had been expecting. He just looked genuinely pleased to see him.

Bryce puffed out his chest and was about to say something—he had no fucking idea what was going to come out of his mouth—when a large body crashed into Bryce from behind at the same time a waitstaff moved past with a tray of glasses and

a wine bottle. Bryce tried his best to get out of the way, but it was futile. and they all went crashing to the floor in a mess of bubbles and broken glass.

Bryce looked up to Noah standing over them, eyes wide.

“Are you alright?” Noah asked in concern. His eyes tracked over the whole party. “Coop? What the hell are you guys doing here?”

“Uh, we were just—”

“Hungry,” Darcy supplied. “Very hungry. They have good, um—” He looked at the menu above the reception desk and squinted. “Beef.”

Bryce appreciated that he was trying to save this, but there was no saving it. They’d driven almost forty minutes to be here, and if they were just hungry, they could have stopped at a lot of places along the way. *And* Darcy was vegetarian, so there was no way that he was here for the beef. They were very obviously here to see Noah.

At least none of the wine had spilled on Bryce. Small mercies and all that. He went to stand and cried out in pain as something sliced across his hand.

“Don’t move,” the waiter he’d knocked over said frantically. “Oh my God, that’s blood. You’re bleeding. Um... ambulance! Do you need a stretcher? Someone help!”

“Calm down,” Coop said to him. “No one needs an ambulance. Can you go get like a broom or something? Some

people to help you clean up the mess? And a clean cloth for Bryce's hand."

Other staff finally made their way over and fussed about.

Noah crouched in front of Bryce and carefully lifted his arm. "Let me see."

"It's just a paper cut," Bryce said. It wasn't that deep, though it was bleeding like a stuck pig.

Someone handed Noah a cloth, and he wrapped it around Bryce's hand. "Squeeze tight to stop the blood flow," he said. He looked up, but Bryce couldn't look away from him. He looked nice tonight. Had he done his hair? What cologne was that?

His heart sank as he realised that Noah was on a *date*. This wasn't a casual arrangement. How long had they been doing this? Was he going to *tell* Bryce at all? Had he lied to Bryce about never taking someone camping? Maybe he and Ryan had gone camping and fucked liked bunnies the whole time. Ryan probably knew how to make damper properly.

"Can I get a bandage, please?" Noah asked. "Do you have a first-aid kit?"

Bryce tried to pull his hand away, but Noah wouldn't let go. "Can you stand? C'mon."

Bryce didn't need to help much; Noah used his strength to pull Bryce into a standing position with enough ease that Bryce felt a flush go through him, remembering how easily

Noah picked him up and carried him around when they were having sex.

He wouldn't be doing that anymore.

Ryan came to stand next to them, a grin on his face that Bryce wanted to smack off. Maybe Coop had been right to bring gloves.

“Speak of the devil,” Ryan said pleasantly. “We were just talking about you, Bryce. Your ears must have been burning.”

It wasn't the only thing that was going to be burning, Bryce thought snidely.

“Bandage, sir,” someone said, handing Noah an entire first-aid kit instead of just a bandage.

Bryce tried to think of something scathing to say that would just eviscerate Ryan's whole face in one go, but Noah was tugging him down a tiny hallway in the next second, and he missed his chance.

“You didn't let me say ‘hi,’” Bryce protested.

“Is that really what you were going to say?” Noah asked with amusement. He led Bryce into a tiny bathroom that was barely big enough for the two of them before closing and locking the door.

“Sit,” Noah said, pointing to the closed toilet seat.

Bryce didn't even argue, just dropped onto it with a huff. Luckily it was wooden and didn't break under his tantrum.

Noah put the first-aid kit on the sink. He washed his hands and dried them with the paper towel dispenser before flicking the kit open. He selected a few things, then wet a wad of paper towel and crouched in front of Bryce with all of it.

“What are you doing here, Bryce?” Noah asked. He took the cloth from Bryce’s cut and wiped it down with the wet hand towel. “If you’d wanted to come along, you could have said something.”

Right. Bryce winced at the sharp pain from Noah’s cleaning. “That would have made it a little hard for you to get laid,” he said acerbically. He wasn’t sorry about his words, even if he was acting like a child. He was *aware* of that; he just couldn’t make himself stop it.

“Did you—what?” Noah paused and looked up, understanding in his brown eyes. “Coop told you.”

“*You* should have told me. I thought—I thought—” Bryce’s words caught in his throat, and he couldn’t get them out.

Noah softened, his thumbs rubbing circles on Bryce’s hand. He took out a small square bandage and carefully secured it over Bryce’s cut. He traced the edges of it with his fingers. A tingle ran up Bryce’s arm.

Noah settled forward on his knees and cupped Bryce’s cheeks. “Is that what you thought? That I was here to get laid?”

“It’s what you do with him, isn’t it?”

“Normally, yes,” Noah said. “Are you jealous?”

“No,” Bryce protested. He wasn’t *jealous*. There just should have been some kind of protocol or courtesy or something here. “You took me camping, Noah.” That meant something to Bryce even if it hadn’t meant anything to Noah. Whatever they were doing... Bryce couldn’t deny that his feelings were getting involved. Maybe Noah’s weren’t, but that didn’t mean he should have been off fucking someone else. He wasn’t jealous. He was hurt. He wanted Noah to belong to him. And *only* him.

Noah captured Bryce’s lips in a sudden kiss. Bryce couldn’t do anything but moan and hang on as Noah took over his every sense until Bryce was nothing but his servant, here for whatever Noah wanted.

“That’s so unbelievably hot,” Noah whispered hoarsely. “You don’t want anyone else touching me, baby?” One hand slipped down and made quick work of Bryce’s belt, slipping inside to cup his dick. “This the only place you want me?”

“Yes,” Bryce moaned helplessly.

“Shh,” Noah said. “There are people right outside. Do you want them to hear you?”

Bryce squeezed his eyes shut as Noah marked his neck and stroked his hardening dick. “Don’t care,” he gasped breathlessly. “Don’t care.” He didn’t care about anything as long as Noah kept touching him.

Noah kissed him again, swallowing all his sounds and causing more. No one kissed like Noah did. The perfect mix of teeth and tongue and possessiveness. Bryce wanted to be

consumed by Noah until there was nothing left of himself except a satiated husk.

He protested when Noah slipped his hand out of Bryce's pants and did them back up again.

"What are you doing?" Bryce asked. "You can't make me hard and then just leave me like that!" he hissed.

"I can," Noah said. "We're going to go out there, and you're going to sit beside me with a hard dick, and then when we get home, I'm going to make you come so hard the next suburb over will hear you scream my name."

Bryce swallowed hard, his gut clenching. "O-okay."

"You could have asked me, Bryce," Noah said. "And I would have told you the truth. I'm not here to sleep with Ryan. I'm having dinner with a friend. And that's it." He tipped Bryce's chin up, a quick slide of their lips together that Bryce tried to chase. "As long as you want to be in my arms, you're the only one that will be there."

Bryce's heart pulsed in his throat, a rapid beat that was loud in his ears. "I—Yes." Why were words so hard? He was good at words. He knew how to rally his team, knew how to talk to someone who was having a bad night or a good one. Sat with his guys on the bench to talk them down from a crappy situation or hype them up at quarter time when things were dicey.

Noah made him forget all of that. He made Bryce feel first and think second, and that was terrifying and amazing all at



once. Noah made his stomach drop out from underneath him, like jumping off a cliff without checking how high it was.

And Bryce wanted to do it over and over again.

Noah's mouth tipped up. He helped Bryce to his feet and kissed him again until Bryce was dizzy with it.

When they got back to the table where everyone was sitting and loudly talking over spread-out menus, Bryce let Noah pull out his chair and seat him in it without thought.

Ryan was sitting right across from him, and the feeling of wanting to punch him in the dick hadn't quite faded. Noah might not have been planning to get horizontal with him tonight, but they had before. He'd had what belonged to Bryce. And that stuck in Bryce's ribs like a jagged knife.

"All bandaged and clean?" Ryan asked, a knowing look in his eyes.

What was the protocol for stabbing someone in the eye with a fork in a restaurant? His sister worked for some kind of hotshot criminal defence lawyer in the city. Bryce could call in a favour, surely. It would be worth every cent.

"Yes," Bryce bit out. He draped his arm across the back of Noah's seat and deliberately rested his hand on Noah's shoulder. He couldn't have made his meaning clearer.

Instead of the animosity, or competition, that Bryce expected, Ryan just smiled pleasantly at him. There wasn't even a hint at anything more malicious. "We're glad you could join us," he said. "The more, the merrier."

Bryce didn't have a response to that. Not anything that wouldn't be rude as fuck and make him the bad guy.

“What are we ordering?” Noah asked.

Bryce's breath caught as Noah's hand skimmed over his thigh, resting dangerously close to his still very much hard dick.

He sent Noah a scathing look, but the asshole wasn't looking at him.

“Not beef,” Coop said wryly.

“No,” Noah agreed. “Since it's a vegetarian restaurant.”

What? Bryce looked over to the menu that Darcy had read from before. It said, “*No beef or meat of any kind used.*” He snorted out a laugh as Darcy smiled sheepishly.

“Menu?” Noah slid one over to Bryce at the same time he brushed his fingers over Bryce's dick.

Bryce grabbed his hand, intending to push it away. Instead, he pushed it against his dick, giving himself much-needed friction.

Coop looked suspiciously at them, and Bryce was sure the smile he gave was not reassuring. Coop rolled his eyes and went back to his menu, pointing something out to Wren. “This part is for you.”

Wren glared. “Tofu is not going to fill me up!”

“Have you ever *had* tofu?”

“That's not even the point.”

“It’s exactly the point. Order this one and shut the fuck up. You’ll like it, trust me.”

Wren mumbled something—likely unflattering—under his breath. “Fine.”

Bryce bit the inside of his cheek to stop from moaning as Noah massaged him through his pants. Noah, who was perusing his own menu and acting like he wasn’t turning Bryce inside out.

He leaned into Noah’s space and hissed, “Stop it.”

“Stop what?”

“My *brother* is sitting across the table from us.”

“Then don’t look at him.” Noah turned his head, their lips mere inches apart. “Do you really want me to stop?”

“What I want you to do is take me home.” He wanted Noah to finish what he had started, in *private*.

“I haven’t eaten yet,” Noah said reasonably.

“I hate you.”

Noah squeezed, and a small sound slipped out of Bryce’s mouth. Noah kissed him, masking it. He *did* pull his hand away from Bryce’s crotch but only far enough for Bryce to be able to somewhat breathe, not enough for him to be able to fully relax.

Part of him was thankful since coming in his pants was not something he wanted to do in a restaurant, and the other part of him didn’t care. He just wanted Noah’s hands all over him.

Darcy couldn't decide what he wanted to order, so he ordered one of everything. Wren and Coop thought that was a brilliant idea and did the same, and soon the entire table was filled with plates of everything. They ended up turning it into a kind of banquet buffet, with everyone taking bits of each.

Noah stole a plate from the middle, and he and Bryce took turns feeding it to each other while Wren and Coop fake gagged.

Bryce curled his ankle around Noah's and rested it there. Noah smiled at him, and Bryce's stomach flipped.

Ryan waylaid him on the way to the bathroom while everyone was deciding if they wanted dessert. This time, Bryce was going for legitimate reasons and did not want to go into the tiny area with one of Noah's ex-fuck buddies. Sort-of ex? Would they start back up again once Noah was done with him?

"Hey, do you have a second?"

"I need to piss," Bryce said bluntly.

Ryan's mouth quirked. "Look, I know you don't like me, and I know *why*. But I'm not a threat to you, I promise."

"I should just take your word for it?"

"Noah's great, and I'm sure you know that"—Bryce scowled. Was this supposed to be a good or bad speech?—"but it's only ever been a casual thing. Noah has never looked at me the way he looks at you, and I sure as hell don't look at him like that. Noah and I are friends, and I'd like it if we could stay

friends because he's a genuinely great guy. And I have a feeling that's not going to happen if you hate me, so..."

"So?"

Ryan huffed out a laugh. "You're not making this easy."

"I'm not making *what* easy?"

"You're a great player, Monaghan. You've got one hell of a kick, and deceptive strength, and you run way too fucking fast, but you're not very bright, are you?"

"I'm about to punch you," Bryce warned. "You're lucky you're getting a warning."

Ryan smiled wryly. "I appreciate the warning." He ran a hand through his hair. "I don't know what the two of you are doing, and I don't know if you're invested like he is, but I know what a guy in love looks like. Well... I did, once upon a time. A lifetime ago, with someone else. I'm not trying to get in Noah's pants, and I won't be in the future. But I'd really like it if we could still hang out, and we could still get dinner together."

"You're asking for my permission," Bryce said flatly.

"Hell no," Ryan said. "Noah's a big boy; he can decide what kind of control he'll allow, and what he won't. But I'd prefer there not be animosity." He stuck out his hand. "Let's be friends."

"Friends."

Ryan wiggled his fingers. "Yeah. It's this thing where—"

“Oh my God, shut up,” Bryce muttered, forcefully taking Ryan’s hand and squeezing as he shook it. “Friends. You’re as fucking annoying as the rest of them; you’ll fit right in.” Ryan went to pull back, and Bryce held tighter, bringing him closer. “Don’t touch him.”

“Scout’s honour.” He took a step back. This time his smile was a little sadder. “For what it’s worth, I get it. Just know that whatever you’re feeling”—he jerked his thumb over his shoulder—“the big guy is feeling it too.”

The words stayed on Bryce’s mind all night even as Noah did exactly what he’d promised and made him scream his name, first against the front door, then in bed before they fell asleep in a tangle of hot, sweaty limbs.

*The big guy is feeling it too.*

Was he?



IF SOMEONE HAD TOLD Noah at the start of the year that Bryce Monaghan would be sitting at his dinner table, wearing Noah’s shirt after Noah had just spent an hour bending him over the back of the couch, he would have told them they’d had one too many hits to the head and to get checked for a concussion. Start thinking about early retirement.

Since he was sure that he wasn’t hallucinating Bryce in his kitchen or the way that the neck kept slipping down his shoulder to reveal those delectable freckles—because Noah’s

clothes were way too big on him—he figured that his life really had changed that much in less than a year.

Bryce looked up at him, the end of his pencil in his mouth as he chewed on it. He tilted his head, his red curls bouncing. “What?”

His textbooks were spread out across the entire table, piles of them, along with pens, highlighters, notebooks, and a really strange-coloured rock that Bryce called his good-luck rock. It had been a long time since Noah had been in school, but he couldn’t remember needing quite that much stuff to study.

“You look good in my shirt,” Noah said, enjoying the way that Bryce’s cheeks heated at the words. It made Noah want to do filthy things to him.

He turned back to concentrate on measuring out the right weight of wax flakes to melt for the set of ceramic jar candles he was making.

“What are you doing with those?” Bryce asked.

Noah turned up the heat on the stove and sprinkled the flakes in, stirring with his silicon spatula. “No idea.” He just made them. There were boxes in his shed that had grown over the years, gathering dust. When the plastic tub he kept them in got full, he taped it up, labelled it, put it in the shed, and then bought another one to start filling. It took a couple of months to fill one. He wasn’t making them every week, just when the urge took him.

“Thought about selling them? You could open an Etsy store.”

“A what store?”

Noah put the temperature gauge into the wax, keeping an eye on it as he stirred. He wished the stove was facing the dining table so he didn't have to keep looking over his shoulder to see Bryce. Maybe he'd get the kitchen renovated just for that reason. There were worse reasons for home renovation, right?

“It's where people put items that are handmade up for sale. You could create a logo, get stickers and shit to put on it, and sell them.”

That sounded like a lot of work. A *logo*? “Why?”

“Why not?” Bryce countered.

Noah didn't know that he wanted to turn a hobby that relaxed him into some money-making venture. What if it ruined what it meant to him?

Bryce's next words made the air leave his lungs.

“You could name the business after your mum,” he said quietly.

A lump caught in Noah's throat. He stared hard at the slowly melting wax, willing the heat behind his eyes to go away. She'd loved candles. Noah couldn't remember her smile, but he remembered how he had *felt* when she'd smiled at his dad. He knew with absolute certainty that when his dad had gifted her with a new candle, it had made her happy. Not just the



candle itself, but the gift giving and the fact it was her husband that had made the effort to do something thoughtful for her.

Not just a fleeting happiness that brushed against a heart for a moment but a deep-seated joyous happy that lived inside forever.

Noah got the same feeling when Bryce smiled at him. It was the first time in his life that he understood what it was like to find complete joy in another person.

“We could—we could look at it?” Noah said tentatively. He couldn’t mask the hoarseness of his voice, but Bryce didn’t tease him for it. Just gave him *that smile* and made his heart skip a beat.

Bryce bit his lip. His face was covered in his happy blush. Noah could get used to that.

“What are you going to do when you retire?” Bryce asked.

It took Noah a bit of time to answer. He considered it as he moved the candles from the heat and selected three of the essential oil scents. “No idea,” he said, realising that he honestly didn’t have an answer. He dropped five drops of each scent into the wax and stirred.

Bryce snorted. “That’s... one hell of a plan.” He tapped his pen on the edge of a textbook with a title written across it that Noah wouldn’t have been able to pronounce if he’d tried. “You haven’t thought about it?”

“No,” Noah admitted. It hadn’t been something he’d contemplated much in his early years—and he definitely

hadn't decided to study *and* play like Bryce was—and then... it had just become a subject that made him uncomfortable to think about. He was only twenty-eight years old. The idea of retiring from a sport that he loved was foreign to him even if he knew he only had a few more good years left. He didn't know what he was going to do when his body decided he could no longer keep up at elite level.

“You don't want to coach?”

“Not at all,” Noah said. He was happy to assist when needed, but he'd never wanted to do what the coaches did. “And commentators irritate the fuck out of me.” Some guys loved them and watched footy for both the joy of the sport and listening to the comments. Like reading your own comment section on a social media post. Noah had never understood that. He'd learned over the years how to shut all of it out when he watched a match. The last thing he wanted to do was become one of them.

“You wanna get married, adopt enough kids to make your own football team?” Bryce teased.

“That's a lot of kids,” Noah said.

“You'll need a bigger house,” Bryce said, his mouth twitching as he fought a smile.

“A bit bigger, yeah.” Noah checked the consistency of the wax, making sure it was melted through, and then carefully poured it into the pastel-pink ceramic jar. “I don't want kids.”

“Ever?”

“Ever.” He barely had the time to look after himself. And when he retired, the last thing that he wanted to do was spend his time running around after a small version of himself. Some of the guys on the team had smaller kids, and he didn’t mind being Uncle Noah or chipping in to babysit if it was called for, but he wasn’t interested in having his own.

“Yeah, me either,” Bryce said. He chewed on the tip of his pencil again and then scribbled something on his notebook. “I think I’d like to teach, though. Science, like Mum 2.0.”

Noah could see that. He’d be the hot teacher. There was some quality fantasy material in there. He’d file that away for later.

“The candle maker and his teacher,” Bryce said, smirking. “It’s got a ring to it.”

“Does it?” Noah asked. Was Bryce implying that he wanted to still be doing this when they retired? Bryce was twenty-three. He had a lot of years left in his career. He was captain for a team that was playing six million times better than the Swallows were this season. They were on top of the ladder and had only been beaten once this year—by the Swallows themselves in the first Showdown of the year, when Noah had first discovered that Bryce thought he was hot. He had so much potential and countless years to hone that even further. He wouldn’t *be* a teacher for a long time. Years.

Noah was too afraid to ask what he meant. Bryce was likely just teasing because it was Bryce. And if he was, and Noah

asked, then he'd look like an idiot. Or worse, like he was catching feelings when Bryce wasn't.

And he had a bad feeling that he'd already passed that quarter and was well into the final, where the clock was running down, the opponent was running around with the ball and wasting time, and he was too far behind to catch up. When the siren sounded, Noah would be alone with a loss that would be more devastating than any of the ones he'd experienced in his own decade-long career.



BRYCE COULD ACCEPT THAT he liked Noah as more than just a casual fuck buddy. He had *feelings* even if the idea of that was completely foreign. Feelings for Noah Walker, of all people—even removing the fact he was a guy—was a trip even for him. But now that he'd accepted it, he didn't know what the next step was.

Did he just come right out and say it? Did he need to ease into it? Did he need to say anything at all?

Yes. He did need to. Because if he didn't say it, then how would Noah know? And Noah needed to know because Bryce wanted to... make it official or whatever.

*"Noah, wanna be my boyfriend?"* Fuck, that sounded dumb.

He needed help. Advice. Expert advice.

Who could he ask?

He glanced around the gym at his teammates. Drew was on the treadmills with him, and the current reason why Bryce was running faster than his coach would like—Drew kept upping the speed, so... Bryce did too. He wasn't prepared to get upstaged by the forward line. As a midfielder, he had to show them that his stamina was way better than theirs.

Oakley was by the weights. Bryce thought about it, then dismissed it. No. That was hit and miss, and Bryce had no idea what he would do with a miss right now.

Locke was on the mats, doing some kind of contortionist exercise. He called it yoga; Bryce called it "fuck that." It was like yoga on steroids. Bryce liked to think of himself as flexible and agile, and he did a full yoga session himself at least once a week and stretched daily, but that was like a... "stick yourself in a box and call it a day" kind of bullshit.

Drew slowed his treadmill down. Bryce waited a few beats before he followed suit until they'd stopped completely.

"I win!" Bryce declared loudly, pumping a fist in the air.

"Got a screw loose, Monaghan," Drew said with a huffed, half-panted laugh. "I worry about the team following such a madman."

"My madman brings all the goals to the yard. Besides, like I'm alone there," Bryce retorted. Drew had been speeding up for a reason, and it wasn't because he wanted to get a good workout in.

Drew threw his towel at Bryce, and it landed on his face. Bryce sputtered and threw it off with a yelp, grimacing. “Dude, gross.”

“Afraid of a little man sweat?”

“Afraid of your man sweat,” Bryce said. “Save it for your wife; she’ll appreciate it more.”

Drew smirked. “Oh, I will.”

“Okay, moving on,” Bryce muttered. He liked sex as much as the next guy. Especially if that sex involved Noah. But he didn’t want to *hear* about it.

He left Drew to his own devices and headed for his favourite contortionist.

“No,” Locke said, the second that Bryce was within a foot of him.

Bryce narrowed his eyes and peered. Locke had his own eyes closed. How did he even know who it was? Bryce didn’t say a word, waving hands in front of his face.

“I’m serious, Monaghan, go away.”

“That’s unfair.”

“Are you here to do yoga?”

“I like my torture with a side of ice,” Bryce said. A little white lie. He actually quite enjoyed the ice baths. More than Coop did, definitely. Coop had words for them that weren’t repeatable in any circumstance. If there was a level above R-

rated, that was the place for them. Maybe a few levels up. Even the devil would be shocked and scandalised.

“Get down here and do a downward facing dog.”

“I still think you’re making that name up,” Bryce muttered. He knew he wasn’t, but it could have been a worldwide prank that had been going on for years for all he knew. He did *not* get into that pose, but he did sit down on the mat next to Locke and cross his legs. Bam. Yoga. Something was crossed, and his thighs were getting a stretch. Couldn’t get more yoga than that.

After a few minutes of what was slowly becoming an awkward silence, Locke said, “Well, spit it out.”

“I can’t just come sit with my mate?”

Locke sighed. He lay down on his back and stretched his arms and legs out like a starfish.

“Is that a move?” Bryce could get behind that one. He mimicked it next to him. “Do we hold hands now?” he asked, peeking to his side.

“Sure.” Locke placed his palm up on the mat, and Bryce put his own on top, twisting his arm so they could lace their fingers together. “Is there something wrong with my form?”

“What? No. Why?” Why would he think *Bryce* knew the answer to that? Did he seem like a yoga guru? Because he was not. At all.

“The captain is coming over to talk to me and wants to hold hands. That question isn’t the weirdest thing happening right

now.”

That was fair. He didn't have anything to say about Locke's form. He was thriving as their rookie ruckman and spending considerable time on the field and taking names. The decision to draft him had been smart.

“If you like someone, how do you tell them?” Bryce blurted.

Locke turned his head. “Uh...” His fingers tightened in Bryce's. “Is this... what...” His face turned thoughtful. “I thought you were with—is this one of those asking-for-a-friend questions?”

Asking for—? Oh. “No, I'm asking for me.”

“I'm not... it's not... uh.” Locke scrunched his lips up, and Bryce was about to ask what was wrong when he said, “You're very pretty.”

“Thanks? You're very pretty too?” Was that the polite response? What the fuck were they talking about? How did their looks come into the conversation?

“Aww, you guys are adorable together,” Oakley said, standing over them. “Are we having a slumber party?”

“Yeah, get in,” Bryce said, gripping Oakley's calf and jerking it forward. Oakley's knees buckled, and he awkwardly fell between the two of them, narrowly missing driving his knee into Bryce's gut. He sighed and turned onto his back, forcing Bryce and Locke to make room for him. Their tangled hands rested under the small of his back.

“I just wanted to do yoga,” Locke muttered.



Oakley groaned and wriggled his hips. “This is uncomfortable.” He tugged at their hands and forced them apart, dragging them out from under himself. He placed them on top of each other on his stomach. “There you go. Room for one more?”

Bryce was glad that the press wasn’t allowed in these rooms while they were training. He could just imagine the headline, seeing the three of them all but snuggled together on the gym floor.

“What are you talking about?” Oakley asked.

“Locke was telling me how pretty he thinks I am.”

“You asked me out! I panicked.”

“You asked him out?” Oakley asked, turning his head in surprise.

“I did not!” Bryce protested. What the hell? That had not at all been what he’d meant.

“It’s all right. I approve.”

“There’s nothing to approve of,” Bryce said. “I wasn’t talking about *him*. I asked him how you tell someone that you like them.”

Oakley nodded. “I can see how that would be confusing.”

“The question was not confusing,” Bryce said. They were both lucky they could kick straight. At least eighty percent of the time anyway. Everyone had a bad day.

“Do you have a crush on someone?” Oakley asked. “Is it me? No, wait, don’t tell me. I want to be surprised.”

“Oh my God,” Bryce muttered. He honestly had no idea how the entire conversation had gone off the rails. This is what he got for asking teammates for advice. As if they were any better in this department than him. If he wanted relationship advice, he should have gone to a few of the married guys and the ones in long-term relationships. Should have stuck with Drew even if the guy would be grumpy because Bryce had beaten him on the treadmills.

“I thought you were dating Noah,” Oakley said, turning serious. “Wouldn’t he already know that you like him?”

“We’re not dating. It’s more complicated than that.”

“Lift your legs up,” Locke said. “If we’re all lying here and gossiping, we can stretch.”

Bryce and Oakley sighed, but they dutifully untangled their hands and lifted their legs, holding their thighs.

“What does this even do?” Bryce asked. They stretched a lot. Stretching was important, of course. But no one did it quite like Locke. There was a reason a lot of jokes about him training to be an NHL goalie got kicked around the locker room.

“You’re supposed to do it against a wall, but this will do, I suppose,” Locke said. “It boosts your immune system by bringing fresh blood flow and oxygen to your brain and

stimulates the flow of your lymphatic fluids and your glymphatic system.”

“My who-what-now?” Oakley asked.

Bryce snorted and laughed so hard he almost lost grip of his legs.

“It’s good for you,” Locke said with a sigh.

“Why didn’t you just say that in the first place?” Oakley turned his head to Bryce. “So, you realised that you were in love with Noah, and now you want to tell him?”

“We’re not throwing around the L word,” Bryce said tersely. The plan was to see if Noah wanted to date him, not make him run screaming in the opposite direction.

“Take him on a romantic date, get down on one knee, and...”

Bryce eyed him suspiciously.

“Tell him you want to go steady,” Oakley finished.

“I knew there was a reason you were always single.”

Oakley elbowed him. Bryce elbowed him back. Chaos descended as they wrestled, and Locke got offended that his yoga area had been invaded by barbarians.



GETTING ON A PLANE at six in the morning was a special kind of hell. Noah had done it plenty of times, and it never got any easier. Especially not with the current lineup. Way too

many of them were morning people and wanted to *chat* while they waited in the airport. Noah wasn't interested in chatting before he'd had his coffee.

Darcy and Forest were walking around somewhere with a camera, doing a segment for their ridiculous footy channel, *The Swallows Landing*, and if they tried to point it in the direction of Noah, they were going to get some footage they wouldn't be able to air anywhere in the world.

It didn't help that he was surrounded by more chaos than usual. It was rare that both Sydney teams were on the same flight. Noah wished it were "never" instead of rare. Forty-six hyperactive players, along with various management and coaching staff, in one cramped area did not a good time make. Unfortunately, it was the Gather Round week in Adelaide, and all eighteen teams were headed for South Australia. Last year it had been earlier in the season, but this year they'd decided to do it in the second half for whatever reason. Noah had long given up trying to work out why the league did half of the things that it did. He was just there to play footy.

He and Coop couldn't be the only non-morning people on the teams, but he was hard pressed to find anyone else who wasn't having a yack. Even Coop was arguing with Wren next to him. Loudly and obnoxiously. So far, Noah's "don't fucking talk to me, or I'll break your nose" face seemed to be working. It was only a matter of time before someone got brave, though.

He hoped they could board the plane soon so that he could get some shut eye and not worry about missing it.

He couldn't see Bryce's red curls anywhere, though Noah was learning that "morning person" didn't necessarily mean *on time* person. He wouldn't have been surprised if buses and flights had been held up in the past because Bryce hadn't shown up yet. Normally it was the captain who got the privilege of head counting and making sure everyone was where they were supposed to be. What did they do when the latecomer was the captain himself?

He leaned his head back and closed his eyes while Coop's voice washed over him.

"—the umpires need an entire overhaul, I agree, but I don't think—"

"I don't care what you think," Wren interrupted. "I say we toss them all into a volcano, and we umpire ourselves."

"You want to create a game where the *players* are the ones making calls?" Coop asked incredulously. "That sounds like a purge experiment."

"Look, buddy, we can't do any worse than what they are."

"Did you just call me *buddy*, buddy?"

"My suggestion is better than yours," Wren insisted.

"Adding more umpires because the game moves at too fast a pace for three to reasonably see everything clearly, putting more cameras at goal posts—with higher definition because you aren't telling me that what we have is the best they can do—and creating a system where captains can request a certain number of reviews a game is... a bad idea?"

“... yes.”

Noah was finding a seat well away from them on the plane because he could not listen to that the entire flight. He would end up doing bodily harm to them, and then they'd be down a midfielder and a key forward, and he'd have to deal with yet another loss. It wasn't worth the hassle. Not to mention they had to win this one because if they didn't, their run to the finals was on a precarious precipice. If they lost this, they would need to win *every* match until the end of the season, with at least a few considerable margins to get their percentage up and make sure they stayed above the Brisbane Crocodiles, who were on the ladder below them only because *their* percentage was lower. They couldn't afford any more slipups, not if the Swallows wanted to take the flag home.

And Noah wanted that more than anything. He *had* won one before, in his second year with the Swallows. Long before even Forest, Coop, and Wren had been drafted. The lineup had been different, and so many of the guys that he'd played with, that had mentored him and built him into the forward he was, were retired or traded. He and Jaryd were the last ones standing from that twenty-three-man team. Noah knew that his years were numbered now—even if he didn't really want to admit it to himself—and he had five or six years left in him if he was lucky, and he wanted to leave with a few more premiership wins under his belt. He knew they had the talent, and the team, to do it. It just needed some fine tuning, and some of the younger guys needed more experience.

Some players matured early and made an impact from the moment they hit the field—like Bryce, who had showcased incredible numbers from the moment he was drafted—and others needed time to hit their stride. Locke was showing considerable stats for North. Not anything like Darcy but pretty damn good for his first year. Ravioli had started out rocky, but he was going to be a force to be reckoned with. He just needed a year or two more. Same with so many of the others.

Noah knew they had the potential. Knew they had one of the best teams in Australia, with an impressive set of skills and experience. It frustrated him that it wasn't translating to wins and making finals. This year, he was determined that it would. They weren't out for the count yet, and he would make the last half of the year work for them. He *had* to.

Bryce's red hair made an appearance just as they got their boarding call. His face was flushed, curls bouncing and sticking up all over the place. There was a smear of toothpaste on his cheek, and his bags—plural; why did he have *two*?—weren't even zipped up properly.

Bryce was a stickler for cleanliness, putting things back where they belonged, and keeping things neat and orderly. The occasions that he wasn't put together, it was spectacular. Like he was making up for all the times he stayed clean.

“Let me guess,” Noah said, standing to greet him. “Slept through your alarm?”

“It's like you read my mind.”

Noah hummed. He slung an arm around him and pushed him towards the Jetway. “When we get back home, we’re going alarm-clock shopping, and we’re installing it on the other side of your room.”

“Shopping together?” Bryce teased. “How domestic.”

Noah pinched his ass and grinned when he yelped, glaring up at him.

“Window or aisle seat?” Noah asked as they greeted the flight attendant and made their way down the cramped aisle of the plane.

“Window seat,” Bryce said. “You?”

“Depends.” Noah took Bryce’s bags and zipped them up. One was heavier than the other, and Noah could already guess what was in it. He left that one on the aisle seat and put his bag and Bryce’s second into the overhead compartment.

“On what?” Bryce asked. He dropped down into the window seat and smiled up at him. Noah was getting used to the way that his body responded to that.

“Duration of the flight. If it’s a short one, I like the window. If it’s a long one, I prefer the aisle.”

“Because you like people hitting your elbow every two seconds?”

Noah shook his head with a huff of laughter as he settled beside Bryce. He lifted the armrest so there wasn’t any space between them. “No, so that getting up to take a piss and



getting food isn't a hassle and a constant 'excuse me, coming through, excuse me.' Inevitably I bruise something."

"It's cause you're huge," Bryce said, nodding.

Noah was going to take that as a compliment.

"What's the protocol on flight canoodling?"

"We won't both fit in the bathroom," Noah replied automatically. He leaned back and closed his eyes. As much as joining the mile-high club with Bryce sounded sexy as hell, there was no plausible way for them to do it. And Noah wasn't going to give him a hand job under a blanket. If anyone caught them, they'd never live it down. And possibly get thrown off the plane. They hadn't taken off yet, but Noah also wouldn't put it past Coop to not just open the cabin door and push them out.

"What about snuggling?"

Noah opened one eye. "Does it involve talking?"

"Not if you don't want it to."

Noah lifted an arm, and Bryce settled into the crook of it, head resting on Noah's shoulder. The noise around them disappeared as Noah focused on the feel of Bryce in his arms and the even rise and fall of his chest.

The chaos was worth a few minutes of this. Noah drifted in and out of sleep, absently running his fingers up and down Bryce's arm and indulging in his constant urge to bury his face in Bryce's soft red curls. They smelled nice.

“So,” Bryce said sleepily. “My hotel room or yours?”

Noah smiled.

Yeah. Definitely worth it.



NOAH HAD BEEN PLAYING footy his entire life. He'd done Auskick when he'd been five, like almost every other kid in Australia did, and he'd fallen in love with it from that moment in a way he couldn't properly articulate. It wasn't just a sport to him: it was in his blood, part of his soul.

Some rounds made him love the game.

This wasn't one of them.

He couldn't find the ball with both hands on it, and his team were making rookie mistakes that should have been trained out of them years ago. They *all* knew better, and they were still making a colossal clusterfuck of the entire thing. Down by twenty-three points at the end of the first quarter wasn't Noah's idea of a good time. They hadn't had enough good games this season to make up for this.

Listening to their coach going over all the things they needed to pick up and which opponents to keep an eye on—“and for fuck's sake, Wren, *stay on your man* and let Coop worry about what Coop is doing”—“Coop got himself in a three way, and I was just helpin' out”—“Let Coop worry about his own orgies”—was business as usual. Noah couldn't even fault

Novak this time, even though he still hated him, because this time he wasn't *wrong*.

Except that they all knew how they were fucking up. Beating them over the head with it only made them feel like scolded children. Coming from someone that didn't inspire them, and actively tried to make their play harder, wasn't going to help them pick up their feet.

Forest's rousing speech was better received, and to give credit where credit was due, they were all better fired up as they jogged back into position for the start of the second quarter.

It didn't help. They still ended up heading into the second half thirty points down, and it didn't pick up from there. They came back valiantly, with Coop and Forest trading off a string of impressive goals and reminding the league why the twins were a force to be reckoned with, but they still lost by three points.

Three measly fucking points.

Less than a goal.

Noah put his head in his hands, internally screaming as the final siren sounded. They had lost. Again.

It had to be some kind of record for the team. Too many losses in a row.

Not the kind of record they wanted to set. Noah hated everything about losing streaks and especially hated *being* in one.

He looked around at his team and saw the same devastation over their faces. Coop with his hands on his knees, sweat dripping down his face and arms, screaming silently at the ground. Forest staring, unseeing. Wren scowling. Ravioli looking lost, turned toward the goal posts as though they had the answers the team needed. Darcy sitting in the centre square, legs spread wide and looking as lost as Noah had ever seen him.

They were exhausted. Noah was exhausted. They'd left it all out on the field, and still something wasn't working. They were on the verge of losing any hope of making it into the final eight teams that would go on after the regular home-and-away season ended and finals began.

If they lost another game, they were done. They had three more matches to go. Next week was against South Yarra Bunyips. And then they were facing North Sydney in the last Sydney Showdown of the year.

Against Bryce.

If they lost, the Swallows' season was over.

NOAH SEETHED AS HE headed into the locker room. The despair after another loss in the bag was heavy and squeezing in on him from all directions. The Crocs had been playing poorly all year, and this had only been their second win, and it shouldn't have come from the Swallows. They'd been building on their skills all off season and working on their weaknesses.

It was like they'd all just forgotten the training sessions and gone back to being green players in their debut matches. The entire season so far had been a mismatch of close, barely there wins and devastating losses.

There was a half circle of plastic chairs in rows in the inner locker area where the press and families weren't allowed. The chairs were waiting for the team to fill them, and the coach to talk them through their newest clusterfuck. Noah wasn't in the mood to hear the same things over and over again. Noah'd had a problem with Novak when they'd first brought him on, and that hadn't changed. If anything, it had grown worse. This season had been coming for a while, and while some of the blame could of course be credited to the team—they were a *young* team, and they had a lot of learning to do—having an incompetent coach wasn't helping any of them.

Noah fished his phone out of his bag before he sat heavily on a plastic chair in the front row. It sagged under his heavy weight.

He couldn't give a shit what the rules about phones were. Bryce's team had started their game roughly fifteen minutes after the Swallows had started, and they would either be just finishing or about to.

Noah would rather catch the last of it than listen to whatever drivel Novak had to say.

Ravioli sat in the seat behind him and leaned forward, draping his arms over Noah's shoulders. "What ya watchin'?"

Noah watched as the ball was fumbled, and Bryce broke through the fray to snatch it up and snap a clean kick right over his shoulder. It arced beautifully and went through the centre of the goal posts like a homing beacon.

“Oh, nice kick!” Ravioli exclaimed.

Coop settled in beside Noah and peered over. “Is this the North game? Guess they’re doing better than we are.”

An understatement. North had only lost two games that year, and those had been earlier in the season. One of them being to the Swallows themselves in their first Showdown during the third round. After that, they’d gone in opposite directions. And not the direction that Noah would prefer. Not that he *wanted* Bryce’s team to lose, but if he had to choose, he’d pick his own team, every time.

North was a mature team, with a lot of talented players *and* experience to guide them. The Swallows had talent, but Coop, Jaryd, Forest, Noah, Darcy, and Wren were the only real players with plenty of years’ experience. And even then, Noah and Jaryd were the only two who had a decade in the league. They were good, but there were seventeen other players on the team, and they couldn’t hold the games on their shoulders. Team sports didn’t work like that.

Bryce kicked another goal with only fifteen seconds on the clock. They were already in the clear regarding winning since the other team was almost sixty points down. It was just another nail in the coffin, and Noah winced. He was intimately familiar with how it felt on the other side of a game that brutal.

Bryce immediately faced the crowd, his red curls glistening with sweat. He lifted his arms into the air, elbows bent as he roared loudly. The crowd went wild around him, a mixture of jubilation and the occasional boo thrown in that literally no one cared about. In the next second, Oakley wrapped him up and lifted him off the ground, and the rest of the team descended, swallowing him up until even the red was hard to see.

The commentator's next words echoed in Noah's mind even after he'd put his phone away.

*“North Sydney is on top of the ladder, and Bryce Monaghan is here to show everyone why they're the team to beat this year!”*

It followed him through the lecture from their coach that did nothing but turn the depressive air sour and dark, all the way to his hotel room and through his shower.



**BRYCE DECLINED THE INVITATION** to go out for dinner to celebrate the win. He had a date in a hotel room, and there was nowhere else he wanted to be.

He and Noah had planned to head to the beach in Glenelg and find a place nearby to grab some grub—somewhere well away from the festivities that were swamping Adelaide and away from hopefully anywhere they were too recognisable—before going back to Noah's hotel room together.

He made short work of showering and heading out, declining two more invitations and ignoring the knowing look from Oakley. The hotel room card that Noah had given him before they'd all left for their game-day matches was snug in Bryce's pocket.

He'd been disappointed that their games were scheduled so close together; he'd have loved to go and watch Noah play, and their game days rarely matched up enough to be able to do that, considering all the travel involved every week for them. When Noah played in Sydney, Bryce was playing elsewhere, and when Bryce played in Sydney, Noah was playing elsewhere. The few times they hadn't overlapped, he hadn't thought to get a ticket.

Unless they were playing each other, which only happened twice in the regular season. The second Showdown was in just a few weeks, and Bryce couldn't wait to be face-to-face with Noah on the field again. He was pumped and ready and more excited about the highly publicised match in a way he never had been before. Noah had always been a challenge to compete against; knowing that the big guy would take him home afterwards and then wreck him made the idea of facing him ten times hotter. A million times. He couldn't wait.

Noah was sitting on the small two-seater couch in his hotel room instead of naked in the bed or in the shower like Bryce had hoped, but he could still work with it. Riding Noah on the couch seemed like a great idea. One of his best. They could do that first and then go out.



Except that the look on Noah's face wasn't that of someone who wanted to get his dick inside Bryce cowboy style. Bryce had seen the final score for his match, and it had sucked balls, so he couldn't say he was completely surprised that Noah was sitting in the dark by himself with a cloud over his head. He *had* hoped that Coop, or Wren, or any of the other Swallows might have been able to lift his spirits a bit more than it looked like they had, but Bryce was here now, and he would do whatever Noah needed to feel better.

That he *could*, and that he was allowed to, and that Noah was *his*—maybe not officially, but Bryce had plans for that—was exhilarating. He could look after Noah and help him. And Bryce wanted to.

“Hey,” he said cautiously, closing the door behind himself with a quiet snick. “Are you ready to go? If you need to have a shower still, I know a great guy that would be willing to soap you up. With a massage thrown in for free.”

“Why aren't you out celebrating?” Noah asked bitterly.

Bryce let out a breath. Okay, that was how the evening was going to go down. “We made plans, remember? We're heading out to Glenelg?”

Noah continued as though Bryce hadn't even spoken. “Oh, that's right,” he said, eyes bright in a way that was frankly terrifying. “You don't need to. So many wins. Hell, what's one more?”

Bryce frowned. “What the hell, Noah?” Is that what this was about? Because North had won? He'd thought it had been

about the Swallows *losing*, not North winning. One had nothing to do with the other. “Look, I’m sorry your team lost, but—”

“But what?” Noah demanded, standing up. “Our team just sucks, so I should be used to it?”

“Hey, whoa,” Bryce said, holding up his hands. “I did not say any of that.” He wasn’t going to let Noah put words in his mouth. Especially not vitriolic ones like that. He would never even *think* that about Noah’s team, let alone say it. “Don’t forget my best mate and my brother are on your team too. Maybe I don’t feel the losses like you all do, because I’m not living them, but it hurts me too.”

“Oh, fuck off,” Noah scoffed. “What have you got to be hurt about? Your team is on the top, Bryce. It’s all laid out there for you. Might as well put on your winning guernsey right now.”

Bryce bit back his response to that. Rising to the bait and getting angry in return, when it was clear that Noah was just hurting and lashing out, would only make things worse.

He took a deep breath. They couldn’t both get angry. “Why don’t we go out, check out the water like we were going to. Maybe there’s a place nearby that rents out surfboards? The water’s cold, but we can pretend we’re just having another ice bath.”

“I’d rather be alone. Why don’t you go out and celebrate with someone else?”

Coming from anyone else, that would have sounded fine. Some guys preferred to be alone after a loss; everyone dealt with it differently. But the snide tone to Noah's voice couldn't be mistaken for anything else.

"I want to be with you." He'd been trying to think of a way that he could tell Noah that he was in love with him. Or just that he wanted to date, try out the word *boyfriend*, and see if maybe they could make something of this beyond just sex. They were both kidding themselves if they thought it was *just* sex anymore. Bryce wanted it all, and he wanted it with Noah. Beach and dinner sounded romantic enough to bring it up.

"Well, I don't, okay? We are *this* close to losing out on a finals chance," Noah said angrily, pinching his fingers together for effect. "And that is more important to me than your gay experiment, Bryce. I'm done being used, okay?"

Bryce's stomach dropped, the words digging in like knives in his throat. "I have never used you," he said in a hollow voice. Was Noah really going to twist that around and turn it into something that it wasn't? Sully everything they'd gone through together all these months?

"And I'm done. I want that flag, Bryce. And you're in the way."

Right. Of course. That made some kind of sick sense, he guessed. There could only be one at the end.

"Winning isn't everything. Losing sucks, *I know*. You think I haven't felt that before? Sport doesn't work that way. We all deal with wins and losses. Some more than others; I can't

change that, and I won't take responsibility for it. Our team is doing well today; that doesn't mean they'll do well tomorrow. We're all just here to take the ride."

"That's easy to say when you're the one winning," Noah said with a snarl. "Easy to say up there in your gilded palace with the entire AFL world singing your praise, and people shouting your name in the crowd, with pictures of your face held up like you're the one carrying your team when there are twenty other guys out there."

Bryce swallowed hard. The unsteady beat of his chest and the sweat forming on his palms was unpleasant, as was the way his heart was aching. "I'm sorry that my success is hard for you," he said quietly. "It's not as though I'm winning to *spite* you or something, Noah. You mean more to me than that."

Noah sneered, his nostrils flaring. "I don't mean anything to you, Bryce. You wanted to ride my dick, and I let you. That's all there is to it. I think you got your answer, and I think we're done."

Bryce understood why Noah was throwing the words at him like weapons. Anger and grief could get mixed up so badly inside that reactions weren't always what they wanted them to be. He knew that Noah would regret everything he was saying and doing now while he was hurting. But Bryce couldn't stand there and listen to it.

"I love you," Bryce said, his voice husky with unshed tears. He wouldn't let this be the end of it, not when Noah was angry

and tired and coming off a devastating loss. It wasn't the right place to make a decision like this.

Noah faltered, hands unclenching at his sides.

“Somewhere along the way, you got inside and stayed there. I'm gonna leave right now because we both need some space before we really say something that we're both going to regret and can't take back. But we're not done. When you're ready to have a rational, adult conversation about the things that are bothering you, you have my number.”

Noah didn't try to stop him when he left, and Bryce didn't know if that made his heartache better or worse.



## Fourth Quarter

COOPER PARK HAD TOO many memories now. Ridiculous how taking Bryce there only a handful of times had changed the landscape too much for Noah to even look at it. He'd travelled an extra twenty minutes to get to the Narrabeen Lagoon Trail instead. He'd never used this trail, and Rufus didn't like his plans changed. He was rowdy and refused to listen the whole run. By the time Noah got them back in his car, he was both physically *and* mentally exhausted just from keeping them both on track.

"This isn't my fault," Noah said sternly before dropping the boot and locking Rufus in. His dog wouldn't even look at him. They'd both gotten too used to Bryce's presence.

He was sick of the way everything seemed to remind him of Bryce now. The redheaded captain had managed to invade every slice of his life.

It was nine a.m. on a Thursday, and Bryce would have been here by now, would have jogged with them. Hell, the last

couple of weeks he'd been spending the night every Wednesday so they could wake up together.

Noah had ruined all of that.

He made coffee as soon as he got home and sat at the dining table to drink it. He thumbed his phone absently. Rufus was staring at him from across the room when he would normally have been under his feet demanding food. They were both off-kilter.

"I didn't do anything wrong," he repeated firmly.

Rufus's head tilted, his ear flopping. Then he turned and walked out, dismissing Noah completely.

Noah couldn't blame him. He didn't believe it either. It had definitely been his fault, and he'd definitely done something wrong. And now he wasn't sure how to fix it, or if he could.

It had been over a week since Bryce had walked out of Noah's hotel room. Over a week since that awkward-as-fuck flight home, where they'd sat on opposite ends of the plane, and Noah had tried not to keep looking at Bryce where he'd been sitting with Wren, Darcy, and Coop. It hadn't been obvious anything was wrong, but Noah had been sure everyone could hear the way his heart had been dragging on the floor of the plane.

Bryce hadn't tried to contact him since then. Noah hadn't really expected him to. He'd told Noah to call him when he was ready to talk, and Noah... hadn't. And now it had been



too long to just waltz back in like, “Hey, how’s your day been, honey?”

The Swallows had beaten the Bunyips by the skin of their teeth—by three points, like some kind of morbid symmetry—in the week since, and now they’d be playing North Sydney in the final Showdown of the year and the second-to-last game of the regular home-and-away-season. They were deep in the final run to the finals, and the Swallows had to win every match to even have a chance at snatching that eighth spot.

And that was the crux of the issue: that North Sydney was on top of their game and one of the only matches left standing in the way of the Swallows making the finals. It was sitting firmly inside Noah like a swirling storm that wouldn’t abate.

If they lost this game, North would be the ones to end their premiership run, and then what would Noah do? It wasn’t Bryce’s fault that the Swallows were playing subpar footy at best, but that didn’t change the fact that Bryce was captain of the team that would decide how *his* team’s season ended.

And the words he’d been trying so hard not to think about, to ignore and pretend they had never happened, echoed in his mind every second of every day.

*I love you.*

Love. That wasn’t supposed to happen.

At least Noah could understand the footy issue. But feelings? Noah was twenty-eight years old, and he’d never had a meaningful relationship in his life. The longest might have

been a couple of months, and was hard-pressed to remember who that was even with. He'd always been focused on footy to the exclusion of all else.

Bryce had been bi-curious, and Noah had been happy to oblige with sexual favours. That had been it. Bryce was Coop's best friend, captain to North Sydney, Wren's little brother. Not someone to fall in love with. And he sure as hell shouldn't have been falling in love with Noah. What could Noah offer him? Bryce was definitely bisexual, and there would be plenty of guys that would line up around the block waiting for a chance to take him out.

Instead, Bryce had chosen Noah.

And Noah had turned around and spat in his face.

Did he love Bryce? He didn't know. He hadn't thought about it. There'd been nothing *to* think about. It was just sex, and Noah wasn't into self-flagellation, so he'd steered clear of thinking about it. Had it snuck in for him as well, the same way Bryce had said it had for him?

He scoffed to himself. He was kidding himself if—His phone rang, and he jumped on it like a lifeline, needing anything to get him out of his thoughts.

“Two questions,” Coop said when Noah answered. “Are you naked, and are you busy?”

“It feels like that's really just one question,” Noah replied automatically.

“It’s really just me trying to make sure you and Bry aren’t fucking while I’m talking to you.”

Noah’s heart skipped a beat. *Bryce hadn’t told him.* Coop hadn’t come at Noah with pitchforks, so in some recess of his mind he knew that. But the confirmation hit him like a freight train.

Bryce was still waiting for him. Being patient in a way that Noah didn’t deserve.

“He’s not here,” Noah said dryly. He could have been there if Noah hadn’t been such an asshole. Could have been sitting across the table from him, smiling the way that he did and eating his weight in food while he snuck pieces to Rufus, thinking he was sneaky and Noah wasn’t noticing. Instead, Noah was sitting alone with a coffee that was going cold and a dog somewhere else in the house because he’d been disowned.

“A couple of us guys are going out to play some mini golf and have something loaded with carbs for lunch. You in?”

“Is Bryce going with you?” Noah asked cautiously. Could this be his chance to make amends? Or another chance to turn it down and keep running? He didn’t even know himself which he would choose.

“Nah, he and Wren have a family thing,” Coop said. “I thought Bry might have been getting a quickie in with you before he headed there. It’s just me, Forest, Darce, Jaryd, Sammy, Ravioli, and Kira.”

“How did you get Kira to agree?” Noah asked. He couldn’t help the sigh of relief. Saved by family obligations. That was pathetic.

“It was tough. And Forest bribed him with vanilla slice.”

“Like luring in a stray cat with promises of food and love.”

“Got it in one. So, you coming?”

“Why are you playing *mini* golf?” Noah asked curiously. He rinsed his mug in the sink and checked that Rufus’s water bowl was filled to the brim and then went in search of the wayward animal.

“Sammy got banned from the golf club that we like, and Darcy likes mini golf.”

“He got *banned*?” Since when? Sammy had been there during the off season earlier in the year, and no one had told him to leave.

“It was a whole thing,” Coop said, laughing. “He and Wren apparently have a plan to fix it, but I told them I didn’t want to know in case I get caught in the web as an accomplice.”

“Smart move.”

“Ignorance is bliss when it comes to whatever Wren has his hand in. You still haven’t told me if you’re coming,” Coop said, exasperated. “I need to book lunch, and I need numbers.”

“Don’t get your knickers in a twist,” Noah said. He opened his drawers to find something to wear. At least it would take

up a chunk of his day, and he wouldn't have time to sit in his own thoughts.

As if he could fool himself into believing that he wouldn't be thinking about Bryce every other minute of the day.



“YOU SEEM QUIET TODAY.”

Bryce carefully pressed the dinosaur cookie cutter into the flattened dough, as though he were conducting brain surgery. It was important that all the T-Rex's hands and feet were shaped properly. The little hands they had were difficult to slide onto the baking paper without breaking off.

“Bryce.”

A gentle hand on his forearm forced him to stop and look up at Abby. His mum and dad—with his siblings, Wren and Monica—were all in the lounge, arguing over which movie to watch for the afternoon while he and Abby baked cookies.

Well. Rolled out the dough that Bryce's dad, Neil, had prepared for them in advance—otherwise they wouldn't be *edible* cookies—and put them in the oven. If they were feeling adventurous, they might attempt royal icing again, but Bryce wasn't much in the mood for adventure.

“I'm okay,” he said, though part of that felt like a lie. Noah hadn't contacted him since he'd walked out. It felt like he was missing a vital organ, one that he needed to survive.

If Noah really cared, wouldn't he have called by now?

Bryce had wanted to send him something when the Swallows had won last week. Wanted to be there for him through that win. He'd tossed and turned all night, picking up and putting down his phone too many times to count.

No matter how much he wanted to step forward and close the gap, he wasn't going to force the issue or show up where he wasn't wanted. The ball was in Noah's forward fifty, and if they were going to make something together, then he had to bring it back to centre square. It couldn't be Bryce alone making the effort.

"Just dealing with some stuff."

"A girl," Abby guessed, giving him a cheeky smile. The raptor she'd just cut out was missing a tail and half its head. She beamed at it as she transferred it to the tray, so Bryce didn't say anything about it. It would still taste the same.

"Something like that." Bryce paused with his T-Rex dough shape half lifted to the tray. His tail fell off too, the soft dough tearing as it hung there. "No," he said firmly. "It's about a guy."

He wasn't going to do either of them a disservice by hiding. Noah might need a swift kick in the head and maybe a kiss that would make him stop thinking so damn hard, but pretending that he was a girl just so that Bryce didn't have to talk about it was inherently wrong. Even if Noah called it quits—properly, not that hissy fit in the hotel room—it didn't

change that Bryce had learned something about himself that he wouldn't deny, especially not to his family.

"I... am sort of in a relationship with a guy. And it's a bit rocky at the moment," Bryce said. He met Abby's eyes and refused to look away. He had nothing to be ashamed of.

There was shock in her gaze and red tinging the tops of her cheeks. "Oh." Her mouth stayed like that, formed in an "O."

"You're in a throuple with a man and a woman; you can't be surprised by this. Or... disappointed or whatever," Bryce said defensively. That would be some A-plus hypocrisy right there. And he wouldn't have thought it of one of his favourite people in the world.

Abby's lips turned down. "Don't you dare come at me like that, Bryce Taylor Monaghan. I love you like I birthed you. You've never shown an interest in someone of the same sex before; I'm allowed to be a little surprised about it. Give me at least thirty seconds to process."

"The word sex coming out of your mouth is wrong," Bryce said, grimacing. Even in a non-dirty context, it was weird.

"Bryce."

Bryce huffed, his head falling back. "Sorry. It was a recent-ish development." It had been almost six months since he'd started sleeping with Noah, and *that* was strange to think about. The passage of time was a weird concept. There had never been a good moment to bring it up with his parents, and for a lot of it, Bryce still hadn't been sure he was confident

enough in his new reality to start sharing it with the most important people in his life. He hadn't wanted to come back a month later and say he'd changed his mind and, "Whoops? Guess it wasn't for me." He wasn't a flake, and he didn't want them thinking that he was.

"And you thought, what? That we wouldn't approve? What did we do when Monica came home and said she had a girlfriend?" Abby raised an eyebrow, daring him to contradict her.

"That's a completely different situation," Bryce pointed out. His stegosaurus was missing a leg and a horn. Did the dinosaurs have health insurance? They needed it. "Monica was thirteen, and what she meant was that she had made a new friend that was a girl. But you got so excited that she didn't want to hurt your feelings, so they pretended they were dating for over a year, Mum. Noah and I are... more than friends." He was not going to say that he and Noah were having sex. There were some boundaries that just shouldn't be crossed with parents. Ever.

Abby blinked. "The day for revelations, it seems." She waved dismissively. "Whatever, potato, potato. The point is that we accepted it with open arms because we don't judge our children. Unless they're criminals. Or Mount Clear Cassowaries supporters, because screw that team. Or eat their pizza with a knife and fork. Or wear socks with their thongs."

"The list keeps growing," Bryce said dryly. "Should we write this down?"



Abby's eyes widened. "Or drink beer out of their shoe. That is something Australian that should be fed to the crocodiles." She clicked her fingers. "Or condition, *then* shampoo."

"Do you know someone who does that?" Either of those things. He agreed on both counts that they should be part of the rules. But he needed to know specifics because it was important to know who to avoid.

"I don't associate with people that would do that," she said, shaking her head. "I make enough of my own problems; no need to invite more. Oh! The people that bite their toenails off."

"Eww."

She nodded solemnly. "We don't associate with those. Do you do that?"

"No!" Bryce grimaced. He rubbed his forehead. "We're writing this down. Also, no one says potahto, that doesn't even make sense. It's tomato, tomahto."

"Are you arguing with your mother?"

His brain screamed *danger* at him, and he liked to think that he was smarter than the average bear. "... no?"

"It sounded like you were."

"I wasn't."

"I think you were."

Bryce smiled, eyes crinkling. "I wasn't."

She huffed at him. “Finish your dinosaurs,” she said. She pointed at him. “I’m watching you.”

He laughed, and she threw a piece of dough at him.

They filled three trays and left the others resting on the bench to be put in when the first batches were done.

Bryce should have known the conversation had only been temporarily put on the back burner.

The moment that they headed into the lounge, where everyone was spread out across the two couches and two armchairs and watching *The Emperor’s New Groove*, Abby blurted out, “Bryce is having boy troubles,” before collapsing down beside his mum, Lana.

All eyes turned to Bryce.

Heat rose to the surface of his cheeks. Could he get to the front door before anyone caught him? Wren was closest to the door that led to the hallway that led to the front door, so... probably not. Little bastard was fast.

“They’re not... we’re not... trouble,” Bryce said. Fucking hell, *that* had been articulate. Good job.

“Holy shit.” Monica whistled. “Boy troubles?” She bounced on her seat, the butterfly clip in her hair jiggling, and then patted the seat next to her. “Come sit by me.”

“I’d rather not.”

“Sit. By. Me.”

Bryce sighed and did as he was told. If he didn't, she would just poke at him until he did. It was easier to agree now instead of prolonging it. "You know, me being the baby of the family doesn't mean you get to still boss me around at twenty-three." He was an adult now, and he wasn't taking the fall for stealing the chocolate from on top of the fridge. He still maintained it wasn't him; he was just the tool. Wren had supplied the teetering stack of three chairs, and Monica had told him to fetch.

"Did you catch *feelings* for Walker?" Wren asked, shuddering in an exaggerated fashion. "I should have known you couldn't have casual sex like a normal person, you wanker."

"Fuck off," Bryce said succinctly.

"Hey," Lana said sternly, pointing at them. "Swear jar."

They both sighed and pulled out their wallets. Bryce only had a ten, so Wren gave him a five, and he put the ten into the jar. The penalty had gone up from the fifty cents it had been when they'd been kids. "Inflation," their dad called it. Which was bullshit because Bryce didn't see *them* putting any money in the jar when they dropped the F-bomb. Or worse.

"Walker." Monica moved the word around in her mouth as she said it again. "*Walker.*"

"You can stop saying it like that," Bryce deadpanned.

Monica clicked her fingers. "Noah Walker? Oh my fucking God, are you dating *Noah Walker*?"

Neil pointed at the jar.

There was a bounce in Monica's step as she stuffed a twenty dollar note in there. "In advance; I'm gonna need it," she said in explanation.

Bryce rolled his eyes.

"That's not how the swear jar works," Abby said. She tucked herself against Lana, who wrapped an arm around her, pulling her closer.

"Noah Walker, as in number thirteen for the Sydney Swallows? Key forward and like sixty feet tall?" Lana asked. She smiled as she absently twirled Abby's hair in her fingers. "You didn't tell us you liked a boy."

"Why do we have to keep saying his full name?" Bryce muttered. They all knew who they were talking about. Just his first name would suffice. "And he's not sixty feet tall." Noah wouldn't even fit in his house if that were the case. He'd need a specially designed building.

"That's how you would describe him?" Wren asked. "By his *height*? Rude, much?"

"Don't be jealous of someone else's looks, Wren, dear. We love you just the size you are."

"That doesn't make me feel better!" Wren spluttered.

"You're like five six, Wren. You're only *short* by footy standards."

“If you look at statistics on the average male height, I am below the standard.”

Monica snickered. “And you don’t even have good looks to make up for it.”

Wren glared at her.

Bryce closed his eyes and shook his head. “Can we not call him a boy? He’s older than Wren and Monica. And we’re not dating. I mean, I don’t think so? Not yet. I was hoping we could, and then...” He shrugged. “We have some things we need to talk through.” He hoped they could talk them through, but Noah would need to speak to him first, for that to happen.

“I can’t believe that you were getting down and dirty with Noah Walker, and you didn’t even tell me,” Monica said. She punched Wren in the upper arm. “And *you* knew, you little stinker. You didn’t think to maybe let me in on the gossip?”

“It was a need-to-know basis, and annoying older sisters don’t get to join the party.” Wren sniffed.

“One more argument, and the swear jar is being tripled,” Neil warned them.

They both sat back with a huff, though they shoved at each other’s shoulders a few times before they settled properly. If the swear jar fine went up because of them, Bryce was going to argue he shouldn’t get punished too. This wasn’t some kind of musketeer situation. He hadn’t asked to have them as siblings.

He stood up. “My name is Bryce, and I’m bisexual.” He sat back down. “And that’s all the discussion that we need to have. If Noah and I sort our shit out, I’ll bring him over for dinner.”

“They’ve met him before,” Wren said, scrunching his face up.

“Not as Bryce’s boyfriend, we haven’t,” Lana said. “That’s different. I might even try to be on my best behaviour.”

Wren snorted, and she shot him a quelling look. He smiled innocently. “Love you, Mum.”

“Should have smacked all of you more when you were children,” she said mournfully. “So many wooden-spoon opportunities.”

“I think that Wren and Noah have more than enough wooden-spoon accolades to their name,” Monica said pleasantly.

“Hey!” Bryce said, scowling. He was offended on their behalf. Mostly for Noah. A little for Wren, but Wren deserved to be heckled. “They’ve had *one*; fuck off.” He pointed at his parents. “I’m not paying for that; she was being rude.”

“That is also not how the swear jar works,” Abby said. She held out a hand. “Cough it up.”

Bryce grumbled under his breath as he pulled out the five Wren had given him and stuffed it in on top of Monica’s twenty.

“Touchy,” Monica said, her gaze all too knowing.

Bryce shoved her shoulder, sandwiching her between him and Wren.

“Ditto!” Wren said, wearing a matching scowl. He jerked his thumb at Monica. “I think she should have to pay our fucking swear jar fuck money.” He paused. “Fuck.”

“I do not have to pay if he’s *deliberately* swearing, Mum!” Monica protested. “I knew I should have left you in the bin when you were a baby.”

“Fuck money?” Neil asked mildly. “What is it you think we do with the money?”

“I think we should keep it PG-13 in here,” Lana said.

“I don’t think they let a PG-13 movie use the word fuck,” Abby pointed out.

“Losers.”

Bryce ignored them all, refocusing his attention on the movie. Good thing he’d seen it a million times, or he would have had trouble following it. Nothing like a spoiled llama to make him feel better.

“I told you that if he broke your heart, I’d punch him,” Wren said, leaning in front of Monica to look at Bryce. “He’s getting a black eye,” he promised.

“Can you reach his eye?” Monica mused.

“I can reach *yours*.”

She got him in a headlock for that, rubbing the top of his head with her knuckles.

Bryce lifted his knees to his chest and rested his chin on them, eyes forward as they jostled him with their wrestling. Sometimes he didn't know if any of them had actually grown up, or if they were just pretending when they went outside.

“I'm sorry, sweetheart,” Abby said gently. “It sounds like you really like him. I hope it works out. I can bake him some cupcakes if you want?”

If he wanted to scare Noah away forever, that could work. But it was the opposite of what he was hoping to do.

“Uncle! Uncle!” Wren choked out, struggling to get out of Monica's hold.

“Submit, loser,” Monica said, cackling.

“That's what ‘uncle’ means!”

“It's just a rough patch,” Bryce said. “Wren is going to keep his hands to himself, and after this weekend, Noah and I will talk about it.”

The sinking feeling in his gut had everything to do with the fact that he wasn't sure that Noah would ever talk to him again if North beat the Swallows.

It felt like more than just the finals were riding on the outcome.



GAME DAY.



They were always a mixed bag. That was before Noah even thought about the fact it would be the first time in two weeks that he'd seen Bryce. Or spoken to him. Two weeks almost to the day that Noah had set everything on fire, and Bryce had walked out.

Noah sat heavily on the bench and pulled the strapping out of his bag. It was a task he'd done a million times before, and thankfully, his muscle memory took over.

Coop was staring at him again as he wrote in his socks. An eerie kind of déjà vu swept over Noah. Was Coop about to tell him again that Bryce saw him in the shower and watched him jerk off? Groundhog Day, except it was the whole year. Maybe he would start over every time he fucked it up until he didn't fuck it up anymore. They'd be in it for the long haul, then, because Noah wasn't confident in his ability to not fuck it up. It wasn't as though he had a benchmark for it or any relationships to refer back to on "what not to do."

Though not blaming his partner for his own losing streak was probably What Not To Do 101. He'd clearly missed class when they'd been teaching that lesson.

Noah sighed and picked up his guernsey and tape, and then moved to sit down beside Coop once more. If he opened his mouth and said something about Bryce and showers, Noah was leaving. If he ignored Groundhog Day, then did it really exist?

A strange metaphor for running from his problems, probably.

He waited until Coop had put his pen down before speaking. Maybe changing certain outcomes could change the entire timeline. “Spit it out.”

“Spit what out?” Coop asked. “I’m not chewing on anything. Wren hid my gum somewhere, and Darcy took my last muesli bar.”

That didn’t sound like Darcy. “He took it?” Noah questioned.

“I gave it to him,” Coop amended. “With... a normal level of force.”

The specificity of that was worrying. “Did he know it was your last one?”

“No further questions, Your Honour.”

“I think *I’m* supposed to say that,” Noah said. Wasn’t it the lawyer that said when they were done? He had no idea. He’d never set foot in a courtroom in his entire life. Jury duty summons had never come for him, and he’d only ever gotten a parking ticket before. He still maintained that he hadn’t *deserved* it. The parking box had been having technical difficulties, and putting in his car registration number hadn’t done anything but cause it to flash at him. So he’d ducked into the store since he was only grabbing one thing. He’d quite literally only been in the store for two minutes and eleven seconds—he’d counted—before he’d been fined. Some higher power had decided he’d slighted them that day. He’d paid it, but he’d grumbled about it.

“Objection.”

“Have you been watching *Law and Order*?” Noah asked. “You have got to stop watching so much TV. You don’t have a lot of brain cells left to begin with, Coop; you can’t be wasting them on the idiot box.”

“You’re an idiot box.”

“Very mature. Moving on,” he said dryly. “Why do you keep staring at me?” he asked. He picked up his tape again and wound it securely around his shoulder.

“Bry has been spending a lot of time on my couch lately.”

Noah paused, one hand on his upper arm, the tape gripped in his palm. “You’re staring at me because you and your best mate have been watching TV? Did Wren hit you? Do you have a concussion? I’m telling Forest to bench you for the match.”

It was the mention of Forest that made Coop bite, of course. “He wouldn’t listen to you.”

Noah bet Forest would listen to him before he listened to Coop, especially about medical stuff. Athletes were idiots that shouldn’t ever be put in charge of their own recovery plans.

“I’m just saying that if he’s with *me*,” Coop said, pointing to himself with his uncapped marker, “then he’s not with *you*.”

“You just worked that out, huh? Teleportation hasn’t been invented yet, and I don’t think Bryce has the ability to astral project.” Even saying his name was painful, dragging up his throat with nails scraping on the walls.

“You’re deflecting so hard right now,” Coop said, narrowing his eyes. “Something *has* happened. I fucking knew it.”

“No,” Noah said slowly. “We had an arrangement that was about Bryce exploring his bisexuality, and now it’s over.” The words hurt deep inside him, an ache that he couldn’t shift even after two weeks of Bryce’s absence.

“I know when you’re lying. I know when *he’s* lying. You’re both so full of shit even an enema isn’t going to help you.”

Noah finished his strapping and dropped the tape on the bench before slipping his guernsey over his head. “There’s only one thing that I want to be thinking about right now, and that’s how we shore up our defence, how we cut *North’s* defence off at the knees, and how we win, okay? I can’t—can’t let anything else get in.”

Coop must have heard the waver in Noah’s voice that he’d tried so hard to hide, because he nodded and let it drop. He held out the marker. “Want to write in your sock?”

“No, Coop, I don’t want to write in my sock,” Noah said with exasperation. Why would he want to do that?

“It helps.”

Noah let out a breath and took the marker. “Fine,” he bit out. “What do I write?”

“Whatever you want. Inspiration, recipe, an ode to Rufus. It’s like... you take it with you, and every step that you take out on the ground, it’s right there. You don’t take your sock off during a match, and so the words never leave.”

That... made more sense than Noah had thought it would. He toed off his boot, got his sock off—freshly put on, so at least it was *clean*—and turned it inside out.

He hesitated with the marker over the fabric. What would he write?

Coop slapped him on the shoulder and stood. “For what it’s worth,” he said, “I think you make a cute couple. The red really works for you.”

There went the idea that Coop could be serious for two seconds. “Bugger off.”

Coop walked away, cackling.

Noah went back to his sock deliberations. He went to write, paused, lifted his hand again.

In the end, he only wrote two things, both on his left sock.

*I remember the important things, Mum. Love is stronger than a memory, and I'll never forget.*

*I love you, too, Bryce.*

It still felt a bit silly writing them on his clothing, but Coop was right. There was a weird comfort in knowing that every time he stepped, those words hugged his calf like a weighted touch.

NOAH SPENT WARMUP OUT on the field deliberately not looking over to where North Sydney were running through their own drills. Bryce’s hair was like a beacon, and Noah

needed to concentrate, to not allow anything to fuck up his focus. This game was too important, and the Swallows needed this win.

Noah would do everything it took to get them there.

They went back inside after the warmups, and then it was time to head through the race for the match itself.

Unfortunately, since Bryce was a midfielder that frequently took up space in the Swallows forward fifty, Noah couldn't avoid him forever.

As they all got into position while the captains did the coin toss in centre square, Noah finally set his eyes on Bryce. He was so close that Noah could almost touch him, and it made his knees weak.

“Hey,” Bryce said awkwardly.

“Hi.” Noah soaked him up, looking his fill and drinking deeply for the first time in what felt like a lifetime, when it had only been a mere two weeks. He looked incredible, with his crisp white shorts that showed off his toned thighs and the freckles that Noah would never tire of even if he had a lifetime to explore them instead of just a few months.

His red curls seemed extra bright under the afternoon sun that peeked out from behind the darkening clouds. It wouldn't be long before they opened up and poured, but it was as though the sun wanted to come out long enough to shine a light on Bryce.

Bryce's Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, his freckles shifting. "Noah, I—"

They didn't get a chance to speak, the first bounce disrupting them as the game began and the Swallows' battle to stay in the finals kicked off in earnest.

It was a scrappy start to the game, the almost desperate movements of the Swallows making everything feel twice as long, twice as hard. The stoppages were plentiful as desperation made the Swallows hesitate when they needed to take action, and they gave North time to wrap them up in tackles that were impossible to get out of, forcing play to stop before an umpire tossed the Sherrin into the air to start it again.

Noah couldn't fault his team; *he* was hesitating too. Not pushing at Bryce when he should have, not going for the mark when it meant touching Bryce, not scrambling for the ball when it meant that he could catch a whiff of Bryce's scent.

Hypersensitivity to everything about Bryce called to Noah. It put him on edge, with anxiety and helplessness wrapped up in his need to be closer.

He wanted this win. *Needed* it. Noah couldn't afford to play careful. He should have been getting in there, kicking goals and putting North's defence in the ground.

All he could think about was Bryce.

How they went into the second quarter only two points behind was beyond him; Noah was ready to burst. If Bryce

looked at him like that one more time, with sadness and *fear*, he was going to lose his mind.

Noah needed to concentrate, and all he wanted to do was hold Bryce, kiss him, whisper filth in his ears until he came apart in Noah's arms.

None of his team were playing their best footy either. It was as though they were feeding off Noah's uncertainty. Forest was trying to rally them, Ravioli and Coop backing him up, but they were falling short of everything they needed to play—and win—against a team of North's calibre. North was the best team in the league right now, and the Swallows weren't playing like a team that could compete with that.

The rain came down hard a few minutes in, with no warning. They'd known it was *coming*, but there weren't even a few spits to let them know it was about to. One second it was clear, the next it was bucketing, soaking them all in an instant.

The rest of the second quarter was a fucking nightmare. They were all sliding and slipping, none of them getting a good grip on the ball. Marks lost when they shouldn't have been, fumbles when it was clear. Noah was more distracted than he should have been by the way that Bryce's gear clung to him and the way his curls darkened and plastered to his forehead. A seduction for the eyes, and Noah was well and truly entranced.

It didn't help that every time Noah looked at him, he was looking right back. Time slowed down when he met those hazel eyes.



Somehow Noah managed to kick two goals, Ravioli soccer kicked one in, and Forest got one with an impressive snap kick over the shoulder, through some miracle and a score review that had them standing on pins and needles while they waited. Charlie Hadley, a defender for North, was adamant he'd touched it, and honestly, Noah wasn't sure he *hadn't*—was almost pretty sure that it had actually been touched—but there was insufficient evidence to overturn the umpire's call during the score review, so it went their way, and that was all he cared about.

Despite all of that, they went into halftime fifteen points down. North's pressure was relentless; they were moving the Sherrin with pinpoint accuracy and bulldozing through the Swallows' defence. All of those things meant they spent more time in their own forward fifty with more shots on goal. North had missed a few critical goals and had racked up five behinds, but North was still well in the lead and dominating every aspect of the game in a way that had frustration curling in every nook and crevice of Noah's insides.

The locker room was quiet at halftime. Noah ate a banana and drank a blue Gatorade while he listened to Coach Jackson tell them all the things they were doing wrong, what they were doing right, and what they needed to do to get back in the game. For once, he was coherent and not going off on random tangents. They were all feeling the tension in the air, and it sat ugly on their faces and in their shoulders.

All the things he talked about, Noah already knew. Make better split decisions, tighten up *and* spread out, make sure

there weren't any North players unmanned and allowed to roam free—when that happened, the assholes made the most of it and scored goals that the Swallows couldn't afford to allow them.

Wren sat heavily beside Noah, and he sighed. “What?”

“I told Bryce that I wouldn't punch you, because for some stupid-ass reason he *likes* you. So get out there, kick the fucking goals that I know you can while I shove North's heads in the dirt, and then make sure my brother never looks the way he did on Thursday. Otherwise, you and I are going to have a problem, got it?”

“Got it.” What else could he say? Noah hadn't set out to hurt Bryce. The frustration of continual losses that *should* have been wins, coupled with Bryce's successes, had been a bitter pill to swallow. And Noah had done it with a distinct lack of grace. He just needed to get through this game, and then he would fix it.

THEY WENT INTO THE third quarter with more energy and somehow managed to even the score with five minutes left on the clock. Noah hated the way that close games felt. Teetering on the edge of panic. North had nothing to lose. The Swallows had *everything* to lose.

A stoppage near the centre square and a beautiful hit out from Darcy gave Noah an opportunity to mark right in front of goal. Except that it meant getting closer to Bryce. Bryce, who

had been trailing Forest after halftime instead of Noah. Who was *still* looking at him far too often, considering they were neck deep in a game that meant too much.

Noah surged forward, determined to show that this was *not* affecting him. The Swallows had earned their spot in the top eight with blood, sweat, and tears, and Noah would be damned if he let his own stupidity get in the way of the last step that they needed to take to stay in the race for the premiership flag.

He slipped on the wet grass just as Bryce ran into him, the Sherrin slipping through his fingers and skidding across the ground.

Noah fell onto his back, breath punched out of him from the impact. Bryce fell with him and landed on top, straddling his hips.

Noah should have moved, gotten out from under him. The ball had been flung sideways, and someone had kicked it away and clear across the field. It wasn't an immediate necessity, but the game moved fast, and he needed to be ready when it came back into his field of play.

Bryce panted, neither of them moving. His nostrils flared, and his lips parted, and he was the best thing that Noah had seen in weeks.

"I miss you," Bryce whispered, the words carrying on the wind.

Noah's fingers dug into Bryce's thighs where they were resting.

He didn't know what to say to that. *I miss you too? I love you so fucking much, and I'm sorry I can't get my head out of my ass?* The truth. And inadequate.

Bryce was lifted by the back of his guernsey, and the moment was broken. Forest stood behind them, still holding North's captain. Other players—on both sides—were standing around them, confused as to what they should be doing. It didn't *look* like Bryce and Noah were fighting, but it was on the line.

A whistle signalled further down the field, someone marking in front of goal and a North forward lining up to make a shot at goal. It would be their fourth uncontested goal, and Noah couldn't bring himself to care. Not when Bryce was looking at him like that, like his heart was broken, and Noah was the only one with the right set of tools to fix it.

“This isn't the time or place,” Forest said, letting Bryce go and hauling Noah to his feet. He walked Noah backwards and away from where Oakley had approached Bryce and was speaking in his ear. “Do you need to be shifted to a different position?”

His gaze caught Bryce's briefly. “No.”

“This is our season on the line, Noah. I need you with me,” Forest said. “Whatever's going on, you have to keep it off the field.”

Noah nodded. It wasn't on the field. It wasn't even off the field. He'd made sure of that. Left it in flames and not bothered to even attempt to put them out since.

*I miss you.*

He needed to tell Bryce that he wanted what Bryce did. To *try* at some kind of relationship. To make it work despite being on different teams. And with their teams being at different stages on their journey. The Swallows were still in the midst of a rebuild that was frustrating at best, devastating at worst. North didn't have that; they were at their prime, with the perfect mix of new and old players working in synchronicity. It allowed the younger, greener guys to make mistakes that didn't cost them a game. The Swallows didn't have that luxury, and it was costing them.

Had Noah let it cost him his chance with Bryce?

With twenty seconds to go in the third quarter, Noah *finally* got the mark he'd been looking for all night. The siren went off like music to his ears.

He bent down, putting his mouthguard securely in his sock, right near the words that he'd written, and lined up for the kick. If he made this kick, the Swallows would be in front for the first time all game.

The footy left his boot and crossed the face of the posts and sailed right through the middle. The Swallows erupted in celebration as though it was the winning goal of the entire match, and all piled on Noah. Ravioli jumped into his arms and squeezed tight. Someone slapped his ass. Someone else ruffled his hair.

Noah's eyes automatically scanned the oval. Bryce was easy to find, and it had nothing to do with his beacon hair and

everything to do with how much Noah *needed* him.

Bryce's smile was tentative but wide and guileless, eyes twinkling with droplets of water running down his cheeks from his hair, dripping from his chin. North, the team he *captained*, was behind now, and he was looking at Noah like he'd made all his dreams come true. Like the possibility of losing meant less to him than wanting to share in the joy of someone he loved, regardless of where the joy came from.

Noah didn't know if he could look at Bryce like that if the shoe was on the other foot. He'd done the opposite, throwing all of Bryce's accomplishments in his face like they were something dirty that he should keep hidden simply because Noah didn't have the same accolades to throw around.

He turned away, an uncomfortable heaviness in the pit of his stomach.

Bryce was a better man than Noah, and that wasn't a surprise to him. He'd always known that.

THE SWALLOWS WENT INTO the fourth quarter with a six-point lead that was quickly swallowed up by North, who kicked three goals in the first ten minutes. One of them was assisted by Bryce, who had to be related to the Flash somehow because he was there one second and in a completely different section of the field the next. His ability to know where the ball would be, and how to maximise that for his team, was extraordinary. And fucking annoying.

Bryce stopped right in front of Noah after the third goal, barring his way, his face hard. “I know that it’s easy to say I understand when I’m not the one who has to deal with the consequences,” he said. “But when you love someone, I think that you do experience it with them because everything that you feel, *I* feel. That means the bad as well as the good. The losses as well as the wins.”

Noah’s lips parted, eyes unfocused as the rain battered down on them.

Bryce put a hand on Noah’s chest, fingers digging in. Noah felt it all the way to his bones. “I’m not going to tank a game, not even for you. And you shouldn’t want me to. Just like I wouldn’t want you to for me. Footy is important to us both, but it can’t be more important than what we have between us. What I want to build with you. Win or lose, I love you. You get to decide what that means to you, and what you want.” Bryce stepped back, a small, uneasy smile on his face. “I’ll wait for you for as long as you need me to.”

Noah should have been the one saying that. Bryce was the one new to this, only just spreading his bisexual wings. And here he was, offering himself to Noah on a silver platter, showing the same bravery that he had when they’d first started this. No hesitation.

Bryce was infuriating and stubborn and needed to learn how to use his alarm. He hogged the blankets and was way too fucking good at spoiling Noah’s marks. He adored Noah’s dog, shared his coffee, and had a ready smile for every situation. He

studied *science* and was probably never going to be any good at surfing, because his balance on water was the worst Noah had ever seen.

And Noah loved him. All of it. Even the parts that made him want to rip out his hair in frustration.

He reached out for Bryce too late. He'd already turned away and was jogging to get in position beside Forest as the ball was bounced in the centre square.

Slipping through his fingers like sand.

As did the last ten minutes of the game. Ravioli flicked the footy off his boot for a one-of-a-kind scrappy goal, which Bryce matched with his own far-less-scrappy goal, then *both* Noah and Coop missed for a behind. Noah knew he was going to be replaying that in his mind for weeks before he could move past it. It had been an easy shot, in front of goal, two North players coming for him but too far away, giving him plenty of time to snap it through the goals, only to *hit the fucking post*.

Darcy came through for them with three minutes left on the clock and snatched the footy right out of the air like child's play, towering over the other players. He didn't often choose to go for goal, instead passing it off to a forward, but this time he decided to.

Noah waited on pins and needles, heart in his throat. He had nothing to worry about: it left Darcy's boot like a fucking miracle and soared between the goal posts in a perfect arc. Noah lifted him in his arms as the team descended on him,



making sure his ass was stinging from slaps and his hair was sufficiently ruffled, praises ringing in his ears.

North ran the ball up the field, and even when the Swallows' defenders tried to lock it down, they found a way past to score a goal. When it came back from the centre, Coop finally remembered where the middle posts were and scored a goal of his own that was so fucking beautiful, Noah hoped he was getting his dick sucked by someone later because he deserved it. His next shot wasn't quite as lucky. It went short and was touched as it sailed through, making it a behind. Karma at work for their earlier goal.

Noah faltered when Bryce spoke to Oakley quietly and then jogged off the field, tagging in Brodie Woodson, who was an interchange for North. With barely two minutes to go, it made no sense to have any changes.

Was Bryce doing that for him? Not even because he wanted the Swallows to win—Noah believed him when he said he wouldn't deliberately tank—but because he didn't want to be on the ground if North won?

Noah didn't have time to process it, with the clock ticking and the footy moving fast, the Swallows desperate to keep the footy in their forward fifty and kick a goal. Just one goal was all they needed to keep their season alive.

Just one.

And then it was over. No one had been able to add to the scoreboard, and the match was over, with a final score: eighty to seventy-seven. It wasn't a slaughter, and they'd done pretty

fucking well, considering the team they'd been pitted against. Just not good enough.

Everything spun, the ground tilting beneath Noah as the final siren went off.

They'd lost.

Their season was finished.

Everything that Noah had gone through this season. Everything that his team had worked so hard for, had fought tooth and nail for. North had dominated them the entire game, and while the Swallows had been able to push ahead and get in front once, they hadn't been able to take the momentum back. As if they'd had any momentum in the first place. The score made the game seem more evenly matched than it had been.

A hand settled on Noah's back. He had no idea whose. His eyes were searching for someone else.

Bryce had moved from the bench and was standing with half his team, a giant sea of purple and black as they celebrated. Bryce turned, sensing that he was being watched. His smile faltered, dropping off his face as their eyes met.

Noah's heart stopped.

He'd done that. He'd taken that smile off Bryce's face, when the only thing he should be responsible for was *putting* it there.

There was no excuse for that.

Noah moved across the ground without thought, Bryce the only thing that mattered.

The North players looked at him with suspicion. They hadn't finished celebrating, weren't ready for the handshake portion of the game. Some looked like they were contemplating getting in Noah's way. He didn't advise it. Nothing would stop him from getting where he wanted to go even if it meant wading through rival colours.

"I'm sorry," he said, the second that he was close enough to touch. "I shouldn't have said what I did or made you feel like what you've accomplished isn't important or meaningful."

"Noah—"

"Losing does suck, and I can't promise I won't be a grumpy asshole when it happens, because I know that I'd break that promise. But I'm sorry that I took it out on you when you didn't deserve it. My frustration should never be pointed at you."

Bryce licked his lips, eyes softening. "Thank you."

"You subbed off for me."

"Yes," Bryce said without hesitation. "I told you: win or lose, I'm on your side, Noah."

Noah nodded. "Don't do that again."

Red bloomed on Bryce's cheeks like a flower opening. He'd missed seeing that.

“Next time we face you, and we win, I want you standing right next to me, so I can rub it in your face.”

Bryce barked out a laugh. “And if *we* win?”

“You won’t. But if you do…” Noah stepped closer, brushing his knuckles down Bryce’s chest. “Then you rub it in my face. Because when we wear these guernseys, we’re not together, Bryce. We’re rivals, and I’m coming for the win.”

“And…” Bryce visibly swallowed. “And when we’re not wearing our guernseys?”

Noah’s hand smoothed up Bryce’s neck before resting his fingers in the soft, wet curls. “When we’re not, then we’re two guys in love, who get to stand side by side.”

“Two…” Bryce bit his lip as he smiled. “Did you really just tell me you love me without telling me you love me?”

Noah leaned down, cradling the back of Bryce’s wet hair, and pressed his lips to Bryce’s ear. “I have the words written on my sock.”

“You—what? Please tell me that Coop is not getting all of you to write in your socks before a game.” Bryce pulled back and turned, their lips touching on every word. “What does Darcy’s say?”

Noah shook his head and then tugged Bryce in for a long, deep kiss, uncaring that the world could see them, that their teammates were wolf whistling and yelling directions and encouragement, and photos were being taken of them. All he

cared about was that Bryce was back in his arms, and he got to call Bryce *his* now.

“You’re gonna win that flag for me,” Noah whispered against his lips. “And then I’m going to put you in my guernsey and fuck you until you don’t even have enough breath left to say my name. The rest of Australia can look all they want, but you belong to me.”

Bryce fistfisted Noah’s guernsey and pulled him closer, slanting his mouth over Noah’s.

Rain poured down around them. The Swallows had lost, and no matter what happened in their last match of the season next week, they wouldn’t make it into the finals.

Noah knew that his team would weather it, and next year they would come back stronger. There was a sadness there, a disappointment that would take time to lessen, but Noah had found something more important.

And he was going to hold onto it.



BRYCE OPENED THE DOOR to his hotel room mid-laugh. The noise of rowdy teammates in the hallway was abruptly cut off as he closed it behind himself with his heel.

He moved further inside, bypassing the king bed and dropping his keycard, wallet, and keys on the small round dining table in the kitchenette area.

Noah wasn't in the room, but the open bathroom door and the running shower were a dead giveaway that he'd been back a little while. He'd said something about dinner with the Swallows who had flown to Melbourne with him while Bryce was out with his own team.

Bryce pulled his T-shirt up and over his head. He folded it and put it on the edge of the bed. His shoes went under it, and his jeans and underwear joined his T-shirt. He wasn't going to pass up the chance to get wet with his man.

Noah had his back to Bryce, arms lifted as he washed his hair. The glass wasn't frosted, and he had a perfect view of his strong back and the curve of his ass and his impressive thighs. The muscles in his arms twisted and flexed as he moved. It was reminiscent of the first time that Bryce had seen him in the shower. Wet and sexy enough that he'd completely flipped Bryce's identity.

Bryce silently padded across the tiled floor. Noah tensed at the first touch of Bryce's fingers and then relaxed. "Bry?"

Bryce followed a trail of water down Noah's back with a finger and then licked back up the same path, ending at his shoulder blade, where he nipped gently.

"Wasn't expecting you until later."

"Coach made us go to bed early like good boys and girls," Bryce replied absently. He dipped into the curve of Noah's spine. He pressed his thumbs into Noah's ass, massaging gently as the water moved around them. "And I had somewhere important to be."

“Might want to get a move on, then,” Noah said. The smile in his voice was impossible not to respond to.

“Yeah, my hot date won’t wait around forever.”

The low growl that rumbled from Noah’s chest was even better than the smile.

Bryce pulled at his hip, and Noah took the hint, turning around. They kissed leisurely while Bryce slid his palms all over Noah’s front, stroking the hair on his chest and moving down until his fingers wrapped around his hardening cock.

He watched himself stroke it from base to tip and down again, the head disappearing and appearing through his hand. He thumbed the slit at the head, and Noah groaned.

Suddenly the water was shut off, and Bryce was hauled into Noah’s arms, lips crushed together as Noah’s fingers dug into Bryce’s back.

Bryce inhaled sharply, and he locked his knees on Noah’s thighs and twined his arms around Noah’s shoulders, hanging on as desperation clouded all of his thoughts. Their cocks slid together, the friction and heat causing lust to burst in his belly.

Noah carried him out into the room. Bryce didn’t care that they were leaving a trail of water behind them. All he cared about was how he felt in Noah’s arms.

Weightless, precious, *loved*.

Noah knelt on the bed, moving into the centre of it, still holding Bryce firmly in his arms. Bryce’s knees hit the bed either side of Noah’s thighs as he rode him. He slipped a hand

between them, wrapping it around both of them. He couldn't get all the way around their combined girth, but he made a valiant effort as he stroked them both and rocked against Noah, adding pressure to the sweet ache in his groin.

Noah kissed down Bryce's throat, stopping to give special attention to the thin skin above his collarbone. The dull ache as Noah sucked spread across Bryce's chest. He gasped, nails digging into Noah's shoulders as his head dropped back, giving Noah more room. He knew it was going to leave a mark that everyone on his team would see in the morning, and he couldn't bring himself to care. The teasing was worth every moment, worth wearing Noah's mark proudly.

Bryce's thighs flexed as he stroked harder, moved faster.

"Tomorrow night," Noah whispered, clasping Bryce's nape and kissing under his jaw. "You're going to wear my name, and my colours, and I'm going to fuck you over the side of this bed until the entire hotel knows that you belong to me."

Did he need a response to that? Bryce didn't have words. Thoughts weren't a thing happening. All that was left in his brain were Noah's words echoing, their cocks sliding together, and the rush of his orgasm getting closer.

He hated they couldn't fuck tonight, that Bryce couldn't afford even a twinge tomorrow during the Grand Final. But he knew he was going to have wet dreams about what Noah would do to him tomorrow night.

A whine escaped his lips as Noah curled fingers in Bryce's hip and ground up.



“That’s right, let me hear it,” Noah said in a low, guttural voice. “Don’t hold back.”

As if Bryce could. He hadn’t been able to from the second he’d seen Noah in Coop’s shower all those months ago.

“I’m—I’m close—I’m—” Bryce whimpered. His movements were urgent, lacking finesse, and his orgasm was frustratingly teetering. He just needed—he needed—*Yes*.

Noah took over, his large hand enough to wrap firmly around them. The pressure was delicious and sent tremors through Bryce’s whole body. He clung to Noah with his face buried against the heat of his neck.

“Come for me,” Noah growled.

The first press of his finger against Bryce’s hole, the tip slipping in, and Bryce was lost. He bit down on Noah’s neck, muffling the sounds as he cried out, muscles tensing as he spilled over Noah’s hand. Noah dragged him in for a kiss as he stroked Bryce through his orgasm. He groaned into Bryce’s mouth and spasmed against Bryce’s cock, and Bryce knew he was coming.

His gut clenched in response. He wasn’t sure he’d ever get over the feeling of knowing that *he’d* done that to Noah. That he had the power to give Noah pleasure enough to make the rest of the world fall away.

Bryce panted as he collapsed against Noah. He didn’t want to move. He was pleasantly satiated and could have fallen asleep right there, being cradled in Noah’s arms.

He half-heartedly protested as Noah lowered him to the bed, pulled the sheets out from under him, and covered him with them... and then left him there. Where was he going? Bryce wanted to snuggle.

He smiled through half-lidded eyes when Noah came back with a warm washcloth and cleaned him.

He trailed his fingers down Noah's arm. "Love you," he murmured sleepily.

Noah paused, looking up from his ministrations. He leaned across and kissed Bryce softly, a featherlight touch that made his stomach flip.

"I love you," Noah said against his lips. "Did you have enough food at dinner?"

Bryce hummed what he hoped sounded affirmative. The entire team had made sure to load up on carbs. They were going to need them for the fight ahead tomorrow. Bryce was going to make sure they brought the flag home. For them, and for Noah too. Bryce had made a promise.

Once Noah was done, he disappeared again and then finally—*finally*—slipped into the bed with Bryce, pulling the sheets over them both. Bryce moved instantly, curling into Noah's side and resting his cheek against Noah's warm chest. Going to sleep against the rise and fall of his breathing had become Bryce's favourite way to sleep.

"Are we still going to the RSPCA next week with your dad?" Bryce asked. Was it next week or the week after? Bryce

couldn't remember. He'd been too nervous about meeting Noah's dad. It had gone so much better than he'd hoped. It helped that on a scale of nervousness, he and Patrick had been pretty even. It had been nice to know Bryce wasn't alone.

"I can't believe he's getting a cat," Noah said with a huffed laugh.

"He's very excited," Bryce said sleepily. He traced circles on Noah's chest, the pattern soothing and lulling him deeper into that almost-sleep state. "Don't be surprised if he gets two."

"Don't encourage him."

Bryce smiled against Noah's skin. "We should get a cat."

"Rufus doesn't like cats."

"That's a lie." Bryce's eyes slid closed as his breathing began to even out. It had been a long day. A long *week*, leading up to the day of the Grand Final. He'd had too many obligations as captain. He'd been grateful to Noah, who had travelled down early to Melbourne with him and stayed the whole time even if it meant sightseeing by himself a few of the days.

Noah tipped Bryce's head up and kissed his forehead. "If you want a cat, we can get a cat."

"You're so easy."

Noah's fingers tangled in Bryce's curls. "Shut up and go to sleep, menace."

Bryce fell asleep with a smile on his face.



FOR ALL THE YEARS that Noah had been playing professional footy, he couldn't remember sitting in the stands for a single game during that time. The seats were uncomfortable as fuck; why hadn't anyone told him? The whole point was to get people to come and watch and spend their hard-earned cash on the sport, not scare them away with torture devices.

“Wren, you need to get out of my space, or I am going to throw you over the fence,” he warned. There was less than five minutes left in the game, North Sydney was up by twenty-five points, and Noah wanted to actually *watch* the game, not supervise his teammates.

Wren huffed. “What am I supposed to do? Go sit in Coop's lap?”

“No!” Coop squawked.

“You're too fucking big for these seats, Noah,” Wren complained. “Go sit on the floor.”

Noah was tempted. Half the Swallows were in the stands with him at the Melbourne Cricket Ground for the AFL Grand Final, and it was like herding primary-aged children on a school excursion. After feeding them nothing but soft drinks and candy for breakfast. The only one of them who was even remotely well-behaved was Darcy. Their ruck was leaning

forward in his chair, eyes wide as his head swivelled to and fro while he watched, like an owl.

Forest chimed in, and they finally all settled in to watch the rest of the match.

The second that the siren went off, they were all on their feet, hollering loudly. Maybe they weren't out there on the grounds, and they hadn't been part of the run to get here, but Bryce was down there, and he meant something to all of them.

He was someone special to Noah, and Noah wouldn't have missed this part of Bryce's journey for anything in the world. If North had lost, Noah would have been there to pick up the pieces. But they'd won, and he was here to help Bryce celebrate and drink until they both threw up.

He was glad for it, and the joy he felt at Bryce's bright smile overshadowed any hint of sadness at not being the one down there. He would get his chance. This was Bryce's time to shine.

They sat through the speeches, and the Norm Smith Medal award, and the presenting of the AFL Premiership Cup. Bryce held it high as the team huddled together for all the pictures. Noah snapped a pretty good one himself, considering his vantage point wasn't all that great.

Heading down into a locker room that wasn't theirs was a strange experience, but after the kiss between Bryce and Noah that had been splashed around the media for the last month—and the fact they were all recognised AFL players—they were

let in without a fuss. Coop gripping Wren by the scruff and hauling him in without letting him cause a scene helped.

The sounds of the North Sydney song being loudly sung—off-key and mostly a jumble of words from so many people singing out of sync—accompanied them as they walked through to where the crowds inside were watching and the entire team, plus all of the management, trainers, and coaches, were in a circle.

Noah rested his forearm on Coop's shoulder, content in a way he hadn't been sure he would be. Both he and Bryce had been a bit anxious leading up to this weekend. Both for different and yet similar reasons. They'd been on edge and careful not to say or do anything that could be misconstrued.

They'd made it here without any arguments, and now Bryce had a smile the size of Australia on his face, looking half drunk on happiness as his head flung back and he sang wildly. Noah knew for a fact, from listening to him in the shower and while he washed dishes, that Bryce had a *terrible* singing voice. It was a good thing for all of them that no one in particular stood out in this ruckus.

The second they finished and dispersed, Bryce's eyes met Noah's, like a beacon homing in on its target. He launched himself into Noah's arms, and Noah lifted him high into the air before bringing him down into a closed-mouth kiss. When he finally lowered Bryce to the ground, he tangled his fingers in Bryce's curls and kept them pressed together for a long moment.

“Congratulations, baby.”

“I’m so glad you’re here,” Bryce breathed. “Are you okay?”

Noah’s fingers tightened against Bryce’s scalp. Still thinking of him, even when he’d just reached the pinnacle of the footy year.

He nipped Bryce’s chin. “We’re coming for it next year,” Noah said.

Bryce grinned. “Yeah?”

“Don’t you want to see me in *your* guernsey next year?”

Bryce’s eyes heated, swaying into Noah. “I’ll be waiting.”

Wren pounced on the side of Bryce, breaking his hold on Noah. He climbed his brother like a monkey. “We share the same blood, so I like to think that I won too,” he declared loudly. Some of the nearby North players booed at him, and he flipped them off.

“That is not how that works,” Bryce said. “Get your own flag.”

“*You* stole it, fucknuts.”

Forest wrapped an arm around Noah and sighed dreamily. “Brothers. Isn’t it beautiful.”

“No,” Coop snorted.

“Word has it the team has a whole pub booked out for celebrating—they’ll start letting people in, in about three hours.” Forest gestured between Noah and Bryce. “Fuck

before or after, I don't care. Just don't be late; first round is on me."

Wren dropped back down to the floor. "Eww. Really?"

"Do you think they're going to go back to their hotel room and play backgammon?"

"They might," Wren retorted.

"I don't think they were playing backgammon last night," Coop said with a twinkle in his eye.

Wren grimaced. "I hate you so much, Cooper."

"Don't be a perv," Bryce said, smacking Coop in the stomach.

Noah ignored them, tugging Bryce into his arms, right where he belonged. He kissed the shell of Bryce's ear and brushed his knuckles down Bryce's back. "Do what you need to and then meet me back at our room?"

"Think they'd notice if I snuck away now?"

"You're the captain," Noah murmured. "Unfortunately, they'd notice. And the red curls are hard to miss."

"Wait for me? I don't want you to leave without me."

As if Noah could say no to him. He had a terrible feeling that his dad wasn't the only one leaving the RSPCA with a cat. "I'll wait as long as you need."

"Bry, get in here!" Oakley yelled. "Canoodle later, loser!"

Bryce pulled away, laughing. The happiness lit up his whole face. Noah had no idea how he'd been chosen by someone like



Bryce, or how, even after fucking it up, he'd managed to keep it. He'd never been gladder that Coop was a meddling idiot.

“Stay here?” Bryce asked.

“I won't move,” Noah promised.

Win or lose, he planned to stay by Bryce's side forever.

# AFL Glossary.

**AFL** – Australian Football League - the governing body for the professional teams.

**Behind** – A score of 1 point - achieved by kicking the ball through either of the sets of posts either side of the centre goal posts.

**Centre square** – The large square in the middle of the field, between each team's 50 metre scoring arc.

**Clearance** – The successful contesting of a ball in the air - where one player (usually a ruck) hits it out to their team's advantage.

**Defender** – A defensive role for a player who plays mostly in their opponent's scoring arc, or plays on a particular opposing forward.

**Defensive fifty** – The opposing team's scoring arc/area around their goal posts.

**Disposals** – Legally getting rid of the ball, by handball or kick.

**Draft pick** – A player who is selected by a team during the draft period - either a rookie or a player who has not had their contract renewed and is sent back to the draft.

**Finals** – The series of qualifying, preliminary, elimination and semi-final games preceding the grand final. Played in September each year between the top 8 teams on the ladder at the end of the regular season.

**First bounce** – The first bounce of the ball by the umpire to begin play, where the opposing ruckmen will contest the ball.

**Forward** – One of a team's attacking/scoring players.

**Forward fifty** – A team's own scoring arc/area. 50 metres is the distance between the line marking the arc and the goal posts.

**Forward line** – The group of players who are responsible for the team's attacking/scoring plays.

**Forward-ruck** – A forward who will contest ball-ups and stoppages in the forward fifty in lieu of the main ruck.

**Forwards coach** – A specialist coach for the forward line.

**Free kick** – Where the umpires deem that a penalty is payable to the other team and they are awarded the ball as though they had marked it.

**Goal** – A score of 6 points, achieved when the ball is kicked through the centre posts and not touched by another player before it passes over the line.

**Goals / goal posts** – The set of 4 posts at each end of the field. The 2 centre posts are taller than the outer posts.

**Guernsey** – A usually sleeveless playing shirt worn by players.

**Head coach** – The team's main or most senior coach who oversees all areas of the game play.

**Incorrect disposal** – Where a player does not kick or handball the ball appropriately, may be a throw.

**Key defender** – A defensive role where the player is tagged to a specific forward, or otherwise sticks close to the goals to defend against attempts to score.

**Key forward** – An attacking/scoring role where the player is one of their team's most capable goal-kickers and sticks close to their own scoring area.

**Mark** – Where a player takes possession of the ball after it has been kicked, cleanly and without interference from other players. A mark can be contested and if the player is deemed to have had sufficient possession before it was interfered with, the mark may be paid.

**Midfield** – The middle of the ground where players contest the ball and try to get it into their own forward fifty.

**Midfield coach** – The coach who specialises in midfield players/plays.

**Midfielder** – A player who plays mostly in the midfield.

**Off-season** – The time between the end of a team’s season in August or September, and the commencement of pre-season training.

**Pocket** – The areas of the field either side of the goal posts.

**Pre-season** – The several months leading up to the commencement of the season where teams begin planning and training.

**Premiership flag** – The award given to the team who makes it through the regular season, through the finals, and wins the grand final.

**Rebuild** – When a team has lost experienced players through attrition/retirement and is in the process of training and testing a young/new roster of players.

**Regular season / home-and-away season** – The 24-round/week season that runs from March to August, prior to the top 8 teams moving to the finals in September.

**Ruckman/ruck** – The player/s who go up against each other at the centre bounce and follow the play to contest the ball when the umpire throws it back in/performs a ball up when a stoppage occurs.

**SCG** – The Sydney Cricket Ground, where the majority of AFL matches in Sydney are played.

**Sherrin** – The official brand of football used by the AFL.

**Showdown** – Where two teams with a particular rivalry, or the only two teams from a state (excluding Victoria which has 10 teams) play each other.

**Skipper** – Colloquial term for the team captain.

**Specky** – A mark taken by a player where they leap into the air/onto an opposing players back or shoulders/to the top of a pack of players.

**Stoppage** – Where the flow of play is stopped, usually because a player is unable to dispose of the ball and it gets caught up without a free kick being paid.

**Tagging** – Where a player is tasked to stick close to an opposing player to limit their ability to get the ball and/or influence play.

**VFL** – The Victorian Football league (South Australia and Western Australia have their own) - a state-based competition where players can be drafted from to supplement or rebuild AFL-level teams, and where the AFL level players who aren't regularly selected as part of the 22-man team can hone and maintain their skills

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Day of Judgment (#1)

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