



NEXT
SEASON

THE ELMWOOD STORIES BOOK TWO

LANE HAYES

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The injured hockey player and the grumpy chef...

Riley

My time playing pro hockey will be up soon. I can feel it. And I've heard the rumors: he's too old, he's had too many injuries, he's lost his edge. I don't want to admit it, but they could be right. Next season might be my last.

Or this season. Because of course, this is when the universe decides I need another concussion. It's a doozy too—the kind that's going to keep me off skates for a while.

Which is how I end up in a small New England town in the middle of nowhere Vermont, eating every meal at a diner where a grumpy chef from Quebec makes haute cuisine...and burgers. Jean-Claude is funny and charming and—

Okay, I have a crush on a gay man.

This is a new one.

Jean-Claude

Confused straight men are entertaining. But Riley is... fascinating, sexy, and curiously vulnerable. His injury has rocked his confidence a bit, so perhaps he's in need of a friend. Any friend. Even moi.

I'm an unlikely choice, but maybe he just likes my tuna salad.

No...I think it's me.

And though I'm happy to help him explore his bisexual curious side, I have career concerns of my own. See, the things I love most about Elmwood seem shaky and uncertain, but not Riley. He's solid and genuine. Suddenly, this temporary secret liaison feels more real than anything in my life.

I need more than this season. I want it all. With Riley.

Next Season is an MM bisexual-awakening romance featuring a grumpy chef, an injured hockey player, and a big HEA in a small town where anything can happen.

*For my dad, my favorite curmudgeon.
I owe my love of words and my appreciation for the subtleties
of language to you.
Merci.*

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RILEY

“**N**ot until we are lost do we begin to understand ourselves.” —Henry David Thoreau, *Walden*

WEDNESDAYS = ORANGE TAPE.

Okay, that was a personal preference and a tried-and-true ritual, but as anyone who'd ever played hockey could attest, certain rituals were sacred. For me it was right sock first, left knee pad last, and orange tape on Wednesdays.

Hey, hockey players were a suspicious bunch, and we all knew that the slightest deviation from routine could result in catastrophe.

Check this out:

The Slammers' center, Mickey Romajski, tore his ACL the weekend after he'd accidentally used a teammate's towel in the shower. For a germaphobe like Mickey, it was a no-no and possibly the cause of injury. Another teammate, Jake Moran, cracked a rib two days after he'd uncharacteristically sat on the bench to pull on his shoulder pads instead of standing as usual. Both injuries were sustained on the ice, but not on the same day as the routine hiccup, which might mean they had nothing to do with messing with tradition, but you couldn't be too careful.

And how ironic was that? Caution didn't fly in this game. The most superstitious D-man out there still had to play like a badass 'cause this was hockey, for crying out loud.

So as my teammates engaged in their own rituals, I taped my stick and gave my pregame “we got this” speech like a good captain. Or co-captain. This would be the night we’d turn our lukewarm start to the season around. This would be the night we’d come out strong, beat our opponent to the puck, pass like a finely tuned machine, and create scoring opportunities at will...no problem.

Except there *was* a problem: As I neared the end of my roll of tape, the color looked more yellow than orange. Like the manufacturer had started with yellow and switched to orange and—*Fuck me*. This was the wrong color.

No wait. It had to be the light. No issues here, folks. Nothing to worry about.

I pushed aside the tinge of apprehension and focused on my surroundings. The locker room was a flurry of fist bumps, words of encouragement, and then someone blasted a raucous beat to pump us up. We were warriors going into battle, and victory was ours for the taking.

We hoped.

We skated out to tepid applause and jeers as per normal for the visiting team. Some crowds were more brutal than others, but it was still early season and anything could happen. And after a particularly off-key rendition of the national anthem, I took my place on the bench, swallowing my annoyance when my co-captain, Ben Childress, lost the face-off.

So...co-captain. Yeah, not gonna lie, it sucked. Sort of like being given a sliver of a slice of chocolate cake instead of the chunk you’d been promised. Three years into sharing the C with a twenty-five-year-old phenom from Boston, I’d thought I’d resigned myself to reality, but some nights...not so much.

At thirty-five, I was one of the old-timers now. My minutes were down, and I resented every fucking thing about that. Childress wasn’t a better forward than me; he was just younger. Ben was also hotheaded, impetuous, and had a tendency to pick stupid fights, which was how he’d earned the nickname Chili.

Case in point: He not only lost the puck, but he pissed off Buffalo's beast of a center. He'd probably called him a pussy or insulted his parentage or made fun of the mole on his left cheek. Who knew? Chili was a dick, and he loved the sound of his own voice.

Needless to say, the tone was set from that first slap of sticks. This wasn't going to be pretty, and Buffalo's fans fucking loved it. They wanted blood on the ice. Preferably ours.

Childress ate up the animosity, egging on the crowd with his arms raised. By the second period, you could practically see the energy roll through the stands like a wave onto the ice. So much for tepid.

I hopped over the boards with the second line and found myself battling with Buffalo's new star, a quick twenty-one-year-old kid with fire in his eyes who'd sized me up and decided I wasn't a problem. I didn't like that. I kept up with the little shit, slicing in front of him and easily stealing the puck.

I could hear Childress's whoop of glee above the crowd and Minski's holler for me to pass as I deked around a D-man and tore off with a breakaway that couldn't have been a sweeter opening if it had been gift-wrapped with a red ribbon and served on a silver platter. I didn't need Minski. I had this one. The goalie was hugging the right corner, but there was just enough space to sling it in on the left. I angled my hips, gaining speed as I pulled my stick sideways, and—flew through the air, landing in a heap against the boards.

A collective gasp was followed by raucous cheering. I didn't take it personally. It was all part of the game, right? One minute, you were on the precipice of greatness and the next, you were tasting your own blood, staring up at white lights.

Was that my blood? Christ, there was a lot of it. And those lights were fuzzy now, dimming in my periphery. Someone was calling my name.

“Trunk! Trunk, can you get up?”

“Fuck, that’s a lot of blood. Is he okay?”

“Get the medic out here. Hurry the fuck up. Move it, move it!”

No way. No medic.

I had to get up. Blood was no big deal. I’d been here before. *Gimme a Band-Aid, I’ll be okay.*

I tried to speak, but nothing came out. The darkness was edging out the light and voices sounded warbled, as though everyone was talking at once with their mouths full of marbles. The sound and the light were fading fast, and my head hurt like a motherfucker. And blood...

It was a lot of blood. Too much blood.

All I could think was... *Damn, that fucking yellow tape.*

“TRUNK, MAN. CAN YOU HEAR ME?”

I blinked awake, floating on a hazy cloud. Where the fuck was I? The IV and the whoosh of some machinery gave clues I couldn’t sort through without using my brain, and damn, my head was pounding. I winced, swallowing around the cotton ball lodged in my throat as I studied the eager six-foot-five wall of muscle sitting beside me.

“Kimbo?”

Vinnie “Kimbo” Kiminski smiled, squeezing my hand with obvious relief. “Yeah, it’s me. Damn, it’s good to hear your voice.”

“What are you doing here? Where am I?”

“You’re at General Hospital in Buffalo, New York, honey,” a chipper woman with dark hair, mocha skin, and beautiful white teeth piped in. “My name is Charlotte, and I’ve been looking after you. I’m happy to see your eyes open, and I’m not the only one who feels that way. You’ve got half the world worried about you. Including this dashing gentleman. Now

you stay put while I grab the doctor, ya hear? I'll let your sister know too."

She was gone before I could respond. I worked my jaw, my gaze fixed on Kimbo. I hadn't seen him since I'd worked as a coach at his hockey camp last summer. That was months ago. Maybe?

I searched my memory as if I were scrolling a Wikipedia entry. Vinnie Kiminski, thirty-nine years old, former teammate and an excellent captain. *Shit. I took his place in Seattle.* I'd always had a bad case of impostor syndrome, knowing there was no way I could ever fill his shoes.

Vinnie was a legend. By the time he retired, he'd been an NHL superstar for almost half his life. He'd been an exceptional D-man and a natural leader. His fans and teammates adored him. Even his opponents grudgingly liked the guy. His retirement had made headlines, but he'd made bigger headlines when he announced he was bisexual and had a boyfriend.

Was that real?

"Are you married to a dude?"

Vinnie grinned. "I am. You were at our wedding, remember?"

"Maybe."

Sort of. But I couldn't remember what month it was or what I was doing in a hospital in Buffalo. Something was wrong with me, but as far as I could tell, nothing was broken. Except maybe my skull. Oh, wait...my ribs ached.

Fuck, did I crack one or...all of them?

None of that explained Vinnie's presence, though. I must have asked, 'cause Vinnie scooted a chair closer to my side.

"You got knocked out at the game last night and lost a lot of blood," he said. "Mega concussion too. A doozy. You've been floating in and out on a steady diet of happy juice."

"Oh." As if that explained everything. "Why are you here?"

“Nolan and I flew in for the game. You were going to meet us for dinner afterward, but...change of plans. Coach Marsden has been pacing the halls with Mickey and the boys. Including that goofball, Chicklet. I cannot believe he’s a captain, but let’s not go there. Tell me how you’re feeling. Can you see me okay?”

“No, you’re blurry.”

“Shit. How’s the noggin?”

“Hurts,” I rasped, more concerned about the fuzzy edges in my periphery. I scanned my hospital room to test my vision and noted the evidence of visitors in the to-go cups on the side table and a pink winter coat draped over a plastic blue chair. “Is that my sister’s?”

Vinnie nodded. “Yeah, Tara drove in from Rochester. Your parents are on a cruise in Alaska, and she’s trying to gauge whether she should tell them to come home or—”

“No.”

“You can work that out with her.” He glanced toward the doorway briefly and continued in the same low, intense tone he’d used for pregame speeches when he’d been captain. “Listen, they’re gonna put you on strict concussion protocol, and Tara wants to take you home with her. She lives closest, so it makes sense, but she’s got kids, animals, and a lot of chaos in her house. You’re welcome to stay with us. Let her nurse you a bit. She’s going to insist and I’m not trying to butt in, but I’m presenting another option ’cause I know how too much family can be. Come to Elmwood. We’re planning to do some repairs on Nolan’s old house before we put it on the market, so it’s free...and furnished. You can stay there.”

“Elmwood?”

“Yeah, I don’t think they want you to fly for a few days, so there’s no hurry to get back to Seattle. Unless you want to. Just...think about it. We—”

“Oh, my God. Riley!” My sister flew to my side, tears streaming down her face.

Whoa.

I shot a panicky look between her and Vinnie as pain sliced through my cerebellum like a blade. The throbbing sensation escalated to a merciless twenty out of ten on the pain-o-meter. The lights were too bright, my skin was too tight, and I couldn't see for shit. *Oh, fuck.* I was going to be sick.

Tara must have sensed it. She fumbled for the plastic container on the table beside me and held my forehead as I promptly puked my guts out.

So...WHAT the fuck happened?

Apparently, I'd gotten leveled from behind by Buffalo's giant as I'd neared scoring position. His perfectly legal, albeit extremely hard hit had sent me careening into the boards, where I'd fallen backward on the ice and cracked my helmet... and my head. Gory shit. I'd been carted out and whisked to the hospital when I lost consciousness and couldn't be revived.

Good news: I was fully cognizant and expected to make a full recovery.

Bad news: No one knew how long that recovery would take. I'd suffered a serious concussion and some internal bleeding. My severe migraine headaches, queasiness, vomiting, and general fogginess were a big concern. Oh, yeah...and I had three bruised ribs and one with a hairline fracture.

I'd been playing hockey my whole life. Concussions, scrapes, and bruises were part of the game. A couple of days of rest was all the coddling I needed. But the team doctor and the doc in Buffalo didn't agree. And of course, specialists, analysts, and reporters from all over the world were weighing in on my injury since the whole damn thing had happened on national television.

I watched ESPN with a tight jaw and clenched fists, listening to the sports analysts in six-thousand-dollar Armani suits give their two cents on my career.

"Riley Thoreau needs to retire. This is it for him. He's thirty-five, and his body's been through the wringer. Let's be

honest, even before this injury, he wasn't doing so great."

"Oh, c'mon. He's a powerhouse. The co-captain of the Slammers," his cohost argued with a smarmy grin that indicated he was egging his partner on rather than defending my sorry ass.

"With Ben Childress, who's a younger, more dynamic player. Is the writing on the wall or what? Hey, I have nothing but respect for Thoreau, but he isn't the player he used to be. That's all."

The host smiled for the camera, tapping a sheaf of papers on the glass table in front of him. *"We wish Riley Thoreau a speedy recovery. We'll be back with baseball playoff highlights and scores from—"*

I turned off the TV in my sister's spare bedroom, unsurprised that my headache had spiked. I wasn't supposed to be watching television or reading. I was under strict orders to literally lie still and do nothing. Fun.

I could hear Tara and her husband, Martin upstairs. It was bath time and bedtime for my seven- and nine-year-old niece and nephew. Their two-year-old brother had gotten early tub time after he'd dumped a can of tomato sauce in his hair in a misguided attempt to help with dinner. Shane was now clean as a whistle and currently glued to my side, sucking on a bottle in his footy jay-jays and twirling his blond curls around his finger.

And me? Well, I was moping.

I wasn't sure what to think of this interesting twist in my life. One minute I was a valued member of a respected NHL team and the next I was holed up in my sister's house, hanging out with a drooling toddler, a snoring dog, and a parrot who hummed the *Star Wars* theme on repeat.

Sure, I was recovering from an injury, but I had a sick feeling I'd been pushed off the merry-go-round and was in the initial phase of a death spiral. Dramatic? Maybe. But I hadn't felt confident about my position on the team before my

concussion, and now...Christ, even ESPN was laying bets against me.

I couldn't do anything to prove myself either. My coach and the Slammers medical staff were demanding a clean bill of health. I'd been ordered to rest and get this...steer clear of bright lights. My CT scans showed swelling near my occipital lobe, which supposedly explained my migraine-like headaches. Dim lighting helped. Unfortunately, that meant that not only was I unable to play hockey, I couldn't attend games or practices. I was basically banned from the arena.

The neuro specialist wasn't willing to guesstimate my return to hockey. Maybe a month, maybe two? Based on the severity of my symptoms, my age, my sport, and the fact that this wasn't my first concussion, he was inclined to advise that I take the rest of the season off and better yet, consider retiring.

Fuck that.

I had to get back on the ice. I could not go down like this. It was fucking humiliating.

I couldn't stay here either.

Tara and Martin had been amazing, and it was great to spend time with my niece and nephews, but I didn't want to be a burden to them...or my folks. It had taken some serious acting to convince my parents that the media had overstated my injury and there was no need for them to cut their cruise short. They assumed I'd stay with Tara, then convalesce with them in Toronto when they returned.

Not happening.

I could go to Seattle if the doctor cleared me to to fly next week. I had a great house on Lake Washington. It was peaceful and quiet and...lonely. I didn't live near any teammates and if I couldn't go to practice or sit with the team, I'd go nuts. It would be torture to be that close to the action yet unable to participate. It was that sliver of chocolate cake all over again.

So now what?

In the back of my bruised brain, I remembered Vinnie in my hospital room. “Come to Elmwood.”

Elmwood?

Maybe. Yes. I liked Elmwood. I’d spent a chunk of last summer helping coach the junior camp Kimbo had started with his best friend. I’d never lived in a small town and I’d been leery about signing on for a month-long stay, but I’d loved it.

The town was quaint and charming...and everyone knew each other. That could have been hell, but it seemed to work. I’d stayed in Nolan’s old house with a couple of other hockey players Vinnie had recruited. We’d fished and hiked in our spare time, and had genuinely enjoyed ourselves.

It would be quieter now, but autumn in New England was beautiful. And peaceful. But not too peaceful. Vinnie and his buddy had recently remodeled the rink, and they’d built a beautiful sports center with a killer gym. I could get in shape there, and I’d bet Vinnie would train with me once my head stopped trying to roll off my body.

Yeah. I liked that idea. Elmwood was a perfect place to heal. And I wouldn’t stay long. A week or two, tops.

“THAT’S AWESOME!” Vinnie enthused over the phone the next day. “The house is yours whenever you’re ready.”

“Thank you. I appreciate it. I’ll pay you whatever rent you were going to charge a new tenant.”

“Don’t piss me off. Your money’s no good here,” he huffed.

“We can work something out. I was thinking Saturday, if that’s cool. I have to break the news to my sister, and hire a driver who’ll—”

“I’ll pick you up. Don’t argue. I’ve been in your shoes, man. I know how concussions work. I’ll fly out in the morning, rent a sweet SUV with heavily tinted windows, and

escort your ass to Elmwood in style. Snacks and tunes included. Road trip! Road trip!”

I grinned, feeling better than I had in a while.

Was I guilty of running away from my problems? No way. I was proactively working on a solution. Was I guilty of crossing my fingers and hoping the world would return to normal within fourteen days? Probably...yes.

I was very aware that my injury was an opportunity to force my retirement. The Slammers could write me off, pay off my contract, and move on without me. There was a real possibility I'd be a has-been before the holidays, and that was just—depressing.

So maybe I *was* on board with a temporary reprieve from unpleasant truths, 'cause let's face it...reality sucked.

JEAN-CLAUDE

“**T**he hockey player, *oui*?” I gestured to the handsome, broody man wearing sunglasses in a booth at the rear of the diner. “What is he doing here?”

Nolan glanced up from his iPad. “Finishing his hamburger, I think.”

“Suddenly you’re a comedian, eh? I know about the hamburger. I made it for him myself, wise guy.”

He chuckled, his eyes crinkling at the corners. “Sorry. I couldn’t resist. Riley’s injured and—”

“I know that too. It’s all over the news in zee sports. Shouldn’t he be in Seattle?”

I wiped my hands on a dish towel, frowning at my accent. I had a harder time reining in my zees and *ouis* when I was tired or agitated. It was one fifteen on a Monday and I’d slept well last night, so exhaustion wasn’t to blame. No, I was fairly certain it was the athlete staring at his burger as if I’d presented him with a cow turd on a bun with a side of fries.

“He can’t work out yet,” Nolan explained. “Bad concussion. That’s why he’s wearing sunglasses. He’s supersensitive to light and—”

“Ground beef? Why isn’t he eating?” I tossed the dish towel onto the marble counter.

“Don’t be offended, JC. He’s just chillin’ out.”

“And staring at my burger. The burger *I* made.”

I marched to the not-so-hungry hockey hunk, crossed my arms and glared.

He started in his seat, lowering his glasses like a movie star a moment later. “Can I help you?”

“You’re not eating,” I replied testily. “Not even one bite. What is wrong with it?”

“Uh...nothing.” He picked up a french fry and popped it into his mouth. “See?”

I glowered menacingly. “The burger, not the *pomme frites*.”

He cocked his head, a smile tugging the corner of his sexy mouth. I tried not to notice the sexy part, but that wasn’t easy. Riley Thoreau was stunning—broad shoulders, floppy dark-brown hair, gray eyes the color of a stormy sky over Lake Saint-Jean, a crooked nose, a square stubbled jaw, and a wicked jagged row of stitches along his temple.

He picked up the burger with both hands and locked his gaze with mine as he opened wide and took a huge bite. His gloomy expression turned euphoric, and *crisse*, I almost swallowed my tongue.

“*Mmm, good.*”

I arched a brow. “Not good. *Magnifique.*”

He chuckled softly. “That’s what I meant to say.”

“I thought so. *Bon appétit!*”

“Wait.” He set his burger on his plate and wiped his hands on his napkin. “I’m sorry. I think we met last summer while I was here for the camp or Vin and Nol’s wedding. You’re the chef, right?”

“*Oui*. Jean-Claude Bouchard. Or JC.” I offered my hand and shook his politely. “They love abbreviations in this town. My mother wouldn’t approve, but I’m used to it now.”

“I’m Riley.” He pulled his glasses off and squinted. “We definitely met. Don’t quote me, though. My memory is wonky lately.”

“I know who you are. I follow hockey closely.”

His smile dimmed. “Ahh. Well, cool. It’s nice to meet you. The burger is great. Thanks for coming by to, um...”

“Nag you?” I suggested. “No problem. Complimentary nagging is on the house. No other kitchen in the area provides this service. Remember that.”

Riley laughed, a soft, deep rumble that reminded me of cognac and leather. And sex. You know...basic inappropriate thoughts.

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

“Good. I’ll leave you to enjoy your meal in peace, but... first, I have to ask one question.”

He gave me a wary once-over as if wondering if the large lumberjack-looking man in an apron was a threat. I could understand why. No one wanted to be hovered over at the dinner table. And certainly not by someone my size. I was six four, barrel-chested with reddish hair, a Quebecois accent, and according to some, I had a tendency to be “too honest.”

But curiosity got the better of me.

Riley picked up another fry. “Go for it.”

“Why is Childress your co-captain? He is an idiot. What were they thinking?”

He grinned like I’d hoped he would. “I have no idea.”

“You had no say?”

“No.”

“That is bullshit. That would be like Nolan telling me he has a friend who makes great pancakes and I should hire him as a sous chef. That’s nice and all, but it’s not job experience. Faults can be hidden by maple syrup, whipped cream, and berries, eh? The truth is in the *jus*.” I slid into the booth in an effort not to loom over him. “Don’t worry. I’m not staying. I just need my answer, and then I’ll go. And you’ll keep eating.”

“You know, you’re kind of bossy,” he snarked without heat, picking up his burger.

“I know. I am terrible. Nosy too. So...” I circled my wrist meaningfully.

“Childress is a good forward. No doubt about it.”

“But he’s not great. He’s a showboat. He cuts corners and relies on fancy footwork when he should hustle instead. I don’t respect that type of play.”

Riley finished chewing. “You have a strong opinion about this. I wouldn’t have pegged you for a Slammers fan.”

I waved dismissively. “No, no. Your team is...mmm...”

“Don’t hold back now.” He snorted in amusement.

“Okay, you’re bad.” I held up a hand like a stop sign. “Not you, personally. I think you’re very talented. But your team... *meh*. I’m prejudiced, though. I’m from Quebec. We have the worst weather, but we do hockey better. There’s no point in arguing, right?”

He barked a laugh. “You’re a lot.”

“Thank you.”

“I don’t think that was a compliment.” Riley nibbled a fry, his eyes crinkled with humor. He looked decidedly more relaxed now and more handsome than ever.

I smiled good-naturedly. “It’s better if I take it as one. I’m very sensitive.”

“Noted. As for Childress...I don’t know what to say. He’s young.”

“You’re not old.”

“I’m thirty-five. Ancient in hockey years.”

“I’m forty. I am dead in gay years. *C’est la vie*.”

Riley ate another fry. “You’re gay?”

“*Oui*, we’re a rare breed in this town,” I lamented theatrically. “But we’re not talking about me or the other gays. We’re talking about the kid who wants your job. Don’t let him have it.”

“It’s not up to me. Childress is hungry...and he’s a flashy player with promise who can score.”

“Ahh, the politically correct reply. I understand. It’s probably in your contract to pretend to be neutral about your teammates. That would be difficult for me.”

“You say it like you see it,” he observed with another snort.

“*Mmhmm*. The truth is, he’s young and greedy. He likes the limelight, the applause.”

“Who doesn’t?”

I scoffed. “Not me.”

“You literally came over here to browbeat me into eating this burger so I could tell you it’s delicious.” Riley held up the burger in question and took another bite.

“*Merci*. And you’re eating, so my work here is done. Welcome to Elmwood. I hope you heal quickly. If you need anything, call...someone else,” I joked. “Or come by for dinner sometime. I serve more than a plain burger, and my specials are...*très bien*.”

“No doubt. What’s for dinner tomorrow?”

“I haven’t decided. Perhaps *coq au vin*. I braise my chicken in a luscious burgundy with tasty mushrooms and crispy pancetta. Sublime.” I kissed my fingers as I stood.

“Then I’ll be back. Nice to meet you, Jean-Claude.”

Nolan gave me a curious look in the kitchen. Thankfully, he was on his way to coach the juniors, so he didn’t have time to interrogate me in depth. That was good because if he’d been paying attention, he might have noticed I’d been more charming than usual, and he might have even suggested that I was guilty of flirting with the hockey hunk. And...he would have been correct.

Which was uncharacteristic enough to warrant an explanation. I didn’t flirt. Ever. I certainly didn’t flirt with straight men.

RILEY WAS at the diner on Tuesday for breakfast. I spotted him and Vinnie in the parking lot on my way to the coffee shop to harass Ivan about his uninspired latte art. I paused at the corner and waved when Vinnie called my name.

Wednesday, Riley showed up for lunch alone. He sat in the same booth in the rear, wearing sunglasses and a Mariners ball cap. He ordered a tuna on rye with french fries. I was busy preparing for dinner, but I instructed the cook on duty to add a salad, compliments of Jean-Claude. I didn't check on Riley or say hello, and he didn't ask to see me. But he ate everything on his plate...including the greens.

Thursday, he came by around three p.m. for...what was the lunch and dinner mix? Linner? I was busy with my *roux* and didn't pay attention to Riley's order, but it was hard to miss the stir in the air at his appearance.

"Is that Riley Thoreau?"

"Oh, my God, yes! Switch tables with me, please. I heard he was in town, but I haven't seen him yet, and wow, he's hotter in person."

"He ordered tuna on rye. Gah! I love tuna on rye and..."

I tuned out the chatter and concentrated on my flour-to-fat ratio. I supposed I could have added salad to his plate or maybe stopped by his table to suggest another lunch idea because...tuna salad again? But no. I stayed put, ignoring the strong urge to check on him. Was he still wearing sunglasses and sitting away from the window? Was he feeling any better?

Mon Dieu, why should I care?

Riley was not a monkey in my zoo. I could not worry about him. It was bad enough that I saw or heard about him every day. In a town where I could rely on running into the same people in the same places, his ubiquitous presence was jarring.

Two interesting facts about *moi*: Number one, as head chef and self-appointed culinary master of Elmwood, I spent ninety-five percent of my time in the kitchen. That meant I rarely saw customers unless I specifically made an effort to say hello. Number two, I hated saying hello. Or as Nolan called it...schmoozing.

Sure, I was a friendly guy, but I didn't want to *have* to be nice—if that made sense. In spite of my admittedly heavy-handed approach with Riley and his burger the other day, it wasn't my style to pump patrons for compliments. Either you liked your meal or you didn't. I didn't need a dissertation. If I made it, I knew it was delicious. If you didn't like it, you probably had bad taste.

And I definitely didn't inquire after the health and well-being of handsome strangers when I was vaguely concerned that my interest had something to do with his striking gray eyes and chiseled jaw. Steering clear of the dining room was wise and no doubt, he'd be off to Seattle by the weekend.

Friday, Riley was still here and still ordering tuna on rye.

Saturday...well, that was my limit.

I took one look at the order sheet and threw my hands in the air. I grumbled a stream of obscenities as I marched out of the kitchen, making a beeline for the hockey man hiding behind dark glasses, his face buried in his cell phone.

“Again with zee tuna. Why?”

Riley glanced up with a start. “Um...excuse me?”

“It's not healthy to eat the same thing every day. It's bad for your digestion.”

“Am I going to get mercury poisoning?” he asked, pulling his glasses off.

I scoffed. “From my kitchen? Never. You would have to eat three cans of tuna every day for months on end, and that isn't going to happen. But you could die from the boredom of eating the same thing every day and if I am responsible for that, I will be very angry. So...choose something else.”

“I like tuna.”

“No one likes tuna that much.” I crossed my arms and glowered. “*Allez*, what else do you like?”

Riley’s lips twisted in amusement. “I like a lot of things. Turkey, ham, BLTs...”

“Okay. I’ll bring you my version of a club sandwich. You will love it.”

“Thanks, but I really just want the tuna,” he replied, grabbing my wrist as I turned.

I sighed theatrically. “Have it your way. One boring tuna on rye coming up.”

His eyes lit with humor. “It’s the least boring tuna I’ve ever had. It’s freaking amazing. Kudos to the chef.”

“Thank you,” I deadpanned. “I will be back. French fries and a salad, yes?”

“Just the fries, please.”

“*Hmm*. One more thing. How is the light in here?”

“Uh...what?”

I gestured to the Ray-Bans he was currently tapping against the table. “Are your eyes still sensitive?”

“Yeah.” He set the sunglasses onto his nose. “It’s getting better, but the headaches can be brutal and they’re worse in the morning for some reason. I’m slowly turning into a vampire.”

“Welcome to the club. I’ve been a vampire for years. I think I’m allergic to mornings now.”

“Me too.” He smiled kindly, adding, “Um...hey, can I get a Diet Coke too, please?”

Oh.

Right.

Why was I still standing here? Was I accidentally flirting again?

I salvaged my potentially awkward episode with a curt nod and a promise to have his lunch delivered ASAP.

I stayed in the kitchen after that. I didn't trust myself not to turn into a fawning, ridiculous fan with a super-crush around the hockey player. I know, I know. It was an illogical diagnosis, but I exhibited telling signs—butterflies in my stomach, irrational irritation, and ultra-awareness. It was... disturbing.

The only remedy was to steer clear and hope he'd heal quickly.

Should have been simple, *oui*?

No, Riley Thoreau was everywhere—the diner, the coffee shop, the bakery.

I spotted him on Sunday, signing autographs in front of the rink; on Monday morning, jogging down Magnolia Street; on my way to work that afternoon, chatting with Vin and Nolan in the parking lot of the newly constructed sport facility he'd built adjacent to St. Finbarr's; and on Tuesday morning, through the window outside the dry cleaner.

And yes, I heard the buzz in the kitchen. According to Dierdre, a sweet waitress in her twenties and a self-professed hockey fiend, Riley looked depressed. Jonathan, a sous chef who fixed Harley Davidsons on the side and also loved hockey, said Riley's eyes were the problem. Why else would he still be wearing sunglasses inside after two weeks, and why would he still be here?

"I think he lost partial vision in his right eye," Ivan the terrible know-it-all barista and co-owner of Rise and Grind suggested as he whisked foam into art on my latte. "The press thinks he'll announce his retirement any day now."

"Who?"

"Riley Thoreau," he replied with his head bent, a pink headband holding his mop of curls in place. "Have you been listening at all, or am I talking to myself again?"

I huffed fondly 'cause I had to admit, Ivan the terrible know-it-all was a good friend and sparring partner. He was a

thirty-two-year-old Elmwood native with blue eyes, brown hair always in need of a trim. His endless wardrobe of black T-shirts were usually paired with skinny jeans and decorated with rainbow pins as if to remind everyone that he was both out and proud and mildly committed to the emo reputation he'd fostered in his youth.

He and his friend Stacy had gone to college in New York and returned to Elmwood with business degrees and a plan to take over the donut shop some genius had opened next to Henderson's Bakery in the eighties. No one could compete with a place that smelled of pastries, freshly baked bread, and served passable decaf and regular java. But Ivan and Stacy were willing to give it a try.

Three years ago, they took over the lease, renamed and revamped the shop into a specialty coffee emporium that sold lattes, espressos, cappuccinos, and every blended caffeinated concoction under the sun. In a town like Elmwood where a generation of old-timers still drank Folgers they made in the Mr. Coffee machines they'd owned for decades, it hadn't seemed like a winning idea.

Wrong. Rise and Grind was a huge success.

Elmwood was a surprising place. Six years ago, I'd agreed to help Nolan revitalize the diner his family had owned for almost a century. The town had been leery of me and my French-Canadian-infused menu improvements in the early days. A burger was a burger in their minds. They weren't sure they could trust an outsider with an accent not to ruin beloved staples. They gave me a chance for Nolan's sake, and now... they accepted me as one of their own.

Probably because I kept their favorite items. Hey, I didn't want to spark a revolution. I'd added more than I retained, though, and our customers loved having choices. In a twist, it appeared that the residents of Elmwood had sophisticated palates and were willing to try new things.

Honestly, Nolan was the true genius, but I took some credit and teased Ivan that the diner had paved the way for Rise and Grind because...well, Ivan was fun to tease.

“You are always talking to yourself,” I lamented, shaking my head. “I worry about your marbles.”

Ivan scoffed. “My marbles are just fine. Thank you. Take your latte and scram, or I’m putting you on my no-share list.”

“That sounds horrible,” I deadpanned. “What are you not sharing?”

“Gossip.” His eyes twinkled merrily as he slid my latte across the marble counter with a theatric, “Ta-da!”

I stared at the glob of foam for a beat before meeting Ivan’s gaze. “What is that supposed to be?”

“A heart, you salty old B. I’m like the Wizard of Oz giving the lion the heart you lack,” he replied, fluttering his lashes.

“Oh, boy. You are mixing everyone up. The tin man has the heart, the lion has the brains, and—”

“No, the lion wanted courage. The scarecrow wanted brains,” a newcomer corrected.

Ivan widened his eyes. “Greetings, Mr. Thoreau!”

See? Everywhere.

“It’s just Riley.”

“Just Riley,” Ivan repeated, flashing a winning smile. “What can I get started for you?”

“That looks good,” he said, pointing at my drink. “I’ll have a latte, please.”

“You got it. One latte coming right up.”

I picked up my to-go cup, pivoting to face Riley. Damn, he was sexy. His red running shorts accentuated his thick quads, and his athletic shirt clung to his muscular chest like plastic wrap. I licked my lips, pretending to be entranced by the heart that looked more like a mushroom in my drink while I counted backward from one hundred.

Do not get a boner. Do not get a boner.

I tried to think of a clever exit speech, but English words dried up in my mouth, replaced by easier French ones...*beau*,

magnifique, splendide.

Ugh. Time to go.

I raised my cup in a toast and smiled. “Enjoy your latte and...have a good—”

“I was hoping to bump into you,” Riley intercepted. He coughed as if embarrassed and briefly glanced out the window, adjusting his sunglasses.

“Oh?”

He licked his lips and switched his weight from his left hip to his right. “Yeah, I, um—”

“All set. Let me just add a little something special.” Ivan wrestled with the spout affixed to his industrial coffeemaker. When he was satisfied with the results, he handed the latte across the counter to Riley. “Here you go.”

“That looks like a penis,” I blurted before I could stop myself. “A *petit* one...with a minor ejaculation. Cute, you know?”

“I might actually kill you,” Ivan grumbled under his breath.

Riley snickered merrily and examined his foam art. “No, it’s definitely a leaf.”

Ivan clapped, shooting a triumphant grin my way. “That’s right. Thank you for noticing. JC wouldn’t know art if it bit him on the booty.”

“Hmph.”

We paid for our drinks, bade Ivan *adieu*, and headed for the door.

“Do you have a second?” Riley asked.

I halted, tilting my chin curiously. “Of course.”

“Thanks.” He shifted from one foot to the other again. “I know this is going to sound wacky, but I need a favor. I can pay top dollar...triple, quadruple, whatever price you name.

We'd have to keep it between us, and I can certainly pay extra for your discretion."

"Now I am extra curious. Is this a nefarious request? If so, I warn you, I'm not an assassin, and I don't make naughty art in lattes."

His whole face changed in an instant. The tight lines around his mouth softened, and laughter creased his eyes at the corner of his glasses. "That's okay. I'm not feeling murderous, and I'm pretty sure this really is supposed to be a leaf."

"It's a dick," I stated matter-of-factly. "But I couldn't do any better."

"That's okay. I, uh...need something potentially more embarrassing."

I bugged my eyes out comically, pleased when he chuckled. "What could possibly be more embarrassing?"

"Tuna salad."

RILEY

Okay, that sounded...weird.

Jean-Claude squinted hard enough to leave a few new permanent creases on his brow.

“Tuna salad,” he repeated in his broad Quebecois accent. “Explain, please.”

I rubbed my stubbled jaw with my free hand. “Listen, I know this is an odd one, but...hear me out. I’ve found that a few things help me stay on track. I eat the same breakfast every day five days a week, and the other two are free days. On game days, I listen to the same song on my way into the arena, I put my pads on in a certain order, I fist-bump my goalie before I take the ice, and...I tape my stick with a particular color depending on the day.”

“You mean you’re superstitious.”

“Yeah. A little...okay, a lot,” I conceded with a heavy sigh. “The day I got injured, I used orange tape ’cause it was Wednesday, but at the end of the roll the color was tinted yellow and *boom!*—everything went sideways.”

“Because Wednesdays are orange, not orange with a hint of yellow?”

“Exactly. Now I’m hiding out in a tiny town in the middle of nowhere Vermont, hoping to get my mojo back, but the headaches are killing me. The glare on ice, the glare off windows, the glare on the water...it’s bad. I have to wear these

glasses during the day, and I'd be okay with that if I felt like it was working. Maybe it is, but—"

"Wait, wait, wait." He squinted and took a leisurely sip of his latte. "Superstition is normal in your profession. I understand it. I like to use the same burners on the stove, the same spatula, the same knives, so I'm a little superstitious too. But what does tuna salad have to do with anything?"

I spotted two kids on bikes, pointing at me from the other side of the street, and waved before replying. "The days I've eaten your tuna on rye for lunch, my head doesn't ache in the afternoon."

"Okay?"

"It's like magic. I want to test my new theory and see if eating tuna in the morning will keep headaches away all day. I tried to do it myself. I bought canned tuna at the store and even added bits of celery and onion like you do, but...it didn't work. Yours might work, though."

Jean-Claude had a great poker face. He sipped his latte and casually sized me up. And fuck, he was intimidating—big and burly with shrewd green eyes and short reddish-blond hair. We were roughly the same height and we were both broad-shouldered, but I was leaner by a long shot. He looked like what he was...a badass chef who thoroughly enjoyed his job.

And I probably looked like a man on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Also accurate.

"I don't think your doctor would advise you to eat tuna all day," he said after what felt like twenty minutes. "But...I will make you some if you think it might help."

Relief flooded through me. Later, when logic returned, I'd be mortified that I'd revealed my phobia so spectacularly, but for now... "Thank you. I appreciate it. I know it's a long shot, but...I'm desperate."

"I feel like a dealer," he joked. "Look at us conspiring—on a street corner, no less."

I chuckled. "Yeah, it's pretty ridiculous. Thanks for not laughing outright. So...how do you want to handle this?"

Should I pay you directly or pay the diner?”

Jean-Claude shrugged. “I don’t know how to charge for random tuna salad requests. You’re asking for a container to last you two days, yes?”

“A week if possible.”

“No, no. Like a visit from your family, fish is no good after three days. What else will you eat? What about vegetables? Have you considered that the salad or the french fries were responsible for your lack of headaches?”

“Tuna is high in proteins, rich in vitamins and minerals like complex-B vitamins, vitamins A and D, iron, selenium, and omega-three. It’s definitely the fish.”

“And now you are a doctor,” he teased without heat.

“Well, no,” I sputtered.

“I’m kidding. Teasing you is helping me think, and I think...I need your phone number. I can’t run a contraband tuna ring out of the diner’s kitchen. I will make a batch at my house and you can pick it up, but if you really are set on eating tuna as a remedy, it is better if I teach you how to make it yourself.”

“I can’t cook. I’m like...not capable of it. Seriously. I’m the guy who leaves eggs boiling so long they explode and my kitchen smells like dog farts for days.”

“Thank you for that image,” he snarked.

“Sorry, but it’s true. I can handle toast and cereal—after that, I’m all about takeout.”

“Making tuna salad is not cooking,” he huffed. “It’s assembly. My recipes require careful assembly, but—”

I threw my hands in the air. “I’m doomed.”

Jean-Claude’s eyebrows shot to his hairline. A slight grin tugged at the corner of his mouth before he burst out laughing. “You are very dramatic.”

“Not usually. I swear I’m normally pragmatic and much more chill. I’ll be better when I’m back on the ice.”

“Of course.” He pulled his cell from his pocket and handed it over. “Put your number in. I’ll text you later with a pickup time. You’re in luck. I’m off today and after I finish my latte with the mushroom art, I will be on my way to the market.”

“Oh, that’s awesome. Thank you.” I typed my contact info, pushing Send so I’d have his too.

He smiled as I returned his phone, and stepped around me. “*Bonjour, Monsieur Thoreau.*”

And then he was gone.

Two thoughts about this. One, exposing myself as a compulsively paranoid athlete had gone better than expected. After his initial surprise, Jean-Claude had seemed relatively unfazed by my oddball request. Two, my name sounded extraordinarily hot spoken in a French accent by a French-Canadian man with a gravelly voice and green eyes and—

Okay, where did that come from?

I gulped, pulling my gaze from his retreating back. I mean, sure...I noticed the guy, but there was a reason for that. Jean-Claude was big and brawny. He was built like a fierce D-man, yet he moved like a panther. I was subconsciously aware of him the way I would be of anyone I might meet on the ice.

Except he was a chef, not a hockey player. And that didn’t explain why my brain automatically tossed up adjectives like sexy, charming, attractive.

That was new and...different.

But I had bigger things to worry about than random queer thoughts. I had to get better. Fast.

VINNIE ADDED a light weight to my barbell and took his place behind my bench to spot me. I cracked my knuckles and adjusted my grip before lifting the bar over my head.

“Nice. Strong as ever, man,” he noted, catching my eye in the gym mirror.

Elmwood's new sports center gym was state-of-the-art per Vinnie's instructions. There was a yoga room, a swimming pool, a sauna, a cardio area, a section for free weights, and another for stationary bikes, elliptical machines, and treadmills. Everything was so new it sparkled in the dimly lit space.

Vinnie had adjusted the lighting for my sake, which I appreciated—though I hated that it was necessary. I didn't bring up my ongoing headache situation. I didn't want to talk about my lack of significant progress, my sleepless nights, or my lack of appetite. And while Vinnie would totally understand my convoluted reasoning behind the tuna-on rye deal I'd struck with the chef at his husband's diner, I didn't want to go there either. I felt as if I were slowly losing control over every facet of my life, and it sucked.

Physical exertion was my best bet.

With a little luck, I'd stop thinking about Jean-Claude... and weird things like the size of his hands and the scar under his lower lip, partially hidden by his well-trimmed beard, and —

Fuck, what's wrong with me?

I fumbled to drop the weight on the stand without crushing Vinnie's fingers. "Sorry. I spaced out."

"It's all good. You're doing well." He clapped his hand on my shoulder and flopped onto the bench across from me. "I should get going. We're down a coach, and I told Ronnie I'd help out with the pee wees. Want to meet up for dinner later?"

"Thanks, but...please take this the nicest way possible—you don't have to entertain me. I'm fine," I assured him.

Vinnie nodded. "I know you are. I don't mean to nag, but I feel sort of responsible for making sure you aren't miserable here."

"Miserable? No way. I genuinely like Elmwood. It's beautiful in autumn and everyone's friendly and...I'm doing okay."

“All right. I’ll shut up.” He uncapped his water and guzzled half of it, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. Nope. Not sexy at all.

But out of the fucking blue, I had a vision of Jean-Claude doing the same thing and my dick twitched in my shorts.

Holy. Fuck.

I sat up quickly and grabbed my water bottle, clandestinely wriggling my boxer briefs to avoid a pup-tent situation. And because I was suddenly nervous for no good reason at all, I started babbling.

“I had a latte at that coffee shop in town today. Rise and Grind. I’m supposed to be going easy on caffeine, but I needed a little jolt and it was good. Better than my usual spot at home.”

Vinnie quirked his chin as if confused by my suddenly manic tone, but he wasn’t the type to look for hidden meanings. He beamed with hometown pride, slapping his knee like a cowboy who’d just won first prize at a rodeo.

“I told you Elmwood was a-fucking-mazing. You wouldn’t believe how progressive it’s become, and it’s only getting better. You’ve seen the diner. That place was solidly stuck in the seventies and eighties when I was a kid, but Nolan has worked a serious miracle over there. It was genius of him to hire a fancy chef like JC and—”

“I ran into him at the coffee shop too,” I intercepted. I didn’t mean to cut Vinnie off, but I’d heard the “Elmwood is so awesome speech” a few times, and I was more curious about Jean-Claude. “What’s he like?”

“JC? He’s a good guy. He comes across as kind of gruff, but he’s funny as fuck once you get to know him. I wasn’t sure what to think of him at first, but that could have been misguided jealousy on my part. In my defense, it’s never easy meeting one of your significant other’s exes.”

“Ex?”

“Yeah, Nolan and JC met in Montreal and JC followed him here. It would be a sweet story if that wasn’t my man we were

talking about,” he huffed with a laugh.

Nolan and Jean-Claude. Huh.

I couldn't see it.

But it had taken me a minute or so to get used to the idea that Vinnie, the fiercest D-man in the game, was bisexual *and* had a male lover. His coming out had rocked the league. It had been all anyone could talk about for a while. I'd found myself answering questions on his behalf as his friend and his successor as captain. Or...co-captain.

Did I know about Kimbo? Did anyone know? Was I okay with it?

Hey, like everyone else, I'd assumed he was with the beautiful model he'd dated for years. Nolan was a shock, but he was a good guy and I liked him. And I loved Vinnie. If Nolan made Vin happy, I was all for it. I'd hoped to prove my allegiance by being the first to sign on to coach their hockey camp and recruit other players too. I'd been vocal in my support of my friend and the LGBTQ community.

Maybe that was why Vinnie had made the effort to help me ride out my concussion away from the media's eye.

But here's a truth I'd never admitted to anyone...ever—Vinnie's revelation had shaken me to my core. Logically, I'd known there had to be a few closeted gay and bi men in the league, but to come out? That took big brass balls. I'd assumed it wasn't possible. Even in retirement, a prolific player like Vinnie proudly hoisting a bi flag made waves.

I wiped down the equipment, willing my heartbeat to steady. “Is it weird, knowing they were a couple?”

Vinnie scoffed. “Dude. Nolan loves me. And why would I waste precious brain cells worrying about an old relationship? If JC was a jerk, I might not feel that way, but he's cool and he has a great sense of humor. So does Ivan. I tease JC that they'd make a cute couple just to see his epic eye roll. Cracks me up every time.”

I smiled as if I were in on the joke. “Huh. So...have Jean-Claude and Ivan dated?”

“No, they’re just friends, and as far as I know, they’re both single—in case you’re interested.” He winked, then cackled like a hyena at my expression, which apparently had slipped from neutral to sheer panic. “Just kidding, man.”

I snapped my towel at his ass and followed Vinnie to the exit, expertly tuning out his weather predictions for the day. Looked like rain and we needed it, blah, blah, blah. My head was stuck in a homoerotic loop, conjuring images of a man’s hands on me, pinning me against a wall or a counter or hell, on the ice. The mere idea of weight and breath and lips made me dizzy. And confused.

What the hell was going on with me?

ARE YOU HOME? I will deliver your contraband tuna in fifteen minutes. I don’t want to leave it on your porch. Soggy tuna is bad for my reputation.

I chuckled at Jean-Claude’s text and peeked out the kitchen window at the gunmetal gray skies. No rain yet, but it was the topic of conversation everywhere. I’d had Vinnie drop me off at the market rather than home. I’d needed a few things and since I’d been advised not to drive till my headaches subsided, I hoofed it. Not a big deal in a town this small, but my lack of a quick getaway left me at the mercy of idle chatter. And today’s hot news: storm alert.

Stop by any time. I’m home, I typed. Or I can pick it up and save you a trip.

I’m already out and if I hurry, I’ll beat the rain.

Ten minutes later, the sky opened up in a torrential downpour of biblical proportions. Lightning streaked across the horizon, followed by a supersonic boom that rattled the foundation of the old house. I loved it. It reminded me of adrenaline-inducing thunderstorms of my youth and telling ghost stories by candlelight with my family when the power went out.

Geez, if this kept up, I'd need a flashlight or candles or something. Did I have a flashlight?

Knock, knock

Ding-dong

I cut my hunt for foul-weather provisions short and hurried to answer the door for the thoroughly soaked, grumpy-looking chef cradling a plastic-wrapped container.

"Come on in," I stepped aside to make room for Jean-Claude in the foyer.

"No, no. I'm wet to the bones. I live two blocks away so I walked, thinking I had a few more minutes. No such luck."

"Yeah, everyone's talking about it. Seemed to come out of nowhere, though," I yelled above the din of the element. "Kind of fun."

"You have strange ideas of fun."

"True." I snickered, feeling oddly energized and lighthearted—pretty much the opposite of my guest dripping all over the mat in his drenched long-sleeved tee and jeans.

Jean-Claude shoved the plastic bag at my chest, jumping slightly as a bolt of lightning lit the sky behind him. If I hadn't known any better, I'd have thought he was nervous.

"Here. Tuna and rye bread. Lightly toast the bread, then sparingly spread a bit of Dijon before—"

"Oh, cooking instructions. I'll have to write that down. Come in, man. You look like a drowned rat. In a good way," I added when he scowled. "Don't argue. I have alcohol—beer or wine?"

I moved ahead of him through the living room into a retro-style black-and-white kitchen. The table for two under the wide window usually let in a ton of sunlight, and the pink and red geraniums hanging from the eaves outside gave the room a pop of color that went with the cheery red plates stacked on exposed shelves over the kitchen sink. The room was dark now, but I kept the overhead lights off in deference to my

sensitive eyes and adjusted the dimmer on the chandelier above the table.

I set the bag on the counter and presented a bottle of the best Pinot in Elmwood...according to Gerry at the liquor store.

Jean-Claude squinted at the label. “That is good wine, but I’m wet and—”

I threw a clean dish towel at him. “Dry off while I pour you a glass for your troubles.”

“Thank you, but my clothes are sticking to me and it’s very uncomfortable. I’ll just give you instructions and be on my way.”

“We’re the same height,” I commented, sizing him up. “I have sweats and a T-shirt you can borrow. I’ll even throw in a pair of socks.”

“Riley...”

Fuck, I liked the way he said my name. Ry-lee, as if the Ri was an appetizer and ley was the main course.

It was...sexy.

And on that thought, lightning flashed, illuminating the kitchen like a spotlight. I blinked, so flustered by the side trip my brain had taken that I didn’t give Jean-Claude a chance to turn me down. I hurried out of the room and returned with a pair of gray sweats and a black tee that had always been a bit too big for me.

I thrust them into his hands and pointed at the direction of the bathroom. “You can change in there—or here if you want. Whatever. I’ll pour wine. Should I do anything with the tuna?”

He glanced from the clothing to me and back again as if weighing a heavy decision: stay or go?

“I, uh...put it in the refrigerator. The bread is there...on the counter. I can write the instructions for you,” he said, tilting his chin slightly. “After a glass of wine.”

Okay, why did I feel like I’d won the fucking lottery?

I wasn't sure what was going on with me. Yes, I liked Jean-Claude and yes, I appreciated that he not only didn't judge my wackadoodle tuna theory, but he'd gone the extra mile to hand deliver it in a rainstorm. Anyone might be convinced that offering dry clothes and shelter was a neighborly gesture on my part. That didn't sound like me, though.

Not that I was a dick...I wasn't. But I was a guy who tipped for services like special deliveries. Somehow, sticking a hundred-dollar bill into Jean-Claude's pocket and sending him out into a storm didn't feel right. I was going with my gut on this one. There was a decent chance I was making a colossal fool of myself, but the ball was already rolling.

"This Pinot smells good," I commented, pouring the burgundy liquid into a glass without looking up. "I guess a wine connoisseur would call it a nice bouquet or—"

Oh, fuck. He was...

He was...

Very fucking hot.

"I look ridiculous," he huffed woodenly.

"No, you don't."

Not even close.

My shirt was snug across his shoulders, accentuating his pecs and thick biceps, and almost not quite covering his belly. And those sweats...I kid you not, I actually licked my lips. The thin fabric hugged his crotch so lovingly it was practically obscene. He *should* have looked ridiculous, but he didn't. Far from it.

I tore my gaze from his junk and gave the wine my full attention, internally listing every boring topic I could think of to get my dick under control.

Glue, car insurance, traffic, celebrity gossip...

Shit. It wasn't working. I poured a second glass and carried them to the table, sliding onto the nearest chair with a relieved

sigh. Jean-Claude shot me a bemused glance before joining me.

He tapped his glass to mine, swirled the contents, sniffed it, then oh so leisurely took a sip. “*C’est bon.*”

“It’s good,” I translated, nodding in agreement. “Gerry must know what he’s talking about.”

“Not quite. I gave Gerry a cheater’s sheet so he’d know where to point his customers.”

I grinned. “You mean a cheat sheet.”

“*Oui.*” His lips twisted wryly. “Gerry is a nice man, but he doesn’t know wine. How is your head?”

“Fine.” And it was. Not even a twinge of the usual ache at my temple I felt around this time of night.

“I’m glad. I thought there were rules about alcohol and concussions.”

I held up my glass to show my minuscule pour. “I’m hardly in any danger here. And now that I have the tuna, I’m set.”

He narrowed his gaze. “If my tuna is a concussion cure, I’ll want a mention in the medical books.”

“I’ll make sure of it.” I chuckled.

Jean-Claude sipped his Pinot, jolting at the next crack of thunder. “At this rate, power will be out soon too. What a night.”

“You don’t like thunderstorms?”

“Not particularly.”

“I love them,” I gushed. “I have a generator at my house in Seattle, which is handy, but also kills the spook-factor fun.”

He fixed me with an unreadable look. “You *are* weird.”

I snort-laughed at his dry delivery and almost choked on my stingy sip of wine. “A little. You’re from Montreal, right? You must have grown up with the occasional wicked rainstorm too.”

“I’m not from Montreal, but yes, I know this weather well. I prefer sunshine or even snow to rain. And I know plenty about snow.”

“Same. So...where *are* you from?”

He took another sip, his gaze glued to mine. “Nord-du-Québec, in a village so tiny you can’t find it on a map. It makes Elmwood look like New York City.”

“Really?”

“*Oui*. It’s a five-and-a-half-hour drive to Quebec City if the weather cooperates. Seven and a half to Montreal. Very remote.”

“How do people make a living there?” I asked conversationally. “Agriculture?”

He scoffed. “No, city boy. Logging and mining.”

“Do you miss it?”

He went still for a long moment. So long I was afraid I’d inadvertently hit a touchy subject. “Yes and no. I miss my family sometimes, but there’s nothing for me there.”

“Not cheffing jobs?”

Jean-Claude chuckled. “Certainly not. I am what you would call an accidental chef. I started clearing tables and sweeping floors at a French bistro that tried to be an Italian restaurant in Saguenay. One day, they needed extra hands in the kitchen, preparing plates for a large party. My job was to cut sprigs of parsley, chop radishes, and help stir the marinara. Silly things, but I loved the energy...fast-paced and furious. Made the adrenaline zip through my veins. When I had enough money to move again, I headed for Quebec City, enrolled in a culinary academy, and soon after, I was an apprentice at a Michelin-starred restaurant, and eventually, I became *chef de cuisine*.”

“Head chef,” I guessed, nursing another small sip. “I could have sworn Vinnie said you were from Montreal.”

His eyes lit with mischief. “You have been talking about me? Interesting.”

I was grateful for the dim lighting as heat flooded my cheeks. “Well, yes but not really.”

“Yes and no? Which is it?” he teased.

“He mentioned that you and Nolan...um...and I thought you’d met in Montreal. But we weren’t talking about you.”

Jean-Claude arched a brow, a smile tugging the corner of his mouth. “If you say so,” he singsonged.

“Okay, we *were* talking about you, but not in a bad way. I was curious about you.”

“Or suspicious? You wanted to make sure I didn’t spike your tuna, eh?”

“Something like that.” I laughed. “So...what’s the story?”

“I hate to be popping bubbles, but there is no exciting story. I moved to Montreal for a better job and met a cute man at a gay bar. That’s Nolan, by the way. We got along so well, he extended his vacation. A month later, I accepted his invitation to come and see his diner in the mystical town of Elmwood and I never left.” He wagged his brows and drained his glass. “What is your story?”

“I don’t have one. I play hockey. That’s all I’ve ever done.” I retrieved the wine bottle from the counter and topped off his glass, setting a calming hand on his shoulder as thunder boomed loud enough to wake the dead. “Relax. As my mom used to say, the angels are bowling and one of them just hit a strike.”

Jean-Claude cleared his throat. “You misunderstand. I’m not afraid. I am only...mildly anxious. It’s October.”

“What does that mean?” I asked with a laugh.

“October storms give me jitters. I’ll tell you the story...it won’t seem terrible to you, but it was scary to me.” He opened his hands and leaned forward in what I could only call storyteller mode. “When I was a teenager, my brother and I went camping near Lac Chibougamau with a couple of friends. It was unseasonably warm for October, so we thought it was a good idea. Not so much. It was a total disaster.”

I smiled at his self-deprecating tone. “What happened?”

“What didn’t happen? The tent had a hole, so we slept with bugs and were bitten everywhere. We lost a fishing pole, caught one tiny perch, and just as we were about to pack it in, the heavens opened up. Lightning struck one of the metal stakes my friend had pulled from the ground and it sizzled his tent. No joking. The rain put out the sparks...*Dieu merci*, but it scared the shit out of us. We huddled under the good tent—four big teenagers in a small tent for hours until the storm passed and my father finally came to pick us up. To this day, October storms make me nervous. Any other month, no problem. But October...”

I snickered. “Don’t worry. I’ll protect you.”

Okay, that sounded weird and flirtatious. Not my intention at all. Before I could sputter and reassure him I was perfectly sane, he sighed theatrically and slumped in his chair.

“*Merci*. I feel much safer now.”

I bit the inside of my cheek to keep my grin in check. I liked this guy. Jean-Claude was charming and funny. His goofy sense of humor softened his edges and made him seem so laid-back. I got the impression he thickened his accent for comedic purposes. All it did was spark my curiosity.

“Good. So how long did you live in Montreal? I love that city. Toronto’s better,” I taunted playfully. “But I might be biased.”

“*Hmm*. Four years in Quebec City, two in Montreal, and five years here...or six, I think.” He tapped the side of his glass and leaned forward. “Now I have a question for you. What time are you planning to eat? The reason I ask is I am hungry and luckily, I made enough to share.”

I snorted. “Is that so?”

“Yes, so you can invite me to stay for dinner...if you want.”

“I was planning to wait till seven.”

He checked his watch. “An hour and ten minutes from now. I can’t wait that long. I will die.”

“Now who’s dramatic?” I barked a laugh and stood, rescuing the tuna container and a jar of Dijon from the refrigerator. “Okay, let’s eat.”

Jean-Claude washed his hands and dried them. “I will need access to your toaster, two plates, a knife, and a dash of salt and pepper.”

“You got it.”

I supplied him with the tools he required and leaned on the counter to watch the master at work. And though you wouldn’t think basic sandwich-making would be entertaining, it was with Jean-Claude.

“As with most things in life, balance is key. There is much to consider here: the thickness of the bread—approximately fourteen millimeters per slice—and the fact that it has been at a room temperature of approximately twenty degrees Celsius must be accounted for as we set the timer on the toaster. I don’t personally know this appliance, but if it’s an average toaster—and it looks average enough—it will take two and a half minutes to achieve a light, crispy surface. No burning.”

I grabbed two water bottles, slid one toward him, and uncapped my own. “Do you really think about all those things when you make toast? ’Cause that’s a little batty.”

“Of course not. I’m imparting great knowledge to you here.” He pointed at the toaster. “Any ordinary cook can throw bread into a toaster, hope it doesn’t burn, then slop tuna fish on top and call it a day. A *chef* will make it correctly. *Voilà!* See, the bread is not burned.”

“It’s rye bread. How can you tell?”

Jean-Claude’s over-the-top reaction was priceless. He threw his hands in the air and burst into a mini chef tirade...all in French. I wasn’t fluent by any means, but I’d taken enough French in high school to understand the gist.

“What is wrong with people? Burn the bread. Who cares? It goes to the same place. No problem at all.”

He switched to English again, moving on to the importance of a light spread of Dijon and precisely measuring your ingredients. He added a touch of salt and pepper, cut the sandwich diagonally, and pushed the plate to me.

“Thank you. It looks amazing as usual. But, uh...do you always add salt and pepper? I’m asking for future solo assembly purposes.”

“Not always, but I didn’t add much to the tuna salad, so a little is fine,” he replied as he prepared a second sandwich.

Side note: Rain battered the kitchen window and the light above the table flickered a few times as lightning and thunder raged outdoors, but Jean-Claude didn’t seem to notice. His razor-sharp focus was flawlessly professional. If I hadn’t known he was a chef, I would have figured it out. No one I knew moved the way he did in a kitchen.

For instance, my mom was a great cook, but she wasn’t concise. She was casually good at it, while he was casually excellent. Kind of amazing for someone who, if I added the time he’d spent in Quebec City, Montreal, and Elmwood correctly, had only been a chef for eleven years. And he was forty now, so...what had he been doing in his twenties?

There had to be a story there. Men like him didn’t languish in the far reaches of northern Quebec to become busboys before making their way to a big city. Maybe he’d had a whole other life in his twenties. Hell, maybe he—

“Were you ever married?” I blurted, my mouth full of an insanely delicious tuna-salad sandwich.

Jean-Claude did that arched-brow thing again, set his half-eaten sandwich on his plate, and reached for his wineglass. “No. Were you?”

“No.”

“Good to know. I’m going to guess you aren’t dating anyone or we would have seen her...or him in town for a visit.”

My mouth went bone dry. “Uh, I’m straight. Mostly straight, anyway. I mean, they say no one is totally straight or

gay, but I'm definitely on the straight curve. No offense to the gay curve, but it's not me. I'm not gay on any curve...I'm—straight.”

My heart thumped in time with the roll of thunder as silence stretched and folded around us.

I rubbed my parched lips together, powering through a bite of my sandwich to keep myself from opening my gob and adding anything else to the stupid column. I wanted to assure him I didn't mean any insult. One of my best buddies was gay...or bi. I wasn't putting up the straight shield as a reminder that I wasn't interested in him “that way.”

But I *was* interested. And I wasn't sure what that meant either, so...eating was safe.

The air crackled, buzzing with heat and yearning and questions I hadn't formulated and feelings I didn't know how to label. My cock swelled in my joggers, my pulse raced, and still...he was quiet.

And undeniably masculine. And sexy.

But quiet.

“I am gay.”

“I know,” I said softly. “You mentioned that.”

Damn it, this was getting more awkward by the second. I needed help tearing my gaze away from his and steering the conversation elsewhere.

“Since you are very...straight.” He hesitated over that last word before continuing, “You must have many women worried about you. I'm surprised they all haven't followed you here.”

“No, I haven't had a girlfriend in a while.”

“Oh? How long?”

“Eight years, I think. Maybe nine.”

Jean-Claude did a double take. “That is shocking.”

I snorted. “Why?”

“You’re not ugly and you play hockey.”

This time, I guffawed. “Gee, thanks. I should put those on my Tinder profile.”

“I’m stating the obvious. I’m sure you have no trouble finding partners, so maybe you aren’t the type who likes to settle down.”

“That’s not it,” I replied, unthinking. “Dating feels like a second sport. It’s fun at first, but then you realize you don’t know the rules. I don’t have time for mind games. I haven’t met anyone who doesn’t feel like work...and that’s on me. I’m too focused on my career, and it’s not going particularly well at the moment. Maybe I’m better off single. You?”

“Better off? No. But I live in Elmwood, so I’ll be single for a while.”

“Will you stay here? It seems like you could go anywhere, open your own restaurant, and make a name for yourself.”

Jean-Claude inclined his chin as he crunched on the last bite of his sandwich. “Maybe I will someday. I’m not in a hurry to leave, though. I like it here. It feels...cozy, yes?”

“I guess. Maybe too cozy. I mean, c’mon...it’s gotta be weird working with your ex. Especially now that he’s married.” I wiped my mouth on my napkin and stacked our empty plates.

“Why? Nolan and I are friends. I have nothing but good feelings for him and Vinnie. Jealousy is a pointless emotion. When you give in to it, you are the only one who is hurt.”

“You’re a more evolved human than I am.”

He narrowed his eyes. “Is that a nice way to say I’m old?”

I pulled a funny face. “Well...forty *is* officially over the hill.”

He flipped me off. “Find your own tuna. I’m out of here.”

“Hey, forty is the new thirty! I think that makes thirty-five the new twenty-five, so we’re both in luck.” I carried the

plates to the sink and moved back to the table as he stood. “Want more wine?”

“No, thank you. I need to go home, take out my dentures, eat Jell-O, and watch *Golden Girls*. *Au revoir*, Riley. You have enough tuna for breakfast. Disgusting, but have fun with that. Maybe not enough for lunch or dinner, though. Next time, I’ll teach you how to make it yourself. *Bon?*”

“*Merci*,” I replied. “I don’t want to make this weird, but I want to pay you for—”

“Weird. Stop,” Jean-Claude intercepted. “I don’t need money. Call it a neighborly favor.”

“Well...thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” He glanced up when the light flickered and wind rattled the window. “Do you know where the flashlights and candles are in case you lose power?”

“Uh...no,” I admitted.

“I do. Come, I’ll help you find them...just in case.” He milled about the kitchen, opening drawers and pulling out flashlights, candles, and matches. He set everything on the table, then ushered me into the hallway and pointed at the basement stairs. “The fuse box is next to the washing machine. You may not need to touch it, but you should know that all the buttons on the panel should click up. It’s an older box, and it gets temperamental in outages. And before you ask...I lived here with Nolan for a year.”

“Ah, right. Would you mind showing me?” I asked.

Okay...I’d done it again. It was as if my mouth were operating on its own steam and I was just along for the ride. I didn’t need help finding a stupid fuse box, candles, flashlights, or matches. I could figure out which buttons turned lights off and on, for fuck’s sake.

“Of course.”

The basement was actually a tricked-out den with a larger flat-screen than the one in the family room upstairs, a mini bar, a comfy gray sectional, two leather lounge chairs, a foosball

table, a dart board, a murphy bed, and a poker table. Pillars divided the game section from the TV area, and behind the doors at the far end of the gigantic space were a bathroom, a utility room, and a laundry room.

It was huge but homey, and best of all, the small narrow windows didn't let in a ton of sunlight, making it the perfect hangout spot for me in my current state. I'd fallen asleep down here watching television—or listening to it when my eyes gave out and my head began to pound—more often than I would ever admit. The stack of pillows and the duvet draped sloppily off the edge of the sofa probably gave me away.

I turned on the lamp next to the sectional and followed him to the laundry room where—

Oh. Shit.

The basket of dirty clothes overflowed from its precarious heap, spilling onto the floor.

“Tomorrow's laundry day,” I commented, kicking a stray pair of boxer briefs out of sight and shoving the basket away from the door with a sheepish half smile.

Jean-Claude didn't reply. He moved to the fuse box and clicked the latch open. “It looks fine, all the levers are in the right place. Always check this one here...on the bottom, see?”

“Uh, yeah.”

I inched closer to him, nodding along like an idiot. But it was all I was capable of at the moment. I could barely breathe. He smelled so fucking good, like soap and woody cologne. Heat emanated from him in waves. Two grown men in a small laundry room, so close the hair on his arms tickled mine...it was too much.

I did my best to pay attention, but I was more concerned about the inferno zipping through my veins than the fucking electricity. I stepped back to give myself room to reset.

“How is your head?”

“My head?” I repeated. “It's...fine. It doesn't hurt.”

Jean-Claude smiled. “Good. Well, I should go now. Don’t worry, I will wash your T-shirt and sweats before I return them. I see you have enough laundry to do.”

“Ha. Right.”

That was my cue to step aside and see him to the door, but I couldn’t seem to move. I braced one hand on the washing machine in a not-so-casual pose while my brain catalogued Jean-Claude’s size and strength, the tattoos on his right biceps, the bulge in his borrowed gray sweats. And yeah, my mouth was watering now. He was...hot.

I’d been in countless locker rooms with celebrated, handsome athletes with chiseled bodies and I’d never ever so much as blinked in their direction. I wasn’t gay.

But was I bi?

Something was up with me because I couldn’t deny that I was seriously attracted to this man. I’d been drawn to him since the day he’d come after me for not eating my burger with gusto. I liked his company, I liked his gruff yet kind manners, his melodic accent, and...his smile. I really fucking liked his smile.

I stared at him and damn, I couldn’t look away.

He stepped closer. “You are sure you’re okay?”

“Yep. I’m...” I sucked in a breath and licked my lips. “I’m...oh, fuck it.”

I grabbed a handful of his shirt, yanked him toward me, and fused my mouth over his.

Yeah, I kissed him.

I’d officially lost my mind. This was what happened when the threads of your carefully stitched world came apart at the seams—inhibitions flew out the proverbial window and the entire world went tits up. I could tell myself I was straight all day long, but obviously that wasn’t true ’cause this felt so damn good.

But Jean-Claude hesitated. *Shit*. This was about to go supernova awkward.

Not yet. Please, not yet.

I was about to pull away just as he cradled my face between his hands, backed me against the washing machine, and thrust his tongue into my mouth.

That spark and hum I'd felt earlier combusted into a full-blown blaze. Our tongues dueled for dominance, and I was totally okay with him winning. All I cared about was this kiss.

I pulled him closer and rested my hands on his hips as he caressed my jaw, sucked my bottom lip, and kissed me as though he'd been waiting for it his whole life.

We made out in a growing frenzy. Careful touches gave way to manic exploration...all above the waist. I wasn't brave enough to go south. My dick was an iron rod behind a thin polyester-blend layer, so yes, I was turned on and I assumed he felt the same way, but I'd never felt a man's erection. That might be too much.

Yet this fire burned hot and wild. It wasn't reasonable to think I could keep my cock out of the equation.

I tentatively raked my fingers along his sides and accidentally lifted his T-shirt up, exposing his stomach. Jean-Claude broke off with a sharp inhale and brushed his nose on mine.

He was going to say something, and that kind of freaked me out. I wasn't ready for words. I splayed my hands on his lower back, moved them to his ass, and kind-of-sort-of accidentally pulled him between my thighs.

"Oh, fuck. You're hard," I gasped, scraping our scruffy jaws and nipping his bottom lip.

He released a ragged half laugh. "Understatement."

"Me too," I whispered. "We should stop, right?"

"If you want to...yes."

I clutched his ass and rolled my hips, dragging my erection over his. "No, I—it feels amazing."

He moved his hands to cage me against the washing machine, pressing featherlight kisses down my neck. It was a tease after the mini grind session. I didn't hate it, though. In fact, I liked having him in control. He knew what to do here; I didn't. If ever there was a moment to take my hands off the wheel and let someone else do the driving, this was it.

We rutted, humping and thrusting like teenagers. I couldn't remember the last time I'd felt this unbridled and free with a... lover? No, that word didn't sound right in my head. I ignored it and gave my undivided attention to sucking face and wantonly writhing with the sexy chef.

Don't ask me how, but somewhere in my quest to lick his tonsils, Jean-Claude picked me up and hefted my ass onto the washing machine. That was a first. I was a big dude. It took real muscle to move me. Once again, I fucking loved it. Desire shot through me, firing every nerve ending in my body to life. I tugged his tee over his head, then splayed my palms on his bare chest, nipping his shoulders and the column of his throat.

"*Crisse*. You are fucking beautiful," he purred along with a string of French sweet nothings I couldn't translate.

Yeah, I'd never been called beautiful by a man either. I liked that too. I tilted my chin to the ceiling and let him feast on my neck. I let him take off my shirt and tongue-fuck my mouth while he tweaked my nipples. Need boiled and churned inside me as I reveled in his casual praise and rough hands. I was still desperate for friction, desperate for release. I groaned aloud when he flattened his palm over my throbbing cock.

"Oh, fuck."

He nipped my earlobe. "Okay...or no?"

"Yes. Touch me," I growled.

He curled his fingers around my length through the fabric barrier, and I kid you not, I almost came. My gaze flitted from his hand on my junk to his mouth and back again, willing him to do more. Anything. Touch me, suck me...I wasn't too proud to beg, but I wished he'd just read my mind.

"You want more."

I shivered greedily. “Yeah, I do.”

“Tell me what you want. Say it.”

“I don’t—I don’t know. This is good—oh, fuck.” I gasped as he tightened his grip and stroked me.

“Say it,” he commanded huskily, licking my jawline. “You want my hands on you, don’t you?”

“Yeah. Fuck, yeah.”

He tugged at the elastic on my joggers and briefs, wordlessly guiding me to lift my ass so he could shimmy the fabric down. My cock popped out on cue, swaying like a flagpole. This was new too. The kind of new that should have tripped internal sirens and warning bells. Not today.

It was just...hot.

Jean-Claude took me in hand, studying my dick as he swiped his thumb over the crown. I wondered what he was thinking and how I measured up. I’d never had any complaints, but I’d also never had a man fondle my balls, stroke my dick, or milk precum from my slit. It was good. So good. He leaned in to kiss me again, bold and dirty.

Stars twinkled in my periphery when he pulled away.

“Still okay?” he asked.

“Yes,” I squeaked. “I’m fine.”

“Good. Just enjoy.”

A sly smile tugged at his kiss-swollen lips as he bent his head and—

Oh, wow. Was he going to blow me? I’d be down with that for sure, but I wouldn’t last. I was on the edge right now, a telltale tingle tickling my spine. Just the thought of his mouth on me would be the end of me.

“Damn, I’m already too close,” I warned.

“Shh. Relax.”

Jean-Claude rested his forehead against mine, his lips hovering as he adjusted his grip on my cock, jacking me with

long, slow strokes. He licked the tip of his middle finger on his free hand and massaged the sensitive skin behind my sac before sliding it along my crease.

And holy shit, that was it for me. Cum jetted between us, spurting over his fist and hitting my chest. I dug my heels into his hamstrings and my fingernails into his biceps as I rode out wave after wave of pleasure.

“Oh, my God. That was...”

“Okay?”

I sputtered a laugh at the inadequate adjective. “Amazing.”

“*Bon.*” He smiled as he stepped aside and picked up a discarded towel from my laundry basket. “For cleanup, or do you want tissue?”

“No, that’s fine.” I wiped up the mess and dropped it to the floor with a chuckle. “I can’t believe we did that. I’ve never...”

“I know. You are straight, remember?”

I shoved his chest playfully and melted into a scorching kiss so powerful it came with a side of courage. I eased my thumb under his waistband. “You need some help?”

He captured my wrist, brought my fingers to his lips, and shook his head. “No, that was for you.”

“That doesn’t seem fair,” I said, unsure if I was relieved or worried I’d done something wrong. I didn’t know the rules here. I was so far out of my depth, it was almost funny.

“It’s perfectly fair.” He found our T-shirts and handed mine over.

We redressed in silence and headed upstairs to find the storm had weakened a bit. It was still raining, but the wind had died down and so far, no more lightning or thunder.

I plucked an umbrella from a hook in the foyer and met him on the front porch. “Take this.”

“*Merci and bonne nuit, Riley.*”

“Bonne nuit.”

Jean-Claude walked along the path to the sidewalk and made a production of opening the umbrella. I snickered like an idiot when he pretended to get blown away by a gust of wind, Mary Poppins style.

And then he was gone.

I crossed my arms, casually watching rain drip from the eaves as though the last two hours hadn't knocked my world off course and sent me reeling.

I had a strong notion I had more problems than a tuna salad sandwich could cure.

JEAN-CLAUDE

I *t's a miracle. No headache this morning.*

What kind of a message was this? I supposed it was positive to hear from Riley after last night, but I wasn't sure if this was a "Let's pretend that hand job never happened" text or a "Let's do it again" text.

What I did know was this...I'd made a terrible mistake. I was undeniably attracted to Riley, but I'd had no business acting on it. My lack of restraint puzzled me. He was lonely in an unfamiliar town and I was a foreigner, like him. Maybe he truly believed my tuna salad would aid his recovery, but he'd also been restless and adamant about wanting company last night. My company.

Perhaps he was just horny in his forced hiatus and I was available. I'd been with a few straight men who'd given in to their bi-curiosity when they were out of town for a night or a weekend. Some could tell themselves a hand job between men wasn't a big deal, and others were more adventurous. I understood better than most the psychological mind games necessary to allow oneself to surrender to desire.

Once upon a time, I'd been that curious "straight" man, desperately hoping one night was all I needed before I could go back to my normal hetero life. It had taken years for me to finally crack, and the aftermath was ugly. I regretted the hurt I'd caused. It wasn't fun to grapple with truth, but it was better than living a lie.

I didn't know if any of that applied to Riley, of course. Sometimes I wondered, though, if the Rileys of the world gravitated to me...as if they knew I understood the potent mix of fear and need and wouldn't judge, might even offer some sage advice.

Not likely.

Communicating nuances in English was difficult for me. It was easier to brush off misunderstandings and blame them on a language barrier than to admit I didn't know how to talk about my queer experience...the things I'd been through, the people I'd lost along the way.

No, it was better to stay in the kitchen, where expectations were simple. I cook, they eat.

I read Riley's text again and decided that joking about the healing effects of tuna salad was the safest option.

I'm glad you're feeling better, I replied.

Nolan burst into the kitchen before I could chastise myself for being a pussy. It was just as well. I needed a distraction, and Nolan was always a pleasant one.

He looked happy, well caffeinated, and if I were a crass individual, I might add, freshly fucked this morning. Good for him. The downside of befriending this particular ex was that I was familiar with his, um...how do you say it—post-sex glow?

“Bon matin.”

“Good morning, sunshine. And yes, the sun is shining. Could you believe that storm last night? It was nuts! My mom told me a few shingles blew off her roof last night. How'd you fare?” Nolan asked cheerfully.

“My shingles are fine.”

He chuckled. “Good to know, but that wasn't what I meant.”

“Ah, you were asking how the rain made me feel. Like psychology, eh? Well, Nolan, it made me feel wet,” I huffed sarcastically.

I could have added horny and that I'd taken care of that by giving his husband's friend a hand job and jerking off later at home, but...TMI? Perhaps a little.

No, I wasn't ashamed of what had happened between Riley and me, and it would have been nice to talk about it with someone I trusted and who knew me well. However, I couldn't say a word without outing Riley, and I would never do that. My feelings about the matter were best kept to myself. That hand job might have been a step on his road to sexual discovery or a "one time only, never to be repeated" fluke.

All I could offer was tuna and a friendly ear if Riley needed it. My hand was also available, because you know... horny.

"Oh, no. Did you get caught in the rain?" he asked.

"Something like that. Now, I have a menu to organize, so how can I help you?"

Nolan narrowed his eyes and tilted his head the way he did whenever he sensed a bigger story. It was very hard to hide anything from Nolan Moore. He was the most intuitive person I'd ever met, and though he might not press me for details now, he'd store the information in a secret compartment in his head and refer to it as evidence later. Just wait.

"Well..." He perched on a wooden stool in front of the butcher block island, shooting one last curious glance before continuing. "I just got off the phone with a woman from Pinecrest who wants to host her parents' fiftieth wedding anniversary here the second weekend in December. One hundred guests. It's two months from now so we'd have plenty of time to plan, but the holidays were good to us last year and I'd hate to disappoint anyone who was thinking of doing a smaller party on that date. We're only taking reservations one month out now, and it feels wrong to eliminate a popular day without giving notice, but...what do you think?"

Now this was one of the many reasons I'd fallen for Nolan. Okay, yes, he was boyishly handsome with dark hair, pretty eyes, and a sexy body. But he was also kind and thoughtful, and he was always looking out for the people he cared about.

To him, this was a serious debate between one family's happiness versus the many who'd potentially be disappointed if the date they'd hoped to host a holiday party was hijacked early.

I, on the other hand, was not sentimental. To me, it came down to math.

“Which makes more money?”

Nolan sighed. “The party, but—”

“We do the party.” I smiled at Nolan as I tucked my cell into my pocket and resumed reading my prep notes.

“It's not that simple, JC. This is the sort of thing that pisses folks off enough that they start going elsewhere for breakfast or drive into Fallbrook for dinner or—”

“Nolan. There're no good restaurants in Fallbrook. Don't worry.”

He raked his teeth over his bottom lip. “What if we hosted the party inside and opened the outdoor patio to the public? We could get one of those all-weather tents with heating lamps.”

“That might work, but if it was stormy like last night, the tents wouldn't be an option. We could do a waiting list for regular reservations or block the date until a week ahead of time. Even then, you never know with Mother Nature.”

“True.”

I listened with half an ear to his what-if scenarios. I appreciated that he sought my advice regarding the diner, but it frustrated me too. I hadn't brought up the subject of ownership in a year. That last discussion had been brief, and while not entirely negative, it hadn't gone my way. I wanted to become part owner of the diner. Period, end of sentence.

The problem was that Elmwood Diner had been in the Moore family for over a century. Nolan held an eighty percent share, and his mother had twenty percent. I understood that it was a legacy property, but I was partially responsible for its newfound success and I wanted in. I didn't have any

immediate plans to leave. I liked Elmwood. I liked the life I'd built here and the friends I'd met. This was home now.

However, I had to think of my career. I'd apprenticed in Michelin-starred kitchens in Quebec City and worked in the finest restaurants in Montreal. It was a feather in my cap to bring haute cuisine diner-style to a small US town, but...now what? I couldn't stay here forever as a glorified fancy fry cook. The logical next step was to open my own bistro.

Maybe Nolan would be interested in going in on a new venture, but I doubted Elmwood could support another upscale eatery, so we'd have to go elsewhere. Or...*I'd* have to go elsewhere. Pinecrest, Wood Hollow, Fallbrook...or perhaps it was time to think about moving back to a big city.

While Riley fretted over his future in the NHL, I mulled over a culinary career move. It didn't matter how old you were, how much experience you had, or the many accolades you'd collected over the years. Time moved faster than ever nowadays. Bigger names came out of the blue and became overnight sensations. You had to keep up or risk being a has-been as you hit middle age.

So yes...this was where my mind wandered. Riley, career moves, and...touching Riley's dick.

"You tuned me out, didn't you?" Nolan flicked the piece of paper in my hands.

I shot a wide-eyed innocent look his way and nodded. "Yes. But you were repeating yourself and I got bored. *Désolé.*"

"You're not sorry," he huffed.

"No, I've told you my thoughts. The option that puts more money in your bank account is better. It's business, Nol." And here was my opening. I pushed my notes aside and said, "Speaking of business—" just as Dierdre rushed into the kitchen.

"Oh, I'm sorry to interrupt, but Riley Thoreau is in the dining room asking for you," she reported eagerly.

"Me?" Nolan and I asked in unison.

“JC. Something about a container...maybe? My brain went fuzzy when he started talking. Gah, he’s so handsome.” Dierdre fanned herself theatrically. “He just ordered a cup of coffee at the counter. No breakfast.”

Nolan stood with a chuckle. “I can handle him for you. I’m heading to my office to catch up on paperwork and—”

“It’s okay. I will see him. I’ll be out in a minute.”

“Aye, aye, captain,” Dierdre saluted me and hurried back to her station, leaving me with a curious Nolan.

He nudged my elbow when we were alone again. “What were you going to say?”

“I forgot,” I lied. “I’m sure it will come to me.”

He didn’t seem to believe me, but he let it go. “Okay. See you later.”

I nodded and waited a few minutes, knowing Nolan would most likely stop to greet Riley before he went to his office. I couldn’t peek around the corner without being spotted, but I lucked out.

Riley sat by himself at the far end of the counter, tracing the rim of his cup and staring into space.

“No sunglasses today?” I commented. It seemed safer than complimenting his lovely eyes. Dierdre was right. He was so handsome.

Riley smiled. “I have them ready, just in case, but no headache so far.”

“I’m glad. Where’s the container?”

“Uh...I didn’t bring it. That was a ruse to talk to you about...” He darted his gaze to his left and right. “...you know.”

“Yes, well, it’s not a great time or place to talk about...you know,” I replied playfully.

“Yeah. I was hoping to catch you on a break. I should have texted, but—”

“It’s fine. I have time now. And if you have time, I can teach you how to make your own tuna fish salad. Come this way.”

“Wait. What?” He threw some money on the counter, nearly falling off his stool in his haste to follow me into the kitchen.

I ushered him toward my workspace and out of the way of the morning cook and his crew.

“Wash your hands,” I instructed, pointing at the sink. I grabbed a few ingredients from the industrial-sized refrigerator, set them on my island, and tossed a clean apron at him before washing my own hands.

“Am I allowed to be here?” Riley whispered.

“I am king here, so...yes. I allow it. Now, let’s discuss tuna fish.”

He wrinkled his nose in a way I could only describe as cute. “It’s barely ten a.m. and I already ate some of this stuff. It hits different when you’re supposed to be eating Cheerios, if you know what I mean.”

“It’s no good?”

“Not great,” he admitted with a laugh. “But that’s probably because I was craving an omelet or a stack of pancakes or—hey, should you be helping them?”

I glanced over at the melee on the other side of the kitchen where Jason, a young fry cook was griping about burned bacon.

“No. I’m king, remember? I’m invisible right now. I don’t work the morning shift other than to supervise an occasional special. They are a talented group. They know how to make eggs and bacon without me looking over their shoulders.”

“King Jean-Claude,” he snarked.

“You catch on quickly. Now...tuna is terrible in the morning. I tried to warn you.”

“And I appreciate that, but...” Riley lowered his voice as he stepped next to me behind the island, the apron bunched in his fist. “That isn’t why I’m here.”

“Riley, tuna salad is the only reason we have,” I said solemnly. “Last night shouldn’t have happened. If I’ve caused you confusion, I’m sorry. I don’t want to add to it by giving you—what are the things you say when you want to say something nice and supportive, but it sounds like a greeting card?”

“Platitudes?”

I snapped my fingers. “That’s it. I want to be honest, and I’m honestly apologetic that I did...what I did.”

“Jerk me off?”

“Yeah...that.”

“We didn’t do anything I didn’t want to do, asshole. So don’t act like you corrupted me with your magic fucking tuna fish. It’s good, but it’s not that good.”

I raised a brow. “*Blasphème.*”

Riley barked a laugh. “You’re so...weird.”

“And you’re the one eating tuna for breakfast,” I deadpanned.

“*Touché.*”

“*Hmm.* The way I see it is this...last night was good, but it can’t happen again. I gave up straight men who’re thinking gay thoughts many years ago. You’re on your own there. The good news is, you have queer friends here if you want to talk about bisexuality or whatever. I’m not that person. I am zee tuna salad person only. And the best way for me to support your um...healing process with the vitamins and omega compounds, etcetera, is to teach you how to make it yourself.” I picked up a can of dolphin-safe tuna and gestured at the label like a game-show model. “We begin with...the main ingredient. *Voilà!*”

“Oh, boy.” Riley rubbed his jaw and shrugged. “All right, fine. You win.”

I opened four cans and drained the water, explaining the difference between tuna canned in water versus brine while he rolled up the sleeves of his plaid button-down shirt and tied the apron around his slim waist. If I'd thought he was sexy before, he was positively delicious now.

Okay, maybe this was a bad idea. *Concentrate, concentrate.*

"Brine is salt water. I love salt, but it can be overpowering and we have to acknowledge that some people prefer low-sodium diets," I replied.

"You mean they're *on* low-sodium diets."

I rolled my eyes. "Whatever. We have the tuna, finely chopped red onion and celery, a bit of relish, garlic, salt and pepper, lemon juice, and of course, mayonnaise. After you drain the tuna, use a fork to separate it like so. You may finish the job while I measure the mayonnaise."

Riley jabbed and poked at the fish with the prongs instead of the side of the fork. There was no point in discouraging him, so I ignored his messy technique and gave him a thumbs-up when it was flaky but not quite mutilated.

"Now what?"

"Add the mayo." I passed the cup of mayo to him. "We are making enough for six healthy-sized sandwiches, so my recipe calls for one cup. This is a homemade mayo and it is literally my secret ingredient. You may substitute with store bought... and that is okay. Julia Child loved Hellmann's. Use that."

Riley grimaced. "Whoa. A cup? That's disgusting. And what do you mean homemade? Do people really make their own mayonnaise?"

"I hate to break this to you, Riley, but there is no such thing as a mayonnaise tree. It's a nice idea, though. I would love to plant one outside next to the herb garden and pluck jars off the branches whenever I need one, but sadly...they don't grow in Vermont. Or...anywhere."

He snickered. "You're a dick."

“I know. Now we continue. Add the—”

“Hang on. Why so much mayo? It isn’t good for you. Can we cut that in half?”

I stared at him until he burst into laughter. I had a hard time not joining in, and eventually I had to look away to hide my smile.

“Can we cut that in half?” I repeated. “Sure, Riley. Cut it in half and kill the flavor.”

“I thought salt added flavor.”

“So does fat. If you’re interested in a chemistry lesson... when fatty acids oxidize, they produce compounds that enrich —”

“Nope.” He waved dismissively and scooped the mayo in the bowl. “Not interested in the science part. Let’s carry on. What’s next?”

We added the sweet pickle relish, lemon juice, and garlic. Soon, it was time to chop. I had a feeling this would be the challenging part, and I was right.

“Please watch your fingers. I have a first-aid kit if necessary, but I’d rather not call the 9-1-1. That knife is very sharp,” I cautioned, hovering like a helicopter mom as he hacked a red onion into small slivers.

“How’s this?”

“Good.” It was terrible, but I was being nice and encouraging. See?

“Celery next?”

I nodded. “Cut it in half, then lengthwise into strips to make it manageable and—wait. What are you doing? Stop. Drop the knife. I’m calling the police.”

Riley snorted, his eyes alight with mischief and humor as he set the knife down and held his arms up in surrender. “What did I do?”

“You are murdering the celery. Murder.” I shook my head somberly and motioned for him to step aside. “Celery is good

for texture. It gives an extra crunch, but it must be diced thinly or it becomes a celery salad and a choking hazard. No one wants either. Am I right?”

He chuckled. “You’re right. So...that’s it?”

“Yes. Add salt and pepper to taste, stir, and refrigerate till you’re ready to enjoy. Simple.” I pulled out a to-go container and transferred the tuna salad, added a few slices of rye bread to a bag, and pushed it across the island to him. “You’re all set.”

“Thank you.” He untied the apron and draped it over a stool, casting a curious glance around the kitchen. “This is a cool space.”

I followed his gaze, trying to see the controlled chaos through someone else’s eyes. The area was divided into three main sections—food prep, cooking, and serving with a large storage and wine room and two commercial refrigerators. For breakfast, the fry cook generally only needed the cooking and serving areas, so the rest was my domain to prepare and plan for dinner.

To me, it looked like any other restaurant kitchen with its stainless steel appliances, wide islands with prep counters, and open shelving. The atmosphere was upbeat and fun with music playing and friendly chatter buzzing in the background in the mornings. I liked it to be more serious during the dinner hour when the diner transformed into a haute-cuisine establishment.

As Nolan’s head chef, I’d been personally responsible for overseeing the kitchen renovation, and perhaps that was why I liked it more than any other place I’d worked. It was mine. Well...sort of.

“Yes,” I agreed. “I like it. If you’re ready to go, I can let you out through the side exit.”

Riley tilted his chin and met me at the door. He moved outside, pushed his sunglasses on his nose, and snapped as if he’d just remembered something. “Shit. I forgot the tuna.”

“I’ll get it.”

I grabbed the bag from the island and stepped onto the porch. Riley had wandered along the hedged-in walkway toward the gate leading to the herb garden in the backyard. He paused when he saw me and removed his glasses, tucking them into his shirt collar, his gaze fixed on the package.

He grabbed the bag from me, set it on the ground, and shoved me against the wall, fusing his mouth to mine.

I was too shocked and dazed to respond immediately, but that didn't last. I cupped his neck and pulled him close before slipping my tongue between his lips. We moaned at the first glide and twist, picking up where we'd left off last night.

I nibbled his bottom lip as I gave in to temptation, allowing myself to touch and feel and fondle any part of him I could reach. He did the same. My hands were on his ass, his were in my hair. We sucked on tongues, swaying and pawing at each other as if in a trance.

A bark of laughter from behind the garden wall broke the spell. We jumped apart, panting like animals in heat.

Riley put his sunglasses on and bent to retrieve the bag. "Come over tonight."

"I work late."

"Doesn't matter. I'll be awake," he said.

No, no, no.

That was a bad idea. A terrible idea. An idea that didn't deserve a second thought. And there was only one acceptable reply.

"Okay."

Oops, that wasn't it.

Too late. Riley was gone...and apparently, so was my self-control.

RILEY

Jean-Claude showed up on my doorstep at midnight, wearing a dark jacket, black trousers, and a beanie. I'd joked that if he hadn't knocked, I might have mistaken him for a burglar. He'd smiled wanly at my silly attempt at humor and informed me that he'd stopped by on his way home from the diner to let me know that he couldn't come inside. It was best if we continued as friends only. His words, not mine.

I'd agreed because it had seemed like the correct response, then asked him about his evening and the special of the day. His eyes had lit up as he described a Quebecois dish called *tourtière* that he made with a twist. I'd said it sounded delicious and when he quipped that it was better than tuna salad, we'd chuckled.

But as our laughter had faded, it was replaced by a potent silence, so thick with desire, oxygen felt scarce. I'd sucked in a gulp of the crisp autumn night and waved good-bye, but at the last second, I'd grabbed his wrist and pulled him into the foyer, slamming the door shut.

We'd collided like magnets, bouncing off the wall and rattling picture frames as we'd stumbled into the living room and fallen onto the sofa with our mouths fused. We'd humped and grinded as our tongues dueled, separating long enough to peel off a few layers of clothing. But with Jean-Claude on top of me, caging my head between his arms as he licked my lips and pressed his erection against mine, I hadn't stood a chance.

Yeah, that was the night I came in my boxer briefs for the first time in nearly two decades.

We did a variation of the same thing the following evening, but skipped the initial coy “Are we really doing this?” song and dance.

The third night...same story. But by some miracle, we made it to my room and got mostly naked before we blew our loads.

Tonight was our fourth “sexy session.” We locked the door, shedding clothes like snake skin on our way upstairs. Naked horizontal writhing was kind of amazing, but it got even better.

It all started with curiosity and a vague sense of reciprocity. It just didn’t seem cool that he was doing all the work, and honestly, I wanted to see if I had the power to make him feel as good as he made me feel. Besides, his cock was right there, drooling precum on my shaft one second then nudging my balls. It was the perfect excuse to reach between us, adjust his angle and *boom*...I was holding his dick.

That was not a typo. Yep, I’d touched another man’s hard cock and I liked it.

A lot.

Jean-Claude rolled sideways to observe me as I took my first good look at his dick. Maybe I should have asked for guidance or a road map, and by unspoken agreement, we didn’t do much talking with our clothes off. Words were tricky, and one of us—okay, me—might accidentally use them to define this naked touchy-horny humping thing we were doing. No, thanks. I was a man of action.

I studied his cock, noting our differences. He was wider and a little longer than I was. I wasn’t small by any means, so let’s just say Jean-Claude was well-endowed. And get this...he had foreskin. I’d seen my share of flaccid penises in the locker room in all shapes and sizes, but never up close and personal...and hard.

It was an unexpected icebreaker.

“Your dick has a hoodie,” I commented, tentatively curling my fingers and rubbing my thumb around his crown.

“Yours is bald,” he countered. “He probably gets cold in winter.”

I snorted. “Don’t make me laugh. This isn’t supposed to be funny.”

“It’s not funny at all. It’s war.” Jean-Claude gripped his cock and tapped it against mine as if he wanted to instigate a juvenile game of swordplay. His serious expression cracked me up.

“Wow, this is another first for me.”

“You’ve never played in a cock fight?” he asked in mock surprise, his accent thicker than usual.

“No. Never.” I pushed his hand away and recaptured him, squeezing him, then tightening my hold.

“Ahhh.”

I bit my bottom lip, my brow furrowed in concentration. “Is that good?”

“It will be better when you move your hand.”

“Like this?” I jacked him slowly, applying more pressure while I pumped...up and down, up and down.

His nostrils flared. “Yes. We’ll do it together.”

My breath hitched as he closed his fist around me. So there we were...face-to-face, stroking each other with our feet entwined. We paused to kiss, messy and greedy, but we didn’t stop touching. I was in a perpetual mode of intense fascination. He looked so blissed out, and I was the one making him feel that way.

I’d been with many women, but I couldn’t remember ever being so invested in their pleasure, which was saying something ’cause I prided myself on making sure my partner was satisfied. This was different. Jean-Claude was a very masculine man. His strength and size excited me. I liked that he had more tattoos and chest hair and that he was undeniably

fit, though he obviously didn't shy away from carbs. All of those things made him more...real, more accessible.

"Am I doing this right?" I ghosted my thumb over his tip, stroking him to his base and up again.

"Yes. Keep going." He thrust his tongue into my mouth, mimicking my inexperienced motion with something so spine-tinglingly perfect I knew it would be the end of me.

"Fuck, I'm gonna come."

He whispered to me in French, nipping at my jaw as he milked every drop from me. I rolled to my back and stared up at the ceiling, blinking the stars from my eyes. *Holy shit*. That was incredible. How was it possible that he could do this to me?

I glanced over as if looking for the answer just as he licked his fingers. It was so nasty and so fucking sexy, my dick actually pulsed. It also reminded me I still had a job to do.

I rolled to face him and renewed my efforts. Jean-Claude closed his fist over mine and pumped a couple of times, coming apart in my hand. He shivered all over as cum dripped along my thumb. I let go when he did and started to wipe my thumb on the sheet, but at the last second, I licked it instead. I didn't think twice. I just...did it.

Jean-Claude chuckled as he sat up and pulled tissues from the box we'd moved to my bedside last night. "Delicious, yes?"

"Salty."

"Are you suggesting I'm high in sodium?" he teased, passing a couple of tissues over.

"If the shoe fits and all that." I cleaned up and pulled the sheet over us. "I kind of can't believe I did that. That was a double first for me. Touch and taste."

"Soon, you'll beg to suck my dick, and for science...I will say yes."

"Science?"

“Yes, you’re obviously running an experiment on me, and I’m obviously okay with it,” he replied, reaching for the duvet and settling it over us. “It’s a little cooler tonight. Give me a moment to warm up before I go.”

I didn’t think twice about him cuddling closer. Sure, it was more intimate than we usually allowed ourselves to get, but he was right. The temperature had dropped over the past few days, and it truly felt like autumn. This was nice.

However, I took exception to the notion that I was experimenting.

“I’m not using you,” I blurted. “I don’t know what else to call this, but it’s not a science thing.”

Jean-Claude quirked a funny half grin. “I don’t care what you want to call it. I like sex and I like you. It’s simple.”

“I’m glad it’s simple for someone,” I huffed. “Trust me, this isn’t where I thought I’d be a few weeks ago.”

He set his hand over mine and squeezed it. “I know, but look at you...making the best of a bad situation.”

I snickered. “Something like that. I have to wonder why you bother with me. I’m a head case—a not-so-straight wounded visitor who has no idea what he’s doing in bed. This can’t be what you’re used to.”

“I’m used to being alone, Riley. I don’t think about the rest. It feels good, and we’re adults who know how to be discreet, and we won’t develop false expectations. So yes... that’s simple. You have my permission to experiment all you want on me.” He flung the cover off and gestured to his flaccid dick.

“Asshole. It’s cold,” I grumbled, fumbling for the covers.

“No one would believe we’re Canadians, complaining about the weather. This is nice where I’m from.”

“I’m only part Canadian. My mom was born in Ottawa, and my dad’s from Rochester...where my sister lives.”

Jean-Claude tilted his head curiously. “I thought you were from Toronto.”

“That’s what my bio says. I was born there, but my family moved to my dad’s hometown in Upstate New York when I was a baby. My dad got a new job in Toronto soon after my last year of high school, and I went with them. My sister, Tara, stayed, though. She and Martin were already a couple and she’s four years older than me, so...I understood, but I was bummed.”

“Why? Toronto is great, and you had hockey.”

“Yeah, but I was seventeen and not naturally gregarious. Making new friends seemed like a chore. Even with hockey. I’ll tell you a secret. I was a late bloomer, and I didn’t become a good player till that move back to Canada. I think I just needed something to keep my head together. When I was on the ice, I didn’t have time to be angry at my folks for dragging me from my friends or to worry about college or...anything.”

He caressed my hip under the covers soothingly. “I understand that. How old were you when you were drafted?”

“Twenty. I couldn’t believe my luck, but then again, I’d spent those three years working my ass off. I became the best benchwarmer in the NHL for four straight seasons. I only got ice time when the game was pretty much in the bag, but when I was traded to the Sharks, things started to change for me. They had a few injuries, and they needed able bodies on the ice.”

“So you got your shot,” he commented, still massaging my hip. Damn, that felt nice.

“Yeah. And another the next game and the one after that. I wasn’t a standout, but I was getting regular playing time, and that made a difference. I could relax and get in a groove and play to win instead of worrying I’d make a mistake and get benched. It helped. I played great hockey in San Jose and I wanted to stay, but...”

“You were traded to Seattle,” Jean-Claude finished.

I nodded. “Six years ago. I wasn’t happy about that trade, but it turned out to be the best thing that ever happened to me.”

“Your team is terrible, and it rains every day in Seattle. What’s so good about this?”

I punched his biceps lightly. “It doesn’t rain *every* day, and it’s a great city. Besides, the Slammers have a loyal fan base, great owners, and I love my teammates.”

“Okay, maybe it’s not so bad.”

“No, and the few years I played with Vinnie changed my game. I wouldn’t be team captain if it weren’t for him. The guy was a human wrecking ball. He cleared paths on the ice that made me look like a superstar on day one. No kidding. I scored a hat trick the first night we played together. He wanted me on his line after that—and what Vinnie wanted, Vinnie got. We didn’t sniff the Stanley Cup, but we all improved. Unfortunately, it hasn’t gone all that well since he retired. That’s on me.”

Jean-Claude furrowed his brow. “If I remember correctly, hockey is a team sport. How can it be your fault if your team doesn’t make the playoffs?”

“I’m the leader. But I’m not so good at leading. Fuck, I should be on the bench now, cheering my guys on and supporting them, but I’m not even allowed near the ice. I’m like some fragile fucking flower.”

“Who eats a lot of tuna.”

I snorted. “Yeah. I’m down to one sandwich a day, though.”

“Ah, improvement! Your headaches are gone?”

“No, but they’re less intense. I’m still supersensitive to light, and the doctor doesn’t like that. I’m supposed to go to Burlington for a brain scan to get my occipital lobe checked again. I’m hoping like hell the swelling has gone away. I’ve done everything the medical professionals have advised and then some. I don’t know what else I can do to speed my recovery along.”

“Rest,” he said simply.

“Easy to say, but every day I’m not on the ice is a day I’m not proving myself, and I’m running out of time. Everyone assumes I’m retiring, including my coach. No one is pushing for me to hurry back to Seattle. They just assume I’m done, and this is not the way I want to end my career. Maybe I was never destined to go out in a blaze of glory, but to be sidelined by a concussion and fade my way to obscurity is just... depressing.”

“It’s early in the season and—”

“It’s November. I’ve been in Elmwood for three weeks, which means I haven’t been on skates in four weeks. Watching games on television is killing me too. And I’m watching with sunglasses on to avoid the glare so...wow.” I heaved a sigh and melted dramatically onto the pillow. “And now this...us. I haven’t really processed what it means that I’m naked in bed with a man. That’s pretty gay, so I’m probably bisexual. I should have freaked out and booked the next flight home already, but I have to tell you, this ‘experiment’ as you called it, is keeping me sane. When I’m with you like this, I’m living in the moment. I’m not worried about the rest of the year or where I’ll be next season. I’m here.”

He grinned. “Good.”

I gazed at the ceiling to hide my certain blush. “Yeah. That was a few hundred more words than I planned on saying on that subject, but I don’t want you to think I’m using you. It’s not my intention. I like you and I’m attracted to you and I don’t fully understand it, but...that’s all right. In fact, it’s the one uncertainty I’m totally okay with.”

Jean-Claude traced my jaw with his forefinger, rubbing his thumb along my chin. “Me too. I like you and I’m attracted to you. Unlike you, I know the reasons. It’s because you are very hot and you have a beautiful cock and...a very sexy ass.”

I burst out laughing. “You like my ass?”

He nodded slowly, a lecherous half smile teasing the corner of his mouth. “Very much. It’s perfectly round and muscular. Let me see it.”

“Right now?”

“Yes, right now. Lie on your stomach.” He gestured impatiently for me to obey. “Good boy.”

“Don’t call me that,” I growled into the pillow, wincing when he smacked my ass hard enough to leave a handprint a moment later. “Ow!”

Jean-Claude smoothed his palm over each cheek, pinching and squeezing my butt, and grazing his fingers in between my crack. Now, come on. If anything was going to snap me out of this queer phase I’d stumbled upon, that would surely be it.

But no.

His featherlight touch ignited a spark deep inside me. I closed my eyes and willed myself to relax and enjoy. I sank into the sensation, parting my thighs slightly as he massaged and explored. Within a few minutes, I was hard again and humping the mattress for friction while trying not to be too obvious about it. Impossible. He straddled me, resting his erection between my cheeks, then pulling them apart and rocking his hips suggestively.

Jean-Claude covered me like a blanket, molding his chest to my back and licking the shell of my ear. “This is very gay.”

“Mmm...yes.”

“Should I stop?”

“No, don’t stop. I mean, don’t try to fuck me, but...don’t stop. This feels good,” I moaned.

He lifted himself above me and slid down my body. “I can make it even better.”

I missed the weight of him immediately, but before I could protest, he rubbed his beard over my ass, parted my cheeks, and licked my hole.

I bucked in surprise. “Holy shit. What are you doing?”

“This is called rimming. It’s also very gay, although I think straight people like it too. Maybe you did this with a girlfriend. Don’t tell me. I’ll get jealous.”

I couldn't string a coherent sentence together to save my life. I'd never been with a woman who wanted this, and I had no clue how amazing it felt. But as he helped me to my knees and urged me to hold on, I silently acknowledged that I wouldn't have wanted to do this with anyone but Jean-Claude. There was something about being fucking owned and dominated by someone physically imposing yet so...gentle.

Christ, the things he did to me. My knuckles were white as I clutched the wooden slat on the headboard and gave in to pleasure. He took me apart, licking me as if I were his favorite flavor of ice cream. My dick was rock hard, dripping precum on the pillow underneath me. I tried to dip my hips in a quest for friction, but he smacked my ass and anchored me in place. In the back of my mind, I wondered why I didn't push him away. This was some kind of pleasure torture, and I wasn't into that.

Except, I was. His rough hands and talented tongue kept me grounded. And when he reached between my thighs to stroke me as he pressed a single digit into my hole, I was a goner. There was no point in denying that I wanted this. I would have taken anything he offered just then. His cock in my ass...sure, why not?

I came down from a satisfied high in bits and pieces, unwrapping my fingers from the headboard and easing my body onto the mattress and into his arms.

And check this out: I fell asleep on his chest. No shit.

I woke in the middle of the night, squinting at the sound of rustling in the dark. "You're leaving."

Jean-Claude moved to my side of the bed and planted a chaste kiss on my forehead. "It's almost dawn. I fell asleep, but don't worry. If anyone sees me, I was making an emergency tuna salad delivery. That's my story, and I will stick to it."

I chuckled and pulled him close for a proper kiss. He told me to go to sleep and I did, but damn, I missed him in the morning.

“WE RECEIVED your recent MRI report this morning. Occipital neuralgia.”

I sighed, adjusting my earbuds as I settled onto the chaise end of the basement sectional. “Yeah, but we already knew that. It’s a pretty common sports injury.”

“I know what it is,” Coach Marsden replied. “And I know that the visual distortion and partial blindness is most likely temporary, but it’s not going away anytime soon if you don’t take care of it. Avoid bright lights, avoid extensive exercise... and you should be seeing a masseuse too. Did that doctor give you a nerve block shot?”

“Yeah. I’m following protocol, checking in with the local doc, wearing sunglasses everywhere, and I’m trying to stay in shape without overdoing it. Vinnie has a skating treadmill at the new sports facility he opened. I’m using it regularly since I’ve been told to stay out of the rink, which sucks, but...look, it’s been a month and I know this isn’t ideal—”

“Don’t be stupid,” he intercepted. “I want you healthy, Trunk. You can’t rush it, and there’s no point in trying to ’cause you’re not getting on my ice until you’re cleared by the professionals. If it takes another month, so be it.”

Icy dread trickled through my veins. Another month would be the holidays, and if this went the way I suspected it might, I wouldn’t see any real ice time till late January or February. I’d be rusty and slow, and—fuck, my career would definitely end the way it began...on the bench.

“It won’t take a month,” I bluffed. “The headaches are almost gone and my vision is clearer.”

“Just concentrate on getting better. That’s your only job for now. We miss you, but we’re hangin’ in there. Did you see the game last night?”

“Yeah, it was a good win.”

He whistled, then launched into the finer points of the third-period game-winning goal Childress had scored on a power play.

I hummed and grunted on cue while my guts twisted and wrung themselves out internally. Hey, I could read between the lines as well as anyone. Coach Marsden didn't have a lot of time to spare, so the fact that he'd personally made this call and didn't seem to be in a hurry to end it was a positive sign. It was his way of letting me know he was rooting for me.

However, he wasn't the type to make empty promises. He couldn't give me what I wanted—a guarantee that my role on the team hadn't been compromised by my injury. I supposed I needed a magic crystal ball for that.

LATER THAT AFTERNOON, I was still stewing over Coach Marsden's phone call. He'd been upbeat and generally positive, but that might have been due to eking out a clutch win against Vegas. I'd been touching base with most of my team before and after each game like a good captain, but I was kidding myself if I thought those rah-rah conversations were enough to keep me in the loop. I felt like an outsider, and I hated it.

I also sucked at reading context. I kind of hoped Vinnie could offer an unbiased opinion. He'd played for Coach Marsden, and he knew most of the guys on the roster. Plus, he had the advantage of being a couple of years removed from the league, so he might have a fresh perspective.

Vinnie wasn't my first choice for a sounding board, though.

I glanced at the diner as I walked the few blocks from Main Street to Elmwood Rink, kicking dried leaves in autumnal shades of orange on the pavement. Jean-Claude was busy preparing for a large party, and I didn't want to disturb him. I hadn't stopped by for a meal in almost two weeks. I

didn't need to. I had a special midnight delivery with complimentary sexy extras.

I was glad we'd decided not to deny we were friends during daylight hours too. That would have been difficult in a place this small. We'd had coffee together at Rise and Grind at least twice over the past week and had met up at the gym for a light workout on Jean-Claude's day off.

However, we made sure no one was around when I let him in through the side door for an afternoon quickie. And damn, just thinking about the things we did made me feel gooey inside.

Shit. I had to tone that down, or Vinnie would want to know what was up with me. Explaining why I was grinning like a fool while worrying about my professional future would be awkward.

I nudged my sunglasses to the bridge of my nose as I approached the reception desk.

"Hi, there. Vinnie's expecting me. Would you tell him—"

"Oh, my God, yes. Of course! I'm Erica and I'm a big fan." She practically levitated as she jumped from her chair and round the desk.

I shook her hand and smiled. "Thank you. It's nice to meet you."

"Well, we kind of met last summer, but it was total chaos. We'd never seen so many hockey stars in Elmwood. It was wild and so cool. I have to admit, I wasn't really a Slammers fan until I saw you all with the kids. You especially. You were so sweet to my little brother. He's still talking about you!"

My smile probably looked ridiculous by now. She had no idea how badly I needed to hear some positive affirmation.

"Thank you. It was a lot of fun. I hope to be back next summer too."

Erica beamed. "Yay! That's awesome! Come with me. I'll take you inside."

Elmwood Rink had gone through a major renovation before the official kickoff of the summer camp. I hadn't seen the original, but according to Vinnie, the new and improved version featured a remodeled lobby with vaulted ceilings, state-of-the-art locker rooms, fresh boards and plexiglass around the perimeter, a high-tech scoreboard, and shiny new stadium seating. It was on par with some of the nicer college facilities in the area.

I thanked Erica when she opened the main entrance door and instantly got that jittery, happy buzz I always did at the first blast of refrigerated air and artificial ice. I sucked in a deep breath, instinctively narrowing my eyes behind my sunglasses in deference to the overhead lighting. But it was surprisingly dim inside.

I lowered my sunglasses slowly as Vinnie approached. "For me?"

He pulled me in for a bro hug and nodded. "Yeah, it's almost romantic in here, dude. Don't get the wrong idea, though. I'm a married man."

"Ha. Ha. Well...thanks. I think I can actually take these off in here."

I hooked my glasses on my collar and focused on the west side of the rink, carefully pulling my gaze from the rows of stadium seats to the edge of the ice. My eyes didn't water, and my head didn't immediately feel like it was going to explode.

"I can dim them a bit more if you want," Vinnie offered.

"No, I think it's okay." I scanned the neutral zone, center ice, the penalty benches, the scorekeeper's bench, and finally...the opposite goal. I set my hands on my hips and grinned. "Damn, I could play in this light. I could—"

"Whoa." He grabbed my elbow before I got anywhere. "Give me the full report, Trunk. I can't be responsible for impeding a pro hockey player's recovery. Spill it. What'd the doc say?"

I filled him in on the doctor's concerns, the MRI, and my call with Coach. "I'm on the mend. This isn't rocket science.

I'm just dealing with the remnants of a severe concussion, and no one likes that it's still fucking with my vision. Especially me."

"I bet." He patted my shoulder sympathetically and hiked a thumb at the rink behind me. "I hate sounding like a wienie, but I checked in with one of the team physicians to be sure this wasn't a completely stupid idea. He basically said that if you can skate in near dark...you can skate. Marsden agreed, but he doesn't want you going overboard."

"You talked to Coach?" I asked incredulously.

"He called after he spoke to you. Coach wants to help. He knows you're anxious to get back on the ice, and he knows I've built a damn fine sports facility here and a sweet rink. There's no harm in getting on the ice...as long as the lights are low and you don't go too hard too fast. The ice treadmill at the gym is all well and good, but you need the real deal."

I glanced longingly toward the rink and inclined my head. "You have no idea. I don't have my skates with me, but I can get them and—"

"No need. You're at a real rink, man. We have rentals, and the cool thing about knowing one of the owners is I can hook you up with the least sweaty gross ones on the shelf." He clapped enthusiastically and motioned for me to follow. "We don't have a ton of time. The juniors have practice in half an hour and there's a Pee Wee game afterward, but for thirty minutes, you've got the place to yourself."

I rubbed my hands together, grinning like a kid on Christmas morning. "I'm ready."

I laced the rental skates and raced to the edge of the rink, feeling oddly emotional at the first slice of borrowed blades on smooth ice. I sensed Vin's eyes on me as I looped around the perimeter, taking it nice and easy and slowly upping my pace, imagining a stick in my hand and a puck just out of reach.

This reminded me of learning to skate when I was five or six, watching older kids play at the frozen lake near my grandparents' house. They were probably only twelve or

thirteen, but they'd seemed like gods to me. Later, after they'd gone home, I'd strapped on skates my grandfather found in the garage and raced onto the ice like I owned it. I'd fallen flat on my ass time after time, but eventually, I matched the streaks the older boys left behind on wobbly knees with a phantom stick in my hand, chasing a ghostly puck.

My grandfather had watched in amusement, a broad smile on his face. He'd cheered me on, his cheeks pink from the cold. I remembered him saying dinner would be ready soon and they'd be looking for us, but we stayed until the evening cast long shadows...something like this.

As much as I'd grown to love the bright lights, the fans, and the frenzy, this felt healing somehow.

I increased my speed, right foot over left, leaning hard into each turn lap after lap. I skated backward, flipped forward, changing directions at whim as I rocketed imaginary pucks out of my way with my imaginary stick. In my head, I scored twenty goals, the fans were chanting my name as my teammates leaped over the wall to celebrate my triumphant return. Reality: I careened to a stop at center ice, bent over with my hands on my knees, gasping for breath as I blinked tears from my eyes and sent up a jumbled prayer of, "Please. Please. Please."

Please what? I didn't know.

Please, don't take this away from me? Please, let me see clearly again?

My grandfather popped into my subconscious out of the blue. He used to caution my sister and me from making greedy requests to the heavens as if we were making holiday wish lists every day of the week. "Gratitude first. Ask for help in finding your path."

I had no idea what the hell he'd meant back then, but now...fuck, it was worth a shot. "Please, show me the way," I whispered.

"Hey, you looked good there," Vinnie called out, skating toward me. "How d'ya feel?"

“Great.” I stood and bumped his fist, waving at Nolan, who was busy dropping orange cones on the blue line. “Thank you for this. It’s...exactly what I needed.”

“I’ll skate with you next time. We’ll get Nol to show his moves too,” he said as Nolan joined us.

“My moves?” Nolan rolled his eyes. “I don’t know if I have any of those anymore, but count me in.”

Vinnie flashed an adoring gaze at Nolan and kissed his temple. “You definitely have moves. Almost as good as mine.”

I shamelessly stared, noting the subtle ways they seemed connected even when they weren’t touching. Every glance carried weight, every smile held a little something extra. I hadn’t been around many same-sex couples. Honestly, Vinnie and Nolan were my first real reference, and they made it look easy. It never felt strange to be with them. They just...fit.

Nolan nudged Vin’s ribs. “Right. We can get a few other guys too...just say the word. The juniors would kill to shoot with you.”

“They’d either try to show off, or they’d be useless with hero worship,” Vinnie scoffed.

“True. But we have other options. Like...” Nolan snapped his fingers. “JC. You’re friends, right? I mean, I’ve seen you at the coffee shop together, so I assumed—”

“Yeah, we’re friends,” I intercepted abruptly. “Um...he’s a nice guy.”

Nolan nodded. “And he’s actually a pretty good hockey player.”

Vinnie’s brows shot to his hairline. “He is?”

“Yeah, he played in the minors for Quebec for a few years.”

“What?” Vinnie gaped. “Are you serious? Why didn’t I know that?”

Why didn’t I know that?

“I don’t know. It was a long time ago.” Nolan nodded a greeting to someone behind us. “The kids are trickling in. Let’s get ready, Coach. Good to see you, Trunk.”

“You too. And thanks for the ice time. I needed it.”

“Let’s do it again tomorrow, man.”

I bumped Vinnie’s fist and skated to the bench, my head buzzing in twenty directions at once and every thought was about Jean-Claude. Not the wonder of being on ice for the first time in a month or my religious moment, or my admiration of Vinnie and Nolan and the life they’d made here.

Nope.

My secret male lover was a former pro hockey player.
What the actual fuck?

JEAN-CLAUDE

“It was a long time ago. Chop a little finer. Like this.”

Riley narrowed his eyes as he set his knife down. “You don’t want to talk about it?”

“No, I want to make zee soup. We’re almost finished. Just zee carrots to add and zee spices, and voilà.” *Calisse*. My zees were out of control. Any second now, I’d forget how to speak English, and that would be an awkward end to what had started out as a very nice evening.

I’d stopped by Riley’s house on my way home from the diner. I brought him the chicken cordon bleu I’d made for the party and ingredients to make a soup tomorrow, but we’d come together in our usual frenzy and the food had taken a back seat to immediate sexual gratification.

Greedy kisses had led to furtive grinding, and hurried unbuttoning and unzipping. The next thing I knew, his mouth was on my cock. And that was new. Riley had never given a blowjob in his life. Yet he’d dropped to his knees without hesitation. He’d breathed me in, stroking me experimentally with his lips hovering at the tip. Then, oh so very slowly, he’d licked a path along my shaft, opened wide, and swallowed as much as he could.

My eyeballs had rolled in my skull as he’d worked some kind of magic on me. He’d been tentative yet determined, as if he’d given this some thought and decided tonight was the night he’d burst his blowjob cherry. Who was I to argue?

I'd leaned against the counter with my trousers and briefs around my ankles, my fingers sliding through Riley's hair as he'd pleased me. He was good. So very good. His gaze had flitted to mine as though he'd needed my praise and that was enough to summon a powerful orgasm. I'd pulled away to finish myself off and ordered him to do the same. He'd obeyed, but his mouth was still too close. I couldn't hold back, and he wouldn't move, so...I'd painted his lips and his chin, shivering when he came a moment later.

He'd sat on his heels, chest heaving and a bewildered expression on his gorgeous face, and said something completely odd and adorable, like, "Why did I wait so long to do that? That was fucking amazing."

Yes, it was. My knees still felt weak from that orgasm.

I'd had visions of sharing chicken cordon bleu with a glass of Pinot Blanc before making our way upstairs to shower, falling in bed naked, and doing a little BJ reciprocation...until he'd asked why I hadn't told him that once upon a time I'd played hockey.

Now that was a tough one.

Suddenly, making soup had seemed like a good idea. I'd set him up with a knife and the vegetables I thought he'd do the least amount of damage to, and given a soliloquy on the perfect way to julienne basil. In other words, I'd ruined the evening.

I didn't know how to fix it without tearing bandages off old wounds and showing scars I'd never wanted anyone to see. Especially not Riley.

"Can I ask what position you played?"

I gave a quick sideways glance. "Defense."

"I thought so. You're a big dude."

"Yes." I pointed at the neglected carrots on his cutting board. "Are you going to finish those?"

"Nope. My eyes are tired and *I'm* tired." He slinked around me and stole my wine, taking a generous sip. "Also..."

it's almost eleven o'clock, and I don't want to make soup. I don't think you do either."

"Of course, I do," I bluffed. "I love soup."

"*Hmm*. Look, if I hit a nerve, I apologize. You don't owe me an explanation. I'm curious, that's all. If you ever feel like talking about it, I'm all ears."

"All ears. Odd statement, but okay, I'll let you know," I conceded, aimlessly stirring the vegetables and broth with my head down.

The ensuing silence echoed uncomfortably. I couldn't tell if I hated that I was the cause or that I was irrationally irritated at him for asking about my life. Definitely the latter. The last person I'd shared any part of my past with was Nolan. We were friends and work associates now, so I had no regrets there, but Riley...I didn't know what we were.

"How was the party?"

"How is your head?"

We spoke at the same time.

I chuckled ruefully, adjusted the heat to a simmer, and stepped away from the stove, leaning against the counter with my arms crossed in a decidedly defensive stance. I couldn't seem to relax, but I offered a small smile as if to let him know I was trying.

"The party went well, but I was in the kitchen, so what do I know? Tell me about your day."

"I skated today."

"Really?"

"Yeah. First time on the ice in so long, I could have fuckin' cried. It was...amazing."

I grinned. "This is good. And your head is okay?"

Riley tapped his temple and gave a thumbs-up. "Yep. I think being on the ice helped. Kimbo kept the lights dim and maybe it's partially psychosomatic, but I never stopped to think it might be bad for me. I felt...free out there. No stick,

no puck, just ice. My mind cleared and the thoughts that popped up were sweet memories of hanging out with my grandfather and that low rumble that vibrates through my whole body when the crowd goes wild. I made up plays in my mind...Xs and Os, and drilled shots with my imaginary stick like I did when I was a kid. I can't wait to do it again. It was cathartic...like the best medicine ever."

I arched a brow. "Better than a blowjob?"

He lowered his chin, blushing adorably when he met my gaze. "How'd I do earlier? Okay for a first effort?"

My heart lurched and swelled in my chest. Something about this warrior of a man captivated me. He was vulnerable yet fierce and proud at the same time. And I was humbled that he'd let his guard down and revealed this side of himself to me. Yes, it was probably all tied to sex and superstitious tuna salads, but...it was there. This fragile offering of personal truths.

Et moi? I'd given nothing in return. In my defense, I hadn't known he wanted more from me.

I dropped my arms and tugged at his wrist, pulling him to me till we stood chest to chest. "You are *magnifique*."

Riley beamed, boyishly bashful and sexier than ever. "I can't believe I did that, but...I liked it."

I ran my fingers along his side and brushed our noses before pressing a light kiss at the corner of his mouth. "Me too. Were you buttering me up to get information out of me?"

He punched my biceps, glowering as he pushed out of my hold. "Fuck you, but...maybe."

That made me laugh. "Maybe?"

"I mean, I wasn't consciously thinking that was some kind of warped trade, but...*subconsciously* maybe. I don't know. I was curious." He threw his hands in the air and sighed. "Sorry. I don't know how to talk to people about real things. It's a major fault of mine. No wonder I'm always single. The second a woman wants to share deep secrets and get 'real' with me, I duck for cover. I don't have a good reason. No trauma, no dark

past. I have an amazing family, I love my job, but I always feel like I'm on the outside looking in. That's on me. Maybe I'm broken."

"Don't say that," I scolded.

"Too dramatic, huh? I swear I'm not looking for sympathy. My mild case of social anxiety isn't exactly noteworthy. It's too hard to explain to anyone, so I rarely try, and—" He paused abruptly and scratched his head. "I don't know where I was going with that."

"You subconsciously seduced me by giving your first ever blowjob to extract information from me. And maybe you're shy too," I added the last sentence in a dry voice I hoped would make him smile.

Ahh! There it was. That beautiful moonbeam, ear-to-ear grin that made his lovely eyes twinkle.

"I'm not shy, asshole," he sputtered, still chuckling. "I'm just...not great with people."

"I disagree." I pursed my lips thoughtfully and blurted, "I was drafted when I was eighteen. It was a one-way contract. I was never going to the NHL, but I had a decent ten-year run, then...poof! It was gone."

"Were you injured?"

"No, I was gay."

Riley froze. "You were kicked off your team for being gay?"

"No, I left on my own."

"Why? What happened?"

"I didn't want to pretend anymore. It's difficult to explain, but I had a very different life in those days. I was a party person. Always out, always drinking, always looking for a good time. I had many girlfriends, many lovers. But when I wasn't on the ice, in a bar, or in bed with a woman, I was thinking about things I didn't want to think about, like...the sexy valet at a random restaurant or the muscular man at the gym who pumped weights with his shirt off. All the time. I

played harder, drank more, and had more sex to keep the desire away. Didn't work. I was twenty-five before I gave in to temptation and stepped foot into a small gay bar in Vancouver. My team was in town for a game, and when I didn't show up to the nightclub, I'm sure they assumed I was with someone. Nothing happened at this bar. I only watched the men dancing, laughing, kissing. It was...*une revelation*."

"You realized you were gay?"

I gave a humorless half chuckle. "You could say that. The problem was...I didn't want to be gay. My family is very Catholic. The roles are set. The men are masculine and tough. The Bouchards are fifth-generation loggers. I was given a hall pass to play hockey, but everyone assumed I'd come home to help run the family business. That was my calling. I stubbornly clung to my straightness for three more years. I even got engaged."

Riley bugged his eyes out. "To a woman?"

"Yes, to a woman. Such a *calamité*." I swiped my hand through my hair and opened my arms in a theatric show of despair. "Her name was Marguerite. She was pretty, blond, *petit*, and best of all, she laughed at all my jokes. The sex was nice. Not great, but nice. Two months before the wedding, I had what I think is called a total meltdown. I hurt my knee and was benched for a few games. No big deal...it happens. But painkillers and alcohol don't mix well. I crashed my truck into a ditch in the middle of nowhere Quebec on a stormy night."

"In October?" he guessed.

"*Oui*. Although, the camping story about the tent and the lightning is true also," I confirmed. "Anyway, I was alone, hurt, and I could have hurt someone else. I could have hurt a lot of people. I thought to myself, 'Oh, you got lucky,' but I was still planning to hurt someone, right? I was going to marry a woman I didn't love. There were formal invitations for friends and family to witness this mistake in the making. For the first time, I realized my secret would cause real pain. So... I blew it all up. Everything. I called off the wedding, quit the

team, went home, came out to my family, who by the way, still think I might have been hit one too many times on the head.”

“Are you close to them, or did coming out change things?”

“They’re good people. They love me and accept me, but I confuse them.” I shrugged and continued, “Not in a bad way. I simply took a new path and started over far from home. *C’est la vie*. Now here I am. Maybe they’ll visit me someday. We shall see.”

His expression was comically endearing—a funny combination of awe and perhaps admiration. “Jesus, you’ve lived like three lives in forty years.”

“Sometimes it feels that way,” I admitted with a sigh. “The hockey years weren’t honest years. Looking back now, I know I was young and lost. I gave up the parts that were bad for me—too much drinking, partying, and women—and I took an interest in food. How to prepare it, how to enhance flavors, how to make something for others to enjoy. Also...I started dating men. And you know what happened, Riley Thoreau?”

He stood beside me and leaned against the counter, so close our shoulders touched. “What?”

“I became a happier man. Now, I’ve been told I’m a little too cranky sometimes, but that’s because I don’t like stupid very much—stupid people, stupid rules, stupid socks...”

“Stupid socks?” He laughed.

“Don’t get me started. The point is...I’m not proud of the man I was fifteen years ago. Maybe I should have brought up hockey, but now you know why I didn’t lead with that bit of information.”

Riley nudged my elbow, then kissed my right biceps. “God, I think you’re really fucking cool.”

I snorted. “Yes? I tell you that terrible story, and you like me more?”

“Yeah, I do.”

I hooked my arm around him and squeezed. “And I think you are...*incroyable*—lovely on the inside and out. You

shouldn't apologize for being exactly who you are. You might be injured, but you are not broken. Not even a little."

He closed his eyes and cuddled close, burying his nose in my neck. I raked soothing fingers through his hair, muttering sweet nothings in French as I pulled him into a warm embrace. Our kisses were lazy and unhurried.

We parted with shy smiles and held hands for a moment before tidying the kitchen and locking up for the night. I showered while he brushed his teeth, sharing pieces of his day over the sound of the spray. He didn't talk about hockey, though. He told me about Ivan's latte art *du jour*...triple hearts that resembled an atomic bomb. He raved about the beautiful foliage on Main Street, the canopy of orange, red, and yellow, and how fun it was to kick at the leaves like a kid.

I used the toothbrush he'd given me a week ago, nodding or grunting in acknowledgment as he chattered away. He'd never been this...chatty. It was tempting to tease him, but I loved the sound of his voice. Deep and masculine, melodic and animated. His joy was a palpable thing, and I was pleased he shared it with me.

We crawled into bed naked, tangled our limbs, and drifted to sleep.

It all felt so...perfect. Like something I hadn't known I'd been looking for.

Dangerous thoughts to have about someone like Riley Thoreau.

EVERYONE IN TOWN knew Riley and I were friends now. They probably assumed we'd met at the diner and bonded over food, which was true. No one seemed to think it was odd to see us having coffee at a bistro table outside the coffee shop or even strolling from the diner into town. But walking into the El Rink together turned a few heads.

“Those kids are staring,” I grumbled, winking at the kids huddled outside the main entrance.

Riley adjusted his sunglasses and waved. “Be nice. They’re like ten years old. Maybe they’re hockey fans. Are you sure you don’t mind taking over for Vinnie? I know this wasn’t how you planned to spend your day off.”

“I don’t mind, but I warn you I’m very rusty...and my skates might not fit. I’ve gained weight everywhere.”

He snorted. “I doubt you gained weight in your feet.”

“Hmph. We shall see.” I nodded to the teenager behind the reception desk. “I’m making brioche french toast tomorrow at the diner, Erica. Tell your brother and your parents.”

“Ooh! Save me some, please.” Erica tossed her ponytail over her shoulder and flashed a friendly smile at Riley, but zeroed in on me. “I’ve never seen you in here, JC.”

“This is my first time.”

“You don’t know how to skate?” she asked, looking vaguely alarmed.

“I do. It’s just been a while,” I replied. “I hope it’s like riding a bike, eh?”

She chuckled. “If not, I think you’ll be in good hands with the pro.”

“This guy?” I hiked a thumb at Riley and widened my eyes dubiously. “We shall see.”

Riley huffed and elbowed me out of the way. “Did Vinnie mention I’d be by today?”

“Yes. They have an away game in Pinecrest and the girls’ team doesn’t practice till four o’clock, so you have the place to yourself for an hour. The lights are low now, but if you need them dimmed any more, let me know. I’ll open the door for you.” She jingled a set of keys and skipped down the corridor. “Our new locks are awesome. You can leave whenever you’re ready, but no one can get in.”

We thanked her for escorting us and promised to be gone within the hour; then we strapped on our skates and glided onto the ice.

I hadn't been kidding. It had been years since I'd been in a rink. At least eight. Strange to think that my life used to revolve around hockey. The smell of artificial ice gave me a wicked case of déjà vu. I pushed aside old memories and followed Riley's lead albeit at a much slower pace.

He skated like the pro he was, crossing one foot over the other, pivoting with ease, and leaning into each turn. I didn't have anything to prove out here, so there was no point in trying to keep up. I'd offered to feed him pucks and run a few passing drills...or do whatever I could do to simulate his ice time with Vinnie.

Over the past week, they'd incorporated actual skating into their daily workouts. The low lighting didn't bother his eyes, and just circling the rink like a tourist at Rockefeller Center had invigorated him on their first few outings, but now...he was ready to play. Riley hadn't been cleared for vigorous training, so he'd stuck with passing drills with Vinnie and Nolan, a few of the teenagers on the Elmwood Eagles junior squad—and now me.

I wasn't so sure I'd make a worthy substitute, but I'd felt a strong urge to step up and...try to help out somehow. I was older, slower, and out of shape in more ways than I wanted to admit, yet I could certainly pass a damn puck or two to him. It would give me a chance to see Riley in his happy place and to be part of it for a short time.

If that meant dusting off my old boots and leaning on my stick like an old man shuffling around on a cane, I'd do it.

Good news: I was still fairly quick on the ice.

Bad news...I couldn't deliver an accurate pass to save my life. It was embarrassing. Thankfully, Riley didn't seem to mind chasing down errant pucks. He twisted and turned, deking out phantom opponents as he charged the goal, shooting rockets to the back of the net at will.

Of course, there was no one there to stop him. I was too slow to adjust from offense to defense. By the time it occurred to me that he might want me to make him work for a goal, his arms were in the air as he skated away, ready for my next wild pass.

His growing confidence had shaken off cobwebs. I could tell he had a true sense that he was healing and that he was anxious to prove himself at the highest level of play. I wanted that for him. I was grateful to have a front-row seat on the road to his recovery, knowing he'd certainly be gone by the holidays. If so, I wanted to be with him every moment possible.

I yanked off the pullover I'd sweated through after two measly laps, tossed it somewhere near the benches, and renewed my efforts to not be a terrible substitute for Vinnie and Nolan.

I slung a puck his way, then chased after it, dropping into defense. Riley's eyes lit with mischief as he circled me like a cat toying with a silly mouse. By some miracle, I managed to poke it away from him. My win was short-lived. He got it back with very little effort and sailed across the ice with a quick glance over his shoulder, inviting me to chase him.

So I did. I almost coughed up a lung, but I was able to get in front of the net and make him work for his next goal.

Okay, fine. I wouldn't have made it to the other goal unless he'd rolled out a red carpet and waited for me, but he was willing to pretend I was good competition. Why would I argue? My ego was happy and he was smiling and...that second thing was all that seemed important. That unfettered, easy grin made my heart skitter and my pulse race.

Well...that and thirty laps around a dark rink, chasing after a professional hockey player in his prime.

I slowed to a pathetic stop at center ice, balancing my borrowed stick across my knees as I bent over at the waist, gasping for air. I'd done a decent job of keeping up, but I'd officially reached my limit. I was going to need oxygen if I didn't take a break.

“You okay?” Riley skidded to a halt to my right, shaving ice on my boots.

I translated a snide remark from French to English in my head, sighing heavily as I straightened, and— *Mon Dieu, he was exquisite*. Anyone could see that he was model handsome, but I had a feeling that few people saw his boyish exuberance and the sheer joy that poured out of him like sunbeams pushing through clouds. He quite literally took my breath away.

But it was safer to blame my condition on exercise than to admit I’d developed a troubling case of infatuation.

“No, I’m not okay,” I gasped. “My lungs are shutting down.”

He narrowed his eyes. “That’s not funny. Are you hurt?”

“Hurt? No, I’m just...old and I like carbs.”

Riley pursed his lips. “You’re not that old, and what do carbs have to do with anything?”

“Carbs are still the foundation of my food pyramid. I don’t apologize for loving bread, but it’s made me a little, um...” I patted my stomach and shrugged, adding, “Center heavy.”

“Center heavy?”

“Yes, pudgy like pudding. Feel.” I grabbed his wrist and pushed his finger at my belly. “So let me recover, eh?”

He burst out laughing and swatted my arm. “You’re an idiot. And you’re not pudgy, you’re—”

“Flubby?”

“Perfect,” he intercepted, his lips curled in a lopsided smile. “How do you say perfect in French?”

“*Parfait*.”

“Isn’t that a dessert?” he asked.

“Yes. A frozen merengue with layers. *Très bon*.”

“Oh, I thought it was yogurt and granola and berries and— why are you making that face?” His eyes crinkled merrily.

“That’s an American healthy breakfast item, not a true parfait,” I huffed derisively. “It’s fine, but I don’t think anyone really thinks yogurt is perfect. Do they?”

Riley shrugged. “I have no idea. And why are we talking about yogurt anyway?”

“You tell me. You brought it up.”

“No, I didn’t. I said—”

“Continue,” I prodded. “I liked what you said. Maybe I should hear it again.”

“You’re a dick.”

“Nope.” I made a buzzer noise and shook my head. “That wasn’t it. Though, perhaps you were talking about my dick.”

“That must have been it.” He tapped his stick on the ice and beamed. “You ready to get out of here?”

I glanced up at the overhead clock. “You still have fifteen minutes. I’m fine now. I can help you—”

He kissed me, quick and sweet. There and gone in an instant. Standing at center ice made it seem like a bigger deal than it probably was, but hey...it was a first for me. And knowing it was for Riley too sent a thrill through my veins. This man liked playing with fire.

“Let’s pick up the pucks and go somewhere private so you can show me your *parfait* cock. What d’ya say?”

He didn’t wait for my reply, which was good since my tongue was tied in knots and my heart rate had skyrocketed as if I’d done another dozen laps around the rink. *Hmm*. I didn’t like this feeling.

It wasn’t healthy to want someone this badly. It was the sort of deep craving that came with an inevitable crash. Yes, I’d happily go along for the ride, but this...this wouldn’t end well for me.

RILEY

Walking had become my main mode of transportation since my concussion, but Elmwood's streets seemed longer than ever this afternoon. Far too long. I felt like a live wire tied by an invisible string to the bear of a man striding beside me.

I was ultrasensitive to every move he made—from the brush of his arm against mine to his taciturn expression as he shot daggers at the crosswalk signal at the corner of Main and Blossom.

“This is a silly place for a light,” Jean-Claude grumbled. “Why is there traffic? There's never traffic in Elmwood. Why today?”

“You in a hurry?” I drawled.

“You could say that. My dick is very anxious, anyway. Yours?”

Damn, that sultry side-eye fucking melted me. I'd never wanted anyone like this. I was less freaked out about being sexually attracted to a man than anyone might have guessed. But I couldn't help wondering: Why now? Why him? And why was this pull between us so strong?

Jean-Claude was rough around the edges with a sharp wit and a biting tongue. He could be generous and kind, and unexpectedly thoughtful, but he spoke his mind and made no apologies. He wasn't traditionally handsome and while he was obviously athletic, he wasn't exactly in shape. I liked him just the way he was.

He was so fucking...real.

So perfectly real.

He'd lived a full life—played hockey, partied and had fun, gotten engaged, come out, become a chef, moved to the States, and was thriving in this tiny town.

And me? All I knew was hockey. My focus was so singular, it was almost embarrassing. What did I have besides hockey? Not a lot. I didn't have a hobby or any interests outside of my sport. My family lived thousands of miles away, my friends were all hockey players, and the one I was closest to had retired a couple of years ago. No wonder I was ready to get back on the ice. I had nothing else.

Except...now I had this cranky French-Canadian who'd taken a few hours on his day off to hang out with me at a skating rink to "help" me train or maybe just to be with me, and geez, that was really fucking nice. I was grateful for his company and this gratitude had morphed into affection that collided with desire, and it all made me feel—happy and... hopeful.

And horny.

Current situation: In spite of the autumnal chill in the air, I tied my sweatshirt around my waist and strategically positioned my workout bag in front of my crotch to hide my semi. It was safe to say my dick was anxious too.

"Same. We could always jog," I suggested. Jean-Claude's deadpan stare made me laugh so hard I almost peed my pants. "Just kidding."

He didn't bother responding. He shot a quick glance at the diner when the light turned green, then tugged at my elbow and made a right on Maple. Two blocks in, I veered toward my street.

"No, no. This way. I'm closer."

He led me along a path lined with low hedges to a two-story brick colonial with topiaries flanking either side of the wide black door. He fiddled with the lock as I gazed at the orange and yellow leaves falling from the majestic maple tree

in his front yard, lost in tranquil thoughts in this idyllic corner of New England.

I'd been here for well over a month and I loved it. I loved the old lamplights throughout the neighborhood, the cracked sidewalks, the stately trees, and well-kept homes. I loved the smell of bonfires and wet leaves, and...I loved feeling like I belonged here. If only for a little while.

We tumbled into the foyer, dropping our bags as we slammed the door shut, and crashed into each other. He caged me between his arms and pushed his tongue into my mouth. I moaned, hooking my fingers under the elastic of his workout pants as I pulled him close.

I squeezed his ass, grinding my aching dick against his. Fuck, that was good. And it only got better.

Jean-Claude angled his hips and joined in until we were humping like animals, clutching and clawing at skin, rattling picture frames on the white walls.

We broke the greedy kiss with a gasp when one fell onto a bench and hit the hardwood floor.

“Oops.”

He bit my bottom lip and smacked my ass. “You’re breaking my house.”

“Sorry about that.” I snickered as I cupped his rigid cock through a couple of layers of cotton. “This is what I want.”

He dragged his mouth over mine and growled. “Upstairs.”

If I hadn't been out-of-my-mind horny, I would have hung back to study the photos on the wall, peek in his kitchen, and check out the sofa and flat-screen situation in his great room. From what I could tell as we whizzed up the wide staircase, Jean-Claude had expensive tastes—modern chandeliers, Persian rugs, and tasteful oil paintings. I was so curious.

And for some reason, it felt like a big deal to get an invite here after spending so much time together. My place was a rental that belonged to his ex-boyfriend. He knew more about how things worked in that house than I did. There was nothing

of me there...other than my clothes. To be honest, the same could be said of my actual house in Seattle. Nice modern home with panoramic ocean and mountain views...but it was kind of cold. Grand yet generic.

This, on the other hand, was a lovingly curated treasure trove. I paused in the doorway of the suite he entered, admiring the wall of landscape paintings opposite his king-sized bed.

“Quebec?” I asked, inclining my head meaningfully.

He whipped his shirt over his head and toed off his shoes. “*Oui*. The Saint Lawrence River, the Otish Mountains, Bouclier canadien...I can show you my art or I can show you my dick. What will it be?”

My choked-out laugh turned into an appreciative groan as he stepped out of his boxer briefs and kicked his clothing aside. A naked Jean-Claude was a beautiful thing indeed.

I moved into his space and reached for his thick cock, my grip firm and so sure you'd never guess I was new to this. I licked his neck under his beard and scraped my teeth along his Adam's apple as I stroked him, twisting my wrist and rubbing my thumb over his slit. He shoved my joggers and briefs over my ass with a hungry growl and captured my mouth. His hands were all over me, tweaking my nipples, raking his nails on my back, kneading the meaty parts of my ass and pulling them apart, then sliding a single digit over my crack.

Our mouths were still fused and I was still jacking him like it was my job, but my brain was stuck on that nasty slide along my crease...up and down, up and down. I added my dick to the equation, lining our shafts up and jerking us between both hands. I was leaking like a sieve and it only got worse when he tapped his finger against my hole.

I released us, afraid I'd explode way too soon if I didn't take a breath and reset. “Holy shit. What are you doing?”

Stupid question. I knew what he was doing. He'd done it a dozen times already.

Actually, he'd done much more than graze my entrance. Rimming and finger-fucking were new staples in the bedroom. The first time he'd finger-fucked me, I'd blinked through a blissed-out haze and told myself that couldn't happen again. It was just too much. Too gay, too exposing, too fucking hot...

But I was greedy for him. His touch set me on fire. I needed his tongue in my hole, his fingers—not one or two... three, please—inside me. I wanted to be stretched open, on the verge of pain while he sucked me like a popsicle on a summer day.

I loved it and he knew it. My orgasms wracked my body and reduced me to a puddle of goo every damn time.

I'd stopped questioning this a while ago. It was too much work to deny I wanted this, and it wasn't as if we were hurting anyone. We were single and free to do whatever the hell we wanted in the bedroom. If he wanted to suck me off while he fingered my ass, I rolled out the red carpet—legs open, dick drooling—and begged him for more.

And yeah, I returned the favor. Not to brag, but I'd become pretty damn decent at giving a blowjob. Not as good as Jean-Claude, but hey...practice makes perfect, right?

The thing is...I was acutely aware of what we weren't doing. Did he want to fuck me? Did I want that?

Yeah, I thought I did.

Every time he slid his finger or his tongue inside me, I imagined it was his cock. He was big, though, and it might hurt, but you know...the thought of riding the edge of pain to share pleasure with him did something for me.

So when he brushed that finger over my hole, I shivered at the very idea.

Jean-Claude tapped the sensitive skin again, nuzzling my neck. "You want more?"

See? He read me like a book.

I gulped. "Yeah."

He spit on the digit, then massaged my hole, slipping the tip of his forefinger inside. That should have been gross, but no...it was off-the-charts hot.

“Like that?”

“More,” I grunted.

He licked my earlobe. “More what?”

“More everything. Please.”

“You want my tongue?” He bit my shoulder. “Inside you?”

I swallowed hard and nodded. “Yes. No.”

He brushed my prostate, sending a shockwave through my body. “No? Okay, we can do this. Or...we can try a toy. Have you ever used a dildo?”

“A what?” I pushed out of his arms and frowned.

“A dildo. You know...” He made a lewd gesture.

“I know what it is,” I huffed. “And no, I’ve never used one. What would I do with a dildo?”

“You would put it in your ass. I’ll show you.” He marched to his nightstand and pulled a ten inch toy from a drawer along with a bottle of lube.

“I—what? I—no, I’m not putting that in my ass. Has it been in yours?”

Jean-Claude shrugged in that casual French-Canadian way of his. “Sure. It’s been a while, but this is a good one. Not too big, you know? And don’t you dare ask me if it’s been washed. You should know me well enough to know I wouldn’t leave a dirty toy in my drawer, eh?”

I chuckled in spite of my apprehension. “I know, I know. I—what’s happening here?”

“We’re going to try something new. You like fingers, you like my tongue...maybe you’d like this. I call him Pierre, but you can change the name if you like. *Allez.*”

“Wait. I don’t want the toy, Jean-Claude.” I curled my fingers around his shaft and squeezed. “I want your dick.”

He dropped the toy into the drawer and picked up a condom. “You’re sure?”

I nodded slowly. “Yeah. I might not like it, but we both know this was where we were always going, so let’s...do it.”

His nostrils flared as he nodded. “Get on your knees on the bed. Let me look at you.”

I finished undressing in a rush, flung my clothes and shoes somewhere near his, and scrambled to obey. I got on all fours and glanced over to see him stroking himself leisurely as though he had all the time in the world.

“Hurry. My dick is kind of into the idea now. I don’t want to give myself too much time to think.”

Jean-Claude snickered softly. “Don’t worry. I’ll make sure you can’t think at all. Just relax and show me your ass. Open for me...that’s it. Ah, very nice.”

Okay...let’s take a moment to appreciate how insane this was.

A month ago, I wouldn’t have been here. No way.

We’d gone from kissing to hand jobs and blowjobs in record time, so I wasn’t sure why this seemed like a big deal, yet here I was—naked in a man’s bed in the middle of the day, presenting my ass like a gift for him to unwrap at his earliest convenience.

He climbed behind me, onto the mattress, with a bottle of lube in hand. He slicked his fingers and rubbed featherlight circles while humming something soft and sexy in French. My muscles began to relax. I hung my head low, releasing a cleansing breath as he teased my hole, pushing a finger inside.

That was good. And familiar.

So was the second finger.

I arched into his touch, willing him to do that twisty thing with his wrist and massage my prostate. I liked that. A lot. He didn’t disappoint. I groaned, falling to my forearms to brace myself when he reached between my legs to grip my cock and fondle my balls.

“Mmm. Fuck, be careful. I might come if you keep this up,” I warned.

“You want me to hurry?”

“No, but...shouldn't you get suited up and you know...get to it?”

Jean-Claude chuckled. “If you say so.”

I looked over my shoulder, spooked at the sound of a condom wrapper. “Wait. I want this...I do, but if I change my mind—”

“We stop,” he supplied, rolling the latex on and adding more lube. He leaned forward and pressed a kiss on my neck. “We won't do anything you don't want. You say yes, we go. You say no, we stop. Okay?”

There it was—that impossibly kind side of his, defusing panic with a gentle tone and a reassuring touch. This was the same man who'd brought me tuna salad in a rainstorm and chased me all over a skating rink on his day off. He was gruff and impatient and silly and fun and so fucking sexy...and right this second, I'd never wanted anyone more.

“Okay,” I whispered. “Just tell me what to do.”

“Relax. That is all.”

His fingers were inside me again. Two...three. He made sure I was strung out and close to desperate before pulling away. I hated the empty feeling, but he didn't make me wait for long. He slid his sheathed dick between my cheeks, grazing my entrance over and over till every nerve in my body was lit up.

And just when I thought he'd make me beg, he pushed his way inside. I tensed immediately. He was big and this was new and I had a bad feeling this would end up being the shortest experiment ever 'cause I couldn't imagine anything more humiliating than lying facedown on someone else's mattress, gritting my teeth as I took it up the ass. No, thanks.

I shifted my weight to my hands, intending to tackle him, then distract him with the best BJ ever. Jean-Claude had other

ideas.

He motioned for me to lie on my back.

I kneeled instead, scooting to face him. “No. Let me—”

He kissed me, hard and needy, brushing our noses as he raked my bottom lip between his teeth. “Do you trust me, Riley?”

“Yes.”

“Good. I want to see you spread your thighs, and show yourself to me,” he demanded.

Gulp.

“I can’t believe you say shit like that to me.” Of course, I obeyed to the T—legs open with my hard-as-nails dick leaking precum on my belly.

He didn’t reply. His gaze was locked on my ass as he guided his cock to my hole, breaching me inch by glorious inch. My breath hitched, driving my lungs into my throat. I didn’t dare exhale until he was fully seated.

“Okay?” he asked, threading his fingers in my hair.

I swallowed around the Sahara in my throat and nodded.

It hurt for sure, but as the pain faded, it started to feel kind of amazing. I didn’t know what to do with my hands, so I rested them on his chest, idly rubbing his nipples with the pads of my thumbs. He liked that. He captured one of my wrists, pulled all the way out, and plunged inside again.

“Holy fuck! That’s good. So good. Oh, yeah. Just like that,” I babbled.

Jean-Claude bent to kiss me, slipping his tongue between my lips as he finally began to move, sweet and steady. And wow...I’d never dreamed it could be this good. Never. I’d never felt so many sensations at once—layer upon layer. His hands pinning me to the mattress, his belly rubbing my cock, his beard on my cheek, his soft lips on mine, and those urgent, soul-sweeping kisses—all moving in time to the rhythm he set with his hips.

Yeah, his dick felt incredible, but it was him. The way he surrounded me, held me, cared for me, and fucked me like a god, powerful and majestic. He seemed to know exactly what I needed, gradually upping the pace and snapping his hips while I moaned his name and raked my nails down his back.

The headboard beat a rapid tattoo and the bedsprings creaked in protest as we came together, grunting and sighing in a fevered frenzy. His hips pistoned faster and faster still. My balls drew tight and—damn it, I was too close.

“Stroke yourself.”

I gasped as he pounded my prostate. “I can’t. I’ll come.”

“It’s okay. I’ve got you.” Jean-Claude wrapped his big hand around my throbbing pole, and that was pretty much the end of me.

Cum shot in an impressive arc over his fist and across my torso. I swear, I felt it on my chin too. I cried out, stunned and spent by the sheer magnitude of my release. I saw stars as he roared, bucking his hips and filling the condom.

I fell into a blissed-out hazy state in the aftermath. I couldn’t remember moving at all, but I must have cleaned up and maybe even showered before falling asleep on his chest. It was dark when I blinked awake and glanced over at Jean-Claude, who was eyeing me cautiously.

“It’s late,” I mumbled, rolling to face him, forcing my foot between his calves. “Are you hungry?”

He nodded, his voice rough from sleep. “Yes. I’ll make us something to eat, but first...I have to ask if you’re okay.”

A burst of affection made my heart swell. I brushed his hair from his forehead and kissed his nose. “I’m great. That was...”

“Great?” he supplied.

I snickered. “Yeah. Great. I’m not fragile, you know. I’m not gonna freak out, so don’t worry about that. I’ve wanted every single thing we’ve done, no regrets.”

“But you’re straight. You told me yourself when you ordered your seventy-five tuna salad sandwiches.”

I pounced on top of him, straddling his torso and pinning his wrists to the mattress. “I never ordered seventy-five sandwiches. Take that back.”

“Fine. It was sixty-two.”

“Sounds more like it.” I nipped his chin and released his hands to run my fingers through his chest hair. “I guess I’m not so straight after all.”

“No?”

“I’m bi and I wish I’d figured it out years ago, ’cause I fucking love this.”

“To be clear...you fucking love fucking a man?”

“Yes. Not just any man, though. You.”

Jean-Claude put his hand over his chest and fluttered his eyelashes. “I am honored.”

I punched his pec playfully and tweaked his left nipple. “Yeah, yeah, whatever. Feed me, *Monsieur* Bouchard. I need to keep my strength up if we’re gonna do that again.”

“So bossy.” He hauled his sexy self out of bed and stretched his arms over his head, then scratched his nuts as he meandered to a dresser and pulled out a fresh pair of boxer briefs. I redressed, sniffing my tee and wrinkling my nose. “Here. Wear this one.”

I caught the T-shirt he tossed at me and stared at it for a beat. “I can’t wear your clothes.”

“Yours stink, mine are clean. They might be large on you because I’m taller, my muscles are bigger, and I like food more than you, but so what? No one will know.”

True, but sharing clothes with the guy who’d just fucked my brains out felt...intimate. Maybe even boyfriend-y. Did I care? Not at all.

I dropped my shirt and tugged his over my head. “Thank you.”

Jean-Claude's lips twitched in amusement. "You're welcome. You look cute, you know. Like my cute little friend."

"Fuck off and feed me," I grumbled without heat.

He ruffled my hair as I walked by, catching me around the waist and pulling me close. "We should do a lot of fucking before you leave, *oui*?"

"*Oui*."

We made out till my stomach growled, then parted with a laugh and headed downstairs to his kitchen, hand in hand. I sat at the island, eating olives and cheese from the charcuterie board he'd prepared, while watching him sear salmon on his professional-grade stove. Some kind of French jazzy music played from the portable speaker on the counter under an open shelf stacked with white plates and mugs.

I admired his blue-and-white French farmhouse-style kitchen, the delicious spread in front of me, and his fine ass in his thin gray sweats as he hummed to a melody I'd never heard till now. I wallowed in a sense of harmony and well-being, and let myself just enjoy.

There was no need to fret about phrases like "before you go." Not yet.

I didn't want to think about leaving when I felt like I was somewhere I belonged.

JEAN-CLAUDE

Rise and Grind was busy this morning. I had an hour to spare till I was needed at the diner and though I knew my coffee was better, this was a good neutral place to be seen in public with a secret male lover. No one thought twice about daily caffeine jaunts. And if they wondered why Riley and I were together so often, they probably assumed he was too new in town to be bothered by my curmudgeony ways.

“This is a...giraffe?” I guessed, squinting at the foam art in my latte.

Ivan rolled his eyes. “It’s a rose. That’s the stem...see?”

No, I didn’t see it at all. I cast a questioning glance at Riley, who countered with a “Be nice” half smile. It was a peculiar power to be able to communicate with someone without words. A quick look, a clandestine touch, a hand gesture...it was a private language, safe to use in public, and I liked it more than I would have thought.

Of course, I preferred having him to myself.

We spent every night at either his place or mine, and every day off or free hour or two before work belonged to him now. Our outings generally consisted of a trip to the gym, the skating rink, or the coffee shop—rarely the diner. I needed to concentrate and besides...Nolan was there. I didn’t want to invite questions I couldn’t answer.

After years of lying to my partners and friends, I’d made a vow never to go down that road again. I’d never lied to Nolan, and I didn’t want to start now. Unfortunately, I couldn’t tell the

whole truth, so I gave him half-truths and found it was easier than it should have been to shrug off our unlikely friendship.

I see Riley at the gym sometimes, so what? Or I haven't been on the ice in years, so what? Okay, maybe I wasn't great at excuses. In fact, I'd bet Nolan was working up the nerve to gently remind me that Riley wasn't gay on the off chance that I was attracted to his husband's former teammate.

Well, Riley was gay enough for me, and it was too late for warnings anyway. I couldn't remember ever feeling quite this silly over a man. That was saying something since I'd followed Nolan to Elmwood, USA on a whim. But I'd always felt that Nolan and I needed something from each other, and perhaps fate had intervened at just the right time. There'd been passion, for sure, but...not like this.

I mean...now was a perfect example. We were in a crowded coffee shop in one of the smallest towns in Vermont, and I couldn't keep my hands to myself. No kidding. It was impossible. I stepped aside to let another customer by and strategically brushed my fingers against Riley's. His breath hitched, inaudible to anyone there but me. I knew he felt it too. I wondered if he simmered on a low boil in public the way I did.

I tried to be cool and act vaguely indifferent; however, it wasn't so easy to do. Every little thing about Riley did something for me—from the curve of his neck, his long eyelashes, and his pink cheeks in the cold air to the low thrum of his voice. I wanted to hook my finger in his belt loop, pull him close, and breathe in the scent of my shampoo in his hair.

Of course, I wouldn't do it, but the thought alone was dangerous. We'd showered together this morning, making out under the spray as we'd soaped each other. I'd washed his hair, massaging his scalp while he stroked my cock. Deep kisses and heavy petting had given way to something more urgent. Next thing I knew, we were dripping wet in front of the mirrored wall in the bathroom, one palm braced on the floating marble countertop to his left, the other jacking his cock as I fucked him from behind.

We'd held eye contact, gazing at our reflection in wonder. He was so beautiful. His muscles flexed and contracted as his hand flew, water dripping from his hair, down his chest. I'd sucked moisture from his shoulder and nudged him to turn sideways for a slightly more pornographic view. He'd whimpered something rude, like, "Oh, my fucking God," and I couldn't blame him. The sight of my cock sliding in and out of his perfect ass had been a game changer. I'd gripped his hips and let go, fucking him hard and fast to a wicked and wild orgasm.

That was less than an hour ago. And it had only been one week since the first time we'd fucked. *Crisse*, how had we gotten so good at it so quickly? Well, we did practice every day—in bed, on the sofa, in my kitchen, on my—

Okay, stop.

No wonder I still felt hot under the collar. I had to get myself under control.

Popping a boner in front of Ivan would be difficult to explain. Our exceptionally observant barista would either immediately guess we were more than friends or he'd mistakenly think I *really* liked roses that looked like giraffes in my latte.

"Thank you for the rose," I said, lifting my to-go cup in a toast. "It's very...nice."

Ivan snorted. "You're the worst."

Riley chuckled, thanking him for his drink without commenting on the blob of foam at the top. "I don't think I've ever seen it so busy in here."

"It's the pre-Thanksgiving rush," Ivan replied, fussing with his apron string. "I'd better get back to it, but first...a teensy heads-up. Bryson Milligan was in earlier."

"Boring Bryson drinks coffee," I deadpanned. "So what?"

"He was chatty today. My polite query about Thanksgiving turkey led to pizza and...." Ivan cast a quick glance from left to right, continuing in a rush. "He happened to mention that the old pizza parlor in Pinecrest is going to be listed for lease."

“Oh. Interesting.”

Ivan winked. “You’re welcome. Have a good one, boys.”

Riley spared me a curious look, then scanned the shop for an open table. There were none available.

“Follow me.” I held the door open for him and crossed the street.

We slipped into the side entrance off the kitchen through the gate leading to the garden. It was a small enclave behind the diner surrounded by majestic elms on one side and tall privacy hedges that shielded the garden from the wind and nosy passersby. Two benches were positioned opposite the elevated boxes of herbs and vegetables.

The trees had lost their leaves and the herbs and veg were mostly dormant for the season, but it was still a pleasant spot to sit with a cup of coffee or to escape before my temper got the better of me in the kitchen. There was another private garden with a table and chairs beyond the hedges that was even more private for our employees, but neither got much use when the temperature dropped.

I settled onto the corner of my favorite bench and patted the empty space beside me.

“This is a cool hideaway,” he commented, zipping his jacket to his chin. “Did you plant the garden?”

“Yes. Only the hardiest vegetation likes the cold, so it doesn’t look nice now, but I have an indoor vegetable garden too. We never have to go without fresh ingredients. I want to build a solarium. There’s enough room for one over there.” I pointed to a section of lawn covered in sodden leaves. “That way we wouldn’t be limited for space to make year-round farm-to-table cuisine possible.”

Riley shot a lopsided grin at me. “You’re very passionate about food, aren’t you?”

“Your body is a temple. You are what you eat. Clichés, yes? But they’re true. Five years ago, no one in Elmwood would have cared if their tomatoes were from Pinecrest instead of their own backyard, but now...I like to think everyone takes

a little pride in knowing we don't rely on rival towns for good produce.”

“*Hmm.*” He sipped his latte. “So what’s with the pizza parlor in Pinecrest? Are you thinking of expanding and showin’ ’em how Elmwood does it better?”

I bit the inside of my cheek and shook my head. I hadn’t planned on sharing this with Riley, but it seemed wrong to leave him in the dark, especially since Ivan the barista knew.

“Not exactly. I’m thinking of opening my own restaurant,” I blurted. “But this is top secret. No one knows and I may not do anything at all, so...shh, okay?”

Riley pushed his sunglasses down his nose and eyed me over the rim of his cup as he made a zipped-lips motion. “You can trust me. What’s up?”

I shifted closer to him on the bench and lowered my voice on the off chance anyone could hear us, then filled him in on my career dilemma.

“Elmwood can’t support two high-end restaurants, and that’s okay. I don’t want to compete with Nolan, but I also can’t wait for something he might not ever be willing to give me.” I winced. “That sounds like a bad love affair. *Amour non réciproque*. That’s not it. But I have to think about my future. I know my worth and I’m selling myself for...being shorter—”

“Selling yourself short?” he suggested, pulling his glasses off.

“That’s it.” I set my hand on his thigh and left it there. “I’ve talked to Nolan about this and I wouldn’t do anything without talking some more, but I’m not getting younger. If I got hit by a bus next year, I want to leave a legacy along with a corpse, you know?”

Riley shoved my biceps. “Shut up. That’s an awful thing to say. The bus and the corpse part—but I know exactly what you mean about a legacy.”

“I know you do.” I caught his wrist and planted a quick kiss on his knuckles. “Maybe everyone feels that way to some degree. We don’t have to be superstars or Nobel Prize winners,

but we want our version of success. I was a mediocre hockey player and maybe a mediocre human too. I'm forty now and I'm still growing up. I don't want to settle for mediocre. The diner is special, and I had a hand in making it that way. I want recognition or the opportunity to do it again...on my terms."

He was quiet for a long moment. "Yeah. I understand."

We sipped our lattes in silence.

"When I was a kid, I thought adults had the answers. Turns out, they were scamming us all along. Adults are stupid. No one knows what they're doing and if they tell you they do, don't believe them. I think we're all just trying to figure out a way to belong. A way to...make a mark, be seen for who we are and not what others want us to be. The louder voices and old regimes win by default when we're too afraid to speak up or take chances. I think it's time for me to take a chance again."

"Then you should."

"Yes." I sighed heavily and in my most dramatic tone, added, "It can be difficult when you're shy like me."

Riley burst out laughing. "You don't have a shy bone in your body."

"My dick is a little shy right now."

"That's because it's forty degrees out here," he huffed, sliding his sunglasses on again.

"Forty degrees. You know I still have to compute that into Celsius," I said, hoping to steer the conversation to lighter topics.

"That would be four degrees."

"Show-off. Your dual citizenship pays off, eh?"

He wagged his brow. "Absolutely. Best of both worlds. Including holidays. I get to choose my favorites and sometimes, celebrate twice."

"Like Thanksgiving. Does that mean you're celebrating Thanksgiving with the natives this week?"

“Vinnie and Nolan invited me to Nolan’s mom’s house. I don’t think I’ll go, though.”

I frowned. “Why not?”

“Ehh, I don’t know. It sounds like a lot of people and lights and noise, and...things that bring on headaches. I don’t want any setbacks ’cause—”

“You’re afraid,” I intercepted. “I understand. But you’re on the mend. Your last MRI was better, your doctor likes your progress, and you’re on track to return to your team in less than a month. It’s time to test your powers.”

“How? By wearing sunglasses inside? It’s bad enough that I skate in the dark. I’ll look like an asshole.”

I scoffed. “I *am* an asshole and they still invited me. They’re good people and good friends. It would be good for you to venture outside your cocoon.”

He inclined his head. “I’ll think about it.”

“Good. I saw the highlights from the Bruins game last night. I can’t believe we watched the Slammers instead,” I teased.

Riley snorted. “Right? We don’t look good. We’ve lost the last five in a row. We need to fix those holes on defense. Carpenter’s timing is way off. One of my old coaches from college told us to...”

I listened to him chatter about hockey...the Slammers’ losing streak, the coaches he’d wanted to impress in college, the time he’d cracked his ribs and the tape was so tight he almost passed out on the ice. I shared my own war stories, which brought us back to yesterday’s sports news. And you know, we could have been a couple of ordinary guys bellied up to the bar watching a game while nursing a beer or five, and not...lovers.

It was so easy to navigate between weighty subjects like fear of falling behind or fear of failure to current events with Riley. He was easy to be with, easy to talk to, easy to confide in.

Easy to fall for.

And on that somewhat disturbing thought, I kissed his cheek and pointed toward the diner. “I have a long commute to work. I’d better be on my way now.”

He walked with me to the gate, clearing his throat as I opened the latch. “Hey, uh...I could go with you to check out the pizza parlor. My grandfather was a contractor. He used to drag me with him to job sites thinking I’d be into the hard hats and heavy machinery. It wasn’t really my jam at all, so he’d end up taking me out for ice cream afterward. And now that I’ve said that out loud, I can tell I’m very unqualified to give an expert opinion, but if you want the company, I’d be happy to join you.”

My lips curled into a crooked grin without my permission. “Okay. I’ll text you.”

We smiled at nothing in particular, then leaned in at the same time, our mouths hovering an inch apart. I wanted a lot of information all at once. I wanted to know about his grandparents, his favorite flavor of ice cream, and while we were at it...his favorite color, his favorite song, his favorite movie. And yes, I wanted to taste him.

I brushed my lips over his as I caressed his cheek.

Crisse, I had it bad.

PINECREST HAD a similar old-world charm to Elmwood with stately trees, narrow streets, and homes that had been around for a hundred years or more. A small lake rambled along the perimeter of the town, providing a natural border between Wood Hollow to the north and Fallbrook to the south.

Elmwood was the fourth town in the Four Forest region and was sort of like an annoying younger sibling to the west of the others, separated by a winding road and a lot of trees.

They were all picture-postcard pretty places, and while they were a bit out of the way to be featured regularly in

“things to see” segments of Vermont travelogues, each town had undeniable New England charm—breathtaking fall foliage, antique lamplights on cobblestone alleyways, pristine lakes, and pretty church spires. Pinecrest, however, had a regal air the other three lacked.

Its Main Street was longer, the buildings were more ornate, and the people were wealthier and a bit...how can I say this nicely? Snottier. Sorry, but it was true. They drove Land Rovers, vacationed in Turks and Caicos, and owned a variety of Canada Goose jackets for cold, medium-cold, and super-cold weather. Oh, and they loved fine dining establishments.

Unfortunately for them...they didn't have one. Yes, those snobby Pinecrestacians had to drive fifteen minutes along curvy, swervy roads for haute cuisine at the not-so-humble Elmwood Diner. I didn't have to do any major research to know that a new restaurant would be heartily welcomed here.

No one would raise an eyebrow at the wine list or question the pricing. And they certainly wouldn't ask what was in *boeuf bourguignon*. Don't get me started.

I parked my SUV at the curb in front of Pete's Pizza Palace on Barnaby Street and met Riley on the sidewalk. We stared at the peeling stickers on the wide bay window advertising two slices for five dollars, complete with a decal of two dancing pizzas. The homespun endorsement looked startlingly out of place next to the pristine black awning and understated storefront of the neighboring bakery...and every other shop on the street. It was a safe guess that the owner was the final holdout in the gentrification of Snobville and had either passed away or decided to retire.

Interesting.

“Ever been here?” Riley asked, pushing his sunglasses to the top of his head.

“No. I bet it was delicious.”

“I was thinking the same thing. So...who are we meeting again?”

“Boring Bryson. He’s a banker who sells commercial and residential properties. Like I said...boring.”

Riley chuckled. “Do you know him well? You must if Ivan knew you were thinking of opening another restaurant and suggested contacting this guy. You seem like a private person, so the fact that they know anything about you means Ivan and the real estate agent are both probably good friends of yours.”

I rolled my eyes. “That’s a stretch. They’re nice guys who both happen to be gay—like me. And they know how to be discreet. Bigots aren’t welcome in these parts, but you have to pick and choose your partners wisely because not everyone is...”

“Out,” he finished.

“Correct. In this case, it’s not discretion about clandestine romances. It’s about property. Ivan mentioned that Pinecrest needed a real restaurant to Nolan and me, and said we should consider expanding. Nolan said it wasn’t a priority, but I asked Ivan to keep me posted...quietly. I’m loyal to Nolan, but it’s smart to have options and maybe Nolan will change his mind. Who knows?”

“Right. Just curious.”

“Looking at this dump is like looking at an open house when you realize you might need to make a move. Not tomorrow necessarily, but someday.”

He inclined his chin slightly. “Got it. And what’s the story with this agent?”

I shrugged. “No story. Bryson is a good guy.”

“You said he’s boring.”

“He is. You’ll see what I mean when—”

“JC! Hey there, how’s it going? It’s great to see you, man. It’s been a while,” Bryson Milligan enthused, striding toward me with his right hand outstretched.

A word about Bryson. He was a sinfully handsome forty-one-year-old single dad with silver strands in his dark hair, crystal blue eyes, and the physique of a runner—long and lean.

He'd moved from Philadelphia to the area a month after I did to better co-parent his now sixteen-year-old son with his ex-wife, who'd remarried and relocated to the country in the hopes of raising their kid in a friendly, safe environment.

Bryson was an exceptional parent, an all-around good person who did nice things like...volunteer to referee youth hockey games and clear snow from the old lady next door's driveway without being asked. Oh, yeah, and he was great in bed.

Too perfect, if you know what I mean. *Yawn.*

I shook his hand. "Hello, Bryson. I would like you to meet my friend, Riley. Riley, this is Boring Bryson."

Bryson slugged my biceps, smile still locked in place as he turned to greet Riley. "What are you doing with this guy? He's an asshole and he talks funny."

Riley furrowed his brow. "So...you guys are actually friends?"

"I put up with him," Bryson replied with a wink, tapping a code into the lockbox on the pizzeria's door. "Come see this place. It's a relic, but it has good bones."

Well, he was right about that. I ignored the ugly bits like the stained ceilings, worn red carpet, and faded faux-wood paneling, and noted that the dining area was large and the huge bay windows provided the perfect amount of natural light. The kitchen itself would have to be gutted. It was cramped, had an inefficient layout, and the fixtures were archaic.

I crossed my arms, imagining a new range, prep islands, and a serving station. The carpet and the paneling would have to go, and the ceiling tiles could be stripped. White paint, hardwood flooring, and exposed ducts for an industrial-meets-fine-dining feel. This was promising.

"What's the story here?" I asked. "You don't see properties like this in a prime location on the market in Pinecrest."

"The owner passed away last month, and his closest relatives live in Burlington and Montpelier. The business has been in the family since the mid-1950s, but they've apparently

reached the end of the era. I don't need to tell you this will get swept up in a hurry. It's not officially on the market till January first, so...you're getting a sneak preview."

"*Hmm.* And the price?" Somehow, I managed to keep my expression neutral. He had to be joking. The place was a steal. Bryson was right...this would get snatched up immediately. "Okay, thank you."

"Sure thing." Bryson pivoted to address Riley while I poked around the kitchen. "Hey, sorry about your concussion. I hope to see you on the ice soon. The Slammers need you."

Riley smiled. "Thanks. Hockey fan?"

"Heck, yeah. I'm from Philly, so I'm afraid I'm not a Slammers fan per se, but I watch it all. My son is obsessed. He couldn't believe his luck when Vinnie came home a couple of years ago and took over coaching the juniors. That camp last summer was a huge hit. Jake was absolutely starstruck. You may have seen him in town. A tongue-tied skinny blond kid with braces." Bryson's indulgent parental grin was kind of sweet.

"I'll be sure to say hi," Riley commented.

"He'll faint, but that's cool." Bryson winked, then threw his arm open, gesturing at the abandoned old pizzeria. "Do you need any more time here?"

"No, this was good. Thank you," I replied. "I'll talk to Nolan and get back to you soon."

"Sounds like a plan. Good to meet you, Riley."

We said our good-byes on the street and climbed into my SUV. I thought about stopping for a bite to eat, but Pinecrest's best bistros closed after lunch and I didn't feel like lingering anyway. Or talking. My mind was buzzing with ideas. I needed space to regroup and think. But I wasn't ready to go home.

On a sudden whim, I veered right, hugging the curve in the road that led to the lake. I parked under a giant maple tree.

“Where are we?” Riley asked, adjusting the volume on a Rolling Stones classic.

“This is Lake Norman. It’s very small, but it’s deep and the fishing is good. In summer, sailboats are everywhere, and in the winter, it freezes over and there are safe spots to skate.” I pointed out the window and continued in my best travel guide voice. “There’s a path that leads about halfway around the lake. It gets cut off by the forest and though I’m still scarred from my disastrous trip many years ago, they say the campground is very nice.”

Riley snickered. “I bet you’ve been camping dozens of times since you were a teenager.”

“At least fifty.” I unbuckled my seat belt. “Come. Let’s walk to the water. It’s pretty even this late in the year.”

We traversed an overgrown path, dodging low-hanging bare branches till we reached the rocky shore. A copse of trees grew between boulders the size of small cars on one side and gave way to a sandy expanse. The trail I’d mentioned to him began at the end of the beach. I pointed it out as I perched on the closest and flattest boulder, shifting to make room for him.

Twilight painted the horizon in shades of blue and the waxing moon shone on the water like a weak spotlight. It was so calm and quiet, yet teeming with life. Birds twittered, crowed, and hooted in the distance, and deer, moose, and beavers roamed, wary of lurking humans.

Riley drew one knee up and gazed out at the dark, placid lake. “Beautiful.”

“Yes. I don’t come here often enough. It’s a good spot to think and remind myself that we’re all tiny specks of dust in the universe. My troubles are all in my head.” I tapped my temple wryly. “They don’t matter in the grand scheme of things.”

“Your friend is right. The pizza place has good bones. It could be a nice restaurant,” he said carefully.

“I agree. I’ll talk to Nolan and see what he thinks about opening a second eatery. Not a diner, though—an elegant

gastronomical extravaganza. Who could say no to such an investment, eh?”

“But if he does?”

I sighed. “I’ll have decisions to make. That’s okay. Change is good for the soul. If you’re not changing, you’re not growing. But...let’s not talk about it anymore tonight. My head is spinning too much. Change the topic for us, please.”

“No problem. What’s with the very *not* boring real estate agent? Talk about false advertising,” he huffed. “I thought he was going to be a shifty-eyed, monosyllabic weirdo. Bryson is fucking hot.”

I shot him an irritated sideways glance. “You’re a new queer. Should you be noticing other men already?”

Riley nudged my ribs. “I’d have to be pretty obtuse not to notice him.”

“Hmph.”

“Ahh, I thought so,” he singsonged.

“What does that mean?”

“He’s another ex of yours, isn’t he?”

I rolled my eyes. “No, not an ex, but we did...fool around a couple of times.”

Riley opened his mouth in an exaggerated wide O. The little shit was teasing me and enjoying it. “Ex fuck-buddy? That definitely doesn’t sound boring to me. What happened?”

“Nothing. We had...you know...”

“Sex,” he deadpanned.

“Yeah. A few times. But it wasn’t special. It was just...sex.”

He snickered. “Got it. Still not sure why you’d say he’s boring. Unless that’s a personal defense mechanism to convince yourself he’s not great, even though he’s clearly not so bad.”

“Whatever. You win.” I threw my arms in the air like a white flag. “Bryson is perfect, but perfect is boring. Perfect hair, a perfect body, perfect car, perfect kid, perfect relationship with his ex...how is that fun? I’m mostly joking when I give him a hard time, but I’m also honest, you know?”

“*Mmhmm*. So basically, you’re attracted to hot messes like me.”

“Yes, that’s it,” I agreed, looping my arm over his shoulder and kissing his cheek.

He buried his face in my neck with a laugh, sighing as he looked out at the water, still leaning against me. “Perfect always backfires on me. I’m getting the idea that it’s better to embrace my flaws.”

“Flaws? You? *Qu’est que c’est*? What flaws, other than not speaking French, do you have?”

“I understand a little,” he commented defensively. “But...I wasn’t a good student, and I haven’t retained much of my high school French. When did you learn English?”

“I’m still learning,” I replied. “As a kid, I copied what I heard on television. As an adult...it was sink or swim. I picked up necessary phrases so I could communicate with my American teammates. I do okay now, but I struggled a lot in the beginning. My translations were painfully literal.”

“Give me an example.”

“Uh, okay. Easy. If I wanted to tell someone ‘Hold on tight,’ I would say, ‘*Attache ta tuque*.’ The literal translation is ‘Attach your beanie hat.’ ” I waited until Riley stopped chuckling and added, “I know you could say ‘Hold on to your hat,’ but you begin with what you know, so in my head, I’d say it in Quebecois and translate to English. I was sledding with my American teammates down a steep hillside on what was supposedly a day of bonding. The snow was icy and slick. It was dangerous, and I could see the toboggan in front of us keeling to one side. So when it was our turn to go, I yelled, ‘Attach your tuque!’ ”

Riley hooted. “I love it. What did they say?”

“They laughed. The joke is that they were from California and no one knew what a tuque was, so it took forever to explain that a tuque is a beanie and...aye, too much work. Thankfully, there was alcohol at the bottom of the hill.”

“That’s funny.”

“And it’s not the first or last time that happened to me. It’s safe to say, I’ve caused a lot of confusion.” I shrugged good-naturedly. “Maybe I’m doomed to be misunderstood.”

Riley shook his head. “No, you communicate very well. Better than me, that’s for sure.”

“You’re reserved. That’s different.”

He stared at the horizon where wisps of fog clung to the water’s edge in shimmery shades of gold and muted blues. “Not with you. If anything, I’m painfully honest when I’m around you.”

“Oh? Let’s take a test. What’s your sexiest fantasy?”

He widened his eyes as he shifted to face me. “Are you for real? Who casually discusses sexy fantasies while freezing their ass off on a rock?”

“We do. You go first.” I bit the inside of my cheek in an effort to keep a monster grin from spreading across my face when Riley snorted derisively. “No? Okay, but I have to say, you’re surprisingly prim and proper for a guy who’d begged me to fuck his hole this morning and—”

“That was in the heat of the moment. Totally different,” he interrupted hotly.

I held my arms up in surrender. “Okay, okay. I’ll go first.”

“No, that’s not necess—”

“I insist.” I squinted as if deep in thought. “I have a lot of fantasies to report—the pirate and the cabin boy, the CEO and the intern, the sexy delivery man.”

“Oh, boy.”

“But right here, right now...I like the idea of fucking you on this rock. You could sit on my lap and watch the sunset

while you ride my dick. Hot, yes?”

Riley cleared his throat and licked his lips. “Yeah, but no condoms.”

“*Hmm*. We don’t technically need them. You get tested often and...I’ve recently been tested too. Plus you’re the only one I’ve slept with in a long, long time. But I’m sure I have supplies in the glove compartment too. Which reminds me...I also have a cop fantasy. A police officer asks for my registration, and when I reach for it, a condom falls out and—”

“Got it.”

My lips twisted in amusement. “Okay. Your turn.”

“I’m not telling you,” he scoffed.

“Shy again?”

“No, I just—all right, fine. The idea of sex in public turns me on. I’ve never done it and I never will, but yeah...hot. And now I have a chubby. Thanks a lot. Let’s go to my place and do something about it.”

“We could,” I agreed slowly. “Or...we could stay here and you could suck my cock.”

He met my gaze and cracked a smile. “You’re serious.”

“Just a thought.” I shrugged lazily.

“Okay. Undo your jeans, and show me your dick.”

I arched a brow and cast a quick glance around us, though I knew we were completely alone. Very few people ventured off the trails on brisk, late November evenings at dusk. And a passing vehicle wouldn’t be able to see the lake from the road no matter what time of day it was, so...yes, this was safe. But cold.

Not that I’d back down. No way. Riley was calling my bluff, and we both knew it. I wasn’t going anywhere now.

I unzipped my jacket, unbuckled my belt, and fumbled to release my semi from the confines of my boxer briefs without my bare ass touching the rock. “Here it is. In less than one

minute, this poor guy will shrivel to the size of a cocktail wiener, so if you're serious, get to it."

Riley's gaze flitted from my crotch to my eyes. "It's a fantasy, though. Dirty talk only."

"No problem. Stop talking and suck my dick, cowboy."

"I'm not a cowboy," he huffed, rubbing his hands together.

"That would be hot too. You could be wearing a hat and—*tabarnak*, your hand is an icicle!"

Riley snickered merrily. "Sorry. Let me try again. Hands free."

We grinned like a couple of idiots, and then his mouth was on mine, and it was sweet and fun and life-affirming in all the best ways. As he lowered his head and swallowed me whole, I had a split second to marvel at how perfect this was—my version of perfect: slightly messy, slightly nonsensical, and more than a little complicated.

Like Riley.

RILEY

Jean-Claude knew too much about me. The real me. The stubborn, superstitious athlete grappling with a fading career and hoping for one last shot to make my mark. And the other real me who loved a dare and was easily persuaded to try kinky shit, like sucking my lover's cock while perched on a lakeside boulder. I barely recognized this part of me, but I couldn't deny that it turned me on.

I ignored the mega erection behind my zipper and put everything I had into giving the best BJ I could deliver to this incredible man who somehow managed to reveal me, layer by layer, like an onion. C'mon, wasn't it obvious? I could claim I didn't have any noteworthy sexual fantasies, but I was currently living every secret fantasy I'd never allowed myself to harbor.

Sex in public—okay, yes, but sex with a man...touching a man, sucking a man, getting fucked by a man—this was next level. And this man was every fantasy come to life.

Jean-Claude was big and powerful, full of life and laughter. I soaked up his energy like a sponge, feeling lighter and happier in his company than I had with anyone in years. Or maybe ever. What had started as a dare became something more as I bobbed my head over his lap, stroking Jean-Claude's thick cock as I worked him over, twirling my tongue over his crown and licking his shaft like a lollipop before hoovering him again.

I wanted to please him. I wanted to be his fantasy. I wanted to give more than I cared about receiving. That was something, right?

Maybe this was part of my bisexual journey. Maybe the next question was...how far would I go? Yes, I already let him inside me, but would I let him come in me? Would he let me fuck him too? Did I want that?

Yes, no question. I wanted everything he'd give me. It was all so fucking good.

"So good, Riley," he hummed as if he could read my mind.

I pressed my palm against my denim-clad dick for the tiniest bit of relief as I sucked and licked, jacking whatever part of him I couldn't get in my mouth. I felt his cock pulse deep in my throat and yeah, I wanted that too. *Give it to me.*

His fingers were in my hair, tugging and pulling.

I sat up, disoriented and strung out. "Are you close?"

"Too close."

"I was ready for it, but now I think you really have to fuck me." I unbuckled my belt and undid my jeans.

Jean-Claude blinked. "Yes. Come with me, *mon cher.*"

Two minutes later, I was bent over the open hatch of his SUV. I'd taken a quick glance to be sure we were still hidden from view. He'd parked close to a huge rocky ledge and there were no streetlights in the vicinity, so unless a random passerby stumbled upon us with a flashlight, we were safe...ish.

There were probably park rangers and patrol cars to worry about but you know, with my ass out and my cheeks spread apart as per Jean-Claude's instructions, I didn't have the brain cells to worry about anything other than getting his dick in me.

I stroked myself as he lubed up his fingers and patiently stretched me open. He held a condom in silent question. *Yay or nay?* I shook my head and braced one hand on the hatch door. A moment later, he pressed his cock at my entrance and pushed his way inside.

He nuzzled my neck, his arms wrapped around me tight, and just...breathed. I must have been quite a sight, impaled on his cock with my jeans pooled at my ankles. I'd unzipped my jacket so he could reach my nipples. He knew I liked it when he tweaked them as he bit my shoulder, and whispered dirty promises about how hard and fast he was going to ride me.

And he didn't disappoint. He bucked his hips double time, slamming into me over and over again. The frenetic pace was a wild contrast to our peaceful surroundings. The gentle roll of the lake current and the melodic hoot of a nearby owl and our carnal grunts as I met him thrust for thrust.

"More. Fuck, yes. That's it," I panted.

He dug his fingernails into my skin and licked my earlobe. "I'm going to come inside you. You want that?"

"Yes."

"Tell me. Say it."

"Come in my ass," I moaned. And he did. I could feel him pulse and explode deep inside me, and it triggered an avalanche-sized orgasm. "Oh, fuck. I'm—*ungh!*"

Jean-Claude held me tightly as wave after wave of pleasure ripped through me, leaving me limp and breathless, and so perfectly...sated.

We cleaned up as best we could with the napkins he'd found in his console, grinning like pirates as we buttoned up, rezippped, and headed to Elmwood. We sang along to a classic rock station in between random conversations about topics like: What's your favorite number? Did you grow up with pets? If you could have any wild animal as a pet, what would it be? Weird answers only.

We'd each grown up with dogs and wanted to own one in the future.

"A trip to the local shelter will be the first thing on my list when I retire," I announced. "And for my-wild-animal-it'll-never-happen pet, I choose a hippo."

“A hippopotamus? Why? They’re not cute or fierce. Do they do anything special?”

“I think they’re kinda cute. And I have no idea what the fuck they do. It was just the first outlandish animal that popped into my mind. They’re huge and they like to chill out in water. That’s all I know. What’s yours?” I asked as the steeple for St. Finbarr’s came into view.

“A baboon. They’re aggressive for no particular reason and their asses are always out, ready to moon my foes at my command. I’ll name him Bartholomew and call him Bart.”

“You win. That’s ridiculous.” I snorted. “Favorite number. No, wait. Let me guess...”

“Sixty-nine,” we said in unison, bursting into laughter.

Nope. It wasn’t particularly funny, but it was fun.

He was fun...and silly and sexy. And he fucking rocked my world. I felt lighthearted and centered in a way I never did off the ice.

It was almost cruel that this—whatever we were doing... would end soon. I’d be gone in less than a month, and he might not even be in Elmwood when I returned next summer for the youth hockey camp—assuming Vin wanted my help.

I didn’t want to future-trip, though. I simply wanted to revel in the moment—the deep rumble of his voice, his smiling eyes, his casual grip on the steering wheel, the faint melody playing in the background, and streetlights lining Main Street as we drove into town.

I ran my fingers along the seam of my jeans, wiggling to relieve my aching ass. I was sore all over from being stretched and filled. I could feel his cum inside me and something told me that should have grossed me out, but it didn’t. Not even a little bit. I wanted to do it all over again, stat, so I could feel him all day tomorrow and the next day...and the next.

Was I greedy? Yes, definitely. I couldn’t help it.

I hated knowing that none of this was meant to last.

“HOW ARE YOU FEELING?”

I leaned against my kitchen counter and gulped my orange juice in a hurry before answering my sister. “Great. I haven’t had a headache in three days, and my last one went away with basic ibuprofen. My eyes aren’t as sensitive to light as they were either. I haven’t tested my vision in a fully illuminated rink yet, but I’m getting there.”

“That’s great news. I’m glad to hear it,” Tara gushed. “But I hate that you missed Thanksgiving. Mom and Dad were heartsick they didn’t see you.”

I winced. “I know. I talked to them yesterday. Sounds like Dad busted up his elbow good.”

“Oh, my God. It was a scene.”

Tara rehashed our dad’s fall from a stepladder at her house over the weekend, where my parents had gone to visit my sister and her family for the holiday. Dad’s idea to help Martin with the outdoor holiday lights had backfired big time. He’d slipped, fractured his arm, and spent an afternoon at the ER. They’d canceled their plan to rent a car and drive to Elmwood to surprise me in favor of getting home for him to see his own doctor.

Wow. I had a feeling I’d narrowly escaped outing myself. Jean-Claude and I had spent all weekend together. If my parents had shown up on my doorstep early in the morning, he would have been here...probably in his boxer briefs. Or I would have been at his house, and how the fuck would I explain to my family what I was beginning to think everyone knew about us anyway?

No one asked outright, but I caught a few curious glances at Thanksgiving dinner at Mrs. Moore’s house. It was our fault. We’d been inseparable all damn day.

When Vinnie and Nolan were called on to do heavy lifting, Jean-Claude introduced me to Nolan’s assorted cousins, aunts,

and uncles, whose names I'd never remember. When he'd helped Nolan's mom in the kitchen, I'd tagged along for sous chef duties. I should have made a better effort to mingle, but I was more aware of time than ever. We had maybe two weeks left till I was back in Seattle, and I wasn't going to waste a single second.

Like I told my sister, I was on the mend. I had a doctor's appointment in Burlington later that afternoon, and based on my recent progress, I assumed I was nearing the all-clear sign. In fact, I'd been tempted to postpone the trip today to delay the inevitable, but I didn't want to let my team down.

The Slammers were in an ugly slump. We'd lost every game on the recent away schedule, eked out one win against the struggling Blackhawks, and got our asses handed to us for the rest of that series. Their mistakes were sophomoric examples of poor passing and slow skating. It was borderline embarrassing.

And the fact that the press had basically written me off as a side note whose only contribution to future news was my impending retirement announcement chafed. I wanted to prove the bastards wrong.

Look, I had no illusions of swooping in and being a savior, but the moment I was okayed to return, I needed to be there for my guys—on the bench, in the locker room, at practices. I had to show my face, be present, be a cheerleader, a sideline coach, or whatever they needed. I certainly couldn't manufacture excuses to stay in Elmwood...no matter how much I wanted to.

I snapped to attention when my doorbell rang. "Hey, Tara, I gotta run. My buddy is here to drive me to my appointment."

"Okay, good luck."

"Thanks, I—"

"Oh! Hang on," she intercepted just as I was about to disconnect the call. "Will I see you over the holidays?"

"Uh, I don't know. I'll try, but I don't know where I'll be and I've already been gone a long time," I replied impotently.

“I know. We all miss you. Just...get better, and we’ll figure the rest out.”

“Yeah. Love you, Sis.”

“Love you too, Ri.”

I pocketed my cell, grabbed my jacket, and headed for the door.

THE WINDY ROADS surrounding Elmwood gave way to a tree-lined ribbon of highway about twenty minutes into the drive to Burlington. Vinnie regaled me with amusing antics of the group of juniors he was coaching in between manic deejay duties.

“Dude, I love this song.” He cranked the volume on fuck-knows-what for the fifth time in less than an hour, furrowing his brow when I smacked his hand.

“You’re giving me a headache, Kimbo,” I grumbled.

He shot an apologetic sideways glance at me. “Shit. Sorry. I wasn’t thinking. How’s your noggin doing?”

“No, no, it’s fine. Seriously. The music was a little loud, that’s all. Let’s just...talk.”

He nodded, eyes focused on the road. I couldn’t gauge his expression from this angle, but his mood so far had been typical Vinnie—relentlessly enthusiastic and upbeat. I figured we’d kill the remaining hour by running our own version of ESPN, giving highlights from every game we’d watched over the past week or something holiday oriented ’cause seemingly everyone wanted to talk about the damn holidays all of a sudden.

But he surprised me.

“We can do that. Tell me what’s going on with you and JC.”

O-kay.

Shit.

I froze...which probably made me look guilty as hell, but I didn't know what to say. So, I gave one of those phony laughs that never fooled anyone and licked my lips nervously.

"Nothing," I lied. "Why do you ask?"

"Believe it or not, I wasn't born yesterday. You guys are tight and that's great, but...I dunno, I gotta wonder if he has a crush on you."

The correct response was, "I hope so 'cause I'm head over heels for that guy and he's a man and it's confusing, but good and I don't know what to do about it. Do I come out? Now, later, ever? If I can't be with him, I don't want another guy, so does it matter?"

Of course, I didn't say any of that. I was too chickenshit. I fidgeted in my seat like a kid on a sugar high and huffed, "Oh, for fuck's sake."

"Sorry." Vinnie winced. "Fuck, that's my bad. I made this weird, and I didn't mean to. Forget I said anything. How 'bout those Dodgers?"

"I hate the fuckin' Dodgers."

"Me too."

We both chuckled. It was awkward, but it was the best we could manage under the circumstances. Our brief, clumsy reprieve was followed by a strained silence. Vinnie countered it by turning up the volume on the radio and making small talk about the expected snowfall this season.

I should have been grateful for the segue, but my brain was pulsing against my skull now. My very real fear of a sudden migraine impacting whatever scan the doctors had in store for me today drove me to speak up.

"Hey, Vin...I like him. That's all." I opened my hands and slid them on my thighs. "I don't know what else to say."

Neither did Vinnie. His eyes creased thoughtfully at the corners behind his sunglasses. If I had to guess, I'd think he was trying to measure his words to avoid pissing me off. It

was tempting to assure him that wasn't necessary, but damn it, I wasn't ready to tear any walls down and share...anything.

My body was healing, my brain was healing, but me? I was a mess of tangled contradictions. Superstitious yet enthralled by my sexual discovery, secretive yet eager to please, confused yet certain I was on the right path. Being with Jean-Claude was easy. Sharing what he meant to me and what that revealed about me...not so easy.

Vinnie cleared his throat after a minute or so. "JC's a good guy. A hothead sometimes, but so am I."

"True," I snarked.

He shot an unabashed grin my way, then resumed squinting at the white minivan in front of us. "Hey, uh...is it too nosy to ask if *you* have feelings for *him* or something?"

"Yeah, it is."

"Oh." Silence. "Well, do you?"

"Fuck, Vinnie."

"Sorry. Shit. I'm sorry. I don't mean to pry. It's not my business. I know that, and I know I would have freaked the fuck out if anyone had asked me these questions. I've been out for a few years now and it's so damn liberating that I forget what it was like when I was in the closet and—"

"Why'd you wait?"

"Huh?"

I twisted in my seat, worrying my bottom lip. "Nosy question, but since we're on a roll. Why'd you wait till you retired to come out? Were you afraid there'd be backlash?"

"Not sure. In my mind they were very separate things, but the truth...yeah, I was scared." He inhaled and sighed. "But if I had to do it over again, I wouldn't wait. I think of the time I wasted that could have been spent with Nolan, and it makes me sad. Maybe that's a dumb way to think, though. Maybe I was never going to be ready to commit until I'd worked through the noise in my head, ya know?"

I hummed in acknowledgment. “Makes sense.”

“Right. And moving on from uncomfortable topics... subject change number two.” Vinnie held up two fingers and continued, “I think I talked Nolan into buying a snowmobile. Remember when Grizzly invited everyone to his cabin in Montana for a team bonding weekend on the holiday break, then busted his arm when he fell off his snowmobile and missed the rest of the season?”

“Grizzly’s still a bonehead,” I smirked.

Vinnie hooted, merrily launching into ancient locker room antics. I joined in, glad to put probing discussions behind us.

But that conversation stuck with me for the rest of the day.

I thought about what it meant to deny feelings, not only for yourself but for someone else.

Let’s be real, wrestling with your sexuality was daunting at any age. My family wouldn’t care that I was bi, and the friends who mattered wouldn’t either—that included a few of my teammates. But I wasn’t naïve. Some of the guys would have a big problem with it. They might not care about the bi part until I mentioned I was seeing someone. Assuming Jean-Claude and I figured out a way to do this long-distance. We might fail, or he might not be interested anyway.

Was the truth worth the possible fallout if we couldn’t be together? When did self-preservation become selfishness? And should I have been concerned that my buddy had not-so-subtly hinted that he knew there was something going on with Jean-Claude and me?

Holy fuck, my head was a trippy place to be.

I didn’t have it in me to play mental hopscotch. I channeled my energy into maintaining a positive outlook in the hopes that it would deliver a clear MRI. The doctor was pleased with my progress and while he was concerned about my lingering light sensitivity, he seemed confident it would fade within the month.

“You might not see any action in December, but I would think your team physician would okay you to practice with the

team by mid-December,” the doctor said.

“That’s good news.”

Doctor Wu smiled faintly. “Yes, be prepared for the lengthy lecture regarding the danger of repeat concussions on your next visit. You’re thirty-five...thirty-six in May, according to your chart. You’ll want to consider your long-term health. See you in two weeks.”

I opened my mouth to assure him my long-term health would be just fine if I continued playing hockey, but he was gone.

Retirement was another plate to throw into the mix. My world had been upended and I’d learned more about myself than I’d bargained on, but this wasn’t how I wanted to go out. There had to be a way to regain control that didn’t involve losing hockey and the best thing that had come into my life in years.

Maybe ever.

I TAGGED along with Vinnie to the diner rather than having him drop me off at my place later that afternoon. It was early for dinner, but Nolan had raved about Jean-Claude’s special *du jour* and promised to save us a spot at the counter if we arrived before the rush.

I perched on my barstool, dragging my fork through rosemary-and-garlic mashed potatoes and stealing glances into the kitchen in the hopes of spotting the chef. He stopped by to say a brief hello and accept compliments for the amazing roast chicken with herbs de Provence. He greeted Vin with a fist bump, nodded in my direction, and politely asked about our drive. I could have been any random customer instead of the guy who’d blown him in the shower this morning.

This was what hiding in plain sight looked like, and I hated it.

JEAN-CLAUDE TEXTED me with instructions to leave the key in the plant next to my kitchen door and stole into my house sometime in the middle of the night. I heard his footsteps on the stairs and the creak of the pipes. His hair was damp when he slipped into my bed naked, pulling me into his arms like a little spoon.

Christ, I was hot for him. I woke up in a hurry, pressing my ass against his crotch in a search for friction. Jean-Claude tugged my briefs down, kissing my neck as he reached around me, teasing featherlight touches along my shaft. In a matter of minutes, he was inside me, moving slowly and pushing me to the edge. I wiggled under him, growling for more. He ignored me. He moved slower than ever, dragging out my pleasure until I was begging.

“Please, please, please. Fuck me.”

He pulled out and turned on the bedside lamp. “Let me see you.”

“What are you—ow, my eyes.” I flipped over, draping an arm over my face.

Jean-Claude pushed inside me, caging me as he hovered close as if to shield me from the light. He nibbled my bottom lip and smoothed his thumbs at my temple. “You want it off?”

“No, it’s okay.” I lifted my legs higher and clutched his ass cheeks. “*Mm*. Just...keep doing that. You feel so good.”

He lowered one of his hands to my cock. “I missed you today. I couldn’t stop thinking about you—this tight ass, perfect cock, and this mouth. I love this mouth.”

He kissed me dirty, sucking my tongue as he stroked me and fucked me. It would have been sensory overload at any time of day, but it hit different in the middle of the night. Or maybe it was that word.

Love. I love your ass, I love your cock, I love your mouth.

It was the kind of throwaway sweet and nasty line that was hot in the moment but meant nothing at all. It sounded different on his lips. Or maybe I needed it to sound different. Maybe I needed—

“I’m gonna come,” I grunted, roaring as my release slammed into me.

“Good boy. Very good.”

He was moving again. A little faster, a little harder. The bed shook as he gained momentum, literally fucking me into the mattress. He bucked and thrust, growling savagely in my ear as his orgasm struck.

We’d done this almost daily for weeks on end. On the evenings he worked late, I either stayed up waiting for him or he came to me like he had tonight, slipping under the covers and curling up close. We didn’t always have sex. That was a nice perk, but it was too easy to claim it was the main draw anymore. I just liked being with him.

I liked how I felt when he was near—a little stronger, a little more confident, and infinitely more certain of who I was...a bisexual man who’d met someone pretty fucking special at exactly the right time.

I kissed his chest and rested my head on his shoulder. “Late night?”

“Not too bad. It’s only midnight.” Jean-Claude captured my wrist and kissed my fingers.

“Seems later.”

“You had a busy day. How was Burlington?”

“Fine.” I didn’t want to go into any details now. That shit could wait till morning. “How was your day?”

“Normal day. Nothing exciting till you came by the diner,” he said sleepily.

I buried my face in his neck and smiled. “Mmm. When I was a kid, we had this dinnertime tradition where we’d go around the table and share your favorite and least favorite part of your day. Something good was usually food oriented, like

‘Grandpa took us out for ice cream after school.’ Or ‘Grandma made chocolate chip cookies.’ The worst was always school. Dunno why ’cause school was fine.”

“I bet you were a cute kid—*un enfant mignon*,” Jean-Claude purred indulgently. “Play your game for me now. What are your best and worst highlights?”

“The doctor says I’ve improved.”

“That’s a good one,” he hummed softly. “And the not so favorite highlight?”

“I dropped half of my fries on the floor in Vinnie’s Jeep.”

“Oh, that’s bad.”

“But they fell on a spare blanket so...I ate them anyway.”

He snorted. “Wise decision.”

We chuckled softly; then Jean-Claude leaned over to turn off the lamp.

My eyes drifted shut as I burrowed under the covers. “What’s your best and worst?”

“Easy. The best was when you walked into the diner, the worst was when you left. *Bonne nuit, mon cher*.”

I inhaled deeply as if savoring his words. No one had ever said anything like that to me. So simple, so sweet, so...lovely.

I changed my answer.

He was my favorite, and this was by far the best part of my day.

“WHAT’S THE DEAL, Trunk? Are you coming back or not?”

I propped my stick against the plexiglass, furrowing my brow as I flopped onto the bench facing the rink. I’d checked my messages in between helping Vinnie run drills with the juniors. Mom wanted to know what date I was coming home for Christmas, my sister wanted the same thing, and a

telemarketer wanted to sell me insurance. I'd return my mom and sister's calls and ignore the sales guy, but this one...

"Chili?"

"Yeah, it's me. Sorry, I should ask how you're feeling or some shit, but I saw a video of you with Kimbo on the ice. You look like yourself. I mean, you're skating well and if you can keep up with him, you're probably ready for real action."

You know, if this was any other teammate, I would have chuckled, called Kimbo over to kick ass via cell, and suggested we FaceTime for more impact instead.

But not Chili. He was the one teammate I hadn't spoken to since I bonked my head. Our co-captain status should have been reason enough for either of us to reach out, but neither of us had bothered 'cause at the end of the day, we weren't buddies. I figured he was rooting for my early retirement, and I was doing my best to disappoint him. Our opposing interests and ten-year age gap didn't jibe, and that was kind of understandable.

So...why had he called now?

"You can't have my locker till I say so, Chili," I teased, motioning to my phone when Vinnie called out a greeting.

"What? Shut up." He snort-laughed. "I don't want your fuckin' locker. I'm just...wondering. ESPN says you're done, and Coach isn't saying much of anything. We're getting our asses handed to us every other night, and it would be nice if someone...older—"

"Fuck you."

"And wiser..."

"Better," I amended.

"Could help boost morale and...stuff," he finished. "Even if you really are retiring, you owe us a good month. We've sucked since you've been gone, and I think you stole our mojo."

"So you miss me."

Childress grunted. “Something like that. We could use some positive press. Coach is probably weighing replacement options for you...no offense, but in the meantime, the team needs you, and our fans need to see you. It’s a mental thing, so I guess I’m trying to say...get better and get your ass to Seattle.”

Not gonna lie. That was nice to hear.

It was also deeply superstitious and maybe a little warped, but I understood mental mumbo jumbo better than most. I’d heard all the same rumors about my career too. And Childress was right. Of course management was in trade talks now, hoping to salvage the year before it became an early season write-off.

No one expected me to be a hero. I was a team commodity in good health or bad, and I was at the end of my shelf life. It should have stung that my presumed usefulness was as a figurehead on the bench rather than an asset on the ice, but I supposed this was the crux of being an aging athlete. My ego insisted I was someone my body didn’t know anymore.

That was my great disconnect. Was it even possible to be someone who made a difference without hockey? I honestly didn’t know.

“I’ll be there next week.”

JEAN-CLAUDE

Snowflakes tumbled from the gray sky, blown sideways by the occasional gust of wind. A perfect day to bake bread.

I sprinkled a generous amount of flour onto my kitchen island and dusted my hands before rescuing my dough from the proofing drawer. Music played in the background, but don't ask me what it was. My thoughts wandered in twenty directions at once. That was typical for me, though I usually focused on menu ideas and recipes I wanted to develop. Lately, all I could think was that change was coming. I could feel it.

I was an expert at reading the signs by now. My restlessness and low-grade worry were muted by Riley's presence. There were no panic attacks, kitchen meltdowns *a la* Gordon Ramsay, and no late nights staring a hole into the bottom of a whiskey bottle, wondering what the hell I was doing with my life. The anxiety was still there, but he was a good influence, though he had worries of his own.

We both were dealing with sudden forks in the road and multiple choices...each one more complicated than the last. I couldn't speak for him, but the overall theme was familiar to me. Stay or go?

The new flash of anxiety was that either way, I was going to lose him.

And that was why I baked bread.

The rattle of the mudroom door yanked me out of my head. Riley called out a greeting as he shed his winter coat and boots.

“*Bonjour.*” I smiled as my lover stomped into the kitchen, pink cheeks, twinkling eyes, and a broad grin on his handsome face.

“Geez, it’s legit cold out there. Today is the first time I wished I had a car. The walk from the rink was treacherous.”

I snickered. “It’s only snow.”

“And wind.” He stood behind me, hands on my hips, and peered over my shoulder. “Whatcha makin’?”

“Bread. How was the rink?” I winced and shivered when he kissed my nape, rounding on him with a scowl. “Your lips are freezing.”

Riley cackled gleefully. “But my dick is warm. Well...not yet, but it will be soon.”

I rolled my eyes on cue. “You want me to knead your ass?”

“Kinky. Do you have orange juice?” he asked, hiking his thumb at the refrigerator.

“Help yourself, and tell me about your practice. You were with the teenagers, yes? That would explain drinking out of the container,” I commented, catching him midsip.

He laughed and swiped his hand over his mouth. Then he poured himself a glass and hopped onto the counter, legs spread. A lock of hair fell over his forehead, giving him a roguish look that went well with his jaunty expression. For the hundredth time that day, I wondered how I’d lucked out.

Riley was the sun, the moon, and every star in the sky. He was braver and stronger than he credited himself for. His determination alone was inspirational. The hollow-eyed man who superstitiously ordered tuna salad from the shadowy corner booth at the diner had been replaced by a confident athlete ready to reclaim his spot on center ice.

Day by day, I’d watched him shed ghosts and face his fears like a pro. He’d gone from skating under dim lights to stay in

shape and keep his speed up to working on drills and eventually playing actual hockey. And now he was helping his old captain with the junior practices.

Vinnie had gradually adjusted the overhead lighting as Riley's eyesight improved and the headaches receded. Yesterday was the first time he'd skated under bright lights. I'd gone to the rink for moral support as he'd tested his vision and warmed up a little before the coaches and their team arrived. I'd even skated with him for a bit—for entertainment purposes.

My faux put-upon griping and exaggerated clumsy skating made him chuckle. I'd hid a silly infatuated grin as I fed him the puck, then chased after passes I purposely missed just to hear that carefree sound. Afterward, I'd taken my time unlacing my skates to watch Riley with Vinnie, Nolan, and the juniors. Riley was a great coach—patient, smart, intuitive, and formidable. He'd be a natural someday.

But he could literally do anything. The cocky tilt of his chin and lopsided smile seemed to indicate that *he* knew he was ready for whatever came next.

Was I?

Not really. On top of worrying about possible career moves, I had a terrible, horrible, awful crush to contend with. I had the sort of symptoms that WebMD said meant you were dying. Shortness of breath, heart palpitations, dizziness...

Riley didn't even have to physically be near me, either. What kind of sorcery was that? I hadn't known it was possible that someone's voice on a cell phone could make your heart skip a beat.

And it was even worse when he walked into a room.

Like now.

“Practice was good. It was a tough workout, but the juniors are coming along and I didn't feel like I was going to puke afterward. In fact, if it hadn't been so stormy, I'd planned on jogging over here.”

“That is not a storm. It’s little baby snowflakes and wind,” I taunted.

Riley snorted. “You just said my lips were cold. I could test them on your dick.”

“I accept your challenge, but we’re at a crucial moment with the dough. We have to knead the dough, proof it, knead it again, and bake it. You leave the dough for too long, you get bad bread.”

“I thought all bread was good.”

“Meh, not quite. If it’s over-proofed, your bread will look funny. It will collapse or go lopsided and the flavors may be off. That won’t be a problem for us. I don’t make bad bread.”

“I believe you. I’ve never attempted to make bread. Out of my wheelhouse.”

“I don’t know what that means, but today is your lucky day. Come, Riley. You can take over while I stare at your ass.”

He barked a laugh and shook his head as if to protest. “Actually, you know what? Put me in, Coach. Show me how to knead your dough.”

Riley hopped off the counter and sidled behind me, squeezing my ass as he tilted his hips suggestively. An electric current zinged through me at the contact and just like that, my cock swelled in my sweats. A rogue vision of Riley inside me took me by surprise. I hadn’t been on the receiving end in years—not my thing. But I might be persuaded...for him.

Crisse, where had that come from?

I refocused, tossing a spare apron his way without making eye contact, waiting till he’d washed his hands to fire off instructions.

“Flour first.” I dusted his hands liberally with flour and pointed at the heel of his palm. “Dig into it. Don’t be shy. Good. Now fold the dough in half toward you and push it away. Turn the dough and repeat.”

He listened intently, making adjustments as advised. “So... this is it? Doesn’t seem so hard.”

“It’s not. Baking is a science. As long as you follow the rules, you’ll get the results you want.”

Riley shook his wrist and stole a glance my way. “You don’t strike me as the type who likes to follow rules.”

“Not true. Religion was a big part of my life when I was a child. Church on Sundays and high holidays, Catholic school. I always did well with structure and discipline. Hockey gave me that too. The practicing, the camaraderie...the game is always bigger than one player, but your contribution matters. It’s like that in a kitchen too. Everyone has a role to play, and we’re better at it when we work as a team. Rules are good, but...” I pulled the dough from him and grinned. “It’s fun to break them.”

He snickered, diligently pushing and folding the dough. “Uh-huh. Now, me? I was a quintessential rule follower. Even after I left home, I made my own rules about...everything in my life. Food restrictions, daily exercise, sleep, alcohol...I even had a no masturbation rule twenty-four hours before a game.”

I wrinkled my nose in distaste. “Is this some kind of testosterone bullshit?”

He blushed, and it was so fucking cute I couldn’t resist looping my arm around his waist, nuzzling his neck, and pressing kisses behind his ear.

“Cut it out.” He wriggled in my arms, then leaned against me. “To be honest, I got carried away with the rules. I have a mild obsessive-compulsive streak, and I’m hard on myself. I was like this as a kid too—always trying to be the best and do the best. It’s fucking exhausting.”

“I bet. I can’t relate. I was terrible.” I sighed. “My poor parents. I was the kid who fell asleep in church, ditched school to smoke with my hooligan friends, and the D-man who showed much promise, but spent far too much time in the penalty box for using my fists instead of my brains. It’s not that I didn’t want to follow rules, but some of them seemed pointless to me.”

“Yeah, that sounds more like you.”

“*Oui*. I had too much energy or not enough. I never got the balance right until I worked in a kitchen and found out the hard way that everything I touched would turn to shit if I didn’t pay attention. So I learned to be patient and put in the work. And because of that, I don’t have to cross my fingers or double-check my recipes. I know this bread will be amazing... unless you fucked it up somehow.”

Riley swatted my ass with a dish towel. “I made it better. Admit it.”

“We shall see. Let’s put it in the oven.”

We washed up, idly commenting about everything from the holiday wreaths on Main Street to the juniors’ passing prowess and their chances of winning their upcoming game against their archrivals, the Pinecrest Penguins, to the weather outside.

The smell of baking bread in a warm house on a cold December morning and the sight of snow drifting prettily through the kitchen window with a gorgeous man at my side... I couldn’t remember the last time I’d felt this content and at peace.

Riley applauded when I pulled the bread out of the oven forty minutes later. “Look at that. I feel like a proud papa. I helped make that little loaf, didn’t I?”

“Bravo. You can have a job in my kitchen any time. I’ll even throw in the apron,” I joked.

His expression clouded for a beat, then brightened so fast I was sure I’d imagined it. “That would be cool. I’ve got this new fantasy I’m working on—you and an apron and nothing else.”

“Ahh, and what are you wearing?”

“I haven’t gotten that far.” He molded his chest to mine and snaked his fingers under the elastic of my sweats and boxer briefs. “We can work that out together. How much time do you have before you have to be at the diner?”

“Plenty.” I captured his mouth in a passionate kiss. “Let’s go to my room. I’ll bring a clean apron.”

We snickered conspiratorially and made a beeline for the stairs, pausing to make out on the bottom step and again on the landing, tongues tangling as we groped and swayed.

By unspoken agreement, we didn’t rush. The world was still and quiet, painting itself in shades of winter white on a mellow Saturday. We could take our time.

We undressed in between kisses and fell naked into bed, diving under the duvet as if it were a tent sheltering us from the elements. When it became too warm, we pushed the covers aside and rolled over on the mattress, playfully jockeying for dominance.

I was bigger than Riley, but not necessarily stronger. He took me by surprise, flattening me and pinning my hands on either side of my head. His eyes lit with laughter as he rocked his hips, dragging his rigid cock over mine.

“I like the view from here,” he rasped. “You’re a sexy motherfucker.”

“Say that in French.”

“*Tu es* sexy...uh, motherfucker?”

“Close enough.” I growled, flipping him onto his back so fast his breath hitched.

Riley guffawed. He grabbed my neck and yanked me forward, mashing our lips together as he clutched at my ass, pulling me over his chest. I scooted a few inches to cover his body with mine, his cock brushed my entrance and—we froze, noses touching, mouths hovering, our breaths shallow and quick.

He licked his lips as he raked his nails along my upper thigh. “Would you ever want to—”

“Yes.” I swallowed hard, adding, “For you. If you wanted me...like that.”

Now...this was an awkward moment for details, so I didn’t bother admitting that I hadn’t bottomed for anyone in years.

I'd tried it and it was okay, but it wasn't something I asked for with a partner. In fact, I probably wouldn't have offered, which made me feel like a jerk because this was something Riley had clearly contemplated. That made sense. Was it really a bi-awakening adventure if you didn't both *give* and receive?

I wasn't overly concerned about making things even or giving Riley the full bi-awakening experience, though. This was selfish too. We talked around the inevitable, but we knew our time was running out. This would be over soon. He would leave, and I didn't want any regrets. If he wanted me, I was his. It was that simple.

Riley's Adam's apple slid in his throat. "Yes. I do. I've done this before...with a girl. I mean, I know what to do, but it's been a while."

I caressed his jaw and bit his chin. "Get the lube. And be generous."

The one thing I remembered I didn't like about getting fucked was the stretching part. So awkward. You had to literally open yourself up, relax and trust that the person attached to the dick wasn't a dick too. That was a lot of trust—more than my usual quota.

But you know, desire was a strong motivator. The visual alone of this beautiful, muscular hockey player slipping lubed digits in and out of my hole as he sucked my cock was... transcendent. I threaded my fingers through his hair and watched the show with my legs spread wide. I gave him a little more than he asked for, pumping my hips to fuck his mouth as he massaged my prostate.

He broke for air, eyes watering, and gripped his cock with his left hand, stroking me with his right. "Do you want to be on your knees or um...on top of me?"

"This is good." I flashed a lopsided grin and pointed at the lube. "More of this stuff and Riley..."

"Yeah?" He glanced up from lube duty, tossing the bottle onto the nightstand.

"Go slow."

He nodded as he grazed the tip of his cock over the sensitive skin...again and again. It was a wicked tease. I held my legs open and reached between us, curling my fingers around his shaft as if guiding him in. He got the message and pushed. We both gasped when he breached my hole.

“Oh, fuck,” he groaned, bracing a shaky hand on my shoulder.

“Yes. Keep going.”

I gritted my teeth and fought the urge to push him off me as pain radiated through me. It didn't subside immediately, but it would. In the meantime, I concentrated on Riley. The sheer wonder in his gaze was mixed with something like adoration. It was humbling and beautiful and so much more than I thought I deserved.

But God, he made me want to be worthy.

He buried his cock deep inside me and went perfectly still with his eyes closed. The sound of labored breathing mingled with the scrape of a tree branch against my window. I inhaled and exhaled with purpose, willing my body to adjust. Riley lifted my right leg to his shoulder and slowly pulled out and slowly pushed in. My eyeballs rolled in my head like a defective Halloween toy as pleasure chased pain away in an instant.

He licked the seam of my lips and whispered, “So good, baby. You feel so fucking good. *Magnifique.*”

French? Oh, that was unfair. I grabbed his ass, tilting my hips to meet his thrusts. “*Mmm. That's it. More, mon ami.*”

I winced inwardly. There was a rule somewhere about sweet nothings and terms of endearment in the heat of the moment. And everyone knew that certain words were a no-no—like love.

My love, *mon ami.*

He fucked away my offhand worries, moving like thunder while issuing a command for me to stroke my cock in a gravelly porn-star voice I felt in my bones. I smeared precum over the tip and watched him through hooded eyelids,

admiring his every contour from the shadowy planes of his toned abs to his muscular pecs.

“Fuck, I’m almost there.” He pulled away abruptly, gripping his base as he squeezed his eyes shut. “Sorry. I don’t want to stop, but I—”

“Shh. It’s okay.” I tugged him close, rolling over and straddling his torso before lowering myself onto his dick.

I didn’t give him a chance to weigh in on the change of view. I dug my knees into the mattress and rode him hard. Sweat dripped from my forehead to my cheek as I slid up and down, jacking my cock furiously. Riley licked his lips, scratching his thumbnails over my nipples and for whatever reason, that was the final straw. I couldn’t hold off my release for another second.

My rhythm faltered, then stopped altogether as my orgasm crashed into me, sending me reeling and trembling toward a cliff. Riley took control, pushing me sideways, clutching my hips as he pounded into me. He roared like a wild beast a moment later, filling me with his seed.

That was new.

All of this was new. And dare I say...perfect.

But perfect never lasted, and this was already almost over. My last conscious thought as I went boneless in his arms was that losing him was going to hurt.

Riley

Confession. I’d never enjoyed watching a lover sleep until now. Sleepovers had always made me uneasy, and I didn’t like hanging out with a naked stranger any longer than necessary. I usually manufactured a reason to get going as soon as politely possible. I could always blame hockey—an early practice, a meeting, exhaustion—and no one batted an eyelash.

I didn’t need excuses here. This was exactly where I wanted to be.

I noted the lines at the corner of Jean-Claude's eyes and mouth, the reddish stubble on his strong jaw, and the faint scar near his lip. He had a hairy chest, a belly, and freckles across his shoulders. Maybe he wasn't traditionally handsome, but he was the kind of man you'd never forget. He had a commanding presence and an intimidating no-bullshit attitude that clearly communicated he didn't suffer fools.

Yet somehow, I'd made it through every line of defense. He'd let me inside him. He hadn't hesitated. He'd opened his arms and legs and invited me to take whatever I needed. Whatever I wanted. I'd never been more in awe of an act in my life. Sex was social currency and physical release. It was fun as long as no one took things too seriously and like I said, I'd always made sure my boundaries were well defined.

Now, everything had changed.

It wasn't the sex itself—which, for the record, was fucking mind-blowing. It was him. And it was knowing that this giant grump of a man had broken his rules for me too. And here we were...two clueless idiots playing a sort of waiting game before real life started again and we were forced to make big decisions. Would he stay in Elmwood or try his luck in Pinecrest? Would I finish this season or retire early?

Jean-Claude's choices didn't personally impact me, but I felt his restlessness and I knew he felt mine. We'd become friends, confidantes, cheerleaders. He knew things about me I'd never shared with another soul. But would any of it matter next season?

My heart swelled in my chest as the answer came at me like a bolt of lightning. Yes. It mattered. We mattered.

There had to be some way to have it all.

He stretched his arms above his head and rolled to face me. "What are you thinking?"

"Uh...bread."

"Liar. If you were thinking about my ass, don't. I'm too sore for a repeat today."

I snickered, rubbing his butt before pulling the duvet over us. “Tomorrow?”

“Okay. Tomorrow.”

“That was...amazing.”

“*Oui*. Amazing,” he agreed sleepily.

“I loved being inside you.” My smile felt too big for my face. “Can I say that, or is that weird?”

“Not so weird. I feel the same about you,” he replied, kissing my nose. He frowned a moment later. “Now what are you thinking?”

“Did it feel good?”

Jean-Claude kissed me and bit my chin. “Yes.”

We held hands under the covers, grinning like fools for no particular reason.

“I had no idea it could be like this. I mean, sex is usually good, but this feels...I don’t know, like—better than usual.” I wrinkled my nose and sighed. “I’ll stop talking now.”

“No, no. I think you’re right. We do sex well.” He squeezed my fingers. “We do a lot of things well.”

I didn’t know how to respond, so I scooted closer and lay my head on his shoulder.

A perfect stillness permeated the air. It was warm and safe and required no reason, no answers. It simply was.

And fuck, it was good.

RILEY

The week I was scheduled to be back in Seattle, I was cleared to drive.

Thank fuck. And perfect timing, because the temperature in Elmwood had nosedived into the thirties, which made the walk to and from the gym or rink a little tiresome—especially in the snow. I’d happily accepted rides from Vinnie and Nolan...and even a couple of the teenagers who lived in my area, but it was nice to have some independence. And avoid scrutiny.

Three days before I picked up my rental car, a senior they called Big Red—because he was tall and had red hair—offered to drive me home. He happened to live down the street from me, and with the wind blowing snow flurries at a diagonal, it was a no-brainer. He was a good kid and a huge hockey fan, so our conversations generally centered around NHL gossip or tips.

Big Red also happened to be a great forward who’d already signed on with an agent. He might not make it to the NHL or AHL but he had the talent to play professionally, and I was more than happy to give whatever insight I could. Honestly, after weeks of excruciating headaches and sunglasses indoors, I finally felt like myself again and I was happy to talk about almost anything.

“Hey, what’s up with you and the chef? Have you known each other for a while or something?”

Even that.

I glanced over at the muscular teen, whose bushy red eyebrows were half-covered by a green-striped beanie he'd told me his new girlfriend had given him for his birthday.

"No, we met when I was here to help coach you knuckleheads with Kimbo last summer."

"Oh, right."

"Why?"

"No reason. I just see him a lot more. I used to think he lived at the diner, man. I'd see him at the coffee shop once in a while, but most of the time, he's behind the counter or in the kitchen. And that's kind of weird 'cause you see everyone everywhere here. The mailman was at Rise and Grind this morning and Mr. Shinoi, my Algebra II teacher, picked his daughter up from hockey practice at the rink today. Those are the first ones to pop in my head, but I could keep going. You tend to notice when you *don't* see people...like the chef."

"*Hmm.* He's a good guy," I said evenly.

"Totally. He's a good skater too. Faster than he looks. I saw him cut you off on a breakaway before our practice the other day." Big Red shot a mischievous grin my way. "That was freakin' hysterical. He actually caught up to you. I didn't think that was possible."

"He got lucky," I huffed without heat.

Big Red hooted merrily. "Yeah, right. JC's cool, that's all I'm sayin'. I like the JC and Thoreau Show. You should get him to come by more often. But not too much. Gotta give the man time to make *poutine*. Have you had those fries? Dude. They're amazing. I order two at a time whenever we go to..."

I tuned him out, humming along while my mind wandered. People here knew Jean-Claude and noticed us, and like Vinnie, had probably put two and two together and wondered if we were more than friends. Two months ago that would have made my head pound and put me in a state of panic. But my mind was clearer these days and for the first time ever, I thought about coming out and you know...it seemed like a good idea.

My other takeaway from that brief conversation was that I really liked hearing his name with mine. The JC and Thoreau Show had a ring. We were a good team, and I couldn't help thinking we *could* be something real.

I didn't say anything, though. The sentiment sounded corny and very difficult to put into words. Not to mention complicated. I lived on the other side of the country, for fuck's sake.

I had too much on my plate to devote unnecessary worry to our logistical issues. I chose to believe we'd be okay. He showed me every damn night how much he wanted me. And I did the same. We made love fiercely, coming together and falling apart in passionate waves that were sometimes hungry and ferocious and other times, gentle and almost...beautiful.

Okay, that sounded like bad poetry, but it was true.

We were solid in a way I hadn't felt about anything in years. I was solid. I didn't need orange tape on Wednesdays or omega-3 tuna salad boosts. Not to say I wouldn't partake, but the desperation was gone.

I felt as if I'd healed and found my missing piece in the process. I knew who I was and what I needed to do. I wasn't fucking retiring, and I wasn't sitting out the rest of the season like an impotent figurehead either. I was going to Seattle to play hockey.

I SPENT a lot of time on the phone with my agent, management, and my coach in the days leading up to my departure. I drove myself to my final doctor appointment, scheduled an MRI with the team physician, and agreed to a press conference to discuss my injury, recovery, and future with the Slammers upon my return to Seattle. It was kind of exciting.

Jean-Claude was my biggest cheerleader. He was thrilled I didn't need sunglasses anymore, happy for me when I picked up my rental car, and was genuinely excited to know the

Slammers were prepared to welcome me home with a bit of fanfare.

He was also swamped with a huge holiday dinner event the weekend before I headed out. It was the type of event that required major menu planning and his most experienced hands on deck. If he seemed a little distant at times, I figured he was in chef-mode. He was a professional who didn't leave details to chance. And if he seemed quieter than usual, I figured he was tired.

He took two days off afterward to be with me and yes, we spent a lot of it in bed, but we also explored Elmwood's winter wonderland.

It snowed in Seattle, but never like this. Elmwood got a foot of snow last week, and though most of it had melted, the town was covered in a beautiful blanket of white. It glowed in the early evening moonlight. Christmas lights twinkled on houses and storefronts on Main Street, and live garland was wrapped around nearly every lamppost. Gorgeous.

I bumped Jean-Claude's shoulder, tilting my chin toward the picture postcard vision. "It's like something out of a movie."

"*Oui*. A horror movie where a villainous Santa steals toys and murders *Bûche de Noël* for fun."

"How do you murder a yule log?" I asked, rolling my eyes as I pushed open the door to Rise and Grind.

"You make it with bad whipped cream or something equally terrible."

"Bad whipped cream? Is there such a thing?"

Jean-Claude gave me some heavy side-eye as he took his place in line behind Penny Henderson, whose family owned the amazing bakery next door. We said hello, commented on the weather and the growing holiday madness, then continued our conversation.

"Of course, there is such a thing. It's always better to make your own whipped cream. And marshmallows. Speaking of

which..." He stepped up to the counter. "Two large hot cocoas with marshmallows...the good kind I make for you, please."

Ivan grinned. "We wouldn't dare serve anything else. Will that be all?"

"Yes. I thought you had today off," Jean-Claude commented, tapping his credit card.

"I'm covering for Stacy. She's helping her mom set up for bingo tonight. We close in an hour, so I'll head over afterward. Do I lead an exciting life or what?" He held his hand up like a stop sign. "Don't answer that. But actually, it is kind of fun. JC never goes, but if you're looking for a real taste of Elmwood before you get back to the real world, this is your chance, Riley."

"Uh...we're on our way to the juniors game. But it sounds cool, huh?" I glanced over at my suddenly grumpy-looking date.

"Bingo? No, I am not eighty."

"Close enough." Ivan snorted.

"If I don't make it, I'll catch you next time," I interjected, elbowing Jean-Claude.

Ivan bit his bottom lip and raced around the counter, pulling me in for an impromptu hug. "We're going to miss you. Don't be a stranger."

"Uh...I won't."

"Good. Now move your booties. I have paying customers behind you. Mwah!"

I picked up our drinks and popped one of the mini marshmallows floating on top into my mouth, humming my appreciation. "We're totally going to bingo."

"No, it's not fun. Trust me."

"I've never played and Ivan said there're prizes," I singsonged, fitting the lid in place and heading outside.

"I thought we were going to the hockey game."

“We are, but you’re right...next time.” I studied the cheery bustling street, surprised by the sudden maudlin dip in my mood. “Fuck, I keep saying that. Next time, next week, next season. It’s not a throwaway sentiment when the clock is ticking and nothing feels settled.”

“I know. Life requires a lot of patience, doesn’t it? We want quick change and immediate answers, but it rarely works that way. But they say the best things are worth waiting for.” Jean-Claude followed my gaze, brushing my knuckles with the softest touch.

To any random passerby, it wouldn’t have seemed significant. To me...it was like holding a lover’s hand in public for the first time. It was a hug or a kiss—something light and breezy but full of promise. I bit the inside of my cheek, nodding as I lifted my cup to my mouth with a trembling hand.

We turned toward the rink and walked silently, lost in our own thoughts.

The Elmwood Eagles were playing a visiting club team from Rutland. It was expected to be a competitive game, but then again, all hockey games were a big deal in this area and I loved that.

The town’s relentless enthusiasm was due in part to having Vinnie Kiminski, retired NHL hometown hero, coach their little darlings. Plain and simple, the legendary D-man drew a crowd and sold tickets. I’d witnessed the frenzy and yeah, I’d been getting the same treatment since I’d started helping out with the occasional practice.

The kids hung on my every word during drills, asked me to sign their jerseys, ball caps, and equipment bags for luck. And their parents waited afterward to talk to me, wanting advice or a piece of my story that might fit whatever they were going through in signing an agent or researching prospective college programs.

There were days I still had major impostor syndrome. I mean, what the fuck did I know about how to make it big? I’d gotten lucky. And now I was hanging on by a thread, worried I

was guilty of drinking my own Kool-Aid yet hoping I really still had enough in me to make a difference.

However, as my head cleared and the fog of what I now knew was mild depression lifted, I was a little more generous with myself. My career wasn't a product of luck, and I still had something to contribute to the sport. I could make a difference. And damn, I felt it walking into that rink with Jean-Claude at my side.

We sat behind the coaches in the seats Vinnie had reserved for us and cheered the Eagles on. After a scoreless first period, one of the new kids, a transfer from Pinecrest, skimmed the crossbar and buried a shot in the back of the net with a minute on the clock in the second. Unfortunately, the Rutland Rangers tied on a power play when we got called on a high-stick penalty.

Vinnie was red-faced, fists clenched, growling testily at the boys to focus. It wasn't pretty. By the middle of the third period, the Eagles looked like they were playing not to lose, which obviously wasn't going to get the job done in a tied game.

"Big Red needs space. Get those D-men to move the puck in the zone and give him some room to work," I blurted, unthinking. I held up a hand, wincing as Nolan shifted to face me. "Sorry. I shouldn't—"

"No, it's okay. Keep going," Nolan said.

"They're struggling with their passes and getting gummed up. Get Big Red a lane, and I bet we'll score."

Nolan considered me for a beat and whispered to Vinnie, who was stabbing his forefinger into a white board. I waved sheepishly when they both glanced my way.

"Coach Thoreau has a nice ring to it." Jean-Claude chuckled. "What makes you think Big Red can save the game?"

"Gut feeling. Also...his girlfriend is here, and he's a bit of a show-off. If he can get clear, he'll make something happen."

And he did.

Our defense descended and kicked the puck to Big Red, who scored on a breakaway. The crowd went wild. Every Eagles fan in the building jumped to their feet with a collective roar and stayed there until the final buzzer.

Eagles 2 – Rangers 1.

I slapped high fives with the team, chatted with their parents after the game, and ended up getting conned into a series of selfies with the players and a few random spectators. I congratulated the red-faced Big Red and shook hands with his girlfriend and his folks, then made my way to the bench where Nolan and Vinnie were huddled with a man I assumed was a proud dad.

“Yo, Trunk. Over here. I want you to meet Will Perez. He’s the sports reporter at the Forest Tribune and a huge hockey fan.” Vinnie slapped the other man’s shoulder and pointed at me. “And you probably know who this beast is.”

“I do. It’s an honor to meet you, Mr. Thoreau.” Will pushed his glasses on his thin nose and licked his lips. “I’ve been following your career for a while, and I was sorry to hear about your recent concussion.”

“Thanks. I’m doing better,” I reported.

“There’s a rumor you’re heading to Seattle soon. I hate to corner you like this, but we don’t get breaking news in these parts and I feel like I have to ask...will you be announcing your retirement as expected or are you hoping to play?” he asked nervously.

“I’m hoping to play.”

Will beamed. “That’s great. I wish you all the best. And I hope your stay in Elmwood helped.”

“Thanks, it definitely did.”

“Cool.” Will clicked the cap off the Nikon around his neck. “Is it okay if I get a photo with Kimbo and you?”

Vinnie and I scooted to give him a view of the rink in the background, and again to make room for Nolan. It was an impromptu photoshoot, over within a few minutes.

I pretended not to hear my name in the melee as Jean-Claude and I escaped the rink.

Fifteen minutes later, I unlocked my front door, stomping snow off my boots. My nose was red, my cheeks hurt, my toes were frozen solid, and my—

Well, I forgot the rest when Jean-Claude pushed me against the foyer wall and slanted his cold mouth over mine.

I hummed into the connection. “What was that for?”

He closed his eyes briefly and rested his forehead on mine. “I don’t know. I just...we don’t talk about what is right there in front of us, do we? You know I’m going to miss you.”

Oh. Shit.

“Don’t do that,” I rasped in a husky tone. “I have a few days still. I don’t want to do good-byes. I don’t think we have to.”

“Okay, but—”

“I’m serious. Come to Seattle,” I practically shouted, clearing my throat while my heart tried to jump out of my chest ’cause what the fuck was I doing?

He cocked his chin in confusion. “Seattle.”

“Yeah, why not? You want to open a new restaurant, but does it have to be in Pinecrest?”

“No, but—”

“Why not Seattle? It’s a big city and it’s a foodie town. You’d do well there,” I assured him, though I didn’t know shit about the restaurant business. I was talking out of my ass, jumbling my words in a panic. I wasn’t ready to acknowledge an end date.

Not for us.

Not fucking yet.

“You’re suggesting I follow you home?”

I squinted as if mulling over the idea. I wasn’t. My brain was short-circuiting and the rest of me was sweating. So much

for freezing my balls off.

“Yeah. Is that weird? I mean, the idea just came to me, and it’s not a bad one. It’s something to think about,” I said in a rush.

Silence.

The harsh and heavy kind that felt like a down jacket on a summer day.

He caressed my jaw, dragging his thumb across my bottom lip. “Seattle.”

“Yes,” I whispered.

“*Hmm.*” He dropped his hand and stepped aside to shrug off his coat. He turned to me, continuing in a cool, detached tone. “I’ve been to Seattle, but it was many years ago. Tell me about your city while we eat. I’m hungry.”

I stared after him for a moment, unable to shake the fear that I’d fucked something up. I didn’t get it. I didn’t know how to read him or whatever this heavy silence was, so I just... talked. And talked. I ran through a top-ten list of the best things about my adopted city as if I were a tour guide trying to drum up business in the off-season. I couldn’t tell if he was listening to my words or the sound of my voice. He was there but...not really.

Fuck, I hadn’t come here looking for this. I wasn’t supposed to stay so long or do anything stupid like have a bisexual awakening and fall for a man. Yet, here I was.

And nothing seemed simple anymore.

JEAN-CLAUDE

“**T**he sauce should be *à la minute*. *Allez, allez*. Go, go, go.” I clapped, irritably gesturing for my sous chef to spring into action.

We had a packed house at the diner tonight, and the special was the number one requested item on the menu. It was rather ironic that the *coq au vin* was more popular than the classic meatloaf on any given night, but none of us had counted on the *pot-au-feu* selling out. That was poor planning and yes, I was to blame. As my American friends would say, my head wasn't in the game.

I barked orders as if I were a cranky captain steering a ship through hurricane winds. I liked order in my kitchen—gleaming counters, sharp knives, the best meats and produce, and a well-trained staff who worked in harmony. This was near chaos.

Boiling water hissed on the stovetop, the floor was littered with garlic skins, and the chatter around the prep island had a manic quality that didn't bode well with three hours of service to go.

“Hey, are we short on the special tonight?” Nolan asked, sashaying through the kitchen door.

I glowered. “*Un peu*. We should have ordered more. We'll sell out within the hour. On the bright side, we can serve your burgers and fries. Anything else?”

He frowned. “Yeah, uh...can you take a break?”

“Now?”

“Two minutes.” He held up two fingers and headed to his office.

I gritted my teeth and counted to ten before following him. I wasn't angry at Nolan. It was simply bad timing. But the entire night felt like bad timing, so what the hell?

“What is it?” I folded my arms and leaned on his door.

“Nothing. You need a minute away from the stove, so this is me looking out for you.”

“Ah, that's sweet of you.” I glanced at my watch. “Are we almost done?”

“Not till you tell me what's wrong.”

“Nolan, I have a kitchen to run and—”

“Two minutes, JC. Talk to me.” He perched on the corner of his desk, casually elegant in khakis and a blue oxford shirt.

The thing about Nolan that set him apart from the crowd was his innately kind heart. He was a problem solver, a novice therapist for anyone who needed a friend, and while I appreciated his concern...timing.

“Okay. The *pot-au-feu* is popular tonight. I should have known it would be, but it's Monday and for some reason pork chops usually do better because this is Elmwood. Tonight, it's beef. Live and learn, eh?”

“Yeah, whatever. It'll be fine.” He pursed his lips and sighed. “Hey, I wanted to—”

I narrowed my eyes suspiciously. “You have one minute now.”

“Forty percent.”

I froze. “Excuse me?”

“You heard me. Forty percent. I own eighty percent of the diner and I can offer you half of that. It's the best I can do today. My mom owns twenty, and yeah, she's a silent partner,

but this place has been in our family for a century so I can't ask her to cede a portion of her—”

“Forty is generous,” I intercepted.

“So...is that a yes?”

I scrubbed my hand over my jaw. “Is it okay if I get back to you?”

He didn't quite hide his surprise, but he nodded politely. “Yeah, yeah. Of course.”

“I have some things on my mind, and my kitchen is on fire behind me, but—”

“Take your time. I just didn't want you to think I've forgotten, 'cause I haven't.”

“Thank you. I—”

“And I've thought about the place in Pinecrest too.”

“Oh?”

Nolan nodded. “It makes me nervous. Vinnie's into it. He loves the idea of investing in our rival community, but I'm still on the fence. I don't want to rely on my husband's money for something I'm not convinced we can pull off. The diner comes first for me. It's family, and this is my town. That doesn't mean I'm not interested. I just need a little more time to think. I asked Bryson for first right of refusal and promised we'd have an answer by the end of the first week of January. That way we can get through the holidays and put together a rough business plan instead of rushing into something. I mean...if that's cool with you.”

“Yes, that's very cool. And it's a lot to think about,” I replied softly.

“Ha. I know. Sorry. I didn't intend to hit you with all that at once, but you were so cranky out there and I don't want you to think I've been stringing you along. I respect you, I care about you, and I know for a fact that I owe you a huge debt for helping me put this diner on the map. So this is me telling you I get it and I want to do what's right, JC. I think we make a great team.”

I inclined my chin. “*Merci.*”

“You’re welcome.” Nolan hugged me, knocking a newspaper from his desk. It wasn’t an awkward embrace, per se, but it had the potential to carry weight neither of us was interested in sorting through. He bent to retrieve the paper, laughing as he pointed at the cover photo. “Oh, check this out. We made the front page. And if you squint real hard, you’re in the background too.”

I took the paper and glanced at the photo of Vinnie, Nolan, and Riley from the juniors’ game the other night. They smiled broadly for the camera, exuding athletic prowess and pride—two professional hockey players and a fit local coach. And yes, the shadowy figure lurking off to the side was me. I stabbed a finger at it, rolling my eyes before reading the caption, directing readers to the sports page for more information regarding the Eagles’ exciting win.

I unfolded the paper and read the headline,

Riley Thoreau Is Seattle Bound!

The veteran pro isn’t ready to hang up his skates yet. After making a full recovery here in Elmwood from a recent concussion, Thoreau is heading back to the ice to finish his season with the Slammers. There’s been heavy speculation about his pending retirement, but hockey fans everywhere will be excited for his return. As for next season...

“They didn’t get my good side,” I deadpanned, handing the paper to Nolan.

He chuckled. “Well, they got your nose.”

“And my stomach. I’m going to work now, and then I’ll do five hundred sit-ups. *Au revoir.*”

“Wait. Can I ask about you and Riley?”

I sighed. “Go ahead.”

“You seem...close to him and—are you going to be okay...when he leaves?”

I couldn’t decide if I wanted to laugh at Nolan’s awkward show of concern or cry that he’d felt the need to voice it at all.

Everyone was guilty of leaving things unsaid to avoid moments like this, so perhaps I should have been grateful that he'd tried, but I felt sad that I couldn't be honest.

I shoved a hand through my hair and shrugged. "I'm okay, Nol. Don't worry about me."

"Okay, but...I'm here if you want to talk. Whenever."

"*Merci.*" I smiled tightly, hooking a thumb toward the kitchen meaningfully and turning the doorknob. "And now... work."

I paused to check on a few dishes on my way to my station and surveyed my kingdom—the gleaming stainless steel appliances, the smartly attired and well-trained chefs, the meticulously organized trays of fruits, vegetables, and herbs. Okay, it was the same mess I'd left five minutes ago. Even the fucking garlic skins were still on the floor. But everything and everyone was in its place.

Even me.

My fork in the road had suddenly splintered. And Seattle...

Could I walk away from this? Could I start over...again?

Yes, and I'd do it in a heartbeat to be with Riley.

But I couldn't shake the feeling that our choices were more complicated than stay or go.

ELMWOOD WAS a winter wonderland cloaked in snow, glittery in the moonlight. Inside, tapered candles flickered on the linen tablecloth, and Nat King Cole crooned softly about chestnuts roasting on an open fire. Neither Riley nor I had decorated for the holidays so there was no tree, no wreath, no tacky gnomes with Santa hats. But we had music, lush wine, and amazing cuisine.

I'd made my signature chicken *cordon bleu* served with lemon-infused scalloped potatoes and green beans gremolata.

For dessert, we'd have a berry pavlova. Riley didn't care about sweets, but to me, a celebratory meal required the proper punctuation via a sugar boost. And the best thing about pavlova was that it looked impressive and pretty on a table, yet it was relatively simple to assemble.

Riley dished up a spoonful of merengue and berries, sighing at the first bite. "Oh, my God. This is so good."

"I'm glad you like it." I sipped my wine, unabashedly staring at my lover.

He was beautiful by candlelight. His cheekbones could have been carved out of marble, and his eyes were bright with humor and happiness. Fantastic food, amazing sex, and a renewed sense of purpose made him glow. It was hard to believe this was the same man who'd come to Elmwood to heal. He'd had a haunted aura of someone on the verge of losing a war, but now...he'd won.

"I don't know how you did all this. Unless your minions did the work and you're taking the credit."

"Hmph. It was all me."

Riley grinned as he slid his foot along my calf. "Thank you. It was delicious, but why'd you do all this?"

"You deserve a proper send-off."

He went still. "Oh. Like a last supper or something."

"That's not it, but I—"

"Have you thought about coming to Seattle?"

"It sounds...*magnifique*."

"Oh, fuck. I can't tell you how happy I am to hear that." He sighed theatrically. "Look, I know it's not a matter of packing a bag and hopping the next flight, but let's put this on the calendar and not leave it for Christmas."

"Christmas?"

"Yeah, I'll swing by when I visit my family over the holiday. I'll be busy next week—medical evaluations, press

conferences, and my first game back. I won't get any playing time, but I'm so ready to be there, ya know?"

I nodded and did my best to make my lips curl into something resembling a smile. "I know."

"We have a stretch of home games the second week of January. I can show you the city, take you to the finest restaurants. Do you think you can get away?"

I swallowed hard as I set my wineglass on the table and leaned forward to cover his hand. "Riley...I can't go to Seattle in January."

He frowned but recovered quickly. "February is good too. The weather will still suck, but—"

"I'm not coming with you, Riley."

He lowered his fork, his brow furrowed unhappily. "You... you just said—"

"That it sounded wonderful and amazing," I interrupted, pushing the pavlova aside to lace our fingers. "It's not that I don't want to...I do. I'd follow you to the ends of the Earth, but you're not ready for this."

"That's not true," he protested.

"Love, you know it is. You have things to figure out—your *sexualité*, for one. How would you explain me? Would we pretend to be friends? I'm gay. I'm out. I *could* pretend. I could go into the wardrobe again, but—"

"Closet," he corrected flatly.

"Yes. I did it for many years, and I'm good at it. But that's not—how do you say?—healthy. For either of us. I think you need to finish this chapter yourself. Finish your season, play without fear. Don't worry about the press looking over your shoulder, looking for scandal. Don't let anyone take this chance from you, because it may be the last one you have. Next season may or may not come. All you have is now, and hockey is your now. Not me."

Riley worked his jaw from left to right, then bit his bottom lip and looked away. "Fuck. I'm sorry."

“No apologies. There is no reason to say sorry.”

“I shouldn’t have put you on the spot. Your life is here.”
His voice hitched and my heart lurched on cue.

“For now...yes.”

“Are you going to open that restaurant with Nolan?”

I shrugged. “Maybe. I don’t know. He offered me forty percent in the diner.”

“Oh.” He licked his lips and nodded like a puppet on a faulty string.

“That’s not the reason, Riley.” I tightened my grip on his hand, my eyes glued to his. “It’s not about my job or your job. It’s not about the distance. It’s about healing and growing and becoming who you are on your schedule, on your time. There’s no rush, *mon cher*. I’m not going anywhere. I’ll be here for you. Always.”

His Adam’s apple slid in his throat. “Fuck. So...this is it.”

“No, this is...until next time.”

We stared at each other for a long moment. Nat King Cole gave way to Elvis Presley’s mournful blues, and suddenly it was difficult to see through the sheen of tears. I blinked as I stood and pulled him into my arms, hugging him close.

I wanted to tell him I wasn’t ready to let go. I wanted to tell him I’d been dreading good-bye for weeks now. I wanted to tell him he’d brightened my life, made me laugh and think and dream, and...love.

And yes, that was the crux of it all. I loved him.

This wasn’t just want and desire. This was love.

It hadn’t presented itself in a neat bow on a single occasion. It was an accumulation of days and hours and minutes, revealing pieces of ourselves, showing scars, and sharing dreams. He was in my veins now. I’d witnessed the fear he couldn’t quite hide at the thought of losing hockey.

But it wasn’t over, and he didn’t have to choose.

They say when you love someone, you set them free. But they never tell you how much it hurts.

And it hurt.

RILEY

My body had a weird way of insulating me from pain. On the ice, I tended to go numb in the place I'd been struck, and if I could breathe through the worst of it till my other organs and synapses kicked in to compensate, I was usually fine. But hey, I played hockey and pain was part of the game.

Hockey players got up when they were knocked down. We wrapped bruised ribs, put Band-Aids on gashes that needed stitches, and if we could get away with it, we played with broken bones and concussed heads. Maybe that was why this two-month hiatus had hit extra hard. I relied on my body to do what I'd trained for...and it had failed me once. And again tonight.

My heart fucking ached in my chest. It felt as if I were bleeding out on the carpet, and one wrong move might send me to my knees.

God, I probably looked pathetic. No, I *was* pathetic. Had I really thought he'd want to take me on? I'd hoped he did, but I hadn't thought this through 'cause I was terrified that I wouldn't get the answer I wanted. And I didn't.

But Jean-Claude had been right to ask the bigger question: did I actually know what I wanted?

I clung to him like a piece of gum on the bottom of his shoe, daring him to pry me off of him as I buried my face in the crook of his neck. I searched for nuances in the moment—the smell of his cologne, the whoosh of wind against the

window, the strains of holiday music in the background—something to ground me and remind me that I could stand on my own.

After a few minutes, I stepped aside, unsure and awkward. I didn't know if I should start cleaning the dishes or suggest finishing dessert, though I was pretty confident I'd puke if I tried to eat another bite.

Jean-Claude saved us with a sweet smile, took my face in his hands, and kissed me with everything he had. We left the dishes, the dessert, and the music, and made our way upstairs.

I didn't remember undressing or turning the lights low, but I knew I'd never forget the look in his eyes as he moved inside me. Sort of desperate, sort of sad, yet somehow hopeful too. Or maybe that was me wanting to believe this wasn't a final good-bye.

I arched to meet every thrust, wrapping my legs around him to anchor him and keep us connected until we orgasmed together, tangled in fervent kisses...and sweat and cum. I was afraid he'd leave after we cleaned up, but he stayed.

We sipped wine while we did the dishes naked, singing along to *Frosty the Snowman* and sharing reminiscence of holidays from our youth—wacky sweaters and gifts you wished came with a receipt. We laughed, pretending not to notice the melancholy sound. Then we turned off the music, locked the doors, and climbed the stairs again, wordlessly falling into each other's arms.

In the morning, he was gone.

I sat up and stared at the empty space beside me, feeling numb and raw. Eventually, I dressed in sweats and a Slammers sweatshirt and headed downstairs to make coffee.

There was a note next to the machine under a roll of orange hockey tape. I pushed the tape aside and picked up the piece of paper.

I checked your schedule. Your first game is next Wednesday so I thought you might need this.

Till next season.

That was when I broke.

My throat closed around the grapefruit-sized ball of emotion, my chest heaved, and my eyes burned with unshed tears. I hadn't cried since my grandfather passed away the week after my NHL debut. It was the last time I'd lost someone important and irreplaceable...the last time my foundation had been cracked.

I sank to the kitchen floor and braced my elbows on my knees.

Fuck, I wasn't ready for good-bye.

I PARKED my rental car next to Vinnie's Jeep in the lot at the rink and tugged my beanie onto my head as I marched to the entrance, mindful of the patch of ice near the curb. The skies were clear this morning, but damn, it was cold and frosty. The kind of weather where even a shallow exhale looked like a steam locomotive.

And in the peculiar way that odd thoughts ricocheted like a pinball machine gone wild, a strong flash of déjà vu hit me out of the blue. I was six or seven, dressed in serious winter gear making snow angels with my eyes half-closed against the sun's glare, yet wide enough that I could see my breath and I could hear my parents and sister laughing nearby. It was freezing, but the memory was warm and carefree...and safe.

Like this town.

I spared a quick glance at the row of well-kept older homes beyond the snow drift and pushed the door open.

The reception desk was empty and the lights in the main corridor were dim, but the building hummed with energy. I called a greeting to the lone skater slicing across the ice.

Vinnie stopped on a dime and cocked his head curiously. "Yo, Trunk. What're you up to? Did you come to work out? We've got forty-five minutes till the figure skaters take over."

“No, I came to say good-bye.”

He skated to the side, a frown etched across his brow. “I thought you were leaving tomorrow. Aren’t you coming to dinner tonight?”

“No, I can’t. I, uh...I’m driving to Burlington today to drop off my rental car. My flight leaves early tomorrow morning, so it’s easier,” I said vaguely.

Vinnie scoffed. “Fuck that. I’ll take you to the airport and deal with your rental for you. We need you at the diner, man. I’ve got the juniors locked in and Nolan agreed to burgers, fries, and shakes on the house.”

“Tonight? Did we talk about that?”

“No, I’m springing it on you now,” he replied with his signature lopsided grin. “We take our send-offs seriously in Elmwood, so humor me, for fuck’s sake.”

“I appreciate it, but...” My gaze darted between the scoreboard and the new plexiglass surrounding the rink. I finally met Vinnie’s eyes and damn, I had a bad feeling I wouldn’t be able to speak without choking up.

“What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.”

“Bullshit. You should be on cloud fucking nine right now. You’re back, Trunk. Ten weeks ago, you were flat on your ass with tweety birds circling your head and everyone said that was it. Hell, two days ago the media was speculating about your retirement, and you’re about to show them what a real fighter looks like. You’ve been smiling for weeks, but you’re gloomy as fuck now. Don’t tell me you’re gonna miss me or something.”

I chuckled softly. “Yeah, I’m gonna miss you. I am. Thank you for everything. This has all been above and beyond. You were right. Elmwood was the perfect place to heal.”

He nodded. “You’re welcome any time.”

“Thanks.”

Vinnie ignored my outstretched hand, fixing me with a sharp no-nonsense look. “Was there something else on your mind?”

“No, I’m good.” I dropped my hand and blurted, “I’m just—I think I’m bi. Actually, I know I am. Not that you care. I know you don’t. Of course you don’t. You’re bi, you’re married to a man, and you’re happy. And I kind of envy that and want that. *Argh*, I don’t know why I’m telling you this. Maybe it’s ’cause I haven’t told anyone, and I think I should. Like...tell everyone. I’m thinking about it, anyway.”

“Whoa, slow your roll, crazy train.” He set a comforting hand on my shoulder and squeezed. “Relax, take a deep breath. It’s all good. If this helps...I kind of figured you were bi.”

“I know you did.”

“You didn’t seem like you were trying to hide it. You and JC, right?”

I inhaled through my mouth and slowly let it all out. “Yeah, we weren’t very careful at the end.”

“The end?”

I shoved my hands into my pockets and shrugged. “I live in Seattle and he’s here.”

“Oh. You don’t want to do the long-distance thing.”

“No, I’d do it. I’d do whatever it takes. The problem is...I don’t know how.” I sighed raggedly and continued. “I don’t have a great track record with relationships, I’ve never been with a man before him, and I’ve never been good with emotions. I’m also not out.”

“Do you want to be?”

“Yeah, I do, but that’s complicated. Fuck, I’ve been out of commission for two and a half months. Everyone is already placing bets about how long I’ll last, and reporters have probably prewritten the ‘Trunk sucks’ op-eds. The pressure to perform feels intense.”

Vinnie inclined his chin. “I know.”

“I know you do. By the way, you’re the first person I’ve come out to.”

“I’m honored. Will you tell anyone else?”

“Dunno.”

“If you can, I recommend it. Start with people you know have your back and will support you no matter what. Saying the words makes it real. No shame, you know?”

“Yeah. Thanks.”

He pulled me in for a bro hug and punched my biceps when he let go. “Nol and I’ll fly to Seattle for a game in January. Score a goal for me, man.”

“Will do. Or I’ll try, anyway. It’ll be trippy to be on the ice again. I’m open to any advice,” I replied with a snicker I hoped would shift us to a lighter topic.

“Ah, then I’ve got something for you. Listen up. Are you listening?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yeah, I’m listening.”

“Don’t play by old rules. These are new times, and you cannot be afraid to change.”

I nodded. “Thanks, man.”

“Here’s another one...and it’s extra important. Be happy, Riley. Not everyone out there gives a shit about your well-being. Some only care about appearances or what they think you’re worth to them. You have to look out for yourself.” Vinnie bumped my fist and skated backward, holding his forefinger in the air. “One last thing...put the puck in the net.”

I barked a laugh. “I’ll do my best. Thank you, Kimbo.”

He skated away, blowing kisses at me till I had no choice but to flip him off on my way out the door.

I felt as if a weight had been lifted from my shoulders as I left the rink, but it didn’t last. My heart lurched in my chest as I drove down Main Street, slowing in front of Rise and Grind and Henderson’s Bakery. I almost didn’t turn on Blossom, but

I couldn't resist one last glance at the diner before I veered to my place to collect my bags and get on the road.

DARK CLOUDS LOOMED on the horizon about an hour outside of Elmwood. Flurries hit the windshield but didn't stick long enough to distract me from thinking about Jean-Claude. We'd spoken nearly every day for two months. It felt wrong and strange not to text him. I thought about calling, but what more could we say?

Fuck. Stop. I needed a mental detour, stat.

I thought about my visiting my family during the holidays. It was going to be a whirlwind trip, but my sister insisted on...

My family.

I picked up my cell with a sense of urgency I couldn't explain. I tried to scroll, but there was no way to do it safely, so I pulled over and pressed Call.

"Hey, Tara, it's me."

"This is a surprise. How are you, little bro?"

I squinted at the ribbon of black road and the occasional vehicle whizzing by me. "Uh, I'm good."

"So I've heard," she enthused. "I saw the Slammers announced you'll be back next week. Congrats."

"Thanks. I'm on my way to the airport now and—"

"Don't tell me you're calling to cancel Christmas. Mom and Dad want to see you and—"

"No, that's not it. I, um..."

I scratched my head and winced, unsure how to continue. It was a little daunting to know I'd have to do this multiple times if I was serious about coming out. And I was serious. I didn't want to hide. I was too old for that shit, but damn...this was hard.

"Hey, Ri, are you okay?" she asked, her voice gentle with worry.

“I’m fine. But I have something to tell you, and I need to try this out with you before I talk to Mom and Dad or... anyone. I—”

“Riley, you’re scaring me. Spit it out or I swear to God, I’ll reach through my cell phone to shake it out of you.”

I chuckled. “I’m pretty sure you can’t do that.”

“Riley...”

“I’m bi.”

Silence.

“That’s it? Ugh! You asshole. You’re going to give me a coronary. My heart is beating so fast right now. I thought you were going to say you were sick or depressed or unhappy.” She grunted, adding in a softer tone, “Are you happy?”

“I am. And I met someone. He’s...um, pretty amazing.”

“Oh, Ri, I’m happy for you, honey,” she gushed.

“Well, thanks. It’s...we’re not together,” I corrected awkwardly. “I wish we could be, but...”

“Hockey.”

“Yeah.” I closed my eyes briefly.

“I see. Well, I’m glad you told me. Will you tell anyone else?”

I nodded, though the gesture was lost in the cell connection. “I’m gonna tell everyone, Tar. It’s going to be public knowledge...as in the world will know. A lot of people won’t care, but a few assholes will. You’ve always been good to me. You’re an awesome older sister...the best. I love you and I just—you deserve to know before anyone...in case you need to process anything. Or whatever.”

“You almost made me cry, but now I want to smack you. What is there to process? You’re still you, Riley. Nothing changes, baby bro.”

“Thanks,” I choked out.

“What’s his name?” she asked after a moment.

“Jean-Claude.”

“French! Ooh-la-la.”

I snorted. “French Canadian. He’s from Quebec, he’s a chef, and he’s funny as fuck without trying to be. You’d love him. Honestly, I think Mom and Dad would love him too, but...”

“Introduce us.”

“It’s not that simple.”

Tara sighed. “I know, but I want that for you. Say his name again.”

“Jean-Claude.”

“You say it beautifully, like it means something to you. Like *he* means something to you.”

“Yeah. He does.”

“Then...maybe you can find a way,” she said wistfully.

“Maybe. Are the kids excited for Christmas?” Okay, not the smoothest topic change ever, but Tara went with it.

We talked for a few minutes until I admitted I was parked on the side of the road and the clouds ahead were looking dark and ominous.

“Oh, shoot! Sorry. Keep driving. I’ll talk to you later. Just...I love you, okay?”

“Love you too, Tar.”

I disconnected the call and checked my rearview mirror before pulling onto the road.

A couple of hours later, I veered into the rental return at the airport and began gathering my belongings while a dour middle-aged man with thick glasses wet from the weather made notes on a *Star Trek*-looking tricorder.

“I’ll check the mileage and give you the receipt, sir.”

“That’s okay. I don’t need the receipt,” I replied, slinging my duffel strap over my shoulder.

The roll of orange tape Jean-Claude left for me tumbled to the ground and landed at my feet. I was about to tuck it into my duffel bag when I spotted two small inscriptions written in black ink along the edge on either side of the roll.

Bonne chance

Je t'aime

Okay, I wasn't great at French, but I knew that *bonne chance* meant good luck and *je t'aime*...

I love you.

I swallowed hard, tracing the jagged words with my thumb.

Things I'd learned about Jean-Claude: He didn't say anything he didn't mean and if he felt strongly about something, he spoke French. Or he wrote in French.

I love you, I love you.

"Since you're still here, take the receipt and have a great day," the rental guy grumbled.

"Uh...no."

"Sir?"

"Cancel the return." I shoved my suitcase into the trunk and my duffel on the passenger seat, then hurried to the driver's side, the attendant hot on my heels. "I need the car."

"You just returned the vehicle, sir."

"Un-return it." I motioned for the customer behind me to move into the next lane, waving my arms like ground control directing a jumbo jet on the tarmac.

"Your card has been charged and the account is closed. You can't take the car."

"Sorry, man. I have to. This is an emergency." I slipped a wad of cash into his hand, jumped behind the wheel, and headed south.

To Elmwood.

I drove like a bat out of Hades, racing down the two-lane highway and slowing when the roads began to wind on the approach to the Four Forest area. My pulse skipped and soared as I passed the ginormous tree bordering Fallbrook and Elmwood, the church with the funny name that was soon to be a bookstore adjacent to the brand-new sports complex. St. Felix, St. Ferdinand? St. Finbarr! That was it.

I slapped my palm on the steering wheel, grinning like a fool as I cranked the volume on a Springsteen holiday classic. Dark clouds had followed me from Burlington and snow fell in earnest now, painting the town like a scene from a newly shaken snow globe. It was so fucking beautiful.

No big shiny towers, no haute-couture designer shops, no Starbucks. And somehow, everything I never knew I needed or wanted was right here in the middle of nowhere, Vermont.

I stopped at one of the only few lights in town and willed myself to think, though. It was early still. Jean-Claude wouldn't be at the diner yet. He'd probably be home and that was good, but damn, I was nervous. I didn't have a plan. This was me being impetuous and stupid.

Should I bring flowers? No. Chocolate? My cell buzzed, pulling me back to reality.

I glanced at the caller ID and put the call on speaker before the light turned green. "Coach. How are you?"

"Much better now knowing you're on your way here. I won't keep you, Trunk. Just wanted to give you a heads-up that you're coming into a media circus. Management has had requests for press conferences up the wazoo—including one with me and you. Yeah, I know I coulda texted this, but I want to make sure we're on the same page. One minute everyone says you're retiring and now they want you to play God, so let's just...get our story straight."

"Sure, no problem." I parked at the curb in front of Jean-Claude's house and licked my lips nervously. "Um, speaking of straight stories...or not-so-straight stories...I'm bi and I'm coming out. We can do that at the press conference or at the next one."

“Excuse me?”

“I’m coming out, Coach.” I unfastened my seat belt and reached for my cell. I spotted the roll of tape and on a whim, I unearthed a pen from my duffel.

“Whoa. Hang on, Trunk. Are you—”

“We can talk later. I have to go.”

Okay, that was a bit of an ad lib and my timing probably sucked, but I didn’t care. I was a man on a mission.

I hurried up the path to Jean-Claude’s house and knocked on his door. No answer.

I rang the doorbell and knocked again.

Ding dong. Knock, knock

Ding dong. Knock, knock

Ding dong. Knock—

A stream of something French and undoubtedly profane greeted me as the door swung open.

And yeah, even in his wrinkled plain white tee, baggy sweats, mussed hair, and a crabby expression, I was sure I’d never seen anyone lovelier in my life. My heart swelled as a myriad of emotions flittered across his face...confusion, joy, wariness.

“Riley.” Jean-Claude cocked his head in surprise. “I thought you were gone.”

“I was. I made it to Burlington and turned around.”

“O-kay,” he drawled, still perplexed as he ushered me inside. “It’s cold. How much time do you have? Do you want coffee or tea?”

“No, thank you.” I tugged at his arm before he walked out of the foyer. “I got your note.”

“Ah, I’m sorry. I hate good-byes.”

“Not that note, this note.” I pulled the tape from my pocket and handed it to him, my heart banging against my ribs as he stared at his own writing, slowly twisting the roll to the

opposite side where I'd written in big block letters, "I love you."

His Adam's apple wobbled as he met my gaze. "A translation."

"Yes. And the truth. I love you, Jean-Claude." I swiped my sweaty palms on my jacket and continued in a rush. "I drove for hours and every fucking mile felt like a stake in the heart. That's fucking dramatic and I know it, but hear me out. I was thinking this was the way it had to be. This is new, and I'm not good at feelings. I've never been in love and maybe I'm a bad bet, but...I know this is real. I know it. And if you love me just a little bit—"

Jean-Claude pulled me into his arms in a crushing embrace. He released me to hold my face and rain kisses on my eyes and nose and cheeks, then crashed his mouth over mine.

When we broke for air, he smoothed my hair from my forehead lovingly. "I do. More than a little. You drove all the way back here?"

"It seemed like the sort of thing best said in person. So... there you go. I love you."

My voice was clear as if I were stating a fact—the oceans were deep, the heavens were vast, and I fucking loved this man. No questions. No room for doubt.

I puffed up my chest, daring him to fight me on this.

He didn't.

He pursed his lips and blinked through a sheen of tears as a slow, wicked grin spread across his face. "You love me?"

I placed my thumbs on his cheekbones, tracing the outline of his face. "Very much."

"Why? I'm terrible." He captured my wrist and kissed my fingers.

"I know." I chuckled. "You're kind of grumpy and a little bossy too."

“True.”

“But you’re fucking phenomenal in bed and you can cook.”

He gave a solemn nod. “Also true.”

I tugged at his T-shirt and held his gaze. “I see you, I know you. You’re tough, but you’re not hard. You have strong opinions, but you’re kind and you care. And you see me—my faults, my fears, my fucked-up single-minded neurosis and superstitions, and you just...get it. You get me. I cannot walk away from this. From us. Fuck hockey. I’ll stay here and—”

“Shh. Don’t be silly. You have to go to Seattle.”

“How do we do this?” I laced our fingers, needing this contact more than I thought I would. “It’ll be public. I hope you’re okay with that. I came out to Vinnie and my sister... and my coach. I want to be out. All the way out.”

“You’re sure? I mean, you want hockey too, right?”

“And you. Us. We come first. But...maybe I can be a hockey player, be bisexual, *and* have you.” I paced from the door to the hallway. “I can do some good in the league. I can be out and proud and play on the biggest stage in the world.”

“I like this idea. What did your coach say?”

“I didn’t give him a chance to say anything. He’s a good guy, but this might not go my way. I might be released or benched for the rest of the season...I don’t know. Fuck, maybe I should stay here. I love Elmwood. I can move in with you, work with Vinnie and the juniors, eat at the diner, buy lattes at Rise and Grind and cookies at the bakery, play bingo at—”

He shut me up with a kiss. “Go play hockey first.”

“Right. Okay. I just...can I ask you for five months? Will you wait till next season for me?”

“Oh, Riley, *mon ami*. I would wait till the end of time for you.”

I beamed. “That’s fucking romantic.”

“No, it’s just love.”

“Fuck, I really love you.”

“Je t’aime, mon cher. Je t’aime.”

This love thing was a strange phenomenon. It felt as though we were holding hands on the precipice of a steep cliff, prepared to jump without a parachute into the unknown. It was scary, but exhilarating too. I had no doubt this was where I was supposed to be.

There was no reason to wait. We didn’t need next time or next season. We had forever to look forward to. Starting now.

EPILOGUE

“**L**ove is just a word until someone comes along and gives it meaning.”—Paulo Coelho, *Aleph*

EIGHTEEN MONTHS later

JEAN-CLAUDE

The black awning over the bistro contrasted nicely with the freshly painted bluish-gray door. There was a bit of controversy regarding the pop of color. Apparently, the town council in Pinecrest had been hoping for a sleek, uniform black and that particular shade of azure was a bit too bold. We'd respectfully disagreed and had politely informed them that the color was nonnegotiable.

Perhaps it was a silly detail to fight over, but I was adamant and I hadn't been inclined to explain my reasoning. I mean, it sounded odd to say the door was the color of your boyfriend's eyes, eh?

Riley had rolled his beautiful eyes and said I was a hopeless romantic. His pink cheeks told me he didn't mind so much, though. Good, because in my mind, the little details mattered and this place was beautiful now.

The rustic wood tables, contemporary lighting, and white-paneled walls screamed simple yet elegant. It looked the part of a bougie bistro, but I was no novice. I'd hired an

experienced staff and created a sophisticated menu that would appeal to anyone interested in modern farm-to-table dining. That was the plan, anyway.

After a year and a half of dealing with permits, a major remodel, and assembling a reliable team, C'est Bon was finally set to open within a week. Sure, we could have opened sooner, but we'd been a bit busy.

I'd accepted Nolan's offer of forty percent of the diner, and had gone fifty-fifty with him on C'est Bon. Riley had invested in my fifty percent, and Vinnie had invested in some, if not all of Nolan's half too. Our hockey players knew nothing about food, so our operation was expected to run the same as the diner.

The real difference would be the menu. C'est Bon was slated to be French fusion while the diner was classic American with the occasional French twist.

"What do you think?" I asked, looping my arm over Riley's shoulders as I tilted my chin toward the awning.

"Love it. It's sharp and classy. I think this is gonna be a swanky joint." He slipped his sunglasses down his nose and wagged his brows.

"Swanky," I repeated. "I like that word. What time is your family arriving tomorrow?"

"Not till late afternoon. My sister and Martin rented a van, and Tara thinks they have enough room to schlep our folks, the kids, and everyone's luggage, but I told them we can help if necessary. My schedule is very open," he grinned.

"Not for long, love."

I kissed his cheek and impulsively kissed the corner of his mouth too. Why? Because he was mine and everyone knew it. And also, there was something rather empowering about a bold public display of affection with my newly retired hockey star boyfriend.

Yes, after seventeen years in the league, Riley Thoreau had hung up his skates in an emotional final game in Seattle last month. The already pumped-up crowd had cheered as the

Slammers took the ice one by one, and when Riley's name was announced, the noise level had skyrocketed to ear-splitting levels.

I'd sat in a box with Vinnie, Nolan, Nolan's brother, Ronnie, and Riley's family. His parents had flown in from Toronto, and his sister and her family had made the trip from Rochester too. This was a big deal. The celebration of a long and successful career of a veteran...who just happened to be one of the first out and proud professional hockey players.

Riley had glided to center ice and waved to the crowd. It was hard to see his expression, but I knew this man well. And for obvious reasons, this was an emotional moment. He'd fought like a true champion to return to the game after his near catastrophic concussion. But one could argue that the physical effort was nothing compared to his very public coming out. I'd never been more in awe of another human in my life.

He'd stood next to his coach at a press conference, answered a million questions about his head injury and the likelihood of being an asset to the Slammers organization with grace. Yes, his head was fine and yes, he hoped to make a positive contribution. He'd also said he had no immediate plans to retire. He'd thanked the press for their support with a touch of sarcasm before thanking management, the fans, Coach Marsden, and his friends in Elmwood, Vermont.

Then he'd stood and waved, signaling the end of the interview, and at the last second had announced, "By the way, I'm queer. Bisexual, to be precise. I'm not going to answer any questions about that, but I want it to be out there in the hopes that it helps any queer kids who're wondering where they fit. I'm thirty-five and I'm a hockey player and this is what bi looks like. I'm lucky to have incredible friends and a great organization behind me. That's all." He'd glanced into the nearest camera and added, "*Merci.*"

That *merci* was for me, in case you didn't catch that.

I'd sat in my hotel room in Seattle, gnawing my bottom lip through his speech with tears in my eyes. I'd felt so proud and so...amazed at his strength and bravery. And more in love

with him than ever. I'd known I'd do anything in my power to make long distance work for us. So I did. I'd traveled to his games, cheering like a loon for a team that...if I can be honest, was just okay. Riley had been the main draw, and everyone knew it.

No doubt, that was why his contract was renewed for another year at the end of last season. Simply put, he sold tickets and the Slammers hadn't wanted to let him go. Their other captain had needed some seasoning, and they'd needed the revenue.

You see, after coming out, Riley became a mini celebrity of sorts. Several national LGBTQ organizations asked him to sponsor events or be a spokesperson. He was ambassador to a homeless shelter charity and had started an LGBTQ youth sports program whose headquarters were located in Elmwood, of course.

When he wasn't on the ice, he worked as an advocate, intent on giving back to the community and creating awareness. When he was home in Elmwood, he worked with Vinnie and Nolan at the rink.

And now that he was home for good, there was talk of him taking on coaching duties and investing time in the community. His newest crusade was to build a high school in Elmwood.

"Did you know that our juniors actually go to school in Pinecrest? Everyone has their own rink, but they share a high school. Can you believe that?" he'd huffed incredulously.

I knew that, but I also didn't think anyone cared. Maybe that wasn't true. Maybe the Four Forest area had needed a blast of new blood to bring a few worthy changes to the community. Pinecrest was about to get a fabulous new bistro, and Elmwood would have its own high school with an elite hockey program within two years. Mark my words.

But now, we had other things on the schedule. Our families were coming into town for the restaurant opening—Riley's would be here tomorrow, and mine would arrive two days

later. It would be my parents' first visit ever to the States and Riley was more nervous than I was.

“Do you think our parents will get along?” he asked as if reading my mind. “My mom speaks a little French, so we're good there. I figure I can use Google Translate. *Comment allez vous?* How are you?”

I winced. “That's a little formal, but it's okay. Don't worry, *mon cher*. They will love you.”

“How do you know that?”

“Because I love you and...because you used to play hockey.” I mussed his hair playfully and kissed him. “Let's go home. I'm hungry.”

“Want to stop at the diner? I heard the chef is off tonight, but someone there might know how to make a burger.”

We held hands as we drove the winding road into Elmwood and chatted idly about everything from the Stanley Cup games and the start of hockey camp in two weeks to what was in our refrigerator.

I slowed to a stop on the turn at Lake Norman and squeezed Riley's hand before releasing it and pointing at the placid water visible through the grand trees along the border. “Just so you know...that's where I'm going to ask you to marry me.”

Riley swiveled in his seat and flashed a radiant smile at me. “Oh, yeah?”

“Yes. And I'm pretty sure you'll say yes. I'm old and I'm not as pretty as you, but I think you still like me.”

He launched himself over the console and crashed his mouth over mine. “I love you. You're the most beautiful man in the whole fucking world and when you ask me to marry you, I'm a thousand percent sure I'll say yes.”

“*Je t'aime*, Riley.” I breathed him in, then kissed his knuckles and steered toward home.

“Hey, you know what sounds kinda good right now?”

“Oh, no,” I groaned. “Don’t say it.”

“I’m totally gonna say it. Unless you can guess.”

“Tuna salad?”

Riley beamed. “Yeah. What d’ya say?”

“You got it. But let me also say...it really must be love, because why so much tuna? It’s not that good, is it?”

“It’s pretty good. And yeah...it’s definitely love.”

We shared a quick smile and chuckled softly, our gazes set toward the horizon, the town we loved, and the home we’d made there.

Someday we’d get engaged, married, and maybe even have children. We’d grow old together, celebrating season after season. And we wouldn’t worry about what came next.

We’d learned a long time ago to live in the moment and be grateful for now.

THANK you for reading Riley and Jean-Claude’s story!

Turn the page for more information about my Elmwood Stories series and be sure to subscribe to my newsletter, [Lane’s Letters](#) for upcoming release news!

A NOTE FROM LANE

Have you fallen in love with Elmwood yet? I know I have! I can envision the quaint church steeples, lush trees, a bustling Main Street, the new and improved ice rink, and the diner on Blossom. And just imagine it during the holidays because yes, Book 3 in the Elmwood Stories is a holiday novella!

Get ready for [Holiday Crush](#), starring Elmwood's own Ivan the barista and Court Henderson, whose family owns the bakery next door. Coffee, tea, and maple cookies...what could be better?

Turn the page for a sneak peek.

Happy Reading!

**COMING SOON- HOLIDAY
CRUSH**

EXCERPT FROM HOLIDAY CRUSH- DECEMBER 2023

Court gestured to the dishes. “Can I help you clean up first?”

“No, no. I’ve got it. I’ll walk you to the door.”

He shook his head at my amazing, incredible black Christmas tree. “I can’t get over that thing. It’s wild.”

I beamed. “I know, right? I buy a regular tree too, even though it’s holiday overkill. But who cares? This is my favorite time of year and I celebrate to the nth degree!”

Court shoved his arms into jacket, a playful grin on his handsome mug. “And do you celebrate by watching scary movies and stringing candy corn and plastic spiders into garland?”

“No, smart ass, but damn, that’s a great idea for Halloween next year.”

He chuckled. “So...what do you do for Christmas?”

I braced my left hand on the door jamb and cast a quick glance at the fireplace to keep from staring at my guest. Standing a foot apart in the cramped area between my foyer and living room felt oddly intimate. Court took up space in my tiny abode with his broad shoulders, towering height, and big muscles. I was more aware of him than ever. I needed a moment to gather my thoughts and remember what we were talking about.

Christmas. Right.

“The usuals—decorate my house, string lights outside, drape fresh garland everywhere. And yes, there’s always mistletoe. I also watch holiday movies, listen to Christmas music till they hurt my ears, and bake cookies which always turn out to be a hot mess, but it’s festive and fun, and my family and friends are kind enough to compliment me anyway. And...I sign up for every event in town, including the Skate with Santa party at the rink, caroling at Wood Hollow’s Home for the elderly, Toys for Tots Sled Fest next to the Christmas Tree Farm in Fallbrook, and of course, Holiday Bingo. By the way, all of those including bingo have volunteer positions...if you’re interested.”

“I’d rather shovel snow in a blizzard,” he deadpanned.

I chuckled. “What do you usually do this time of year?”

“Absolutely nothing. I’m usually on the road. The day or two I have free for the holidays are reserved for rest. The years I’ve made it home, I watch football with my family, eat a lot, and feel guilty that I put off buying a thoughtful gift for my parents and am forced to go the gift card route again...while my brother shamelessly shows me up. Oren bought our folks an oil painting of their ten-year-old Golden Retriever last year. And it was really nice. I gave Mom the same gloves I bought her the year before and the wrong size slippers for Dad.”

“Ouch. Well, I’m happy to help you this year. I’m an expert at gift-giving and—what’s so funny?”

“You. I had no idea you were Elmwood’s emo elf.”

“Ha. Ha.” I flipped him off and moved by him to unlock the door. “Good-bye, Court.”

He snickered. “Later. And thanks for tonight. It was fun.”

“Yeah. It was,” I agreed, smiling as he stepped closer.

This was where I was supposed to shuffle out of the way to give him room to slip outside without letting the cold inside, but my feet were seemingly glued to the floor. And now, we were inches apart. So close I could see flecks of gold in his blue eyes and a scar half hidden in his left brow. I should have

jumped away and laughed off this little dance before I accidentally made it awkward.

Too late.

Ugh. Now I was staring at him and he was staring at me and...his mouth was right there, hovering over mine. I could feel his breath on my lips and smell gin and something woody and masculine on his skin. And nope, I couldn't resist. Just one little kiss couldn't hurt, right?

I leaned in, set my palm on his chest and pressed my lips to Court's.

And that was the match that started the fire.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Lane Hayes loves a good romance! An avid reader from an early age, she has always been drawn to well-told love story with beautifully written characters. She loves wine, chocolate and travel (in no particular order). Lane lives in Southern California with her amazing husband and her fabulous pup, George.

*Join Lane's reading group, [Lane's Lovers](#) for immediate updates!



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